

MEMORANDUM

RM-5427-PR

SEPTEMBER 1967

THE "OPERATIONAL CODE":  
A NEGLECTED APPROACH TO  
THE STUDY OF POLITICAL LEADERS  
AND DECISION-MAKING

Alexander L. George

PREPARED FOR:

UNITED STATES AIR FORCE PROJECT RAND

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PREFACE

This RAND Memorandum stems from a continuing effort within the Social Science Department at The RAND Corporation to develop and assess methodologies that have promising applications for foreign policy research. From this standpoint the author restructures and attempts to codify an approach developed some years ago at RAND by Nathan Leites for studying the "operational code" of Soviet leaders.

The policy relevance of this kind of knowledge of the opponent is suggested particularly in the sections of the Memorandum that deal with the special kind of optimizing strategy favored by Soviet leaders in the past (pp. 27-35) and the general approach they appear to have taken to the calculation, acceptance, and control of risks in foreign policy conflicts with the United States (pp. 38-42). It is particularly in these two sections of the report that the present Memorandum elaborates on what was presented in Leites' original study.

It is hoped that the suggestions in this paper for systematic study of the approaches different elites take to political calculation and strategy will interest not only investigators who engage more directly in policy-oriented research but also those engaged in developing theories of world politics and models of decision-making.

Much of the work on which this paper is based was done in connection with a graduate seminar on Political Leadership which the author gave at Stanford University, Winter Quarter 1967, while on leave from The RAND Corporation.



SUMMARY

The term "operational code" is a misnomer. It really refers to a general belief system about the nature of history and politics; it is not a set of recipes or repertoires for political action that an elite applies mechanically in its decision-making. The beliefs and premises that comprise what Leites called "operational code" have a more subtle and looser relationship to decision-making. These general beliefs serve, as it were, as a prism that influences the actor's perception of the flow of political events and his definition or estimate of particular situations. The beliefs also provide norms and standards that influence the actor's choice of strategy and tactics, and his structuring and weighing of alternative courses of action.

In A Study of Bolshevism Nathan Leites presented the "answers" the old Bolsheviks gave to some of the central questions of history and politics as they bear on the problem of action. These central issues and questions themselves, however, were not all explicitly stated; nor did Leites structure and synthesize adequately the relationships between the different "answers" or beliefs about politics which, together, comprised what he called the Bolshevik "operational code." As a result, the content and meaning of an "operational code" has remained somewhat uncertain, and this has added to the difficulties of doing similar studies of other political elites.

This Memorandum attempts to redress this situation by explicitly stating the issues and questions around which

the Bolsheviks constructed a belief system about politics. They are stated here in general terms to emphasize the fact that they constitute fundamental issues about which all political actors must formulate a set of beliefs or premises. The "answers" other political actors give to these questions will probably differ from those the Bolsheviks gave. But an explicit statement of the questions and issues should at least facilitate efforts to find out how different elites and political actors approach the problem of action.

In characterizing the belief system implied by "operational code" we can usefully distinguish two sets of questions -- one a more general set of "philosophical" issues, the other more specifically oriented to "instrumental" or policy questions having to do with goals-means relationships:

A. Philosophical Issues

1. What is the "essential" nature of political life? Is the political universe essentially one of harmony or conflict? What is the fundamental character of one's political opponents?
2. What are the prospects for the eventual realization of one's fundamental political values and aspirations? Can one be optimistic, or must one be pessimistic on this score; and in what respects the one and/or the other?
3. Is the political future predictable? In what sense and to what extent?
4. How much "control" or "mastery" can one have over historical development? What is one's role in "moving" and "shaping" history in the desired direction?



5. What is the role of "chance" in human affairs and in historical development?

B. Instrumental or Policy Issues

1. What is the best approach for selecting goals or objectives for political action?
2. How are the goals of action pursued most effectively?
3. How are the risks of political action calculated, controlled, and accepted?
4. What is the best "timing" of action to advance one's interest?
5. What is the utility and role of different means for advancing one's interests?

The Bolshevik views about politics that were described by Leites are summarized under these categories in this Memorandum and their interrelationships and some implications for policy and research discussed.

Making the structure of a belief system about politics explicit in this manner also facilitates the important task of studying whether an elite's beliefs change over time. This is illustrated in this Memorandum by noting the amelioration in some elements of the old Bolshevik belief system that Leites noted in a follow-up study which he made of the Khrushchev period.



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## I. BACKGROUND

It is now almost fifteen years since Nathan Leites published A Study of Bolshevism,<sup>1</sup> which broke important ground in the newly emerging behavioral approach to the study of political elites. During and after World War II many students of world politics had become increasingly interested in the ways in which different elites approached the problems of international conflict and cooperation. They posed questions for research that could not be satisfactorily answered by traditional approaches, such as the systematic biographical analysis of a ruling group according to the social origins, education, training, and other background characteristics of its members. Biographical profiles of this kind often suggested factors that helped account for the emergence and formation of leadership groups, but they did not really illuminate the political orientations, styles of calculation, and behavior of the ruling groups in question.<sup>2</sup>

Leites' book was by no means universally acclaimed. But there were those who welcomed it not merely for its insights into Bolshevik mentality; some thought it introduced a new genre of elite study that might fill some of

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<sup>1</sup>Free Press, Glencoe, Illinois, 1953.

<sup>2</sup>For a useful critique of the systematic multi-biographical study of elite groups, see Morris Janowitz, "The Systematic Aspects of Political Biography," World Politics, April 1954. For a comprehensive critical appraisal of elite theories and related empirical researches, see Dankwart A. Rustow, "The Study of Elites," World Politics, July 1966.

the needs for a behavioral approach to studies of political leadership.

Thus the eminent anthropologist, Clyde Kluckhohn, praised A Study of Bolshevism as being "a work of gigantic stature that is likely to faire école in politics and the other behavioral sciences for many years to come."<sup>3</sup> This expectation has not materialized. A Study of Bolshevism inspired few efforts at similar research on other leadership groups.<sup>4</sup>

Among the reasons for this, I believe, is the unusually complex nature of Leites' work, which is not one but several interrelated studies that are subtly interwoven. While the complexity of the work adds to its richness and intellectual appeal, it has also made it unusually difficult for readers to grasp its structure or to describe its research model.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>In his review article, "Politics, History, and Psychology," World Politics, October 1955, p. 117.

<sup>4</sup>An early attempt was made by Théodore Chen to apply the "operational code" approach to Communist Chinese leaders. More recently, in December 1966, Robert North organized a conference of Chinese area specialists at Stanford University to consider again the utility and feasibility of doing a study of the Chinese Communist operational code. Other studies pursue similar research objectives, though not modeled on the operational code: See, for example, Davis B. Bobrow, "The Chinese Communist Conflict System," Orbis, Vol. 9, No. 4 (Winter 1966); Howard L. Boorman and Scott A. Boorman, "Strategy and National Psychology in China," The Annals, Vol. 370, March 1967; Tang Tsou and Morton H. Halperin, "Mao Tse-tung's Revolutionary Strategy and Peking's International Behavior," American Political Science Review, March 1965.

<sup>5</sup>A helpful effort to identify the several components of A Study of Bolshevism is provided by Daniel Bell,

I wish to call particular attention in this paper to that portion of A Study of Bolshevism known as the "operational code." Leites employed this phrase to refer to the precepts or maxims of political tactics and strategy that characterized the classical Bolshevik approach to politics. (As we shall note below, the term "operational code" has misleading connotations and should probably be replaced by some other phrase, such as "approaches to political calculation.") Leites initially published this portion of his larger treatise separately, and in abbreviated form, as The Operational Code of the Politburo.<sup>6</sup> Two years later his more detailed statement of the "operational code" appeared in the full-scale A Study of Bolshevism (1953), but now several new dimensions were added and interwoven with it. Hence, the "operational code" became embedded in a much more ambitious socio-psychological account of the historical origins and meanings of Bolshevism. The reader was provided not only with the "operational code" but, as Daniel Bell noted, also with a special kind of history of the changing moral temper of an important element of the radical reform-minded Russian intelligentsia. A third component of the study, in some ways the most ambitious, was Leites' delineation of the "Bolshevik character" which, he suggested, constituted in some respects a distinct type in social history in the sense that any

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"Bolshevik Man, His Motivations: A Psychoanalytic Key to Communist Behavior," Commentary, XIX (1955), pp. 179-187; much of this essay was reproduced in the same author's "Ten Theories in Search of Reality: The Prediction of Soviet Behavior in the Social Sciences," World Politics, April 1958.

<sup>6</sup> McGraw-Hill, New York, 1951.

individual is unique though resembling others in important respects.<sup>7</sup>

Hence A Study of Bolshevism emerges as far more than a list of maxims of political strategy. Rather, the "operational code" blends and merges at many points with the discussion of "Bolshevik character." The maxims of political strategy that comprise the "operational code" take on the character of rules of conduct held out for good Bolsheviks and norms of behavior that, ideally, are internalized by the individual who thereby acquires a new and different character structure -- that of the reliable, "hard-core" Bolshevik. In the terminology of modern ego psychology the individual who succeeds in internalizing this preferred character structure thereby accomplishes an "identity transformation."

Leites dealt briefly, and necessarily speculatively, with the origins of the "Bolshevik character." He saw it as being, in part, a reaction to those qualities of the reform-minded Russian intelligentsia of the nineteenth century that had, in Lenin's judgment, proven to be quite unsuitable for the task of making a successful revolution.

In dealing with the origins of the Bolshevik character and, in particular, with its "reactive" aspects, Leites employed a method that drew in part, but only in part, on psychoanalytic theory. This has further complicated the

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<sup>7</sup>In this connection see, for example, Michael Walzer's recent study of the origins of modern radical politics in the sixteenth century and his effort to construct a general model of radical politics that encompasses Bolshevism as well as Puritanism. The Revolution of Saints, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1965.



task of understanding the research model on which his complex study is based. Since the question is germane to the task of "disentangling" the operational code portion of the work, some clarification of the role psychoanalytic theory played in Leites' study is necessary before proceeding.

It is true that Leites felt that the full significance of some important elements of the new Bolshevik character could be better understood by regarding them as "reaction formations" (and other ego defense mechanisms) to powerful unconscious wishes that had helped to shape the older character structure of Russian reform-minded intellectuals.<sup>8</sup> But, according to Leites, the Bolshevik character also represented a conscious effort by Lenin and his associates to reverse certain traditional aspects of Russian character. Leites therefore employed psychoanalytic theory to illuminate the unconscious significance of Bolshevik beliefs; but he noted explicitly that his "delineation of the preconscious and conscious content" of Bolshevik doctrine and the operational code did not require the reader either to accept the theory of psychoanalysis or to agree with the particular use Leites made of it in his admittedly speculative attempt to illuminate the possible

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<sup>8</sup>The psychoanalytic hypotheses employed by Leites were touched upon at various points in A Study of Bolshevism and discussed more fully in his article, "Panic and Defenses Against Panic in the Bolshevik View of Politics," in Psychoanalysis and the Social Sciences, Vol. IV, International Universities Press, New York, 1955, pp. 135-144.

unconscious significance of some of these Bolshevik beliefs.<sup>9</sup>

What emerges from this is that the set of beliefs about politics associated with the concept or term, "operational code," can be investigated without reference to psychoanalytic hypotheses. These beliefs, implicitly or explicitly held by the political actor, can be inferred or postulated by the investigator on the basis of the kinds of data, observational opportunities, and methods generally available to political scientists. In this respect, the "operational code" approach does not differ from research efforts to identify many other beliefs, opinions, and attitudes of political actors. Leites' use of psychoanalytic theory, therefore, offers no impediment to "factoring out" the operational code part of his study.

At the same time, it is one of the attractive features of the operational code construct for behaviorally-inclined political scientists that it can serve as a useful "bridge" or "link" to psychoanalytic interpretations of unconscious dimensions of belief systems and their role in behavior under different conditions.<sup>10</sup> Thus,

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<sup>9</sup>A Study of Bolshevism, p. 22. Daniel Bell, op. cit., also called attention to the fact that Leites regards Bolshevik character as both a conscious and unconscious reaction to features of the earlier pre-Bolshevik character.

<sup>10</sup>I have suggested elsewhere that political scientists interested in applying personality theories to the study of political leaders need to build a number of conceptual "bridges" of their own that reflect the problems, theoretical interests, and available data of their own discipline in order to make more effective use of personality theories rooted in psychoanalysis. The "operational

once an actor's approach to political calculation has been formulated by the researcher, he can proceed -- if he so wishes and is able to do so -- to relate some of the beliefs in question to other motivational variables of a psychodynamic character. With the belief system of the political actor in hand, the investigator can move more easily than would otherwise be possible into the sphere of unconscious motives and defenses against them that affect the strength and operation of these beliefs in the actor's political behavior in different circumstances, and to an assessment of the extent to which these beliefs are subject to reality-tests of various kinds. An elite's fundamental beliefs about politics are probably resistant to change for various reasons, of which unconscious motivations are but one factor.<sup>11</sup>

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code" construct is one such "bridge"; it provides a solid stepping stone for efforts to deal with unconscious motives and psychodynamics precisely because the cognitive belief system about politics it refers to is subsumed under modern ego psychology. "Bridges" of this kind are needed for relating research on political personality and behavior more effectively to the theories and findings of dynamic psychology. Another "bridge" of this kind, also based on a component of ego psychology, is discussed in my "Power As A Compensatory Value For Political Leaders," to appear in a forthcoming issue of the Journal of Social Issues.

<sup>11</sup>In this connection, Leites argued that the fact that the beliefs comprising the operational code appeared to be held with unusual stubbornness, exaggeration, and intensity raised the presumption that adherence to them was reinforced by defenses against strong unconscious wishes or fears and, hence, that they were relatively impervious to many kinds of rational tests. (We shall return to this point below, p. 45.)

I have discussed several aspects of A Study of Bolshevism that help account for the fact that it has not inspired similar studies of other leaders' "operational codes" or, more appropriately, their approaches to political calculation. In this connection, another shortcoming of the Study should be mentioned. Leites did not structure and synthesize the various beliefs, rules, and maxims about politics associated with his concept of "operational code." The relationship of the different elements of the Bolshevik view of politics to each other and to the problem of making specific choices of action remained somewhat obscure.<sup>12</sup> That is, he did not clarify sufficiently the order, hierarchy, and interrelationships among the various elements of the "code." I have attempted to redress this by reinterpreting various components of the so-called code and restructuring it into a more tightly knit set of cognitive beliefs about fundamental issues and questions associated with the classical problem of political action. It is in this sense -- as a set of premises and beliefs

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<sup>12</sup>This point was well made recently by John Weakland in a perceptive and balanced appraisal of A Study of Bolshevism. Weakland notes that Leites' work is "remarkably simple in overall organization, and for a work aiming to present a code, it gives little attention to synthesis and systematization.... We are presented with a list of themes, but these parts of the code are not interrelated.... And there is even less attention given to questions of more complex structure, such as possible relationships between themes or principles of different levels...." John H. Weakland, "Investigating the Operational Code of the Chinese Communist Leadership," an unpublished paper written for the Politburo Feasibility Study Conference, Stanford University, 16-18 December 1966.

about politics and not as a set of rules and recipes to be applied mechanically to the choice of action -- that the "operational code" construct is properly understood.



## II. THE "OPERATIONAL CODE" AND COGNITIVE LIMITS ON RATIONAL DECISION-MAKING

A political leader's beliefs about the nature of politics and political conflict, his views regarding the extent to which historical developments can be shaped, and his notions of correct strategy and tactics -- whether these beliefs be referred to as "operational code," "Weltanschauung," "cognitive map," or an "elite's political culture" -- are among the factors influencing that actor's decisions. The "operational code" is a particularly significant portion of the actor's entire set of beliefs about political life.<sup>13</sup> Not all the beliefs and attitudes that influence a political actor's behavior, then, will be considered here. A comprehensive model of decision-making behavior, for example, would also consider the actor's ethical and normative beliefs.<sup>14</sup>

It is widely recognized that there are important cognitive limits on the possibility of rational decision-making in politics as in other sectors of life.<sup>15</sup> In

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<sup>13</sup>For a more general discussion of political belief systems, see Lucian W. Pye and Sidney Verba (eds.), Political Culture and Political Development, Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J., 1965, particularly the "Introduction" by L. Pye and "Conclusion: Comparative Political Culture" by S. Verba.

<sup>14</sup>These were considered by Leites in A Study of Bolshevism, especially pp. 99-144.

<sup>15</sup>In recent years a number of social scientists have attempted to draw upon the field of cognitive psychology in order to elaborate better decision-making models for studies of world politics. While cognitive theory is relevant and suggestive, it does not lend itself readily to the task. Considerable adaption and development is needed. In

contrast to models of "pure" rationality in statistical decision theory and formal economics, efforts at rational decision-making in political life are subject to constraints of the following kind: (1) The political actor's information about situations with which he must deal is usually incomplete; (2) his knowledge of ends-means relationships is generally inadequate to predict reliably the consequences of choosing one or another course of action; and (3) it is often difficult for him to formulate a single criterion by means of which to choose which alternative course of action is "best."<sup>16</sup>

Political actors have to adapt to and try to cope with these cognitive limits or "boundaries" to rational decision-making. It is of considerable importance for political scientists who are interested in understanding and possibly improving decision-making procedures to acquire a better appreciation of the variety of ways in which different political leaders deal with this problem in similar

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particular, investigators will have to articulate the substantive beliefs and cognitive problems that are relevant in decision-making in political settings, and they will also have to define more specifically the special contexts in which these political beliefs originate, operate in decision-making, and change. For a useful discussion and statement of a still quite general model, see Richard A. Brody, "Cognition and Behavior: A Model of International Relations," in O. G. Harvey (ed.), Experience, Structure, and Adaptability, Springer, New York, 1966.

<sup>16</sup>For useful discussions of these cognitive limits and some of their implications in the arena of political decision-making, see James G. March and Herbert A. Simon, Organizations, Wiley, New York, 1958; and Charles E. Lindblom, "The Science of 'Muddling Through,'" Public Administration Quarterly, Vol. 29, No. 2 (Spring 1959), pp. 79-88. Lindblom's views were elaborated in subsequent publications.



or different political settings. This is, indeed, an aspect of comparative political research that has received little systematic attention.<sup>17</sup> How do political leaders in varying political cultures and institutional structures approach the task of making calculations, of deciding what objectives to select, and how to deal with uncertainty and risk -- that is, more generally, how to relate means and ends, etc.? What styles of political calculation and strategies are developed for this purpose by different leaders? This has to do, of course, with the familiar problem of the relation of knowledge to action on which many observers and practitioners of politics have reflected. What is proposed here is that this classical problem be conceptualized more rigorously and studied more systematically than in the past.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>For interesting developments in this direction, however, see Albert Hirschman's effort to identify some characteristic features of the problem-solving and decision-making styles of Latin American reform leaders, in his Journeys Toward Progress, Twentieth Century Fund, New York, 1963; and the research by Wendell Bell and James Mau on "images of the future" as a key variable in social change in developing countries.

<sup>18</sup>For insightful essays on some of these questions see, for example, David S. McLelland, "The Role of Political Style: A Study of Dean Acheson," in Roger Hilsman and Robert C. Good (eds.), Foreign Policy in the Sixties, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1965; Peter Gourevitch, "Political Skill: A Case Study," in John D. Montgomery and Arthur Smithies (eds.), Public Policy, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1965, especially pp. 266-268; Erwin C. Hargrove, Presidential Leadership: Personality and Political Style, Macmillan, New York, 1966. Systematic research on presidential leadership styles is currently being undertaken by Professor James David Barber, Department of Political Science, Yale University.

The issues and questions referred to in the preceding paragraph comprise one part of the "operational code" construct. We shall refer to the "answers" given by a political actor to these questions as his "instrumental beliefs," that is, his beliefs about ends-means relationships in the context of political action.

There is another set of more general issues and questions that are part of an operational code. These are what may be called the political actor's "philosophical" beliefs, since they refer to assumptions and premises he makes regarding the fundamental nature of politics, the nature of political conflict, the role of the individual in history, etc.<sup>19</sup>

It is in terms of these two sets of beliefs -- the specific contents of which will be discussed shortly -- that I have redefined and restructured the concept of "operational code." What emerges is a research construct for empirical work on decision-making that focuses more clearly than did A Study of Bolshevism on the interrelated set of beliefs about the nature of political conflict and an effective approach to calculation of political strategy and tactics.

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<sup>19</sup>I have borrowed here and adapted the general distinction between "epistemological" and "instrumental" beliefs made by O. G. Brim, D. C. Glass, D. E. Lavin, and N. Goodman, Personality and Decision Processes: Studies in the Social Psychology of Thinking, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1962. In attempting to apply their useful distinction to the subject matter of the "operational code" I have found it necessary to formulate differently the specific issues and questions related to the problem of political action.

A Study of Bolshevism emphasized the "answers" the old Bolsheviks gave to these central questions about politics and the relation of knowledge to action. The issues and questions themselves were not all explicitly stated. Accordingly, this paper attempts to formulate these issues in order thereby to analyze or explicate the operational code as a research tool. This should facilitate similar studies of other leaders and other leadership groups, and lead to systematic comparative studies.

There are, of course, difficult problems in employing knowledge of a leader's "operational code," or belief system about politics, for purposes of explaining or predicting his behavior in specific instances.<sup>20</sup> The term "code" in this respect is misleading insofar as it implies a set of recipes or repertoires for action that are applied mechanically by the actor. The investigator's knowledge of the actor's general belief system can assist, but not substitute for, analysis of specific situations and assessment of institutional and other pressures on the political actor's decisions. Knowledge of the actor's approach to calculating choice of action, therefore, does not provide a simple key to explanation and prediction; but it can help the researcher and the policy planner to "bound" the alternative ways in which the subject may perceive different types of situations and approach the task

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<sup>20</sup>Leites himself did not overlook these problems or oversimplify the task of utilizing the operational code, with its ambiguous and inconsistent prescriptions, for explaining or predicting Soviet behavior. See A Study of Bolshevism, Free Press, Glencoe, Illinois, pp. 16-18; hereafter cited as Study.

of making a rational assessment of alternative courses of action. Knowledge of the actor's beliefs helps the investigator to clarify the general criteria, requirements, and norms the subject attempts to meet in assessing opportunities that arise to make desirable gains, in estimating the costs and risks associated with them, and in making utility calculations.

Whether it be from the standpoint of philosophy, history, psychology, sociology, economics, or political science, students of human behavior have long agreed that the individual must necessarily simplify and structure the complexity of his world in order to cope with it. In everyday life as in the laboratory, problem-solving often requires deliberate or unwitting simplification of a more complex reality. This applies also to the political actor, for he too must somehow comprehend complex situations in order to decide how best to deal with them.<sup>21</sup> In doing so, the actor typically engages in a "definition of the situation," i.e., a cognitive structuring of the situation that will clarify for him the nature of the problem, relate it to his previous experience, and make it amenable to appropriate problem-solving activities. The political actor perceives and simplifies reality partly through the prism of his "cognitive map" of politics. This includes the belief system that has been referred to in the past as the "operational code" of a political actor.

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<sup>21</sup>This point has been emphasized particularly in the writings of Charles E. Lindblom. See also March and Simons, op. cit., pp. 139, 151.

We turn now to the content of an operational code. I have identified a number of questions about politics that, together, hopefully cover most of the central issues connected with the problem of knowledge and action. (See Fig. 1.) The "answers" a political actor gives to these questions serve to define his fundamental orientation towards the problem of leadership and action. Before proceeding, we take note of the possibility that in some non-Western cultures the problem of knowledge and its relation to the calculation of political action may be approached differently and, hence, the list of fundamental questions identified here may not be entirely applicable.

Most of the observations Leites made about the classical Bolshevik approach to political calculation can be subsumed under one or another of these issues. We will not take up here whether Leites' construction of the classical Bolshevik belief system was valid in all respects. But we shall consider later the question of the extent to which some of the old Bolshevik beliefs have since changed. And we shall suggest some of the ways in which knowledge of this belief system relates to the task of explaining or predicting Soviet behavior.

The immediate objective of this paper -- to explicate the operational code -- does not require us to delve deeply into these additional questions. It will serve as a useful check on the adequacy of our explication and restructuring of the code to see whether the Bolshevik beliefs described in the Study can be subsumed under the various philosophical and instrumental questions we have formulated. We need deal only summarily with Leites' study for this

Fig. 1

THE CONTENT OF AN "OPERATIONAL CODE"

I. Philosophical Beliefs

- A. The "essential" nature of political life:  
conflict or harmony; image of the opponent.
- B. Optimism or pessimism regarding the future:  
in re ultimate realization of one's funda-  
mental values and aspirations.
- C. Predictability of the future: In what sense?  
To what extent?
- D. How much "control" or "mastery" does one  
have over historical developments? What  
is one's role in "moving" and "shaping"  
history?
- E. Role of chance.

II. Instrumental Beliefs

(regarding means-ends relationships in politics;  
i.e., general rules of strategy and tactics).

- A. Choice of policy goals/objectives.
- B. Pursuit of goals/objectives.
- C. Calculation and control of risks.
- D. Timing of efforts to make desired gains.
- E. Evaluation of means.

purpose; we shall ignore those dimensions of his multifaceted study that do not constitute the operational code per se but comprise related questions of the "Bolshevik character," the social-psychological origins of the code, and the underlying psychodynamic processes Leites speculated above.





### III. THE PHILOSOPHICAL CONTENT OF AN OPERATIONAL CODE

1. What is the "essential" nature of political life? Is the political universe essentially one of harmony or conflict? What is the fundamental character of one's political opponents?<sup>22</sup>

A political actor's belief system about the nature of politics is shaped particularly by his orientation to other political actors. Most important of these are one's opponents. The way in which they are perceived -- the characteristics the political actor attributes to his opponents -- exercises a subtle influence on many other philosophical and instrumental beliefs in his operational code.<sup>23</sup> In the classical Bolshevik belief system the "image of the opponent" was perhaps the cornerstone on which much of the rest of their approach to politics was based. The old Bolsheviks perceived the capitalist opponent as thoroughly hostile at bottom, whatever facade he might display, and possessed of great shrewdness and determination to annihilate his class opponent.

Accordingly, for the old Bolsheviks the political universe was one of acute conflict. The fundamental question of politics and history, as formulated by the Bolsheviks, was "who [will destroy] whom?" This conflict

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<sup>22</sup>The summary presented here is drawn from Study, pp. 27-30 ("Politics Is A War") and pp. 429-441 ("Who-Whom?").

<sup>23</sup>For this reason, it is of particular interest that in his more recent work Leites has found indications of an amelioration in the Soviet leaders' image of their opponent. (See below, p. 45.)

between Communists and their class enemies was viewed as fundamental and irreconcilable. It was not attributable to particular historical personages but sprang from the "objective" historical conditions described by Marxist dialectics.

Consistent with these views was another Bolshevik belief regarding the instability of any "intermediate" historical position between being annihilated or achieving world hegemony. So long as the Bolsheviks had not yet achieved world hegemony, the danger of being annihilated by the enemy would remain an ever-present danger.

Other answers to the first question posed here are possible and have been given by different elites. For example, the traditional "idealist" conception of international affairs postulates a fundamental harmony of interests among peoples and nations that is only temporarily disrupted because of the wickedness or weakness of certain individuals and the lack of adequate institutions, a view with which "realists" have increasingly taken issue.<sup>24</sup>

It is important to recognize that on this issue as on other elements of the belief system, not all members of a ruling group will necessarily agree; moreover, beliefs can change significantly over a period of time. Thus, as will be noted below, Nathan Leites noted in research undertaken subsequent to the publication of A Study of Bolshevism

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<sup>24</sup>On this point see, for example, Robert E. Osgood, Ideals and Self-Interest in America's Foreign Relations, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1953; and Kenneth Waltz, Man, the State and War, Columbia University Press, New York, 1959.

various indications of an important modification in this basic Bolshevik belief which, in turn, has potentially far-reaching implications for the Soviet style of political behavior.

2. What are the prospects for the eventual realization of one's fundamental political values and aspirations? Can one be optimistic, or must one be pessimistic on this score; and in what respects the one and/or the other?<sup>25</sup>

The conventional Bolshevik position was optimistic, drawing as it did upon ideological-doctrinal premises regarding the eventual triumph of Communism on a worldwide scale. Yet, it was an optimism tinged with conditional pessimism, i.e., an underlying belief that catastrophe could not be excluded and was an ever-present danger. One had to be constantly aware of the possibility of catastrophe and avoid contributing to its actualization by defective calculations and inept political behavior.

3. Is the political future predictable? In what sense and to what extent?<sup>26</sup>

The classical Bolshevik position on this issue reflected the strong "determinist" streak in the Marxist view of history; but this view was balanced by strong "indeterminist" conceptions. Thus, the Bolsheviks believed that

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<sup>25</sup>The summary which follows draws from Study, pp. 404-416 ("The Incessant Danger of Attack," and "The Uncertainty of Survival Before Victory").

<sup>26</sup>The summary presented here draws from Study, pp. 32, 77-85 ("Unpredictable Aspects of the Future").

while the direction and final outcome of the major historical development from capitalism to Communism are predictable, nonetheless the rate of this development and its particular paths are not. At many junctures or branch points of historical development, therefore, more than one outcome is "objectively possible."

This general belief has had important implications for the way in which Bolsheviks approached the problem of "action." The passive orientation to action that was logically and psychologically implicit in the "determinist" view of history was counterbalanced by the "indeterminist" conception of the many zig-zags that historical developments could take prior to reaching their predictable final outcome. From an operational standpoint, the latter, "indeterminist" component of the belief dominated in that it emphasized the importance of intelligent, well-calculated action as a means of expediting the historical process. As a result, the Bolshevik answer to this question encouraged and, when reinforced by the other beliefs already referred to, even drove its adherents towards "voluntarism" and initiative rather than fatalism and passivity.

Elaborating on this philosophical theme, the Bolsheviks believed that "objective conditions" from time to time create certain "opportunities" for the Party to advance its interests at the expense of its opponents. However, it was regarded as not predictable and by no means certain that the Party would succeed in "utilizing" these opportunities for advance and in transforming them into realities.

4. How much "control" or "mastery" can one have over historical development? What is one's role in "moving" and "shaping" history in the desired direction?<sup>27</sup>

The classical Bolshevik answer to this question follows from beliefs held with respect to the preceding issues. Thus, in the Bolshevik view, the Party is obliged to seize and utilize any "opportunity" for advance, for men can determine within fairly wide limits the cost and duration of an "inevitable" social change. The answer to this question, therefore, emphasizes the role that dedicated, disciplined and intelligent political actors can play in "moving" history in the desired direction.

5. What is the role of "chance" in human affairs and in historical development?<sup>28</sup>

The classical Bolshevik answer was that all politically important events are explainable by the laws of Marxism-Leninism; therefore, that history can be importantly shaped by "accidental" events is rejected.

Consistent with this general belief was the Politburo's tendency, often noted by Western observers, to perceive connections between events where we see none; to regard unrelated details as symptomatic of major political trends; and to believe there is complicated planning behind events which we know to be fortuitous. Bolshevik thought minimized the role of chance -- with all its unsettling implications for their belief system -- by distorting the image

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<sup>27</sup>See Study, pp. 85-92 ("Transforming Opportunities Into Realities").

<sup>28</sup>See Study, pp. 67-73 ("The Denial of Accidents").

of the opponent and perceiving him as preternaturally calculating and powerful, which, in turn, had other unsettling implications.

Related to this was the emphatic negative the Bolsheviks gave to the question: Can one "muddle through"?<sup>29</sup> It is not only not possible to "muddle through," they believed, but extremely dangerous to try to do so. Accompanying this was the related belief that there is in every situation just one "correct" line or policy. All other policies or choices of action may result in, or tend to lead to ruin -- i.e., the "catastrophe" held to be an ever-present possibility, as noted above. In the Bolshevik belief system, moreover, political mistakes were rarely harmless or anything less than acutely dangerous. ("Every small step has to be carefully weighed.")

As the preceding discussion has suggested, these beliefs about the major philosophical issues concerning politics are related to each other. This set of beliefs, in turn, is logically and psychologically related to a set of "instrumental" beliefs that refer more specifically to key aspects of the problem of knowledge and action. What should be stressed before proceeding is that the answers different political leaders or elite groups give to the basic questions implicit in the traditional problem of knowledge and action are affected by their philosophical beliefs about the nature of politics.

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<sup>29</sup> See Study, pp. 49, 264-268.

#### IV. THE INSTRUMENTAL BELIEFS IN AN OPERATIONAL CODE

1. What is the best approach for selecting goals or objectives for political action?<sup>30</sup>


The classical Bolshevik answer to the question of how best to set one's goals in embarking upon action was influenced by two of the general philosophical beliefs already alluded to: the mixture of determinist and indeterminist conceptions regarding future historical developments and the view of one's role in "moving" history in the right direction. Recall in this connection, too, the general injunction implicit in the Bolshevik answer to the third and fourth of the philosophical beliefs noted earlier, namely that the Party is obliged to seize all "opportunities" that arise for making advances. How, then, did the Bolsheviks orient themselves more specifically to the critical question of determining what one should strive for, and what the goals and objectives of action should be when an "opportunity" to make gains arises?

The classical Bolshevik "answer" (perhaps partly at the preconscious level) was along the following lines:

- (a) One should not approach the task of setting the objective or goal of political action by trying first to calculate precisely the probability of achieving each of the alternative objectives that might be pursued in a given situation.

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<sup>30</sup>The discussion of this question draws from and freely interprets materials in Study, pp. 32, 77-92, 47-49, 514-524.

- (b) Further, one should not limit the objective one strives for in a particular situation to that which, on the basis of such calculations, appears to be quite likely or rather certain of being achieved by the means at one's disposal. (Note here the Bolshevik admonition against the tendency to allow assessments of available means and their presumed limited efficacy to unduly circumscribe and limit the magnitude of the objective or goal to be pursued.)
- (c) In setting one's goals, therefore, one must counter tendencies towards an overly conservative approach to political action: a reluctance to push for useful gains against seemingly difficult odds, and the related tendency to "pare down" the goals of action to those that seem highly feasible and likely to be achieved.
- (d) Against this conservative approach to calculation of ends-means relationships to politics, the Bolsheviks argued on behalf of a strategy of attempting to optimize or maximize the gains that might be derived in a given situation. (Note here the Bolshevik tendency to reject what has been called the )



"satisficing" strategy that many other decision-makers often prefer to an "optimizing" one.)<sup>31</sup>

Let us consider now how some of the familiar cognitive limits on rational decision-making are dealt with in support of the preference for an optimizing strategy rather than a more conservative approach. In Bolshevik thinking on this central issue, the problem of uncertain or incomplete knowledge relevant to choice of action is "bounded" in a special way. In behalf of the preferred optimizing approach, the Bolshevik code argues -- not unrealistically, it may be said -- in the following vein:

- (a) Political action often has to begin with incomplete knowledge about possible outcomes; it is action itself and only action that will increase knowledge.
- (b) What can be achieved in a particular situation cannot be predicted in advance -- it can only become known in the process of "struggle" in which one attempts to get the most out of a situation.
- (c) In choosing the goals or objectives of a particular course of action, therefore, one should limit them only by assessing what is "objectively possible" in that situation -- i.e., not impossible to achieve by intelligent use of resources at one's disposal.

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<sup>31</sup>On this point see, for example, James G. March and Herbert A. Simon, Organizations, John Wiley, New York, 1958; pp. 140-141, 169.

The operative belief, restated, is that in initiating an action the Party must be concerned only with ascertaining that the goals it sets are "objectively possible" (in the general and somewhat vague sense already indicated) -- not that they can be achieved with high probability. For what can be achieved cannot be predicted in advance; it depends on the "relationship of forces" which can be known only in the process of "struggle" carried out "to the end." What is important, therefore, is that the limited knowledge available to assess the likely consequences of alternative courses of action should not lead the political actor who engages in ends-means calculations to make an overly conservative choice of what to strive for.

Applying these beliefs to the problem of action, the Bolsheviks developed a special kind of optimizing strategy. In undertaking an initiative to advance their interests, they often set for themselves not a single objective but a set of graduated objectives. The standard task faced by all decision-makers -- namely, that of attempting to reconcile what is desirable with what is thought to be feasible -- is not over-determined in this optimizing strategy. Rather, action is oriented in a specific situation to a series of objectives embracing payoffs that are graduated (but perhaps inversely related) in degree of utility and feasibility. The optimizing strategy calls for striving simultaneously for a maximum payoff -- even though the probability of achieving it appears to be low -- and the more modest payoffs which appear to be less difficult, and more probable. There seems to be an implicit assumption that such a strategy not only provides an opportunity to

achieve the maximum payoff in a given situation but, should that prove infeasible or emerge as too costly or risky, it will enable one to settle, if necessary, for one of the lesser of the graduated objectives that will constitute the largest payoff that could have been squeezed out of the "opportunity" the situation afforded. The contrast here is with "adventures" where there are no lesser objectives, but only a maximum payoff or a severe loss. (See below.)

Such an optimizing strategy, therefore, is consonant with the general philosophical belief alluded to earlier: namely, that what can be achieved in a particular situation cannot be predicted in advance, that action must begin with incomplete knowledge and a measure of uncertainty regarding possible outcomes, and that it is only through "struggle" that one can find out how much a given "opportunity" to advance will yield.<sup>32</sup>

It should not be assumed that resort to an optimizing strategy of this kind necessarily implies neglect of risk and cost calculations. On the other hand, adherents of this strategy may not give due recognition to the possibility that striving for the maximum possible payoff in a given situation may well entail the prospect of special costs and risks. Thus, an optimizing strategy might well arouse the opponent's sense of danger and mobilize his

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<sup>32</sup>During the course of efforts to assess Soviet intentions in placing missiles in Cuba, Charles Bohlen, a leading U.S. specialist on the Soviet Union, cited one of Lenin's adages which compared national expansion to a bayonet drive: If you strike steel, pull back; if you strike mush, keep going. Theodore C. Sorenson, Kennedy, Harper and Row, New York, p. 677.

potential for resistance and counteraction in a way that pursuit of more modest objectives might avoid doing.<sup>33</sup>

We shall shortly discuss Bolshevik beliefs about calculation, control, and acceptance of risks. Here we note that the general Bolshevik answer to the question under discussion proclaimed the need for important limits to this preferred optimizing strategy. Thus, the injunction to optimize was "bounded" by the somewhat contradictory maxim: "Avoid adventures." This maxim, or rule of action, conveys several different imperatives:

- (a) A generalized injunction not to embark on forward operations against an opponent that are not carefully calculated in advance to exclude complacent overestimates of one's own strength and underestimates of his strength. Complacent miscalculations of this kind reflect a failure to assess properly whether the "objective conditions" permit a responsible effort to make gains of any kind, and, if so, what the range of objectives should be that one can safely pursue in the given situation.
- (b) A generalized injunction against undertaking action that has an uncertain chance of yielding any payoff but is coupled, at the same time, with a large

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<sup>33</sup>For a discussion of the possibility that the Bolshevik tendency to push to the limit led to an underestimation of the undesired consequences of such conduct, see Leites, Study, pp. 33-34, 36-37, 39.

risk of severe loss if it fails. Actions to advance one's interests should be avoided when they cannot utilize the optimizing strategy noted above in which graduated objectives and payoffs are pursued. An action is "adventuristic" if it has no lesser objectives and no possibility of lesser payoffs -- i.e., one for which the expected outcomes are limited to a maximum payoff or a severe loss.

- (c) A generalized injunction against permitting one's calculations and choice of action to be dominated by prospects of immediate or short-term gains while ignoring the possibility of the longer-range costs and risks attached to the same action.

We may summarize our discussion of the first instrumental belief in the Bolshevik code as follows: Choose an optimizing strategy that pursues graduated objectives, but "avoid adventures."

The fact that not one but several graduated objectives may serve to orient Soviet action in conflict situations is particularly important in the sphere of world politics. The special character of the optimizing strategy that lies behind Soviet initiatives in foreign policy from time to time has had important implications both for the ability to correctly assess Soviet intentions and to devise

appropriate measures for thwarting this kind of optimizing strategy. On various occasions in the past, unfamiliarity with this aspect of the Soviet operational code has resulted in unnecessary perplexity, confusion, and alarm in attempts to assess Soviet intentions. Western observers have responded to Soviet initiatives (such as the Berlin blockade of 1948) on the assumption that Soviet leaders were pursuing a single objective. Equivocal indications of what the Soviets were after were variously interpreted in terms of what "the" Soviet intention really was, as if the Soviets were pursuing only a single objective rather than a set of graduated objectives. Some Western interpretations focused on indications that the Soviets were pursuing an extremely ambitious objective, thus heightening apprehensions regarding the aggressive bent of Soviet policy, the "risks" Soviet leaders were willing to take, and the "danger" of war. Other interpretations focused on indications that the Soviets were pursuing only a quite modest, even "defensive" objective, thus encouraging the belief that the crisis could be quickly and easily terminated if only the Western policies that had "provoked" the Soviets were altered and concessions made to satisfy them.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup>In the Cuban missile crisis U.S. policy-makers at first entertained various theories, partly overlapping and partly divergent, as to Soviet intentions. They seem to have settled on an interpretation that avoided attributing to the Soviet leaders a single motive in favor of a theory that the Soviets expected that the deployment of missiles would give them prospects for a variety of specific gains in foreign policy. See particularly Roger Hilsman, To Move A Nation, Doubleday, New York, 1967, pp. 161-165, 201-202; and Theodore C. Sorensen, Kennedy, Harper and Row, New York, 1965, pp. 676-678.

It is not possible to discuss in detail here the variety of damaging consequences that can result from misconceived, maladroit responses to the Soviet optimizing strategy. We must be content with the general observation that effective responses are more likely in such situations if based on awareness that the opponent is pursuing a set of graduated objectives ranging from relatively modest to quite ambitious goals. His initial actions, his evaluation of the feedback to them, and his improvisation of new actions as the "struggle" continues have to be seen as designed to assist him in the pursuit and implementation of an optimizing strategy. What this implies more concretely will be clarified to some extent in turning to other instrumental beliefs.

2. How are the goals of action pursued most effectively?

The classical Bolshevik answer to this question can be summarized in three maxims: "push to the limit," "engage in pursuit" of an opponent who begins to retreat or make concessions, but "know when to stop."<sup>35</sup>

The first part of the answer, "push to the limit," enjoins that maximum energy be exerted to attain the objectives of action. The "struggle" to attain them should not be curtailed prematurely; pressure should be maintained against the opponent even though he doesn't give signs of buckling and even though it seems to stiffen his resistance at first.

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<sup>35</sup>See Study, pp. 30-34, 505-512, 442-449, 52-53, 514-524.

The second part of the answer invokes the principle of "pursuit." Once some progress, some weakening of the opponent's position has been achieved, it is imperative not to yield to the temptation of relaxing pressure. When an opponent begins to talk of making some concessions or offers them, it should be recognized that this is a sign of weakness on his part. Additional and perhaps major gains can be made by continuing to press the opponent under these circumstances.

Once again, however, the Bolshevik operational code set important limits, though of a generalized character, to the preceding two maxims. These limits are, characteristically, embodied in a general injunction, "know when to stop," which is directed against the psychological danger of being carried away by one's success to the point of failing to calculate soberly and rationally the costs and risks of continuing efforts to press forward. Once again, a general injunction of this type lacks operational content; it does not suggest how the maxim is to be applied meaningfully in specific situations; but it is presumably a valuable part of the cognitive and affective makeup of a good Bolshevik.

It has been of considerable value on occasion to Western leaders to understand that their Soviet counterparts structure the problem of action with a set of beliefs and maxims that seem to contradict or, rather, oppose one another. There is, as a result, what might be called a "tension of opposites" in their cognitive structuring of the problem of action. We saw this already in the beliefs held with respect to the first of the instrumental issues:



attempt to optimize gains, but don't engage in "adventures." And we see it again here with reference to the second instrumental issue: "push to the limit" and "pursue" a retreating opponent, but "know when to stop."<sup>36</sup>

Another "tension of opposites" may be discussed at this point that applies to situations in which a Bolshevik leader feels himself put on the defensive by some action of the opponent. The maxims which "bound" this problem of action and create a tension are "resist from the start" any encroachment by the opponent, no matter how slight it appears to be; but "don't yield to enemy provocations" and "retreat before superior force."<sup>37</sup>

"Yielding" to an opponent is so worrisome a danger in the classical Bolshevik code (and, presumably, so anxiety-arousing a fantasy in the old Bolshevik psyche) that it gave rise to a strong injunction to be ultra-sensitive to encroachments of any kind. No matter how trivial they seem, the opponent's encroachments are to be opposed because failure to "resist from the start" may encourage him to step up his attack. (This is related to fears associated with the second of the philosophical beliefs in which ideological/doctrinal optimism regarding the final triumph of Communism is mixed with a certain pessimism, i.e., an underlying belief that nonetheless catastrophe and major setbacks cannot be excluded.)

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<sup>36</sup>A similar "tension of opposites" has been noted in the Chinese Communist approach to the problem of strategy and action. See Tang Tsou and Morton H. Halperin, op. cit., p. 89.

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For a discussion of these maxims, see Study, pp. 55-57, 449-461, 46-47, 57-60, 475-503. See also N. Leites, Kremlin Thoughts: Yielding, Rebuffing, Provoking, Retreating, The RAND Corporation, RM-3618-ISA, May 1963.

3. How are the risks of political action calculated, controlled, and accepted?

The Bolsheviks' answer to this question was importantly influenced by their experience in struggling against vastly stronger, dangerous opponents -- first the Tsarist government and then, after the revolution, the leading capitalist powers. If we recall the Bolshevik answer to the earlier question on choosing one's objectives in embarking in political action, the present question can be reformulated as follows: How does one pursue an optimizing strategy while at the same time knowing how to calculate and control its risks?

- (a) The Bolsheviks recognized that it was of course possible, in principle, to "provoke" a strong opponent into a major attack designed to crush the Bolshevik party (or, later, the Soviet Union). Behavior that might have this effect upon the opponent, therefore, was to be avoided. Nonetheless, it was believed that considerable scope was left short of this for lesser, well-calculated efforts to advance at the stronger opponent's expense. The opponent, it was believed, would be deterred by various constraints from lashing back in an effort to crush the Bolsheviks. The opponent's evaluation of his overall self-interest would keep him from translating his basic hostility -- always present -- into an operational

plan for liquidating the Bolshevik party (and, later, the Soviet Union).

- (b) It is often safe to pursue even quite major objectives at the expense of a stronger opponent (as in the Berlin blockade of 1948-1949 and in the Cuban missile crisis). In the Soviet view, the risks of offensive actions of this kind can often be controlled by limiting the means they employ on behalf of their ambitious objectives. In the Soviet view, it is possible to pursue quite large gains at an enemy's expense in this fashion without triggering a strong, undesired reaction.

We digress briefly at this point to take note of an important difference that often characterized Soviet and U.S. approaches to the calculation and acceptance of risks during the period of the Cold War. The question of how to keep conflicts between them safely limited was answered somewhat differently in the "limitations" theories of the two sides. The U.S. theory, strongly reinforced by our reading of the lessons of the Korean War, has been that a limitation on one's objectives is essential to keep limited conflicts from expanding dangerously.<sup>38</sup> This seemed

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<sup>38</sup>See, for example, R. E. Osgood, Limited War, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1957; W. W. Kaufmann, "Limited Warfare," in Kaufmann (ed.), Military Policy and National Security, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1956; Morton H. Halperin, Limited War in the Nuclear Age, Wiley, New York, 1963.

to be borne out by the consequences -- i.e., Chinese Communist intervention -- of our failure to keep the U.S. objective limited in the Korean War. After defeating the North Koreans we enlarged our war aims to include unification of North Korea and South Korea by force of arms, which triggered the Chinese Communist intervention.

The Soviet theory of limitations, on the other hand, holds that it is often safe to pursue even large, far-reaching objectives in limited cold war conflicts without immediate danger or undue risk of their expanding. What is critical in the Soviet view is not so much the limitation of one's objectives but rather limitation of the means one employs on their behalf. (Examples of this theory of limitations are Soviet behavior in the Berlin blockade and Chinese behavior in the Quemoy crisis of 1958. In both cases far-reaching objectives were among those being pursued, but the risks of doing so were controlled by limiting the means employed against the two Western outposts.)

- (c) It is a Soviet belief that the fact that risks of high magnitude are in some sense present in a conflict situation -- e.g., the danger of war between the Soviet Union and the United States -- is less important than (1) whether that undesired consequences is immediately at hand or at some remove in time, and (2) whether the Soviet leaders believe themselves able to control the intermediate events of the sequence that could result in war. Soviet leaders have displayed

considerable confidence in their ability to control and avoid quite unacceptable, more distant risks in this way. Their approach to risk calculation is often more sophisticated than that of Western leaders in that Soviet leaders distinguish not only the magnitude of risks but also between risks that are immediate and those which are more remote.

Hence Soviet leaders believe, and often act on the premise, that in a struggle to make important gains one can accept seemingly high risks so long as the undesired event is several steps removed in a possible temporal sequence and so long as, in addition, they believe they can control the sequence of events leading to it. In a number of cases (the North Korean attack on South Korea, some of the Berlin crises, the Cuban missile crisis) the Soviets acted in ways that seemed to indicate to Western leaders and publics that Soviet leaders were prepared to risk and indeed were risking general war. The risk of general war, however, was in fact several steps removed; and Soviet leaders could well believe that they retained the possibility of calling off the crisis or redirecting it into safer channels,

if necessary. We may contrast this with the tendency of Western leaders and publics to blur the time-component of the different risks created by a Soviet initiative, or by their own actions, a tendency which disposes Westerners to magnify their estimates of the prevailing risks and to greater conservatism in risk acceptance.

In this respect, therefore, as in others previously noted, Soviet and U.S. approaches to risk calculation and risk-acceptance often differed. The greater sophistication of the Soviet understanding of ways in which undesired risks could be controlled often constituted an advantage. Tending to perceive and interpret Soviet risk-acceptance behavior erroneously from the standpoint of their own approach to risk calculation, Western leaders and publics were inclined to distorted judgments regarding Soviet intentions and the riskiness and significance of Soviet cold war initiatives, which on occasion perhaps adversely affected Western policy calculations and responses. (One may note briefly the additional hypothesis that, over time, the U.S. has come to understand better the Soviet approach to risk calculation and risk acceptance.)

4. What is the best "timing" of action to advance one's interest?<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup>See Study, p. 34.

Once again the Bolshevik answer displays a tendency to state the matter in terms of opposites (excluding middle positions). Thus, the Bolshevik code says, somewhat enigmatically or tritely: "There must be neither procrastination nor precipitate action." The Party must be able to bide its time indefinitely, if need be. But it is forbidden to defer an advance that is feasible now (even though difficult) in the necessarily uncertain expectation that advance would be easier at some later date. Action, therefore, tends to be either required or impermissible; there is nothing in between.

5. What is the utility and role of different means for advancing one's interests?

Of a number of Bolshevik views about the utility of different means, mention will be made here of one that has been rather unfamiliar to Westerners and is perhaps more idiosyncratic than other Bolshevik beliefs about means. This is the belief that in order to deter a powerful enemy "it often pays to be rude."<sup>40</sup> Rude and even violent language, which may or may not be accompanied by small damaging actions, is expected to serve this purpose by heightening the opponent's estimates of one's strength and determination and/or by weakening the mass support for his policies. The tactic of rudeness was believed to be not overly risky because, in Bolshevik thought, a "serious" powerful opponent is expected not to allow himself to become emotionally aroused by such tactics.

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<sup>40</sup> See Study, pp. 34-42.





## V. CHANGES IN THE BELIEF SYSTEM

Even a belief system that reflects well-considered evaluations of past political experience is subject to change under certain conditions. Resistance to changing beliefs may be accentuated by personality rigidities, which may be greater in some members of a ruling group than in others; but a variety of other factors may be operative.

Some political elites have a pronounced tendency to perceive and to deal with present problems in the light of authoritative diagnoses they have made of past experiences. They attach considerable importance to making correct diagnoses of past events which, they feel, provide usable "lessons" of history in the form of models and precedents. The tendency to approach calculation of present policy in this manner is particularly pronounced in radically oriented elites, such as the Marxists, who claim to have a special understanding of history and historical development. As a result, a body of general beliefs develops about the nature of political conflict and basically correct or incorrect approaches to dealing with opponents that takes on a doctrinal character. Special precautions may be taken to safeguard the content of such beliefs from arbitrary, unauthorized changes. Beliefs about politics, then, become part of the sacred political culture of the elite that is systematically transmitted to new leaders. Change in such an elite's belief system, then, does not follow simply from the fact that the composition of the top leadership changes.

As noted earlier, indications are available that some changes in important elements of the classical Bolshevik operational code took place or became noticeable in the Khrushchev era. I believe that the restructuring and synthesis in this paper of the major elements of a "code" into a belief system facilitates inquiry into the possibility of changes in its content and of their implications. Thus, as was suggested earlier, the first philosophical belief in our list appears to be of critical importance in shaping the character of the belief system as a whole and in regulating its impact on the actor's political behavior. Particularly close attention should be given, therefore, to possible shifts in the political actor's image of his opponent and, related to this, his view of the fundamental nature of political conflict.<sup>41</sup>

Let us look briefly now at Leites' more recent research on the Soviet elite from this standpoint. Leites studied statements by Khrushchev and other contemporary Soviet leaders in order to establish whether they held the same set of beliefs regarding the nature of political conflict and the same image of the opponent as Lenin and Stalin had earlier held. He noted various indications that a somewhat more moderate view had emerged of the basic "who-whom" problem that Lenin had so starkly formulated (see p. 21, above), and that the related fear of annihilation had softened.

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<sup>41</sup>This would appear to apply also to the Chinese Communist leadership. (See the forthcoming report by Robert C. North on the Stanford University conference which considered the feasibility of research on the Chinese politburo.)

The hypothesis of a change in these beliefs was stated cautiously by Leites.

When one strikes a balance...it would seem that Bolshevik fears of annihilation have declined, which presumably decreases the urgency of total victory as an antidote against extinction.<sup>42</sup>

Such change would be of considerable significance since, as Leites noted, the aggressiveness and expansionist drive in the older variant of Bolshevism had probably been motivated to a significant extent by this basic view of the nature of political conflict and the related fear of annihilation.<sup>43</sup>

If this fundamental belief was attenuated over time, one would expect that such a change would influence other components of the belief system as well. Leites found indications that this was the case. Examining evidence bearing on the question: "Are They Relaxing?," Leites concluded, again cautiously: "Despite the Cuban affair, it cannot be excluded that they are relaxing, to some limited extent."<sup>44</sup> Posing another question: "Are They Mellowing?" and reviewing relevant statements by Khrushchev and other leaders, Leites concluded:

Thus it would seem that the Bolshevik fear of yielding has, after all, declined, and the insistence on "utilizing possibilities" weakened.... contemporary Soviet leaders probably feel less constrained to push forward

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<sup>42</sup>Kremlin Moods, The RAND Corporation, RM-3535-ISA, January 1964, p. 126.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., p. 91.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., pp. 164-166.

into any possibly accessible space without regard for delayed and indirect consequences. They may even have gained for themselves some slight liberty to concede without an immediate concession in return.<sup>45</sup>

We turn briefly now to the task of accounting for an amelioration in elements of the older Bolshevik belief system. This task is admittedly formidable; the following remarks are by no means intended as an authoritative explanation. Any effort to explain such a change should probably consider several factors and the interactions among them. Changes in top Soviet leadership following Stalin's death in 1953 were undoubtedly of great importance. As Leites noted, Stalin had bent some of the Bolshevik beliefs of Lenin's time in a harsher direction. Even before the accentuation of Stalin's paranoid tendencies in his later years, idiosyncratic elements of his personality had probably rendered his adherence to the Bolshevik belief system relatively impervious to reality-testing.<sup>46</sup> Khrushchev's mind was apparently less "closed" in this respect than Stalin's; he was more receptive to recognizing relevant experiences and historical changes as being in some sense "critical tests" of basic components of the belief system, and also more capable of cautiously modifying some of these beliefs.

While the difference between Stalin's and Khrushchev's personalities was perhaps critical in this respect, other

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<sup>45</sup>Ibid., p. 211.

<sup>46</sup>The importance of Stalin's personality for his political behavior has been emphasized particularly by Robert Tucker. See his "The Dictator and Totalitarianism," World Politics, July 1965.

factors also must be taken into account. The growth of Soviet power may have contributed to Khrushchev's reassessment of the "danger of annihilation." Perhaps of greater importance was the fact that historical experience demonstrated, more during Khrushchev's rule than in Stalin's, that perhaps after all the United States would not engage in an unprovoked war with the Soviet Union. U.S. leaders had not only failed to wage preventive war while the Soviet Union was weak in the immediate post-World War II period, they also seemed prepared to allow it to approach parity with the United States. Well might these historic developments encourage post-Stalin leaders to alter somewhat the earlier image of the U.S. elite as an overwhelmingly hostile, shrewd, determined opponent and to permit themselves to feel a somewhat greater sense of security.<sup>47</sup>

In accounting for changes in the Soviet belief system, therefore, it appears necessary to give weight not only to changes in personality variables but also to the impact of significant historical developments. In addition to those already mentioned, reference should be made to events such as the emergence of greater independence and conflict within the international Communist movement after Stalin's

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<sup>47</sup>Interestingly, Khrushchev's period also saw the emergence of a less favorable image of the United States as an opponent. There was both less idealization of, and less respect for the U.S. elite than in the old Bolshevik view. The historic class enemy was now perceived as an "aging," "declining" elite, one which was weaker, less intelligent, less determined than in the past. The changed characteristics imputed to the United States leadership, however, were seen as making it in some respects possibly more dangerous. (See Kremlin Moods, pp. 91-126, 1-13.)

death. It is probably the case that changes in top leadership made it easier to reconsider older beliefs in the light of new developments.

Changes in the belief system that manifested themselves during Khrushchev's period are indeed of considerable significance for world politics. But it is necessary to note that they evidently constituted modifications of the classical Bolshevik belief system, not its abandonment or radical transformation. There remained substantial elements of continuity with the past in the belief system and political culture of post-Stalin Soviet leadership.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup>This point was emphasized in Leites' Kremlin Moods. There is, in the writer's knowledge, no similar study of further changes in the belief system that may have emerged in the post-Khrushchev era. However, Vernon V. Aspaturian is studying Soviet images of the Kennedy Administration.

## VI. CONCLUSION

This paper has formulated and illustrated the set of beliefs about basic issues concerning the nature of politics and political action that have been heretofore implied by the term "operational code." This term is a misnomer in important respects; it should probably be replaced by some other way of referring to these beliefs, such as "approaches to political calculation." I have tried in this paper to codify the general issues and questions around which such a belief system is structured in the hope that it will encourage and facilitate systematic efforts to apply this research approach to a variety of other ruling groups and individual political leaders as well. The possibility emerges of a useful new dimension for comparative studies of different leaders and elite groups.

I have argued in this paper that knowledge of this belief system provides an important input for behavioral analyses of political decision-making and leadership styles. The "operational code" construct does this insofar as it encompasses that aspect of the political actor's knowledge and structuring of the political world to which he relates, and within which he attempts to operate to advance the interests with which he is identified. The construct of a political actor's "operational code" should be useful for studying his decision-making "style," its application in specific situations, and other aspects of his political behavior. The "code" is useful for these research purposes because it has been designed to include the political actor's beliefs about major issues and questions regarding

the nature of politics (particularly political conflict), and his orientation to the problem of knowledge and action in the face of the familiar cognitive limits on rational problem-solving in politics.

As noted earlier (p. 21), this paper focuses on the political actor's orientation towards opponents (domestic and international) rather than towards other types of political actors. I believe this focus is justified; a belief system about politics is influenced particularly by the actor's assumptions about the nature of political conflict and by his image of opponents.

Of course, the image of the opponent may play a less central and a somewhat different role in the belief systems of elites who do not attribute (as did the Bolsheviks) an irreconcilable hostility to their political enemies. When political opponents are perceived as limited (and perhaps temporary) adversaries, important consequences may be expected to follow for other elements in the belief system. Particularly in such cases is it desirable to supplement attention to the actor's image of the opponent with observations about his orientation towards political friends and followers.

There remain, of course, important questions concerning data and methods to be employed for research directed towards constructing a political actor's belief system about politics. These problems are not taken up in this paper; I would suggest here merely that questions of data and methods be approached in an eclectic and pragmatic spirit. Even provisional answers to the research questions encompassed by the operational code are likely to be useful.



Opportunities for research of this kind vary considerably, depending on the particular leaders or elite groups that happen to be of interest. Different research methods may be employed for using materials that are already available and, when opportunities permit, for acquiring new data more systematically. Data relevant to the operational code may be obtained from various kinds of content analysis<sup>49</sup> both via qualitative analysis of texts (as in Leites' study) or more rigorous quantitative analysis (as by Professor Ole Holsti in his study of John Foster Dulles' image of the Soviet opponent).<sup>49</sup> Similarly, when interviewing is possible, several variants of open-ended, in-depth, or structured interview techniques might be employed. Useful data and inferences on these matters are likely to be obtained also by those who have opportunities to engage in "participant observation," whether as researchers, political journalists, or political participants. Finally, inferences about various aspects of an actor's operational code are possible from case studies of his behavior in particular situations.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup>Ole Holsti, "Cognitive Dynamics and Images of the Enemy," in D. J. Finlay, O. R. Holsti, and R. R. Fagen, Enemies in Politics, Rand McNally, Chicago (forthcoming).

<sup>50</sup>For example, Arnold Horelick, "The Cuban Missile Crisis: Analysis of Soviet Calculations and Behavior," World Politics, April 1964.