The Central Ideological Conflict
of Our Time

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The central conflict of our time is a power struggle in which the entire tradition of human liberty is at stake, asserts George S. Counts, professor of education, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York.

WE LIVE in an age seething with ideological conflicts. But there is one such conflict that dwarfs all others—a conflict that rocks the earth, divides the world into two hostile camps, colors every serious political discussion, casts its shadow over the future of mankind, and raises the stark question of human survival. Reference is made of course to the struggle between freedom and dictatorship, between democracy and communism—a struggle that will probably be with us in open or hidden form for years and even decades. It is assumed that the controlling purpose of our people in the struggle is to preserve our free way of life and to do so without resort to war, if that is possible. This would seem to place a heavy responsibility on organized education.

NATURE OF THE CONFLICT

If organized education is to discharge this responsibility, the nature of the conflict must be clearly understood. And the first element in understanding is the clear realization that it is not merely a conflict of ideologies. It is not an intellectual controversy conducted according to the best traditions of the academy—a controversy in which the participants are devoted to the advance of knowledge and the discovery of truth. Nor is it a friendly or orderly debate governed by rules of parliamentary procedure and decided by the counting of ballots. It is not even a peaceful competition between two social systems committed to differing and opposing ideologies. To be sure, following the Second World War, many in America hoped and even believed that such a competition was both possible and probable. The Roper polls of January through September of 1945 revealed a widespread spirit of optimism regarding Soviet-American relations in the postwar world. This spirit was particularly strong among the business and professional classes.

We know now that the conflict is a power struggle in which ideologies are deeply involved, in which the free world is on the defensive, and in which the entire tradition of human liberty is at stake. Whether the Soviet leaders are marshalling power in the support of an ideology or employing ideology as a weapon in the struggle for power is a question that will be touched upon later. Here it must suffice to note that since Potsdam they have been pressing forward with great success on all fronts employing, in the words of the Royal Institute of International Affairs, “all mischief short of war,” or at

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least "all mischief short of general war." At the same time they have erected the "iron curtain," reduced free cultural relations with the West almost to zero, and directed all agencies and organized processes for the molding of the mind to the propagation among their people of two perfectly fantastic myths—one about themselves and the other about the rest of the world and particularly about the United States. At present they hold sway over approximately one-third of the human race. Their political and military conquests since 1939 are unsurpassed in the history of mankind.

The nature of this ideological conflict has been expounded again and again by Soviet spokesmen. But never since the revolution has the essence of the matter been stated more clearly and plainly than in recent years. Through a series of "resolutions on ideology" issued by the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party beginning in August, 1946, the members of the entire intellectual class, from scientists to circus clowns, have been told in the bluest of language that they are "soldiers in the front line of battle" and that "ideological indifference" or "neutrality" on their part would not be tolerated. The position of the Party was perhaps outlined most eloquently in these words by the noted dramatist, Konstantin Simonov, at an All-Union Conference of theatrical producers, dramatists, and actors in November, 1946: "A most ferocious ideological struggle between two systems, between two world outlooks, between two conceptions of the future of mankind has been, is being, and will be waged in the world."

**Americans Know Little About the Soviet Union**

The educational task is shaped by the fact that the American people today, thirty-four years after the Russian Revolution, are profoundly ignorant of the Soviet Union and world Communism. Although they expected the revolution, as they expected revolutions against monarchies, autocracies, and despotisms everywhere, and although they greeted with enthusiasm the revolution of March, 1917, they had little knowledge of either Russia or Marxism and were quite unprepared for the triumph of the Bolsheviks in November. Indeed, even now the word "Bolshevik" carries no precise meaning to the American mind. It is not surprising therefore that we have made mistake after mistake in our appraisal of the Russian Revolution, the Soviet Union, and world Communism. A review of a few of these mistakes should serve to create the frame of mind necessary for a sober consideration of the problem.

In 1917 three interpretations of the revolution, all equally mistaken, were vigorously propagated. A small minority composed of Marxists and near-Marxists saw it in terms of the Marxian apocalypse. To them it meant the swift fulfillment of man's fondest dreams—the establishment of socialism, the building of a classless society, the achievement of complete political democracy, the withering away of the state, the closing of prisons, and the liberation of men from every form of bondage. The reality today bears little resemblance to this vision of 1917. Only if socialism is defined as merely

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the absence of private ownership of the tools of production can the Soviet system be called socialist. The other outstanding features of this system—the vast inequalities in condition, the millions in forced labor camps, the all-embracing system of mind control, the outlawing of political dissent, the single slate elections, the network of secret police, and the dictatorship of Stalin—these features are not to be found in the writings of Karl Marx or in the thought of nineteenth century socialists.

Many American liberals interpreted the “events of October” as a delayed democratic revolution. They saw the Russians following the path blazed by the countries of Western Europe and America during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. To be sure, they were disturbed by the violent language and methods of the Bolsheviks—the seizure of power by force of arms, the establishment of the dictatorship, the resort to mass terror, the attack upon religion and the church. But they tended to view these developments merely as excesses which would soon disappear. They were still living in the afterglow of the optimism of the nineteenth century respecting the prospects of mankind. In their eyes all roads were leading to democracy. The idea that the revolutionary overthrow of the autocracies of central and eastern Europe might usher in new forms of despotism was unthinkable. Obviously a little band of Russian revolutionists could not reverse the trend of the age. Moreover, the Bolsheviks proclaimed loudly their commitment to the extension of popular control over economic as well as political power. The expectations of the liberals have not been fulfilled.

American conservatives were generally convinced that the Bolshevik regime was merely a passing phase of the revolution. Though outraged by the attack on the institution of private property, they comforted themselves with the thought that Lenin and his associates would soon be swept from power by crisis, famine, and pestilence. It was clear to them that the Soviet system violated the universal laws of economics and human nature. Obviously such a system could not endure. Some of these people expected daily to hear of its collapse. Then after it had survived for a period they gave it a full week of life, later a month, and still later a year or two. Even toward the end of the twenties one of our most distinguished statesmen declared the Soviet Union to be an “economic vacuum.” Clearly the hopes of these conservatives have not been realized. The Bolshevik regime has endured and Russia has become a mighty industrial state.

Since 1917 many Americans have misinterpreted almost every great shift in Soviet policy. In 1921 the New Economic Policy was interpreted as heralding the abandonment of socialism. In 1928 the launching of the First Five-Year Plan under the slogan of “Socialism in One Country” was interpreted as the abandonment of the doctrine of world revolution. In 1935 the call for a “united front of all democratic elements” was interpreted as the abandonment of disruptive and conspiratorial methods. In 1939 the Soviet-Nazi Pact was interpreted as a measure designed to gain time for building up reserves against Fascism. In the war years the resistance of the Soviets to
the Nazi assault was interpreted as demonstrating the essential democratic character of Bolshevism. In the early postwar years Soviet seizure of eastern Europe was interpreted as an evidence of weakness and an effort to gain security. And throughout this entire period the various national Communist Parties were interpreted as authentic responses to the interests and conditions of the popular masses of their respective countries. Needless to say, all of these interpretations have been proved mistaken.

**Needed: Knowledge About Marxism and Russia**

This partial list of the mistakes which we have made in appraising the Soviet State and world Communism suggests that we have had something less than adequate understanding of these things. And I should add that very few of us indeed, whatever our political philosophies, can truly say that we understood the Russian Revolution from the beginning.

The fact is that we have had little in our experience to prepare us for understanding. The histories of the Russian and American people have been profoundly different. And at no time have we ever made either imperial Russian or the Soviet Union a subject of serious study in our schools and colleges. Neither have we studied Marxism.

Moreover, in spite of the great migrations from Europe during the latter part of the nineteenth and the early years of the twentieth century, including many Marxists, this body of revolutionary doctrine scarcely reached our shores. And when it did, it quickly withered away under the influence of the political liberties and the economic opportunities of America.

The time has come for us to remove this critical deficiency in our intellectual equipment. Possibly already the hour is too late, the crisis too near. Yet we must assume that the respite allotted to us is sufficient to gain the needed understanding. This means that we must speedily find place in the curricula of our schools and colleges for the thorough study of this strange, complex, and dynamic political phenomenon that threatens the survival of free institutions on the earth.

Russian Communism is indeed strange and complex. It is in all soberness Russian Communism. It is not just communism. Nor is it German, or French, or English communism. Our failure to recognize this truism of cultural anthropology is a major source of our mistakes since 1917. Russian Communism is a dynamic fusion of elements from East and West—from two powerful cultural and ideological sources—the imperial, absolutistic, and holy Russia of tsar, priest, cossack, and muzhik, on the one hand, and the materialistic and international revolutionary socialism of Karl Marx and his followers, on the other. Some years ago Louis Fischer remarked with true insight that it is a union of Peter and Marx. And we might add Michael Bakunin and the Russian monk who after the fall of Constantinople to the Turks thus waxed prophetic: "Two Romes have fallen and passed away, the western and the eastern; destiny has prescribed for Moscow the position of the third Rome; there will never be a fourth."
Contribution of Marx

The contribution of Marx to Russian Communism is two-fold and probably explains the power of the outward thrust of Bolshevism. In the first place, from Marx come the great promises, the apocalyptic vision of a new heaven and a new earth, which give the movement its appeal to idealists and oppressed classes, races, and nations everywhere. Marxism promises the abolition of the exploitation of man by man, the abolition of the exploitation of one people by another, and the abolition of war. These are precisely the things that countless millions throughout the world and particularly in Asia want to hear today.

The second contribution of Marxism is often called the laws of social development, or, as applied to the present age, the laws of transition from capitalism to socialism. The strength of this body of doctrine, derived from the monumental labors of Marx and Engels, lies in the fact that it is labelled and assumed to be “scientific.” To the true believer therefore assurance regarding the coming of the ideal state of socialism or communism rests not on the dreams of some Utopian stargazer but on the objective deliverances of “science.” The result is a body of sacred literature that is scarcely surpassed in authority by the literature of any one of the great religions of the world. All of this gives tremendous power to the ideological foundations of Russian Communism. It inspires unsurpassed dogmatism and fanaticism in all true believers. Its spirit is expressed in the following words of the highest theoretical organ of the All-Union Communist Party: “The general laws of the transition from capitalism to socialism, revealed by Marx and Engels, tested, applied, and developed by Lenin and Stalin on the basis of the experience of the Bolshevik Party and the Soviet state, are obligatory for all countries.”

Contribution of Russia

The contribution of Great Russia to this strange synthesis is probably more important that that of Marx. Certainly the revolution has become more Russian with the passing of every year since 1917. Three elements of this contribution should be mentioned here. The first and most important perhaps is the All-Union Communist Party, the decisive political reality in the Soviet Union and the whole Communist world, something not to be found anywhere in the writings of Marx. It is derived from an old Russian revolutionary tradition, dating from the early years of the nineteenth century and developed by such men as Paul Pestel, Michael Bakunin, Sergei Nechaiev, Peter Tkachev, and Lenin. According to this tradition, the people can neither overthrow the old nor build a new social order. This is to be done by an elite of dedicated social revolutionists through a society practicing the methods of conspiracy and constructed on the pattern of an army with three levels of membership—the fully initiated, the partly initiated, and the wholly initiated, or the high command, the officers, and the soldiers. Such is the organization of the All-Union Communist Party today, and of the other Communist Parties of the world.

The second contribution of old Russia is the autocrat. Certainly the image
of Stalin, the charismatic leader, the all-wise, the all-good, and the all-powerful father and teacher, is not to be found in the pages of Marx. "Long live our wise leader and teacher, the greatest scholar of our epoch—Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin," shout all the professors in the higher educational institutions of Moscow. "Long live our leader and teacher, father of the people, the great Stalin," sing the musical composers. "Glory to the great Stalin, leader of the people and corypheus of progressive science," cry the scientists. "Accept, Comrade Stalin, the bowing down to the ground of the Ukrainian people, who sing your praises and will sing your praises for ever and ever. . . . Glory to Stalin, benign everlasting glory," chants the Supreme Soviet of the "free" Ukrainian Republic. Obviously we see here, not Marx, but Dostoievsky and perhaps the Greek Church incongruously holding aloft the banners of dialectical materialism.

The messianism of the Great Russians constitutes another element in the synthesis. Throughout the nineteenth century there was carried on in Russia a spirited and sometimes bitter controversy between the "westerners" and the "Slavophils," or more accurately the "Russophils." The former lamented with unabashed tears Russian backwardness and looked to the West for salvation. The latter glorified the noble and unspoiled qualities of the Russian people and proclaimed that they were destined to bring salvation to Europe and the world. With the triumph of the Bolsheviks under Marxian colors in 1917, it was generally assumed that the old struggle was over and that the Westerners had triumphed. Today, we know that this was a mistake. Since the early thirties the entire Russian past has been recovered and glorified in most extravagant terms. The following statement made in 1840 by Vissarion Belinsky, father of Russian literary criticism, is universally quoted in the Soviet Union and is usually followed by the words "this remarkable prophecy has been fulfilled": "We envy our grandchildren and great-grandchildren who in 1910 will see Russia standing at the head of the civilized world, giving laws to the arts and sciences and receiving reverent tribute from all enlightened humanity." In the new edition of the Large Soviet Encyclopedia the authority of scholarship is employed to support this prophecy by proving that all of the major discoveries and inventions of the past several centuries were made by Great Russians.

At this point a word of caution is imperative. The foregoing analysis is necessarily over-simplified. It must be emphasized that Communism is a synthesis of certain elements derived from Marxism and Great Russia. Conceivably, unless we accept the view that all history is fated, the revolution of 1917 might have taken a profoundly different form. Except for the apocalyptic features of the Marxian promises and Russian messianism, Lenin and his followers adopted the harshest elements from both sources. Marx recognized that the "laws of history" must be interpreted and applied differently in different societies. And he would have repudiated utterly the doctrine that all countries must follow the course set by the Russian Bolsheviks. Nineteenth century Russia, moreover, witnessed the emergence of truly liberal demo-
ocratic ideas and movements. Many of the foremost revolutionary leaders and thinkers rejected with great power the doctrines of revolutionary absolutism expounded by Bakunin and eventually incorporated into the system of Bolshevism. They also rejected the conception of the all-wise and benevolent autocrat. And the doctrine of the messianic mission of the Great Russians was never officially espoused by even the most imperialistic of the tsars. The differences between the peoples of the West and the East must therefore not be exaggerated as we confront the present situation. The cause of human freedom certainly has millions of friends behind the "iron curtain," in the Soviet Union itself, and even among the Great Russian people.


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Recognition of the need for a systematic approach through education to this great ideological and power conflict is long overdue. Our people today are simply not prepared to deal intelligently with the most fateful challenge which they have known in their entire history. Even the members of our profession for the most part have little grasp of the problem. The present writer was astonished and dismayed this past summer to find that in a class of approximately one hundred teachers engaged in graduate study only nine had read as much as one book on Russia, the Soviet Union, Marxism, or Communism. Such a condition must not be allowed to continue. We must study this vast and complicated phenomenon in our schools and colleges as soberly and thoroughly as we ever studied any subject. The fact is that as a people we are politically illiterate in a domain that may embrace the issue of war and peace and the destiny of freedom in America and the world.

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Frances Middleton Foster, for many years editor of the Building America series, died in Bronxville, New York, on November 5, 1951. She was sixty-three years of age. For more than a quarter century she edited educational publications, and at the time of her death was a staff editor of The Encyclopedia Americana.

Educated in New York City, Mrs. Foster began her career as a freelance medical editor. She edited the Journal of Educational Psychology for about a decade. She then became associated with Columbia University, editing all the curriculum studies series published in the early 1930's by the Lincoln School of Teachers College, Columbia University, as well as doctoral dissertations for publication by the Columbia University Press. From October 1934 until May 1938 she edited Progressive Education. She then served as an editor of children's reading matter for Edward Stern & Company of Philadelphia. Subsequently she was instrumental in obtaining a Rockefeller Foundation grant to aid in the publication of a high school social and economic textbook series entitled Building America, which was prepared under her direction by a research staff. She later developed for the U.S. Navy in 1948 and 1949 a basic civics text, Your America.

Mrs. Foster provided intelligent and devoted leadership such as is sought by every editorial board but seldom obtained. She worked tirelessly because of a deep conviction that it was essential to provide to schools authoritative materials of a nonpartisan nature on the vital issues of American life.