

The background: Marx, Lenin, Stalin and the theory of international relations

It seems that I have left out a section of Lenin's fundamental thoughts about the approach to the program and they are worth recalling.

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MARX AND ENGELS

At first glance one is struck by the dearth of substantive references to Marx and Engels in contemporary Soviet writing on international relations. True, Marx and Engels are often enough hailed as offering the first genuinely systemic view of society and the world, but little beyond this is said in indication of Marx and Engels' actual contribution to the study of relations among states. Such silence, though, is hardly surprising, since in fact neither Marx nor Engels devoted any sustained attention to international relations, though they frequently wrote of world politics, which could encompass the role of classes, and the various diplomatic constellations and maneuvers of the day.¹ It is interesting to note, however, that most of what Marx in particular had to say about international relations was concerned with relations among states, on the whole diplomatic, military, and colonial affairs. Like other historians of the nineteenth century, Marx and Engels saw through the prism of great power politics, and not in the perspective of a "*Europe des nations*." And, as in the case of Lenin, whose authority is constantly invoked in Soviet writings on international relations, the materialist conception of history, despite its stress on economic determinism, is modified by the role they attribute to voluntary human activity, especially where revolutionary action is concerned. "Thanks to this 'corrective,'"

* Aside by Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev in his Political Report to the 27th Soviet Party Congress, 25 February 1986.

Molnar notes, "international politics displays [for Marx and Engels] a certain autonomy in relation to economic forces."² This "corrective," it should be added, also prepared the ground for Lenin's decisive contribution, i.e., the salvaging of Marxism "through the concept of social practice which becomes the decisive verificatory criterion of theory," or Marxism–Leninism.³ While objective forces, above all the social and political consequences of the state of the means of production in relation to the "mode," or organization of production, continued to determine the nature of a given historical epoch, the actual course of events depended on the conscious intervention of men in the historical process. That the efficacy of such intervention depended on the degree to which the objective "laws" of a period were subjectively apprehended (in the sense of "freedom as recognition of necessity") in no way effaced the decisiveness of the human element. The introduction of this subjective element, with its consequent enhancement of the influence of the political and ideological "super-structure" on the economic "base," imparts a certain flexibility to Soviet thinking on international relations which is concealed by notions of a rigidly deterministic Soviet ideology.

Although it is true that Marx never formulated a theory of international relations, he did help "to 'unveil' one aspect of international relations that was completely ignored in his time. He had the merit," writes Marcel Merle:

of bringing out the interdependence of phenomena – economic and political, internal and external – and to discern, behind the apparent incoherence of the facts, the inexorable march toward the globalization of international relations. If he had not necessarily discovered the actual motor of social evolution, he at least formulated a hypothesis which explains a portion of the facts and which remains one of the possible outcomes of an uncertain future.⁴

The Marxist hypothesis states, of course, that the contradiction between the means and the mode of production under capitalism leads to a dynamic surge on the part of capitalism to expand in an effort to resolve this fundamental tension – new markets, in particular, would enable capitalists to dispose of otherwise surplus production. This expansionist drive, which cannot be understood simply in terms of the system of sovereign states but which must incorporate the increasingly internationalist perspective of the holders of "capital," leads to the globalization of the capitalist system whereupon, the labour–capital conflict having become insoluble, capitalism self-destructs and the reign of socialism is ushered in.⁵

In this way Marx's theory breaks totally with traditional approaches of understanding international relations. Whereas traditionally states, possessing juridical sovereignty and standing over the nations they ruled, were considered the focal point of international relations, Marx argued for what today might be called a "transnational" perspective, concentrating especially on the increasingly internationalist character of the forces of production. Indeed, in this regard Marx's analysis was quite consistent with that of the liberal Manchester School critique in favor of free trade. Marx simply carried that critique further. He viewed the state as subject to the influence of the very economic forces it had so recently set in motion. Where others took the interstate order as given, and were preoccupied with ways of assuring its "stability" (or its subordination to a hegemonic power), Marx viewed the state system as a temporary phase in the transition from feudalism to socialism *via* "bourgeois", and initially national capitalism. The international aspect is thus central to Marx's revolutionary vision. And the validity of his view of international relations, as well as of revolution itself, collapses if his predictions on the self-destruction of capitalism are not fulfilled. It is this insufficiency of the critique, "its relative failure . . . to account for contemporary international realities"⁶ through its underestimation of the independent vitality of the political, national, and technological forces which makes international relations the area of greatest confrontation between Marx and his ideological successors.

In its pure, theoretical form, then, Marx's critique of international relations subordinates political struggle to the imputed requirements of the capitalist system and is strictly determinist. Yet, in examining specific aspects of the international politics of his day, such as the foreign policy of Tsarist Russia or capitalist Britain, Marx was not, in a sense, a "Marxist". In his journalistic writings for the *New York Herald*, for example, Marx focused, as the Romanian Marxist sociologist Silviu Brucan has said:

on such factors as the mutual influence between the forces of revolution and those of counter-revolution; the rivalries between the big powers; Prussia's aspiration to become a major power and the opposition it encountered from Russia and Austria; the revival of old European antagonisms generated by the struggle for territories, strategic positions, and commercial routes and markets, and for influence in the Middle East; and the role played in that general ambience by the nationalist ideologies of various European countries.⁷

Marx noted, for example, that the Second French Republic often had the same foreign policy as the France of King Louis Philippe, thus

recognizing the imperatives that geopolitical position imposed upon states.

In his discussion of colonialism, whose cruelties were justified, in Marx's mind, by its historical effect of breaking down traditional socio-economic structures and paving the way for the universalization of the capitalist system, Marx often gave ample consideration to the influence exerted by non-economic factors.⁹ He conceded that profits derived from colonialism could be of a purely private, and not national, character, and that the total cost of colonial enterprises could be negative (just as the Manchester liberals argued, to continue the parallel).⁹ In an article written for the *New York Herald* Marx gave an analysis of Persian–Afghan political antagonisms “founded on diversity of race, blended with historical reminiscences, kept alive by frontier quarrels and rival claims . . . sanctioned by religious antagonism.”¹⁰

It is in his writings on the Euro-centric international balance of power, however, focusing above all on the position of Imperial Russia, that Marx's attitude to contemporary international relations most closely resembles the classical, state-centric approach that is best epitomized in the work of Leopold von Ranke. Though Marx's concern, indeed obsession, with Russian foreign policy was ultimately tied to his general conception of revolution, and the obstacle that was posed by a powerful, reactionary Russia, his analysis of the play of power interests preserves a certain autonomy in relation to his revolutionary theories. Most immediately concerned with the organization of the revolution in Germany, and hence in the consolidation of the historically “progressive” German bourgeoisie (as well as proletariat), Marx was a fervent advocate of a unified Germany. The precise nature of the unification, whether carried out by the Frankfurt liberals or under Prussian auspices, was a secondary consideration.¹¹ Consequently, Marx developed an analysis of the European balance of power that was tied to his interest in a strong Germany (as a “civilized” country) and that came to resemble very closely a “power-politics” approach, hinging directly on the relationship between Prussia, Poland, and Russia. In terms of content, Marx's writings on the subject are filled with a passionate analysis of political intrigues; methodologically, there is very little reference to social and economic forces.

For Marx, Prussia would necessarily remain subordinate to Russia, the bastion of reaction, in the absence of an independent Poland as buffer and check upon Russian policy. Since the Polish question was,

for Marx, the German question, containment of Russian power became, in some sense, the indispensable precondition for the liberation of the revolutionary forces in Europe. The Russian suppression of the Hungarian revolution in 1849 naturally weighed heavily on Marx's mind. Yet Marx also saw that the prospects for Russian foreign policy were intimately tied to British foreign policy and its relation to the "Orient," which extended from the Balkans through the Middle East to include Afghanistan and India. Anglo-Russian rivalry thus came to occupy a critical place in Marx's preoccupations with international politics.

There is no neat way to separate these concerns from each other in Marx's thought. Each impinged on the others. Topics of particular interest, though, were the events of the revolutions of 1848–9 and the Russian threat to Europe and German politics; the Crimean War; the foreign policies of Napoleon III in Italy, Mexico, and Western Europe, with the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1 as the culminating point; and the American Civil War. It was Marx and Engels' view of Russia, Poland, and Germany, as we have said, which occupied the center of their attention on international politics; international politics, in turn, had become essential to their revolutionary outlook. And yet, it

represents an entirely new revolutionary conception compared to *The Communist Manifesto*. Foreign policy, the struggle among nations, takes precedence over class struggle, even only temporarily. States become invested with a role that only classes could fulfill in the *Manifesto*. They embody in some sense the revolution. Instead of being absorbed by the revolution, it is international politics which absorbs, envelops, and implements social struggles. And it is German foreign policy which bears, more than any other, this new mission.¹²

Thus Engels supported German claims on Schleswig, in the name of civilization *versus* "barbarism," and the law of historical development (and which would lead, as Molnar notes, to the "Brezhnev Doctrine" *via* the colonization of Asiatic countries).

In their analysis of the Crimean War, which really represents their first analysis of international politics *per se*, Marx and Engels transformed the very meaning of revolution in their unqualified, indeed enthusiastic support for the British and French position. Whereas 1848–9 presented a revolution without war, the Crimean War of 1853–6 posed the problem of war without revolution, yet war with revolutionary import nonetheless. In their unstinting opposition to Tsarist Russia, which they regarded as an inherently expansionist

power whose “natural” frontiers would extend from Stettin to Trieste unchecked, Marx and Engels clearly hoped more for some change in the balance of power than in revolution or revolutionary war, as in 1848–9. The very meaning of revolution was changed – it no longer connoted insurrection as much as the “process” or “march” of history. In this way power politics was fitted into the Marxian revolutionary framework. Any action was justified toward undermining Russian power, including the encouragement of Serbian and Romanian nationalism as bulwarks against it.

To sum up, we note that, on the one hand Marx, whose first concern was revolution, was interested in the world as a whole rather than in international relations as such. His global vision encompassed class-conflict, not the conflict among states. For Marx, the “horizontal division [of the world] into states is only a surface projection of the basic conflict between classes and serves only to conceal the real struggle underneath.”¹³ Although, as we have suggested, the “base-superstructure” relationship is dynamic, the superstructure, i.e., the realm of the political, can never substantially modify the irresistible economic currents. Hence, there are no essential distinctions among “capitalist” states. International antagonism is absolutely dependent on domestic strife. Thus Marx posits, to the extent that he explicitly treats the subject at all, a reductionist theoretical vision of international relations. The nature of international relations, of the international system, is to be understood in terms of the nature of its constituent units. This, of course, represents Marx’s fundamental position on the subject and is his major legacy to history with respect to it.

Yet diplomacy eventually assumes capital importance for Marx and Engels. They integrated the study of diplomacy with their conception of revolutionary action and historical factors in an attempt to grasp and advance the movement of history. An event of international politics could have direct repercussions on the revolutionary cause through changes in the existing equilibrium of interstate power, economic change, change in the structure of the international order, etc. To this extent, their view of international relations possesses a certain independence as a field of analysis. The tension between the class-oriented, economics-grounded, determinist analysis of the *Manifesto* and the state-focused, politically-oriented, open-ended critique of international power would continue to inform the attitudes of Marx and Engels’ ideological heirs in the Soviet Union from Lenin’s time to the present day.

LENIN: "IMPERIALISM"

To the extent that the Soviet Union is credited with a theory of international relations at all, one is thrown back to Lenin's critique of "imperialism." It is curious critique, for it combines, in its purest form, a reductionist interpretation of international relations with a voluntarist vision of revolution. War, and by extension interstate tension and conflict, is an inevitable corollary of the division of society into classes and can hence be abolished only with the abolition of classes. International relations are thus conceived as a deterministic projection of the contradictions of capitalism onto a crisis-ridden world capitalist system. The study of the topic is, in this view, fundamentally a problem of global political economy. The "problem of studying imperialism," Lenin's student Bukharin wrote in 1915, "its economic characteristics, and its future, reduces itself to the problem of analyzing the tendencies in the development of the world economy, and of the probable changes in its inner structure."¹⁴ It is thus that we associate with Lenin the most prominent features of traditional Soviet theory of international relations: the primacy of "objective," economic factors; the law of uneven capitalist development as the generator of the driving tensions of international relations; the classification of states, following Marx and Engels, into oppressor and oppressed; the inevitability of war in a class-riven international society; the inseparability of the survival of socialism from the successful advent of the world revolution.

Lenin's analysis, most clearly expressed in *Imperialism. The Highest Stage of Capitalism*, focused on the dynamics of the internal contradictions of capitalism to explain international political behavior. World politics, in this view, is merely the field for the resolution of these contradictions. The economic factor is dominant; it is the character of the individual units which defines the essence of the international "system of states." It was thus necessary for the student of international politics to acquire a thorough mastery of "the fundamental economic question, *viz.*, the economic essence of imperialism, for unless this is studied, it will be impossible to understand and appraise modern war and modern politics."¹⁵

For Lenin the term "imperialism" acquired a peculiar meaning. Traditionally conceived of as a particular kind of power relationship between at least two political units, imperialism became for Lenin a condition, and an essentially economic condition at that. Now

imperialism was the highest stage of capitalism. The progressive concentration of production, foreseen by Marx, had led to the transformation of competitive capitalism, which was considered an historically progressive force, into “monopolistic, finance” capitalism, viewed by Lenin as both parasitic and dangerous.¹⁶ The fusion of banking and industrial capital, which Lenin noted particularly in the somewhat exceptional case of Germany, led to the creation about 1900 of a narrow financial oligarchy, both national and international, which held the economic life of whole countries between its hands. “Finance capital is such . . . a decisive force in all economic and international relations,” Lenin wrote, “that it is capable of subordinating to itself, and actually does subordinate to itself, even states enjoying complete political independence.” Faced with the necessity of disposing of surplus capital that was incapable of being profitably invested in the home market, this new “imperialism” intended to continue the division of the globe by the great capitalist powers to secure markets for goods and outlets for capital. “The more capitalism develops,” wrote Lenin, “the more the need for new materials arises, the more bitter competition becomes, and the more feverishly the hunt for raw materials proceeds all over the world, the more desperate becomes the struggle for the acquisition of colonies.” These five elements – monopolization; the merging of bank capital with industrial capital and the consequent emergence of a powerful financial oligarchy; the export of capital, which is critical to the system’s survival, as distinct from the export of commodities; the rise of *international* monopolies which divide the world amongst themselves; and the completion of the territorial division of the world – constitute the core of the Leninist critique of imperialism.¹⁷

How does this structural analysis, though, lead to an explanation of international political behavior, especially of war? How is it that imperialism necessarily generates war, and ultimately world war, as Lenin held? How, in short, is Lenin’s skeletal analysis fleshed out, as it were? Lenin advances the thesis of the uneven development of capitalism, a kind of power-disequilibrium analysis, to explain the phenomenon of war. “Is there,” Lenin asks, “*under capitalism*, any means of remedying the disparity between the development of productive forces on the one side, and the division of the colonies and ‘spheres of influence’ by finance capital on the other side – other than by resorting to war?” The answer is emphatically no. In spite of the increasingly internationalist character of capital, there is no basis

under capitalism for permanent alliances, such as negotiated spheres-of-influence arrangements. Such alliances, in Lenin's view, were based on calculations of strength – economic, financial, military – and the strength of the participants does not change in equal measure because of the uneven development of capitalism. In particular, the changes in the relative standing of the capitalist powers that would take place in the “scramble” for colonial dominion would reinforce the inequalities in levels of development among capitalist states, intensifying still further the struggle for colonies and necessarily implying the resort to force. Such alliances, Lenin concluded, are therefore inevitably nothing more than truces in the periods between wars.¹⁸ In this “anarchical” *milieu* (though one of an admittedly distorted market-kind rather than an international-political one, properly speaking) characteristic of contemporary imperialism, “there is nothing else that periodically restores the disturbed equilibrium [a product of the uneven development of capitalism] than crises in industry and war in politics.” “There is and there can be no other way of testing the real strength of a capitalist state,” Lenin concluded, “than that of war.”¹⁹

War, then, is produced by conflicts of interest, heightened by differing levels of economic, and thus political and military development, that are endemic to the capitalist mode of production. If capitalism were to be abolished, as it necessarily would be, and replaced by socialism, wars would cease. “We understand,” Lenin declared, “the inevitable connection which relates wars to the class struggles within a country . . . that it is impossible to suppress wars without suppressing classes and without installing socialism.”²⁰

Thus Lenin, like the Marx of *The Communist Manifesto*, presents an economically determinist view of international relations, in which the explanatory source of international behavior is located in the nature of the constituent units of the international “system.” That is, capitalist states must produce war, socialist states will not. The state system is secondary to the global social system; in a sense, as the Soviet theorist Vladimir Gantman wrote in 1969, the international social system (capitalism vs. socialism) “runs deeper” than the interstate system (the US vs. the USSR).²¹

We know, however, that Lenin's opinions were ultimately far from categorical on these issues. Arguing that inasmuch as knowledge is a reflection, or copy, of reality, and that the only true test of knowledge is practice, Lenin opened the way to the introduction, and even the primacy, of the “subjective” element. The October Revolution itself is

inconceivable without this conviction on Lenin's part. The test of practice, ironically, would later modify another of Lenin's central propositions, that concerning the necessity of world revolution (or at least revolution in Germany) for the survival of socialism.

Though Lenin conceded the theoretical possibility of "socialism in one country" as early as August 1915, he clearly had the triumph of socialism in one of the advanced capitalist countries in mind.²² "The task of the proletariat in Russia," Lenin argued, "is to complete the bourgeois-democratic revolution in Russia *in order* to kindle the socialist revolution in Europe." The pervasive internationalism of Lenin's pre-revolutionary outlook is reflected in article 20 of the Soviet Constitution of 1918. All foreign workers residing in the territory of the Russian Republic possessed Soviet citizenship because of their *class* affiliation. (Strictly speaking, of course, the contemporary Soviet Union is not a state but a federation of soviet republics.) The later assertion of the thesis of socialism-in-one-country, foreshadowed even in the Soviet debate on the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk of March 1918, is all the more striking.

The development of the concept of "peaceful cohabitation" with the capitalist world may be seen as another rent in the classical Leninist critique. In his closing speech to the Tenth All-Russia Party Congress in late May 1921, Lenin held that a rough "equilibrium" prevailed between revolutionary Russia and the capitalist world. He did not speak of "coexistence" (*sosushchestvovaniye*), though he had already introduced the word "cohabitation" (*sozhitel'stvo*), in an interview with a Western journalist on 18 February 1920, "as a Soviet *aim*." Lenin argued before the Congress that "we are now exercising our main influence on the international revolution through our economic policy [i.e., of cultivating state-to-state contacts with the capitalist world]." ²³

Thus, as with Marx and Engels, there is a genuine problem in determining the "real" Lenin. Lenin's prodigious output, reflecting his experiences as theorist and statesman, only magnifies this difficulty. One can, with little hindrance, search and find the appropriate citations for almost any point one wishes to make. Indeed, an entire department of the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party is devoted to providing exactly such a service for Soviet leaders and journalists.²⁴ The point is simply that Lenin too, through a voluminous and often contradictory output and a view of international relations that evolved from an apocalyptic one envisaging, and expecting, the

end of international relations itself to one that was considerably less deterministic and sure of itself, does not represent for contemporary Soviet theorists on international relations the last word on the subject. This does not mean that Lenin is not terribly important, certainly in the normative sense and probably in setting the bounds to the discourse as well. It does suggest, though, that Lenin's writings, which unlike Marx and Engels' did explicitly consider international relations as such, are subject to and indeed experience "creative" interpretation on the part of respected and influential Soviet theorists on the subject.²⁵

STALIN: "SOCIALISM IN ONE COUNTRY"

Curiously enough it was Stalin, for all of his strident dogmatism and general ignorance of the outside world, who in effect laid the foundation for the eventual development of international relations as a self-conscious area of study in the Soviet Union, though he annihilated or terrorized many of its practitioners in the process. While it is true, as Barghoorn put it, that Stalin had "followed Lenin's conception of international relations as essentially a struggle between Soviet Russia and her foreign supporters and a capitalist camp usually wracked by contradictions," he was nevertheless "the first Marxist writer to formulate a theory of international relations that would not explicitly incorporate a theory of the end of international relations and in so doing started a process that continues to the present day."²⁶ The concept of "socialism in one country," by distinguishing the complete, or domestic victory of socialism from the final, or worldwide victory of communism, superseded Lenin's perception of international relations as above all a field for the class struggle and substituted for it Stalin's conception of international relations as "a subject around which the struggle for power raged . . . [C]ontroversial issues in the domestic environment were [thus] all to a greater or lesser extent reflections or derivations of international developments and relationships."²⁷ The idea of the Soviet state was itself transformed with this conception of international relations. No longer, at least not primarily, focused outward toward and expanding into and incorporating a vulnerable and receptive international environment, the Soviet state was to turn inward, to be sealed off as a "healed area," as Kubalkova and Cruickshank suggest, permanently isolated from the rest of the diseased capitalist body. This Stalinist corollary, as it were, to Lenin's

critique of imperialism, decisively affected future Soviet attitudes toward the question of international relations. It fused the sense of moral outrage at the current international order with the novel Marxist idea that international relations would persist into the indefinite future. To be sure, this was never explicitly broached by Stalin and indeed, many of his statements on, for example, the inevitability of war and the economic wellsprings of foreign policy tend to contradict the assertions just made. Yet, the assumption of a world where Soviet Russia could survive, however precariously, into the indefinite future, combined with the conviction that it was the power-political relations among the great states that really counted, implied the existence of a discipline of international relations that was no longer the mere handmaiden of the class struggle and the orthodox categories of Soviet political economy. Indeed, by actually subordinating the class element, by in effect containing the revolutionary proletariat in the developed countries and ignoring the underdeveloped world, "Stalin's focus would seem to be on that part of the triangle that remains – the capitalist states . . . , a most un-marxist theory of inter-state relations."²⁸ The clear implication of this analysis is that the foreign relations of the Soviet Union are essentially a derivation of interstate relations, rather than of the socio-economic character of the socialist order in the Soviet Union. These relations, in turn, are subsumed under a "two-camp doctrine," according to which the main contradiction of the current historical period is that between capitalism and socialism. In fact, the protagonists in this struggle are states, in the first instance the United States and the Soviet Union, each leading its own alliance system of states with sympathetic socio-economic structures.

Stalin's influence, then, on the Soviet study of international relations in the Soviet Union must be reckoned as considerable. Though preserving the traditional Marxist notion of the irreconcilable hostility between the forces of socialism and those of capitalism, Stalin grafted onto this edifice a conception of international relations that was fundamentally political, rather than economic, that preserved the voluntarist thrust of much of Lenin's later writings, and that implicitly refuted the old idea of international relations as a closed system, and thus with a predictable solution point at any given moment in space or time.²⁹ It must, though, be conceded that the preservation and elaboration of the two-camp image has tended to obscure some of Stalin's innovations in the area of international relations as well as the

extent to which current Soviet undertakings in this field, however unorthodox at first glance, have their roots in the deeper Soviet past.

STALIN'S DISPUTE WITH VARGA

Much of the difficulty in perceiving the extent to which the idea of international relations as something more than an exercise in political economy had already been implanted in Stalin's time lies in the debate, more precisely in the repression following the debate, that took place in the immediate postwar period between, in effect Stalin, and the economist Yevgeniy Varga over the prospects for the survival of capitalism. More narrowly, the debate focused on whether the capitalist economies could avoid an immediate postwar depression in light of their wartime experience with a substantial amount of state intervention, i.e., planning, in the economy, something which traditionally Marxism held to be impossible. One must be careful here and avoid the attribution of perfect theoretical consistency to Stalin. On the one hand he did prepare the ground, however inadvertently, for a systemic interpretation of international relations with the idea of socialism-in-one-country. This was an idea, furthermore, which reconciled itself to the long-term existence of international relations. Much of Stalin's later postwar discourse, though, is dedicated to demonstrating the imminent collapse of capitalism (and by extension international relations) and the inevitability of war among *capitalist* countries because of their economic competition.³⁰ Thus the course of the Varga controversy, in which Varga was compelled to recant his views affirming the probability of the medium-term survival of capitalism, has often been interpreted as aligning Varga, the forerunner of a more sophisticated Soviet study of economics and international relations, against Stalin, the dogmatic defender of the orthodox Bolshevik conception of these subjects. As we have tried to indicate, this is only partially true. To be sure, many of Stalin's notions were crude and mechanically deterministic. But they did not preclude the possibility of studying international relations in terms other than those of the class struggle. The Varga dispute should be viewed first as a policy debate about the conduct of relations with the West as well as an even more veiled debate about the degree of sophistication and empirical input that the Soviet model of international relations – incorporating both elements of the class struggle and the struggle of nations – was to possess.

It is interesting to read contemporary Soviet evaluations of Varga's work, for they indicate that the underlying postulates of this prominent Soviet economist, once compelled to publicly recant his strongly held and carefully formulated views, have long been treated as accepted dogma by the Soviet academic establishment.³¹ In essence, Varga maintained three points: that as a consequence of the wartime experience with government intervention in the economy, capitalism would stabilize itself, at least for ten years; that the nature of the political systems in the Western capitalist democracies, especially Great Britain and the United States, was such that socialist reforms could be introduced without violence; and that war, both among capitalist states and between capitalism and socialism, was not inevitable.³² The counter-thesis, advanced by Stalin and decisively established with the 1952 publication of his *Economic Problems of Socialism in the USSR*, held that, on the contrary, capitalist collapse was imminent and that war among capitalist states was more likely than war between capitalism and socialism – in short, a substantial reversion to the traditional Bolshevik critique of imperialism. In light of the later appropriation of many of Varga's ideas by a number of contemporary Soviet analysts of international relations, to the point where something like a Varga revival may be observed among Soviet economists, it may prove instructive to treat Varga's main points in greater detail.

As if to draw attention to the originality, in Soviet terms, of the views to be presented, Varga prefaced his 1946 work, "Changes in the Economy of Capitalism as a Result of the Second World War," by emphasizing the difficulty of the material, and that "some parts" should be read twice and "carefully thought about." "Deep and complex changes," Varga began, had occurred in the societies of the belligerent capitalist countries. Most important of all, the difficulties in realizing profit had been eased as a consequence of the state's systematic intervention in the economy. The bourgeois state had thus come to represent "the interests of the entire bourgeoisie as a class," in the process creating the entirely new phenomenon of "military-monopoly-state capitalism," posing the possibility of a partly stable economy, at least in the near future. This probable stabilization of the more advanced capitalist economies was assisted by an unprecedented concentration and centralization of capital, a great increase in labor productivity, and the prospects for the peaceful application of atomic energy. The improved productive capacity of the United States in

particular provided it with the foundation for good economic progress in the short term. Such economic development could be relatively stable inasmuch as the capitalist governments were now seriously committed to “capitalist” planning, both on the domestic and the international levels. Indeed, Varga’s embrace of the Keynesian analysis in his treatment of the capitalist economies is quite categorical. Hence, it would be wrong to assume a repetition of the economic catastrophe that eventually followed the First World War. Conditions had changed too much for that.³³

The political implications of Varga’s analysis were clear. The capitalist countries would continue to exist for the foreseeable future and in fact would even progress. War would not be the inevitable handmaiden of revolution.³⁴ The question became, then, what form would relations among states, in particular among capitalist states themselves, and among capitalist and socialist states, assume? In addressing this delicate question, Varga was careful to draw a sharp distinction between the character of the polities of the leading capitalist states and those of the fascist countries. He suggested that “bourgeois” democracy contained a considerable portion of the real thing, thereby providing avenues of influence for the substantial elements of public opinion in the advanced capitalist countries that were in favor of improved relations with the Soviet Union.³⁵ Relations of tension, not to mention of war, were by no means a foregone conclusion. Prospects for the peaceful development of relations between the USSR and the West, including no doubt the export of capital in one form or another to the Soviet Union for reconstruction purposes, would be reinforced by the geopolitical imperative of inter-allied cooperation to suppress the resurgence of fascism. Therefore,

Relations of the capitalist countries with the Soviet Union will not be like those of the prewar period . . . [T]he [capitalist] governments, considering the forces of democracy and with the proof in the Second World War of the military might of the Soviet Union, will not lightly decide to embark on a military confrontation. Before the new international organization for the preservation of peace,

Varga concluded,

stands the task of not permitting different contradictions from spilling over into military struggle.³⁶

After the death of Stalin, Varga returned to the theses developed in his 1946 book and applied them to the international conditions of the late

1950s to early 1960s. This work revolved around two fundamental notions: the “third” stage in the general crisis of capitalism, and the implications both of this stage of capitalist development and of nuclear weapons for the nature and conduct of international relations.

The concept of the third stage in the crisis of capitalism represented a further development of the implications of Varga’s 1946 book and effectively removed the issue of the collapse of capitalism from the historical present to an ever distant and receding future. Indeed, the thrust of Varga’s later, post-Stalin work, already implicit in 1946, was aimed at pinpointing the changes that capitalism had undergone in the course of the twentieth century.³⁷ A number of previously held dogmas were therein refuted. The Second World War, for example, represented the last period in which inter-imperialist contradictions were stronger than the contradictions between the two systems, capitalism and socialism. It was recognized that the existence, and perhaps even some of the policies, of a powerful Soviet-led bloc contributed, in a decisive way, to the greater harmony that characterized inter-capitalist relations in the postwar world. Varga drew attention to the prolonged period, over a decade long, of capitalist economic growth on the basis of a “one-time extraordinary widening of the capitalist market and the absence of a world crisis of overproduction until 1957–8” and concluded that this implied a relatively stable and prosperous future for the capitalist economies. No tendency toward a levelling off of industrial production, in contrast to the pre-war period, was discernible. Hence, and this was the point which had created so much trouble for him a decade earlier, government intervention in the capitalist economy could, did, and would continue to constitute an efficient tool for economic stabilization. The external changes wrought by decolonization hardly affected the matter. Although Varga explained this partly by recourse to the theory of “neocolonialism,” according to which the former metropolises perpetuated their imperial positions through the maintenance of informal, but no less effective, economic empires, primary emphasis was squarely placed on the ability of the capitalist countries to exploit their domestic markets more intensively. It was also unfair to allege that the capitalist economies could not exist without vast military expenditures. On the contrary. “[P]olitical problems,” Varga wrote, “are much more difficult for imperialism than economic ones.”³⁸

The political implications of this analysis were hardly encouraging

for committed revolutionaries. Though the material preconditions for socialism and communism in the capitalist world were growing, "monopoly-capital" had experienced considerable success in spreading counter-revolutionary ideology among the masses. Combined with the pernicious influence of social democrats and the Catholic Church (i.e., Christian Democracy), these efforts had resulted in the setting in of a certain degree of passivity among the working masses. Furthermore, this was no mere "subjective" trend. The changing composition of the capitalist proletariat in favor of service employees, a fact of "great political significance," added an objective foundation to the counter-revolutionary spirit of the Western working class.

All of these remarkable new phenomena taken together, Varga said, constituted the essence of a new, third stage in the developmental crisis of capitalism, characterized above all by the growth of "state-monopoly capitalism." This has occurred, in addition, in peaceful conditions. Although there was a possibility of a global, nuclear war by accident, the struggle between the two systems did not necessarily have to assume a military form. "Time," Varga wrote, with an intimation that perhaps time alone would prove sufficient, "works for socialism, for communism!" Concerning the end of capitalism, Varga would only aver that the twentieth century was the last century of capitalism. And even that foggy prediction was qualified with the proviso that: "The exceptional complexity of the situation of the historical transition from capitalism to socialism does not permit a more concrete prognosis."³⁹ Later work, including a volume published posthumously in 1965, essentially extended this scheme.⁴⁰ His main theses were defended and elaborated upon by his successor at the Institute of the World Economy and International Relations, A.A. Arzumanyan.⁴¹ Varga's theses continue to occupy an important place in the work of contemporary Soviet analysts of international relations. However unorthodox their contributions may seem, their basic viewpoint, like Varga's, remains Marxist, but, as Jerry Hough has noted, "it is a Marxism that fully accepts Varga's judgements about the ability of capitalism to survive for a long time."⁴²

Varga's name has come to symbolize, for Soviet economists and analysts of international relations, the principles of greater professional latitude in their work and the application of strict empirical criteria to political analysis. One of the most influential Soviet students of international relations has maintained that Varga's ideas are useful not only for studying such international and transnational phenomena

as the scientific–technical revolution and economic integration, but also for the analysis of the contemporary political economy of the United States.⁴³ The initiation of the Soviet study of international relations, so ably documented by William Zimmerman,⁴⁴ not to mention its development in the post-Khrushchev period, almost certainly would have been a far more arduous task had it not been for the pioneering efforts of Yevgeniy Varga.