

What Will the Soviets Settle For?

Paul Mojzes

There is an interesting, unconscious but nevertheless real, propaganda collusion between the Marxist-Leninist and the anti-Communist "hard-liner" versions of history. Both maintain that the Communists are winning the contest between East and West.

It is a long-range goal and a matter of declared belief for Marxists that communism is the wave of the future. The more they themselves believe in it and other people accept it, the greater will be their psychological advantage. In this they have been fairly successful. Indeed, there are many people who, though quite unhappy with the Eastern European version of socialism, have come to accept fatalistically that the Soviets and their friends will take over the world.

Without sharing this long-range belief, the "Right-wing" anti-Communists use a similar line of argument as a scare tactic to obtain short-range benefits. They argue the military supremacy of the USSR in the interest of greater defense spending either to achieve or maintain parity or to gain military superiority over the Soviet Union. Such talk, for instance, can be heard often during the domestic debate over SALT II. It is not surprising that a recent poll revealed that most Americans now believe the Soviet Union is in fact the militarily stronger nation, despite repeated assurances by the United States Government that we are militarily and economically second to none.

The "hard-liners," in the long run, are doing us an enormous disservice. To persuade us to be militarily vigilant they project an inflated image of the USSR that no level-headed Soviet can accept as true. They project a Soviet Union that, with great assurance and cunning, marches on to world conquest with no one standing in its way but a weak U.S. and its NATO allies. They play right into the hands of Soviet psychological warfare propagandists.

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The Soviet reality is different indeed. No one who has visited the USSR can fail to see its economic difficulties and disorganization. Its military preparedness is greater than its economic viability, but this military strength is achieved at great economic sacrifice.

Such a sacrifice made a lot of sense to the Soviets in the immediate post-World War II era as they sought to ensure the security of their nation. In addition to overcoming Hitler's assaults—which were, though costly, psychologically satisfying to the Soviet leaders and people—other events boosted to the point of ecstasy their expectations that their social system represented the wave of the future. But, as will be shown, such expectations failed them, and they are forced to reappraise their role in the world.

For thirty years, from 1917 to 1945, they alone among nations had their particular form of social structure. They were justifiably defensive, perceiving themselves surrounded by enemies who threatened that unique social system. At the height of the Nazi attack the system experienced its most acute danger and might have collapsed had not the more imponderable element of patriotism emerged to rescue it, despite economic and military weakness and the notable lack of faith many of its people had in the system.

Suddenly, in 1945, the Soviet Union emerged not merely territorially intact but enlarged. Then, from 1945 to 1948, country after country of Eastern Europe came to be run under the same social system. This too was a cause for celebration by the Soviets. And when, in 1945, the Chinese Communists, contrary to Soviet expectation, were successful in *their* revolution, the Soviets had reason to be jubilant indeed. The world socialist revolution so ardently desired by early Bolsheviks seemed finally to be taking place.

The Titoist Yugoslav defection in 1948 must have seemed to Stalin but a temporary anomaly in the general pattern. With little effort the Yugoslavs might be placed in line within the emerging monolithic Soviet bloc. There was reason to believe the North Koreans could unify Korea under Communist rule. The civil wars in Greece and Iran and the emerging Middle East conflict could be utilized to bring about a Soviet presence in the Mediterranean and the Pacific. All these appeared from the Soviet vantage point as signs of a sure and quick

world domination by their social system, with the USSR in uncontested control—the first socialist nation, whose experience could be applied to other nations. In the early Fifties things looked so good that Stalin felt no need for a doctrine of peaceful coexistence.

In the late Seventies, however, the Soviet Union is not in the same enviable situation it was in the Fifties, despite the fact that it is today more powerful militarily and more developed economically. Its vision of the unified socialist bloc of nations is shattered. Not only did Yugoslavia continue on its independent path, but it also fostered the creation of a group of nonaligned Asian and African nations which, while anti-colonialist—i.e., anti-Western—did not relish full partnership with the Soviet Union. Even more ominous, other socialist nations began to defect.

The well-known Sino-Soviet split resulted in virulent animosity between the two socialist giants and caused the Soviets practical and theoretical difficulties. The Chinese policy seemed to be to do everything that would aggravate the Soviets. The Albanians, too, left the bloc. The Rumanians only thinly veil their desire to become nonaligned and cannot be counted on. The Hungarians, Czechoslovaks, and Poles showed on several occasions that theirs is a limited loyalty. The recent visit of Pope John Paul II must have reconfirmed the tenuousness of the Soviet hold on Poland.

Egypt, once a reliable ally, turned pro-American. The inroads made in Africa are unreliable and appear to be costly efforts with only temporary success, as Ghana, Algeria, and Somalia have demonstrated. The Southeast Asian victories in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia can by no means be chalked up in the column of Soviet victories. Indeed, genocidal Kampuchea and China's attempt to "discipline" Vietnam can only be embarrassing to communism. From the Soviet view there is reason to rejoice in Cuba, which has become ever more tightly tied to them, but at enormous economic cost to the Soviets, which so far has not paid off in additional pro-Soviet revolutions in South America.

It is obvious that if the Soviets are optimistic at all in the late Seventies, it must be a very guarded kind of optimism. Most likely they are in a mood to try to shore up their gains and hold on to what can be held to, lest they find themselves again totally alone in the family of nations. In my estimate the Soviets are—at least for the time being—quite sincere in their attempts to promote peaceful coexistence, détente, and arms limitations. All of these offer them a chance to keep the status quo, for which they are quite willing to settle. Of course, should an unexpected chance occur, such as in Afghanistan, they are no more likely to let this pass by than the U.S. would pass up a pro-American development in Iran or Afghanistan. But neither Afghanistan nor Iran nor Ethiopia nor any of the countries that are currently an embarrassment to American foreign policy can be counted on to be of permanent advantage to the Soviet Union.

The Soviets need détente to hold on to those countries that are truly of interest to them: those on their immediate borders in Europe. Under conditions of détente the

Soviet Union would seek ways to work out its tenuous relationship with them. For their own reasons Eastern European countries also welcome détente and the disarmament of the two superpowers, for this gives them a chance for greater autonomy.

The reason that Richard Nixon and Leonid Brezhnev got along so well was that Nixon understood the Soviet need to call an area "its own" and would make concessions to an American sphere of interest. Jimmy Carter's Soviet policy is not nearly as transparent and is often interpreted by the Soviets as an attempt to unsettle their position in their own sphere of influence. They perceive Carter's policies as aggressive counterattacks. SALT II is to them evidence that they learned how to deal with Carter.

Because they are aware of the difficulties the Soviets are experiencing and of the superiority of the system of private enterprise in producing goods (including military hardware), U.S. policymakers face a great temptation, which probably quickens the pulse of every true "cold warrior." The temptation is to push the Soviet Union into a tremendously escalating and costly arms race in the hope that the Soviet economic system would be unable to bear the strain and would collapse in economic devastation.

A Soviet diplomat, who shall remain anonymous, compared the Soviet-American competition to a race between a four-cylinder car and an eight-cylinder car (leaving no doubt that the four-cylinder engine is his country's system). If both cars were to accelerate to great speeds, the four-cylinder engine would burst at some point, while the other car would speed off to uncontested victory. However, the diplomat warned—and justly so, in my opinion—this is not an altogether apt analogy. Despite the Marxist belief in the primacy of economic matters, the Soviets are not, at least in this case, economic reductionists. "Do not push the Russian bear into a corner," he cautioned.

Neither should we be economic reductionists. Our leaders would be ill-advised to consider the economic and political difficulties of the USSR as reasons for pushing them against the wall. Before their economic system snaps the Soviets are likely to unleash their military potential in order to save themselves, just as the U.S. is likely to do if pressed against the wall.

Our policymakers, we have reason to believe, know the threshold of Soviet tolerance. They are also aware of the military power of both nations—though this should not create undue concern for the national security of the United States. But many of our people and politicians still need to be educated about the limits of power, about the extent of the threat of nuclear war, and especially about Soviet intentions. These intentions, while not crystal clear, are certainly not "a riddle wrapped in an enigma," to borrow Churchill's phrase. Soviet policy is on the whole no more irrational than the policy of any other nation, though it may not be spelled out in a language that lends itself to the immediate understanding of casual observers. Our political traditions and figures of speech are different, but our fundamental human and social needs for survival are mutually understandable.

As long as both the Soviet Union and the United States harbor the hope that one of them will discover the ultimate weapon, the weapon that allows it to strike first and demolish the counterstrike capability of the other, the world stands in danger of a nuclear holocaust. The discovery of such a weapon would create an enormous temptation to blackmail the other nation to surrender. The same temptation would exist if either superpower were to disarm unilaterally. The world could not depend on the goodwill of the Pentagon or the Soviet military establishment if clear military preeminence were obtainable.

The Soviet Union is willing to settle for gradual disarmament and for holding on to their present sphere of influence, hoping to prevent our calculated efforts from unsettling them there. This is the plan that for the time being makes most sense to them, given the present international situation. Surely they would like to be in a better position; we cannot hold that against them. But they are not in a very advantageous position today. Nor are we. As Marxists, the Soviets put little hope in good and honorable intentions, but they do believe in self-interest. They know that their self-interest dictates arms limitations and some sort of general political and economic accommodation with Western industrial nations, with open hostility limited to the sphere of ideology. They count on this as being ultimately in the greatest self-interest of their competitors as well.

And so it is. With the exception of the "hot-heads" who nurse imperial ambitions for

this country that would dictate bringing our opponents to their knees, most people in the U.S., including the responsible leadership, know that arms limitations and general accommodations to the existence of the antagonistic social system as practiced by the Soviet Union are in the best interest of the United States. This is why SALT II and similar treaties will be eventually accepted, despite the present loud opposition to them.

Ultimately, those who oppose the Soviet system have more to gain by waiting and hoping it will change from within than by hoping for war, just as the Soviets have to concede that the best they can expect is that our social system will change from within. It is far better to put hope against hope than one threat of extinction against another threat of extinction!

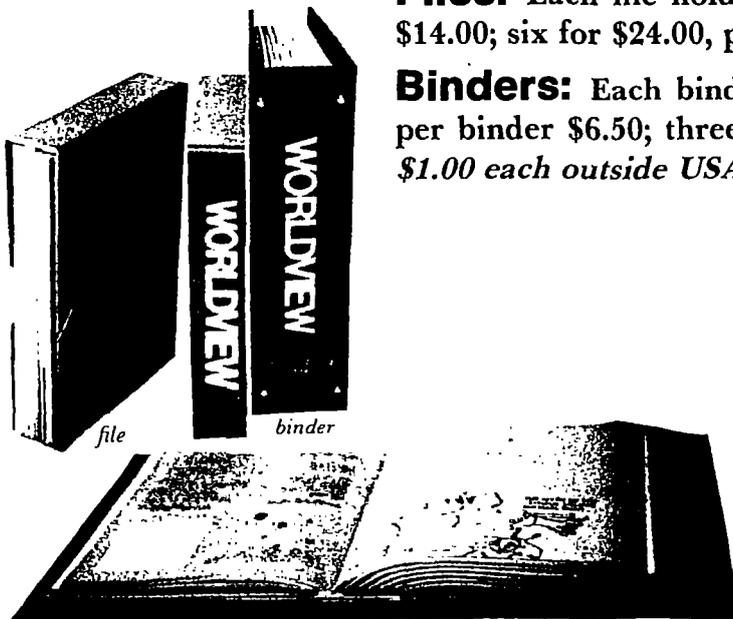
The Soviet Union will settle for hope in the ultimate victory of their socio-economic system, aided by some interventionism in muddled international waters and a lot of muscle on the domestic front. Our system does not need the muscle on the domestic front. We should be satisfied with the hope and expectation that freedom, democracy, and human rights will prevail in the future, everywhere. We, too, will likely use some interventions, we trust wisely, for the advance of our hopes, provided we learn how to control the fluctuation of our economic system. Neither we nor the Soviet Union must be pushed to settle for war. Both are now quite willing to settle for less than they once desired. This may be a welcome sign of maturity on the part of the two superpowers. 

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