SOVIET-THIRD WORLD RELATIONS: IDEOLOGY, REALITIES AND NEW THINKING

Introduction

Reversing the title of our conference, this article deals with the impact of the Third World on the USSR after 1955 when Khrushchev, calling on neo-Leninist ideology, launched his anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist campaign. Of course, this is not to deny or even to slight the considerable, positive impact the USSR had on the developing countries, especially during the early stages of their independence. It ranged from bracing the self-confidence of radical leaders like Nehru or Nasser to providing military aid and supporting economic development.

Active Soviet entry into colonial and post-colonial affairs was based on a firm belief in the demonstrable superiority of socialism over capitalism and on the Soviet capability to prove it. That belief was an inseparable element of Soviet-US competition in the Third World and elsewhere. With time, Soviet ideological messianism gave way first to pragmatic policies and eventually to disillusionment with various radical policies – a process that undermined faith in socialism itself not merely in the Third World but also at home.

Not to be ignored was a parallel process of disillusionment and distancing among the Less Developed Countries (LDCs). Radical leaders took to pursuing a socialist vision of their own rather than following the Soviet model. The Non-Aligned Movement abandoned its initial pro-Soviet stance, declaring itself equidistant from East and West. Similarly, the Third World version of the New International Economic Order no longer granted Soviet aid-trade policies a special dispensation but classified the USSR among the rich developed countries, thus replacing the East-West division with a North-South dichotomy. In effect, the Soviet Union had ceased to exist as an alternate model or example on the cognitive map of the Third World before it expired as a state. In 1991 only Castro would state: “To speak of the collapse of the USSR is to speak of the sun not rising.”

What I propose to examine is not so much the growing pragmatism of Soviet policies and their eventual failure as the stepped-up questioning of their ideological premises. What started out in the late 1960s as suggestions for readjustments in Soviet policies and prescriptions for the Third World ended up a decade later as increasingly serious questioning of the fundamentals of
Marxism-Leninism in its official interpretation. This went beyond the intractable Third World and broached the viability of socialism as applied and practiced in the USSR itself.

In effect, by the late 1970s much of the discussion about socialist solutions to the problems encountered in the Third World was a discourse in Aesopian language on problems faced by the USSR itself. (Since the USSR had been decreed by Brezhnev to have attained the stage of "developed socialism," reconsideration of socialism's failures in Soviet Russia could not be raised and freely discussed in print.) Even though the Aesopian undercurrent was recognized for what it was in Moscow, it escaped notice abroad. I was told about the ruse at the time, but did not mention it in my publications.

As a good example of what the critically minded were promoting prior to Gorbachev one can cite the case of Nikolai Shmelev, an economist and member of the "1960s generation" (shestidesiatniki), as the young supporters of Khrushchev's de-Stalinization were called. After 1985, he became one of the most outspoken proponents of market reforms and accountability in the USSR — ideas that he could discuss only in his publications on Third World economic issues before that date. As he told Steven Cohen in 1988, it was possible earlier in the decade to discuss economic reforms in the USSR that touched on the nature of socialism: "In very reserved and disguised ways [one could] express almost anything." And he insisted: "We must give credit to all those people who carried on forms of honest struggle [i.e., discussions] before the beginning of perestroika."

In other words, hands-on experience with the failure of systemic models encouraged a critical re-examination of official theories. It was at the time among the first manifestations of the New Thinking that contributed to the general disillusionment and eventual implosion of the USSR. What started out as a loss of faith in the viability of socialist models for the Third World (as well as the realization that the USSR did not have the economic wherewithal to sustain its efforts to remake those countries) led to the questioning of socialist policies and results at home and, historically, even of the readiness of Russia to adopt socialism as a state system in 1917.

To illustrate the nexus between the failure of Soviet ambitions in the Third World and the loss of faith in socialism itself I want to refer to a znachok, or pin, that could be seen on many lapels in Moscow in the late 1980s. It displayed the bushy head of a Black chieftain, with appropriate adornments, over a logo that read: "We shall catch up with Africa." Repugnant as the pin was in its flagrant racism, it nevertheless encapsulated vividly the bitterness and cynicism about the systemic claims formerly made abroad and their current results in Soviet Russia.