

The Cold War in the Curriculum

The two interpretive frameworks most often used in history textbooks can be biased and misleading in their treatment of U.S.-Soviet relations. Students need to be given the facts in order to understand America's role in the world.

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All historians express a viewpoint, account for events in terms of an interpretive framework, and develop a thesis that relates the past to present conditions. For this reason history is more a debate or a discourse than a neutral presentation of what happened, and the publication of new histories is always the occasion for much discussion and dialogue. Unfortunately, such is not the case with public school history textbooks, which claim to be "objective" and which strive to avoid controversy.

But if history textbooks claim objectivity, as histories they are not objective, nor can they be.

I recently analyzed ten popular United States and world history textbooks currently used in secondary schools.¹ I focused specifically on how these textbooks treat United States-Soviet relations—an issue of interest to educators and the general public at this time of mounting concern over the arms race and the possibility of a nuclear holocaust.²

The textbooks contained two dominant frameworks for interpreting United States-Soviet relations. The first and most common of these I call the "ideological" framework or perspective. It

treats the United States and the Soviet Union in terms of a struggle between right and wrong, freedom and totalitarianism, us and them. Such interpretations are ideological in that they simplify and distort social reality in such a way that, without engaging in direct falsehood, they consistently support one side of an issue or dispute, and discredit or ignore opposing viewpoints. Ideological portrayals of history deal in stereotypes and clichés, and appeal selectively to common-sense beliefs, national pride, and fear of the enemy.

The second framework I call the "real politik" perspective. It treats superpower relations more in terms of strategic interests, pragmatic reasoning, and a mutual struggle for domination. In this framework, (1) the viewpoint and reasoning of Soviet leaders is presented along with the reasoning of American leaders so that the Soviets are seen to have some legitimate concerns and reasons to fear the United States; (2) both sides in the cold war are depicted as acting largely in terms

of their pragmatic self-interests; and (3) some domestic political debate over the direction of American foreign policy is acknowledged.

Overall, the majority of these textbooks devoted considerable space to ideological explanations, with a ratio of about 5 to 1 over real politik explanations. However, there were significant differences among the textbooks as well. For example, some of them were consistently or exclusively ideological, while several others were over 50 percent real politik in orientation. Some textbooks occasionally interspersed real politik interpretations throughout a text that was basically ideological in its perspective. Perhaps this represents the results of co-authoring, or an attempt to update and balance texts by lessening their overtly ideological appearance.

The Ideological Framework

The ideological framework for understanding United States-Soviet relations is not a new one. Its themes are familiar to most Americans who have grown up since the early 1950s, when textbooks began adopting a more explicitly ideological and pro-American/anti-Soviet stance. Prior to the 1950s,

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The ideological framework treats relations between the U.S. and the Soviets as a struggle between good and evil.

social studies textbooks were heavily influenced by progressive thinking. This meant an emphasis on cooperation and understanding between the American and Soviet people and governments, and respect for the democratic and social ideals of the Russian revolution.

But as the cold war began to heat up, this progressive curriculum came under increasing attack, first from various right-wing groups, and eventually from liberals as well.⁵ Respectable groups such as the Anti-Defamation League urged educators to teach children about the evils of communism and Soviet plans for world domination, since "communism has to be defeated on whatever ground it seeks to occupy."⁶ William F. Russell, Dean of Teachers College, Columbia University, argued that an analysis of the postwar crisis "points to the supreme importance, in the better prosecution

of the cold war, of bringing every American into close relationship with the glorious history of his country. When he knows it he will thrill to it. He will sense that he is a part of it. He will make the sacrifices."⁷

Although in somewhat muted tones, this same basic perspective continues to dominate many history textbooks. There are a number of ways in which this ideology is presented. First, the Soviet Union is depicted as intent on world domination. For example, "It seemed clear after the [second world] war that the Soviets were still intent upon fostering communism throughout the world . . . to stir up dissention and revolution wherever and whenever it could. . . ." and "improved relations between the two powers does not mean that they [the Soviets] have given up the struggle to make communism supreme everywhere in the world." The Soviets, and communists

in general (the two categories tend to become conflated in some of the texts), are depicted as gaining power in Eastern Europe and the Third World by eliminating opposition, rigging elections, spreading propaganda, and "taking advantage of discontent and the desire for a higher standard of living."

Whether there is some validity to these charges is not at issue here. What makes these texts primarily ideological is their intent to simplify and distort a complex situation since events are presented in an uncontested, taken-for-granted manner, and the United States is not portrayed as an aggressor, as spreading propaganda, or as taking advantage of discontent—at least not in the textbooks that are most consistently ideological.

A second way that ideological textbooks distort reality and reinforce fears and hostilities is by consistently depicting Soviet leadership and the Soviet people in pejorative terms. One textbook claims: "the secretive and overly suspicious Russians were chiefly to blame" for the tensions of the cold war caused by poor communication. The same textbook says of Khrushchev: "At one moment he was full of talk about peace, at the next he was threatening to explode nuclear bombs. One historian has described Khrushchev as a mixture of Santa Claus and a wild, angry Russian bear."⁸ Soviet leaders are also characterized as lacking any sense of ethical or moral responsibility to keep their promises. One textbook notes that after America finally recognized the Soviet government in 1933, ". . . the Soviets did not keep their promise to stop their propaganda against the United States"; another remarks: "Stalin again and again violated the Atlantic Charter and the Yalta agreements."

The cold war ideology typifies the United States as the great protector of world freedom in the face of Soviet expansionism, and the provider of assistance to those less fortunate than ourselves. One textbook notes: ". . . it appeared that if communist expansion was to be stopped, the United States would have to take the lead"; and another explains: "Our government was determined to stop this new threat to our way of life. . . . Communists gained control of North Korea, China,

and Vietnam. Their attempts to expand their holdings led to wars in Korea and Vietnam." The war in Vietnam is thus understood as simply another instance of the United States coming to the assistance of a friendly nation threatened by monolithic communism. In this vein, one textbook remarks of President Reagan's arms build-up: "Its main objective is to prevent nuclear war. It is intended to show other powers that they cannot threaten or defeat the United States."

Most textbooks tend to analyze United States-Soviet relations in the post-World War II era in terms of a series of crises and responses—the Berlin airlift, the Truman Doctrine, the Marshall Plan, the Cuban missile crisis, and so forth. American presidents are often glamorized as standing up to the Soviets in these instances. Almost all of the textbooks emphasize the Cuban missile crisis, depicting it as a great victory for the West and a personal victory for President Kennedy, even though it brought the world close to nuclear war. One textbook notes: "The United States and the Soviet Union stood, eye to eye, on the brink of war. As one American leader put it, the Russians blinked first." Another textbook sees the crisis as a test in which "President Kennedy decided to stand up to his adversary and serve warning of his determination."

In facing the communist challenge, the American people are often invoked as supporters of a strong military posture. For example, in one of the textbooks we find: "Most Americans did not want to see communism spread. They were determined to stop this threat before it became too powerful. They strongly supported our government's policy of 'containing communism'—that is, of stopping its spread anywhere in the world." The Truman Doctrine is then interpreted as a "statement of our responsibility to nations threatened by communism." Later we read: "... the American people came to understand that a powerful nation has great responsibilities." The textbook omits any discussion of the domestic debate over foreign policy, or public protest and dissent, particularly during the Vietnam war. Instead, the United States is treated as a unified force, "... stopping the spread of communism..."

working to "ease tensions and improve relations..." and "... working for peace in many parts of the world."

The Real Politik Framework

The real politik framework appears to be a significant improvement over a simplistic, one-sided, explicitly ideological depiction of American history. While it does not draw direct conclusions that lead to criticism of American policy or actions, it recognizes that there are alternate viewpoints and interests within situations, and that negotiation rather than confrontation is the best way to resolve disputes between competing interests. This means that Soviet distrust and fear of the United States is taken seriously.

For example, in one textbook the authors state: "The Soviets had not

forgotten that between 1918 and 1920 the Allies, including the United States, had sent troops into Russia... Nor had they forgotten that the United States refused to recognize Russia's Communist government until 1933," and later: "The United States became convinced that the Soviets wanted not cooperation but world domination. For its part, Russia believed that the Americans, negotiating 'with the atom bomb on their hip,' were seeking the capitalist encirclement of the Soviet Union." The textbook also recognizes Soviet domination of Eastern Europe as part of a trade-off involving spheres of influence: "Churchill and Roosevelt appeared to agree that Eastern Europe should be within the Soviet sphere of influence." Finally, the textbook acknowledges that the United States, as well as the Soviets, did not always



The real politik framework portrays U.S.-U.S.S.R. relationships as a struggle for domination between two self-interested parties.

keep its word: "The United States no longer accepted the idea of a Soviet sphere of influence in this region."

The implicit message of real politik interpretations tends to be that negotiation rather than confrontation is the best means for America to pursue its interests. One textbook speaks of confrontations as incidents in which "each side refused to compromise"; another notes that the Cuban missile crisis was only successfully resolved when "both sides had stepped back rather than risk the destruction of the whole world"; and still another defines détente as a system of superpower relations in which "each came to feel that its interests could be better served by negotiations."

President Reagan is implicitly criticized in two of the textbooks for being overly confrontational and simplistic in his depiction of communist expansionism. One states: "Reagan soon made it clear that he would oppose Soviet expansion everywhere, even at the risk of confrontation." It also describes the situation in El Salvador as a complex one, in which "guerrilla fighters, supported by some intellectuals and peasants, battled to dispossess the ruling class and to redistribute the land," and that some of their arms came from the Soviet Union and Cuba. Finally, the textbook notes that Reagan has critics at home who are fearful that we might become "involved in another war like that in Vietnam." The other textbook critical of Reagan notes: "Many people thought that Reagan was not concerned about the dangers of nuclear war."

Toward a New Interpretive Framework

The effort to achieve a balanced, or real politik, treatment of United States-Soviet relations is admirable in a number of ways. It asks students to think with their heads rather than react with patriotism; it teaches them to take the role of the other; it recognizes that one can dissent and still be a loyal American; and it emphasizes that negotiation is the best way to solve disputes. In the textbooks that were found to be most real politik in orientation, a genuine effort seemed to be made to eliminate ideological language. On this basis, educators may

consider real politik textbooks beneficial in building a social studies curriculum that de-escalates cold war rhetoric and thinking.

Nevertheless, the real politik framework is also limited, and I think we need to look beyond it. First, in the textbooks examined it was most often found to be a subordinate interpretive framework, so that a truly balanced treatment was not achieved. Second, when a real politik perspective was employed, in most cases the Soviet viewpoint was given significantly less attention than the American viewpoint, so that readers may be likely to conclude that the American viewpoint is most persuasive. This means, paradoxically, that in some instances a real politik history may actually serve an ideological function of distorting and simplifying viewpoints so that one side is generally supported. In fact, by appearing more neutral and appealing to reason rather than emotion, these textbooks may be more effective in gaining support for American foreign policy than are more traditionally ideological textbooks.

Finally, none of the textbooks adequately developed linkages among United States-Soviet relations and broader political, social, and cultural issues and debates. For example, we learn nothing about the relationship between the arms race and the growth of a vast corporate-state industrial sphere that directly profits from an arms buildup, or of the relationship of the arms race with the national deficit and declining social services. None of the textbooks offers an analysis of the pervasiveness of patriarchal values in the determination of our nation's foreign policy. And we learn little about the enormity of the crisis the world faces because of the existing pattern of United States-Soviet relations. This means that the possibility of a nuclear holocaust and its likely effects get largely ignored in textbooks,⁶ perhaps out of a belief that children need to be protected, or that such a presentation would only promote cynicism and resignation. But that need not be the result. The young, particularly adolescents, can handle reality, so long as it is not presented as the "natural" or inevitable order of things. They need and want to be challenged to form convictions based on their knowledge

of history, to formulate and debate alternate futures, and to act to help realize valued futures through the political process. For if one thing seems agreed upon in the current debate over the nuclear arms race, it is that the present situation cannot continue indefinitely without leading to a nuclear nightmare. □

⁶The textbooks examined included the following: Herbert Bass, George Billias, and Emma Lapansky, *America and Americans, Volume II From Reconstruction to the Present* (Morristown, N.J.: Silver Burdett, 1983); Henry Drewry, Thomas O'Connor, and Frank Freidel, *American Is* (Columbus, Oh.: Charles Merrill, 1984); John Garraty, *American History* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982); Robert Green, Jr., Laura Becker, and Robert Coivello, *The American Tradition, a History of the United States* (Columbus, Oh.: Charles Merrill, 1984); Anatone Mazour, John Peoples, and Theodore Rabb, *People and Nations, a World History* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983); Sidney Schwartz and John O'Connor, *The New Exploring Our Nation's History* (New York: Globe Books, 1979); Boyd Schafer, Everett Augspurger, and Richard McLemore, adapted by Milton Finkelstein, *A High School History of Modern America* (Irvine, Calif.: Laidlaw Brothers, 1977); Clarence Steeg and Richard Hofstadter, *A People and a Nation* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978); Lewis Todd and Merle Curti, *Rise of the American Nation* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982); and Wilder, Ludlum, and Brown, prepared by Susan Roberts, *This is America's Story* (Atlanta: Houghton Mifflin, 1983).

⁷The type of analysis and the understanding of ideology employed in this study owes much to the extensive research conducted by Jean Anyon of labor and labor relations in 17 United States history textbooks, *Harvard Educational Review* 49 (August 1979): 361-386.

⁸See Lawrence Cremin, *The Transformation of the School, Progressivism in American Education, 1876-1957* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1961), chapter 9, and Joel Spring, *The Sorting Machine, National Educational Policy Since 1945* (New York: David McKay, 1976), pp. 7-15.

⁹Cited in Lewis Todd, "How to Teach About Communism," *NEA Journal* (May 1952).

¹⁰Cited in C. J. Karier, P. Violas, and J. Spring, *Roots of Crisis, American Education in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1973), p. 175.

¹¹See Dan Fleming, "Nuclear War in High School History Textbooks," *Kappan* (April 1983).

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