

Corliss Lamont's 1952 Evaluation of Soviet Democracy

By MAX GORDON

IN THE LIGHT of the current reevaluation of the Stalin period in the USSR, it is instructive to call attention again to Corliss Lamont's Soviet Civilization, published in 1952.

Lamont, a careful and thorough scholar, is highly aware of the immense historic significance of the Soviet Revolution, sympathetic to its general development, while critical of violations of civil liberties and democratic procedures.

For present purposes, we will omit his sober tribute to the massive economic development of the USSR, its unprecedented cultural and educational progress, its great moral strength, and its historic peace policy.

Here we want to discuss his evaluation of civil liberty and democratic rights, and the probable line of development.

Lamont's thesis is that there have been many cruelties, injustices, persecutions, "unnecessarily harsh measures" in the course of development of the USSR. But, he writes in summary, "the objective verdict of coming generations will be that the Soviet Russians, during their first 35 years, laid the foundations of a great new civilization of enduring achievement and high promise, ranking in world historical significance with the outstanding civilizations of the past.

He believes that in some respects, Soviet democracy goes far beyond that established anywhere before in history. He notes, in this connection, "certain basic economic, social and cultural rights that had never

before been considered constitutional prerogatives of citizenship as such."

He includes the right to a job, to rest, to leisure, social security, medical care, education, maintenance in old age and sickness, equality of women, proper care of children and maternity care. And he has praise for the ethnic equality among the nations and national groups comprising the USSR.

The Soviet Constitution, he notes, also makes provision for a system of civil liberties. This, however, has not been put into effect. Many of the Soviet Union's actions "to preserve itself" have been "crude and cruel; blood flowed throughout the Russian land; purges and political persecutions took place; sometimes the innocent suffered along with the guilty. But the first socialist society in history survived, persevered and moved forward into the future."

WHAT is the source of this weakness, as Lamont sees it?

He writes, in summary: "Despotic practices inherited from Tsardom, the historical Russian pattern of exalting the community above individual rights, the long tradition—fostered by the Orthodox Church of the principle of unanimous agreement on important issues, the domestic turbulence and hatreds resulting from the greatest revolution in the history, the fear and actuality of foreign aggression, and the Marxist theory of proletarian dictatorship . . ."

Elsewhere he adds the backwardness of Russian life at the time of the revolution, 70 per-

cent illiteracy and lack of any knowledge regarding democracy.

He places much emphasis on the carry-over of the despotic practices of tsarism.

INTERESTINGLY, the great French historian of the early 19th century, Alexis DeToqueville, makes the same point regarding the French Revolution.

In his study of the Ancient Regime, DeToqueville wrote that the Revolution wanted "to make a clean sweep of the past," but many of the laws and administrative methods which had been suppressed in 1789 reappeared a few years later, much as some rivers after going underground reemerge at another point in new surroundings."

DeToqueville noted the men who made the Revolution were "shaped by the old order" and the effects remained with them.

But Lamont's major emphasis on the cause of the Soviet's harsh measures is the necessity to preserve the Revolution. To explain, he says, is not to excuse, and he believes there were many unnecessary cruelties and suppressions.

He also attributes much of the lack of democracy to the principle of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat. But one question that remains unanswered by him is whether it would have been possible to preserve the Revolution, under the difficult conditions he describes so well, without the Dictatorship of the Proletariat.

LAMONT wrote his book be-

fore the 20th Communist Congress in the USSR. Reviewing the Congress revelations concerning the Stalin period in the light of Lamont's observations, I would tend to draw these conclusions:

1) The 20th Congress and the discussion it opened concerning past practices represents a new stage in Soviet democracy. This is the subjective reflection of the objective fact that socialism is no longer surrounded by an overwhelmingly powerful foe. Hence the major factor hampering development of civil liberty has been removed.

2) This does not mean that limitations on civil liberties and democracy will be removed overnight. The excesses and brutalities of the Stalin period were made possible, though not caused, by deep-going historic conditions, objective and subjective. These conditions resulted in systematic practices that will take time to change.

The Soviet Union has indicated it is overhauling its judicial code, and Poland has indicated an overhaul of its parliamentary system. The men in Soviet leadership today have been trained in the Stalin period, however, and will not suddenly shed past practices, whether these were required by the objective situation or not.

3) The new stage in development of Soviet democracy has also initiated a new stage in the relations between the Soviet Union, other socialist lands and Marxist movements in capitalist

nations. The objective strength of socialism removes whatever need may have existed for Marxists elsewhere to accept uncritically everything that goes on in the USSR.

Moreover, exposure of the weaknesses of Soviet democracy and the specific circumstances out of which they arose, has compelled, or will compel, Marxist movements elsewhere to study the extent to which their thinking was conditioned by the specific factors in Soviet life, and the extent to which this distorted their theories and practices.

One prime example was the application of the theory of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat to the U. S. In our concept of the U. S. path to Socialism, American Marxists did not take into account the profoundly different character of the United States from tsarist Russia. Nor did we consider the vastly different circumstances under which the movement for socialism will develop here. Unquestionably, these errors helped to isolate us.

A fundamental re-study is necessary, though this does not mean throwing overboard the Marxist understanding of the class struggle.

There is no doubt that this new stage, both in the evolution of Soviet democracy and in the development of more mature, nationally-grounded Marxist movements, will speed our society in the direction of world socialism, a society far more democratic than any yet known.