

What Educators Can Do About the U.S.-Soviet Relationship

ALEX MOLNAR

In the face of a possible nuclear war, American educators need to learn more about the Soviet Union and convey this information without prejudice to their students.

Most Americans probably know relatively little about the Soviet Union beyond the slogans and caricatures that now and then capture headlines. There is little reason to believe that a higher level of awareness exists among professional educators. Given this probable state of affairs, any proposal that schools begin to teach about the Soviet Union runs the risk of generating even more confusion and misinformation.

Considering the intense ideological passion surrounding the U.S.-Soviet relationship, educators can hardly be blamed if they want to avoid the subject altogether and stick to reading, writing, and arithmetic. Unfortunately, when we bypass this topic, we endanger ourselves and every citizen, especially if one believes that nuclear war between the U.S. and the Soviet Union could conceivably destroy the entire planet, and that the less the two countries know about each other, the greater the danger of nuclear war.

Establishing and maintaining a peaceful world involves complex political, economic, and cultural relationships. It is not solely an educational task. However, since one of the principal tasks of public education is to increase student awareness and understanding of the world and its problems to the extent that greater understanding can contribute to the goal of world peace, educators play a potentially important role.

What Can Educators Do?

Contributions that educators can make to increase U.S.-Soviet understanding fall into two complementary categories. First, we can work within our professional organizations (NEA, NCSS, AFT, ASCD, ATE, APGA, and so forth). Second, we can work in our districts, schools, and classrooms to find ways

that we, our colleagues, and our students can learn more about the Soviet Union and its relationship with the U.S.

Naturally, we can seek to increase our knowledge about the Soviet Union as a matter of personal interest. However, those of us who are members of professional organizations can attempt to influence those organizations to sponsor activities and lobby in support of governmental programs to increase international understanding in general, and U.S.-Soviet understanding in particular. Specifically, this might mean sponsoring symposia, establishing or expanding professional exchange programs and study tour opportunities, collecting and distributing resource materials about the Soviet Union with special reference to Soviet education, developing teaching materials designed to help students and teachers learn more about the Soviet Union, and using professional journals to circulate information about Soviet life and education.

In advancing such proposals, the emphasis should be on the need to have knowledge about the Soviet Union—its history, culture, traditions, and political, economic, and cultural institutions. For example, many educators might be professionally interested in how reading is taught in Soviet elementary schools, how their educational system is organized, how curriculum is determined, some of the typical instructional problems in Soviet schools, and so on.

Admittedly, because the U.S.-Soviet relationship is distorted by ideological prejudices, any attempt to learn more about the Soviet Union may be some-

Alex Molnar is Associate Professor, Department of Curriculum and Instruction, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.



what controversial. Many parents will be interested only in having their children learn why the Soviet Union is evil. Others will see any effort to learn about the Soviet Union as an attempt to introduce pro-Soviet propaganda in the schools. Course descriptions must be clearly stated to alleviate such concerns. Efforts to learn more about the Soviet Union should be, so far as possible, conducted without ideological presuppositions. This means that the position of educators interested in increasing their own and their students' understanding of the Soviet Union should be within the long-established U.S. educational tradition of free and open inquiry.

How Can It Be Done?

A fruitful model for educators to follow may be that of person-to-person contact among people with given cultural, scientific, or educational interests, within the context of a desire to increase the overall level of understanding between our two countries

Educational organizations that adopt this model should be prepared to resist the current tendency to use cultural, scientific, and athletic activities as political weapons.

Educators can work individually in their school districts and together within professional organizations to develop programs aimed at increasing U.S.-Soviet understanding. At the district or building level, possibilities include slide shows, panel discussions, debates, and presentations on the Soviet Union today and in history. Classroom activities might involve discussions of events in Soviet history, correspondence with the Soviet Embassy, and communication with pen pals. Emphasis should be on the development of U.S. and Soviet sources of information. Students might enjoy learning about Soviet schools, how Soviet children learn to read, and how career decisions are made in that country. A comparison of the same historical event in U.S. and Soviet textbooks may be particularly interesting.

Of course, the danger is that teachers will, unknowingly, impart whatever is ideologically in vogue as objective information about the Soviet Union. The best defense against this danger is for educators to think small (that is, not attempt grandiose projects), to admit it when they know relatively little about the Soviet Union, and to undertake projects that will enable them to learn *along with their students*.

To argue for more meaningful opportunities to learn about and understand the Soviet Union is controversial and sometimes politically difficult. Nevertheless, mutual ignorance, coupled with decreasing opportunities for scientific, cultural, and educational exchange between U.S. and Soviet citizens, contributes to hostility and suspicion that we can ill afford between two countries capable of destroying all life on earth. As educators, we can be neither pro- nor anti-Soviet in our efforts. We should, unquestionably, be pro-understanding and anti-ignorance. □

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