

Nuclear War and Soviet Policy

by David R. Jones

It is now clear that President Reagan's administration, in spite of the widespread doubts and opposition of many, intends to provide the United States with the theoretical capability to wage a protracted nuclear conflict. Two basic assumptions are used to justify this policy. Firstly, the President and his colleagues claim to believe that the West has become dangerously inferior to the Soviet Union in strategic nuclear weaponry. This assessment is at best debatable. But since it has been challenged by numerous eminent specialists at home and abroad, it is not my intention to comment on it here. It is rather the administration's second assumption which I want to examine. This maintains that in Soviet military and political thought, wars — nuclear conflicts included — continue to be considered a rational means (or "viable policy option") for attaining political goals, and that therefore the Kremlin is persisting in efforts to develop superior "nuclear war-fighting and war-winning capabilities" for use in hastening the "inevitable" victory of "socialism-communism" over "capitalism-imperialism." And if this is true, any responsible Western statesman can only support concerted and costly defence programs to convince Soviet leaders that such hopes are illusions.

Politicians arguing this case have drawn support from a phalanx of conservative Kremlinologists, among whom Professor Richard Pipes is the best known. Even so, this interpretation deserves careful scrutiny, if only because it stands in sharp contrast to Soviet statements which insist that an East/West nuclear conflict cannot remain limited, but that it must entail a tragedy of worldwide proportions. During 1980 and 1981 no less a figure than Premier Brezhnev himself issued a number of warnings couched in these terms. On one occasion, for example, he cautioned that any US/Soviet war would have "disastrous consequences . . . for mankind because it inevitably would assume a global nature." On another he told delegates of the Supreme Soviet that if "modern weapons . . . were unleashed, the future of all mankind would hang in the balance." Yet there are some who still suggest that such sentiments are only crafty, propagandistic responses to Washington's newly-found determination to match and negate the supposedly rapid expansion of Soviet military might.

Soviet war fears

Nevertheless, it is hard to dismiss such statements merely as a passing phenomenon or temporary expedient. Soviet spokesmen at all levels have expressed similar views

throughout the 1970s. Indeed, as early as January 12, 1965, an article in *Pravda* argued that even if a nuclear war would bring down capitalism, "the destruction would be so great that this would not speed up the transition to socialism but, on the contrary, it would throw mankind a long way backwards." In a still more dire vein, during the early 1970s Brezhnev worried that a "nuclear war could result in hundreds of millions of deaths, the destruction of entire countries and contamination of the earth's surface and atmosphere." More recently, apart from the growing frequency of such warnings, the USSR's officially-sanctioned vigorous support for groups such as "Physicians Against Nuclear War" can be seen as part of an increasingly frantic desire to convince Western policy-makers that the Politburo regards a nuclear exchange as a catastrophe of unimaginable magnitude.

Given this background, why have many found the views of conservative Kremlinologists so persuasive? To some extent this results from the latter's buttressing of their interpretations by what appear to be official Soviet statements, but what in fact are often only partial quotations taken out of context. For instance, an analyst may cite a section of a quote that speaks of the downfall of capitalism, but simultaneously down-play — or simply ignore — the qualifiers about a nuclear conflict's general, disastrous consequences. Quite apart from such carelessness, however, for a time such experts could justify their conclusions in part by a long-standing and apparent contradiction that was to be found in Moscow's pronouncements on military policy. For in 1915 Lenin had analyzed the teachings of the great German military thinker Karl von Clausewitz. Thanks to this, many of the latter's conclusions on the nature of war were incorporated into Marxist-Leninist military doctrine.

Clausewitzian confusions

For our purposes, the most important consequence was the Soviet's rigid acceptance of the Clausewitzian-Leninist formula that "war is the continuation of politics [or of policy] by other, that is by violent, means." Therefore Soviet theoreticians might reject thermonuclear war as a

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