

BEWARE OF MISLEADING SOVIET TERMS

Since Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in the Soviet Union in April 1985, America's media have been deluged by terms describing a very complex political, economic, and social situation in the U.S.S.R. Many words from the Soviet political lexicon, regurgitated by the media without explanation and often poorly understood by the journalists themselves, often confuse the American newspaper reader or television viewer.

Properly understanding the Soviet political lexicon is important because more than just words are at stake. No sense can be made of the momentous events now reshaping the Soviet Union without first understanding the reality behind the stock expressions. Distorting the meaning of terms used in the Soviet political discourse leads to misunderstandings about what is happening there. And that may result in flaws in United States policy toward the Soviet Union.

A few Soviet terms, used by the U.S. media, requiring better definition are:

Black market - This is the huge sector of the Soviet economy that operates outside state control as a free market. Western journalists often use this term in a pejorative way. However, black markets operate according to the laws of supply and demand, and not arbitrarily according to orders by the state. For decades it has been the only sector of the Soviet economy that functioned efficiently.

Conservatives (also see Right) - This is the word most commonly used in the Soviet Union for hard-line communists. While it makes some sense to view hard-line communists as wanting to conserve the old totalitarian system, it is incorrect to attribute any philosophical meaning to the term. Conservatives in the West are anti-communist and pro-free market—the exact opposite of “conservative” hard-line communists in the Soviet Union.

Democrats (also see Left) - These are those who struggle for free and fair elections, individual liberties, private ownership of property, a free market, and a sharp reduction in the role of the state in the economy. In the Soviet Union they sometimes are called “progressive” or, mistakenly, left-wing.

Left (also known as the Democrats) - The term “left,” as used by Western journalists and most Soviet politicians, refers to those who criticize and oppose the Soviet political system and communism in general and struggle for political liberty, a free-market economy, and a drastic reduction of bureaucratic interference in the lives of the people. In the West, this is, of course, the agenda of the right. The Soviet left, therefore, bears more of a resemblance to American conservatives than American liberals. Mikhail Gorbachev himself admitted as much when he said in Minsk (Byelorussia), on February 26, 1991: “Left wing implied... adherents of socialism and communism. But the democrats reject the socialist idea and are in favor of making society capitalist. Is it not clear that what we are dealing here with is a typical opposition of a right-wing kind? We should call a spade a spade.” Thus, in Western terms, Boris Yeltsin is on the right, while Gorbachev, who calls himself a “convinced communist,” is on the left.

Perestroika - This is the attempt by Gorbachev to create a "socialist market" by giving managers, and not central state planners, more control over running state enterprises. Gorbachev also allowed the creation of so-called cooperatives—small shops, restaurants, and service organizations owned collectively by the employees. Because it was only a half-hearted reform program, perestroika not only failed to improve the economy, it made it worse. Under Gorbachev the state continued to control industry, land, raw materials, prices, and the distribution of food and other products.

Right (also see Conservatives) - The meaning of this word in the Soviet Union is the opposite in the West. In the Soviet Union the "right" means those who support communism, reject free market capitalism and seek to perpetuate government control over the daily life of the people. In the West this is the agenda of the left. Thus, contrary to what the media assert, the August 19 putsch intended to restore communism was undertaken by the Soviet left, not the right.

Russian vs. Soviet - Although these terms often are used interchangeably in the West, they refer to very different things. The Soviet Union consists of fifteen republics of which Russia is but one. It is by far the largest republic, comprising three-fourths of the area of the Soviet Union, and on its own would still be the largest country in the world. Although ethnic Russians constitute roughly half of the Soviet Union's population, they are but one of over one hundred nationalities. Russia has been the vehicle through which the communist empire was ruled, and before that the Tsarist Empire. Most of the top officials throughout both empires have been Russians. Russian nationalism often was invoked by Moscow to justify its rule. But this was not done with the consent of the Russian people, who lost more lives to Soviet totalitarian repression than any other people in the Soviet Union. The Russians decisively repudiated Communism when on June 12, 1991 they elected Boris Yeltsin, who resigned from the Party in 1990, as President of the Russian Republic.

Sovereignty - This word has been used by different groups in the Soviet republics to describe different goals for independence. For democratic reformers, "sovereignty" has meant the assertion of control by the republics over their own affairs. For the communist hard-liners, "sovereignty" for the republics is used to describe a new Soviet Union in which the powers of the Soviet government over the republics would remain largely intact. For them, it is largely an empty declaration, not a stepping stone to independence and democracy, as democratic reformers believe. Every Soviet republic declared its "sovereignty" in 1990.

Stability - The concept of "stability" is the watchword of the Bush Administration's Soviet policy. Bush's discomfort over the revolutionary transformation of the Soviet Union and his preference for controlled and limited change convinced the President to support Mikhail Gorbachev long after he had become an obstacle to further democratization. Believing Gorbachev was the key to stability, Bush clung to Gorbachev and the central government and shunned Boris Yeltsin and other democratic leaders of the republics, including those in the Baltics. Moreover, as in Yugoslavia, the Bush Administration's support of the center against the republics in the name of stability may backfire and contribute to greater instability and even civil war. True stability cannot come from the forcible maintenance of an unwanted imperial structure, but only from the free self-determination of the republics.

Suicidal Nationalism - This term was used by George Bush in his August 1, 1991 speech in Kiev to describe the national independence movements in the Soviet empire. Bush's policy has been to oppose the dissolution of the Soviet empire to bolster "stability." Before the August 19 coup attempt, Bush had only minimal contacts with the republics. He feared encouraging their efforts to free themselves from Moscow's control.

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