

**Zeitschrift:** Schweizer Monatshefte : Zeitschrift für Politik, Wirtschaft, Kultur  
**Herausgeber:** Gesellschaft Schweizer Monatshefte  
**Band:** 62 (1982)  
**Heft:** 9

**Anhang:** The Soviet Empire and the British Empire : a strategic comparison  
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# SCHWEIZER MONATSHEFTE

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SONDERBEILAGE

HEFT 9

62. JAHR 1982

WINSTON CHURCHILL LECTURE 1982

**Correlli Barnett**

The Soviet Empire and the British  
Empire: A Strategic Comparison

Herausgegeben von der Schweizerischen Winston Churchill Stiftung

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Gedruckt als Sonderbeilage zu Heft 9 des 62. Jahrgangs, September 1982,  
der «Schweizer Monatshefte».

Zu beziehen durch das Sekretariat der Schweizerischen Winston Churchill Stiftung,  
Limmatquai 62, 8001 Zürich.

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Tirage à part des «Schweizer Monatshefte», 62<sup>e</sup> année, N° 9, septembre 1982.

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Correlli Barnett

# The Soviet Empire and the British Empire

## A Strategic Comparison

The title of my lecture is 'The Soviet Empire and the British Empire: a Strategic Comparison'. It is therefore appropriate to recall that Sir Winston Churchill passionately believed that the British Empire was the source of Britain's power in the world. This is what he wrote in 1934 on this topic:

'Here we are on this 24<sup>th</sup> day of May, 1934, with the population of a first-class power, forty-five millions of us ensconced in this small island and dependent for our daily bread on our trade and Imperial connections. Cut these away and at least one-third of our population must vanish speedily from the face of the earth. It is too late for us to be a Holland or a Little Belgium. We must hold our own or lose our all . . .'<sup>1</sup>

It is this view of the Empire's importance to Britain that I mean to examine in the course of this lecture. But, firstly, the given title of my lecture requires, I think, some amendment and explanation. Perhaps 'imperialism' would be a better word than 'Empire', because it covers not only possessions under the flag, but also protectorates such as Egypt in the nineteen-twenties in the British case and the countries of Eastern Europe today in the Soviet case; it equally covers spheres of interest and intervention, such as the Middle East in both cases at different times, or parts of Africa in the case of the Soviet Union today. Moreover, the reference in the title of the lecture to 'a strategic comparison' must also imply *contrasts* as well.

I propose to examine the anatomy of the British imperial involvement mainly as it stood in the period between the world wars; that of the Soviet imperial involvement in the present era. The strategic comparison will not be made in narrowly military or naval terms, but in the light of what I call 'total strategy'. 'Total strategy' in my definition means the management of the various components of power – social, political, military and economic

– in pursuit of group survival and prosperity. It means the correct proportioning of those components within total strategy; for example, the relation of obligations and responsibilities to military strength; and the relation of military strength to a nation's economic, industrial and technological resources. Such then is the scope of my lecture.

At first sight, there may appear to be little in common between the Soviet Empire, or Soviet imperialism, and the British. The British Empire was oceanic, its possessions scattered across the globe, dependent on sea-borne trade and maritime communications; its ruling people a relatively small nation of some 45 millions dwelling on an island. Soviet Russia is a great landpower, whose non-Russian imperial possessions and most of whose protectorates are contiguous with her. With Britain the Royal Navy took decisive priority over the small, all-professional army; with Soviet Russia, and despite the expansion of Soviet seapower, it is land forces and their air component which dominate. Whereas Britain was attempting to perpetuate a world role bequeathed by history, the USSR since 1945 has been trying to create a world role *de novo*. Then again, Britain even during her imperial epoch was a parliamentary democracy devoted to liberal ideas in politics and economics; Soviet Russia is a despotism, perhaps one should say a theocracy, even if a theocracy without God, and espousing a fundamentalist Marxism-Leninism.

But underlying these obvious differences between Britain and Soviet Russia as imperial powers there are in fact illuminating similarities and analogies. Indeed, as I hope to show, the British imperial experience serves as a historical exemplar which can cast light on Soviet problems of 'total strategy' today. To cite but one instance: the British Empire in the 'thirties faced the dilemma of a possible two-theatre war against Germany in Europe and Japan in the Far East, with all the consequent problems of juggling overstretched military and naval resources. Today the USSR faces a similar two-theatre dilemma in the face of China and NATO. The United States, by contrast, has only one great-power enemy to consider.

The total-strategic similarities between the two imperialisms go very much deeper than particular aspects such as this. The fundamental common factor, in my analysis, lies in that both imperialisms were created as compensations for national weakness in the face of more formidable rivals. As a consequence of this, the role of myth, the role of ideology, *was* paramount in British imperialism and *is* paramount in modern Soviet imperialism; the vision of the imperial mission serving as a psychological crutch. It follows that in both cases the cherished myth and ideology failed – fails – to accord with the political and strategic reality of under-

lying weakness and overstretch. It is examination of this discrepancy between myth and reality, ideology and objective fact, that forms the theme of this lecture.

I will begin with British imperialism. As a concept rather than a miscellaneous collection of colonies left over from previous centuries of conquest, the British Empire dates from the late Victorian age. This was the era when Britain's earlier unchallenged world commercial ascendancy was passing away; when Britain faced new rivals surpassing the United Kingdom in population, such as the German Empire and the United States; when Royal Commissions on technology and education reported that Britain was already falling behind in the efficiency of her industries and in the application of science.<sup>2</sup> Propagandists of the new imperial idea, such as Sir John Seeley, the Cambridge historian, argued that Britain could still remain a preeminent world power if she welded her imperial possessions and the overseas colonies of British race, such as Australia and New Zealand, into a single political and strategic entity directed from London; indeed a federal Empire on the German model.<sup>3</sup> The vision of this new British imperial super-power was preached by organisations like the Imperial Federation League, founded in 1884, and the British Empire League and Imperial Federation Defence Committee both founded in 1893. But as we know, the dream of imperial federation, together with an imperial *Zollverein*, an imperial foreign policy and imperial navy, proved impossible, and was finally abandoned at the Imperial Conference of 1911. The 'white' colonists of British race, isolated in their own continents or islands, moulded by their own climates and environments, were swiftly growing into nations in themselves, more and more jealous of their independence. They did not wish to become parts of an imperial mosaic arranged in London. Yet while the attempt to create a cohesive political and strategic imperial organisation was failing in reality, the *myth* of Empire seized British minds. Queen Victoria's Golden and Diamond Jubilees in 1887 and 1897 served as potent propaganda exercises about the power and the glory of the Empire – the beginning of the 'pink-on-the-map' or 'public-relations' Empire taught to generations of schoolchildren. This propaganda version proudly enumerated the numbers of human beings, races, religions and sheep ruled by the British monarch, in order to show that the British Empire rendered Britain the world's greatest power. The British Empire exhibition at Wembley in 1924 provided the climax of this imperial propaganda.

Now, it was not only schoolchildren or the man in the street who came to believe this myth of empire. Politicians in the nineteen-twenties and 'thirties talked in public and private about 'the Empire'; kings talked about

'the Empire'. A standard reference work was issued to the armed forces in 1931 on *The Elements of Imperial Defence: A Study of the Geographical Features, Material Resources, Communications and Organization of the British Empire*.<sup>4</sup> Every five years Imperial Conferences were held to discuss, but only rarely to solve, imperial problems. There was a Committee of Imperial Defence; a Chief of the Imperial General Staff. Thus the imperial myth the British had created for themselves continued to console them between 1918 and 1939 in a belief that the Empire provided the buttress of British power and importance in the world. Not only the British themselves but also foreign countries, be they friendly or hostile, took the British Empire at the face value placed on it by myth, and assumed that Britain was indeed a world power, with strength and role to match.

Since belief that the Empire was the source of Britain's greatness served as a necessary psychological crutch to the British, it is hardly surprising that neither as a whole nor in its constituent parts was it ever subjected to a critical cost-benefit analysis. Yet when measured in terms of economic or strategic advantages balanced against involvements and obligations, the Empire in the 'thirties did not add to British power, but drained it. The Empire was not so much an asset as a predicament; one could say, one of the most remarkable examples of strategic overextension in history.

Let us consider first the economic aspect; resources, raw materials, markets, investments. There was in fact no correlation between the Empire, nor of British imperial strategic responsibilities, and the pattern of British economic interests. In 1929 British imports from the Empire amounted to some 29 per cent of her total imports, rising to 39 per cent by 1936.<sup>5</sup> With regard to food supplies, 23 per cent of British beef supplies came from the Empire, as against 34 per cent from outside; 33 per cent of lamb from the Empire as against 30 per cent from foreign sources.<sup>6</sup> A Study Group of the Royal Institute of International Affairs on the British colonial empire – that is, colonies or mandates of non-European peoples – reported in 1937 that imports of all kinds of raw materials from these territories amounted to just 11 per cent of Britain's total imports of raw materials.<sup>7</sup> The Empire supplied no more than one-fifth of Britain's needs in oil. The Royal Institute of International Affairs Study Group summed up:

'The reliance of the United Kingdom on British colonial resources is not therefore great on the whole, though for one or two commodities, e. g. rubber and tin, it is considerable.'<sup>8</sup>

India, though a key British economic asset in the nineteenth century, had lost its importance by the nineteen-thirties. British investment in India in 1938 represented 12.5 per cent of total British overseas investment, and about a third less than in South America, for which continent Britain of course incurred no political or strategic entanglements.<sup>9</sup> As a market India took only 7.4 per cent of British exports in 1931, and Britain's share of India's imports of manufactured goods was falling swiftly.<sup>10</sup> After 1931 the hitherto favourable balance of trade between Britain and India swung against Britain.<sup>11</sup> Nor was the economic importance to Britain of the Dominions of European race decisively greater than regions outside the Empire such as Europe or the United States. As fields for British investment Australia and New Zealand rated only a little more important than Argentina; New Zealand rated as less important than Brazil, Canada as less important than the United States.<sup>12</sup> The most valuable Dominion sources of minerals, South Africa and Canada, were at the same time strategic backwaters for Britain, making no calls on British naval and military strength. The one major attempt to forge an imperial 'Common Market', the Imperial Economic Conference at Ottawa in 1932, had witnessed the Dominions, as primary producers, ranged in bitter bargaining against the United Kingdom as the industrial sector;<sup>13</sup> and economic historians dispute whether the resulting Imperial Preference tariff had any significant impact.<sup>14</sup>

Sir Keith Hancock, the historian of interwar imperial economic policy, sums up the economic value of the Empire to Britain in the 'thirties by writing that the words 'Empire as a whole' had no economic meaning, because of the immense differences between the problems and situations of the different parts.<sup>15</sup>

Moreover, the pattern of the economic importance to Britain of these different parts bore little relationship to the pattern of British imperial strategic responsibilities and costs. The essential strategic axis of the Empire extended eastwards from the United Kingdom through the Mediterranean and Middle East to India, Malaya and the white dominions of Australia and New Zealand. In 1938 land defence of India and the route to India swallowed up over half the British army.<sup>16</sup> The Mediterranean fleet at that epoch was the largest single British fleet, amounting to half the Royal Navy's battleships. In the Far East Britain lay under the obligation to defend Malaya, New Zealand, Australia against Japan; in other words fight a naval war on the far side of the globe at a time when Britain might probably be in danger at home from Nazi Germany. Moreover, thanks to our role of Mediterranean power, we also stood in peril of a third major conflict, with Italy. The economic assets along this strategic



axis of Empire in no way justified so great and so risky a British military and naval involvement. I have already mentioned the less than crucial economic relevance of India, Australia and New Zealand. Malaya was certainly the richest single British colony, the world's major source of tin and rubber, but Britain herself took only 10 per cent of Malaya's tin exports, while drawing 20 per cent of her rubber supplies from sources outside the Empire.<sup>17</sup> In the Middle East Iraqi and Iranian oil then amounted to only 3 per cent of world output, and Britain drew most of her supplies from the United States and Venezuela.<sup>18</sup> The Suez Canal, though an important commercial and strategic link, was by no means vital, as was shown in the course of the Second World War and when blocked after the Arab-Israeli War of 1956.

Looked at, then, with an accountant's eye, there was no United Kingdom economic or security interest in the whole of this grand strategic axis of Empire through the Mediterranean to New Zealand that could justify the huge military and naval investment, the strategic entanglements, and the risk of wars with Japan and Italy.

When we examine the relative contributions made by Britain and the Empire to the common imperial defence, it becomes even more evident that the Empire constituted a heavy net drain on British strength; not a reinforcement. Britain alone supplied the forces by sea, land and air that defended the Mediterranean and Middle East. In the Far East and Pacific Malaya merely contributed a quarter of the cost of the Singapore naval base, and Australia and New Zealand maintained tiny navies and citizen land forces for home defence. No wonder, then, that United Kingdom defence expenditure *per capita* was some ten times higher than that of the Dominions.<sup>19</sup> Nor did the Indian army contribute to the general defence of the Empire, by way of compensation for the 50 battalions of the British army locked up in garrisoning India. Not until 1939 was it agreed that India should provide 10 battalions for overseas service, of which 3 were to be in any case British battalions based in India.<sup>20</sup> This was hardly a profitable return on the British military investment in India.<sup>21</sup>

Finally, it should be noted that the British Empire in the nineteen-thirties in no sense constituted an imperial alliance or imperial 'Nato', with clearly stated mutual obligations. For example, the Dominions refused to associate themselves with the United Kingdom in signing the Locarno Treaty. While Britain herself assumed a limitless strategic obligation towards the Empire because of sentiment and the imperial myth, the Dominions assumed no reciprocal obligation towards United Kingdom security in Europe. In dealing with the rise of Nazi Germany after 1933,

and specifically in the Munich crisis of 1938, the United Kingdom was diplomatically and strategically on her own, as if no such thing as the British Empire existed. She could not count on a man, ship or aircraft from the Dominions.<sup>22</sup>

So it was that the British Empire was in reality not a source of strength to Britain but of weakness and danger. The entire sprawling, outwardly impressive structure rested essentially on the human and industrial resources of the British nation at home of only 45 millions. It was quite impossible for Britain to provide for the defence of the Empire against all potential foes. In the 'twenties British opinion solved this puzzle by taking refuge in another myth born of liberal ideology – the Covenant of the League of Nations, coupled with general disarmament. Since the Empire could only safely exist in a peaceable, law-abiding world, then the British chose to believe that such a world was in process of creation. When the advent of militaristic aggression after 1931 destroyed this ideological vision, Britain faced an insoluble strategic dilemma. The opposite pulls of Britain's own security, tied up with the fate of Europe, and the security of the Empire supplied the basic theme of Government and Chiefs-of-Staff debate on British grand strategy in the 'thirties.<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, the problem of resources was worsened because Britain in that era was a relatively declining and technologically backward economy. Governments and the Treasury therefore found themselves caught in the scissors between Britain's imperial strategic obligations and this too-narrow economic and industrial base. The British rearmament programme from 1936 onward absolutely depended on foreign advanced technology – American and German machine-tools, Swiss and American instrumentation; Bofors and Oerlikon cannon; Czechoslovakian armourplate. These foreign purchases had a cumulative adverse impact on the fragile British balance-of-payments; and the Treasury repeatedly warned that a larger rearmament programme could only be achieved at the cost of exports and the balance-of-payments, so leading to eventual national bankruptcy.<sup>25</sup>

By the eve of the Second World War British belief in the imperial myth, the British sense of obligation towards their kith-and-kin in the Dominions, had led Britain into a strategic situation of grim paradoxes: an Empire that was supposed to buttress Britain but which instead Britain would have to defend, but in fact lacked the strength to do; a war which the Chiefs of Staff said Britain could only win if it were a long one, but which the Treasury warned we could only afford if it were a short one.<sup>26</sup>

The years 1940–42 saw this precarious world structure – world bluff, or myth, one might rather say – finally collapse under the triple attack of Germany, Italy and Japan. In the defeats in the Mediterranean and

Middle East, the loss of the Far Eastern Empire, the passing of Australia and New Zealand under American protection, the advent of British national bankruptcy by the time of the American Lease-Lend Act of April 1941 – in these things we see the final denouement of Britain’s attempt to sustain a world role on the resources of a second-rank, industrially backward, country. We see the final penalty for allowing a cherished myth to blind national policy to realities, so that Britain failed to tailor her total strategy according to her basic economic and technological resources, and committed the error of believing that the imperial ‘pink-on-the-map’ was evidence of global power rather than strategic overextension, and hence weakness.

Now I come to Soviet imperialism in the postwar era. Here I shall begin with the economic base, because as Admiral Gorshkov in his book *The Sea Power of the State*<sup>27</sup> approvingly paraphrases from Lenin:

‘Policy, as Lenin taught, is a concentrated expression of the economy, the state of which primarily determines the power of such an important instrument of policy as are the armed forces of a nation. It is precisely in the state of the armed forces of a given country that its economic power is reflected.’<sup>28</sup>

Gorshkov notes that ‘Engels already scientifically demonstrated the dependence of the ways of waging war on the economic bases of society, the level of production.’<sup>29</sup> Indeed, Gorshkov quotes Engels’ own words on the matter:

‘Nothing so depends on economic conditions as the army and the fleet. Armaments, complement, organisation, tactics and strategy depend first and foremost on the level of production reached at any given moment and on the means of communications.’<sup>30</sup>

The Admiral himself adds the following dictum:

‘The military-economic potential of the state is determined by such factors as natural resources and above all strategic raw materials satisfying the needs of production; industry – factories, mills, power stations, agriculture; the transport and communications network; labour productivity; human resources satisfying the high requirements of modern production both on the quantitative and qualitative side; the development of science and technology; and state material reserves.’<sup>31</sup>

Now, I need hardly emphasise that I entirely agree with this Marxist analysis of the essentially economic basis of a state’s total strategy; and agree that a state’s economic strength determines, or *ought* to determine, such other factors of total strategy as the nature and deployment of its political commitments and its armed forces. One could further say that the objective of total strategy as a whole should be to promote and secure the economic advancement of the toiling masses of the state in question.

This is, after all, the standpoint of my own analysis of the British Empire in terms of the real interests and resources of the United Kingdom. However, when one turns from the pronouncements of Engels, Lenin and Gorshkov on the determining role of economic and industrial potential in total strategy to the reality of the Soviet economy, what do we find? We find that Soviet Russia belongs more to the category of a backward, or developing country, than of an advanced industrial nation. That Soviet Russia is far more dependent on foreign sources of high technology than even the United Kingdom had been in the 'thirties, and thus a more inadequate base for a global total strategy than was the UK at that time.

I have only space to give a brief summary of the key indicators. In 1970 the Soviet Union rated merely twentieth in the world in terms of output per head.<sup>32</sup> According to Jovan Pavlevski, the distinguished Swiss economist, writing in 1969, the real wages of Soviet industrial workers re-attained the 1913 level only in 1963.<sup>33</sup> Living space in the Soviet Union per person is about half that in Western Europe.<sup>34</sup> The degree of poverty to be seen in Soviet Russia off the tourist tracks astonishes even visitors from African countries.<sup>35</sup> The outwardly impressive but partial and unbalanced technological advancement in the Soviet Union, especially in armaments and space exploration, has depended, according to one authority, on 'the massive transfer to the USSR of technology from the market-oriented economies of the United States and Western Europe.'<sup>36</sup> This transfer began with wartime aid to Russia, continued with the removal to Russia after the war of up to two-thirds of Germany's 1943 industrial capacity and the large-scale purchases ever since of ships, factories, chemical plant and electronics from the West. Between 1946 and 1966 Soviet imports of machinery and equipment rose by a hundredfold.<sup>37</sup>

Let me quote the broad judgement of Philip Vander Elst, of the Institute of Economic Affairs, in his book *Capitalist Technology for Soviet Survival*:

'The technological inferiority of the Soviet economy has reflected itself in the Soviet Union's post-war export trade. In the late 1960s (and similarly today) Soviet exports consisted largely of raw materials and semi-manufactured goods like chrome, manganese, pig iron, glass blocks, furs and foodstuffs. When manufactured goods were exported they were usually machine-tools and vehicles, based on Western designs and exported to underdeveloped countries. Even ailing Soviet foreign aid projects have been rescued from failure by foreign equipment, as with the Aswan Dam where British and Swedish equipment was used.'<sup>38</sup>

Recent import-export statistics confirm this picture of the backwardness, almost the Third World nature, of the Soviet economy. 50.3 per cent of Soviet exports in 1976 were made up of primary commodities, as

against 12.2 per cent for Great Britain, 9.6 per cent for the German Federal Republic and 29.1 per cent for the USA. The Soviet figure comes much closer to the Indian and Bolivian proportion, at 46.6 and 56.5 per cent respectively.<sup>39</sup> In terms of the proportion of exports made up by manufactured goods, a similar pattern is revealed; only 43.6 per cent for the Soviet Union, as against 81.5 per cent for the UK, 88.5 for Federal Germany, and 68.2 per cent for the USA. Again the Soviet proportion comes close to the Indian and Bolivian, at 53.1 and 43.4 per cent respectively.<sup>40</sup>

A backward economy, then. It is true that in the 'fifties the Soviet leadership believed that within a decade the Soviet Union would become, in Krushev's words, 'first in the world, both in total production and in her *per capita* income.'<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, despite the complete failure to realise these aims, and in contradiction to Marxist dictum that the economic factor must determine the rest of total strategy, the Soviet Union has pursued a policy of matching, even over-matching, the United States in military, especially thermo-nuclear, strength. She has created a great ocean-going navy in addition to the mass army appropriate to a continental power. She has sought strategic footholds and political penetration far beyond the needs of the security of the Soviet Union itself: that is, in the Mediterranean and Middle East, South-East Asia, Africa, Cuba. Just as the British in the late Victorian age and afterwards created the myth of the British Empire in order to compensate for their relative decline in economic and political power, so the Soviet Union since the Second World War has sought to compensate for its objective nature as a backward country by assuming the role of global super-power. Whereas America's super-power status grew naturally out of her gigantic economic strength and her worldwide involvement at the end of the war, the Soviet Union set out to become a super-power out of deliberate policy, measuring herself always against America, as Imperial Germany once measured herself against Britain.

The Soviet Union and the West alike have concurred in perceiving this Soviet expansion in military might and overseas political intervention as marking a dramatic increase in Soviet power. However, I would argue that the Soviet Union has been, and is, creating for itself dilemmas and weaknesses analogous to those of Great Britain with regard to her Empire: above all, the mismatch of imperial responsibilities and military requirements to the economic base, and the consequent vulnerability that comes from national over-extension. Naval port facilities or military presences may appear to represent power, but they can too easily represent hostages to fortune, weakening entanglements, as did the British bases and military presences in the Mediterranean and Middle East, in India and at Singapore.

The same is true of the acquisition of client states or protectorates: Cuba in the case of the Soviet Union in 1963, and indeed today, no less than India or Egypt in the case of Britain in the past. Moreover, except for nuclear-powered submarines the new Soviet navy is not immune from the constraints of Russian geography. Even with fleet supply-trains, surface fleets still require defended main repair bases, and the Soviet Navy would be cut off from such bases from the outbreak of a war. It is interesting that for all Admiral Gorshkov's discussion of the constraints of Russian geography and their effects on Russia's past naval history, he offers no convincing argument that his own new surface navy is exempt from those constraints.<sup>42</sup> It is hard not to agree with a Working Group of the Atlantic Council of the USA which reported in 1978:

'... the outcome of a series of encounters between surface forces would most likely to be the virtual elimination of the Soviet elements present and considerable damage to the NATO units. Surviving Soviet surface forces would probably thereafter be compelled to operate close to home under landbased defences.'<sup>43</sup>

The Soviet high-seas fleet, together with Soviet military and political involvements in the Middle East and Africa, just like the former British imperial involvement in these regions, thus constitute sources of strategic over-extension and hence weakness. This is also true of the Soviet commitment to Cuba, as was harshly demonstrated in 1963. The Soviet leadership would have done well to heed the judgment of the Czarist Foreign Secretary, Count M. N. Muravyov, in 1900, who advised his government not to occupy a port on the Persian Gulf:

'... whose defence could not be fully ensured. It might be added that the building of strategic positions and coaling stations, which are divided by long distances from the operational base, disperses the forces of the country, and costs so much, that the advantages in most cases are not worth their material sacrifices.'<sup>44</sup>

It must be borne in mind that as well as incurring wide potential strategic risks, the process of Soviet expansion has demanded heavy material sacrifices by way of military and economic aid; and in the case of Egypt with an eventually totally vain result.<sup>45</sup> It has been estimated that between 1955 and 1970, for example, Soviet military equipment supplied to Egypt, Syria and Iraq amounted to between 2.5 per cent and 4.4 per cent of Soviet defence production.<sup>46</sup> The Soviet re-supply of Arab losses in the Yom Kippur war in 1973 drew heavily on Soviet and Warsaw Pact war stocks.<sup>47</sup> Economic aid to Cuba is estimated at about one million dollars a day; even to the People's Democratic Republic of the Yemen, to an annual total of 27 million dollars by 1971.<sup>48</sup>

In a further similarity to the British case, Soviet imperialist involvements, strategic or political, bear little correlation with Soviet economic

interests. The USSR sends only 0.9 per cent of her exports to Africa; 0.7 per cent to the Middle East, and 75.5 per cent to industrialised countries.<sup>49</sup> The corresponding figure for imports is 1.6 per cent of the total from Africa, 0.9 per cent from the Middle East, and 69.1 per cent from industrialised countries.<sup>50</sup>

To bridge the gap between her weak economic base and her chosen super-power role the Soviet Union has an option that was not open to Britain, as a parliamentary democracy with governments responsible to voters jealous of their material standard of living. It is to give military expenditure overriding priority, to the detriment of general economic progress and the Soviet consumer. Such expenditure now runs at an estimated 12–14 per cent of GNP, and some experts reckon it could rise to 20 per cent by the end of the 'eighties.<sup>51</sup> Thus, in contradiction to the teaching of Lenin and Engels, the modern Soviet leadership opts for military strength out of all proportion to the state of the economy. In similar contradiction to those teachings, they give primacy to political and prestige considerations over economic. Philip Windsor thus sums up the consequences of the Soviet self-imposed pursuit of a super-power role:

'The Soviet Union is weak. Indeed, it might well be argued that her military strength is a function of her weakness in other spheres. Her economic aid to developing countries consists largely of showpiece projects ... She is in no sense capable of sustaining a programme of widespread economic growth ...'<sup>52</sup>

Windsor further concludes:

'... there is very little connection in the Soviet case between economic need and political association ... On the whole, economic and political business are conducted separately in the Soviet Union ... In fact, the Soviet system cannot afford to allow its economic interests to determine its political structure: the primacy of politics is essential to maintaining the primacy of the party ... In these circumstances it would be misleading to suggest that the weakness of the Soviet Union will allow economic constraints to influence her political behaviour. The contrary could even be the case ...'<sup>53</sup>

'Politics' in this context means Marxist-Leninist ideology; the myth of the unfolding crisis of capitalism and the step by step advent of world revolution. Like British ideology and myth in the inter-war period, these simply do not accord with objective facts, and therefore give a false guide to total strategy. But the very purpose of such myths is to provide psychological reinforcement; to veil the harsh realities of national weakness and failure. As the British between 1918 and 1939 believed that the British Empire made Britain a world power, and that the Empire was not disintegrating but transforming itself into a Commonwealth of Nations, so the Soviet leadership today chooses to believe, or asserts it believes, against

all evidence that 'the correlation of forces' in the world ideological struggle favours and strengthens the Soviet Union. As Brezhnev told the 23<sup>rd</sup> Soviet Communist Party Congress in 1966:

'The successes of the national liberation movement are inseparable from the successes of world socialism and of the international working class. The firm and indestructible alliance of these mighty revolutionary forces is the guarantee of the final triumph of the national and social liberation of the peoples.'

As I have discussed, the contradictions between Britain's imperial responsibilities and her true strength – contradictions concealed by the myth of Empire – led in the short term to the crisis and collapse of 1940–1942. In the long term, however, British liberal ideology, with its belief in national self-determination, and British democracy made possible the process of de-colonialization, and the adjustment of Britain herself to a national role commensurate with her real resources and interests. In the case of India, for example, Britain actually developed the governing élite and the institutions to which she handed over power in 1947. The new myth of the multi-racial Commonwealth with the Queen as its head served psychologically to smooth the liquidation of the British Empire and of Britain's world role.

In the case of Soviet Russia today, however, ideology offers little promise of fostering a similar transformation that would relieve the Russian people of the risks and material sacrifices inherent in maintaining the super-power role from the resources of a backward country; and enable them to concentrate on economic progress at home. Ideology offers little promise that Soviet Russia may grant full and true independence to the countries of eastern Europe, as Britain has to her old protectorates and possessions. Such transformations are ruled out because of the narrow dogma of Marxism-Leninism, as embraced by the Russian Communist Party, coupled with the fact that the Party regards itself as the sole legitimate voice of Marxist-Leninist truth and the sole legitimate vanguard of the world working class. Given this inherent rigidity, we may expect dialectic juggling to prevent ideology and reality too blatantly parting company, but hardly a fundamental transformation that would shrink Soviet Russia's role into proportion with her economic base.

We may therefore expect the contradictions between Soviet resources and the self-adopted global-power role to sharpen, with consequently increasingly severe internal strains and external strategic over-extension. The West should shape its own total strategy accordingly.

*Fifteenth Winston Churchill Lecture given in the University of Bern, 14<sup>th</sup> May 1982.*



<sup>1</sup> *The Daily Mail*, 27 May 1934. – <sup>2</sup> Cf. C. 3981, *Second Report of the Royal Commission on Technical Instruction*, 1884. – <sup>3</sup> J. R. Seeley, *The Expansion of England*, London, 1883. – <sup>4</sup> A. G. Boycott, Aldershot, 1931. – <sup>5</sup> N. Mansergh, *The Commonwealth Experience*, London, 1969, p. 245. – <sup>6</sup> Boycott, *op. cit.*, p. 83. – <sup>7</sup> Study Group, Royal Institute of International Affairs, *The Colonial Problem*, London, 1937, p. 324. – <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* – <sup>9</sup> E. J. Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire*, Harmondsworth, 1969, Table 33. – <sup>10</sup> Boycott, *op. cit.*, p. 112. – <sup>11</sup> B. R. Tomlinson, *The Political Economy of the Raj*, London, 1979, p. 56. – <sup>12</sup> W. K. Hancock, *Survey of British Commonwealth Affairs*, Vol II: *Problems of Economic Policy 1918–1939*, Part I, Oxford, 1942, p. 27. – <sup>13</sup> Public Record Office: CAB 32/127 IC (36). – <sup>14</sup> Mansergh, *op. cit.*, p. 246. – <sup>15</sup> Hancock, *op. cit.*, p. 205. – <sup>16</sup> Brian Bond, *British Military Policy Between the Two World Wars*, Oxford, 1980, Chapter 4. – <sup>17</sup> Study Group Royal Institute of International Affairs, *op. cit.*, p. 292. – <sup>18</sup> Boycott, *op. cit.*, pp. 89–90. – <sup>19</sup> Public Record Office: CAB 32/128, E(PD) (37)-7, p. 8. – <sup>20</sup> Public Record Office: CAB 27/654, *Report of the Expert Committee on the Defence of India 1938–39*. – <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* – <sup>22</sup> C. Barnett, *The Collapse of British Power*, London, 1972, pp. 229–30. – <sup>23</sup> Barnett, *op. cit.*, passim. See also Brian Bond, *op. cit.*, passim, and M. Howard, *The Continental Commitment*, London, 1972. – <sup>24</sup> Public Record Office: CAB 16/136–143, *Minutes and Memoranda of the Sub-Committee on Defence Policy and Requirements*. – <sup>25</sup> G. C. Peden, *British Rearmament and the Treasury 1932–1939*, Edinburgh, 1979. – <sup>26</sup> Public Record Office, CAB 29/159, AFC 1, *British Strategic Memorandum*; CAB 16/209, SAC 4, Opinion of Sir Alan Barlow, Under-Secretary at the Treasury. – <sup>27</sup> S. G. Gorshkov, *The Sea Power of the State*, Oxford, 1979. – <sup>28</sup> Gorshkov, *op. cit.*, p. 247. – <sup>29</sup> Gorshkov, *op. cit.*, pp. 182–3. – <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* – <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* – <sup>32</sup> Official United States estimate, in Hearings be-

fore the Subcommittee on Strategic Arms Limitation Talks, US Senate, Washington, 1970, quoted in Philip Vander Elst, *Capitalist Technology for Soviet Survival*, London, 1981, p. 28. – <sup>33</sup> Jovan Pavlevski, in *Economies et Sociétés*, Geneva, February, 1969, quoted in Elst, *op. cit.*, p. 25. – <sup>34</sup> Svetozar Pejovich, *Life in the Soviet Union: A Report Card on Socialism*, Dallas, 1979, p. 55, quoted in Elst, *op. cit.*, p. 25. – <sup>35</sup> Comments to the author by a Ghanaian air force officer, March, 1982. – <sup>36</sup> Vander Elst, *op. cit.*, p. 30. – <sup>37</sup> Vander Elst, *op. cit.*, p. 52. – <sup>38</sup> Vander Elst, *op. cit.*, p. 39. See also Georges Sokoloff, *Sources of Soviet Power: Economy, Population, Resources*, in Christoph Bertram (Ed.), *Prospects of Soviet Power in the 1980s*, Part I, London, International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1979. – <sup>39</sup> Special Table J, *Yearbook of International Trade Statistics*, United Nations, 1978. – <sup>40</sup> *Ibid.* – <sup>41</sup> Quoted in Bertram, *op. cit.*, Part I, p. 7. – <sup>42</sup> See especially Gorshkov, *op. cit.*, pp. 53, 56, 91–2, 95–6, 158–9, 180, 183–4, 191, 276. – <sup>43</sup> Leonard Sullivan (Rapporteur), *Securing the Seas: Soviet Naval Challenge and Western Alliance Options*, Atlantic Council Working Group on Securing the Seas, 1978, p. 24. – <sup>44</sup> Quoted in A. Yodfat and M. Abir, *In the Direction of the Gulf: The Soviet Union and the Persian Gulf*, London, 1977, p. 25. – <sup>45</sup> Peter Mangold, *Superpower Intervention in the Middle East*, London, 1978, Chapter 7. – <sup>46</sup> Mangold, *op. cit.*, p. 175. – <sup>47</sup> Mangold, *op. cit.*, p. 176. See also Footnotes 3 and 4, p. 184. – <sup>48</sup> Yodfat, *op. cit.*, p. 111. – <sup>49</sup> Direction of Trade Statistics, *International Monetary Fund Yearbook 1981*, Washington, 1981. – <sup>50</sup> *Ibid.* – <sup>51</sup> Andrew Marshall, *Sources of Soviet Power: The Military Potential in the 1980s*, in Bertram, *op. cit.*, Part II, p. 11. – <sup>52</sup> Philip Windsor, *The Soviet Union in the International System of the 1980s*, in Bertram, *op. cit.*, Part II, p. 2. – <sup>53</sup> Windsor, in Bertram, *op. cit.*, Part II, p. 10.