

SOVIET COMMUNISM

dictatorship
or DEMOCRACY?

SIDNEY
&
BEATRICE

Webb

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SOVIET COMMUNISM

by SIDNEY & BEATRICE WEBB

A DETAILED description—analytic and critical—of the whole social structure, activities and principles of the USSR as it exists to-day, including Trade Unionism and all forms of co-operation in agriculture and manufacture, as well as a full analysis of the Communist Party as an organised Vocation of Leadership; with an epilogue showing in what sense it amounts to a New Civilisation, and an answer to the enquiry, WILL IT SPREAD?

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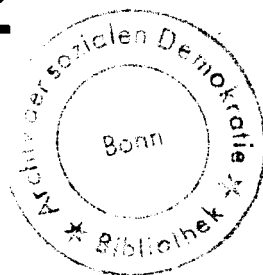
SOVIET COMMUNISM:

DICTATORSHIP or
DEMOCRACY?

By

**Sidney &
Beatrice
WEBB**

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

SINCE Mr. and Mrs. Webb published *Soviet Communism*, from which the subject-matter of this pamphlet is taken, a new draft Constitution of the USSR has been produced and is now the subject of discussion in every factory, farm and office of the USSR.

The new Constitution has been variously depicted. Some have preferred to see in it nothing but a paper concession that will prove worthless in actual practice, but informed opinion throughout the world has hailed it as a most tremendous advance, as genuinely giving to the vast Soviet country the freest and broadest constitution in the world.

There are others who welcomed it at first, but profess to have seen in the recent trial of Zinoviev and fifteen others something incompatible with the spirit of the Constitution. This seems to be particularly stupid. There is nothing in either the old Constitution or the new which provides for terrorists being allowed to go scot-free if caught red-handed.

But although the changes embodied in the Constitution are very big, they do not in any way denote any fundamental change in Soviet practice. In the main they only legalise and put on a proper footing changes that have already taken place as a result of the organic growth of the USSR. No change of principle is involved.

From the very first days of the Revolution it was realised that the discrimination in voting power between town and country was only temporary. And now that the political consciousness of the countryside has been developed—through the collective and State farms—and now that individual farming is largely a thing of the past, the basis for any such discrimination has passed away. All that the Constitution does in this matter is to recognise the change that has already taken place and to legalise it.

Hence, there being no fundamental change of principle, the conclusions here drawn by Mr. and Mrs. Webb remain as true, in their essentials, as when they were written. For the details of the changes in the Constitution the publishers of this pamphlet would urge all readers to get a copy of the *Draft Constitution of the USSR*, with a foreword by Mr. Sidney Webb, and commentaries and explanations by other experts, which is published by the Committee of the Congress for Peace and Friendship with the USSR, at 2d.

And having read thus far, the reader who wants to learn still more about the Soviet Union cannot be too strongly recommended to turn his attention to the great book of which this pamphlet is a part : *Soviet Communism*, by Sidney and Beatrice Webb. It will be many, many years before it is supplanted from its proud position as the most comprehensive and authentic work on the USSR.

DICTATORSHIP OR DEMOCRACY ?

ONE difficulty of accurately assessing and defining the essential characteristics of the constitutional structure of the USSR is the rapidity with which it changes. Even the so-called " Fundamental Law " defining the rights and obligations of citizenship has nothing of the rigidity of a formal constitution embodied in a special instrument, unchangeable except by some elaborate process. Any alteration that seems to be required need not wait for a plebiscite, or even a general election. Much of it is independent of any action by a legislative body. Whether or not the All-Union Congress of Soviets is in session, there are always at work standing committees empowered to make without delay any alterations, in any part of the constitution, affecting any section of the population, in any part of the country, that changing circumstances require. And in so vast a territory, with so huge and so varied a population, going through so tremendous an economic development, the circumstances are always changing. Hence the constitution of the USSR is far and away the most mobile of any known to political science. We cannot to-day simply take it for granted that it is supremely important that a constitution should be rigid. It is certainly not clear that the mobility of the working constitution in the USSR during the past decade has been, in itself, detrimental to the progress of its inhabitants in health or economic prosperity ; or that it has incurred popular disapproval.*

The characteristic mobility of the constitution of Soviet Communism is, however, all the more perplexing to the student in that the several parts of the constitution change independently of each other ; and change, moreover, at different rates and in different directions. Thus, the hierarchy of soviets seemed relatively stable in form and in substance. It grew, indeed, in volume. The continually increasing electorate, the constantly rising total of

* It is interesting to notice that many of the advantages claimed for rigidity in constitutions have to do either (a) with the private ownership of land or other forms of personal wealth, which it is thought desirable to defend against confiscatory legislation or executive action ; or else (b) with the making of private profit, which might be hampered by unexpected or frequent changes in social institutions ; or else (c) with the maintenance of the privileges of a privileged class, whether aristocrats, landed proprietors, or a " superior " race. In a community in which neither personal wealth nor private profit-making exists, and no class has legal privileges, constitutional rigidity loses many of its supporters.

votes cast at the innumerable electoral meetings, and the perpetual multiplication of councils of one or other kind, and of councillors to man them, involves the personal participation in government by an ever-increasing number of the citizens, women as well as men. To this characteristic of an ever-widening participation we shall recur. In 1935 another kind of widening was announced for adoption before the next general election; namely, the substitution, for indirect election upon a not quite equal franchise, of direct election by an entirely equal franchise, in an electorate that may then approach the colossal total of one hundred millions.

The continual growth in the volume of manufacturing industry, mining, transport, electrification, mechanised agriculture, social services and governmental departments, with the corresponding increase in the number of wage or salary receivers, has led, not only to an ever-mounting trade union membership, but also to a continuous advance in trade union functions. The great work done by trade union committees in the administration of accident prevention, labour recruiting, factory schools and technical classes, social clubs, recreation and holiday arrangements, and all forms of social insurance, was emphasised in 1933 by the abolition of the office of People's Commissar of Labour, directly controlled by the Sovnarkom; and the transfer of the direction of the actual administration of the huge ministerial departments concerned with every branch of social insurance to the All-Union Trade Union Council (AUCCTU).

An analogous growth is to be noted during the past few years in the less completely organised hierarchies of the manufacturing artels and of the widespread kolkhosi of the shore fishermen. During the same years an enormous extension has been made in the collectivisation of agriculture, on the one hand into sovkhosi, or state farms, and on the other into kolkhosi, or collective farms, principally of the artel type. Among the collective farms only the base of the pyramid has yet been laid, and the development of tiers of congresses of delegates for rayon, oblast, republic and All-Union deliberations has been postponed. In the consumers' co-operative movement, the rate and kind of change is difficult to assess with precision. Whilst continuing to increase its colossal membership, and even its aggregate volume of transactions, it has been losing ground in various directions, partly to those manufacturing trusts which do their own retailing; partly to the "commercial" shops set up by the government itself; partly to the republic and municipal soviets which multiply their retail "selling points"; and partly, as elsewhere described, to the trade

union hierarchy so far as concerns not only the retailing of household commodities but also the production of foodstuffs for the workers in the larger establishments. Moreover, a marked feature of the last few years, described in *Soviet Communism*,* has been the growth and encouragement of wholesale trading between these different forms of organisation, in order that each of them may be in a better position to supply its individual customers. This has resulted in a vast network of free contracts, based on competition in an open market, among collective farms and trade unions and industrial artels and consumers' co-operative societies, each of them functioning alternately as an association of producers and an association of consumers.

Amid this unending flux, the student must note the significance of the universal adoption and continuous retention, often without legislative prescription, for all the various parts of the constitution, of the common and nearly unchanging pattern of organisation which we have described, termed by its originators democratic centralism. This pattern, now pervading the whole social structure of the USSR, is not found in any other part of the world, nor in any previous constitution. Another characteristic of this pattern of social organisation is its extreme fluidity. The different parts of the constitution have often been set going one by one, by spontaneous activity, in areas hitherto without government—and, for that matter, also in areas professedly under other governments—without proclamation or formal authority, and irrespective of other parts of the USSR constitution, which have sometimes followed at later dates. Thus, in various popular accounts of the gradual organisation of primitive regions in the northern forest districts or in the recesses of Kamchatka we see the holding of a village meeting which elects a soviet, linking up with other soviets, and eventually sending delegates to the congress of soviets at Moscow. Presently the local residents coagulate as consumers into a co-operative society which gets eventually into communication with Centrosoyus. Stray members of the Communist Party form a nucleus or cell, now styled a primary Party organ, and presently constitute themselves a Party Group in the local soviet or in the co-operative society's committee; and they conform their activities to the latest "directives" from the Politbureau or Central Committee at Moscow. When mining or transport or manufacturing industry creates a class of wage-earners, these join their several trade unions, irrespective of municipal

* Chapter IX in Part II, "In Place of Profit." (The references throughout are to *Soviet Communism*.)

frontiers or racial differences; and they then begin to send delegates to the hierarchy of indirectly elected trade union councils, conferences and congresses, of which the highest periodically assembles at Moscow. The constitution formed on this pattern may, we suggest, appropriately be termed a multiform democracy, organised on the basis of universal participation with democratic centralism; a constitutional form so loose as to be exceptionally mobile and, for that reason, endowed with an almost irresistible quality of expansiveness.

In describing, in *Soviet Communism*, the organisation in the USSR of Man as a Citizen, Man as a Producer, Man as a Consumer and Man in the Vocation of Leadership, we may have seemed sometimes to imply that all these separate parts of the constitution of Soviet Communism are of equal status, each exercising supreme authority in its own sphere. This is not so. The Central Executive Committee (TSIK) of the All-Union Congress of Soviets, representing the totality of the inhabitants in the USSR, and not merely any fraction of them, stands supreme over all the ramifications of the trade unions, the consumers' co-operative movement and the various kinds of associations of owner-producers, just as it does over the tier upon tier of soviets.* As for the relation in which the All-Union Congress of Soviets stands to the All-Union Congress of the Communist Party in the USSR, what can be said is that there has been no attempt by the soviet legislature to make laws for, or to interfere with the activities of, the Communist Party. The practical independence of the soviet authorities is not so apparent. Since 1930 all important decrees of the USSR Central Executive Committee or the Sovnarkom, whether legislative or administrative, have been issued over the signature, not of their president (Kalinin or Molotov) alone, but also over that of Stalin as General Secretary of the Communist Party. It is, moreover, significant that these decisive acts are, in all important cases, initiated within the Politbureau of the Communist Party; and they receive in due course the endorsement either of the Central Committee or of the All-Union Congress of the Communist Party.

* It is, however, significant of the persistent striving towards participation and consent, that when alterations are made in the constitution or statutory obligations of either the trade union hierarchy or the consumers' co-operative movement, these authoritative decrees are normally discussed, decided and actually signed, not only by Kalinin or Molotov or other authorities representative of the soviet, but also by the leading official representing the trade unions or the consumers' co-operative movement respectively.

Indeed, as we explained in *Soviet Communism*, the Communist Party is perpetually issuing "directives," great or small, to its members exercising authority or influence within all the other organisations of the state. In the present connection it must be recalled that this remarkable companionship is not, in theory, an organisation within the USSR. It professes to be an organisation of the vanguard of the proletariat throughout the world, knowing neither racial nor geographical limits. Its highest authority is the periodical congress of the "Third International," representing the Communist Parties of all the countries of the world. This body acts normally by the directives which the Comintern issues to the faithful in all countries. It aims, in fact, at a world supremacy over all the administrations established by the proletariat of the several nations or countries. The historical student will be reminded of the supremacy which the Pope, as the head of the Catholic Church, for centuries maintained over Christendom. Whether, on the occasion of some great crisis, there will arise any effective rivalry, or any disturbing friction, between the secular government of the USSR and the ideological companionship or order which to-day dominates the situation, may be left as a fascinating problem for the sociologist of the future.*

* The question of the possibility of the governmental organisation becoming emancipated from the control of the Communist Party has more than once been discussed within the Party. "In 1925," so the French historian Henry Rollin puts it, Stalin himself pointed out the "danger of the disappearance of the tutelage of the Party." He showed how greatly the governmental organs, both administrative and economic, steadily increased in magnitude and influence with the reconstruction of the country. "The more they grow in importance, the more their pressure on the Party is felt, the more they take up an attitude of resistance to the Party. Hence the danger of the state apparatus shaking itself free from the Party." Against this danger Stalin pressed for a regrouping "of forces, and a redistribution of directing active members among the governmental organs, so as to ensure the directing influence of the Party in this new situation. This was the origin of the disgrace of Rykov, president of the Council of Commissars, and of Tomsky, president of the trade unions, as well as of the purging of the soviet apparatus that was completed in June 1929, in order to seat firmly the domination that Stalin exercised in the name of the Party" (*La Révolution russe*, vol. 1, "Les soviets," by Henry Rollin, Paris, 1931, pp. 269-270).

"The Party makes no concealment of the tutelage in which it holds the soviet organs. Thus, on the check to collectivisation in March 1930, the Central Committee of the Party issued direct instructions of a purely governmental kind by a circular addressed to all the Party organisations and published in the entire soviet press on March 15. The official governmental organs could do more than put these decisions in a more official form a few days later" (*ibid.*, p. 278).

We have to add, as a further elaboration of the constitution of the USSR, some reference to the circumambient atmosphere of voluntary organisation which it is perpetually creating and developing as a part of itself. Some people have asserted that government activity kills voluntarism. In the USSR, on the contrary, every government activity seems to create a vastly greater voluntary activity, which the people themselves organise up to a high point, always along the lines and in support of the government's own purpose and plan ; always and everywhere led and directed by members of the Communist Party. We despair of conveying in a few pages any adequate idea of the magnitude, the variety or the range of action of these voluntary organisations linked up or intertwined with one or other government department. We need not repeat our description of the ten million or more young people voluntarily enrolled as Little Octobrists, Pioneers and Comsomols, in subordination to the extensive membership of the Party. We may more conveniently begin with the specifically patriotic society, formed "to co-operate in defence of the revolution" (OSO), and another "for aviation and chemical industries" (Aviakhim), both now merged in one huge contributing membership of a dozen millions (Osoaviakhim). These millions of members in village or city form cells, or sections, or circles, or corners, co-ordinated in a whole series of provincial and central councils. They are all pledged to active personal co-operation in the defence of the country, in peace-time as well as in war, against foreign invasion or external pressure. They seek to arouse general interest in foreign affairs by lectures, literature and discussion. They study military science, especially aerial bombing and chemical warfare. They form clubs for rifle practice and aviation. They maintain specialist museums and libraries, and "defence homes," which are practically social clubs. They have collected considerable sums for building additional aeroplanes for presentation to the Red Air Force. Organised bands of members have participated in the training manœuvres of the Red Army. Other bands have, with equal zeal, undertaken the clearing of particular districts from noxious insects. Out of the vast membership, several thousand local societies for regional study have emerged, devoting themselves to exhaustive surveys of the physical and economic characteristics of their own neighbourhood, partly for the benefit of the local schools, in which regional study has its place.

Vying in size with Osoaviakhim is the League of the Godless, for the emancipation of the backward part of the population from the religion that seems to the Marxist mere superstition, benumbing

or distracting the spirit of man. This entirely voluntary organisation, made up for the most part of young people of either sex, corresponds essentially to the nineteenth-century National Secular Society of Great Britain ; but enormously transcends it in activity, as well as in magnitude and range of operations. Its millions of members, organised in cells or branches from one end of the USSR to the other, campaign actively against the various churches and their religious practices ; circulating atheistic literature ; pouring scorn on any but a scientific interpretation of nature ; clearing the icons out of the homes, and weaning the boys and girls alike from churchgoing and from the celebration of religious festivals.* We should fail to appreciate either the magnitude or the dogmatic intolerance of the crusade against supernaturalism in the USSR, conducted by these militant atheists, if we compared it with anything less than the campaign against atheism and heathendom carried on in all their fields of action by all the missionary societies and religious orders of all the Christian churches put together.

Another society of colossal magnitude, claiming indeed many millions of members, is the International Society for Assistance to Revolutionaries in other countries (MOPR). This has for its object, not only to bring "the broad masses into contact with the world-revolution," but also "to enable them to come to the assistance of those who are fighting for it." It disseminates information of doubtful accuracy about the progress of communism in all countries, but it is most interested in rebellions and riots, strikes and the various kinds of "martyrdom" to which, as it is alleged, the ruling classes everywhere condemn their working-class victims. The tens of thousands of branches of MOPR collect funds for the assistance of sufferers all over the world, from those in the prisons of Hungary or Poland to "Sacco and Vanzetti" and "the Scottsborough negroes." We could mention dozens of other voluntary organisations of the most varied nature. There is a "Down with Illiteracy" society, and a "Hands off China" society ; a "Friends of Children" society (ODD), and a "Society for settling Jews on the Land" (OZET) ; a gigantic "Peasant Society for Mutual Assistance" (KOV), and a whole movement of working women's and peasants' conferences, to which tens of thousands of villages send delegates, and in which everything specially interesting to

* See Chapter XI in Part II, "Science the Salvation of Mankind," especially the section headed "Anti-Godism," and the detailed account in *Religion and Communism*, by J. F. Hecker (1933).

women is discussed and assisted and promoted. Nor must we omit the immense membership of all the various societies arranging every kind of athletic sports, under the supervision and with the constant encouragement of the Supreme Council for Physical Culture in the USSR, appointed by the Central Executive Committee (TSIK), and the People's Commissars for Education in all the constituent and autonomous republics. It is active personal participation in games and competitions that is promoted, among an aggregate membership of all races running into tens of millions, in Asia as well as in Europe; not merely the organisation of spectacles at which the members look on, although this factor in the habit of athleticism is not neglected. Gigantic stadiums are being built out of public funds in many of the cities, including a "Middle Asian Central Stadium" at Tashkent. Even more remarkable is it to learn that the members of the sports associations include in their activities the rendering of personal assistance to the agricultural and transport departments, whenever required. "Uzbek, Tadjik and Turkoman athletes," we read, "have helped considerably in the repairing of locomotives, in cotton planting and in harvesting, in the re-election of the soviets and in the quick response to the new internal loan."*

Whilst unable to exclude from our statement of the constitution some account of these auxiliary voluntary activities, we hesitate to make any estimate of their net worth. They take up time and energy. They may even distract attention from more urgent problems. But their colossal magnitude and ubiquitous activities make the voluntary organisations a very important part of the social structure. There can be no doubt about their enormous educational effect upon the half-awakened masses which still make up so large a part of the population of the USSR—especially upon the "deaf villages" of the interior, and upon what Marx and Lenin termed the "idiocy of village life." The sharing in public affairs which the vast membership of these voluntary organisations secures, and the independent action which each cell or section, group or corner, learns to take in co-operation with the various departments of the soviet administration, constitute an essential part of that widespread "participation" in government which seems to us one of the most characteristic notes of Soviet Communism. It is, more than anything else, this almost universal personal participation, through an amazing variety of channels, that justifies the designation of it as a multiform democracy.

* *Moscow Daily News*, June 29, 1933.

The Meaning of Dictatorship

Can the constitution of the USSR, as analysed in the *Soviet Communism*, be correctly described as a dictatorship? Here we must deal one by one with the various meanings given to this word. In the popular British use of the term, a dictatorship means government by the will of a single person; and this, as it happens, corresponds with the authoritative dictionary meaning, in strict accord with the undoubted historical derivation.* It is clear that, in form, there is nothing in the constitution of the USSR at all resembling the Roman office of dictator; or, indeed, any kind of government by the will of a single person. On the contrary, the universal pattern shows even an exaggerated devotion to collegiate decision. In the judicial system, from the highest court to the lowest, there is nowhere an arbitrator, a magistrate or a judge sitting alone, but always a bench of three, two of whom at least must agree in any decision or judgment or sentence.† In municipal administration there is no arbitrary mayor or burgomaster or "city manager"—not even a high salaried official wielding the authority of a British Town Clerk—but always a presidium and one or more standing committees, the members of each of which have to be

* *The New English Dictionary* gives the following meanings: *Dictator*—"A ruler or governor whose word is law; an absolute ruler of a state . . . a person exercising absolute authority of any kind or in any sphere; one who authoritatively prescribes a course of action or dictates what is to be done." *Dictatorship*—"The office or dignity of a dictator."

"A dictatorship is the most natural government for seasons of extraordinary peril, when there appears a man fit to wield it" (Arnold's *History of Rome*, vol. i, p. 446, 1838).

† It may be added that even the Ogpu was not governed by the will of a single person. It was a commission of persons, appointed annually by the USSR Sovnarkom (or Cabinet). Its last president was reported to be somewhat infirm, who, far from being even as much of a personal influence as his predecessor Djerdjinsky, was reported to leave the control rather too much to the other members of the commission. Its practice was never to condemn people to death, exile or imprisonment without formal trial by a collegium of three judges; and even then the sentences had to be confirmed by the commission as a whole, whilst clemency could always be exercised by a decision of the Central Executive Committee (TSIK) of the All-Union Congress of Soviets. The fact that the Ogpu trials, and all its other proceedings, were behind closed doors—like the British proceedings against spies in war-time—may be abhorrent to us, but is not relevant to the question of whether or not it was in the nature of a dictatorship, in the strict sense of government by a single person. We refer to this in Chapter VII in Part II, "The Liquidation of the Landlord and the Capitalist."

continuously consulted by its president ; or else a specially chosen commission, all the members of which have equal rights. Moreover, all of them have to be incessantly reporting in person their proceedings to the larger elected soviet, or its standing executive committee, from which they have received their appointment. From one end of the hierarchy to the other, the members of every council or committee, including its president, can always be " recalled " without notice, by a resolution passed by the body (or at a meeting of the electorate) to which they owe their office. At any moment, therefore, anyone taking executive action may find himself summarily superseded by his collectively chosen successor.

And if we pass from the soviet hierarchy, with all its tiers of councils, and its innumerable proliferations of committees, and commissions, and People's Commissars, and other executive officers—which collectively exercise the supreme authority in the state—to the semi-autonomous hierarchies finally subject to this supreme authority, whether they are composed of trade unions or of consumers' co-operatives, or of manufacturing artels or collective farms, or of co-operative hunters or fishermen, we find, as we have shown, always the same pattern of organisation. Nowhere, in all this vast range of usually autonomous, but finally subordinate authorities, do we discover anything involving or implying government by the will of a single person. On the contrary, there is everywhere elaborate provision, not only for collegiate decision, but also, whether by popular election or by appointment for a given term, or by the universal right to recall, for collective control of each individual executant. Thus, so far as the legally constituted legislative, judicial and executive authorities of the state are concerned, at any stage in the hierarchy, or in any branch of administration, it would, we think, be difficult for any candid student to maintain that the USSR is, at any point, governed by the will of a single person—that is to say, by a dictator.

Is the Party a Dictator ?

But, admittedly, the administration is controlled, to an extent which it is impossible to measure, but which it would be hard to exaggerate, by the Communist Party, with its two or three millions of members. On this point there is complete frankness. " In the Soviet Union," Stalin has said and written, " in the land where

the dictatorship of the proletariat is in force, no important political or organisational problem is ever decided by our soviets and other mass organisations, without directives from our Party. In this sense, we may say that the dictatorship of the proletariat is substantially the dictatorship of the Party, as the force which effectively guides the proletariat.* [How the Bolsheviks do love the word dictatorship !] It must, however, be noted that the control of the Party over the administration is not manifested in any commands enforceable by law on the ordinary citizen. The Party is outside the constitution. Neither the Party nor its supreme body can, *of itself*, add to or alter the laws binding on the ordinary citizens or residents of the USSR.† The Party can, by itself, do no more than “issue directives”—that is, give instructions—to *its own members*, as to the general lines on which they should exercise the powers with which the law, or their lawful appointment to particular offices, has endowed them. The Party members, thus directed, can act only by persuasion—persuasion of their colleagues in the various presidiums, committees, commissions and soviets in and through which, as we have seen, the authority over the citizens at large is actually exercised. The 50 or 60 per cent. of the Party members who continue to work at the bench or in the mine can do no more than use their powers of persuasion on the ten or twenty times more numerous non-Party workers among whom they pass their lives. By long years of training and organisation this Party membership exercises a corporate intellectual influence on the mass of the population which is of incalculable potency. But the term dictatorship is surely a misnomer for this untiring corporate inspiration, evocation and formulation of a General Will among so huge a population. For it is, as we have seen, the people themselves, and not only the Party members, who are incessantly called upon to participate personally in the decisions, not merely by

* *Leninism*, by J. Stalin, vol. i, 1928, p. 33.

† Presumably this is the reason why, as already indicated, specially important “directives” to the Party membership which are in the nature of decrees or laws, to be obeyed also by the non-Party mass, though emanating from the Central Committee of the Communist Party, bear the signature (in addition to that of Stalin) of Kalinin, signifying the concurrence of the Central Executive Committee (TSIK) of the All-Union Congress of Soviets; or that of Molotov, expressing the concurrence of the USSR Sovnarkom, each of which bodies can constitutionally enact new laws, subject to their subsequent ratification by the All-Union Congress of Soviets and its two-chambered Central Executive Committee.

expressing opinions about them in the innumerable popular meetings ; not merely by voting for or against their exponents at the recurring elections ; but actually by individually sharing in their operation.

Is Stalin a Dictator ?

Sometimes it is asserted that, whereas the form may be otherwise, the fact is that, whilst the Communist Party controls the whole administration, the Party itself, and thus indirectly the whole state, is governed by the will of a single person, Josef Stalin.

First let it be noted that, unlike Mussolini, Hitler and other modern dictators, Stalin is not invested by law with any authority over his fellow-citizens and not even over the members of the Party to which he belongs. He has not even the extensive power which the Congress of the United States has temporarily conferred upon President Roosevelt, or that which the American Constitution entrusts for four years to every successive president. So far as grade or dignity is concerned, Stalin is in no sense the highest official in the USSR, or even in the Communist Party. He is not, and has never been, President of the Presidium of the Central Executive Committee of the All-Union Congress of Soviets—a place long held by Sverdlov and now by Kalinin, who is commonly treated as the President of the USSR. He is not (as Lenin was) the President of the Sovnarkom of the RSFSR, the dominant member of the Federation ; or of the USSR itself, the place now held by Molotov, who may be taken to correspond to the Prime Minister of a parliamentary democracy. He is not even a People's Commissar, or member of the Cabinet, either of the USSR or of any of the constituent republics. Until 1934* he held no other office in the machinery of the constitution than that, since 1930 only, of membership (one among ten) of the Committee of Labour and Defence (STO). Even in the Communist Party he is not the president of the Central Committee of the Party who may be deemed the highest placed member ; indeed, he is not even the president of the presidium of this Central Committee. He is, in fact, only the General Secretary of the Party, receiving his salary from the Party funds and holding his office by appointment by the

* In 1934 he was elected a member of the presidium of the Central Executive Committee (TSIK).

Party Central Committee, and, as such, also a member (one among nine) of its most important sub-committee, the Politbureau.*

If we are invited to believe that Stalin is, in effect, a dictator, we may enquire whether he does, in fact, act in the way that dictators have usually acted?

We have given particular attention to this point, collecting all the available evidence, and noting carefully the inferences to be drawn from the experience of the past eight years (1926-1934). We do not think that the Party is governed by the will of a single person; or that Stalin is the sort of person to claim or desire such a position. He has himself very explicitly denied any such personal dictatorship in terms which, whether or not he is credited with sincerity, certainly accord with our own impression of the facts.

In the carefully revised and entirely authentic report of an interview in 1932, we find the interviewer (Emil Ludwig) putting the following question: "Placed around the table at which we are now seated there are sixteen chairs. Abroad it is known, on the one hand, that the USSR is a country in which everything is supposed to be decided by collegiums; but, on the other hand, it is known that everything is decided by individual persons. Who really decides?" Stalin's reply was emphatic and explicit. He

* He is also a member of the Executive Committee of the Third International (Comintern), which is, like the Communist Party of the USSR, formally outside the state constitution.

A very critical, and even unfriendly, biographer gives the following characterisation of him: "Stalin does not seek honours. He loathes pomp. He is averse to public displays. He could have all the nominal regalia in the chest of a great state. But he prefers the background. . . . He is the perfect inheritor of the individual Lenin paternalism. No other associate of Lenin was endowed with that characteristic. Stalin is the stern father of a family, the dogmatic pastor of a flock. He is a boss with this difference: his power is not used for personal aggrandisement. Moreover, he is a boss with an education. Notwithstanding general impressions, Stalin is a widely informed and well-read person. He lacks culture, but he absorbs knowledge. He is rough towards his enemies but he learns from them" (*Stalin: a Biography*, by Isaac Don Levine, 1929, pp. 248-249).

An American newspaper correspondent, who has watched both Stalin and the soviet administration in Moscow for the past decade, lately wrote as follows: "Somebody said to me the other day—'Stalin is like a mountain with a head on it. He cannot be moved. But he thinks.' His power and influence are greater now than ever, which is saying a great deal. He inspires the Party with his will power and calm. Individuals in contact with him admire his capacity to listen and his skill in improving on the suggestions and drafts of highly intelligent subordinates. There is no doubt that his determination and wisdom have been important assets in the struggles of the last few years" (Louis Fischer, in *The Nation*, August 9, 1933).

said : " No ; single persons cannot decide. The decisions of single persons are always, or nearly always, one-sided decisions. In every collegium, in every collective body, there are people whose opinion must be reckoned with. From the experience of three revolutions we know that, approximately, out of every 100 decisions made by single persons that have not been tested and corrected collectively, 90 are one-sided. In our leading body, the Central Committee of our Party, which guides all our soviet and party organisations, there are about 70 members. Among these members of the Central Committee there are to be found the best of our industrial leaders, the best of our co-operative leaders, the best organisers of distribution, our best military men, our best propagandists and agitators, our best experts on soviet farms, on collective farms, on individual peasant agriculture, our best experts on the nationalities inhabiting the Soviet Union, and on national policy. In this areopagus is concentrated the wisdom of the Party. Everyone is able to contribute his experience. Were it otherwise, if decisions had been taken by individuals, we should have committed very serious mistakes in our work. But since everyone is able to correct the errors of individual persons, and since we pay heed to such corrections, we arrive at more or less correct decisions."*

This reasoned answer by Stalin himself puts the matter on the right basis. The Communist Party in the USSR has adopted for its own organisation the pattern which we have described as common throughout the whole soviet constitution. In this pattern individual dictatorship has no place. Personal decisions are distrusted, and elaborately guarded against. In order to avoid the mistakes due to bias, anger, jealousy, vanity and other distempers, from which no person is, at all times, entirely free or on his guard, it is desirable that the individual will should always be controlled by the necessity of gaining the assent of colleagues of equal grade, who have candidly discussed the matter, and who have to make themselves jointly responsible for the decision.

We find confirmation of this inference in Stalin's explicit description of how he acted in a remarkable case. He has, in fact, frequently pointed out that he does no more than carry out the decisions of the Central Committee of the Communist Party. Thus, in describing his momentous article known as " Dizzy with Success," he expressly states that this was written on " the well-known decision of the Central Committee regarding the ' Fight

* *An Interview with the German Author, Emil Ludwig, by J. Stalin, Moscow, 1932, pp. 5, 6.*

against Distortions of the Party Line' in the collective farm movement. . . ." "In this connection," he continues, "I recently received a number of letters from comrades, collective farmers, calling upon me to reply to the questions contained in them. It was my duty to reply to the letters in private correspondence; but that proved to be impossible, since more than half the letters received did not have the addresses of the writers (they forgot to send their addresses). Nevertheless the questions raised in these letters are of tremendous political interest to all our comrades. . . . In view of this I found myself faced with the necessity of replying to the comrades in an open letter, i.e., in the press. . . . *I did this all the more willingly since I had a direct decision of the Central Committee to this purpose.*" We cannot imagine the contemporary "dictators" of Italy, Hungary, Germany and now (1935) the United States—or even the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom or France—seeking the instructions of his Cabinet—as to how he should deal with letters which he could not answer individually. But Stalin goes further. He gives the reason for such collegiate decision. He points out that there is a "real danger" attendant on the personal "decreeing by individual representatives of the Party in this or that corner of our vast country. I have in mind not only local functionaries, but even certain regional committee members, and even certain members of the Central Committee, a practice which Lenin had stigmatised as communist conceit. "The Central Committee of the Party," he said, "realised this danger, and did not delay intervening, *instructing Stalin to warn the erring comrades in an article* on the collective farm movement. Some people believe that the article 'Dizzy with Success' is the result of the personal initiative of Stalin. That is nonsense. Our Central Committee does not exist in order to permit the personal initiative of anybody, whoever it may be, in matters of this kind. It was a reconnaissance on the part of the Central Committee. And when the depth and seriousness of the errors were established, the Central Committee did not hesitate to strike against these errors with the full force of its authority, and accordingly issued its famous decision of March 15, 1930."*

The plain truth is that, surveying the administration of the USSR during the past decade, under the alleged dictatorship of Stalin, the principal decisions have manifested neither the promptitude nor the timeliness, nor yet the fearless obstinacy that have

* *Leninism*, by Josef Stalin, vol. ii, pp. 294-295.

often been claimed as the merits of a dictatorship. On the contrary, the action of the Party has frequently been taken after consideration so prolonged, and as the outcome of discussion sometimes so heated and embittered, as to bear upon their formulation the marks of hesitancy and lack of assurance. More than once, their adoption has been delayed to a degree that has militated against their success ; and, far from having been obstinately and ruthlessly carried out, the execution has often been marked by a succession of orders each contradicting its predecessor, and none of them pretending to completeness or finality. Whether we take the First Five-Year Plan, or the determination to make universal the collective farms ; the frantic drive towards " self-sufficiency " in the equipment of the heavy industries, and in every kind of machine-making, or the complete " liquidation of the kulaks as a class," we see nothing characteristic of government by the will of a single person. On the contrary, these policies have borne, in the manner of their adoption and in the style of their formulation, the stigmata of committee control. If the USSR during the past eight or ten years has been under a dictatorship, the dictator has surely been an inefficient one ! He has often acted neither promptly nor at the right moment ; his execution has been vacillating and lacking in ruthless completeness.* If we had to judge him by the actions taken in his name, Stalin has had many of the defects from which, by his very nature, a dictator is free. In short, the government of the USSR during the past decade has been clearly no better than that of a committee. Our inference is that it has been, in fact, the very opposite of a

* It is not easy to get hold of copies of the pamphlets surreptitiously circulated in opposition to the present government of the USSR, which is personified in the alleged dictatorship of Stalin. One of the latest is described as entitled *The Letter of Eighteen Bolsheviks* and as representing the combined opposition to the dictatorship of both " right " and " left " deviationists. The specific accusations are reported as relative, not so much to the manner in which policies are framed, or to their origin in a personal will, as to the policies themselves, which are now alleged to have been faulty on the ground that they have failed ! These policies were (a) the stifling of the activities of the Comintern, so that no world revolution has occurred ; (b) the confused and vacillating execution of the faulty Five-Year Plan ; (c) the ruinous failure of so many of the collective farms ; (d) the weak half-measures adopted towards the kulaks ; (e) the making of enemies, not only among the peasants and intelligentsia, but also within the inner governing circle, by failing to get them to combine on policy !

It will be seen that these criticisms of the USSR Government are exactly parallel in substance and in form with those that are made by a Parliamentary opposition to the policy of a Prime Minister in a parliamentary democracy. They do not reveal anything peculiar to a dictatorship as such.

dictatorship. It has been, as it still is, government by whole series of committees.

This does not mean, of course, that the interminable series of committees, which is the characteristic feature of the USSR Government, have no leaders; nor need it be doubted that among these leaders the most influential, both within the Kremlin and without, is now Stalin himself. But so far as we have been able to ascertain, his leadership is not that of a dictator. We are glad to quote an illustrative example of Stalin's administration, as described by an able American resident of Moscow: "Let me give a brief example of how Stalin functions. I saw him preside at a small committee meeting, deciding a matter on which I had brought a complaint. He summoned to the office all the persons concerned in the matter, but when we arrived we found ourselves meeting not only with Stalin, but also with Voroshilov and Kaganovich. Stalin sat down, not at the head of the table, but informally placed where he could see the faces of all. He opened the talk with a plain, direct question, repeating the complaint in one sentence, and asking the man complained against: 'Why was it necessary to do this?'

"After this, he said less than anyone. An occasional phrase, a word without pressure; even his questions were less demands for answers than interjections guiding the speaker's thought. But how swiftly everything was revealed, all our hopes, egotisms, conflicts, all the things we had been doing to each other. The essential nature of men I had known for years, and of others I met for the first time, came out sharply, more clearly than I had ever seen them, yet without prejudice. Each of them had to co-operate, to be taken account of in a problem; the job we must do, and its direction became clear.

"I was hardly conscious of the part played by Stalin in helping us to reach a decision. I thought of him rather as someone superlatively easy to explain things to, who got one's meaning half through a sentence, and brought it all out very quickly. When everything became clear, and not a moment sooner or later, Stalin turned to the others: 'Well?' A word from one, a phrase from another, together accomplished a sentence. Nods—it was unanimous. It seemed we had all decided, simultaneously, unanimously. That is Stalin's method and greatness. He is supreme analyst of situations, personalities, tendencies. Through his analysis he is supreme combiner of many wills."*

* *Dictatorship and Democracy in the Soviet Union*, by Anna Louise Strong, New York, 1934, p. 17.

There is, in fact, a consensus of opinion, among those who have watched Stalin's action in administration, that this is not at all characteristic of a dictator. It is rather that of a shrewd and definitely skilful manager facing a succession of stupendous problems which have to be grappled with.* He is not conceited enough to imagine that he has, within his own knowledge and judgment, any completely perfect plan for surmounting the difficulties. None of the colleagues seated round the committee table, as he realises, has such a plan. He does not attempt to bully the committee. He does not even drive them. Imperturbably he listens to the endless discussion, picking up something from each speaker, and gradually combining every relevant consideration in the most promising conclusion then and there possible. At the end of the meeting, or at a subsequent one—for the discussions are often adjourned from day to day—he will lay before his colleagues a plan uniting the valuable suggestions of all the other proposals, as qualified by all the criticisms; and it will seem to his colleagues, as it does to himself, that this is *the* plan to be adopted. When it is put in operation, all sorts of unforeseen difficulties reveal themselves, for no plan can be free from shortcomings and defects. The difficulties give rise to further discussions and to successive modifications, none of which achieves perfect success. Is not this very much how administration is carried on in every country in the world, whatever may be its constitution? The "endless adventure of governing men" can never be other than a series of imperfect expedients, for which, even taking into account all past experience and all political science, there is, in the end, an inevitable resort to empirical "trial and error."

At this point it is necessary to observe that, although Stalin is, by the constitution, not in the least a dictator, having no power of command, and although he appears to be free from any desire

* Mussolini describes very differently his own statutory dictatorship. He once said: "There is a fable which describes me as a good dictator but always surrounded by evil counsellors to whose mysterious and malign influence I submit. All that is more than fantastic: it is idiotic. Considerably long experience goes to demonstrate that I am an individual absolutely refractory to outside pressure of any kind. My decisions come to maturity often in the night—in the solitude of my spirit and in the solitude of my rather arid (because practically non-social) personal life. Those who are the 'evil counsellors of the good tyrant' are the five or six people who come each morning to make their daily report, so that I may be informed of all that's happening in Italy. After they have made their reports, which rarely takes more than half an hour, they go away" (*Through Fascism to World Power*, by Ion S. Munro, 1935, p. 405).

to act as a dictator, and does not do so, he may be thought to have become irremovable from his position of supreme leadership of the Party, and therefore of the government. Why is this ? We find the answer in the deliberate exploitation by the governing junta of the emotion of hero-worship, of the traditional reverence of the Russian people for a personal autocrat. This was seen in the popular elevation of Lenin, notably after his death, to the status of saint or prophet, virtually canonised in the sleeping figure in the sombre marble mausoleum in Moscow's Red Square, where he is now, to all intents and purposes, worshipped by the adoring millions of workers and peasants who daily pass before him. Lenin's works have become "Holy Writ," which may be interpreted, but which it is impermissible to confute. After Lenin's death, it was agreed that his place could never be filled. But some new personality had to be produced for the hundred and sixty millions to revere. There presently ensued a tacit understanding among the junta that Stalin should be "boosted" as the supreme leader of the proletariat, the Party and the state. His portrait and his bust were accordingly distributed by tens of thousands, and they are now everywhere publicly displayed along with those of Marx and Lenin. Scarcely a speech is made, or a conference held, without a naïve—some would say a fulsome—reference to "Comrade Stalin" as the great leader of the people. Let us give, as one among the multitude of such expressions of whole-hearted reverence and loyalty, part of the message to Stalin from the Fifteenth Anniversary Celebration of the Leninist League of Young Communists (the five million Comsomols). "In our greetings to you we wish to express the warm love and profound respect for you, our teacher and leader, cherished in the minds and hearts of the Leninist Comsomols and the entire youth of our country. . . . We give you, beloved friend, teacher and leader, the word of young Bolsheviks to continue as an unshakable shock-detachment in the struggle for a classless socialist society. We swear to stimulate the creative energy and enthusiasm of the youth for the mastery of technique and science and in the struggle for Bolshevik collective farms and for a prosperous collective farm life. We swear to hold high the banner of Leninist internationalism, fearlessly to fight for the elimination of exploitation of man by man, for the world proletarian revolution.

"We swear to continue to be the most devoted aids to our beloved Party. We swear with even more determination to strengthen our proletarian dictatorship, to strengthen the defence of the socialist fatherland, to train hundreds of thousands of new exemplary fighters, super-sharpshooters, fearless aviators, daring

sailors, tank operators and artillery corps, who will master their military technique to perfection. We swear that we shall work to make the glorious traditions of Bolshevism part of our flesh and blood. We swear to be worthy sons and daughters of the Communist Party. The Leninist Comsomol takes pride in the fact that under the banner of Lenin, the toiling youth of the country which is building socialism has the good fortune freely to live, fight and triumph together with you and under your leadership.”*

It seems to us that a national leader so persistently boosted, and so generally admired, has, in fact, become irremovable against his will, so long as his health lasts, without a catastrophic break-up of the whole administration. Chosen originally because he was thought more stable in judgment than Trotsky, who might, it was felt, precipitate the state into war, Stalin is now universally considered to have justified his leadership by success; first in overcoming the very real difficulties of 1925; then in surmounting the obstacle of the peasant recalcitrance in 1930-1933; and finally in the successive triumphs of the Five-Year Plan. For him to be dismissed from office, or expelled from the Party, as Trotsky and so many others have been, could not be explained to the people. He will therefore remain in his great position of leadership so long as he wishes to do so. What will happen when he dies or voluntarily retires is a baffling question. For it is a unique feature in Soviet Communism that popular recognition of pre-eminent leadership has, so far, not attached itself to any one office. Lenin, whose personal influence became overwhelmingly powerful, was President of the Sovnarkom (Cabinet) of the RSFSR, or, as we should say, Prime Minister. On his death, Rykov became President of the Sovnarkom of the USSR, to be followed by Molotov, but neither succeeded to the position of leader. Stalin, who had been People's Commissar for Nationalities and subsequently President of the Commissariat for Workers' and Peasants' Inspection, had relinquished these offices on being appointed General Secretary of the Communist Party. It is Stalin who has, since 1927, "had all the limelight." No one can predict the office which will be held by the man who may succeed to Stalin's popularity; or whether the policy of "boosting" a national leader will continue to be thought necessary when Soviet Communism is deemed to be completely established. For the moment the other dominant personalities seem to be L. M. Kaganovich, one of the Assistant Secretaries of the

* *Moscow Daily News*, November 1, 1933.

Communist Party of the USSR and Secretary of the Party in Moscow, in 1935 appointed People's Commissar of Railways; Molotov, the President of the USSR Sovnarkom; and Voroshilov, the popular People's Commissar of Defence.

The Dictatorship of the Proletariat

We have yet to discuss the most ambiguous of so-called dictatorships, the "dictatorship of the proletariat." This high-sounding phrase, used more than once by Karl Marx,* and repeatedly and vehemently endorsed by Lenin, has been accepted by those in authority as an official designation of the constitution of the USSR, in preference to any reference to the leadership of the Communist Party or to the early slogan of "All Power to the Soviets." We frankly confess that we do not understand what was or is meant by this phrase. As rendered in English it seems to mean a dictatorship exercised *by* the proletariat, *over* the community as a whole. But if the terms are to be taken literally, this is the union of two words which contradict each other. Dictatorship, as government by the will of a single person, cannot be government by the will of an immense class of persons. Moreover, if by the proletariat is meant the mass of the population dependent on their daily earnings, or as Marx frequently meant, the whole of the workers engaged in industrial production for wages, the dictatorship of the proletariat would, in highly developed capitalist societies like Great Britain, where three-quarters of all men of working age are wage-earners, mean no more than the rule of an immense majority over a minority. Why, then, should it be termed a dictatorship?

* See, for instance, his statement of 1852: "What I added (to the conception of the existence of the class struggle) was to prove: (1) that the existence of classes is only bound up with certain historical struggles in the development of production; (2) that the class struggle necessarily leads to the dictatorship of the proletariat; (3) that this dictatorship is itself only a transition to the ultimate abolition of all classes and to a society without classes" (Marx to Weydemeyer, March 12, 1852; see Beer's article in *Labour Monthly*, July 1922).

It may be helpful, in the interpretation, to consider what, in the view of Marx, was the opposite of the dictatorship of the proletariat. This was emphatically not democracy in any of its meanings, but the "dictatorship of the bourgeoisie." One or other dictatorship was, Marx thought, inevitable, during the transition stage, which might last for a whole generation. See the useful book *Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx*, by Professor Sidney Hook, 1933, pp. 250-269.

We do not pretend to any competence in determining what Marx may have meant by the dictatorship of the proletariat. More relevant is what Lenin meant by the phrase when he made it one of the cardinal principles of his revolutionary activity. This meaning we can best discover in the successive stages leading up to the first formulation of the constitution in 1918, and to its subsequent elaboration.

Lenin had long held that the revolution in Russia could never be carried out by, literally, the masses of the people. He differed profoundly from both the rival sects of revolutionaries, the Social Revolutionaries and the Mensheviks, as to the correct interpretation of the Revolution of February 1917, which they accepted as a "bourgeois" revolution, but which he insisted on making into a socialist revolution. But Lenin never believed that the actual transformations of social structure involved in the socialist revolution that he desired could be effected either by the hordes of peasants, whether still grouped in villages, or driven off their little holdings; or even by a mass movement in the cities. In Lenin's view, the socialist revolution could be carried into effect only by the long-continued efforts of a relatively small, highly disciplined and absolutely united party of professional revolutionists (which became the Communist Party), acting persistently on the minds of what he called the proletariat, by which he always meant the manual-working wage-earners in the factory and the mine, in mere alliance with the vastly more numerous, but for this purpose inert, peasantry, whether poor, middling or relatively well-to-do.

Thus Lenin expected and meant the social transformation itself to be, like all social changes, designed and promulgated by a minority, and even by only a small minority of the whole people. On the other hand, he had in view no such personal *coup d'état* as Louis Napoleon perpetrated in December 1851. He steadfastly refused to countenance any attempt at an overthrow of the Kerensky Government until he was convinced that an actual majority of the manual-working wage-earners in the factories of Leningrad and Moscow had become converted to the support of the growing Bolshevik Party. It may, indeed, be said that all three stages of the Russian revolution, and, most of all, that of October 1917, enjoyed wide popular support, whilst the last was effected by a widespread upheaval among the city populations, supported by the mass of the disintegrating soldiery, and willingly acquiesced in by such of the peasantry as became aware of what was happening. The Russian revolution may therefore fairly be described as democratic rather than dictatorial.

But Lenin had long pondered over what Marx had come to realise after 1848, that it was much more difficult to maintain a revolutionary government than to put it into office. Whilst believing firmly in government by the people, much more firmly and more sincerely than most parliamentary democrats of the time, Lenin knew that the revolutionary enthusiasm of the mass of the people quickly subsides. The force of old habits of thought is rapidly reasserted. Long before the new government could possibly effect any improvement in material conditions, there must inevitably be an ebbing of the tide. Reactionaries within the city and without would promptly influence the mob, as well as the timid *petite bourgeoisie*, to sweep away a government which had brought only disillusionment. Hence it was indispensable that, if the revolution was to be maintained, there should be no immediate resort to popular election of the executive government. The members of the Constituent Assembly were accordingly promptly sent about their business, and all attempts to maintain their position were drastically suppressed by force. Pending the formulation of a constitution, Lenin and his colleagues undoubtedly ruled the state as an autocratic junta, ruthlessly suppressing all opposition irrespective of the momentary popular feeling, whatever it was. The peasants, whom it was impracticable to consult, were induced to acquiesce by being left free to continue the anarchic seizure of the landlords' estates, and their redistribution among all those belonging to the village. To please the soldiery as well as the urban proletariat, the war was brought to an end as speedily as possible, on whatever terms could be obtained from the triumphant German army. Everything, even popular control, was temporarily sacrificed to the maintenance in power of an executive resolute enough, and strong enough, to prevent a popular reaction. This was the heyday of what had been foreseen as "the dictatorship of the proletariat." Lenin was quite frank about it. "The essence of dictatorship," he had written, "is to be found in the organisation and discipline of the workers' vanguard, as the only leader of the proletariat. The purpose of the dictatorship is to establish socialism, to put an end to the division of society into classes, to make all the members of society workers, to make the exploitation of one human being by another for ever impossible. This end cannot be achieved at one stride. There will have to be a transitional period, a fairly long one, between capitalism and socialism. The reorganisation of production is a difficult matter. Time is requisite for the radical transformation of all departments of life. Furthermore, the power of custom is immense; people are habituated to a petty-bourgeois

and bourgeois economy, and will only be induced to change their ways by a protracted and arduous struggle. That was why Marx, too, spoke of a transitional period between capitalism and socialism, a whole epoch of the dictatorship of the proletariat.”* Nor was this authoritarian control of the transition period to be in any sense partial or half-hearted. What Lenin meant by the oft-quoted phrase is clear. “The dictatorship of the proletariat,” he said, “is a resolute, persistent struggle, sanguinary and bloodless, violent and peaceful, military and economic, pedagogic and administrative, against the forces and traditions of the old society. The force of habit of the millions and tens of millions is a formidable force.”†

But this autocratic executive action of the transition period had nothing to do with the constitution, which was adopted for the RSFSR at the earliest possible moment. Historical students habitually think of representative institutions, especially when based on popular election, as providing a check upon autocratic executive action. But every politician knows that there is no more powerful bulwark of a government than representative institutions which provide it with popular support. Lenin and his colleagues, whilst summarily dismissing the Constituent Assembly, actually hurried on the enactment of a constitution, deliberately as a means of strengthening the central executive authority. For their purpose there was no need for the constitution to create a dictatorship. Indeed, as enacted by the Fifth All-Russian Congress of Soviets on July 10, 1918, within nine months from the seizure of power, this Fundamental Law contained no trace of anything that could possibly be termed a dictatorship. It vested “all power in the soviets,” directly chosen by the people. Each soviet freely chose its delegates to the district and provincial councils, and these finally to a national assembly, which appointed not only the Cabinet of Ministers but also a standing Central Executive Committee and its presidium to control them. And though the city populations were given

* Lenin, *Works*; Russian edition, vol. xvi, pp. 226-227; adopted by Stalin in his “Problems of Leninism” in *Leninism*, by Josef Stalin, Russian edition, 1926; English translation, 1928, vol. i, p. 27.

† *The Infantile Disease of Leftism in Communism*, by N. Lenin (1920); English edition, 1934. Marx had clearly predicted a prolonged transition period. “Between the capitalist and communist systems of society lies the period of the revolutionary transformation of one into the other. This corresponds to a political transition period, whose state can be nothing else but the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat” (from Marx’s “Critical Analysis of the Gotha Programme of the German Social Democratic Party,” translated in *Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx*, by Sidney Hook, 1933, p. 255).

proportionately larger representation than the peasantry—at about twice the rate—the numerical preponderance of the rural population was so enormous—more than four times that of the cities—that the delegates deriving their mandates ultimately from the village soviets at all times constituted the majority of the All-Union Congress of Soviets.

It is difficult to assert that the system of popular soviets and indirect election was deliberately chosen by Lenin or anyone else. This was the form into which representative institutions inevitably flowed in the Petrograd and Moscow of 1917, whilst the peasantry knew no other. But we may well believe that Lenin was alive to the fact that, whilst this “soviet system” satisfied the popular aspirations and provided for the constitution an invaluable basis of direct election on the widest known franchise, this same system gave the national executive the necessary protection against being swept away by a temporary wave of popular feeling. The soviet system left no room for a referendum, or even for a parliamentary general election. It was the reverse of government by the mob! The very multiplication into millions of the election meetings and the interpolation of tier upon tier of councils, gave the fullest opportunity for the persuasive action of the highly disciplined companionship into which the Bolshevik party was shaped. We may say that, if the “dictatorship of the proletariat” continued after 1918 to be indispensable for the maintenance of the revolutionary government, as was undoubtedly thought to be the case, it was perpetuated, not in the representative structure, which might fairly claim to be a particular species of popular constitution, in fact just as truly “democratic” as the parliamentary government of Great Britain or the United States; but in the actual use made by the executive, with the aid of the Communist Party, of the powers entrusted to it under the constitution. Any government, whatever the form of the constitution, can use the powers entrusted to it in a manner that people will term dictatorial. As democrats confess with shame, it is undeniable that governments, professedly the most democratic, in countries enjoying the blessings of parliamentary government and universal suffrage, have, on occasions, in peace as in war-time, distinguished themselves by their drastic use of force, and even of physical violence, against their opponents, just like the most dictatorial of the personal dictators that history records. Thus, if we must interpret the “dictatorship of the proletariat,” as exercised in the USSR since 1918, we might say that it is not in the constitutional structure, nor even in the working of the soviets and the ubiquitous representative system, that anything

like autocracy or dictatorship is to be found, but rather in the activities that the constitution definitely authorises the executive to exercise.

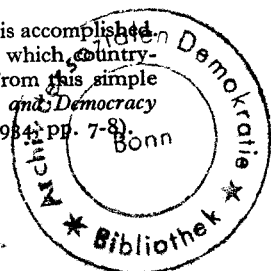
Is the USSR an Autocracy?

How far, and in what sense, the habitual action of the executive government of the USSR is in the nature of autocracy we have now to examine. A government is usually said to be an autocracy, or a dictatorship, if the chief authority enacts laws or issues decrees without submitting them beforehand to public discussion and criticism by the people themselves or their authorised representatives in order to be guided by their decision. This safeguard of debate can, of course, only be obtained in the case of fundamental or important legislation. It would plainly be impracticable, in any populous country, to submit for public discussion the thousands of separate decisions that every government has to take from day to day throughout the year. In the USSR, as we have seen, the amount of public discussion of government decisions, before they are finally made, is plainly very considerable. From the trade union or co-operative society or village meetings, up to the frequent sessions of the Central Executive Committee (TSIK) and the biennial All-Union Congress of Soviets, the systematic discussion of public affairs, from one end of the USSR to the other, and in terms which are regularly communicated to the highest authorities, appears, to the citizen of the western world, simply endless.* But,

* " Under what form shall social ownership be manifested—municipal, federal or voluntary co-operative? Which industries are better handled by state-appointed managers? Which by small groups of workers selecting their own management? What relations shall exist between various forms of socially owned production, between city and rural districts? What relative attention shall be given to each of a thousand factories, trades, localities? Over this daily stuff of government, discussion and struggle goes on; and change and experiment. . . . Political life in rural districts starts around the use of the land. Sixty peasants in council—the collective farm of a small village—meeting with the representatives of the township [(rayon) land] department, or the farm expert from the tractor station, to draw up their ' farm plan.' Number of households, of people, of horses, ploughs, tractors, extent and type of land, must be included. The plan must take account of the little community's food and fodder needs, the past crop rotations, the marketable crop recommended by the State for their locality. Certain general directions come down from the central Commissariat of Agriculture, filtered through the provincial [oblast] land office, and adapted to their region; a two per cent. increase in grain, or a rise in industrial crops is asked for. The sixty peasants in council consider by what concrete means they will expand or rearrange their fields for all these purposes; discussion

in addition, there are occasions on which the highest legislative and executive authorities will publicly call upon the whole population to help in the solution of a difficult problem of government. We may cite two remarkable examples. In October 1925, after seven years' experience of the great freedom in sex relations which the revolution had inaugurated, when the proposals of the People's Commissar for Justice for an amendment of the law as to marriage were brought before the Central Executive Committee (TSIK), a heated controversy arose. What did this practically supreme legislature do? It resolved to submit the draft law, which excited so much interest, for discussion by the whole people throughout the length and breadth of the USSR. "The whole country," we are told, "was shaken to its depths by the question. In countless discussion meetings—from gatherings of thousands of workers in the large cities to the tiny debates in the peasant [village] reading-rooms—the separate points of the new draft were threshed out again and again. The People's Commissariat [for Justice] received reports of more than 6,000 meetings of this kind, but, of course, the number of debates actually held was much larger. The point about which the discussion chiefly revolved was the question whether an unregistered, so-called 'factual' marriage should be placed in its legal consequences on an equality with one that had been legally registered. . . . There were, in the Soviet Union, some 80,000 to 100,000 couples whose 'marriages' in no wise differed from those officially contracted, either in substance or form, except in the absence of registration. . . . The legal protection which the law provides in the case of registered marriages—which is of particular importance to the wife—ought certainly not to be withheld from the partners in these 'factual' marriages. A number of arguments were arrayed against this view. . . . But the other additional provisions and changes in the new code—the question of divorce, alimony and women's property—were also fiercely contested . . . especially . . . the provision of the new law that women's domestic work should be placed on an equal footing with men's work. . . . The discussion brought [to the Government] a flood of letters, largely from working women, as is usually the case in such circumstances in Russia. . . . The general discussion of the new marriage law lasted a whole year: doubtless the first

after discussion takes place all winter through till the 'plan' is accomplished. Consciously they are settling problems of government on which country-wide, province-wide, nation-wide plans will be issued. From this simple base all other tasks of government spring" (*Dictatorship and Democracy in the Soviet Union*, by Anna Louise Strong, New York, 1934, pp. 7-8).



case in which a whole people, a people of 160 millions, made a law for itself, not through elected representatives [nor yet, we may add, by mere assent or dissent to a finished law formally announced to them on referendum], but by all expressing their opinion. And when, in December 1926, the draft (revised in the light of the opinions popularly expressed) was introduced for the second time in the TSIK . . . the debate raged once more before it was finally decided, and for the last time the various opinions clashed." The new draft was adopted by a large majority, and came immediately into force (on January 1, 1927).*

The popular discussion on the marriage law concerned a matter in which the people's interest was probably more intense than that of the legislators. We therefore take as a second example a difficult problem of statesmanship, in which only persons of trained and well-informed judgment could usefully pronounce an opinion. We have already described in our section on Collective Farms†how the problem arose. The momentous decision to solve the problem of the national food supply mainly by what has been called the Second Agrarian Revolution—the brigading of the millions of individual peasants into some hundreds of thousands of collective farms, and the "liquidation of the kulaks as a class"—was not taken until after more than two years of public discussion and heated controversy, as well as long-continued debate in the legislative bodies. Moreover, the decision eventually arrived at, and announced by Stalin in 1928, was not exactly any one of the proposals which had been put forward at the outset of the debate in which the whole thinking and reading population, and not merely the members of the Communist Party, had been participating. It was itself the outcome of the debate, combining what seemed to be the best features of several of the proposals with safeguards against the dangers which discussion had revealed. Our own conclusion is that, if by autocracy or dictatorship is meant government without prior discussion and debate, either by public opinion or in private session, the government of the USSR is, in that sense, actually less of an autocracy or a dictatorship than many a parliamentary cabinet.

In whose Interest does the Government act?

There is, however, yet another view of the much-debated phrase, the Dictatorship of the Proletariat, which must not be overlooked ;

* See *Woman in Soviet Russia*, by Fannina W. Halle, 1933.

† In *Soviet Communism*, Chapter III, Part I.

and which may well be thought to be wholly applicable to the government of the USSR from 1917 to 1927, and, in a wider sense, to that of the present day. It may be suspected that, when socialists or communists talk about the Dictatorship of the Proletariat, with some "dynamic passion" in "downing" a former ruling class, what they really mean is a government which, irrespective of its form, provides a strong and resolute executive, acting unhesitatingly in the interests of the manual-working wage-earning class. When such socialists or communists talk about the Dictatorship of the Bourgeoisie (or of the Capitalist), it is clearly not the form of the government that they have in mind, but merely its strong and resolute administration in the interests of the proprietary class. In the same sense, it is exactly accurate to describe the government of the USSR, at any rate from 1917 to 1927, as a Dictatorship of the Proletariat, meaning the urban or industrial manual-working wage-earners. Since 1928, that government may be deemed to have in view also the interests of the kolkhosniki, the owner-producers in agriculture who have joined together in collective farms. Perhaps the scope of the word proletariat is becoming enlarged, so that it now includes all those, whether mechanics or agriculturists, who will admittedly be qualified for citizenship of the future "classless state."

A New Social Form?

We add a final comment. We have discussed, as a current controversy, the question whether the government of the USSR is a dictatorship or a democracy. But there is no more fertile source of error in sociology, as in any other science, than posing a question in the terms of ancient categories, or even of yesterday's definitions. Can we wisely limit our enquiries by such alternatives as "aristocracy, oligarchy and democracy"; or "dictatorship versus democracy"? History records also theocracies, and various other "ideocracies," in which the organised exponents of particular creeds or philosophic systems have, in effect, ruled communities, sometimes irrespective of their formal constitutions, merely by "keeping the conscience" of the influential citizens. This dominance may be exercised entirely by persuasion. The practical supremacy at various times of the Society of Jesus in more than one country was of this nature. The Communist Party of the USSR frankly accepts the designation of "keeper of the conscience of the proletariat." Have we perhaps here a case—to use a barbarous

term—of a “creedocracy” of a novel kind, inspiring a multiform democracy in which soviets and trade unions, co-operative societies and voluntary associations, provide for the personal participation in public affairs of an unprecedented proportion of the entire adult population? The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics does not consist of a government and a people confronting each other, as all other great societies have hitherto been. It is a highly integrated social organisation in which, over a vast area, each individual man, woman or youth is expected to participate in three separate capacities: as a citizen, as a producer, and as a consumer; to which should be added membership of one or more voluntary organisations intent on bettering the life of the community. Meanwhile, leadership is carried on by a new profession, organised, like other professions, as a voluntarily enlisted and self-governing unit; the only part of the constitution of Soviet Communism, by the way, that has no foundation in any statute. In short, the USSR is a government instrumented by all the adult inhabitants, organised in a varied array of collectives, having their several distinct functions, and among them carrying on, with a strangely new “political economy,” nearly the whole wealth production of the country. And when, in addition, we find them evolving a systematic philosophy and a new code of conduct, based upon a novel conception of man’s relation to the universe and man’s duty to man, we seem to be dealing with something much greater than a constitution. We have, indeed, to ask whether the world may not be witnessing in the USSR the emergence of a new civilisation.

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