Introduction: The USSR: what do we know and how do we know it?

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By Uri Ra’anana
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Shortly after its inauguration, following the approval of its Charter by Boston University, the Institute for the Study of Conflict, Ideology & Policy initiated its activities with a three-part lecture series which constituted the prelude to its first annual conference, held shortly thereafter. These events were intended to serve not only the research and publication interests of the Institute, but also the educational goals of the University Professors Program, to which the Institute's faculty belongs.

The lecture series addressed the question of "The USSR: What Do We Know and How Do We Know It?" (Historical, Ideological, and Diplomatic Dimensions). This primarily methodological issue had to be tackled before one could turn to the question that the subsequent annual conference explored, namely "Gorbachev's USSR: A System in Crisis?"

With this purpose in mind, the Institute invited three pre-eminent personalities, who have devoted a major portion of their lives to the three "dimensions," to which the title of the series refers: the late Sidney Hook, to whom this publication is dedicated, who bestrode the intellectual arena as the authority on ideology and philosophy, in his writings, his teachings, and his public activities; Professor Robert Conquest, the outstanding figure among historians of the Soviet Union; and Ambassador Edward Rowny, who deduced a set of fundamental propositions from his decades of negotiating with Soviet representatives on issues of arms control, and provided invaluable guidelines for diplomats dealing with the USSR.

Between them, these speakers were in agreement on one basic aspect, namely, that Winston Churchill, despite his otherwise superb instincts, was misguided in calling the Soviet Union "a riddle inside a sphinx wrapped in an enigma." In other words, Sovietologists are not embarked on a hopeless quest when they attempt to decipher the operational code used by the Soviet leadership, its allies and associates. Each speaker, in his own particular sphere, demonstrated just how much was or
is known and is knowable, and how each discipline provides its own key for decoding Soviet directives and policies.

In following the lecture series with its annual conference, the Institute's faculty felt encouraged to proceed on the assumption that Sovietology not only has performed a valuable service in the past, but that it has not been superseded by a more reliable tool of analysis, despite the changes in the Soviet political landscape that appear to have been wrought by the era of Glasnost'.

This publication of the lecture series will be succeeded in short order by the publication of the post-conference book on Gorbachev's USSR: A System in Crisis (Macmillan; London), with an introduction by Dr. George Urban. The conference itself received prominent and favorable international review, with particular attention to the contributions of such eminent participants as Lt. Gen. William Odom, former Director of the National Security Agency, Dr. Arkady Shevchenko, former (Soviet) Under Secretary General of the United Nations, Professor Eugene V. Rostow, former Under Secretary of State, and outstanding academic Sovietologists.

Another book, addressing the issue of international policy formation and implementation in closed societies (focusing on the USSR, its allies and clients) is in the hands of the publishers. It draws heavily upon oral history tapings of former high Soviet, East European, Caribbean, and Ethiopian officials and émigrés.

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