

The Thought of the Constitution

by Michael Lind

Confronting the Constitution

Edited by Allan Bloom

Washington, D.C.: The American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy; 564 pp., \$24.95

In their program "A Decade of Study of the Constitution," Robert A. Goldwin and his collaborators at the American Enterprise Institute have consistently published the most readable and stimulating discussions of contemporary constitutional issues to have appeared in America. The virtues of previous AEI books such as *How Democratic is the Constitution?* are embodied, on a larger scale, in a new collection of essays edited by Allan Bloom, *Confronting the Constitution*, which takes the form of a theological disputation where the orthodoxy being defended is "the thought of the Constitution," or, more precisely, the philosophical beliefs and social structures supposedly implicit in the early American version of liberal democracy.

Heresies against the Constitution include Utilitarianism, Marxism, Idealism, Historicism, and other Isms which, Bloom asserts in a brilliant if not entirely persuasive essay, are offshoots of Rousseau-ism: "In essence, Rousseau's bourgeois is identical to Locke's rational and industrious man . . . [who] might be an instrument of stability, but the cost of relying on him is human dignity. This contrast between two ways of seeing the central actor in modernity summarizes the continuous political debate of the past two centuries." Bloom notes that, with one exception, "All of the contributors to this book are . . . students of, or students of students of, Leo Strauss," a German émigré scholar who "reinterested us in America by teaching us how to read our country's political texts and demonstrating how wise they are." Very Straussian is Bloom's distinction between classic Lockean liberal democracy and modern ideologies (for Strauss, Machiavelli rather than Rousseau was the evil thinker who separated the "ancients" from the "moderns"). Also characteristically Straussian is the

tendency to treat politicians and historical events as epiphenomena of political theory. As Bloom says, "Bacon, Locke, and Montesquieu are worthy interlocutors—on the level of Kant, Hegel, Marx and Nietzsche, who inspired less impressive political achievements." If you mentally added, "such as those of Hitler, Stalin and Pol Pot" to the last line, you win an A in the Straussian school of esoteric reading.

As a rule the essays in *Confronting the Constitution* are thorough and scholarly. Thomas L. Pangle and David F. Epstein have contributed good discussions of "The Philosophic Understanding of Human Nature Informing the Constitution" and "The Political Theory of the Constitution," respectively. The sections on post-Lockean philosophies are less impressive. Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr., the champion of extra-constitutional executive prerogative, engages in a rambling and incoherent attack on a straw man he calls Social Science. One wonders why chapters on the existentialists, Freud, and the trio of Rawls, Dworkin, and Nozick were included at all, particularly since this meant less space went to the important alternatives to Lockean liberalism—Utilitarianism, Idealism, and Historicism.

Susan Shell's too-brief and muddled account of the German idealist tradition of Kant, Fichte, and Hegel fails to meet the standard set by Bloom in his own essay on Rousseau. A certain lack of moral discrimination and historical distance is evident in her praise of "what Abraham Lincoln once called our 'political religion,' the core beliefs that constitute us as a country and as a nation," and in her criticism of the "fanatical nationalism" of the Mexican War. (Who was more "fanatical"—President Polk, who secured Texas against recurrent Mexican invasions and gained the Southwest in a limited war ending in a negotiated settlement, or President Lincoln, who invoked a mystical "Union" and drenched the continent in blood while refusing to negotiate with the South?) The absence of a thorough and serious discussion of Idealism is a pity, because it is the idealist conception of communitarian national democracy, not Lockean liberal democracy, which inspired the "Springtime of Nations" in Europe in 1989.

The Idealist tradition, it might be added, could provide American conservatism with a firmer intellectual basis than the inanities of natural-rights and social-contract doctrine, or the sonorities of Burkeanism. Such a suggestion, of course, would horrify Straussians, whose definition of America as a purely voluntary society united by rational assent to a few 18th-century Whig dogmas better describes a club rather than any flesh-and-blood country, including America, yesterday and today. Bloom, with others of his school, finds it difficult to distinguish healthy subphilosophical patriotism from throne-and-altar reaction and xenophobic fascism: "The genius of this country—which cannot and does not wish to treat its citizens like plants rooted in its soil—has consisted in a citizenship that permits reflection on one's own interest and a calm recognition that it is satisfied by this regime." Is it "reflection on one's own interest" rather than "the instinctive and unquestioning love of our own" that motivates our troops in Saudi Arabia? Bloom writes of such watery commitment, "This is the peculiarly American form of patriotism." Actually, it is a form of patriotism most Americans find peculiar.

This completely abstract definition of American identity, empty of everything historic, cultural, and contingent which makes the United States more than a test case for a hypothesis of 18th-century intellectuals, is what separates conservatives from Straussians (and libertarians). Either there is an American nation, above and beyond mere frames of government and "political religions," or there is not. If there is an American nation, then constitutional questions take second place to questions of cultural and social identity. If there is not an American nation, merely an American government, then a clever constitution and elaborate political ideology will not prevent American society from collapsing into racial, religious, regional, and class Balkanization. Straussians believe that the "thought of the Constitution" is all that ultimately holds the United States together. Conservatives fear that they may be correct.

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Power and Ideology

by Paul Gottfried

The Soviet Union, the Communist Movement, and the World: Prelude to the Cold War, 1917-1941

by Alan J. Levine
New York, Westport, and London:
Praeger; 203 pp., \$37.95

Alan J. Levine explores the relations of the Soviet Union with both Asia and the West, from the Bolshevik Revolution through the Nazi-Soviet Pact. From the title and from the author's biographical notes, it is apparent that this volume is intended as an attempt at understanding the Cold War. In fact, Levine has already concluded the sequel to this book, which I for one look forward to seeing in print. Having been familiar with his interpretation of Soviet foreign policy from the time I was made a reader of his doctoral dissertation, I am still in awe of the factual thoroughness and rigorous argument that he brings to bear on his subject. Levine has read all available secondary works, and used whatever original documents were accessible in the United States.

Even so, what is most significant about his work on the Soviet Union is neither his thoroughness nor his painful digesting of endless monographs, including Stalinoid revisionist defenses of the Sovietization of Eastern Europe. Rather, Levine's greatest talent is in making sense of the foreign policy of Churchill's "enigma wrapped in a riddle." He has weighed all the standard interpretations of Soviet behavior toward other countries, from George Kennan's and Richard Pipes's emphases on Russian national character, through Stefan Possony's picture of demonic Communist expansion, to the desperate attempts by the American and European left to depict the Soviets as a perpetually beleaguered power. Levine believes that the Soviets have been too aggressive towards their neighbors, and too ruthlessly determined to impose their political-economic system even on friendly occupied countries, to be described as merely defensive in their actions. During the time in which the Nazi-Soviet Pact of 1939 (which Stalin had sought since 1933) was in effect, and after helping to bring Hitler to

power through the German Communists, the Soviets slaughtered as many Poles in their occupied area as the German Nazis did in theirs.

Levine is reluctant to speak of the Soviet Union as an extension of the pre-revolutionary czarist regime; he insists on viewing that government as one with self-imposed geopolitical limits. Though affected by nationalist and imperialist currents, czarist Russia at the beginning of the century was interested not in world control but in absorbing contiguous regions and in Russianizing subject minorities. Levine also stresses the liberalizing tendencies operative in the imperial government in the wake of the Russo-Japanese War of 1905. Looking at the establishment of a Russian parliament (the Duma), the legalization of political parties (including the Bolsheviks), and the land reforms begun by the Russian statesman P.A. Stolypin in 1905, Levine concludes: "Had peacetime economic development and the reforms instituted after 1905 continued undisturbed for two decades, Russia might have peacefully become an industrial constitutional monarchy."

Levine takes a relatively favorable view of Russian internal development on the eve of the First World War, and a relatively negative one of the democratic leftist provisional regime from which the Bolsheviks took over in November 1917. His attitude is certainly not that of the sentimental czarist but rather that of the clearheaded historian. Formerly a student of William Blackwell, the Russian economic historian, Levine accepts Blackwell's documented thesis that Russian economic modernization, particularly the development of heavy industry, was well underway by 1914. Yes, the czarist regime struck out sporadically against Jews and other minorities, but it was also accepting by then a new political and social order: one in which the growing middle class and a landed peasantry would hold the cards.

Russia's ill-advised entry into the First World War set into motion a chain of events that brought revolution and economic, as well as political, disaster. The provisional government, brought to power by the first upheaval in March 1917, set the stage for the second upheaval that brought the Communists to power in November.

Its moderate socialist prime minister, Alexander Kerensky, panicked, on the basis of questionable rumors, over an alleged plot led by Army commander-in-chief Lavr Kornilov. Kerensky called upon all forces of the left to save his government and allied himself with Bolshevik conspirators against right-center constitutionalists. Lenin and other Bolsheviks then dispensed with Kerensky in the mopping-up action known as the "October Revolution."

Levine, in the end, comes down on the side of those who interpret modern Soviet expansion in terms of Marxist dogma. But he does qualify what in other hands might be served up as an anticommunist *plat du jour*. Thus, Levine never denies that Lenin and Stalin were interested in "the reconquest of the Russian Empire." Having surrendered considerable territory—which the Allies did not return—to the occupying German armies in 1917 and 1918, Russian leaders were understandably concerned with retrieving lost land. They also appealed to nationalist feelings among the Russians and among divided neighboring peoples whose territory they coveted. Despite its apparent incompatibility with Marxist internationalism, nationalism was a tool that the Soviets discovered long before Hitler attacked the "Russian motherland."

But Levine also stresses the application of an expanding body of Marxist-Leninist teaching to the expansionist aims of the Soviet Union. His pointed references to Lenin's writings during the First World War are designed to show the conceptual foundation for an expanding Soviet state. Fighting capitalist imperialism, mobilizing socialists and socialist peoples against bourgeois societies, and waging wars of popular liberation provided the Leninist justification for the export of the Soviet experiment and of Soviet armies. Levine does not claim that Lenin's interpretation of Marxist revolutionary practices was the sole or perpetually overriding force behind Soviet aggression. Rather, he seems to suggest that it was a *leitmotiv* that could be and was invoked by aggressive Soviet leaders, who at least half-believed in Marxism-Leninism. This *leitmotiv* was also available to gull those who allowed themselves to be fooled: for example, Westerners who believed that the