

Letters to the Editor

Soviet Commentaries on Two American Books

Washington, D. C.
July 22, 1958

Editor, *Educational Leadership*

Dear Sir:

You might be interested in Soviet commentaries on the Office of Education's *Education in the USSR* and on George S. Counts' *The Challenge of Soviet Education*, both of which you reviewed earlier this year.

The two Soviet critiques appeared in the December 1957 issue of *Narodnoe Obrazovanie (Public Education)*, a journal published monthly by the Ministry of Education of the RSFSR (Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic).

After some understandable gloating over the American reaction to the first two sputniks, the editors note some of what they term the U. S. Office of Education's "admissions about education in the USSR." These include the emphasis on science and mathematics, the use of scholarships and stipends to encourage students of technology, the nonexistence of a teacher shortage, the favorable teacher-pupil ratio, and the prestige allegedly enjoyed by teachers. The Russian article, entitled "Forced Acknowledgements," goes on to interpret the post-publication dispute between Mrs. Lowman, who prepared the initial draft of the book, and the Office of Education as evidence that "the American authorities would not tell the whole truth about education in the Soviet Union." Mrs. Lowman is quoted in particular as having denied the impression allegedly given in

the published version that the Soviet schools stress "the pure sciences and mathematics at the expense of the humanities." Also cited in the Russian article are: (a) a statement by Benjamin Fine in the *New York Times* on the "fantastic" Soviet achievements in all areas of education; (b) an article in the *Afro-American* contrasting Soviet tolerance with Central High School in Little Rock; and (c) an appeal by Theodore Huebener, Director of Foreign Languages in the Schools of the City of New York, for the teaching of more Russian in the United States.

Another journal article, "In Defiance of Scholarship and Common Sense," was written by one Professor N. Bernshtein. The lengthy article is introduced by a short editorial, which adequately explains the title. The editors describe Counts' *The Challenge of Soviet Education* as a:

... filthy slander of the Soviet land and Soviet education. For the preparation of his latest slanderous book Professor Counts, rather than make a personal trip to the Soviet Union, preferred to use various vile sources, including even the false testimony of those dregs of society, the enemies of socialism who have fled or been expelled from the Soviet Union. The Soviet reader angrily rejects Professor Counts' pitiable attempts to cast doubt, in defiance of common sense, upon the vast achievements of our people in the field of education.

Professor Bernshtein's article includes a pat explanation for Counts' "unscholarly" behavior:

The great victories of the Socialist system and of the anti-colonial movement engender a profound uneasiness and a burning hatred among the imperialist bourgeoisie. This uneasiness has taken a peculiar form in the book of Dr. George Sylvester Counts.

Bernshtein further criticizes Counts for having the "audacity" to express doubts about official Soviet statistics.

The tenor of the article is apparent also in a six-by-seven inch cartoon which pictures a sly-faced Counts dipping his pen into an inkwell labeled "slander," into which ink is dripping from wells higher up named "falsehood" and "mal-

ignity." The wells are in the form of ducks, that is, canards (which denote stories designed to deceive), and the cartoon is captioned "Professor Counts at Work."

Americans will hardly be surprised that a Soviet reviewer might disagree with American authors of books containing any criticism of the Soviet Union. The interest is in noting the form which that disagreement takes.

Sincerely yours,

RICHARD L. RENFIELD

Project Secretary, Educational
Policies Commission, NEA

Response to a Soviet Review

New York, New York
September 10, 1958

Editor, *Educational Leadership*:

Dear Sir:

First of all, I want to thank you for permitting me to send in a note on Professor Bernshtein's review of my book on Soviet education which appeared in *Narodnoe Obrazovanie*. I had already seen and read this review.

The review is typical of Soviet scholarship in all realms involving Communist politics and ideology. As Stalin said, "Education is a weapon whose effects depend on who holds it in his hands and who is struck with it." Khrushchev has not repudiated this conception of his mentor. This means, as Andrei Zhdanov, one of the foremost of Soviet leaders, told the assembled literary writers some years ago, that "all of our ideological workers are soldiers standing on the front line of fire." And teachers and educators belong to this category.

Bernshtein, whom I knew well, un-

doubtedly regards himself as such a soldier. Perhaps he is particularly sensitive on this score because he is guilty of having committed two serious pedagogical heresies in the course of his career. In the nineteen-twenties he was associated with a small group in Moscow who advocated the doctrine of "the withering away of the school" which was based on the Marxian theory of "the withering away of the state." In the early thirties the Central Committee of the Party declared the doctrine counter-revolutionary, sent the leader of the group, Shulgin, to a labor camp, and exiled Bernshtein for a period to a post in Tomsk, Siberia, where I saw him in the autumn of 1936.

He was also a leading pedologist. The reader will understand the meaning of this term if I say that the Soviet educators of that day regarded E. L. Thorndike as the outstanding pedologist in the United States. In 1936 the Central Committee abolished pedology by decree.

condemned it as a pseudo-science, and labeled it counter-revolutionary. Paul Blonsky, the foremost Soviet pedologist, disappeared, and his followers were required to shift to other fields of work. So Bernshtein has been compelled to traverse the long and difficult road to rehabilitation. No one who has understanding of the nature of a totalitarian state should judge him too harshly. He has merely done what was necessary for survival.

Bernshtein suggests that I should have made a visit to the Soviet Union before writing my "slandorous book." The reader may be interested in knowing that the North American Newspaper Alliance asked me in 1946 to go to the Soviet Union as a special correspondent for an indefinite period. I agreed to go, obtained an American passport, and applied for a Soviet visa. After waiting six months, John Wheeler, head of the news service, cabled Stalin on my behalf. He never received even an acknowledgement. I should add that my book has been criticised on the grounds that it relies too much on Soviet sources. It is true that for many years I have subscribed personally to six Soviet journals.

The review contains a statement about the present condition of the world which should be widely read and seriously pondered in America. This statement, which follows, gives the official Communist interpretation of the events of the past 40 years:

The mighty ideas of a new world to which the Great October Socialist Revolution gave birth are winning triumphantly the minds and the hearts of millions of people. Marching with the one billion population of socialist countries are approximately 700 million people in former colonial countries which

have now become independent, and 600 million in countries which are struggling for independence. Only about 400 million people comprise the population of the countries of the camp of imperialism. Today, as picturesquely expressed by Comrade Mao Tse-Tung, it is no longer the West wind that directs the East wind, but the East wind that directs the West wind.

On the whole I am quite satisfied with Bernshtein's review of my book. In fact, it is inversely the most complimentary review which the book has received. All doubts of the basic accuracy of the data and the essential authenticity of the interpretation have been removed. The review is another case of seeing American education through "The Soviet Looking Glass."¹

Sincerely,

GEORGE S. COUNTS

Emeritus Professor of Education
Teachers College, Columbia

University

EDITOR'S NOTE: On July 17, 1958, in San Francisco, California, George S. Counts received a very important award. It was the American Library Association's "Liberty and Justice Award" for *The Challenge of Soviet Education*, "adjudged the most distinguished book of 1957 in contemporary problems and affairs."

The jury was composed of Ralph McGill, of the *Atlanta Constitution*; Agnes E. Meyer, author and journalist, of Washington, D. C.; and U. S. Senator Paul H. Douglas, of Illinois. The award carried a cash prize of \$5,000.00.

¹ See a review of Dr. Counts' book on this topic by Professor Hubert Park Beck on page 131.

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