

The Soviet Dictionary on “Socialism” and “Capitalism”

Between 1935 and 1940, Dmitri Ushakov published *The Explanatory Dictionary of the Russian Language*. Wikipedia describes the book as a major philological advance:

Its appearance filled an important gap in the description of modern twentieth-century Russian. The success of the dictionary may be partly attributed to the work of skilled specialists using lexicographic works from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, without which the picture of the modern Russian language would be incomplete. The dictionary contains over 90,000 entries and is designed for a wide range of readers.

Though published in Stalin’s Soviet Union, most of the book is apolitical. Here, for example, is Ushakov’s entry for “Adam’s apple”:

кадык КАД’ЫК, кадыка, ·муж. (·разг.). Выдающаяся вперед часть щитовидного хряща, тоже, что адамово яблоко. «Большой кадык, мясистый и продолговатый, как кошелек.» Достоевский.

Adam’s apple Kad’yuk, Adam’s apple, masculine (colloquial). The protruding part of the thyroid cartilage, the same as the Adam’s apple. “A big Adam’s apple, fleshy and oblong, like a purse.” Dostoevsky.

On politically-sensitive topics, however, Ushakov’s dictionary is blatantly ideological. Here’s what philologists had to say about “socialism” (социализм) to stay alive in Stalin’s Russia (Google translation confirmed by three Russian speakers):

socialism SOCIAL’ISM, socialism, pl. no, masculine (from lat. socialis – public).

1. The first phase of communism, a social system, the basis of production relations of which is public ownership of the means of

production under the conditions of the dictatorship of the proletariat and the destruction of the exploiting classes, and in which distribution according to work is carried out. “- ... Socialism is the society that grows out of capitalism directly, it is the first type of new society. Communism, on the other hand, is a higher form of society, and it can develop only when socialism is fully established.” Lenin (1919) .

“Socialism is the first stage of communism...” Lenin. “From capitalism, mankind can only pass directly to socialism, that is, the common ownership of the means of production and the distribution of products according to the work of each.” History VKP(b). “The victory of socialism in all areas of the national economy has abolished the exploitation of man by man.” History ·VKP(b) . “- ... Soviet society has achieved that it has already achieved in the main socialism, created a socialist system, i.e. brought about what the Marxists call otherwise the first or lower phase of communism. This means that we have already achieved in the main the first phase of communism, socialism. Stalin. “The principle of socialism is being implemented in the USSR : “from each according to his ability, to each according to his work.” Constitution ·USSR. “Our factories and factories are working without capitalists. The work is led by people from the people. This is what we call socialism in practice. Toilers of the land are working in our fields without landlords, without kulaks. The work is led by people from the people. “This is what we call socialism in everyday life ...” Stalin. “Let socialism built in battles be our common monument.” Mayakovsky.

2. The doctrine of building such a social system, going to replace the capitalist. “... The founders of modern scientific socialism, Marx and Engels, said: equality is an empty phrase, if by equality one does not understand the destruction of classes.” Lenin. “Under the leadership of Lenin, the St. Petersburg Union of Struggle for the Emancipation of the Working Class, for the first time in Russia, began to unite

socialism with the labor movement.” History ·VKP(b) . “... Socialism is turning from a dream of a better future of mankind into a science.” History ·VKP(b) .

3. The name of various bourgeois and petty-bourgeois teachings on the reform of the capitalist social system. “Even in the Communist Manifesto, Marx and Engels castigated primitive utopian socialism, calling it reactionary for its preaching of “universal asceticism and gross equalization.” Stalin. populist socialism. Katheder-socialism (an ironic name for a trend in bourgeois political economy that put forward the demand for “social” reforms with the aim of disintegrating the revolutionary movement; German Katheder-sozialismus, lit. socialism from a professorial chair; polit.). Police socialism (see Zubatovshchina and policeman). Constructive socialism (a reactionary bourgeois doctrine that preaches the idea of “class peace”). municipal socialism.

Notice: Ushakov puts orthodox Marxist-Leninist definitions first and second, even though two decades earlier multiple competing factions of Russian socialists were angrily contesting the meaning of the word – and the fate of Russia.

Only at the end of the entry does he mention any other uses of the word “socialism” – and makes sure to drench them with disdain. Socialists do not like being called “bourgeois” or “petty-bourgeois.” And no reformer likes it when you add scare quotes to their desired brand of reform.

The entry for “capitalism” (капитализм) isn’t as egregious, but still goes out of its way to regurgitate a pile of Marxist dogma:

capitalism CAPITAL’ISM, capitalism, pl. no, masculine (French capitalisme) (polit. , economics). A mode of production in which the means of production are private property, production has a commodity character, products reach the consumer through the market as a commodity and not directly, production is carried out for profit through the exploitation of labor power, and labor power itself is

also a commodity. industrial capitalism. The era of financial capitalism.

A social order based on this mode of production. "There is no serfdom, but capitalism is growing." Chekhov. Fight to overthrow capitalism. The October Revolution is the grave of Russian capitalism.

- *State capitalism (econ. , polit.) - 1) an economic system in which the state controls and regulates the economic activities of private capitalist enterprises; 2) an economic system in which the state itself acts as a capitalist-entrepreneur.*

Who cares? Ushakov's work is an extreme illustration of the fact that even dictionaries can be politicized, especially given a climate of fear. So while we can trust dictionary definitions in the vast majority of cases, we should be skeptical about the touchiest entries.

The goal of this corruption is straight out of Orwell's *1984*. Ushakov's dictionary makes it rhetorically hard for democratic socialists to reject Stalinism: "socialism *by definition* requires a dictatorship of the proletariat." Ushakov makes it even more rhetorically uncomfortable to defend capitalism: "Oh, so you *favor* the exploitation of labor power." As Orwell pontificated:

The purpose of Newspeak was not only to provide a medium of expression for the world-view and mental habits proper to the devotees of Ingsoc, but to make all other modes of thought impossible. It was intended that when Newspeak had been adopted once and for all and Oldspeak forgotten, a heretical thought — that is, a thought diverging from the principles of Ingsoc — should be literally unthinkable, at least so far as thought is dependent on words.

I normally oppose semantic arguments. I think Dan Klein's quest for free-market fans to recover the word "liberal" is a waste of time. Why? Because (a) when people say "liberal," almost all of them *do* mean "left-wing," and (b) "libertarian," a well-understood substitute for "free-market fan," is already in common use.

I make an exception, however, for Orwellian malpractice. Dictionaries are supposed to

describe how most of us actually use words, not declare how all of us *ought* to use words. When a few fanatics try to push their eccentric definitions on the rest of us, I object. Especially if they use intimidation to make us pretend that the fanatics speak for all of us.