

THE SOVIET UNION:
Socialist
OR
Social-Imperialist?

Part II

Raymond Lotta vs.
Albert Szymanski

The Question Is Joined —
Full Text of New York City Debate,
May 1983

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Preface

May 19-22, 1983, a major conference was held in New York City, focusing on the question "The Soviet Union: Socialist or Social-Imperialist?" Originally proposed by the Revolutionary Communist Party in May of 1982, the conference was actively built by and involved the participation of scholars, activists, and political forces, holding diverse views on the conference topic. The first three days of the event consisted of topical sessions presenting contrasting views on Women in the Soviet Union, The Soviet Union in the Horn of Africa, The Law of Value in the Soviet Economy, The Soviet Union and the Arms Race, Workers' Role in Soviet Society, and The Soviet Union in Southern Africa, with each session characterized by spirited debate on the part of both the panel speakers and the audience.

The conference culminated May 22 in a face to face debate by major spokespersons for the opposing views. Speaking in support of the socialist character of the Soviet Union was Albert Szymanski, Professor of Sociology at the University of Oregon. Szymanski is the author of *Is The Red Flag Flying? The Political Economy of the Soviet Union Today* (1979), *The Logic of Imperialism* (1982), and a forthcoming volume on human rights in the Soviet Union. Presenting the Maoist and Revolutionary Communist Party analysis that

capitalism has been restored in the Soviet Union and that it is today a social-imperialist country was Raymond Lotta, author and lecturer. Lotta is the editor of *And Mao Makes Five: Mao Tsetung's Last Great Battle* (1978) and co-author of *America in Decline* (1983). The debate was moderated by Anwar Shaikh, Associate Professor of Economics at the Graduate Faculty of the New School for Social Research in New York City.

As a contribution towards the conference and debate, the editors of *The Communist* invited several scholars of opposing viewpoints to present their analyses of different aspects of the debate over the nature of the Soviet Union. That collection of four essays appeared in April 1983 under the title *The Soviet Union: Socialist or Social-Imperialist?* This volume brings the contending issues into even sharper focus by presenting the complete text of the historic debate of May 22, 1983, recorded before an audience of over 800 in the International House Auditorium adjoining Columbia University.

The last twenty years have witnessed a profound and explosive debate over the nature and role of the Soviet Union among both scholars and revolutionaries. It has not, however, been "the same old debate" rerun in terms more shrill. Rather, there has been a progressive development of the substance of the debate, with important turning points corresponding to major developments in the world. Splits have emerged over this question within revolutionary movements, and long-standing alignments have broken with new ones forming. Wherever new forces break into mass struggle, the question pushes itself to the fore: "the Soviet Union — friend or foe? capitalist or socialist?" In addition, there has been the development of new theoretical work, posing new questions and problems, and demanding that theory be developed and not just enshrined. In all, a lively, exciting atmosphere exists around this question.

A major turning point was the 1963–64 publication of the Chinese polemics blasting away at what they termed "modern revisionism." This struggle took place against a backdrop of the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Khrushchev's changes in Soviet political theory and economic management, and Soviet foreign policy during a high tide of anticolonial struggles worldwide.

The Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia and the Cultural Revolution in China added more fuel to an already raging debate and

sparked some notable theoretical exchanges and contributions. Prominent among these was the exchange of essays between Paul Sweezy and Charles Bettelheim. This was followed in the mid-1970s by new contributions originating from Maoist parties and organizations throughout the world.

The intensification of the U.S.-Soviet conflict and the denunciation in China itself of Mao's theories of revolution and revisionism have produced yet another turning point in the debate. This has been accompanied by the publication of a number of important theoretical challenges to the Maoist theory of capitalist restoration, presenting new arguments to support the socialist character of the Soviet Union.

The contradictory events of this new period have raised even more profound questions about the nature of capitalism and the nature of socialism. In Poland there has been a massive political movement in the working class against a self-described socialist government. Even allowing for the reactionary influence of the Church and the West, why would a working class raised under socialism rise against a socialist government? In Central America and Africa, where millions are struggling against U.S.-backed neocolonial regimes, the Soviet Union is now actively involving itself in the armed struggles of the national movements. If the Soviet Union were actually imperialist, would not the logic of that system impel it to unite with other imperialists against any genuine revolutions? China has for now moved into the U.S.-led bloc, while preserving state ownership and moving ever closer to the Soviet system of economic management. Is the essence of socialism to be found in an ownership form, and is there no connection between a country's economic system and its foreign policy? Globally, the Soviet Union has achieved a rough level of parity with the U.S. in strategic weapons. Yet while millions take to the streets in opposition to the threat of nuclear war, both blocs engage in a frenzied emplacement of new and ever more horrifying nuclear and chemical weapons systems. Is the Soviet Union the force for world peace which it claims to be, forced into an unwanted arms race by aggressive U.S. imperialism, or is it an aspiring imperialist power in its own right driven by the same compulsion to a war of global redivision?

It is against this backdrop that the May 1983 conference took up and debated major underlying questions of theory: How is it possible for capitalist relations of production to exist without the jurid-

ically private ownership of productive property and a traditional capitalist labor market? If the Soviet Union is capitalist, then where are the phenomena classically associated with capitalism — recurring crises, unemployment, and class differentiation? How could the rule of the working class be overthrown and a different mode of production be established without a violent counterrevolution and without the masses sensing and resisting the change? Isn't it idealism to assert that the restoration of capitalist economic relations emerges from changes in the ideological and political line of the ruling party? Where is there any evidence that the Soviet Union exports capital or is in any way subject to the laws of imperialist accumulation? And doesn't the theory of a Soviet social-imperialism driven to international expansion dovetail with the Reagan administration's rationale for a renewed arms race?

These were the questions joined at the May 1983 conference, debated, and raised to a new level. As this was the first major theoretical confrontation since the death of Mao in 1976 to address explicitly the question of whether the Soviet Union is socialist or social-imperialist, interest was high and the results of the new theoretical work were in evidence. Because of the obvious relevance of the issues being addressed, a public letter of support was signed by over fifty prominent individuals representing both sides in the debate. Total registration was over 1,000, including individuals and groups from numerous countries, including: Afghanistan, Australia, Azania, the Dominican Republic, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Guinea, Haiti, Indonesia, Iran, Jamaica, Libya, Mexico, Nicaragua, occupied Palestine, Panama, Puerto Rico, El Salvador, and Turkey.

The culminating debate consisted of one-hour presentations, first by Szymanski, then by Lotta. The presentations were followed by fifteen-minute rebuttals in the same order. The session was then opened up for one hour of questions and comments from the audience, during which the debate panel did not respond. The session ended with closing remarks by both speakers, speaking in the opposite order, in which they addressed some of the questions raised by the audience and summarized their own positions.

The text which follows consists of the speakers' remarks only, in the order in which they were presented and slightly edited by the authors.

On behalf of the Organizing Committee, I would like to thank all those whose efforts made this important exchange possible, including especially Raymond Lotta, Anwar Shaikh, Al Szymanski, the speakers and moderators of all the topical sessions, the many signatories of the letter of support, and the volunteer office staff. We also wish to thank RCP Publications for making publication of this transcript possible.

C. Clark Kissinger
for the Organizing Committee
August 1983