A number of years ago a Soviet historian was reported to have remarked wryly, "The future remains the same. It's the past that is always changing." His words were inspired not only by the periodic necessity of rewriting history to fit the dictates of each new political leadership, but also by the certainty that the one most firmly fixed star in the constellation of public discourse in the USSR was the assurance that Communism was the destination toward which Soviet society was inexorably moving. Karl Marx had said very little about the "higher phase" of Communist society, which Soviet sources came to call simply "Communism," other than to indicate that after a period of transition the distinctions between social classes would disappear, the coercive functions of the state would become superfluous and society would be able to distribute materials benefits to each person according to need. The standard doctrine of Soviet leaders from 1936 until Gorbachev's administration was that their society was in the first phase, which those leaders labeled "socialism," and that the further development of socialism would lead to the achievement of full Communism in the USSR. Since the Soviet Union was an "ideological political system" in the sense that the governing elite based its right to rule on the claim to apply an esoteric body of teachings, continued insistence on the veracity of Marx's predictions for the future and on the correctness of the methods used by the Communist Party's leadership to fulfill his expectations was vital to the pretense of legitimacy of the political regime. To have suggested that the future of Soviet society was uncertain would have cast doubt on Marx's confident assertion that Communism was the solution to the riddle of history and knew itself to be that solution, which would have immediately called into question the
principle of the leading and guiding role of the Communist Party in the Soviet system.

The paradox of the ideological life of the Soviet regime from the time of its founding in the autumn of 1917, however, was that the further that Soviet society was said to have progressed in the development of socialism, the more distant the attainment of the goal of Communism appeared to be. Within a few years after winning power, in the absence of victorious proletarian revolutions in the major European countries, Lenin had arrived at the sober view that the construction of Communism in Russia would require an historical epoch of change. He did not even contend that socialism had been realized in Russia, but he did believe that a state representing the interests of the working class and peasants should begin to see to the fulfillment of the prerequisites for socialism as a way station on the path to the eventual arrival at full Communism. Stalin had the honor of proclaiming in 1936 that the foundations of socialism had been laid in the USSR, with socialization of the means of production and the liquidation of the basis for the existence of exploiting classes. Stalin saw Soviet society's entrance into the phase of socialism as a proper occasion for the proclamation of a new constitution for the USSR; however, he warned that the effort to frame a new program for the Communist Party of the Soviet Union would be premature. That warning was sufficient to discourage open discussion of the means of preparation for the transition to the Communist society of the future.

The urge to connect the policy trends of the then-current period to the realization of the promise of the system's goal-state persisted, nevertheless, as revealed by Stalin's repeated encouragement for what proved to be abortive attempts to draft a new program for the CPSU following the 18th Party Congress in 1939 and the end of the Second World War. Finally Stalin unburdened himself of his conception of the future of Soviet society with his publication in 1952 of the essays and letters which collectively bore the title of *Economic Problems of Socialism in the USSR*, and which evidently were intended to guide the writing of a new Communist Party program. In that collection of essays Stalin asserted that Soviet society had entered a new and higher stage of the development of socialism. In Stalin's view, however, the content of policies in that stage would be determined not by the aspiration of carrying out a direct transition to Communism but by the necessity of further amassing the pre-