

War, Peace and Neutrality: The View From Moscow

by

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If years of effort to achieve a secure and peaceful relationship with the Soviet Union have had so little success, the problem may lie not so much in confusion as to how peace may be achieved, but rather in confusion as to the very purpose and meaning of the word "peace". The purpose of this article is to consider the Soviet understanding of the concepts of "war", "peace" and "neutrality", and to suggest that in many ways this understanding differs fundamentally from our own in the West.

Russian Traditions of Government

Any modern state is, to a greater or lesser extent, shaped by its own historical and ideological traditions. In the case of the Soviet Union it is important to begin by briefly recalling both the governmental traditions of the pre-revolutionary Russian state and the implications of Marxist-Leninist ideology, so that we can better understand the influences which have shaped Soviet thinking.

Russia was always a nation apart from Europe, with its proprietorial and anti-democratic forms of government, its hostility to foreign influence, and its insular and xenophobic church.¹ But most fundamental of all traditions in Russian history has been that of militarism. It is sometimes argued that the modern Soviet drive for military power owes in part to Russian experience of enemy invasion. This is to ignore the fact that the Russian state is itself the product of centuries of expansion into neighbouring territories. It has been estimated that from the mid-16th century to the end of the 17th Russia conquered territory the size of the Netherlands every year — for 150 years running.² For the Russians nation-building and empire-building were indistinguishable, and the constant imperatives of the years of expansion were the 'softening-up' of adjacent states, seizing them and eliminating all traces of self-government. In addition, *the armies required for this process enabled the rulers to maintain order internally despite the strains caused by the constant military effort.* It is not surprising that shortly before the First World War the Russian statesman Sergei Witte could declare that Russian statehood, strength and influence owed its existence entirely to military might.³

Modern Soviet leaders are thus heirs to an ancient tradition of militarism and expansionism, but we should take care to realize that they *think and act differently from the tsars and that "we neglect their ideology to our peril"*.⁴ That ideology is based on the theories of Marx and Engels as developed by Lenin and subsequent Soviet leaders. Its relation to the particular concepts of war and peace will be considered later, but it is essential first of all to establish a few fundamental tenets of Soviet Marxism-Leninism.

Marx based his world view on the theory of social evolution brought

about by conflict as the engine of change. Thus capitalism was destined to be replaced by socialism, and socialism by communism. The fact of the collapse of capitalism was fatalistically inevitable, but it would have to be engineered by violent revolution. The final establishment of world communism was the ultimate good for all men, therefore all means could and should be used to bring about the Revolution: this became the one absolute moral criterion by which men's actions should be judged.⁵

From this theory of legitimate government based on an ultimate moral certainty Lenin developed a means of government. His instruments were the Soviet Communist Party (CPSU) and the "dictatorship of the proletariat". Lenin's Party was a consciously created élite, active and dedicated, with a tightly restricted membership. Acting collectively the CPSU was deemed infallible, but the theory of 'democratic centralism', by which the lower echelons of the party always deferred to the higher, meant that in practice this 'infallibility' devolved on the leadership. Any potential opposition within the party was forestalled by the absolute prohibition of 'fractionalism'. Given this absolute control of government Lenin was able to impose the 'dictatorship of the proletariat', from which vague concept of Marx he created a state of emergency to guard against any attempt by the "bourgeoisie" to regain power. In effect it meant that any and every means necessary to maintain the Soviet system and to crush opposition could justifiably be used.⁶

It has been said that Lenin was the first statesman to accomplish the 'militarization of politics'.⁷ From Marx he took the themes of conflict and class struggle and resolved them into a single policy of a perpetual struggle to achieve the final extermination of the class enemy. His vocabulary and thinking were heavily influenced by his study of the tactics of the German general Ludendorff,⁸ and from the military theorist von Clausewitz Lenin acquired the dictum that war is the continuation of policy by other means.⁹ Militarism, which for so long had ensured the economic and political survival of the Russian state, was rationalized by Marxism-Leninism. The ideology not only provided the means by which the new élite could seize and retain absolute power, but it provided the legitimacy with which to exercise it. By creating a perpetual enemy, both internal and external, in the form of 'class' it justified constant military effort and constant repression at home. By abandoning conventional morality in favour of the absolute moral imperative of world revolution Marxism-Leninism denied any restraint on the means by which it would achieve its ends.

The Soviet View of War

Even a brief survey of the background against which Soviet decisions are made should be enough to suggest that the criteria governing those decisions may be very different from our own. The criteria shaping Soviet attitudes to war can best be approached by asking three questions: Can war be justified in Soviet terms? If so, what use can be made of it? And how can such wars be won? In the light of the answers to these questions we can consider the role that war may play in Soviet policy in the future.

1. *Can War be Justified?*

For Marx war was an undoubted evil, but an evil inherent in the class system and one that could only be eradicated by the final overthrow of capitalism. Until that time war could have positive value: because of the strains that it imposed upon a society, in victory as well as in defeat, war could hasten that inevitable revolutionary change from capitalism to socialism — it might even actually bring that revolution about.¹⁰ Marx, Engels and Lenin all took pains to analyse different types of war — revolutionary, imperialist, wars of national liberation, etc. — but the decisive issue remained whether or not they advanced the cause of revolution and socialism.¹¹ Since the time of Stalin this has been more simply resolved into the theory of the ‘just’ and ‘unjust’ war that remains current to this day:

“A war is just if it is the continuation of a policy of the defence of the people’s revolutionary achievements, freedom and independence, and of the cause of Socialism and Communism. A war is unjust and reactionary if it is a continuation of a policy aimed at suppressing the revolutionary struggle, freedom and independence of any people and the working people’s Socialist achievements.”¹²

This is important in that it not only makes it clear that a ‘just’ war serves the interests of Socialism, but that it is also ‘defensive’. Few people would object to ‘self-defence’ as a justification for war, but they might differ from the Soviet Union as to the exact significance of ‘defence’. The Soviet ideologue would argue that in the class struggle, whether on a national or international scale, the ‘exploited’ class (that is, the proletariat or the socialist state) is always on the defensive.¹³ It follows from this that a socialist state may legitimately *start* a war and still be acting *defensively* — as Lenin confirms:

“The character of the war (whether reactionary or revolutionary) is not determined by who the aggressor was, or whose territory the enemy has occupied, it is determined by the class that is waging the war, and the politics of which this war is a continuation.”¹⁴

In short, Soviet ideology not only accepts the role of war in promoting revolutionary change and in advancing the cause of Socialism, but it accepts unreservedly the right to begin war in the pursuit of those ends.

2. *What Use Can be Made of War?*

Both the above statements of doctrine, spanning almost 60 years, contain the assertion that war is a “continuation of policy”. This is one of three related principles which Lenin derived from von Clausewitz and which remain fundamental to contemporary Soviet attitudes to war. The second and the third were that war and strategy are the tools of policy.¹⁵ Taken together these three concepts reveal a ruthless, but entirely pragmatic, attitude to the use of force. War is one instrument, but only one, available in the pursuit of a particular policy; it remains an instrument and must never dictate policy. Similarly, it must serve the interests of strategy: minor objectives demand only minor commitment, but fun-

damental objectives demand a fundamental commitment and fundamental conclusions. Such “fundamental” objectives include the utter annihilation of one’s enemy in a “war of hate”, a type of war von Clausewitz believed to have become extinct. For Lenin, who believed that “hatred is the basis of communism”,¹⁶ it was recreated in the life-and-death struggle of the revolutionary class war.¹⁷

But pragmatism warns that although victory in war can substantially advance one’s policies, defeat can disastrously reverse them. It follows that while Soviet thinking accepts the right to start a war in the pursuit of the historic struggle against capitalism, such a step will only be taken when there is the greatest probability of success:

“Policy, by evaluating military and political factors, selects the most propitious moment to start a war, taking into account the strategic considerations”.¹⁸

It remains now to consider what factors might be considered propitious by the Soviet leadership in the context of armed confrontation with the West.

3. *How is Such a War Won?*

Among the principles which Stalin considered to be decisive in the outcome of any war were the ‘stability of the rear’, the ‘morale of the army’ and the ‘quantity and quality of the divisions’.¹⁹ The militarist and ideological traditions of the Soviet Union are mobilised to fulfill these requirements. Hatred for the enemy is a fundamental feature of military-patriotic education;²⁰ military training is provided for every male from the age of 15 or 16, and national service begins at the age of 18.²¹ More than 90% of army officers are members of the CPSU or *Komsomol*.²² In terms of ‘quantity’ the Soviet Union has access to a vast reserve of trained military manpower, and can mobilise between five and six million men within a matter of days.²³

However, there is one factor which operates very much to the Soviet disadvantage, a factor which Stalin ignored, perhaps for that very reason. But it is, nevertheless, a fundamental tenet of Marxist-Leninist military thinking: the prime necessity of a sound national economic base. Marx and Engels accepted that in a battle, or even in a brief war, factors such as surprise or courage could decide the issue, but they insisted that in the long term victory would always go the nation with the greatest total economic resources.²⁴ In terms of the ‘correlation of forces’, by which Soviet thinking assesses the total military, political, and economic resources of a state, the Soviet Union has at no time come close to rivalling the strength of its potential enemies in the West. Consequently, it has been possible in the past to agree with the eminent Marxist Isaac Deutscher when he declared that the Soviet Union would never willingly embark upon a war “which, by their own theories they must lose”.²⁵

There is reason to believe that this conclusion is now no longer regarded as inevitable in Soviet military thinking — a significant shift brought about by the Soviet concept of the role of nuclear weapons in war. It is clear that if long-term economic factors invariably prove decisive, their ef-

fects can be reduced or completely nullified if the war can be decided in a short space of time. In such cases other factors, such as surprise or available manpower, will win the day. It is well established that Soviet strategy in the event of a major war in Europe is based on the necessity of fighting a *short war*, and that any weapon — chemical, bacteriological or nuclear — may be used to win it.²⁶ But it is above all nuclear weapons that have given reality to the concept of the “short war”, for a conventional blitzkrieg might conquer Western Europe but could not reach the United States.

The Soviet Union accepts nuclear weapons as useable, and not, as in the West, of value only as a deterrent.²⁷ It is evident that according to Soviet ideology a new World War would involve ‘fundamental’ objectives that would make the use of nuclear weapons, tactical and strategic, inevitable, and it accepts that it may be necessary to launch a pre-emptive strike to assure ‘the destruction of the aggressor’s means of nuclear attack’.²⁸

The use of nuclear weapons fulfills an additional primary requirement in Soviet military doctrine. It was Marx’s belief that every war carries within it the seeds of a future war,²⁹ and he was writing long before the aftermath of the 1919 Versailles Treaty vindicated the theory. It is clearly not enough just to win a war; there must be no chance that the enemy will ever pose a threat again. The Soviet method of solving this problem is by ‘Sovietization’, whereby the existing social structure and government are eradicated in favour of a Soviet system, which Lenin had insured was the form of government best suited to impose and perpetuate absolute control.³⁰ Sovietization is achieved through military occupation, as was seen in Georgia in 1921, in the Baltic States in 1940, and in Eastern Europe after 1945; and Stalin acknowledged that the reason that post-war France and Italy did not have communist regimes was that the Red Army had not got there first.³¹ It must be assumed that military occupation and sovietization are essential *political* aims of Soviet strategy.

But there remains the problem of the United States, which is too large for any such conventional occupation and sovietization. Since Soviet doctrine insists that a World War will lead to ‘the death of capitalism as a social system’,³² it must be assumed that the destruction of the economic and social bases of the United States is an essential precondition of Soviet victory. Thus in Soviet military doctrine it is nuclear weapons that will be used “to destroy and devastate enemy objective over the entire depth of his territory, in order rapidly to achieve the main *political* and strategic goals at the outset of the war.”³³

4. *Looking to the Future*

It may be suggested that such an aggressive interpretation of Soviet military ideology is not confirmed by the reality of Soviet history. Two points should be made in answer to this. The first is that the Soviet Union has made use of war and armed force on a number of occasions and with considerable success. The Red Army was used in Georgia in 1921, on the Chinese border in 1929, in Finland in 1939-40, and in Afghanistan in 1979; by means of war the Soviet Union won control of Eastern Europe and im-

posed its authority in Hungary and Czechoslovakia.

The second point is that in its use of war the Soviet Union has always acted according to its principles, particularly that war is a tool of policy. This has had three effects. First, once the objective had been achieved the war came to an end — as in the Russo-Finnish War. Secondly, war is only employed when it is the most effective instrument for the purpose in hand; alternatives may include the threat of military force, as in Poland in 1981. Finally, the long-term interests of policy demand that war should only be used where there can be no risk of escalation into a military conflict with the United States. Thus the invasion of Afghanistan was implemented only after the most detailed analysis of all the tactical, strategic and political considerations involved.³⁴

This final inference from the dictum that war is the tool of policy may hold the key to the use of war by the Soviet Union in the future. It has been shown that war, in Soviet terms, is an acceptable means of achieving both short and long term ideological goals. But because of the immense damage that defeat in a major war would inflict on the cause of Socialism the same ideological considerations dictate a policy of caution. Soviet policy has therefore been conditioned, since 1917, by a realisation of Soviet weakness in relation to the West, both in economic resources and, until recently, in strategic nuclear forces. Accordingly it has not hitherto been Soviet policy to seek a military confrontation with the West nor, all other things being equal, is it likely to become so.³⁵

It must be repeated, however, that the Soviets see no objection to the use of war, or of nuclear weapons, other than the purely practical one that in terms of the “correlation of forces” the balance remains tipped in favour of the West. If, through loss of Western military capability or failure of political will, this balance is perceived to have shifted in the Soviet direction, the factors imposing upon them a policy of caution would cease to exist.

The Soviet View of Peace

It should be apparent that “peace” is an awkward concept for an ideology based on the theory of perpetual conflict and on the ceaseless class struggle between Capitalism and Communism. Lenin was in no doubt that peace was merely the pursuit of policies of war by other means,³⁶ and that its principal function was to provide a breathing space when war was going badly. This pragmatic approach is responsible, as has been shown, for a Soviet policy of caution in the face of Western strength, but peace has also a more positive role in Soviet thinking.

In the first place, it enables the Soviet Union to tap the economic resources of the West. Thus Khrushchev’s peaceful co-existence drive in the 1950s owed to the need to give the nation time, first to recover after the appalling strains of the previous two decades, and secondly, to attempt to build up Soviet economic and military strength.³⁷ The failure of these economic ambitions motivated the 1971 decision to seek Western financial co-operation as a means of stimulating the Soviet economy.³⁸ But it should not be assumed from this that there is any implicit Soviet recognition of

the international *status quo*. When President Brezhnev declares that détente “does not in the slightest abolish, and it cannot abolish or alter, the laws of class struggle”,³⁹ he makes it clear that in ideological terms “peace” can only mean a temporary suspension of armed conflict.⁴⁰ It does not in any way preclude offensive policies in other spheres., and Soviet writers are quick to pour scorn on “the demands put forward by definite capitalist circles that peaceful co-existence should guarantee the *status quo*”.⁴¹

One other factor ensures that the Soviet concept of “peace” goes little further than an absence of war. It is to a certain extent the Soviet ability to project and emphasize internally the Western threat as a real and present one that justifies the scale of Soviet militarism, just as hate for the enemy is a basic feature of political education. Any real acknowledgement that the Soviet Union could live in peace with the West would seriously undermine the militarist and ideological traditions of state control. But this is unlikely to happen. “Peace” in Western terms implies very much more than a mere absence of war, and there can be little doubt that, in the context of the Marxist-Leninist understanding of the world as it is today, no such view is tenable in the Soviet Union.

The Soviet View of Neutrality

Marxist-Leninist ideology has no use for the notion of “neutrality”; in the class struggle one is either for the proletariat or against it.⁴³ But pragmatism demands greater flexibility, and in practice Soviet policy has assigned two distinct functions to neutrality. The first is closely allied to the use of peace in that it is a product of Soviet weakness. Thus a whole series of non-aggression pacts were signed during the 1920s and 1930s with countries bordering on the Soviet Union together with France, Germany and Italy. The purpose of the treaties was not so much to assure perpetual peace with the countries concerned but rather to avert their incorporation into any hostile alliance.⁴⁴

The second function of neutrality is developed from the first but fulfills a more aggressive strategic purpose. The policy of “neutralism” arose from post-war Soviet attempts to have Austria, Germany and Japan declared states of perpetual neutrality — an objective which would have been, and in the case of Austria was, of considerable strategic advantage to the Soviet Union. In the late 1950s Soviet interest in the theory revived and neutralism was actively promoted amongst the newly independent nations of the post-colonial world.⁴⁵ Significantly it is never to be applied to socialist states, as for them it would be a retrograde step. But it demands from so-called “neutrals” a distinctly leftward bias in such policies as nuclear disarmament and anti-colonialism.⁴⁶ The leading role of Cuba in the “non-aligned” movement is entirely consistent with this Soviet concept of neutralism. In short, the purpose is to *neutralise* states which might otherwise form part of the “imperialist” bloc, or those areas, such as Antarctica, where the Soviet Union would be ill-placed to compete with the West on equal terms. In short neutrality, in Soviet thinking, is like war and peace — an instrument to be used to advance of Soviet policies.

Conclusion

It may be argued that so much emphasis on ideology presents an artificial view of Soviet decision-making. Certainly there is much in Soviet policy that runs contrary to the tenets of Marxism-Leninism, and there is much that may be put down to old-fashioned Russian nationalism. But if opinion is divided as to the precise status of ideology in Soviet policy decisions there is greater agreement as to its effect.⁴⁷ Firstly, it is clear that the details of ideology can be adapted to circumstances without affecting the validity of basic doctrine. Secondly, that ideology legitimates the rule of the CPSU and its control of both foreign and domestic policy. Thirdly, that it provides a rationale by which traditional Russian militarism, expansionism and nationalism can be justified. And finally, that unlike Russian nationalism the goals of Marxism-Leninism provide the basis for a common sense of purpose throughout the Soviet bloc.

In short, to know whether ideology is a prime motivating factor in Soviet policy or merely a source of *ex post facto* justification, matters less than to realise that policy cannot depart from the broad guidelines without calling into question the very foundation on which the morality and legitimacy of the Soviet state are based. It is within those guidelines that we have found these concepts of war, peace and neutrality, and it is that ideology, and its ultimate goals, that we neglect "at our peril".

Footnotes

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3. Pipes, *US-Soviet Relations*, p. 196.
4. B. Wolfe, *An Ideology in Power* (London, 1969), p. 350.
5. P.H. Vigor, *A Guide to Marxism and its Effects on Soviet Development* (London, 1966), *passim*.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 131-45.
7. Pipes, *US-Soviet Relations*, p. 22.
8. Pipes, in *Detente*, ed. G.R. Urban (London, 1976), pp. 175-6.
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11. *Ibid.*, pp. 28-58.
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13. Vigor, *Soviet View*, p. 72.
14. V.I. Lenin, "The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky", 1917, in Greig, p. 14.
15. Vigor, *Soviet View*, p. 72.

16. V.I. Lenin, "Defeat of One's Own Government in Imperialist War", 1915, in Greig, p. 14.
17. Vigor, *Soviet View*, pp. 91-93.
18. V.D. Sokolovsky, *Soviet Military Strategy*, quoted in Vigor, *Soviet View*, p. 87.
19. Vigor, *Soviet View*, p. 106.
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22. Michel Tatu, "Decision Making in the USSR", in *Soviet Strategy in Europe*, ed. Richard Pipes (Stanford, 1976), p. 54.
23. Scott and Scott, p. 84.
24. Vigor, *Soviet View*, pp. 96-99.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 140. Original emphasis.
26. See C.H. Donnelly and P.H. Vigor, "The Soviet Threat to Europe", *Journal of the Royal United Services Institute for Defence Studies*, vol. 120, no. 1 (1975).
27. Pipes, *US-Soviet Relations*, p. 208.
28. Sokolovsky, *Soviet Military Strategy* (3rd ed., 1968; English ed. 1975) ed. H.F. Scott, p. 194.
29. Vigor, *Soviet View*, pp. 96-99.
30. *Ibid.*, pp. 113-114.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 205.
32. Sokolovsky, quoted in Vigor, *Soviet View*, p. 123.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 124. Emphasis added.
34. William Hyland, *Soviet-American Relations: A New Cold War? R-2763* (Santa Monica, Calif., 1981), pp. 50-52.
35. See Vigor, *Soviet View*, p. 146; Ken Booth, *The Military Instrument in Soviet Foreign Policy 1917-72* (London, 1973), pp. 55-56.
36. Pipes, *US-Soviet Relations*, p. 175.
37. Pipes, "Détente", pp. 14-15.
38. *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18.
39. L.I. Brezhnev, Address to 25th Party Congress, *Pravda* 25 Feb. 1976, in *Current Digest of the Soviet Press*, vol. 28, no. 8 (1976), p. 14.
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41. Y. Zakharov, "The World Revolutionary Process and Peaceful Coexistence", *International Affairs*, no. 4 (1978), p. 85.
42. Pipes, *US-Soviet Relations*, pp. 154-5.
43. Vigor, *Soviet View*, p. 178.
44. *Ibid.*, pp. 184-5.
45. *Ibid.*, p. 189.
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47. See, for example Leopold Labeledz, "Soviet Foreign Policy: Looking Back to the Future", in Wesson (New York, 1980), pp. 15-30; R.J. Vincent, *Military Power and Political Influence: The Soviet Union and Western Europe Adelphi Paper, no. 119* (London, 1975), pp. 7-8.