

'Russia Since 1917,' By Prof. Schuman

RUSSIA SINCE 1917. By Frederick L. Schuman. Knopf. New York, 508 pp. \$6.50.

By ROBERT FRIEDMAN

The test of any new book on Soviet history — there have been so very, very many — is or at least should be its success in depicting the many-sided and still-evolving nature of Soviet society.

The Soviet Union is not "only" the Stalin cult or "only" the rapid industrialization of a peasant country. It is a complex structure of great achievements and shortcomings both. Professor Schuman's new book is well worth reading because it recognizes that both exist and although he may not succeed in pleasing either blind detractors of the Soviet Union or its inflexibly uncritical defenders — Prof. Schuman attempts to explain the origin and significance of each.

Schuman is not stingy with his praise for the achievements of the Soviet Communists and Soviet peoples in creating a modern society. And this was achieved not by the knout but by the voluntary effort of an entire people as he indicates:

"... Almost all Soviet citizens participated in planning, contributed to fulfillment in proportion to their abilities, and shared in the results. Nothing remotely comparable to this endeavor had ever been before attempted. Most outside observers were therefore certain that the effort would fail. But in all that was decisive for the future, Party and people carried through their self-imposed tasks to success.

"This gigantic design for change can scarcely be depicted in statistics. It has tangible meaning only in terms of the experiences of millions, sharing in the excitement of achievement and in the deprivations required to translate fantastic blueprints into fabulous actualities. A staggering human reality is mirrored but faintly in the obvious generalizations: the adventure led from illiteracy to literacy, from the NEP to socialism, from archaic agriculture to collective cultivation, from a rural society to a predominantly urban community, from general ignorance of the machine to social mastery of modern technology."

All of this is not new, of course. The tribute to Soviet Russia's phenomenal rate of development has been voiced before. But it is worthy of note not only because it is the current fashion to believe that the Soviet peoples were brain-washed and bullied into building socialism instead of being conscious, eager participants, but because it suggests that Professor Schuman in elsewhere criticizing Soviet shortcomings in the sphere of individual liberties is not doing so as a vengeful foe of the Soviet Union.

Thus, in discussing the "paradoxes" of the Soviet political structure, Schuman both lauds Soviet efforts to elevate the standards of the "backward peoples" of Central Asia and the Caucasus as "conforming to the highest ideals of Christianity and liberalism" and condemns both the manipulation and transfer of populations and boundaries from Moscow as a negation of the federalism proclaimed by the Soviet constitution. He adds, "In Stalin's last years, moreover, anti-Semitism and other forms of discrimination against minority peoples became a marked feature, despite semantic disguises of the official conduct of Soviet policy-makers."

Individual property rights; women's equality; health and education; social legislation embodying "the major social gains of the Revolution" including "free dental and medical service" are cited

among the rights of Soviet citizens regarded by Schuman as "more substance than shadow."

Against these he poses as failures or deficiencies the formal voting by Soviet citizens which "to Western liberals . . . is a travesty of representative democracy, since there can plainly be no effective freedom or representation or democracy in ritualistic exercises in unanimity," as well as the sweeping violations of individual liberties acknowledged by Khrushchev in his indictment of the Stalin era, at the 20th Congress of Soviet Communists.

Nevertheless, Prof. Schuman believes that the post-Stalin developments indicate and that, in fact, a changing Soviet society demands — "that the legal rights of Soviet citizens will be more and more adequately protected against arbitrary action; that decision — making in Party organs and government bodies will increasingly be based upon free discussion, debate, and voting (as in the first years of the Soviet regime) rather than upon dictation from above; and that popular 'elections' will cease to be formal exercises in the rituals of unanimity and will offer voters some choice among candidates."

The recent Soviet shakeup, in which Molotov, Malenkov and other high leaders of government and party were removed after closed-circle discussions of basic national policy from which the Soviet people were rigorously excluded to be informed only after the fact, demonstrated both the need for reform and the lag in bringing it about.

It may be shocking to read of veteran Soviet political figures being harshly branded as traitors. But it is the logic of a political structure so organized as to exalt the false fetish of unanimity which makes it impossible even for the men at the very pinnacle of Soviet power to debate or to oppose publicly decisions once these are made. For the absence of the right or opportunity to use the forum of free, national debate on public issues virtually decrees that, from time to time, defeated Soviet political leaders must be regarded, not naturally as in opposition on this or that policy, but as traitors and enemies.

Schuman emphasizes that such changes as must come are not likely to copy Western multi-party patterns but will rather be based both upon Russian traditions and Marxist teachings.

And he warns the West, proven wrong in earlier predictions of Soviet failure in war and in peace, not to sell the Soviet Union short in this, perhaps its greatest challenge to date, the achievement of a "relatively free and democratic system of public policy-making."

Offering many rewarding insights, Prof. Schuman's book is not however free from numerous over-glib and sweeping generalizations and some downright confusing contradictions.

When, for instance, he implies that the Soviet society "unquestionably" spells a total "denial of civil rights and human dignity," he extends acknowledged crimes and shortcomings to negate what other, less sympathetic observers of the Soviet Union have noted: that millions of Soviet citizens, little more than serfs and ciphers under Czarism, first found dignity under Soviet rule as literate individuals whose labor, health and rights (certain, if not, tragically, all) counted and mattered.

To deny Schuman's view out of hand is to perpetuate the blindness which kept most friends of the Soviet Union from recognizing the

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sins of Stalinist rule until Khrushchev ruthlessly ripped the blinders from their eyes. But to swallow Prof. Schuman's sweeping phrases is to fall into the trap — whose existence he himself is so careful to portray — of ignoring the complex interviewing of accomplishment and shortcoming in Soviet life.

Perhaps one of the most obvious examples of Prof. Schuman's tendency to pose one contradictory absolute against another occurs on a single page wherein he both asserts that the U.S. Congress would doubtless have "repudiated" the Marshall Plan had the Soviet Union agreed to participate and at the same time condemns the Russians, "bewitched by their dogmas," for rejecting participation and thus "an opportunity for constructive East-West collaboration."

Whatever one may think about the Communist attitude toward the Marshall Plan, obviously it was not an opportunity for East-West accord which was rejected, if Prof. Schuman's first assumption of Congressional intentions has any meaning.

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Although this review has not

dealt with it, much of Prof. Schuman's book necessarily deals with foreign policy matters. In this sphere it concludes hopefully that, despite vicissitudes, peaceful co-existence is certain to triumph over prospects and plans for a new war.

A one-volume work which attempts to narrate and interpret 40 years of turbulent history as this one does is bound to be guilty of compression and, at times, a frenetic pace.

Most Marxist readers (even those well aware that some Marxist doctrine does not stand up to current reality) will dissent strongly from Prof. Schuman's almost total disparagement of Marxist teachings as retaining any validity in the modern world. Others may raise a doubting eyebrow at his view that the similarities between U.S. and Soviet societies as they grapple with the problems of a complex, urban people in the nuclear age already do and will increasingly overshadow their distinguishing features.

"Russia Since 1917" remains, nevertheless, a stimulating study of Soviet history.