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Soviet Marxism-Leninism as Mythology

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Marxism-Leninism is usually regarded as an ideology, an intellectual construct. For the overwhelming majority of the Soviet people, however, it was presented in a form that was more mythological than ideological. This article analyzes the mythological use of the main ideas of Marxism-Leninism during the Soviet period. This mythology was used as one of the major bases for building a common Soviet national identity among the myriad ethnic groups living on Soviet soil. The rise of nationalism during the Gorbachev period and the rapid disintegration of the Soviet Union highlight the failure of the Soviet leadership to build a common Soviet identity that might have formed the basis for a more stable Soviet nation-state.

KEY WORDS: mythology; Soviet Union; Marxism-Leninism; persuasion; social control; nation-building

Human beings are myth-making animals. As far back in history as anyone can trace, we have been creating and using myths. This fact alone would indicate that mythology fills some basic and continuing human need. When most people think of myths, however, they tend to think of them as fantastic stories concocted by primitive people who needed some way of explaining what they found bewildering in the world around them. Most of us are quite sure that we do not have, or need, myths because we have science to look to for explanations (Wolin, 1985). Even if there is much that we still do not understand about our world, the scientific method gives us confidence that, in time, research will bring us understanding. After all, we like to think of ourselves as rational, logical beings who will be able—sooner or later—to figure things out. Nothing could be farther from the truth than the notion that we live in a myth-free world.

Contemporarily, a myth is “a widely accepted belief that gives meaning to events and that is socially cued, whether or not it is verifiable” (Edelman, 1977,

p. 3). We all embrace myths about ourselves and our world, but we usually do not call them myths or even recognize them as such. We need these myths to help us to understand ourselves and our place in the world—perhaps even the universe. Many of these are political myths, tales which help us to make sense of our political past, present, and future (Nimmo & Combs, 1980). They can also persuade us to act in certain ways and, for this reason, can be powerful aids in the imposition of social control on a population. When political myths are successful in their persuasive role, people do not think of them as myths; they believe them to be true.

And they may be. The truth or falsity of a myth is not what gives it its psychological persuasiveness. Most myths about the modern world are some combination of fact and fiction. What is important, however, is that people internalize the myths and their values. To internalize a myth is to accept its persuasive influence and to act on that basis. When we do, we find out actions and attitudes “intrinsically rewarding” because they are “congruent with” our value systems (Kelman, 1958, p. 53). That is to say, because we believe the values in myths are right and proper, we use myths as guides for our own attitudes and behavior. And, further, we feel virtuous about doing so. The potential for myths to play a persuasive role in our lives is related to their characteristics and functions.

This article will examine the attempt by the Soviet leadership to use mythology to persuade the Soviet people that they were a single people with a common identity that transcended their traditional ethnic roots and, thus, to build a Soviet nation. The major theoretical framework concerning mythology will be taken from Nimmo and Combs’s book *Subliminal Politics* (1980) with some modifications. The first topic will be the characteristics and functions of myths as they were used in the Soviet Union. Included in this discussion will be an examination of Lenin as mythic hero. Then there will be an exploration of the Soviet master myths. Finally, there will be a discussion of the failure of this mythic system to create a common identity among the various ethnic groups making up the Soviet system. This, in turn, will be related to the rapidity with which the Soviet Union fell apart after the failed coup of 1991.

THE CHARACTERISTICS AND FUNCTIONS OF MYTHS

According to Nimmo and Combs (1980), modern myths have five basic characteristics.¹ First, they are believable. As was noted above, they may be true, partly true, or blatantly false; it does not matter. What matters is that it is possible for perfectly ordinary, reasonable people to regard them as true. One Soviet example was the belief that Lenin was a wise, benevolent, and heroic leader. Because Lenin conveniently died before the Soviet Union took on a relatively stable form and because of the way the official historians presented Lenin and his

¹In their book they list six. The sixth, however, is qualitatively different from the other five and thus is discussed separately here.

life, it was easy for Soviet citizens to believe that he was one of the truly great and good figures of history. Thus, right up to the collapse of the Soviet Union (Smart, 1990), Lenin served as a believable mythic hero for the Soviet people—because he did lead the Bolshevik Revolution and because information about him was carefully controlled and orchestrated by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) as part of its use of persuasion as a social control mechanism.

Second, myths are created through a social process. A myth can emerge from a group of people spontaneously—seemingly without conscious direction. Most of the major Soviet myths, however, were at least cultivated, if not created from scratch, by the Soviet leadership. Again, we can use Lenin as an example. After the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, Lenin was hailed as the single most important person bringing about the victory of the “people” over their “oppressors.” In those first heady days after the Bolshevik victory, there were many who did believe in a certain and glorious communist future. They began to endow Lenin with mythic qualities—to make him a mythic hero (Tumarkin, 1983, pp. 64–111). After Lenin’s death and, particularly, after Stalin’s death, conscious measures were taken by the Soviet leadership to encourage and strengthen his mythic status. In this way, there evolved a cult of Lenin which was “the collective construction of a credible reality” (Nimmo & Combs, 1980, p. 17; Tumarkin, 1983). Long after glasnost had led to the discrediting of other Soviet leaders, belief in the mythic qualities of Lenin persisted. For example, one member of the CPSU’s Central Committee put it this way: “For me, Lenin was the man who provided us with our Soviet Union and all that we became—an advanced country. The mistakes were not Lenin’s. The mistakes came in carrying out Lenin’s line. . . . I tell you straight that we have a genius in Lenin” (*The Washington Post*, November 1, 1988, p. 27).

Third, a myth is like a drama. It is a story with a beginning, a middle and an end. Lenin’s life furnished just such a story. There he was, a normal boy growing up in an ordinary upper-middle-class family. Then his beloved and brave older brother got involved in revolutionary activities in St. Petersburg and was executed by the evil tsarist regime. Lenin was radicalized by this and by the blatant discrimination he experienced as the relative of a convicted anarchist. He selflessly decided to sacrifice all and devote his life to overthrowing the evil tsarist regime, the cause for which his brother gave his life. And, finally, after many struggles he emerged triumphant—a savior of the common people of Russia. Soon afterward he was the victim of an assassination attempt which hastened his premature death. What more dramatic story could one wish?

Fourth, once a story has attained mythic status, it is seldom questioned. This was certainly true of the Lenin myth; Lenin became an object of unquestioning, almost religious, veneration. The Lenin mausoleum in Red Square became a “holy shrine” to which people made pilgrimages: “To this ritual centre both individual persons and society (in the form of its representative groups) [came] to draw moral strength at crisis points, to give heightened significance to important

events, to give an account of important missions accomplished, to display and rejoice in successes or just to give homage” (Lane, 1981, p. 210). Lenin’s memory was to be revered, not questioned. It was significant “that [until the virtual end of Soviet rule] one never [found] any of the many portraits of Lenin defaced” (Lane, 1981, p. 213).

Also, during most of the Soviet period, there was little public criticism of Lenin, even from dissidents. In fact, when some historians—emboldened by glasnost—began to question the Lenin myth, they were greeted with shock. One of the first of the historians who took a more skeptical look at Lenin’s life and work, Selyunin, observed that it was personally difficult for him to question the Lenin myth. This was especially true, since he found himself suggesting that Lenin had started the process that led to the forced labor camps of Stalin: “Understand, it’s not a joy to write this. My jaws lock sometimes. But it is necessary. . . . We cannot repeat this” (*The Washington Post*, June 7, 1988, p. A17).

Fifth, myths have a practical purpose. In the case of political myths, that purpose can be social control through the mechanism of persuasion. In other words, myths can be used to persuade people to hold certain political beliefs and attitudes—and, when necessary, to act on them. In this sense, the myth of Lenin was very practical as a vehicle which could be put to persuasive use by the CPSU to help it create a common Soviet identity. For a country that had, until recently, high levels of illiteracy, the use of concrete, nonverbal symbols and easily understood stories was politically important. The more abstract and intellectual ideological formulations of some of the same information were beyond the comprehension of most of the Soviet people.

Lenin was a real person who could be (and was) depicted in photographs, statues, paintings, books, movies, and plays. All of these could lay claim to conveying some vital “truth” about him and the country he helped create. He had been flesh and blood with all of the joys and sorrows that implies—someone people could relate to personally. Children were taught to call him “Uncle Lenin.” At the same time, as a symbol, he embodied the values and norms of Marxism-Leninism and the Bolshevik Revolution. The combination of his very human image with a carefully selected set of interpretations of reality was intended to promote allegiance to the Soviet Union. This, in turn, was linked to loyalty to the particular regime in power at the time.² During most of the Soviet period it seemed to succeed very well—at least on the surface. As Friedrich and Brzezinski noted many years ago, myths “play a vital role in totalitarian dictatorships” (1965, p. 91).

Even while the Soviet Union was disintegrating, many people found the destruction of the myth of Lenin far more threatening than negative revelations about any other Soviet person or event. As one highly placed supporter of

²While the basic information conveyed remained substantially the same, each regime gave it a unique “spin,” sometimes changing the interpretation from time to time in order to take into account developments in the Soviet Union and the rest of the world.

Gorbachev's reform put it: "Remember, the very limited democratic tradition we do have is in Lenin's NEP [New Economic Policy].³ To begin assaulting that would lead to a terrific loss of confidence in people's souls. Millions of people still can't believe there was a cult of Stalin. So to take a tough look at Lenin too soon would not be wise" (*The Washington Post*, November 1, 1988, p. A21). Thus, Gorbachev and his supporters utilized the Lenin myth (especially his New Economic Policy) to mobilize support for perestroika, while focusing the hard, cold light of glasnost on Stalin (Smart, 1990).

Mythic thinking and scientific thinking are two very different processes. In science, the ability to evaluate a proposition using objective, concrete observation, and replicable experimentation is central and definitive. Myths, however, are made up of symbols and stories, objects of belief. By definition, they are not amenable to disproof by any generally agreed-upon method. A myth becomes important when people *believe* it to be true and when they *act* on that belief. If a person behaves as if a myth is true, there is a sense in which—for practical purposes—they have made it true. For example, there is no concrete archeological evidence that Jesus lived. Millions of people, however, have spent their lives believing that he did, and this fact has had a powerful effect on them and on the course of history.

Myths serve four general functions in people's lives (Nimmo & Combs, 1980, pp. 20–24). First, they are easily understood and, therefore, make life's events easier to grasp and, perhaps, to accept. This is particularly important when situations are unavoidable (as in natural disasters) or when a regime wants to impose hardships on its subjects. The victorious Bolsheviks inherited a land that was, by contemporary European standards, economically underdeveloped and educationally backward. In addition, it had been devastated by World War I and the period of War Communism (civil war) which followed the Bolshevik Revolution. In order to repair the human and material damage inflicted by warfare, as well as to catch up with the more developed European countries, the Soviet regime needed to convince the people to work hard and to make tremendous personal sacrifices. The idea of building a utopian society for their children and their children's children was a powerful incentive (Luke, 1985). And so, central to the mythology of the Soviet Union was the idea that its people were engaged in the building of communism and that this effort would result in a more affluent and just society than the world had ever known. The mythology asserted that deprivation endured in the present was worth it, because the future payoff would be so great.

Second, myths give people roles in life, by providing "a sense of self, wholeness, and importance that cold, scientific, technological thought simply cannot supply" (Nimmo & Combs, 1980, p. 23). A central myth of the Soviet

³Briefly, Lenin's new Economic Policy in the 1920s encouraged a limited market economy in the Soviet Union, particularly in the form of what we would call small businesses.

Union was that they were changing human nature, creating a new type of person: the builder of communism. This was seen as central to the goal of establishing the good society—Soviet style (Vasilenko, 1985). People who measured up to the standard were considered to be assets to the society and to be of high moral worth. What was expected of a builder of communism was the following:

- Devotion to the cause of communism, love for the socialist Motherland, for the socialist countries;
 - Conscientious labor for the good of society: who does not work does not eat;
 - Concern of each person for the conservation and increase of social property;
 - A high consciousness of social duty, intolerance toward violations of social interests;
 - Collectivism and comradesly mutual aid; one for all and all for one;
 - Humane relationships and reciprocal respect between peoples: person to person—friend, comrade, and brother;
 - Honesty and truthfulness, moral purity, simplicity, and modesty in social and personal life;
 - Mutual respect in the family, concern for the upbringing of children;
 - Irreconcilability toward injustice, parasitism, dishonesty, careerism, greed;
 - The friendship and brotherhood of all the peoples of the U.S.S.R., intolerance toward nationalistic and racial hostility;
 - Irreconcilability toward the enemies of communism, of the cause of peace, and of the freedom of nations;
 - Fraternal solidarity with the workers of all countries and with all peoples.
- (Bogdanova & Kaninina, 1984, pp. 10–11)

Taken from the Program of the CPSU which was in effect from 1961 to 1986, this Moral Code of the Builder of Communism specified what each person could do in order to be part of the creation of a future utopia in the Soviet Union. It offered people identities designed to make them feel that they were important actors in the drama of transforming their country.

Third, because myths are shared, they forge bonds between people and create community. The idea of community, in the form of the collective, was the central organizing principle of the Soviet social order. The builder of communism did not work alone. He or she was a member of societal subgroups which coordinated the effort of individuals, uniting them in working toward common goals. Membership in collectives was not optional. When you entered a school or took a job, you automatically became part of one (Kiprianov & Kuznetsova, 1986). The collective connected you to the larger society: “By means of [the collective] two opposite streams of social activities meet—from society to the individual and from the individual to society. As the direct means by which a

person carries out his life's work, the collective's functions draw him into the life of society" (Vasilenko, 1985, p. 49). For the adult, the collective was supposed to be "family," the place where she spends her "most active and fruitful time" (Vasilenko, 1985, p. 49). Thus, the collective was intended to create community—binding people together by strong social bonds.

The myth of the collective, in turn, was tied to the wider social myth which was about the function collectives supposedly played in the society. In reality, the collective was chiefly a means of social and political control over the individual⁴ (Dontsov, 1984; Kassof, 1965, p. 42; Barry & Barner-Barry, 1991, pp. 32–33). In the mythology, it was presented as the way in which individuals banded together in order to realize the utopian goals of the Soviet Union. Article 8 of the U.S.S.R. Constitution adopted in 1977 stated that

Labor collectives take part in discussing and deciding state and public affairs, in planning production and social development, in training and placing personnel, and in discussing matters pertaining to the management of enterprises and institutions, the improvement of working and living conditions, and the use of funds allocated for developing production and for social and cultural purposes and financial incentives. (As translated in Barry & Barner-Barry, 1991, p. 336)

As a description of the actual role collectives played, this is not accurate. Their impact did not even approximate what is suggested. As part of the mythical building of communism, however, collectives were cast in the role of the organizing force which made things happen. This myth was supposed to give people the feeling that, through the decision-making function of their collectives, they were important actors in shaping a utopian future for the U.S.S.R.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly from the point of view of the Soviet experience, myths can be manipulated to achieve goals. Clearly, if an individual identified herself as a builder of communism and strived to conform to the Moral Code, she became a more effective means for realizing the goals of the leadership. With the people organized into collectives, their work could be channeled and monitored so that it became easier to carry out the policies of the CPSU. When people accepted the mythic hero, Lenin, as a role model, they brought to the experience of "building communism" the ideas and values that the regime was associating with Lenin. This made it easier for them to identify themselves as engaged in a heroic task, following in the footsteps of their founding father and mythic hero. The CPSU was, after all, leading them, and it was the party of Lenin.

The mythology about Lenin and the building of communism did not exist in isolation. It was part of the master mythology of the Soviet state. Master myths are "broad, overarching myths that constitute the collective consciousness of an entire society" (Nimmo & Combs, 1980, p. 26). In their efforts to control the

⁴This phenomenon was not unique to the Soviet period. Its roots stretched much farther back into Russian history (Keenan, 1986).

beliefs of the Soviet people, the leadership attempted to create a set of master myths that would channel the emotions and efforts of Soviet citizens in desired directions.

THE SOVIET MASTER MYTHS

There are three basic types of master myth (Nimmo and Combs, 1980, pp. 26–27). The first is the foundation myth, which deals with the story of a country's origin. The second is the sustaining myth, "a core belief, a central motif, in which the ideal culture patterns are embedded . . ." (Tucker, 1987, p. 22). The third is the eschatological myth, the story of the country's ultimate destiny. In one way or another, the revolutionary experience and an extremely simplified Marxist-Leninist ideology lay at the heart of these master myths. Both were subject to modification and distortion to serve the purposes of those currently in power. But, although there were frequent changes in the details, the larger picture painted by the Soviet master myths remained basically stable over time.

The Foundation Myth

The Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 ushered in a "revolutionary mass-movement regime under single-party [CPSU] auspices" (Tucker, 1971, p. 7). Thus it marked the symbolic founding of the Soviet Union, and the mythology which grew up around the revolutionary period became the foundation myth of the U.S.S.R. The mythic interpretation of the Bolshevik Revolution was summed up nicely at the beginning of a book entitled *The Soviet Way of Life* which was published the same year Gorbachev came to power:

The Great October Socialist Revolution marked a basic turning point in the historical fate of our Motherland, marking the beginning of the formation of socialist civilization. The Leninist concept of a proletarian revolution and the construction of socialism based on the teachings of Marx and Engels ideologically armed the Party and the working class in their struggle against the bourgeoisie for a new life which would bring good fortune to the workers. (Kas'ianenko, 1985, p. 9)

Several things should be noted about this summarized version of the foundation myth.

First, the Soviet Union is implicitly regarded as an extension of the Russian Empire which had been overthrown in 1917. And, in truth, the country which initially emerged was nominally Russian. The Soviet Union did not officially come into being until 1922. Thus, both the focus of the Soviet foundation myth and the major Soviet founding father (Lenin) were Russian. The many other ethnic groups played bit parts, if they were given credit for participating at all.

This is particularly important, since the Soviet leadership subsequently tried to persuade both the Russian and the non-Russian ethnic groups to internalize a common Soviet national identity. This effort failed, in part, because it was based on a foundation myth that related almost exclusively to one ethnic group, the Russians. By the time of Gorbachev, that group was about to become a minority (albeit a privileged minority) within the Soviet population.⁵ Thus, the very basis of the foundation myth excluded a large portion of the Soviet citizenry, while feeding the belief of one ethnic group that it was naturally more important.

Second, it is asserted that the Bolshevik Revolution established a new form of “civilization,” a socialist civilization. In context, the phrase implies that all previous forms of civilization were seriously lacking. This, in effect, dismisses the historical and cultural heritages of all of the constituent peoples of the Soviet Union, some of whom—like the Central Asians—could boast of a rich cultural heritage. Even the Russian tsarist heritage was dismissed, in that it was the heritage of the official revolutionary “enemy.” By 1985, there were few people who had personal memories of the days immediately after the Revolution when a new world of possibilities seemed to have opened up and when it was easy to be a “true believer.” As a result, the Soviet foundation myth had very little historical or emotional appeal for most of the citizens of the Soviet Union during the Gorbachev era.

Third, this foundation myth sets forth a story about a desired social order—and the social order involved was a Eurocentric social order. Although the young Soviet state turned inward to provide its people with the isolation from the outside world their rulers needed to exact the human effort and sacrifice necessary for the rapid transformation of the Soviet political-economic system, the model was primarily that of the modernized West. The ancient civilizations of places like Georgia, Armenia, and the Muslim republics were ignored. In addition, the foundation myth lacked reference to the natural environment or the human life cycle, both of which are classic mythical themes. This led to a ritual symbolism “developed in a modern industrial society which [was] characterized by its remoteness from the ‘natural’ and by its disdain of the ‘physiological’” (Lane, 1981, p. 192). Thus, the foundation myth was not based on anything which all of the Soviet people had in common. In fact, with its emphasis on a Europeanized and Russianized utopia, it was based on much which potentially divided them.

Finally, the foundation myth asserted that the new socialist civilization was the creation of the working class along with their vanguard, the CPSU, and that it would usher in a world of “good fortune” for the workers. To start with, the Bolshevik Revolution was hardly a creation of the working class. Although many

⁵At the time of the last Soviet census in 1989, the Russians made up 50.8% of the Soviet population (*Narodnoe khoziaistvo SSSR v 1990 g.*, 1991, p. 77).

workers and peasants participated, it was first and foremost the creation of a small, tightly knit group of professional revolutionaries. The new “socialist civilization” which followed was largely the creation of the CPSU led by Stalin. And, only by strictly limiting the availability of information about the world outside the Soviet Union could the CPSU leadership sustain the belief that this new life had brought “good fortune” to the workers.

Another important part of the foundation myth was its tie to an official ideology, Marxism-Leninism, and its interpretation of the basic nature and sources of that ideology. According to Christenson et al. (1981, p. 4), “a political ideology is a system of beliefs that explains and justifies a preferred political order, either existing or proposed, and offers a strategy (institutions, processes, programs) for its attainment.” Thus, ideologies are very much like myths.

Unlike myths, however, reasonably well-developed ideologies like Marxism-Leninism are primarily appeals to rationality and logic, rather than the emotions. They attempt to set forth an intellectually viable, integrated belief system—cognitive construct. And, in the early works of Marx, “we find both a preoccupation with the problem of achieving a morally coherent world and a rudimentary vision of a future communist society . . . nothing that can be described as a mythical account” (Tudor, 1972, pp. 115–116). Only with the publication of *The German Ideology*, did Marx lend his ideological system to myth-making. Here, “for the first time, the destiny of the revolutionary proletariat [is] set forth as a dramatically coherent sequence of events” (Tudor, 1972, p. 116). Certainly, the ideology which dominated the Soviet political-economic system had a strong intellectual core derived from the writings of Marx and Engels, supplemented by the writings of Lenin.

While some ideologies are clearly different from myths, others contain a certain amount of overlap embodied in some of their important characteristics and functions. First of all, like master myths, ideologies offer “an interpretation of the past, an explanation of the present, and a vision of the future” (Christenson et al., 1981, p. 4). However, rather than being formulated in dramatic form, they present “an ordered arrangement of logically related ideas offering an explanation and vision of human destiny.” (Christenson et al., 1981, p. 5) In other words, myths are primarily designed to appeal to our feelings and our taste for the dramatic; ideologies are primarily designed to appeal to our capacity for logic and intellectual thought.

What do they have in common? In the Soviet case, there were five major similarities. Both the mythology and the ideology were, first of all, simplifications of complex political realities. Second, they were designed to be persuasive, to motivate the population from top to bottom—the ideology being aimed more at the intelligentsia, the mythology being aimed more at the poorly educated or uneducated masses. Third, each claimed both truth and universality. Fourth, they were millennial, looking toward a utopian future. Fifth, they had heroes, sacred documents, and rituals.

In the Soviet Union, there were also important differences. First, formal Marxist-Leninist ideology was articulated, verbal, systematic, and explicit. It was easy to pick up a book and read the writings of Marx and Lenin—they were certainly abundant. The mythic formulation was to be found in the ubiquitous symbols and slogans, in most works of art, in the agitation and propaganda system (AGITPROP), and in all but the most advanced sectors of the educational system. Second, Marxism arose in a period of societal stress in Western Europe and continued to be elaborated during a period of growing crisis in Russia. The mythology played a part in the revolutionary period, but it became much more developed as the situation in the new Soviet Union was becoming more stable, and it was used to mobilize the people behind the goals of the CPSU. Finally, formal Marxist-Leninist ideology was most attractive to people who were relating to the Soviet political system in a mainly intellectual way (on the surface, at least). Its mythological variant was aimed at the general citizenry, at people who were relating to the Soviet political system on a more emotional level.

Over the years after the Bolshevik Revolution, Marxist-Leninist ideology underwent many modifications as different Soviet leaders manipulated it for their own purposes. The core which was tied to the mythology, however, tended to remain reasonably constant. The Soviet leadership tried to use Marxism-Leninism as a source of legitimacy and as a tool for persuasion. As a source of legitimacy, ideology can be used “to justify an existing social system,” lending authority to the decisions made by the current leadership. As a tool of persuasion, it can be used to project “a desirable future social order,” motivating the people to work hard to achieve that goal (Plano & Greenberg, 1985, p. 12).

How did the foundation myth treat Marxist-Leninist ideology? To return to Kas’ianenko:

Marx and Engels developed a genuinely scientific dialectical-materialistic interpretation of history, substantiating the global-historical mission of the working class, its role in the revolutionary renewal of society. . . . [They] demonstrated the objective necessity of a dictatorship of the proletariat for the accomplishment of the transition from capitalism to communism. . . . [They] were the first to attempt to describe the communist way of life and work.

V. I. Lenin scientifically substantiated the path and method of eliminating the foundations of the past, the form of life and work of the people and the establishment of a socialist society. Lenin’s plan for the building of socialism armed the party with a concrete program for the creation of a new way of life by the workers themselves. (Kas’ianenko, 1985, pp. 9–10)

Thus, the intellectual construct takes on a more dramatic form. This also warrants closer scrutiny.

First, note the use of the term “scientific” (*nauchnyi*) in connection with the theories of Marx and Engels. Not only are these theories supposed to be scientific, but they are “genuinely” (*podlinno*) scientific. The dictionary definition of the Russian word for “science” (*nauka*) is

A system of knowledge about the lawful [according to natural law] development of nature, society and thought, and also a single branch of such knowledge. *Social science*.

Natural science. . . . 2. That which instructs, gives experience, a lesson. . . . ”
(Ozhegov, 1988; emphasis in the original)

While English dictionary definitions of “science” encompass this meaning, in popular usage the term tends to be used in connection with a particular, rigorous, experimental methodology, and the theories which inform it. It is not customary in the English-speaking world to refer to bodies of philosophical thought, like Marxism, as scientific (e.g. McLellan, 1979).

As a tool of persuasion, Marxism-Leninism was repeatedly characterized as scientific, given a status which corresponded with the purely intellectual (and usually quantifiable) theories of the natural sciences. This was easy to do because of the way in which the Russian word for science was commonly used. It had its mythic advantages as well. It gave a weight of inevitability to any idea or prediction which carried the label “Marxism-Leninism.” For example, the 1961 Program of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union stated: “Socialism will inevitably succeed capitalism everywhere. Such is the objective law of social development. Imperialism is powerless to check the irresistible process of emancipation” (as quoted in Kaiser, 1986/87, p. 237).

When Marx and Engels “demonstrated the objective necessity of a dictatorship of the proletariat,” they did not do so by scientific experimentation but by arguing logically from a carefully chosen set of assumptions. Any philosophy is only as good as its assumptions, and Marxism-Leninism is no exception. But when Marxism-Leninism was being used mythically, the identification of its assumptions—let alone the questioning of them—never came up. Its validity was simply asserted, not proven. And, the telling increasingly took on the form of a story, rather than a philosophical or scientific discourse.

In fact, for Kas’ianenko to say what he does about the goodness of the life led by the workers, in a book published in 1985, is absurd on anything but a mythic level, given the historical and contemporary realities of the Soviet Union. That government would wither away and be replaced by a dictatorship of the proletariat any time in the foreseeable future was an untenable proposition. In fact, the Soviet government apparatus was enormous and growing. The one thing it showed no inclination to do was to wither away.

But, for the bureaucratically besieged Soviet citizen, the notation that communism would bring with it a withering away of the state was attractive. Yes, it required magical thinking, but humans are good at magical thinking when it promises them a better life. Moreover, ideas presented in mythic form encourage magical thinking. For example, the senior anchor of Soviet television (an unusually well-informed citizen) describes his feelings when, in 1961, Khrushchev promised that communism would be achieved within his lifetime: “As Khrushchev spoke those words, the sun came out—and the entire [CPSU] Congress seemed to light up. See, we told each other, even nature believes in our cause. That’s when my wife and I decided to have our first daughter. We hoped

that she would live under communism” (*The Washington Post*, December 29, 1991, p. A26).

Second, this mythological treatment tends to downplay Marx’s and Engels’s writings about socialism and give the impression that Lenin’s “plan for the building of socialism” was an enhancement, rather than an action plan for the realization of their goals. This fits into the heroic myth of Lenin as philosopher, as well as master politician and the activist leader of the political forces which triumphed in 1917. Note that Marx and Engels “substantiated” (*obosnovali*) the role of the working class in history and Lenin “substantiated” Marx and Engels. Thus the mythic hero, Lenin, is given a central role, and the philosophy becomes as much Leninist as Marxist.

Finally, note that the Party is empowered to act on behalf of the workers, to administer the program by which the workers would create a new way of life. This might have made sense in 1925. It made very little sense in 1985, since the workers had become the employees of an enormous bureaucratic state which was run by the CPSU (and, to a great extent, for the CPSU). The workers were cogs in the machine of the state. More and more of them were coming to realize this by 1985. It is hard to believe that Kas’ianenko did not. That the Party worked on behalf of the workers does make sense, however, as a myth which was used to persuade the workers that things were not what they seemed—that they were more important than they perceived themselves to be.

Thus, the foundation myth was designed to persuade the people of the transformational importance of the Bolshevik Revolution, that it meant the creation of a new and better world—a utopia based on scientific Marxism-Leninism. The revolution and the founding of the Soviet Union were presented as events of epic proportions, because they were *scientifically guaranteed* to lead to a utopian transformation of, first, the old Russian Empire and, next, the entire world. The guarantee came from the “scientific” theories of Marx, Engels, and Lenin. The key was the effort of the workers and peasants of the Soviet Union. They could make it all happen (if they did their share) in a great dramatic surge into the future. This idea was developed in the Soviet sustaining myth.

The Sustaining Myth

The sustaining myth⁶ emerging from the revolutionary period was that the Soviet people were an essentially egalitarian collective of workers engaged in the (ultimately and inevitably successful) task of building, first, socialism, and then communism (Tucker, 1987, p. 46). It was intended to keep everyone working hard and using individual initiative to achieve the utopia for which the Bolshevik Revolution was fought. Each Soviet citizen was obliged to do his or her share.

⁶Von Laue refers to this as the guiding myth (Von Laue, 1993, p. 132).

In fact, in the early years after the Revolution, the entire CPSU was so involved in this persuasive effort that it did not even bother to create a separate propaganda organization (Von Laue, 1993, p. 132). Later, it created a complex agitation and propaganda network (AGITPROP) which reached into all corners of Soviet society with its persuasive message. This overtly persuasive organization was reinforced by socialist realism⁷ in literature and the arts, as well as strict orthodoxy in education and scholarship.

The Soviet people, the human raw material for this ambitious project, were not promising material for transformation into unified, highly motivated, self-starting workers or citizens. First, the Soviet people encompassed over a hundred different ethnic groups. Thus, as a citizenry, they had little in common culturally, linguistically, religiously, or ethnically. Second, they had much that divided them. For example, there were wide gaps between the city dwellers and the rural peasants (not to mention the tribal peoples of Asia and the Transcaucasian region). The intellectuals had little contact with the masses, and the CPSU elite became increasingly alienated from the people they were supposed to be serving. These divisions were further intensified by the animosities many ethnic groups held for those who occupied neighboring territories and who frequently were their historical enemies (not to mention the imperialist Russians against whom almost every group had resentments). Third, for virtually all of these people the habit of centuries was to be passive subjects, rather than active citizens. Perhaps most importantly, this habit of passivity carried over into the workplace. The Protestant work ethic which had energized the industrial development of Europe and America was not part of the culture of the former Russian Empire. Those who would be the builders of communism were generally uneducated, unskilled, unambitious, and passive. Thus, although the sustaining myth was developed, maintained, and elaborated, it quickly became supplemented with a good measure of coercion—which, paradoxically, prevented much of the psychological change that the sustaining myth was intended to promote.

The Soviet sustaining myth was supported in two ways. First, from the very start the CPSU attempted to eliminate, or at least limit, all information that might contradict, or even raise questions about, what the Soviet people were being asked to do. Thus, the Soviet Union turned inward, information from the outside world was reduced to a minimum, and the people were told that they were living a life superior to that of the oppressed masses of the noncommunist world. For example, the 1923 Soviet Constitution declared:

There in the camp of capitalism we find national animosities and inequalities, colonial slavery and chauvinism, national oppression and pogroms, imperialist brutality and wars.

Here in the camp of socialism there is mutual confidence and peace, national free-

⁷Socialist realism dictated that writers and artists depict only people and events that supported the mythology.

dom and equality, and the fraternal collaboration of nations peacefully dwelling side by side. (As quoted in Van Laue, 1993, pp. 132–133)

The Soviet Union, in other words, was the most advanced country in the world, with its toiling masses leading the way to a utopian future. This was merely asserted, not proved. There was no need for objective proof, since the Soviet people had little or no outside information which might cause them to question the sustaining myth. Second, over time they were subjected to an increasing barrage of persuasive messages constantly reinforcing this myth. It was everywhere; there was almost no escape except in the family, with trusted friends—and, for some, in the oblivion of alcohol.

As with the foundation myth, the sustaining myth invoked a Russified Marxism in the service of the goals of the CPSU. To return to *The Soviet Way of Life*:

The cumulative result of the economic, socio-political and spiritual development of Soviet society demonstrates that, based on the steady growth of the national economy and increase of its scientific and technical potential, the country will continue perfecting the whole system of social relationships, all spheres of Soviet communal life. Together with the creative energy and initiative of the masses, the social policy of the CPSU and the Soviet government has guaranteed the steady movement of our society toward even higher levels of social progress. (Kas'ianenko, 1985, p. 207)

The ultimate goal, of course, was a communist utopia, and the author observes that as a result of the policies of the CPSU and the Soviet government, “the sprouts of a communist community are already appearing” (p. 207). Again, several things are worth noting.

First, sustaining myths have the basic function of “enhancing the maintenance of political relationships” (Nimmo & Combs, 1980, pp. 26–27). Here two basic political relationships are evident. The first is the relationship between the Communist Party and the government. Note that the CPSU is mentioned before the Soviet government. This is not an accident or an oversight. It is a clear indicator of both the close relationship between the two organizations and the fact that the CPSU was primary. Major policy initiatives were generated by the CPSU; the principal role of the Soviet government was to implement them. Thus, the CPSU and the government combined to perform the functions which normally fall to the government alone in a contemporary Western political system.

The second basic political relationship being enhanced and maintained was that between the people and their CPSU-led government. According to the myth, the policies emanating from the CPSU leadership combined with the effort of the Soviet people would create an infallible coalition; success could be guaranteed. The Russian verb *obespechivat'* (to secure or guarantee) is used in the past tense. The process is going to be successful; it is a sure bet. In fact, it is asserted that little bits of evidence (sprouts) of the inevitable triumph of communism were already appearing. The relationship which would make it all happen, of course,

was the CPSU as leader, the government as intermediary, and the people as followers. But the words “creative energy and initiative” imply that the masses were actively shaping their destinies, rather than passively carrying out a destiny shaped for them by others. Such a myth has the very practical purpose of sustaining the effort of the population without which the continued growth and strength of any state is impossible.

Finally, the mythic goal of all of this effort was the triumph of communism, the supposed ultimate goal of the Bolshevik Revolution. In its sustaining version, this myth envisions the creation of the first communist state in the Soviet Union. Thus, Soviet citizens were called the “builders of communism,” and one of the goals of child-rearing was to create better builders of communism (e.g., Bogdanova & Kalinina, 1984, pp. 148–149). From the start, the major emphasis was on economic development. Immediately after the revolution, Lenin emphasized that economic progress was vital to Soviet survival: “War is inexorable and puts the question with unsparing sharpness: either perish or catch up and overtake the advanced countries economically as well” (as quoted in Von Laue, 1993, p. 86). This never changed. At the end, the impetus for and central focus of Gorbachev’s reforms were economic. As he urged his people to work hard for perestroika, his words were often eerily similar to those of past Soviet leaders.

A key indicator of the CPSU’s vision of the ideal Soviet citizen and worker was “The Moral Code of the Builder of Communism” translated above. Predictably, the first element in this code is “devotion to the pursuit of Communism,” followed closely by “conscientious labor for the good of society.” The moral code ends with “Implacable opposition toward the enemies of Communism, the pursuit of peace, and the freedom of nations.” This leads to the third type of master myth, the eschatological myth.

The Eschatological Myth

An eschatological myth paints a vision of the destruction of the old world and its replacement by an entirely new world. In the case of the Soviet Union, the focus was on a complete change in the way life was lived, not on the more mystical or religious end of the world itself. “The old order is abolished and the new order comes into being, but the world as such remains” (Tudor, 1972, p. 92). In the case of the Soviet Union, this new order was a utopian one. The utopia would be established first by the Soviet people, and its benefits ultimately would spread to the rest of the world. In other words, it was the destiny of the Soviet Union to create a utopian social order that would transform social relationships throughout humanity.

Thus, in its eschatological myth the ultimate historical role of a nation is identified. The Soviet mythology, then, was not only designed to maintain the

revolutionary momentum of the people inside the Soviet Union (i.e., the sustaining myth). Ultimately, it saw the destiny of the Soviet Union to be the “turning of the revolutionary dynamism out upon the world,” the “export of the revolution” (Tucker, 1971, p. 15). This was, of course, in service to the goal of world communism which would bring the utopia that was then being created in the Soviet Union to the rest of the world. The capitalist world was to be destroyed, and a communist one would take its place. “In the classic Bolshevik conception, the revolutionary constituency begins with the working classes of the revolutionary homeland and embraces the working classes of all countries, and the international bourgeoisie (or ‘international imperialism’) is the enemy” (Tucker, 1971, p. 15). The destiny of the Soviet Union, therefore, was to demonstrate the superiority of its political-economic system and, in doing so, to lead the entire world toward a utopian communist future.

For the Soviet people this destiny myth was designed to be a source of pride and inspiration. They were the leaders in a “global anti-Western revolt, proud of having been the first to leap forward into a new era of human history, sure of possessing the foundations for the most advanced social order in the world” (Von Laue, 1993, p. 94). When the Communist International was founded in March 1919, the Soviet people were cast in the role of the saviors of the human race: “Humanity, whose entire civilization lies in ruin, is threatened with complete annihilation. There is only one force that can save it, and that is the proletariat” (as quoted in Von Laue, 1993, p. 116).

THE FAILURE OF THE SOVIET MYTHOLOGY

Nation-building is “the process whereby the inhabitants of a state’s territory come to be *loyal* citizens of the state” (Bloom, 1990, p. 55, emphasis in the original). By the end of the 1920s, the Bolsheviks had managed to establish a Soviet state which took the form of an empire (built on the Russian Empire), but they were a long way from establishing a Soviet nation. That is, the Soviet Union was “a political community occupying a definite territory, having an organized government, and possessing internal and external sovereignty” (Plano & Greenberg, 1985, p. 24). This Soviet state could be and (for the most part) was established by coercion. To create a Soviet nation, however, was much more difficult. It involved the internalization of a *Soviet identity* by those living within the U.S.S.R.

This was a difficult task for a country stretching across 11 time zones and containing well over 100 different ethnic groups, many with deep-seated antagonisms toward one another. In order to transform the Soviet Empire into a modern nation-state, its rulers had to merge this geographically scattered and diverse population into a single nation—a people who identified themselves primarily as

“Soviet” and only secondarily as Kazakh, Russian, Armenian, or whatever. This could not be accomplished by force; it required persuasion, since it aimed to change the way in which the inhabitants of the Soviet Union perceived themselves and their fellow Soviet citizens. The cornerstone of the persuasive effort of the Soviet leadership was Marxism-Leninism. In order to reach the illiterate, as well as the literate, and the educated, as well as the poorly educated or uneducated, the essence of Marxism-Leninism was distilled into a mythology. This mythology, however, failed to do its part⁸ in creating the common Soviet identity sought by the Soviet leadership, *and* the Soviet leadership did not adequately appreciate this and, thus did not fashion more effective policies in this area.

If the Soviet leadership had succeeded in creating the common identity, the Soviet Union would not have had the acute nationality problems that surfaced during the Gorbachev years. Also, it is unlikely that the Soviet Union would have collapsed so quickly. The failure of Gorbachev and the other reformers to appreciate the importance of national identities and antagonisms was one of the key factors in their failure to hold together the Soviet Union. The ethnic unrest of the Gorbachev years and the rapidity of the breakup of the empire was a sign that the commitment of a large number of the Soviet people to the beliefs and values of the Soviet mythological system was relatively shallow and fragile, motivated more by simple compliance than internalization. It is worth examining a few of the more obvious reasons for this.

The first is time. The Soviet Union existed for less than 75 years. Inculcating a new mythic or religious system is not the work of a few decades. Most of the world’s major myth systems have developed over centuries. The Soviet leadership was trying to displace an older set of mythologies and replace them all with a new one, but it did not have the time needed to plant it firmly in the consciousness of the Soviet people. In fact, the bulk of the ritual associated with the mythology was less than 30 years old when the Soviet Union collapsed (Lane, 1981).

Another serious problem was the fact that the mythology was almost exclusively based on the cultural and religious heritages of Western Europe (Marxism) and the Slavic nationalities. Virtually nothing was incorporated from the rich heritages of the non-Slavic peoples of the Soviet Union. This had two major consequences. First, it was poorly designed to be accepted and internalized by people who were neither Slavic nor focused on Europe as a model for their own future. For some, like the Muslims of Soviet Central Asia, it could not have been more alien; its official atheism was in sharp contrast to their Islamic heritage. Although some local efforts were made to rectify these problems by modifying some of the rituals, they did not make a significant difference. Second, when the

⁸There were other factors in this process, but any discussion of them is outside the scope of this article.

mythology began to be translated more and more into rituals, particularly life-cycle rituals, many Soviet citizens were forced into behavior which was not only alien, but repugnant. For example, the Soviet Solemn Registration of the New-Born Child ritual was to take place within a month after birth. This ignored the Islamic rule that the mother and child be completely secluded for the first 40 days of the newborn's life (Lane, 1981, p. 232).

Because the Soviet mythology was Marxist-Leninist and because Marxism-Leninism was officially atheistic, there was little to feed the spiritual needs of the Soviet people. Most of the peoples of the former Soviet Union have deep and long-lived spiritual heritages, which for the most part, took the form of religion in the pre-Soviet period. To say that one was Russian Orthodox was equivalent to saying that one was a citizen of tsarist Russia (I. M. Dolgoplova, personal communication, 1962; White, 1979, p. 39). Correspondingly, the interconnection between Islam and the governments of Muslim nations is still a very widespread phenomenon. To impose a regime that not only was secular but that also preached atheism and actively discouraged traditional religious worship created a deep spiritual hunger in these people. The Soviet mythology had no compensating spiritual base. Therefore, it gave the Soviet people little help in filling their need for a meaningful spiritual component in their lives.

This had a great deal to do with the fact that people born after the revolutionary period were highly materialistic in their concerns—dialectical *materialism* was at the center of their official credo. Because of government opposition, spirituality was not an attractive option. This meant that a large part of the satisfactions available to the Soviet people had to be in the material realm. If the Soviet materialist mythology had been able to “deliver the goods,” if the Soviet leadership had been able to exchange material prosperity for loyalty—the outcome might have been different. But it was not, and the fact that it was not became more and more important for social control as the materialistic citizenry invented ways to get what they needed in spite of the failings of the Soviet economic system. As a result, the black market and official corruption thrived, creating additional social control problems.

This was related to the fact that the Soviet Union had a mythic system which was tied to certain predictions about the material future, both immediate and long-term. As the Soviet people grew more and more cynical about their mythology and its unfulfilled promises, they often made the point that the future was like the horizon—it was always receding. And, in the final analysis, this was the Achilles' heel of the whole persuasive system. The advent of glasnost only confirmed what many of the more perceptive of the Soviet people already suspected. Instead of living in the most advanced society in the world, they were living in what amounted to a third-world country with superpower weaponry. Faced with this awful truth, the complex web of lies and half-truths which comprised the persuasive system collapsed. To return to our original definition of

myth, the “widely accepted belief that [gave] meaning to events” ceased to fulfill its function, because it was no longer believable. Myth and reality were grossly different.

Material success in the developed Western world had depended greatly on important Western attitudes and habits, often referred to as the Protestant ethic. The economic and political ascendancy of countries like England, France, and the United States “was largely the result of the spontaneous enterprise of individuals, not of their governments” (Von Laue, 1993, p. 11). Such cultural resources did not, for the most part, exist in the heritages of the Soviet people. Faced with a citizenry which had little in the way of individual ambition and initiative, the Soviet government was forced to organize and command its people to do what Western Europeans had done spontaneously. This practice tended to discourage the spontaneous initiative and creativity necessary for success in a 20th century global market which was growing technologically more sophisticated year by year. As economic strength began more and more to depend on individual risk-taking and initiative, the Soviet economic system became less and less able to compete. In turn, it became less and less able to show its people any convincing evidence that it was making progress toward its materialistic utopia.

Even deeper than this, and contributing greatly to the vulnerability of the Soviet system, was the underlying assumption that utopias of any sort are achievable here on earth. If the Soviet populace was being conditioned to work so that a utopia could be achieved, it was not unreasonable for them to expect to see progress toward that utopia. Instead, much of what they experienced in their daily lives seemed to indicate progress in the opposite direction. For example, it is difficult to believe in progress toward the “withering away of the state” or the “dictatorship of the proletariat” when one’s daily existence is one long struggle with an all-powerful and inflexible bureaucracy led by a dictatorial and privileged Party elite. No scientifically verifiable utopias have ever existed on this Earth, and it is reasonable to assume that none will—at least in the near future. What the Soviet mythic system promised for the future was simply not achievable, within the Soviet Union or in the contemporary global system.

When Gorbachev instituted his much-heralded *glasnost*, the Soviet people and their utopian myth shattered once and for all. Not only had they made little progress toward the materialistic utopia they had been promised, they had been shockingly brutalized by those who had promised it to them. Cynicism had been growing long before *glasnost* (Lapidus, 1984, pp. 703–710; Stites, 1988). The revelations of *glasnost* left the Soviet people with little to fall back on other than their cynicism and—more ominously—their nationalism. The mythology and rituals of their ethnic, and related religious, heritages quickly began to replace the Soviet system of myths and rituals.

Thus, rampant nationalism was a major cause of the disintegration of the Soviet Union and remains a serious problem for all 15 of the Soviet successor

states. For all but a few “true believers” the mythology that their Soviet leadership tried to inculcate has become a thing of the past. As Von Laue (1993, p. 93, 95) puts it, “Marxism-Leninism was a . . . myth. . . . Many ingredients recommended this myth to the conditions of Russia. . . . The preservation of the myth was the central condition for Communist survival.”

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