

SOVIET DEMOCRACY



by HARRY F. WARD

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NOTE ON THE AUTHOR

Dr. Harry F. Ward is Professor Emeritus of Christian Ethics at Union Theological Seminary. He has spent considerable time in the Soviet Union and has written and lectured extensively on the Soviet Union. His books include *In Place of Profit, Democracy and Social Change* and *The Soviet Spirit*.



The cover is by Lynd Ward, son of the author, distinguished American artist who is known for his novels in pictures and for his book illustrations.



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CHAPTER I

THE ECONOMIC BASE

DURING 1945 and 1946 the Soviet press carried on an extensive discussion of Soviet democracy—what it is and how it works. This discussion began as an educational preparation for the election of the Supreme Soviet. It continued in response to much talk here about “different ideas of democracy” that arose from disagreements in the United Nations and in the occupation of enemy countries. Soviet writers point out that underneath such differences over procedures is the historic fact that theirs is a socialist democracy. This, they tell their readers, makes it a higher form than capitalist democracy. They mean higher in the ongoing of the democratic process not merely as a form of government, but a cooperative way of life through which more and more of the people of the earth, by increasing their control over both nature and human society, emancipate themselves from famine, pestilence and war, as well as from tyranny.

The essential advance that socialist society makes in the democratic process is the extension of government of, by and for the people from political to economic affairs; it puts the people's power over the economic processes upon which their lives and their cultural advance depend.

To understand Soviet democracy it is necessary to remember that the order of its growth has been different from ours. In the days of free land, handicraft industry and travel by horse, we established a political democracy adapted to individual free enterprise. Now, in the time of concentrated monopoly power, we are faced with the necessity of finding the way to the economic democracy required by the machine age if freedom is to live. The Soviet system was founded in the days of Big Business and its economic empires, among peoples without experience in the political procedures of democracy and with little industrial development. Its founders, followers of Marx, held that further development of political democracy was impossible except on the base of a democratic economy. So it was after this base was securely laid by the socialist ownership of the means of production, the collectivization of agriculture and successful economic planning, that an advance in political democracy was made in the adoption of the Constitution of 1936.

An Economic Bill of Rights

The drafting commission was instructed to prepare the "most democratic constitution in the world, that is, the one best expressing the will of the people." The draft was discussed for several months in over half a million meetings that sent in 154,000 amendments, mostly duplicates of course. The few that were adopted were those which made the final document still more democratic. The uniqueness of the Constitution is the attempt to unite the economic and political aspects of democracy in an effective union for their joint continuous development. Its chapter on "Fundamental Rights and Duties of Citizens" precedes the guarantee of all the freedoms proclaimed in our Bill of Rights, and in the French Declaration of the Rights of

Man, with an economic Bill of Rights. It should be remembered that the Soviet delegation tried in vain to get the right to work inserted in the Charter of the United Nations.

Soviet writers continually point out to the people that their economic rights are constitutionally guaranteed not only in principle but also in terms of the legal measures which make the principles effective. Thus the right to work is guaranteed by the planning that eliminates the possibility of economic crises and their resultant unemployment; the right to rest and leisure, by the eight-hour workday (and a shorter day for heavier jobs), annual vacations with full pay, and a network of sanatoriums, rest homes and clubs for the working people; the right to maintenance in old age, sickness, or incapacity, by universal social insurance, free medical service and a wide system of health resorts.

How much a Bill of Rights, economic or political, can be put in practice depends, as we are finding out in the case of the G.I.'s, upon what the national economy permits. A self-evident truth which the American people have yet to learn is that economic democracy can grow only from the root of a democratic economy. The democratic nature of Soviet economy is set forth in Article I of the Constitution, entitled "The Organization of Society."

The economic foundation of Soviet society is said to consist of the socialist system of economy and the socialist ownership of the means and instruments of production. When it talks of political rights this Constitution, like its Western forerunners, speaks in part the language of desire and intent. But when it says that socialist ownership and the socialist economy are "firmly established" it is recording hard won experience. Behind the few lines recounting how these things were done is almost twenty years of terrific struggle; the hardships and heroisms, the inevitable

revolutionary excesses, of the days of military communism, of the temporary restoration of the market and private profit through the N.E.P., of the resistance to collectivization, of the going over the top with the First Five-Year Plan. Yes, the economic foundation of Soviet society was securely laid, and now eleven years after the beginning of the new political structure, despite the attempt of the anti-democratic legions of Europe led by Hitler to destroy it, the building itself is well under way.

Two Forms of People's Ownership

Just how democratic is Soviet socialist ownership and the economy it makes possible? The Constitution breaks down socialist property in the U.S.S.R. into its two forms—state property and property of the collective farm or cooperative association. State property covers natural resources; industrial plants; banks; rail, water, and air transport; post, telegraph, and telephones; large state organized agricultural enterprises; municipal enterprises; and the bulk of the dwelling houses in cities and industrial localities. Collective farms and cooperative organizations own in common their livestock, implements, products and common buildings. The land occupied by collective farms is secured to them for their use free of charge and for an unlimited time, that is, in perpetuity. Every collective farm household has the right to a small plot of land for its personal use, and as its personal property a dwelling house, livestock, poultry, and minor agricultural implements.

Whenever the socialist property of the state is mentioned it is specified that this belongs to the whole people. This emphasizes the Communist view that the state is not a bureaucracy over the people but the whole people acting together. Article 3 declares: "In the U.S.S.R. all

power belongs to the working people of town and country as represented by the Soviets of Working People's Deputies"; and Article 12 proclaims that "work is a duty and a matter of honor for every able-bodied citizen." Beside his share in the socialist state property and in the common property of the collective farm or cooperative to which he may belong, every Soviet citizen has the right to personal ownership of income and savings, of dwelling houses and subsidiary household economy, household furniture, and utensils and articles of personal use and convenience, as well as the right of inheritance of personal property. Alongside the socialist system of economy, the Constitution also permits the small private economy of individual peasants and handicraftsmen "based on their personal labor and precluding the exploitation of the labor of others." In practice, as far and as fast as is possible, the handicrafts, and even such individual pursuits as fishing and hunting, are organized into producers' cooperatives.

It is obvious that this combination of forms of ownership is an extension to more people of the right to property established by capitalist society. In talking, in various parts of the Soviet Union, with workers who have lived in the U.S.A., I found that they have a consciousness of public property being "ours" which they told me they never had while here. This explains something that puzzles many American visitors, that is the interest of Soviet citizens in graphs and charts which show the progress of the Soviet economy. Along with this goes the amount of space given in the press to reports of the work done by the people. "I should think this would interest only a few specialists," said a newly arrived American correspondent.

The relation of socialist ownership to the development of economic democracy is somewhat similar to the relation of universal suffrage and the secret ballot to the development of political democracy. These rights can be, and

have been, used to put bosses, economic royalists, and fascist dictators in power; also to put the power of the people over their economy and culture. In like manner nationalization of economic resources and processes can be used to establish a bureaucratic dictatorship or to give all power to the people. In the case of the Soviet Union the Constitution speaks again from the record and not merely from desire.

Planning By and For the People

Article 11 tells us: "The economic life of the U.S.S.R. is determined and directed by the state national economic plan. . . ." Note the qualifying word "national." This is to make it clear that in the Soviet mind and purpose, and in accomplished fact, economic planning is not the instrument of a bureaucratic state, but of the whole people. Socialist ownership puts economic power into the hands of the people. Socialist planning enables the effective use of this power to increase production and the well-being of all the people. On paper a Soviet Five-Year Plan is an amazing network of figures which could not have been worked out until certain equations first formulated in our time were available. In reality, as Stalin in the early days of Soviet planning told both their industrial managers and an international planning conference, the "production plan is millions of workers creating a new life."

The general aims of Soviet planning are those which any people would democratically approve, as the Soviet people did in adopting their Constitution. ". . . the aim of increasing the public wealth, of steadily improving the material conditions of the working people and raising their cultural level, of consolidating the independence of the U.S.S.R. and strengthening its defensive capacity." The specific objectives of any given plan, for instance the cru-

