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Soviet Ideology and Its Influence on Society in the 1950s–1960s

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Abstract: *This study examines the role of Soviet ideology and its influence on society in the 1950s–1960s, a period marked by de-Stalinization, the rise of Khrushchev's reforms, and the adaptation of socialist discourse to new political and social realities. The introduction situates the research within the broader framework of Cold War tensions and highlights how ideology functioned as both a mechanism of state power and a framework of social identity. The literature review evaluates previous scholarship on Soviet political culture, propaganda, education, and everyday practices, while also identifying gaps concerning how ideology was simultaneously internalized and contested in daily life. The methodology employs a qualitative historical approach, integrating archival materials, official speeches, policy documents, and cultural texts, analyzed through discourse and content analysis to capture the multifaceted ways ideology was constructed and received. The findings reveal that ideology in this period remained a central instrument of governance, though it shifted in tone from Stalinist rigidity to Khrushchev's narrative of optimism, progress, and peaceful coexistence. It permeated education, cultural production, public rituals, and international relations, reinforcing loyalty while also encountering subtle resistance from citizens whose lived experiences often contradicted official promises. The discussion highlights the adaptability of ideology, its global projection through the socialist camp, and the growing contradictions between rhetoric and reality, particularly regarding economic development and social expectations. The study concludes that Soviet ideology during the 1950s–1960s was both resilient—maintaining cohesion and legitimacy—and fragile, as dissonance between ideals and realities gradually weakened its authority.*

Keywords*: Soviet ideology, de-Stalinization, Khrushchev reforms, propaganda, Cold War, education, culture, everyday life, socialism, discourse analysis*

1. INTRODUCTION

The decade of the 1950s to 1960s marked an important period in the development of Soviet society, especially in the context of ideological influence and state control. Following the devastation of the Second World War, the Soviet Union entered a new stage of political, social, and economic transformation under the leadership of Joseph Stalin until his death in 1953, and later, Nikita Khrushchev. The ideological framework of the state—commonly referred to as Soviet ideology or Soviet Marxism-Leninism—was not only a political doctrine but also a powerful instrument for shaping public consciousness, regulating cultural life, and consolidating the unity of the Soviet people [1, p. 3]. During these years, the Soviet government maintained a strong commitment to the principles of collectivism, central planning, and loyalty to the Communist Party. Propaganda played a central role in everyday life, from schools and universities to mass media and cultural organizations. Through newspapers, radio, literature, and film, Soviet citizens were constantly reminded of their duty to the socialist motherland, the superiority of the socialist system over capitalism, and the necessity of unwavering loyalty to the Communist Party [2, p. 41]. This ideological environment limited the freedom of individual thought and expression but simultaneously created a sense of unity and shared purpose among millions of people.

The death of Stalin in 1953 brought significant shifts in the political climate of the Soviet Union. Nikita Khrushchev initiated a process often referred to as "de-Stalinization," which included the denunciation of Stalin's cult of personality and partial liberalization of Soviet life [3, p. 117]. However, this did not mean a retreat from ideology itself. On the contrary, Soviet ideology continued to play a dominant role, but it was now reoriented to emphasize a "new course" in socialism. The government sought to prove the vitality of socialism by promoting rapid industrial development, advances in science and technology, and improved standards of living [4, p. 76]. In the cultural sphere, Soviet ideology continued to dictate the limits of artistic expression. Writers, poets, filmmakers, and artists were encouraged—or forced—to follow the principles of socialist realism. This artistic method aimed to portray life not as it was but as it should be under socialism. The state heavily censored works that were considered "bourgeois," "decadent," or "anti-Soviet." At the same time, cultural institutions were mobilized to propagate the image of the "new Soviet person," characterized by devotion to labor, collectivism, and loyalty to the Communist Party [5, p. 223].

The education system also served as a vital channel for ideological indoctrination. From the earliest years, children were taught the values of Marxism-Leninism, the heroic role of the Communist Party, and the historical inevitability of socialism's triumph over capitalism [6, p. 56]. Higher education institutions likewise emphasized political reliability alongside academic achievement, ensuring that the Soviet elite remained ideologically committed to the state. Thus, the period between 1950 and 1960 was one of both continuity and change in the ideological life of the Soviet Union. While Stalin's rigid control and cult of personality were partially dismantled, the broader system of ideological domination remained intact, continuing to shape Soviet society in

profound ways. The ideology of the Soviet state penetrated politics, culture, education, and daily life, reinforcing the legitimacy of the Communist Party while constraining individual freedom. It was within this framework that millions of Soviet citizens lived, worked, and imagined their futures during the mid-20th century.

2. Literature review

The study of Soviet ideology and its influence on society in the 1950s and 1960s has attracted wide scholarly attention. Researchers from both within the former Soviet Union and abroad have examined the role of Marxism-Leninism as a guiding principle, as well as its practical implementation in political, cultural, and social life. The works discussed in this section highlight different perspectives, ranging from ideological control and propaganda to education, cultural production, and the transformation of Soviet society under Khrushchev. One of the central themes in the scholarship is the continuity of ideological dominance after Stalin's death. While Stalin's era was characterized by severe repression, terror, and the cult of personality, many scholars argue that ideology itself did not weaken in the post-Stalin period. Hosking stresses that the essence of Soviet political life remained grounded in loyalty to the Communist Party, which maintained its monopoly over the dissemination of ideas [7, p. 214]. In this regard, ideology served as both a political tool and a social adhesive, ensuring the survival of the system despite its contradictions. Another significant area of research concerns the impact of de-Stalinization. Khrushchev's Secret Speech of 1956, which criticized Stalin's cult, has been analyzed as a turning point in Soviet intellectual and political history. Conquest notes that this move, although shocking for many Party members, was framed within the logic of preserving Leninist principles and thereby strengthening socialism, not weakening it [8, p. 97]. Thus, ideology remained the central framework even as certain aspects of Stalinism were repudiated. Scholars also emphasize the role of propaganda and cultural policy in maintaining Soviet ideology during this period. According to Dobrenko, literature and art were shaped by the demands of socialist realism, which sought to construct an idealized vision of Soviet life [9, p. 53]. This artistic framework functioned as a ritual of reaffirming ideological loyalty, leaving little space for alternative interpretations of reality. Similarly, Tumarkin underscores how public rituals, celebrations, and monuments reinforced Soviet historical narratives and ideological legitimacy [10, p. 188].

In addition, the education system has been extensively studied as a channel of ideological reproduction. The Soviet government recognized schools and universities as critical spaces for shaping young citizens. Filtzer highlights how curricula in the 1950s emphasized technical knowledge for modernization, but always within a Marxist-Leninist interpretive framework [11, p. 142]. Political education was embedded at every level, from early schooling to higher education, ensuring that intellectual elites were as ideologically committed as they were technically skilled.

Another key topic of investigation is the everyday experience of ideology. Instead of viewing ideology as a purely top-down mechanism, some historians focus on how ordinary citizens engaged with, negotiated, or resisted ideological messages. Kelly shows that Soviet citizens often internalized official propaganda while simultaneously reinterpreting it in light of their own realities [12, p. 64]. This duality illustrates that ideology was not only imposed but also absorbed into daily practices, shaping language, rituals, and interpersonal relations. The international dimension of Soviet ideology has also been addressed. According to Zubok, during the 1950s–1960s, ideology was instrumental in defining the USSR's global mission, particularly in presenting itself as the leader of the socialist camp and an alternative to Western capitalism [13, p. 201]. This global projection further reinforced the domestic necessity of ideological conformity, as Soviet citizens were constantly reminded that they represented the vanguard of a worldwide struggle. Overall, the literature converges on the conclusion that ideology remained a dominant force in Soviet society during the 1950s–1960s, even as forms of repression were reduced compared to the Stalinist era. Scholars highlight continuity in ideological control, the shaping of cultural production, the centrality of education, and the persistence of propaganda. At the same time, there is recognition of partial shifts in tone under Khrushchev, which opened space for limited criticism and experimentation, though always within the overarching framework of Marxism-Leninism.

The works collectively demonstrate that Soviet ideology was not a static doctrine but a dynamic force, adapted by the leadership to changing political and social circumstances. Whether through de-Stalinization, cultural production, or international projection, ideology continued to legitimize the Party's authority and shape the lived experience of millions of Soviet citizens. This body of scholarship provides a crucial foundation for understanding the multifaceted influence of ideology on Soviet society during the mid-twentieth century.

3. Methodology

This research employs a historical-analytical methodology to examine the influence of Soviet ideology on social life in the 1950s–1960s. The study relies on both primary and secondary sources, applying qualitative methods of interpretation to identify ideological patterns, institutional practices, and their effects on society. By combining discourse analysis, archival research, and comparative historical approaches, the methodology ensures a systematic exploration of how ideology permeated multiple layers of Soviet life. The historical-analytical approach is central to this study. It allows for the reconstruction of the political and cultural context of the Soviet Union during the mid-twentieth century by critically engaging with official documents, speeches, and Party resolutions. As Tosh argues, historical methodology must situate events within their socio-political frameworks, emphasizing both continuity and change [14, p. 62]. Accordingly, this research situates Soviet ideology not as an

abstract doctrine but as a lived system that structured social practices. Another key method applied here is discourse analysis, particularly of propaganda texts, literature, and education materials. As Fairclough notes, discourse shapes not only communication but also power relations in society [15, p. 18]. Analyzing Soviet newspapers, school curricula, and Party directives reveals how language constructed the "ideal Soviet citizen" and reinforced loyalty to the state. By focusing on narratives of collectivism, anti-capitalism, and socialist superiority, discourse analysis highlights the mechanisms through which ideology was normalized and internalized.

The research also employs a comparative historical method, contrasting the late Stalinist and Khrushchev periods. This approach makes it possible to identify both continuities and shifts in ideological practices. For instance, while Stalin's cult of personality relied heavily on repression and rigid control, Khrushchev's period emphasized optimism, modernization, and "peaceful coexistence" with the West. Skocpol emphasizes that comparative historical methods are essential in explaining how structural and ideological changes interact over time [16, p. 45]. By applying this framework, the study distinguishes between ideological rigidity and adaptation within the Soviet system.

In addition, the study incorporates social history perspectives, focusing on how ideology shaped everyday life. Following Scott's concept of "hidden transcripts" [17, p. 29], attention is given to how ordinary Soviet citizens responded to ideological impositions—sometimes by adopting official discourse, sometimes by resisting or reinterpreting it. This helps to move beyond a purely top-down perspective and recognize the agency of individuals in negotiating ideological control.

The sources of data include archival Party documents, official speeches, Soviet newspapers, school textbooks, and memoirs. Secondary scholarship provides theoretical frameworks and historiographical debates. Triangulating these different types of sources strengthens the validity of the analysis, ensuring that interpretations are not limited to state-produced narratives but also reflect the lived experiences recorded by individuals.

The methodology is qualitative in nature, prioritizing depth over breadth. The goal is not to quantify ideological influence but to understand its mechanisms, forms, and impact. As Yin highlights, qualitative methods are particularly effective when the aim is to interpret complex social phenomena in their contexts [18, p. 33]. This makes them especially suitable for analyzing ideology, which operates through symbols, discourses, and practices rather than measurable statistics alone.

In summary, this research combines historical-analytical reconstruction, discourse analysis, comparative history, and social history perspectives to study Soviet ideology in the 1950s–1960s. These methods provide a multidimensional understanding of how ideology functioned as both a political doctrine and a lived reality. By analyzing documents, discourse, and social responses, the methodology ensures that the study captures the complexity of Soviet ideological influence during this transformative decade.

4. Analysis and results

TThe findings of this research demonstrate that Soviet ideology during the 1950s–1960s continued to exercise a pervasive influence on society, despite important political and cultural shifts between the late Stalinist and Khrushchev eras. By examining official documents, propaganda materials, education policies, and cultural production, several key patterns of ideological impact emerge. These can be summarized in terms of continuity, adaptation, and the lived experience of ideology in everyday Soviet life.

1. Continuity of ideological dominance. Even after the death of Joseph Stalin in 1953, the overarching role of Marxism-Leninism as the guiding framework of Soviet life did not diminish. Archival evidence and contemporary accounts suggest that the Communist Party continued to maintain strict control over political discourse and social practices [19, p. 134]. The dominance of ideology was expressed in the Party's monopoly on truth and its ability to define what was considered legitimate knowledge. This continuity underscores that de-Stalinization did not equate to de-ideologization but rather a recalibration of ideological priorities.

2. Transformation under Khrushchev. The Khrushchev period introduced a new tone in ideological expression. The denunciation of Stalin's cult of personality in 1956 sought to restore Leninist principles as the true basis of Soviet socialism [20, p. 77]. This shift manifested in the language of optimism, progress, and reform, contrasting with the climate of fear and repression under Stalin. Nevertheless, the central role of ideology remained intact, as Khrushchev's government still mobilized propaganda, education, and culture to consolidate loyalty. The emphasis was now placed on building communism within a generation and demonstrating socialism's superiority through modernization, technological innovation, and competition with the West, particularly in the context of the space race [21, p. 241].

3. Ideological penetration into culture and arts. The findings reveal that Soviet ideology continued to dictate the boundaries of cultural production. The principle of socialist realism remained mandatory for writers, artists, and filmmakers. While some degree of creative experimentation was tolerated during the "Thaw," works were still expected to highlight the heroism of workers, the collective spirit, and the inevitability of socialist triumph [22, p. 159]. Deviations from these norms were censored or suppressed. Thus, culture functioned both as a space for limited renewal and as a tool for reinforcing ideological conformity.

4. Education as an instrument of indoctrination The education system remained a crucial channel for ideological reproduction. School curricula were designed not only to provide technical skills but also to instill Marxist-Leninist

values. Textbooks emphasized the historical inevitability of socialism and the moral superiority of the Soviet system [23, p. 93]. At the university level, political education courses were compulsory across disciplines, ensuring that even future scientists and engineers were versed in ideological principles. This system effectively socialized generations of Soviet citizens into the ideological worldview of the state.

5. The everyday experience of ideology Another significant finding concerns the extent to which ideology shaped daily life. Public rituals, parades, and commemorations of revolutionary anniversaries reinforced collective identity and loyalty to the state [24, p. 51]. At the same time, oral histories and memoirs suggest that individuals often adopted a dual approach: outward conformity to ideological expectations while maintaining private skepticism or reinterpretations. This confirms the view that ideology was both imposed from above and negotiated from below, creating a dynamic interaction between state and society.

6. International projection of ideology The findings also show that Soviet ideology during this period was deeply intertwined with foreign policy. The Soviet Union presented itself as the vanguard of socialism, supporting liberation movements in Asia, Africa, and Latin America [25, p. 302]. This external projection reinforced domestic ideological legitimacy by framing Soviet citizens as participants in a global struggle against imperialism. Thus, the Cold War context amplified the ideological function of the state, linking international rivalry with everyday Soviet life.

7. Limits and contradictions of ideology Finally, the research reveals that although ideology remained powerful, it faced growing contradictions. The promises of rapid progress and improved living standards often clashed with the realities of shortages, inefficiencies, and bureaucratic rigidity [26, p. 187]. These contradictions eroded the credibility of official propaganda, particularly among younger generations exposed to alternative images of modernity from the West. By the early 1960s, the gap between ideological rhetoric and social reality had become increasingly visible, planting seeds of disillusionment that would later deepen in the Brezhnev era.

Summary of results. Overall, the findings confirm that ideology in the Soviet Union during the 1950s–1960s remained a central and indispensable component of political and social life. While the form and tone of ideological expression shifted under Khrushchev, its role in legitimizing the Party's authority and shaping the lives of citizens did not diminish. Ideology permeated culture, education, daily practices, and international relations, ensuring continuity of control while adapting to new circumstances. At the same time, contradictions between promises and realities reveal the limits of ideological power, highlighting both the resilience and fragility of the Soviet system.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that Soviet ideology in the 1950s–1960s maintained a dominant role in shaping political authority, social practices, and cultural life. Yet, a deeper discussion reveals how this ideological system both reinforced stability and exposed contradictions that foreshadowed long-term challenges for the Soviet Union. The analysis of 24 scholarly works provides insights into continuity, transformation, and the broader implications of ideological control. First, it is clear that ideology functioned as the glue of Soviet society. Scholars such as Suny [19, p. 134] and Hosking [7, p. 214] emphasize that the Communist Party maintained an absolute monopoly over truth and authority. This ensured the regime's survival in the turbulent years following Stalin's death. Even though Khrushchev's de-Stalinization undermined the cult of personality, it did not reduce the dominance of ideology itself. Instead, it recalibrated ideological priorities toward modernization, optimism, and competition with the West [20, p. 77; 21, p. 241]. At the same time, the discussion highlights the adaptive nature of ideology. Dobrenko [9, p. 53] and Clark [5, p. 223] show that socialist realism remained central to cultural production, yet the "Thaw" permitted cautious experimentation. This duality reflects how ideology could absorb limited change while still policing the boundaries of acceptable expression. Similarly, in education, Jones [23, p. 93] and Fitzpatrick [6, p. 56] note that technical knowledge was increasingly emphasized, but always within a Marxist-Leninist framework. These adaptations reveal a pragmatic dimension of Soviet ideology, which allowed it to remain relevant amid modernization. The role of ideology in everyday life is also crucial. Tumarkin's work on Soviet rituals [10, p. 188; 24, p. 51] demonstrates how commemorations, parades, and monuments reinforced collective identity. Yet, as Kelly [12, p. 64] and Scott [17, p. 29] argue, citizens often adopted dual strategies: outward conformity and private skepticism. This negotiation shows that ideology was not passively absorbed but interacted dynamically with lived experiences. The persistence of such "hidden transcripts" suggests limits to ideological penetration. Internationally, ideology shaped both foreign policy and domestic legitimacy. Zubok [13, p. 201] and Westad [25, p. 302] explain how the USSR projected itself as the global leader of socialism, supporting revolutionary movements abroad. This external mission reinforced internal propaganda, framing Soviet citizens as participants in a worldwide struggle. However, contradictions between ideological rhetoric and domestic realities became increasingly evident. Filtzer [26, p. 187] and McCauley [20, p. 77] highlight how promises of rapid progress clashed with inefficiencies, shortages, and bureaucratic rigidity.

The discussion also reveals a tension between continuity and fragility. On the one hand, ideology ensured stability, legitimized Party control, and mobilized society for industrial and scientific achievements, such as the space race [21, p. 241]. On the other hand, the credibility of ideology eroded as citizens recognized the gap between official propaganda and lived reality. Scholars such as Conquest [8, p. 97] and Bonnell [22, p. 159] show that while propaganda remained pervasive, its effectiveness declined over time.

In summary, the body of literature demonstrates that ideology in the Soviet Union during the 1950s–1960s was not static but adaptive, capable of both sustaining authority and generating contradictions. Its reach extended into politics, culture, education, daily life, and foreign policy, but its effectiveness was undermined by dissonance between rhetoric and reality. The interplay between continuity and fragility underscores why ideology was both the greatest strength and an eventual weakness of the Soviet system.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

The analysis of Soviet ideology during the 1950s–1960s demonstrates that ideology was not simply an abstract political doctrine but an all-encompassing system that shaped governance, culture, education, and everyday life. Following Stalin's death in 1953, Khrushchev's reforms and the process of de-Stalinization sought to distance the Party from the excesses of terror while reaffirming the centrality of Marxism-Leninism. This dual approach highlighted the paradox of Soviet ideology: it was both an instrument of continuity and a mechanism of adaptation. Ideology provided legitimacy to the regime, cultivated a sense of collective identity, and justified both domestic policies and international ambitions.

The results show that ideology in this period shifted from a narrative of fear and repression to one of optimism and progress. The promise of scientific achievements, symbolized most prominently by the launch of Sputnik in 1957, became proof of socialism's superiority. Education and cultural production were instrumental in this process, reinforcing loyalty to the system while shaping new generations of Soviet citizens. Yet, despite these achievements, the ideological system faced persistent contradictions. Shortages, inefficiencies, and social inequalities undermined the state's promises, while citizens often practiced outward conformity paired with private skepticism. These tensions foreshadowed the gradual erosion of ideological authority in the decades that followed. The study concludes that Soviet ideology in the 1950s–1960s was both resilient and fragile. It was resilient because it continued to provide a unifying framework for governance and society, adapting to changing contexts without losing its dominance. Yet it was fragile because the gap between official rhetoric and lived reality widened, creating disillusionment that could not be fully contained by propaganda.

Recommendations 1. For Historical Research: Future scholarship should place greater emphasis on the micro-level experiences of ordinary Soviet citizens. Oral histories, letters, and memoirs can provide deeper insights into how ideology was lived, resisted, and reinterpreted in daily contexts.

2. For Comparative Studies: Examining Soviet ideology alongside other socialist and authoritarian systems of the mid-20th century would enrich understanding of how ideology functions across different political environments, particularly regarding its adaptability and limits.

3. For Contemporary Relevance: The Soviet case demonstrates how ideology can both stabilize and undermine a political order. In modern contexts, scholars and policymakers should recognize that when state rhetoric consistently diverges from lived realities, legitimacy is endangered regardless of propaganda strength.

4. For Educational Application: The integration of ideological narratives into education remains a powerful tool for shaping collective identity. Contemporary societies should remain cautious of how curricula may reflect political agendas, ensuring that education fosters critical thinking rather than conformity.

5. For International Relations: The projection of ideology beyond domestic borders—as seen in Soviet support for anti-colonial and socialist movements—shows the strategic use of ideology in global politics. Current global powers may similarly employ ideological narratives to extend influence, making it essential for analysts to critically evaluate such strategies. In sum, the Soviet experience of the 1950s–1960s provides valuable lessons on the endurance, adaptability, and eventual vulnerability of ideology as a tool of governance. Recognizing both its strengths and weaknesses allows for a more nuanced understanding of how states manage legitimacy, mobilize societies, and confront contradictions between ideals and realities.

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