A Summary of the Theory

The Soviet approach to the problem of disarmament is very different from that of the Western nations. It is true that both the Russians and the West agree in saying that it is a cure for a disease, the existence of excessive armaments; but they disagree in toto about the cause of the disease, and hence they differ profoundly about the cure.

In the Soviet view, the cause of the amassing of armaments is militarism. This is true, whether the state which amasses them is capitalist or communist; because, although no Leninist would accept for a moment that a communist country could itself be infected with militarism, he does accept that the communist countries are obliged, for the purpose of defending themselves against impending capitalist aggression, to respond to the capitalists’ frenzied accumulation of armaments by accumulating arms of their own.

It is in the capitalist countries, therefore (and in capitalist countries only) that, according to the Soviet Union, the virus of militarism is to be found. And militarism is defined in authoritative Soviet sources as the piling up of military strength by an ‘exploiting’ state for the purpose of waging predatory wars against other countries, and also for suppressing internal opposition on the part of its own workers.¹

But the piling up of armaments by one state for the purpose of waging war upon another (the first of the two reasons for militarism given in the preceding paragraph) will naturally induce the other state to increase its own store of weapons in order to protect its territory from the impending attack. Furthermore, assuming that the other state in question is itself an ‘exploiting’ society (‘capitalist’, feudal or slave-owning, to use the Marxist categories), it will naturally desire to accumulate still more armaments, in order to make use of these extra weapons to start predatory wars against its neighbours. And this in turn will lead to the neighbours reacting in a similar manner, and to the original countries reacting to the neighbours’ reaction. This, therefore, is the origin of the arms race, and the impulse that keeps it going.

The concept outlined above is very simplistic, and, if taken literally, will surely lead to error. ‘Exploiting’ nations, based upon class societies,
have been with us for a very long time now. By Marx's own reckoning, they can be traced back for at least as far as several millennia before Christ. If, then, an arms race were to be presumed to have been running continuously for 3000 or 4000 years or more, the weight of the arms thus hoarded up would surely have proved sufficient to sink this planet or drive it, lurching horribly, from its accustomed orbit.

But, of course, the Russian notion of this concept is not so simplistic as that. In the Soviet view, there are two factors above all which prevent the arms race from having been, historically speaking, a simple arithmetical progression. The first is that, every so often, the arms race results in wars. These destroy the accumulated arms in the part of the world where the war has raged; and since wars have been raging over most of our planet for the greater part of recorded time, the whole process of the increase in stocks of armaments has not gone smoothly upward, but has zigzagged violently. The second reason preventing the increase of arms from having reached such a pitch that the world is smothered in metal is that man's ability to manufacture has been exceedingly small during most of the period we are speaking of. Only in the nineteenth century did machinery, in all but its most primitive forms, come to be employed in workshops; and it was not until well into the middle of that century that the use of machinery was widespread. The First World War took place in the twentieth century for the simple reason that it could not have happened earlier. Prior to the twentieth century, the major combatants were quite incapable of raising, transporting and feeding a multimillioned army while at the same time keeping it liberally supplied with the latest contemporary munitions. It is therefore no accident that the earliest arms race which is big enough and eye-catching enough to serve the Russians as a good example of what they see as 'militarism' is that which immediately preceded the First World War; nor that this, together with the one which preceded the Second, should have been so much bigger than those which had taken place earlier as to dwarf all the latter into insignificance.

But it is time to return to the main line of our argument. We had just agreed that the arms race was due to one state piling up arms to make war upon its neighbour, and the latter reacting by amassing its own stock of weapons. It is, of course, indisputable that history provides no lack of examples of this. In addition to the two outstanding examples which have been mentioned there is a whole string of others, such as those which preceded the Austro-Prussian and Franco-Prussian Wars. Those who wish to study in detail these particular arms races or any others, are advised to consult the classic work on the subject, V. I. Skopin's Militarizm (Moscow, 1956).