

Soviet view of nuclear war

practical tool of policy for the USSR, but they still were forced to insist that *all* wars remained a continuation of the political process. So in this sense, even a nuclear conflict could to some degree seem "rational," especially to desperate "imperialists" who might see it as their only chance of "reversing the tide of history." This last consideration also helps explain, of course, why the Soviet military authorities have gone on implementing measures aimed at raising their damage limitation, war-fighting and war-survival (rather than "war-winning") capabilities. After all, given the fact that a nuclear war was still theoretically possible, any other policy would be irresponsible and risk a repeat of the disasters of 1941 on a mammoth scale.

Even so, some Western specialists predictably saw matters otherwise. They included Pipes, for whom the Soviets' continued adherence to the Clausewitzian-Leninist dictum quite simply signified that they really believed that a nuclear war "is not suicidal, [that] it can be fought and won, and thus [that a] resort to war must not be ruled out." Writing in *Commentary* in July 1977, Pipes argued that this Soviet belief "spells the rejection of the whole basis on which US strategy has come to rest," and that "as long as the Soviets persist in adhering to the Clausewitzian maxim on the function of war, mutual deterrence does not really exist." For the same reason one obviously can contend that Moscow's expressed fears about the disastrous outcome of a nuclear struggle be taken with a large grain of salt, and that one should prepare to meet the USSR on its own terms. Since this is precisely the position adopted by the Reagan administration, it is no accident that Professor Pipes serves as one of its leading advisers on matters Soviet.

Double guessing in earnest

Yet good grounds exist both for challenging this view's validity and for suggesting that the Kremlin's leaders themselves have redefined their own interpretation of the Clausewitzian principle, perhaps in response to just such critics as Pipes. To begin with, one should stress that they never saw the dictum in question as a recommendation that war, thermonuclear or otherwise, was a beneficial or even necessary means of pursuing policy. For them, rather, Clausewitz and Lenin had merely stated the simple facts that the use of armed force was one of many available means of gaining certain ends, and that when a state went to war, it did so in order to achieve some political goal. And in this sense it is difficult to deny that any armed conflict between nations is not precisely "a continuation of politics" by violent means. In addition, once this formula became part and parcel of Marxism-Leninism, it helped focus study on the origins and political essence of each particular conflict, which in turn became the method for deciding whether or not a struggle could be classified as "just" or "progressive." But as Lieutenant Colonel E. Rybkin pointed out in *Communist of the Armed Forces* in September 1965, just because "war is always the continuation of politics . . . it cannot always serve as its [politics] weapon." In other words, the maxim clearly has *descriptive*, but not necessarily *prescriptive*, merits.

This qualification has special relevance in discussions of nuclear war, a point Soviet military and political writers have had little reticence in making. Until recently the problem was that faculty members of the prestigious Lenin Political-Military Academy — the institutional guardian of

political orthodoxy for the Soviet Armed Forces — have chastised those challenging the Clausewitzian-Leninist formula for "methodological errors," and particularly for not clearly distinguishing between the descriptive and prescriptive aspects just mentioned. Thus in the mid-1960s Rybkin himself and others criticized Major General N.S. Talenskii for arguing that a thermonuclear war could *not* serve as means for achieving political ends. However, by 1973 Rybkin had joined those who insisted that "a total nuclear war is unacceptable as a means of gaining a political goal," since the destructiveness of thermonuclear weapons now made "such a war an unfeasible means of policy." Again the time was not ripe for such a seemingly radical revision of Lenin's teachings. This fact perhaps reflected orthodox theorists' concern that such a step would reflect adversely on the "justness," and by inference on the rationality, of the Soviet Union's responding in kind to any nuclear strike launched by an enemy. In any case, those rejecting the revisionists' position in the military press usually coupled their arguments to warnings that if attacked by nuclear weapons, the USSR would not hesitate to return the blow.

War if necessary, but not necessarily war

Signs of a change in this situation appeared in 1979. Then Aleksandr Bovin, a prominent *Izvestia* commentator who also had been attacked widely in 1973 for expressing opinions similar to Rybkin's, took the lead. He twice told listeners to Radio Moscow's domestic service that "while any war, in any age, always has been and always will be the continuation of some particular policy of a particular class or state," a nuclear war could not be considered to be a *rational* means of pursuing political objectives. He therefore insisted that on this issue "the interests of the socialist countries coincide." Significantly, Bovin's remarks provoked no angry reproofs. Instead, support began coming from the very highest levels. By September 1980 B.N. Ponomarev, a Secretary of the Party's Central Committee, was telling an audience in Sophia that "world war as a means of achieving political goals has become impossible. It is senseless to count on such a war to establish, for example, the hegemony of the United States or Peking."

Such sentiments accorded well with those found in other Soviet pronouncements, as well as with the tone of Brezhnev's speeches. Now to the Premier's warnings that "mankind might be totally destroyed" in a conflict (November 1976) was added explicitly the logical conclusion that neither superpower could win a "nuclear duel" (*Pravda*, January 15, 1981). Although other leading spokesmen expressed similar thoughts, Army General A.A. Epishev's indirect confirmation of their validity deserves special note. As head of the Armed Forces' Main Political Administration, he is the high priest of the Marxist orthodoxy of contemporary Soviet military doctrine, for which reason one who might well have been expected to object to these developments. However, the January 16, 1981, issue of *Red Star*, the Ministry of Defence's official newspaper, quoted this officer as calling attention to recent "reckless" American policies that could "push the world into the abyss of a thermonuclear catastrophe."

Although in part these statements may have been intended as an answer to some Western Kremlinologists, none explicitly had met Pipes's criterion by openly and officially rejecting the Clausewitzian formula's applicability to nuclear war as such. True, Bovin's careful