

How Soviet Democracy Worked in the 1930s

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...In December of 1936 the Russian Communist Party was to hold its annual election of officers. Until then nominations and elections to Communist Party posts had always been openly made. By this practice such members as might dislike some powerful office-holder often felt limited in expressing their opposition for fear of reprisal. The Central Committee decided to put its entire leadership to the test as to whether they were really acceptable to the membership. Those who were performing a useful public service would likely be re-elected and those who were simply holding on to a sinecure and a place of power would be hard put to hold on to their posts. For this they introduced the secret ballot.

The results were surprising. In some districts of the Party the whole leadership were swept out of office. In others there was severe criticism leveled against the leadership by a good-sized opposition vote although on the whole, the national leadership of the Party received a resounding endorsement. The party felt greatly refreshed by the new people elected to office and the elimination of those who had become hardened bureaucrats and were no longer welcome to the rank and file.

The fight against bureaucracy had, ever since the establishment of the Soviet Government, been one of the chief self-imposed tasks of the more responsible Soviet leaders. Nepotism, favoritism and factional group practices had bred an unhealthy situation where, whenever one man got a post of responsibility in some industry or office, he would immediately bring in as his assistants all those whom he for one or another reason favored and gave them the most desirable posts under him. Often those people were not qualified and even where they were qualified the feeling of having a protector caused them to become slothful and bureaucratic. Besides which, the tendency was for such a key person to increase the staffs under him beyond the needs of the enterprise in which he was engaged both because he wanted he wanted to 'take care of' all his friends as well as because he felt the larger the staff under his control the greater his influence.

The problem finally became serious enough for the Government to take measures, which they did beginning in 1935. On one occasion it was discovered that there was a grave shortage of harvest hands. As against that it was estimated that there were at least 25,000 workers in Moscow offices who were not absolutely necessary to the continued functioning of the economy of the country. After an educational campaign each government trust was simply given a quota of office workers it would have to surrender to agricultural work. And with proper selection, 25,000 office workers were transferred from Moscow to places of production.

The battle to keep the nation on its toes against the creeping paralysis which the opposition on one hand deliberately tried to introduce and bureaucracy by its very existence tended to bring about was waged with particular severity in the popular elections to the All-Soviet Union Congress which followed the adoption of the new Soviet Constitution in December of 1935 [1936 – *transcriber's note*].

Watching that election close at hand it struck me as being curious that in all the discussions of Soviet Democracy and its comparison to democratic practices in other countries one rarely got a picture of how the channels of democratic expression of the people operated in their new electoral process.

Looking at it from 3,000 miles away it appeared as if there was one electoral ticket and the people were given the chance to vote 'yes or no' on it. This was indeed true of Nazi elections but it is completely a false picture when applied to the Soviet Union.

To start with, in the Soviet Union politics and elections are not the special duties of a political party. If one does not understand that paramount fact everything else is likely to be unclear. Nominations to public office are not made by a political party alone. The Communist Party does indeed put forward many candidates but so do the trade unions nominate independent candidates for political office; so do the cooperatives, the cultural organizations, the scientific academies, the youth organizations, whatever special women's organizations exist and every other organisation or institution that desires to. In short, nominations for office, which in our country stems only from political parties, in the Soviet Union stems from every possible people's organisation.

The second thing that must be understood about Soviet elections which give them their special democratic quality is that the emphasis

in the selection of candidates does not lie in the final vote but lies in the choosing of the nominees.

I had the privilege of observing the nominations and elections in the district in which I lived and worked from beginning to end. The particular election which I referred to was the All-Union elections for selecting of delegates to the All-Union Soviet Congress, that being equivalent of our choosing of members of the United States House of Representatives in Washington. Each institution in the congressional district in which I resided and worked held meetings of the people to nominate candidates. Meetings were held in factories. The Moscow university, which was in this district held a meeting. The Great Lenin Library held a meeting of its staff to put forward candidates. So did all of the cooperative stores associations that operated there. So did the trade union organizations, the Communist Party, the youth organizations, etc. etc. A great many candidates were put forward in each meeting. The procedure for each candidate was to stand up and give a brief biography of his life and reasons why he should or should not be nominated. It was considered a lack of civic responsibility for a candidate to decline out of hand. If he thought he should not be elected it was his duty to take the platform, provide a brief biography of his life, and give the reasons why he should not be accepted. Two whole weeks were set aside for this procedure. Some organizations met every night for the entire period and examined thousands of people who were put forward as candidates there. Each candidate had to submit to questions from the floor. At the end of that time one or more nominees were put in nomination for the entire district with the endorsement of the body choosing him or her.

In addition to putting forth nominees each group chose a number of delegates on a proportional representation basis to a congressional district conference. The congressional district conference also met for a period of about two weeks. The nominations were put before that body. The same procedure was gone through there, each nominee was examined, his or her qualifications weighed against other nominees and finally a vote taken by the delegated body for the final choice.

Frequently the body decided to accept not one nominee but two or three or even more. These nominees, after this thorough process of distillation were then submitted to the electorate for final voting. And the electorate thus, by popular majority, judged one of the candidates in that congressional district they desired to have represent them in the All-Union Soviet Congress.

From this it can be seen that far from lacking in democracy this process is a very democratic one in that it gives the common people a very direct hand in who is nominated and we know from our own electoral system that in the last analysis the selection of the nominee is the critical thing in any election.

In the election which I witnessed I saw nominees 'put through the mill' in a manner which would be very wholesome if applied to our own country. Their contributions and social service, their own interest in public affairs, their record of unselfish service, their own schooling and education and the degree to which they took advantage of self-improvement and social betterment were all gone into. Men of bad personal and moral conduct who offered themselves as candidates had their neighbors, friends and fellow workers who knew them well, discuss them right on the floor. It was in some respects our New England Town Meeting used on a colossal national scale covering an election in which 170 million people were involved. It is this process which provides the incentive for social service and social striving and interest in the public welfare by people throughout their country. In that election, for example, about half of the previous members of the All-Soviet Congress were not reelected. Many a smug big-wig including numerous Communists were surprised at the end of that election campaign to find themselves unwanted and many a person who was not even a member of the Communist Party who had given no thought to politics but who had served the public weal well out of sheer devotion to the people in their own professions or occupations or in some volunteer organisation found themselves members of the highest governing body, the new Congress of the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics. It is a new type of democracy and I would say it serves them very well.

Every generation must be vigilant concerning its own liberties. No people can guarantee the liberties of succeeding generations, liberties won can be lost again. Therefore mere mechanical electoral organisation is of itself no guarantee for all time that the liberties of the people will be assured, but insofar as any political structure can be so set up as to be most responsive to the moods and the needs of the people, I would say that the Soviet Union has made great strides forward in that direction.

But even the Soviet Union, as we were constantly reminded, was not an isolated entity living in a vacuum – it was part of the real world. West Europe and Asia were seething with the first battles of

the Second World War. There were things to do to help the embattled Spanish people, the underground movement in the Nazi dominated countries, the promotion of People's Front movements against the Nazis in the democratic countries and the growing anti-Japanese forces in China.

My primary interest was of course the United States. But the United States also does not live as an isolated entity in a vacuum and the future of our country was in no small measure being decided in Europe and in Asia. Like thousands of other Americans I decided to lend a hand where I could be useful. I was fortunate in being able to make almost a free choice.

Typed Manuscript

From: Sam Darcy Memoirs, Chapter XX, pp. 25-31, Tamiment Library, New York