

THE COMMUNIST REFORMATION: GLASNOST, GORBACHEV AND CANADIAN DEFENCE POLICY

by Lieutenant-Commander David N. Griffiths

The Need for Fresh Perspectives

What a time! What a civilization!

Cicero (106-43B.C.)

The unexpected upheaval which has engulfed the Communist world this past year has brought about the most dramatic and rapid change in Europe since Hitler's armies swept across the continent fifty years ago. And that tide of change has washed away much of what had been fundamental reference points for the post-war world. Forecasting future developments, difficult at the best of times, has thus become a daunting task, but it is as vital now as ever it was. Economic and political pressures are bearing heavily on the perennial debate over defence requirements, both in Canada, as a new defence policy is being formulated, and within the Western alliance. Redeeming a so called "peace dividend" and assigning non-traditional roles to the Armed Forces are typical of the initiatives now being discussed. In considering such options, it is easy to forget that capabilities and skills once abandoned are not easily resurrected. Inappropriate national defence policy can have potentially catastrophic consequences. It is therefore essential that the forecasts on which defence policy is based are sound.

Modern Western culture tends to foster a short attention span. When information is often absorbed from brief television news reports, and when historical eras seem to last months instead of generations, it is easy to forget the importance of taking a longer, historic view. Another undesirable modern tendency is to look at problems only from comfortable and familiar perspectives. Defence posture, for example, is usually analyzed from the predictable viewpoints of political science, economics, geography and modern history. It can be useful discipline to search for unorthodox frames of reference which might shed light from another direction and perhaps illuminate previously unnoticed factors.

What follows is an exploration of the dramatic events of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation which reshaped the Western World in the 16th and 17th centuries. The study provides both an unorthodox frame of reference and an historical perspective with which to better understand the events in contemporary Eastern Europe. There are relevant lessons to be drawn from the comparison.

The Communist Faith

If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent Him.

Voltaire (1770)

Many analysts of Soviet Marxism-Leninism have remarked on its quasi-religious aspect. It has doctrine and dogma, martyrs and missionaries, rituals and relics. These similarities are not entirely accidental. Stalin, a one time seminarian, recognized that if the Party was to purge the traditional Russian Orthodox faith from the national life it would have to provide a substitute. The Orthodox Church in pre-revolutionary Russia, just like the medieval Catholic Church in the West, realized that "abstract ideas must be made concrete by means of images, icons, banners, relics and other objects which could be grasped by the senses of the matter-of-fact and uneducated peasantry".¹ Stalin therefore adopted some aspects of Orthodox tradition, capitalizing on the revolutionary fervour of the Party faithful and setting the stage for his own peculiar vision of Lenin's dictatorship of the proletariat.

After Lenin's death in 1924, Stalin created an Immortalization Commission to "handle the embalming and to regulate development of the Lenin myth".² In addition to creating the shrine that is still an object of pilgrimage for thousands each year, the Commission dealt with such matters as prohibiting pictures of Lenin from being printed on cigarette or candy packages. If they were dropped on the street, pedestrians would thus be spared "unwittingly stepping on Lenin's face".³ Even in this modern and better educated age, a religious aura remains, either through genuine belief, cynical design or sheer habit. At the 22nd Party Congress in 1961, a Madame Lazurkina, who had been part of Lenin's fac-

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tion during the Revolution, made a speech in support of Khrushchev's de-Stalinization campaign. She claimed that "Lenin lived in her heart", and had spoken to her, expressing his dissatisfaction at Stalin's embalmed body lying in state alongside his own.⁴ Even if this was staged rather than genuine, it is significant that such a statement was considered appropriate and necessary on the tightly controlled agenda of the highest assembly of a Party dedicated to "dialectical and historical materialism". Even if this cult is ignored — and no one seriously suggests that Lenin should be worshipped in the *spiritual* sense — it is still the norm to quote Lenin in Soviet writing in order to give a sort of scriptural legitimacy to the ideas of the author.

There are many parallels between the institutions of Soviet Communism and those of pre-Reformation Christendom. The Kremlin is reminiscent of the Vatican of old: an arbiter of dogma which, in its prime, could bring even distant kings to heel. The KGB (Committee for State Security) is not so very different in concept from the Inquisition, which was created in the 13th century to suppress heresy. Inquisitors, like KGB agents, could be given to excess. In medieval Spain, as in modern Russia, an excess of zeal could play havoc with those whose ideological credentials were questionable, particularly with Jews. Even the titles of some institutions are similar. The Soviets published a document entitled "Index of Information Not to be Published in the Open Press".⁵ The name echoes the "Index" of prohibited books instituted by Pope Paul IV in the mid-16th century. There was even a medieval counterpart to Chinese Communism in the Eastern Orthodox faith, which shared common roots with the Western Church, but developed in its own distinct, and sometimes hostile, direction.

The idea of examining Marxism-Leninism from a viewpoint of religious history is therefore not so bizarre as it might first appear.

Reformation and Counter-Reformation of the Church

...an age of revolution and reformation

Thomas Jefferson (1801)

On 31 October 1517, a 34 year-old priest named Martin Luther nailed a document he called *Ninety Five Theses Upon Indulgences* to the front door of the church in Wittenberg. The author was not a revolutionary. Rather, he was using an accepted means of protest to spark debate; in this case against the concept that remission of pain in purgatory could be bought and sold like a commodity. This unlikely and obscure event was to become a catalyst that united diverse elements into a mighty reaction that was to change Western society forever.

Europe in the age of Luther was emerging from the relatively predictable and stable Middle Ages. A number of factors were changing the temperament of European societies. Nationalism was growing, straining against the older, feudal ideal of a homogeneous Christendom. The Renaissance and humanism were in their early stages. Literacy was improving: Gutenberg had invented the printing press just seventy years earlier. The great age of exploration was also gaining impetus. Columbus had made his momentous journey to America twenty five years before, in 1492. Cabot returned from Canada five years later, in 1497. By the time Luther was proposing his *Ninety Five Theses*, the Portuguese had reached Canton in China. Science and exploration were broadening the horizons of the human mind.

In the increasing intellectual vigour of the age, the demand for reformation of the church was widespread and intense. There were three converging streams of discontent. The first was doctrinal. The gap between theory and practice had become progressively more obvious to an increasingly literate and questioning society. If Pope and Bible differed, then the Pope's doctrinal authority became suspect. Luther had been forcefully struck by the text, "The just shall live by faith". If God's grace was free, the concept of buying indulgences was clearly wrong.

The second stream focused on corruption. Graft and abuse had become widespread, pervasive and blatant. "Everything in the Church, said the critics with exaggeration, is sold for money — pardons, masses, candles, ceremonies, curacies, benefices, bishoprics, the Papacy itself".⁶ The open keeping of mistresses was not uncommon among the supposedly celibate clergy. As one would expect with corruption rampant among the shepherds, morality among the flock was not exemplary either.

Finally, there were the factors of economics and politics. Kings and princes resented the flow of money out of their realms into the coffers of Rome. They resented too, the influence of Rome in their internal affairs. In Scandinavia, parts of Germany, some Swiss cities, and England, the ecclesiastical split from Rome was to coincide with and reinforce rising nationalism and political revolt.

The Counter-Reformation

The reform movement within the Catholic Church is generally called the Counter-Reformation. There was, in fact, a Catholic Reformation, of which Luther was originally a part, attempting to reform the Church from within, "The Protestant and Catholic Reformations were two phases of one movement. Both sought



Martin Luther

to cleanse the Church and bring it to a closer approximation of the Christian ideal".⁷ Strictly speaking, *Counter-Reformation* refers to the political reaction to counter the rising tide of Protestant revolt.

A detailed history of the Reformation would be inappropriate here and could, in any event, be misleading. To search for coincidence of detail with current events would be to miss the spirit of the inquiry. A brief summary will suffice.

Luther had intended to right a wrong, not to split his Church. As so often happens, however, events swiftly moved beyond the control of their initiator. Luther was excommunicated. Convinced that he enjoyed the legitimacy of scripture while the Pope did not, he became determined to go his own way. He also had the backing both of public opinion and of his prince, who had no love for Rome. The Papal Legate reported that "nine tenths shout 'Luther' as their war cry; and the other tenth cares nothing about Luther and cries: 'Death to the courts of Rome!'"⁸ Even in that era there were student demonstrations. At one point Luther had to come out of hiding to stop a student riot in Wittenberg.

The Lutheran precedent unfettered latent movements elsewhere. In Switzerland, Zwingli created a radical theocracy in Zurich, from which emerged some of the more radical forms of Protestantism. Calvin formed a Christian community in Geneva which in turn inspired Knox, the founder of Presbyterianism. The English reformation was unique in its almost purely political genesis. England was to swing between Catholicism and Protestantism, with the appropriate "purges" each time, until fatigue and external threat prompted a tolerant accommodation. In the Netherlands, the Calvinist minority became the nucleus of resistance to the bloody rule of Spain, ultimately achieving the split into what are now Protestant Holland and Catholic Belgium. In France, Catholics and Huguenots engaged in bloody civil war until an uneasy peace in 1598. Armed conflict in Germany ended temporarily in 1555, but broke out again in 1618, ultimately embroiling much of the continent. This Thirty Years War was to be "one of the most exhausting armed conflicts in the history of Europe".⁹ It ended with the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, 131 years after Luther first nailed his *Theses* to a church door. The Treaty effectively ended the wars of religion and defined the map of modern Europe. The cost in blood and misery had been enormous.

Reformation and Counter-Reformation of Communism

Socialism cannot be built unless advantage is taken of the heritage of capitalism.

V.I. Lenin. (1921)

On 14 August 1980, a 37 year-old unemployed electrician named Lech Walesa climbed the wall of the Lenin Shipyard in Gdansk, Poland and became spokesman for the striking workers. Like Luther, he was not a revolutionary. "We are accused of antisocialist tendencies", he said, "while in fact our demands are completely within the law and in no way conflict with the existing system or the government's political alliances".¹⁰ Like Wittenberg, Gdansk became a catalyst. Unlike the Reformation Vatican, however, the Kremlin contained reformers who read the storm signals well. The best response to a justified reform movement is to take the initiative and lead it. Change in the political face of Europe was again inevitable. This time, however, if there were to be breakaway "protestants" separating from monolithic orthodoxy,



V.I. Lenin

there would be at least an attempt to control the agenda.

Like the Europe of 1517, Eastern Europe in the 1980s was emerging from an apparently stable and predictable era. In this case it was the stability imposed by the force of Soviet arms. Hungary, Poland and Czechoslovakia had all learned the cost of reformation before its time. Nationalism, resilient from long repression, needed only the loosening of restraint to flourish. As in the earlier age, an ever more educated and politically sophisticated populace was less prone to uncritical acceptance of dogmatic platitudes. The Renaissance "Age of Exploration" was echoed in the modern technological explosion, again opening new horizons to the mind and promising opportunities for the future.

The same three threads of 16th century discontent can be seen again in the 20th. Theory and practice were far apart. Marxist-Leninist doctrine centres on the supremacy of the worker, predicting the ultimate "withering away" of the state after the people "become accustomed to the observance of the elementary rules of social life that have been known for centuries".¹¹ The Polish workers had dramatically demonstrated the contradiction of an entrenched "workers state" diametrically opposed to the workers it claimed to represent. The lesson was not lost elsewhere in the Communist bloc. Corruption was every bit as evident among the Party elite of all Communist countries as it had been among 16th century churchmen. In the same way corruption permeated to all levels of society.¹² And even more so than in the earlier era, economics and politics were the strong undercurrent to the ideological debate. Resentment flourished over the flow of national wealth to Moscow, and at the influence of Moscow in internal affairs.

Back to the Gospels

Poland's "Solidarity" trade union publicly exposed the gulf between the "worker's state" and its workers. Its logic was irrefutable in demanding that the state conform with its own ideology and give power to the workers. As the logic and precedent of the Polish stand inspired similar movements in Eastern Europe, Moscow, like Rome before it, found oppression to be a bankrupt solution. The Communist bloc had become, to borrow a phrase of Havelock Ellis, "a thin crust over a volcano of revolution".

The internal contradictions within Eastern Europe states applied equally to the Soviet Union itself. The "old guard", all contemporaries and heirs to Stalin, seemed to have run out of ideas. The 1985 election of Mikhail Gorbachev as General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union was to change all that dramatically.

Gorbachev possesses an invaluable key to understanding the Russian soul — peasant roots. In his formative years, he saw the devastation of Hitler's war. He also experienced the enormous national pride in the defeat of fascism and the rebuilding of the nation. "Everything lay in ruins", he wrote, "hundreds and thousands of cities, towns and villages, factories and mills. Our most valuable monuments of culture were plundered or destroyed — picture galleries and palaces, libraries and cathedrals. In the West they said that Russia would not be able to rise even in a hundred years ... today they say with admiration and others with open hostility, that we are a superpower! We revived and lifted the country on our own, through our own efforts, putting to use the immense potentialities of the socialist system".¹³ Clearly this was not a man mired in the gloom of the "old guard".

By the time he was elected to the Central Committee of the Communist Party in 1971, the national progress of which Gorbachev was so proud was faltering. As a young law student, Gorbachev, like many other committed Communists of his generation, had been much affected by the revelations of Khrushchev's de-Stalinization campaign. Old assumptions were no longer sacred. Under these new circumstances, new thinking was needed to explain the loss of momentum and the appearance of "stagnation and other phenomena alien to socialism".¹⁴ As a Leninist, Gorbachev returned to first principles, considering what Lenin might have done under the same circumstances.

Lenin produced a vast corpus of writings. As with the Bible, one can find a quotation from Lenin to justify almost anything. What is generally forgotten today is that, despite his autocratic temperament, Lenin believed in democracy. He was also a pragmatist. Stalin's fossilization of the Lenin myth has obscured the fact that Lenin's philosophy had evolved with experience and circumstance. The early Lenin was a theoretician, writing on "revolution as a predominantly social and techno-economic process".¹⁵ The Lenin of the Revolution and subsequent Civil War was "the organizer, conspirator, power-politician, practitioner of violence, leader of insurrection, dictator and conqueror. This was the Lenin that served as Stalin's model".¹⁶ The intervention of foreign powers after the Revolution, the state of economic collapse, the thousands of deaths from hunger, violence and disease, had all warranted the draconian measures of "war communism".

By 1921, the wars were over and the nation was exhausted. The sailors' mutiny in Kronstadt brought home the depth of discontent. Lenin reacted with a radical change of direction. His New Economic Policy restored a degree of private trade. Some factories were restored to private ownership and others were given to cooperatives. "It means that we are re-creating capitalism to a certain extent", he said. "We are doing this quite openly... Without the slightest denationalization, we shall lease mines, forests and oil wells to foreign capitalists, and receive in exchange manufactured goods, machinery, etc., and thus restore our own industry".¹⁷ The Lenin of this third period scarcely sounds Leninist as the term is commonly understood today.

Lenin had made no provision for his succession. Shortly after his untimely death at age 53 he was succeeded by Stalin, following a vicious power struggle. Bukharin, the theoretician who had

been closest to Lenin, and who stressed the fundamental importance of Lenin's last writings, was purged.¹⁸ For the next sixty years "theoretical" and "revolutionary/war communism" thinking dominated Soviet theory. Stalin, the self-styled "disciple" of Lenin had chosen to preach only two of the three "gospels" of the Master. As Gorbachev himself said, "Lenin's ideas were not always adhered to after his death. The specific situation in the country made us accept forms and methods of socialist construction corresponding to the historical conditions. But those forms were canonized, idealized and turned into dogma".¹⁹ Gorbachev's mission became a revival of Lenin's pragmatic third phase of thinking, transposed as necessary to fit today's situation. Not only did this approach offer an escape from the impasse, but it also enjoyed the legitimacy of Leninist "scripture". "Lenin lives on in the minds and hearts of millions of people", said Gorbachev. "Today we have a better understanding of Lenin's last works, which were in essence his political bequest".²⁰

A Communist Reformation

Immediately on assuming office Gorbachev secured Party commitment to a policy of restructuring (*perestroika*). This Leninist revival began with the uncomfortable recognition that, contrary to sixty years of Stalinist interpretation, Lenin for all his autocratic temperament believed in the goodness of man and in democracy. According to Gorbachev, *perestroika* would mean "broad democratization of all aspects of society". That in turn meant reversing sixty years of byzantine secrecy with democratic openness (*glasnost*). *Perestroika* would revive "the Leninist concept of socialist construction both in theory and in practice". By cleaning up corruption within the Party structure it would then be possible to check the "gradual erosion of the ideological and moral values of our people".

Seen in this light, the tumultuous events that followed come into perspective. Gorbachev recognized that there was no immediate military threat from the West and that the faltering Soviet economy would benefit greatly by reducing military expenditure. Besides, he explained, "Lenin said that we, the socialist state, would chiefly influence world development through our economic achievements". If "communism originated and exists in the interests of man and his freedom"²¹ then there would be nothing to gain and much to lose by holding on to a "protestant" Eastern Europe against its will. To the Stalinist tradition, any separatist movement among the national groups within the Soviet Union would be unthinkable. Following Leninist logic, however, although "attempts to fuel passions on ethnic grounds can only complicate a search for reasonable solutions", the Soviet Union must be a "union and fraternity of free nations in a free country".²² Gorbachev has supported the right to secede. Indeed it is explicitly stated in the Constitution of the USSR. The fact that he must nurture and push his reformation in the face of a strong, conservative counter-reformation movement within the collective leadership structure, accounts for his intense frustration with the Baltic independence movements, whose impetuosity in the present may risk everything for the future.

Despite doubts in the West as to his motives, and despite strong opposition from those whose thinking was defined by six decades of the old dogma, Gorbachev's actions to date have been absolutely consistent with Lenin's vision of Communism. It is not only the Soviet "old guard" who have been misled by Stalin's interpretation. We in the West have become victims of our own preconceptions and failed to see Lenin, despite his faults, as a democrat, visionary, pragmatist and Russian.

Results of the Reformation

*Learn to see in another's calamity the ills
which you should avoid.*

Publius Syrus (ca. 42 B.C.)

The Communist reformation is far from a mirror image of the religious one. Nonetheless, there are sufficient similarities to be able to draw useful conclusions.

The instability generated by the breakdown of a stable system liberated long suppressed grievances and ambitions. The Reformation was a time of division and conflict. The single, monolithic Church split irrevocably into separate and often hostile denominations. As events gained momentum, they often got beyond the control of those who started them. In some cases, mobs took to the streets. The ideological aspect fostered extremism, and, sadly, there is no war so vicious as a "holy war". Northern Ireland today is but a faint echo of the events that shook Europe for over a century. Heretics, by definition people of opposing views, could be treated with un-Christian brutality. In England, this was limited to a few high profile individuals, but France experienced wholesale massacre of Huguenot communities.

The political map of Europe changed. The concept of the modern nation state became established and the old idea of a united Christendom virtually disappeared for three centuries, until the genesis of the modern ecumenical movement. Ideology soon became secondary to national interests, and international wars of ever increasing scale dominated the next three hundred years. Finally, the ideological change had a radical impact on the economic system. Capitalism reinforced by the "Protestant work ethic" was to change the face of the modern world.²³

Perhaps the most important lesson to learn from the Reformation is to avoid attempting precise prediction. Once great forces are unleashed, nothing is certain. Historical precedent suggests that peace is not "breaking out all over", and that the future may be turbulent. The world may be walking back from the nuclear precipice, but may be becoming safer for conventional struggle in a more fragmented world. Violence and separatist nationalism in the southern USSR, rumblings over such issues as the Polish-German border, and continuing unrest in the Baltic states should serve as warnings that people have not changed much in 300 years. The success of *perestroika* is already in doubt, and there are even suggestions in some Soviet quarters that things were better under Stalin. A Stalinist counter-reformation could look to external adventure to divert attention from internal problems. It is equally possible that Gorbachev may be forced back into Leninist autocracy in the face of internal dissent. If *perestroika* does succeed, the West may ultimately be faced with a dynamic and efficient Soviet Union. One can only hope that it would remain simply an economic rival.

Perhaps the Communist reformation will result in the establishment of "denominations" — a Western-style socialist, "protestant" Communism in Eastern Europe and a conservative, Leninist and more traditional "catholic" Communism in Russia. Perhaps a purified and renewed Soviet Leninism will emerge from the ashes of the present turmoil with new missionary fervour. Perhaps, even in the now independent nations of Eastern Europe, parochial Communist schools will be established to teach and preserve the true faith of Lenin. As in the earlier time, the political, economic and social face of Europe will not be the same again. As before, events may not mature and stabilize for generations.

Conclusions

There is nothing permanent except change.

Heracleitus (c. 513 B.C.)

A comparison of *perestroika* — the "Communist reformation" — with the 16th century Catholic and Protestant Reformations provides four useful lessons for defence planning. First, we must think in the long term, avoiding rushed judgements on dramatic events. Second, we must think broadly, and avoid basing strategies on traditional scenarios. Third, we must not ignore ideology; it remains a force to be reckoned with, whether among dedicated Communists, fundamentalist Moslems or devout Christians. Finally, we must remember that rapid change is inherently destabilizing; once begun, no matter how noble the motives, it can rapidly elude the control of its creator.

The Gorbachev interpretation of Leninism does not warrant lavish defence spending. Barring a major upset in present trends, a Third World War is unlikely in the foreseeable future. The Soviet philosophy of "reasonable sufficiency" is equally reasonable for the West, if it is achieved within the current arms control process. On the other hand, conflict at a lesser level is, if anything, more likely than ever. Canadian involvement in future conflict is, however, as in the past, impossible to predict. It would therefore be irresponsible indeed to maintain anything less than balanced, general purpose air, land and naval forces, capable of credible response to the unexpected. The most earnest desire for calm will not disperse the storm clouds on the horizon. □

NOTES

1. Christopher Hill, *Lenin and the Russian Revolution*. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1971), p.154.
2. Donald D. Barry and Carol Barner-Barry, *Contemporary Soviet Politics: An Introduction* (3rd ed.). (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1987), p.8.
3. *Ibid.*, p.10.
4. *Ibid.*, p.1.
5. *Ibid.*, p.59.
6. Owen Chadwick, *The Reformation*. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1964), p.19.
7. Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity*. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1953), p.698.
8. Chadwick, *The Reformation*, p.55.
9. Latourette, *A History of Christianity*, p. 881.
10. Quoted by Stan Persky, *At the Lenin Shipyard: Poland and the Rise of the Solidarity Trade Union*. (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1981), p.107.
11. V.I. Lenin, *State and Revolution*. (Reprint of the 1935 ed.; Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press Inc.), p.74.
12. Discussed in detail by Hedrick Smith, *The Russians*. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1976), Chapter III.
13. Mikhail Gorbachev, *Perestroika*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), p.28.
14. *Ibid.*, p.5.
15. Stefan T. Possony, *Lenin Reader*. (Chicago Henry Regnery Co., 1966), p.xiii
16. *Ibid.*
17. Quoted in Possony, *Lenin Reader*, p.113.
18. *Ibid.*, p.xiii.
19. Gorbachev, *Perestroika*, p.31.
20. *Ibid.*, p.11.
21. *Ibid.*, p.141.
22. *Ibid.*, p.107.
23. The classic work on the subject is Professor R.H. Tawney's, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1961.