

THE SOVIET UNION AND THE WORLD ORDER
IN A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE.

By

Yusufu Bala Usman,
Department of History,
Ahmadu Bello University,
Zaria.

A Contribution to the North-East Zonal Conference
of the Nigerian Political Science Association,
University of Maiduguri, Maiduguri, 6th - 11th
April, 1992.

THE SOVIET UNION AND THE WORLD ORDER
IN A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE.⁺

By

Yusufu Bala Usman,
Department of History,
Ahmadu Bello University,
Zaria.

The theme of this conference, appears on the surface, to be clear and straightforward. For, what can appear to be more straight forward, clear, and reasonable, in the context of what we are told is happening in the world today, then for the national political science association of an important Third World country like Nigeria, to deliberate on the issue of, "The collapse of the Soviet Union: implications for Third World sovereignty and development"? With this as our theme, our task at this conference seems cut and dried. Over the years, we have been made to accept certain premises regarding the nature of the world order. These premises have come to appear as so obviously true that they have come to be made just part of our common-sense conception of

⁺ A contribution to the North-East Zonal Conference of the Nigerian Political Science Association, University of Maiduguri, Maiduguri, 6th-11th April, 1992.

global reality. Our discourse on this issue can therefore begin with these premises, as its point of departure, and end within the limits defined by them, without our even been aware that these are just premises which, like all premises, should be open to question as to their meaning and validity.

PREMISES

The substance of these premises regarding the nature of the world order can be summarised as follows: firstly, that since about 1945, the world has been basically divided into two major blocs, each bloc under one of two superpowers, both of which have dominated the world in the last four decades and a-half. Secondly, that these two blocs; a bloc of capitalist countries led by the United States of America, constituting "the first world"; a bloc of socialist countries led by the Soviet Union, constituting "the second world", have been engaged in a cold war, and regional conflicts, parts of which involved a contest over who influences and controls the rest of us, who belong to neither of the two blocs and whose countries therefore constitute "the third world". Thirdly, that this cold war,

including this contest between the two blocs for influence and control of the Third world has constituted the decisive dimension of the process of international relations since the end of the Second World War.

With these premises underlying our conception of the nature of the world order since 1945, the dramatic developments in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union in the last two years would appear as earth-shaking, since one of the two blocs and the super power heading it ^{have} ceased to exist. We are left with one of the two blocs intact and its super power appearing to be dominant all over the world. We are therefore faced with the issue of what to do with ourselves, in what has been called "the third world", when among other changes, "the second world" seems to have disappeared! All this appears to make our task at this conference clear and straightforward.

POSITIONS

Already, we have, widely propagated in this country, a number of positions regarding the implications of the recent dramatic developments in

Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union which are all derived from these premises and from their definitions of the nature of the world order. These positions have tended to paralyse serious political discourse on our future options and alternatives in international relations.

One of the most widely propagated of these positions is the one that has it that, it is not only one of the two super powers that has collapsed. But that the collapse of the Soviet Union, also means the collapse of the ideology, and of the social and economic system of socialism and communism, which the Soviet Union is supposed to have pioneered and embodied. Therefore in the ideological contest between socialism and capitalism, it is capitalism, pioneered and embodied by Western Europe and the United States of America, which has emerged victorious, conclusively proving that it is superior to socialism. Therefore, we should recognise this reality and come to terms with it and accept the triumph of capitalism and the dominance of its free market, and of its market forces, over our daily lives and the destinies of our countries.

But another widely propagated position, starts from the same premises but draws different implications. According to this position the collapse of the Soviet Union is much more than a conclusive proof of the bankruptcy of socialism and communism, but actually demonstrates that all godless and secular ideologies are bound to fail and also to be exposed as bankrupt. And that we should realise this from what has happened to the Soviet Union and turn to our religions for the correct path for developing our economy and our social and political systems. Among those who espouse this position are those who say that with the collapse of the Soviet Union, and therefore, they insist, of socialism and communism, the central ideological conflict in the world today is between resurgent Islam led by the leaders of the Islamic Republic of Iran, on the one hand, and Western Judeo-Christian civilisation, on the other. They cite the attitudes and actions of the West in the Middle East, North Africa and towards Islamic fundamentalism generally, as evidence of this global contest, which has more clearly come into prominence with what has happened with the Soviet Union.

Others, who basically share this second position will, however, insist that the way out is to follow the path according to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and its message of love; for that is what the godless and secular ideologies like socialism lack and that is why they have failed, as the developments in the Soviet Union are supposed to show.

But a third position which is also quite widespread is that with the collapse of the Soviet Union (which according to this view only started socialism and communism in its game of realpolitik) the rivalries between the former great powers of the world, in Western Europe, North America and Japan, which came to an end with the end of the Second World War, shall revive. Therefore, Third World countries, like our own, should work out their survival strategies in the context of this return to a new form of late nineteenth century power politics, already manifested in the rising protectionism, emerging trading blocs and incipient trade wars across the Pacific and across the Atlantic.

SCIENTIFIC INQUIRY

This conference can quite easily busy itself, for the next four or five days, deliberating upon these, and other similarly-derived positions regarding the implications, of the dramatic developments in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe for Third World countries like our own. But would this be a satisfactory exercise for the conference of a national scientific association of an important Third World country like Nigeria? Would such an exchange, of what shall be largely platitudes, cliches and slogans, no matter how pompous, or noisy, amount to carrying out the responsibilities of political science by its leading professional organisation in this country? Surely the primary responsibility of a political science association is the promotion of scientific political inquiry. And scientific political inquiry is not the same thing as the repetition and regurgitation of premises, definitions, concepts and formulae arrived at elsewhere, no matter how authoritative this elsewhere may be. Scientific inquiry begins with questions and ends up with propositions, whose basis can be also questioned, in the perpetual attempt

to grasp the complex dimensions and motions of objective reality. That is why it is inquiry and not liturgy.

If, therefore, the Nigerian Political Science Association is to promote scientific political inquiry through this conference, then the conference should start its deliberations by going beyond the routine of defining the theme and the key concepts constituting it. It is not enough here to merely start by defining the Soviet Union, the Third World and the meaning of "collapse", "sovereignty" and "development." It is not enough to pile facts upon facts about the Soviet Union and recent development there; or about the countries of the Third World and what is happening to them now. That exercise is really secondary, even if necessary.

What this conference has to start with is the clarification of the basis of the discourse it is part of, through the examination of the premises, or in other words the fundamental **assumptions**, underlying the conception of the world order prevalent in this country, which not only inform the choice of the theme of the conference, but also constitute its intellectual background and context. This conference has to start off from the

very issue of whether there actually exists a world order/s, an international system/s, a global arrangement/s, through which what happens to the Soviet Union can have implications for the sovereignty and development of Third World countries like our own. If no such world order or orders; international system or systems, global set of arrangement or arrangements, exists or existed, and therefore what happens to the Soviet Union has nothing, or very little to do, with sovereignty and development in the Third World, then there would be no basis for this conference organised around its present theme. If on the other hand, this exercise of basic clarification shows that there does exist a world order, an international system or a global arrangement through which what happens to the Soviet Union has implication for Third World countries like our own, then the next task is to seek to comprehend the nature and movement of this order, system or arrangement, and the place of the Soviet Union in it, before and after the recent dramatic developments.

After this, we can seek to establish what exactly these recent dramatic developments amounted to, with regards to the position of the Soviet Union in the world order, and particularly in relation to the position

of Third World countries in that order, and the prospects with regards to their sovereignty and development.

This contribution is not going to be an exhaustive treatment of these and other related issues. It is merely intended to raise them here for discussion and for developing them later as part of the continuing attempt to challenge and transform the basis of intellectual discourse in this country in order to bring its premises and framework much more in line with our actual historical experience and independent grasp of contemporary reality.

WORLD ORDER?

The first issue to raise is obviously the issue of whether there exists a world order within the structure of which what happens to the Soviet Union has implications for the sovereignty and development of Third World countries. This can best be tackled by examining the meaning of "order" as it is used in this context. For, once it is

recognised that "world order" as used here does not mean an "order" in the sense in which it is used in the term "law and order"; meaning a regulated arrangement and regulated activity in accordance with the prescriptions of an established code, then we can begin to get somewhere. But not very far. For, it is also strongly argued that what we have in the world today cannot be correctly described as a "world order" but is in fact much closer to "world disorder". It is said that given the number of wars raging in various parts of this planet, the genocidal deprivations inflicted on large sections of the human race, and most flagrantly the brazen disregard for crucial provisions of existing international law by the United States of America, the world situation can be more accurately characterised as one of disorder, than of order.

It is pointed out that, when, within the last decade alone, the United States of America has invaded and occupied Grenada, one of the smallest countries in the world; attacked Nicaragua directly and by proxy, and rejected a World Court ruling on the case; invaded and occupied Panama and siezed

and carried away its head of state for criminal trial in its courts; bombarded Libya; and violently enforced double-standards in the Middle East, it is deceptive to speak of a world order. For, how can there be any order when such a militarily powerful country behaves openly as an outlaw, violating every article of international law providing for the sovereignty of nation-states, their rights to self-determination, and freedom from foreign interference; and for the peaceful resolution of disputes between states?

In this sense, there is certainly nothing like a world order. But world order is used here not in this sense. It is used here to mean a structure of relationship and a pattern of interaction which link up all of us inhabiting this planet at all levels of our existence, from the geological, microbiological, to the economic, political and even musical. It is an order because it has some regularities, structures and pattern which link up all of humanity at almost all levels, even if these regularities, structures and pattern are not obvious. It is, in this sense that it can be argued that the Soviet Union and the countries of the Third World belong to a world order and what happens

to the Soviet Union has implications for the Third world.

But the crucial issue really is not over whether or not there exists a world order in the sense conceived above. The crucial issue is the nature of this world order and, for the deliberation at this conference, the position of the Soviet Union in it, particularly with regards to the sovereignty and development of Third World countries.

THE U.S.S.R.

The Soviet Union, or the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, as it was formally known, was established on 30th December 1922 when the First All-Union Congress of Soviets formally ratified the Declaration and Treaty of Union setting it up as a confederation of republics, some of which were themselves federations. By 1925 this confederation was made up of six union republics, fifteen autonomous socialist republics and sixteen autonomous regions. It covered an area of over two million square kilometers with a population of about 130 million, made up of over one hundred nationalities. It was, and up to

its recent demise, remained the largest country by size in the world covering one-sixth of the total land area of this planet and stretching across ten times zones.

This new polity was established as a result of the victory of the Bolsheviks in the civil war and wars of intervention which followed the October Revolution of 1917. The peasants and workers Soviets led by the Bolsheviks constituted the political core of this confederation which brought together all the territories of the former Empire of the Tsar of All the Russias, except Poland, Finland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia.

This confederation faced bitter hostilities from other countries around it from its foundation. This active hostility and the nature and revolutionary project of the Bolsheviks, led to a large measure of centralisation of its political system.

IMPERIALISM

The world order in which the Soviet Union came to be established in 1922 was not just an order made up of sovereign nation-states relating to one another according to the size of their population,

territory or even resources. Certainly the sovereignty of European nation-states, had been a major issue in the contest which exploded into the violent eruption of First World War, out of which the Soviet Union was built. But the world order was not just an order of sovereign nation-states, just like that.

This world order was structured by relations shaped and determined by the nature of the economy and society of some of these nation-states. These nation-states, particularly Britain, Germany, France, the United States, Japan, and a few others in Western Europe namely Italy, Belgium, Spain and Portugal dominated this world order into which the Soviet Union emerged in 1922.

In their societies the relationship between human beings for the production, distribution and utilisation of goods and services was organised for the purpose of making profit by those who own the land, the factories, the banks and other assets. These owners were few in number. The majority of the populations owned nothing for use in producing goods and services except their mental and manual labour. They had to sell their labour to the few

who own the land, the factories, the banks and other assets, in order to survive. The motor of the system is individual greed. Its driving force is the fierce competition for wealth and the fear of hunger and impoverishment.

This social and economic system, known as the capitalist system, had developed several centuries before 1922. It came together with a revolution in humanity's grasp of nature and of natural processes, to lead to a phenomenal growth in science and technology. It led to a tremendous expansion in wealth and in man's capacity to control, dominate and exploit other human beings and nature.

From its genesis this system was nourished by the large-scale plunder and exploitation of the people and the resources of the Americas, Africa, and Asia. It was not just a social and economic system within countries, but also a global system emerging from the relationship established between the continents of Europe, Africa and the Americas which bordered the Atlantic Ocean.

By the time the Soviet Union was formed this system of imperialism has become entrenched world-wide, as a system by which a handful of countries in

Western Europe and North America subjugated and exploited other countries as colonies, semi-colonies or as economic dependencies in the case of the countries of Eastern Europe. The competition between these countries became very fierce. The Tsarist Russian Empire played a role in this system and was even a leading actor in the first half of the nineteenth century. But increasingly although it conquered and annexed neighbouring countries, its system was outdated and backward and it could not really cope. Its defeat by Japan in 1905 brought this out clearly.

When the October Revolution of 1917 brought this empire to an end and by 1922 enabled the Bolsheviks to replace it with a Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, covering most of its territory, this historical event did not bring to an end the world order dominated by imperialism. Although the Western imperialist powers were bitterly hostile to the Soviet State and its revolutionary project of overthrowing them and building socialism, the vast Eurasian plains over which the Tsars had ruled, and across which the Bolsheviks established their new polity was historically marginal to the development of capitalism and of the imperialist

world order, whose centre of gravity has remained in the Atlantic Region, and later on spreading to the Indian Ocean Region and the Asian Pacific.

Tsarist Russia was an important actor in the imperialist order, but its demise did not bring that order to an end and created a new order.

It is not insignificant that after the civil war and the wars of intervention against the young Soviet State, the imperialist powers came to terms with its existence and extensive trade developed particularly with Germany and the United States. But when new states emerged in East Asia from the 1940s which declared a commitment to defeat imperialism and build socialism, there has been prolonged warfare in East Asia which has not ceased since the Japanese invasion of 1931. This was because the revolution in China and Indo-China threatened one of the core areas (the East Asia mainland and archipelago), from where the imperialist world order has drawn its sustenance.

In fact, the October Revolution and the threat it posed to the ruling classes of the imperialist countries revitalised imperialism. It facilitated its coming to terms with section of the leadership

of the national liberation movements in Africa, Asia and the Americas, in such a way that old-style colonialism has been successfully replaced with various forms of neo-colonial and dependency relationships. It also favoured domestic reforms, which particularly after the Second World War enabled imperialism to accept local socialist movement, raise the living standards of its working class, expand production and project a powerful consumerism which has come to dazzle significant sections of the population of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.

COLD-WAR FIXATION

This reality of the place of the Soviet Union in the world order, from its foundation to its demise, is heavily obscured by the spectacular industrial and military achievements it made which enabled it to make advanced weapons of war and play a leading role in space exploration. Out of this, and the creation of a system of military alliance and bases by both the Soviet Union and the United States was promoted the notion of these two being

"super powers." This notion suited the military - industrial complex within the American establishment. It also suited certain ruling circles in the Soviet Union. But as is very obvious from what has been happening in the world the central global contest has not been between the two "super powers" but between the national liberation movements in Asia, Africa and Latin America and the imperialist world order built over the last five centuries, and still dominant.

This is not to say that the threat which the nuclear weaponry of the USSR and the USA posed to the existence of the human race did not make the issue of the relationship between these two crucial to human survival. But it is to argue that important, and mortal as this issue is, what has constituted the decisive dimension of the world order is the struggle for self-determination by the majority of the human race who are in Asia, Africa and the Americas, and whose struggle has made them constitute the most mortal threat to imperialism.

"Professor Dudley obviously expects us to parallel criticism of the West with those of the Communists... what happens between the East and the West is not determining my view point here. In any case if the Soviets and China were to vanish today, it will not change, by an iota the educational system of Nigeria or the nature of our economy. They will remain substantially dominated by the Anglo-Americans."

What has been taking place recently has only gone to confirm this rather hyporbolic rejoinder.

Over twenty years ago, I pointed out how the role of the Soviet Union in the World Order, has been given importance far beyond what it was in reality, as a result of cold-war fixation, which reduced almost everything in world affairs to the relations between the so-called superpowers and the two blocs they headed. This was in an exchange with one of the founders of this association, the late Billy Dudley, in 1971. I pointed out that:

"Professor Dudley obviously expects me to parallel criticisms of the West with those of the Communists what happens between the East and the West is not determining my view point here. In any case, If the Soviets and China were to vanish today, it will not change by an iota the educational system of Nigeria and the nature of our economy. They will remain substantially dominated by the Anglo-Americans."¹

MYSTIFICATION

But the mystification about the role of the Soviet Union in the world order has deeper dimensions to it than mere cold-war fixation. These had more to do with the Soviet Union's symbolic status as the first state in world history which openly and explicitly declared itself, at its foundation, as committed to eliminating feudalism and capitalism and all forms of exploitation of man by man; and set out to build socialism and communism and a new society for all of mankind free of exploitation and oppression.

This promise of the October Revolution of 1917 and of the new Soviet state shook the world. Many movements of the oppressed and exploited all over the world were deeply moved by this and placed a lot of their hope in it and saw it as a shining example of what they should struggle for. The bitter hostility of the ruling classes of the imperialist countries to the new state and the international communist movement made this attraction to the Soviet example deeper. The intense fear the Soviet Union aroused among the rich, the powerful and the privileged, all over the world further exaggerated its status. Almost every popular movement seeking improvements and changes to the existing order was accused and witch-hunted as "communists" and "Soviet agents." This symbolic status was consolidated by the decisive and historic role that the Red Army played in defeating Nazi Germany, particularly the victory at Stalingrad in 1942 when Nazism appeared invincible and was about to bring all of Europe from the Urals to the Atlantic under its heels. This was followed by the spectacular achievements the Soviet Union made in developing military and space technology rapidly enough to compete effectively with the United States. All these came together to favour the mystification of its role in the world order, whose nature was not really changed by its emergence.

Even when, in the early 1960s Mao Tse Tung and others started saying loudly that what was being built in the Soviet Union was not socialism; but that a privileged bureaucratic caste of had emerged and was taking the

Soviet Union back on to the capitalist road, this did not substantially effect this mystification.

The historic reality was that in the Soviet Union the mass democratic essence of the original Soviets, and of the revolutionary socialist project, has been substantially destroyed. And while the party elite preserved and increased their priveleges, the administrative command system of economic management proved incapable of taking the economy to a level at which it could even in its Eurasian space, could challenge the imperialist order at a fundamental level.

Some of the leading revolutionaries of the third world in the 1960s, particularly Mao Tse Tung, Che Guevara and Frantz Fanon, saw clearly this limitation of the Soviet Union and made this very clear in their statements, writings and actions. But the mystification had gone too far for even this to have any effect particularly as Western imperialism also found this mystification convenient for its domestic and foreign political operations. That is why this process of mystification has established one of the premises of our present conception of global reality.

COLLAPSE OR DISMEMBERMENT ?

The recent dramatic developments have called into question this mystification but seem to be producing new ones. It is for example asserted, even in the theme of this conference that the Soviet Union has "collapsed" it is surely not enough for anybody engaged in scientific political inquiry to accept that a polity has collapsed simply because its political leaders have announced that it has are working out new institutions.

A polity no matter of what form is constituted at various levels, not just at the level of the apex leadership.

There seems no doubt about the fact that a process of dismantling, or dismembering, the Soviet Union's taking place. This is not the same as a collapse; for it amounts to deliberate and purposeful activity unlike "collapse." It may or it may not succeed.

The level of integration of the population of the republics of the Soviet Union does not seem to allow for a neat dismantling even under the cover of a commonwealth. At the level of the economy, highly centralised planning has also given the economy a high level of integration.

Take the Ukraine, for example, whose position seems crucial whatever new arrangement emerges. By the early 1980s it obtained 60% of the machines and equipment for its factories from other republics. It got 50% of its bulldozers and excavators from them; 80% of its lorries and more than 60% of its wood, paper and container board; and also 66% of its woollen cotton and linen fabrics.² This involved exchanging its own agricultural and industrial products with the other republics.

Take Byelorussia, for example. In the early 1980s it sold to other republics 84% of its tractors; 90% of its instrument-making and electronic equipment; 73% of its ball-bearings, 70% of its machine tools; 70% of its man-made fibre and 54% of its plywood.³

This level of integration at the economic level can be seen to be much higher when the energy, transport and communication sectors are considered.

Can this level of integration continue even at reduced level without a much higher level of political integration than is provided for in the arrangement called the Commonwealth of Independent States ?

CONCLUSION

Given what has been sketched out above, the most obvious implications of the recent dramatic developments in the Soviet Union for Third World sovereignty and development has to do with the very premises with which we define the world and our relations with others and our place in it. For us to ensure our self-determination and sovereignty, which are key foundations for any genuine development, we have to work out a perception of the world based on our independent grasp of our contemporary global reality, rooted in our historical experience and derived from scientific inquiry. As almost every Nigerian now **bitterly** recognises, what we face in the 1990s is more than a question of sovereignty and development, but a question of survival. This survival is not possible without **sovereignty** and development, at all levels including at the level of how we comprehend the world, our relations with others and our place in it.

REFERENCES

1. Yusufu Bala Usman, For The Liberation Of Nigeria, New Beacon Books, London, 1979, p. 215
2. Victor Shevtsov, The State and Nations in the USSR, Progress publishers, Moscow, 1982, passim
3. Ibid