Censorship and Socialism

Censorship shall not impede any serious and restrained pursuit of truth

(Prussian Censorship Edict, 1843).

If an investigation must constantly attend to this third factor, an irritation supported by law, will such pursuit not lose sight of the truth?

With inquiry, restraint is the prescribed fear of finding the result, a means of keeping one from the truth.

(Karl Marx, commenting on this Edict).

In the events in Czechoslovakia the issue of censorship has occupied a key place. On the one hand its abolition enabled the Communist Party to regain a great deal of the mass support it had lost under Novotny. On the other, things said or written in the new conditions so alarmed the leadership in the Soviet Union and elsewhere that they declare they saw in them more than enough reason for military intervention.

Censorship is being both justified on practical grounds, and advocated in principle, with opposition to it being denounced as a departure from essential theoretical standpoints of marxism-leninism. A similar view is adopted by a number of critics of the Communist Party's Draft Charter of Democratic Rights. (See Discussion, Nos. 1, 2 and 3, 1968). These circumstances make necessary some examination of the theoretical issues involved and the practice of censorship in the Soviet Union as the oldest and most developed of the socialist countries.

In discussing the question one problem is that it is usually posed in terms of absolutes—either censorship or absolutely none, which I consider obscures rather than clarifies. For one thing it does not distinguish the different requirements of peace time from times of war or civil war. Neither can I envisage in any foreseeable future absolute abolition of censorship becoming possible in the field of state secrets, or even (though to a much lesser degree) in the field of so-called morality or 'pornography'. Nor is it possible absolutely to prevent censorship by means of selection of what is reported, or reasonable to require editors, producers, etc., to refrain from pursuing some policy under the guidance of which they assemble their materials, accepting some and rejecting others.

The question of how dividing lines are to be drawn, between protecting state secrets and wilful censorship, between licence for
the depraved and freedom for artistic expression, between freedom for editors and workers in the mass media and the rights of those who establish these media and the subscribers to or viewers of them deserves much study in its own right and is related to our present discussion. But it cannot be effectively tackled until some questions of principle are canvassed.

I hold that the *aim* of socialists, their point of departure and orientation should be against censorship. And since I have already rejected absolutes, I hold that the dividing lines drawn in the Soviet Union are so far in the direction of censorship as to be quite wrong in principle.

The main argument for censorship is simple. It is that the field of ideas is a vital arena of the class struggle, of the struggle between socialism and capitalism, and that it is not only permissible, but even a revolutionary duty to prevent views hostile to socialism being expressed.

But if ideas do not have to be combated because they are not allowed to be expressed, the art of combating them will atrophy, as will the active development of one's own ideas necessary for the purpose. The same applies in the case of what amounts to a sham ideological struggle through arbitrary selection of phrases or interpretations of meaning. The straw man is easily knocked down, but the boxer who trains that way is unlikely to win any real fights.

For example, one *Pravda* criticism of the much talked of "2000 words" statement was "the authors of this anti-socialist platform threatened to use armed force in support of their positions." The only reference to armed force in the 2000 words is:

"We can assure the Government that we will give it our backing, if necessary even with weapons, as long as the Government does what we gave it the mandate to do; and we can assure our allies that we will observe our treaties of friendship, alliance, and trade. (London Guardian, July 16, 1968).

I am not here arguing about the subjective intentions of the authors of the 2000 words, but I am saying that *Pravda* is using a wrong and ineffective method, based on censoring the actual remarks of the real or supposed adversary. Legions of such examples could be quoted, for the conception and method is one in general use.

The reverse side of this is the continual repetition of so-called "well-known truths" and the saying by rote of what is expected about the glorious this or the unshakable that, which in the end becomes at best a boring formalism, but as often as not actual self-deception. Sometimes this is justified on the grounds that we must not speak of not-so-pleasant realities as they may lead to
a drop in morale. Probably Lenin himself is the best answer to such an outlook. Reading his speeches or articles at whatever period of the revolutionary struggle shows conclusively that he scorned this sort of nonsense, and spoke frankly and directly to the people, however tough the situation. For example, at the Second Congress of Political Education Departments (October, 1921) he said concerning the New Economic Policy:

We could not have started anything without this general discussion because for decades the people had been prohibited from discussing anything, and the revolution could not develop without a period in which people everywhere held meetings to argue about all questions. This has created much confusion. This is what happened—this was inevitable, but it must be said that it was not dangerous. (Collected Works, Vol. 33, p.70.)

Then in his letter to A. L. Sheinman, Chief of the State Bank, who had written that the bank was now (1921) “a powerful apparatus”:

At present the State Bank = a bureaucratic paper game. There is the truth for you, if you want to hear not the sweet communist-official lies (with which everyone feeds you as a high mandarin), but the truth.

And if you don’t want to look at this truth with open eyes, through all the communist lying, you are a man who has perished in the prime of life in a swamp of official lying. Now that is an unpleasant truth, but it is the truth. (C.W., Vol. 36, p.567).

These words of Lenin’s come to mind on re-reading much communist literature over the years from most countries including our own, and when listening to speeches at some conferences, anniversaries, etc., where the history of socialism can be spoken of mentioning barely, if at all, Stalin, Trotsky, Khrushchov and others, and various key questions of socialist development.

The flabbier the ideological atmosphere engendered in such conditions, the less is effective ideological activity carried on, and the more it tends in snowball fashion to become necessary to restrict expression. But in the end this becomes self-defeating, for no press or other medium of communication can be so managed or controlled as to change realities which people experience in life. Although there is no measure for the effectiveness of the mass media, and powerful and all as they must be reckoned to be, there are limits to what they can do for good or for ill.

One example in practice was the widespread mass dissatisfaction in Czechoslovakia, which 100% freedom from “bourgeois ideas” in the mass media could not allay. On the contrary, it is clear that the censorship was an additional and powerful cause of cynicism and discontent—the very soil for anti-socialist ideas which the censorship is claimed to combat.

On the other hand, if the monopoly press, etc., were so powerful, how is it that the revolutionary forces are able to triumph
at all not only against their influence, but against that influence backed by the power of the state? And if the mass media are under the control of people's organisations instead of private capital and the state power is socialist, how can a few hostile ideas be regarded as the beginning of the end?

Pravda (22/8/68) says of what they call anti-socialist statements in Czechoslovakia “One could cite dozens if not hundreds of similar utterances”. Dozens, even hundreds seems rather small, in a country of 14 million people, yet Pravda adds “Day by day the working people were swept by this wave of hysterical abuse openly directed against communism and socialism. . .” (emphasis added).

The view that ideas alone can cause a counter-revolution is in contradiction with the marxist concept of the relation between life and ideas. True, ideas have some life of their own and can play to a degree an autonomous role but this is very far from absolute. If there are not sufficient causes in real life (e.g. bureaucracy, concentration of power, reliance on positions of authority, mismanagement, lack of freedom), the ideas of capitalism will not succeed in undermining a socialist society after 20, still less after 50 years. Recognition of this will direct attention to real causes away from measures such as censorship which I claim are ultimately self-defeating.

But censorship and the conception of ideological struggle that goes with it has another very important side. It arrogates to those already in power, and in charge of the censorship the “right” to decide what ideas are to be denounced as counter-revolutionary, revisionist, etc., and therefore beyond the pale. This in turn has the effect of branding the holders of such ideas as “counter-revolutionaries” or “aides of counter-revolutionaries” and therefore open to punishment without much possibility of redress. This has, over the years, led to such terrible results that it is deeply disturbing to see it still pursued. Either the communist parties must discuss together the interpretation and development of the principles of marxism-leninism, in a spirit of free exchange of ideas and respect for those who adopt a different view while continuing the debate, or one party or a majority must be given the ultimate authority. This has proved impossible in practice, and was specifically rejected (with the support of the Australian party) at the 81 parties' meeting. More important, it is wrong in theory, and could only result in conversion of marxism into a dogma and/or a religion, in which certain “scriptures” (in whose custody?) are beyond question or investigation. This contradicts the essential spirit of marxism as a
scientific enterprise and can only lead to its ossification or even destruction.

But to return to the practice of branding people or ideas without stating what these ideas actually are or arguing them out. Speaking of a speech of C. Cisar, secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, Pravda says (22/8/68):

It amounts to apostasy of Leninism, repudiation of its international significance and denial of the idea that Leninism remains a guide to action in present day conditions.

Perhaps it does, but it is nowhere argued, or combated ideologically, and Pravda readers have little chance of knowing what Cisar actually said.

Speaking of criticism by Vice-Premier O. Sik, of Czechoslovakia's economic development and relations, Pravda says:

While criticism is, of course, a necessary thing, it must at the same time meet the two criteria of being scientific and objective and of according with the interests of the working masses of people and of socialism.

Perhaps Sik's criticisms do not meet these criteria, but do Pravda's? Readers could not know, because they have no means of knowing what was actually said.

Pravda says of the elected leader of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia:

. . . a minority of presidium members, headed by Alexander Dubcek, came out openly (at Cierna Nad Tisou) on right-wing opportunistic positions. . . While professing as a camouflage their desire to defend socialism these people were, in fact, trying to gain time while conniving with counter-revolution.

Apart from the peculiar circumstances that a person described in these terms still has to be accepted as the leader of the CPCz, there is no adequate presentation of the respective arguments or of how such a far-reaching condemnation is arrived at.

Pravda is particularly critical of "the repeated calls made by leading officials of the CPCz, 'to end the communist power monopoly,'" and it is strongly inferred that this contradicts fundamental and immutable principles of marxism-leninism, and is virtually counter-revolutionary.

The reasons why the CPCz believes that the Communist monopoly of power should be ended are set out in the Action Program (see, for example, my previous article in ALR No. 4). They are not examined by Pravda, and I know of no principle of marxism-leninism which says that the communists must monopolise power. The Communist Party of Australia, along with many other communist parties in fact reject this as a principle, let alone as an immutable one. But in any case no party or parties has the
right to enforce by arms a certain (dubious) interpretation of marxism-leninism on another.

Censorship is wrong and bureaucratic also because what information or ideas are let through to the people is decided from on top, and without any possibility of control or restriction from below. It also increases the size of the unproductive administrative apparatus, and breeds within it an, at best, paternalistic outlook—that is, it reinforces the bureaucratic incubus on society.

Lenin, on contrasting the state under capitalism and socialism laid great emphasis on the socialist state being "no longer a state in the proper sense of the word" because of mass participation in various forms. These forms included the ready flow of information and ideas from which the workers were previously in the main excluded, both by the monopolisation of the means of information by the rich and their deliberate efforts to deceive and to foster ignorance, and also because of the cultural backwardness of the people, their oppression by want, deprivation and over-work.

Today, with the shortening of hours of work, greater affluence and the higher level of education and culture (all with many reservations it is true), the withholding of information becomes all the more irksome and frustrating under capitalism, being one of the prime sources of the feeling of alienation and powerlessness. Unless people are well-informed about facts and their interpretation—including possible alternate interpretations—they are neither in a position to participate in decision making nor likely to be encouraged to aspire in that direction.

"Information" means more than just a collection of facts. Most company reports contain many facts, but facts such as tend to obscure the real position as far as possible. Many parliamentary speeches, answers to questions, white papers, etc., are of the same kind. In fact, one of the main forms and reinforcements of bureaucracy today is the monopoly not only of the ownership of the means of production but monopoly of information, which is kept internally within the management, administration, etc. This same monopoly is also one of the main ways that a bureaucracy uses to protect itself. Socialism, requiring the participation of people as a basic means of changing society and eliminating bureaucracy, should have a ready flow of information, both as to facts and ideas, but the practice under socialism so far leaves a great deal to be desired in this regard.

Implicit in much of the justification given for censorship is the idea that as socialism develops the population will become more
and more homogeneous in composition and in thought. But all modern industrial societies are very complex—and I would say of growing complexity—in the field of occupations at least, and this finds its reflection in different approaches to questions, different aspects of reality having different impacts and being differently assessed by various strata. There needs to be both confrontation and harmonisation of these different sides and approaches, and this cannot take place without freedom in the field of ideas.

The development of a common dialectical materialist world outlook (which in any case cannot be expected to be complete) by no means precludes differences in ideas in other fields. And dialectical materialism itself requires freedom in the field of ideas in order to develop itself further in the light of scientific discovery and new social experience.

In today's conditions, with the general rise in cultural and educational standards, and especially the great growth in the numbers of those intellectually trained at tertiary level and their increasing participation in all fields of production, service, administration, teaching and research, this applies particularly to the circulation of ideas between intellectuals and workers, but involves all strata.

Another feature of modern industrial society is the increasing dissidence at certain features of it, usually described in the general term the "mass society". This is meant to convey such ideas as the "lostness" of the individual in what appears as a vast machine, with insufficient sense of community among its members and with most feeling powerless to make any impact on it.

Such problems are much compounded in modern capitalist society because of the alienation due to dispossession and exploitation, and the commercialisation and general tawdri ness of prevailing values. But they are by no means completely absent under socialism, and this is expressed theoretically and politically by describing socialism as only the lower stage of communist society. Before the higher stage is realised some not-so-savory features of modern industrial society can give rise to nihilistic or anarchistic ideas, as well as other forms of dissidence.

Produced to one degree or another by sociological factors in a socialist society, it is a great mistake to simply label them as "bourgeois ideology". And a mistake tactically as well as in theory, because not every dissident in socialist society is an actual or even potential supporter of capitalism. But they may be made so by wrong treatment and the problems they are expressing in a roundabout way may be wrongly ignored. It seems to me this is part of the error in the persecution of writers and others in the Soviet Union.
Some “dissidents” also have, in history, proved to be the harbingers of the future, and there is no infallible means of distinguishing these from other more negative dissidents. The communists themselves are an example of a minority which became a majority.

During this year the CPSU has developed the view that a great ideological offensive by reaction is under way, and is a prime cause of difficulty in the socialist countries and the world movement.

All Party organisations must carry on an offensive against bourgeois ideology and take vigorous action against attempts to smuggle in, through various literary productions, works of art and other works, views alien to the socialist ideology of Soviet society. (Resolution of the Central Committee, CPSU, April 10, 1968.)

Besides finding application in increased pressure and repression within the Soviet Union, this same idea seems to be contained also in the much publicised view that the new tactics of the enemy are “peaceful counter-revolution”. This is claimed to have been the main factor in Czechoslovakia.

Just as a revolution cannot be accomplished without smashing the reactionary state machine and replacing it by a new one, so counter-revolution has set itself a similar aim — that of smashing the socialist state apparatus and replacing it by its own apparatus. In the beginning this is attempted by peaceful means, replacing cadres loyal to socialism by advocates of so-called “liberalisation”.

Such thinking, incidentally, makes it clear why the intervention was undertaken on the eve of the Czechoslovak Party Congress. The fact that Dubcek and other main leaders are still in power with the united support of the people shows also how erroneous and contrived are such theories as the above supporting the intervention.

All this seems wrong to me in the light of what is discussed above. Two main objections may be formulated as follows:

1. If “peaceful counter-revolution” and “ideological subversion” is in fact the order of the day, the thing is to develop a real ideological struggle.

2. I do not think capitalism is on the ideological offensive, but rather on the defensive. In these circumstances bold development of the ideas of marxism is called for to push it back further.

On both grounds censorship, restriction on ideas, hampers the struggle. And I believe it cannot be for too long maintained, for more enlightened and forward looking forces must continue to expand as socialism develops.