America Lacks a Foreign Policy Toward Russia

*Interview with Alexander N. Yakovlev*

A principal force behind the Soviet Union's reforms in the second half of the 1980s, Alexander N. Yakovlev argues in this interview with Demokratizatsiya that the United States has a purely impulsive, reactive and visionless policy toward Russia. Much of the blame for this lack of strategy, he asserts, rests with what he characterizes as the poor quality of “Sovietology” in American academe. Yakovlev, who served as Soviet ambassador to Canada, chief of the Communist Party Central Committee International Department, and as a member of the CPSU Politburo, is currently chairman of the Russian Presidential Commission for the Rehabilitation of Victims of Political Repression. He is also a member of the Demokratizatsiya editorial board. The interview took place in October 1993 with Demokratizatsiya Moscow chief editor Nikolai V. Zlobin.

**Zlobin:** Alexander Nikolaevich, as we have already discussed, one of the questions that has confounded American policy, “Sovietology,” and public opinion in the United States is the question of the kind of political evolution in Russia following the coup attempt in August 1991. Will democracy succeed or fail? You have stated that the people have gained little as a result of these events, and that only the apparatchiki and bureaucrats have come out ahead. The omnipotence of the state, a traditional feature of Russian history, and the suppression of the individual remain intact. How should American policy-makers orient themselves toward the current events unfolding in Russia today?

**Yakovlev:** I think that there is a certain confusion within American Sovietology, just like there is in Russian “Americanology.” “Sovietology” was determined in such a way that it was subjected to an entire collapse and went bankrupt. The cause of this is simple and without surprise: Sovietologists were, if you will, terribly corrupted and ideological. They fell into a comfortable situation where they had the ability to publish dozens of books and articles with only a very simple ideological framework. Even more, in practice our country gave many reasons for criticism from an ideological point of view. I myself was driven to write from this point of view. Believe me Nikolai, there were tremendous opportunities to show off on your “high horse” in making accusations. It was easy to ride this horse, and one did not even need to whip her to ride at a gallop. The work was always done in reverse order. In the beginning, a goal was set, then the results from the “research” were formulated, and then, everything else was simply put into place. That is to say that Sovietology was based on an anti-
scientific methodology.

**Zlobin:** Wasn't there any possibility for the establishment of a non-ideological Sovietology and social science? For example, Russia presently finds itself in a definite ideological vacuum where many feel uncomfortable and unstable, including scholars and journalists.

**Yakovlev:** I think that this possibility existed. Although of course, it was difficult then as it is now. How do you separate philosophical research from the problems of democracy, especially since the problems of democracy are political problems? Moreover, how do you maintain the elements of objectivity within yourself? This, however, is not the main point.

The important point is that real policy-makers ought to put the conclusions of political science to use. For example, Karl Marx did not derive his political conclusions on the basis of his earlier research. He wrote about humanity, even though to him, the individual person in his thinking never existed. Science ends where ideology begins. Marx the scholar succumbed to his ideology at the time when he discovered that his writings were talented, and unquestionably applicable to life. This is where Marx's most renowned conclusions about “violence—the midwife of history,” “violent revolutions—the locomotives of history,” the negation of civil society, the accusation, and in the words of Engels, “the good-for-nothing middle class,” all appeared. From here arose the principles of terrorism, especially Jacobism.

In our generation, this thinking arose in the notion of world revolution. For us it was already clear to everybody that a world revolution would not occur, but none the less, the state was built “under the realization” that world revolution was under way. Energy was allocated to foster this revolution, but it was not used for this purpose. Instead, it was spent on internal repression. And up until now, the effects of this have occurred in the form of rebellions and coups. Both in Russia and in the United States, the military-industrial complex was built under the auspices of predetermined goals. Now, these goals no longer exist and the military-industrial complex is compelled to exist by begging.

**Zlobin:** But for any policy-maker, some sort of understanding of good, evil, and fairness should exist—isn't this already a form of ideology?

**Yakovlev:** Yes and no. When you study, for example, the origins of good and evil, virtue and sin, this is merely science, but when you study a person, and say to him—when you act one way and not another, this is your personal choice, it is not politics. The politician himself should have a full sense of good and evil, and in this respect, he should be aware of several different views on these subjects. Ignorance destroyed many of our Soviet leaders. We became accustomed to
ignorant politicians. This is our traditional misfortune. Even now we still trust the politician who has certain instincts, populist manners, and skill. But for some reason, we still have no interest as to how much a person is cultivated. We are shocked when we see a politician who has a full understanding of the issues.

I'll give you another example. I was once walking alone in the Kremlin with Gorbachev. This was during the Congress of People's Deputies, and several journalists ran up to him asking questions. There was not a single translator in sight. Gorbachev says to me: “Alexander, translate!” “Alright, I'll translate,” I replied as the cameras were rolling. Never before in my life did I receive so many letters, telegrams, or telephone calls as I did following that event. People were in shock that a member of the Communist Party Central Committee Politburo knew a foreign language. They were really in shock, amazed even. Why? Because everybody knew that members of the Politburo were poorly educated and ignorant people.

Zlobin: All the same, Alexander Nikolaevich, in your opinion, can we overcome this crisis? Will the policies that were applied to the Soviet Union be the basis for American foreign policy toward Russia? American Sovietologists lost their advantage by misinterpreting information and providing poor analyses.

Yakovlev: I think that the way out of this crisis for American Sovietologists is to join forces with us. This is exactly why I believe Demokratizatsiya has made an important impact. I don't know whether or not you realize this yet, but you are the first example of what I am talking about—a joining of forces in one hand. From both sides you have access to the archives, access to freedom of creativity, and you can develop an overall methodology. In the future, I foresee, I even believe, that some sort of international institute of contemporary society, including the study of political problems, will be established on the basis of the journal.

We are in desperate need of a new societal theory. Both the Americans and the Russians are in a deep crisis, one that we are starting to escape, as are the Americans. If we are able to jump from place to place at a higher level with the aid of technology, then surely the Americans will begin to fall behind for the mere reason that they are simply not prepared for this type of activity. But if some sort of joint intellectual organization was created, and if some kind of mutual understanding between elites from both countries was developed, then perhaps something useful could be done for the world.

In general, neither we nor the Americans have an understanding of Russia's path toward democracy. I doubt that anyone can understand this. After all, in
America's thinking, this crisis is not only political, but societal as well. This is too descriptive. I have read literally thousands of American books, especially when I was writing my dissertation. I still remember picking up on the same sort of theory on international relations. I think it was the theory of neo-realism by Hans Morgenthau.

This crisis of American Sovietology has a strong effect on the policies of the American administration toward Russia. These policies may be described, but to really understand what is behind them, how they were developed, and what is inherent within them, is impossible to understand, simply because there is no understanding. America has no policy whatsoever toward Russia. It possesses the usual policy prescribed for a period of confrontation. After all, at a time of confrontation, there is only one type of strategy—war. When war in the nuclear age is excluded, a political deadlock develops, a final goal disappears. This is what happened to American foreign policy toward Russia. Only one policy remained—reaction to events. I react to one event, you react to another. I introduce the Strategic Defense Initiative, you do something worse, and so on. This is not a strategy.

In my opinion, Americans are unable to decide for themselves how they ought to conduct themselves. They say that the superpowers of the world have disappeared. But how does one measure the strength of our “superpower” status? If you take, for example, a small power that holds in its possession twenty nuclear warheads, then one might consider it a superpower. After all, it has the capability to level all of the major cities in America. So then, why has Russia lost its status as a superpower? Just because Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Ukraine went independent? In the United States, I see many remnants of the Cold War still in place. To be considered a great power, you only need to get hold of a nuclear weapon. The only criterion is fear.

So then, what is the present foreign policy of the United States? Bomb Baghdad. I assure you, Nikolai, if the USSR was in the same position, there would not have been any bombing. The United States has no foreign policy. They only have impulsive reactions to events. No policy.

Here is a second example: humanitarian aid to the USSR and Russia. A lot of noise and fervor was voiced that made absolutely no sense. We weren't allowed into the world market, and then they took away some of our markets, especially military ones. Truthfully speaking, I would not be upset if Russia stopped selling weapons, but only if America stopped selling as well. Even more, the Jackson-Vanik amendment which was adopted, obviously in reaction to the Israeli question, is still in effect to this day. Just as the differentiation of nations by “Most Favored Nation” status still exists, regulating a country's ability to trade with others. This status was held by Ceauescu's Romania, Yugoslavia, and China even after the Tiananmen Square massacre, but the U.S. refused to grant it to the USSR, even at the height of perestroika. They even delayed granting it to
Russia. Is this not discrimination? What about the continued existence of NATO? Present American conduct cannot go on like this.

The Cold War way of thinking still remains in U.S. policy. America does not understand that the period of confrontation is over. It's time to move on to a post-confrontational period with a new ideology and a new policy. From the point of view that international relations are always confrontational, full of struggle and war, this was appropriate for an age which has passed. At the end of the 20th century, when we decided to reduce nuclear weapons and take a step back from apocalypse, it became possible—not certain—to begin a civilized development. When international relations stop being conducted in a confrontational way, some sort of coordinated cooperation should begin.

**Zlobin:** Alexander Nikolaevich, how do you bring the conflict of economic interests into the picture?

**Yakovlev:** I hope that American and Russian economic egoists have enough brains to understand that their total stupidity may lead to a terrible collision between the North and the South.

This may turn into a vendetta against the white man. From one point of view, the present growth of nationalism is a reassertion of traditional nationalism, but from another point of view, it is a trend that will bring us directly into this vendetta. A new world order encompassing everything—military, economic, political, ecological, and other relations, must be developed. Are we capable of such a deep understanding?

The 21st century will not be the century of traded goods; instead it will be the age of information. The demographic factor will intensify. To this day, China has still not made its declaration of peace. It is preoccupied with its own internal problems, but what lies ahead? Presently, a great deal of energy is being wasted on maintaining the state, so where does the energy from the disintegration of the state go under the conditions of Chinese democratization?

In the USSR, we were able to avoid the “troop landing” of energy from our breakup. The disappearance of the USSR did not create a world conflict. This was our success. All of our energy is being “wasted” on domestic conflict, but there are few who are interested in these problems, and they do not directly concern anybody. American politicians fear the reunification of the USSR—for no purpose. This is a big mistake.

In other words, American foreign policy toward Russia at this time cannot depend on American science. Sovietology has no chance to get out of its present crisis. It does not comprehend the true Russian situation.
Just look how it failed to anticipate the downfall of the Soviet Union. Generally speaking, they gave not even one hint, not one idea this would happen. Their only “scientific discovery” was the unavoidable collapse of communism. This however is straight-forward ideology—not science.

However, I see hope in today's young American Sovietologists. This is a new generation, with new questions, and with a new non-ideological approach. Although, of course, the task set before them is a very difficult one. It is enough for us to spend one week abroad, read over the newspapers, watch television, in order to formulate a good picture of the full catastrophe underway in Russia. But when you fly into Sheremetevo [international airport in Moscow] and ask someone how things are going, nothing is said. Everything is the same; everything is all right. It's difficult to realize. American Sovietology is doomed without cooperation from us. This is a great problem for their politics.

Zlobin: Let's return to Russian domestic problems. In your opinion, what are the most vital and difficult problems facing reform in our country today?

Yakovlev: I think that the main problem is the need to change the way people think and their outlook on their relationship with the state. The bureaucrats should be working for us, not vice-versa. We need to realize that we are paying their salaries, and not the other way around. They should do only what we tell them to do—go where we direct them to go. They have to know that if they don't behave in this manner, they should expect a pink slip in their box and find themselves out of a job. But right now, the exact opposite exists. For example, you only have to visit some bureau where you pick up a declaration form stating that you are not, in fact, a madman. You feel like a criminal. The government enjoys a “presumption of absolute innocence” while the people are burdened with a “presumption of permanent guilt.” You have the state, and then you have millions of normal Russians who are guilty of something—but of what, nobody knows.

The state is only a temporary body of apparatchiki which we can change. We need to understand this and rebuild a new mutual understanding between society and the state. A person only lives once in this world. Life is very short and should not be spent kneeling before some bureaucrat.

Zlobin: There is a need for strict laws that the state cannot trample over, as it is doing in Russia today.
Yakovlev: And those who do not implement the law should be beaten with a stick! The main point here is that in Russia, we need to move from “power to the people” to the rule of law.

Zlobin: In this process of drafting new laws, we first of all have to establish this rule of law, and not just rule through law.

Yakovlev: The country and the people have the will, but not the freedom. “I want . . .” This is how people mainly think. It's not important what they want or if they can have something or not. The main point is that when somebody wants something they will do anything they have to in order to attain it.

It's clear that I can only be free after I consent to grant you your freedom. But for the time being, we will continue to act outside of the law, harm our neighbors, lie, and insult others.

Zlobin: Overall, do you consider yourself an optimist?

Yakovlev: Yes I do. Although my children are completely different. I understand them, although they don't believe that I do. Progress is being made—this is without a doubt.