

# *The American* MERCURY

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## CAN STALIN'S RUSSIA GO DEMOCRATIC?

*The fact that Russia, a completely dictatorial country, is on the United Nations side of the war against Germany is a paradox that raises both high hopes and profound misgivings. Can the Soviet régime under Joseph Stalin undergo an internal revolution — or evolution — that would give Russia democracy, at least in the American sense? Because the political future of Russia is a matter of the greatest significance to the whole world, we are pleased to present two sharply contrasting answers to the question. — THE EDITORS.*

*Yes —* BY ARTHUR UPHAM POPE

CAN the *United States* become really democratic? This is a question that the Russians might and probably are asking today. But we cannot say whether the United States, Russia or any other nation is or can become democratic unless we ourselves are quite clear what democracy really is.

We used to assume that democracy and our own form of government were identical. Democracy, however, was not an American invention nor is it in any sense a unique American achievement. Indeed, if one were to take contemporary political debate seriously, it would seem that democracy is

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not working in the United States and that we might any day lose what we have. The President has been denounced by his political opponents as a dictator, charged with trying to purge Congress, demoralize the Supreme Court and set up a lifetime personal rule. If the Hearst-McCormick-Patterson press were to be believed, the scheduled Congressional elections of 1942 were to be set aside. Even a high-ranking bishop said if we ever got a million men under arms, "we would never be able to return to the ideals of democracy and a free people."

The disfranchisement of the Negroes in many sections, the operations of the poll tax, the pressure groups and rackets that often defy the will and interests of the majority — all this and more can be cited to prove that the United States itself, after one hundred and fifty years of this lively experiment, has not yet succeeded in becoming a perfect democracy. The achievement of democracy takes time, requires vigilant and continuous service, hard and honest thinking. National democracy cannot be had merely by multiplying the New England Town Meeting by a million and then standing pat. New problems, new magnitudes and complications require new forms.

Democracy is not a gift but a challenge, not a fact but a process, not an achievement but an ideal.

There are, moreover, many ways of complying with the forms of political democracy but cheating on the substance. The essential or potential democracy of a nation cannot be fairly judged by the political practice of any given moment. It is the nation's fundamental ideal and the direction of its development that determine whether or not the nation is on its way to becoming democratic. Thus viewed, we can with confidence expect Russia to become a full-fledged democracy.

If Russia has not been rapid in developing the final forms of the democratic process, it is because she has envisioned democracy in a large way and has always, partly because of practical urgencies and partly because of her realistic logic, placed a prior value on social amelioration, actually the goal of democratic process everywhere, which Russians think can afterwards be permanently secured by the apparatus of political democracy. She has already attained economic democracy, democracy of education, full democracy between the sexes, and the very important ethnic democracy. In Russia racial discrimination and dissension are

unknown. The legal and social equality basic to democracy have actually been achieved. The next step, full political democracy, cannot be long postponed.

The democratic ideal is deep in the Russian character and even under the Tsars found expression in basic institutions like the village *mir*, and in the democratic county councils like the *zemstvos*. Moreover, those who know Russia know her capacity for self-criticism. The fury with which the shop committees can indict management; the sharp ridicule of bureaucracy, the outspoken criticisms of some of the government departments are signs of an alert and increasingly vocal public opinion. The Stalin régime operates through a superb system of information and reports that bring to the Kremlin the needs, the state of mind, the hopes of the people; and decisions are taken, not in tyrannical caprice, but after long, patient, open-minded discussions with those best qualified to advise. These are all elements that favor assumption of full democracy.

The basic determination of the Russians to have a voice in their own government is illustrated by an amusing incident recounted by Albert Rhys Williams:

I found myself in a far away Russian

village where an emissary from Moscow was persuading the peasants to install a radio loud-speaker. As a final argument he said, "Put in a loud speaker, and then you won't have to take *my* word as to what Stalin and Kalinin are saying in Moscow. You will be able to hear for yourselves." "Very good, Comrade talker," interjected an old, long-bearded peasant. "But will this new contraption talk backwards? Will they, in Moscow, be able to hear what we are saying in the villages?"

## II

Russia is still a young and growing nation, a nation on the march, continually developing. Even the old Russia was not static. The revolution itself was not the sudden crash of flame and thunder that it seemed; the storm had long been gathering, and out of suffering, wrath and titanic ambitions, plans for a new order were steadily emerging; passion and turmoil were gradually rationalized and programmed. Its ideals were based on Russian experience and tradition, even its very violence was characteristic, and the exalted vision of a free and prosperous humanity which animated its sincere founders was typically Russian.

This combination of the Russian character and the spirit of change — growth-energy, the biologists call it — is a most significant but

insufficiently stressed feature of Soviet Russia today. For while the Soviet régime holds faithful to its socialist ideal, broadly conceived, yet it is steadily adapting its program to the realities, and the last twenty-five years have seen immense and truly fundamental changes.

Many of the original slogans of the revolution have been silenced. The rigidities of Marxian formulae have been relaxed; world revolution has been given up; Russia has become increasingly nationalistic, patriotic, disciplined, flexible and contemporary.

Moreover, the democratic ideal has been expressly formulated and endorsed and, further, made a feature of foreign policy. The people are growing in responsibility and sense of participation. This process is certain to be expedited at the end of the war. It was Lenin who demonstrated that great wars are the precursors of revolution and favor expanding liberties. To suppose that this process will be halted is to deny the plain teaching of history and Russian history in particular.

The direction of this development is forecast and controlled by the pledges of the new Soviet constitution. Here is the evidence, indeed the proof, that Stalinist Rus-

sia can and will become democratic. It is Stalin's own handiwork, quite as much as the Declaration of Independence was the work of Jefferson. Here is one of the great democratic documents, less democratic at a number of points than our own constitution; definitely more democratic at others.

It affirms throughout the sovereignty of the people, it acknowledges and proclaims the authority of the common man. It provides that all the natural resources of the country plus the principal means of production should "belong to the whole people" (Article 6), but that individuals have the right "to personal ownership of their incomes from work and of their savings" (Article 10) and personal property, including a plot of land and minor agricultural equipment (Article 7). Furthermore, each State in the Soviet Union is accorded the right "freely to secede" (Article 17).

### III

What are universally regarded as the basic forms of political democracy are guaranteed in the most positive terms. Equality of all before the law is assured. All citizens, including women, are guaranteed equality "irrespective of their nationality or race, in all spheres of

economic, state, cultural, social and political life" (Article 123). Similarly, the citizens of the USSR are guaranteed by law "freedom of conscience" and "freedom of religious worship" (Article 124), inviolability of person, the home and the right of asylum (Arts. 127, 128, 129).

Again, citizens are guaranteed (Article 125) "freedom of speech; freedom of the press; freedom of assembly"; and with the extraordinary realism that has marked the continuous development of the Soviet Union, the citizens are assured the means for implementing these rights — "freedom of street processions and demonstrations, printing presses, stocks of paper, public buildings, the streets, communications facilities and other material requisites for the exercise of these rights," the want of which has often in the western democracies frustrated the expression of the public will, and stifled the voice of the minority.

Of course, it will be said that Russia is a one-man and one-party government. It is, in certain particulars, but the one-party system is not required by the constitution and people who are promised freedom of speech, assembly, security of person, property, and the means to implement their opinions, certainly

will have the power to make such changes in that system as they wish.

Here, then, is a document which, if lived up to, will provide a democracy as ample and as real as any in the world. But why was not the constitution put into full effect when promulgated in 1936? For the simple reason that Russia felt herself already at war. As Hitler said, "War begins long before the actual fighting." For ten years Russia has known that she would have to fight Germany for her very existence. She has also known that she had no chance of success unless she could industrialize with unprecedented speed which would require superhuman anguished efforts on the part of all. If industrialization and other urgent forms of preparation did save Russia, they knew that it would be by such a small margin that any slowing up or diversion because of political dissensions or even discussions by the Russians, who are great talkers, might be fatal.

And so, as is inevitable and right in times of grave national peril, certain constitutional guarantees were suspended, just as they have been in Great Britain and the United States, and a severe centralized control took all the responsibilities and made all the important decisions.

Never has a government given its citizens a pledge more specific or so irrevocable as the Soviet constitution. It even anticipated the demand of the Russian people for full participation in government, and it was presented to them with a ceremony, a thoroughness and an enthusiasm which thrilled the entire nation. From one end of the land to the other there were impressive celebrations. Elaborate and costly copies are to be seen in every community and village. The Russians know their constitution, on the whole, better than we know ours.

#### IV

The constitution, moreover, is a contract with the people sealed with their blood. No mind can describe nor heart comprehend the vast and infinite sufferings of the Russian people in this war. Probably not less than fifteen million people have been done to death, most of them in the very extremities of anguish. Russia's lands have been devastated, her cities wrecked, her populations tortured and massacred.

The world has never seen a national effort so vast, so complicated, yet so genuinely unified as that which the Russian people have put

forth in the present conflict. Could there be more overwhelming proof that the government of Soviet Russia rests firmly upon the will of the people? As Winston Churchill proclaimed in his Quebec speech of August 31: "No government ever formed among men has been capable of surviving injuries so grave and cruel as those inflicted by Hitler upon Russia." Powerfully established as it is, nonetheless, neither the Soviet régime nor any other government could default on such a pledge as that given by the constitution without inviting destruction. The Russian people now know how to wage war as no nation on earth — not even the Germans. They are thoroughly armed, even almost to the children, and will not be gainsaid or cheated of their hopes even if anyone so wished.

The Russophobes protested that Stalin was not supported by the people, that he would not trust them with arms, that he would not dare to take on himself the responsibility for the sufferings and disasters that war would bring. They were wrong in every respect, and will again be equally wrong if they imply that reaction and suppression are to be the rewards of the Russian people; and that the forward liberalization which is the trend of the Soviet régime and the

clear indication of Russian history is now to be frustrated.

We have been consistently wrong about Russia. We once believed that Lenin and Trotsky were German agents; that Lenin died eighteen times in one year; that Russia was a bedlam of criminal lunatics slaughtering millions of the intelligentsia.

We even believed the coarse joke about the nationalization of women; naïvely thought that we could remedy things by a blockade which brought thousands to their death while our food stores piled up almost in sight of the starving; that military intervention would help; and that the Soviet régime, anyway, was going to collapse — a fantasy which survived for a great many years.

Few believed that Russia, supposed to be a nation of illiterate, indolent and drunken *muzhiks*, constitutionally and incurably non-mechanical, could ever be industrialized. Well, it has and right thoroughly, too. We believed, and ranking military officials declared, that Russia would be overwhelmed by Germany in three weeks — then six weeks — ten weeks — three months — that Stalin was done for; that Moscow would fall was proclaimed by our own Assistant Military Attaché; that Stalingrad would

hold out few imagined; that Russia could mount a formidable winter offensive and then an even greater summer offensive also was greeted with equal incredulity.

The United States was astonished at the success of the Moscow conference. Even Secretary of State Hull said it went way beyond expectations. But the Moscow conference was in complete accord with Soviet policy, and our expectations were not very generous or realistic. Then came Teheran, which provided further proof of that lack of realism and of generosity.

For twenty-five years we have continuously sold Russia short and on nearly every occasion we have been wrong; and we, as well as Russia and the whole world, have thereby lost immeasurably. We can no longer afford to make such mistakes. Had we fully understood and respected Russia ten years ago as much as we do now, had we cooperated with good will and mutual confidence, the war could have been averted.

No enduring or satisfactory peace is possible without good will and cooperation between Russia and the United States. We must not repeat our previous errors by doubting that Stalin's Russia can go fully and truly democratic. As Captain

Eddie Rickenbacker said, after an extensive tour of the Soviet Union, "Russia is on her way to becoming the world's greatest democracy" — *unless*, we might add, America should get there first.

*No* — BY WILLIAM HENRY CHAMBERLIN

CAN Stalin's Russia go democratic? My answer is an emphatic No. I submit that by no fair or reasonable definition could Stalin's régime, with its highly perfected totalitarian setup, be considered a democracy. And I consider it extremely improbable that Russia under Stalin's rule will ever become a democracy.

I am not inclined to take the word of an absolute dictator that his régime is "democratic." When Mussolini, in an Italian encyclopedia, declared that "fascism is the purest form of democracy" it impressed me as a good item for the funnies. In precisely the same category is Stalin's comment, after the first national elections held under the provisions of the Soviet constitution of 1936: "Never in the world have there been such truly free and democratic elections." His foreign apologists don't dare claim that Russia now has political democracy; but the point is that Stalin does claim it — that's his strange idea of democracy.

The "elections" to which he referred in such lyrical terms were not elections at all, in the sense of permitting any freedom of choice between opposing political groups, or even opposing individuals. A single list of candidates, carefully handpicked by the ruling Communist Party, was put up to the voters. The procedure was about as democratic as the choice of a Fascist Chamber of Deputies or a Nazi Reichstag.

I do not conceive democracy as something that can be divorced from individual liberty. This identification of liberty with democracy was recognized when President Roosevelt stated America's war aims in terms of Four Freedoms. Officially Stalin has subscribed to the Four Freedoms. But words in such matters are meaningless. How far are the Four Freedoms a working reality in the Soviet Union at the present time?

1. *Freedom of speech*, with its logical accompaniments, freedom of the press, of election, of trade-

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