

Teaching About Russia

A good way to help students see the difference between the Soviet government and the Russian people is to study the rich cultural heritage that has shaped the Russian character for five centuries.

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By the time children leave middle school, their basic attitudes about other nations have been firmly established. Not the least of their concerns in the future will be survival in close contact with people who are culturally and politically different. Thus, teaching American children about Russian culture is relevant.

Textbooks do not tell about Russia's cultural and emotional roots. These roots are historical, but are very "present" to people there today. I teach my students about them by using geography and the pristine emotional attitudes found in music, art and literature, hence avoiding some of the prejudices found in our society. For

the sake of clarity, I do not teach about specific ethnic groups living in the USSR today, although each has a unique story that is not to be confused with the Russians, despite their historical relationships.

Confronting Prejudice

Because of the negative political coverage given to Russia by the mass media in the United States, students often bring their prejudices against anything Russian into the classroom. To help them approach this unit with open minds, I always make a clear distinction between the Russian people and their government. We use the term *Soviet* to refer to the government, and *Russian* when we talk about people. The best resources for overcoming prejudices are guest speakers who have recently arrived from Russia or other Eastern European countries.

To reinforce the idea that Russians are people much like ourselves, rather than enemies, I describe elements of Russian life such as education, entertainment, food, family life, shopping—things that students can relate to their own lives.

Once a common bond has been established, students are ready to move into content areas.

Geography, History, and Climate

I try to make students understand that Russia's emotional roots are tied to the soil by explaining to them that there



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are three elements of Russian character that have been constant for centuries: the feelings they have for the Russian Orthodox Church, the throne which represents authority, and the motherland (the soil). In teaching about Russian geography, I ask students to look at a map of the Soviet Union as I describe its physical characteristics; they fill in outline maps of their own. I also use stories, lectures, more maps, slides, and photographs to teach about Russia's history, which is closely related to her geography. We discuss, for instance, the implications of borders without natural barriers to help defend against invaders.

In one exercise, we use the entire classroom floor as a map of Russia. Students divide into groups of Swedes, Germans, Russians, Tartars, and Mongols and walk through the invasions of the Russian homeland. In doing this, they see that Russians needed discipline and a strong leader. They also begin to look at Russian history as Russians do—as a series of border defenses—and to understand the reasoning behind such invasions.

Moral issues come into focus as we consider Russia's control over Poland today. We talk about the morality of killing and seizing lands and compare the Russian invasions with the invasion of the American Indians by European

settlers. I give students time to write papers about their feelings and the facts they've learned, which I can use to evaluate the effectiveness of the lesson. By now, I expect my students to have an understanding of Russia's security problems and the close relationship between geographic vulnerability and human culture—in this case, a military culture.

Climate, as well, is an important influence in Russian life. I explain to my students that farming is somewhat of a gamble because of the brief growing season, poor soil, and unreliable rainfall. We discuss why problems of agricultural production and transportation of crops, coupled with the dismaying climate, make Russia's food supply a significant problem.

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Music

In introducing Russian music to the students, I begin with folk and Cossack songs. As we look at the lyrics of these songs, I explain that they describe the lives of peasant women at their spinning wheels or coachmen driving across the endless steppe. They may tell of melancholy laborers subjected to tedious, work-filled lives, or of the delirious joy and love for life of those who live close to nature. It's an emotional music of people who give into their emotions and don't hide, moderate, or repress them.

My students compare the lives of Cossacks with cowboy life in America by examining the songs of both groups, and contrast American spirituals with Russian folk tunes, which were both written by suppressed peoples.

We use Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture* to uncover the deep patriotism and spirituality of the Russian people. Tchaikovsky also serves as an introduction to Tsarist Russia. I ask the students to compare democracy with autocracy and to research and write reports about patriotism in Russia during the Tsarist period.

Shostakovich brings us into the 20th century. We read parts of his biography, *Testimony*, and listen to the *Leningrad Symphony*. While this composition was supposed to represent the gloom of Leningrad under siege by the Germans in World War II, Shostakovich actually had in mind the pre-war purge of Leningrad by Stalin.

Shostakovich, like other Russian artists, was forced to create “for the glory of the government,” but his music is delightful and appeals to children. I

tell my students that he was very popular in Leningrad during the 1920s when American jazz was also the rage. We play some of his more well-known compositions as background music while the students write spelling words or penmanship exercises.

Art

I like to leave books on Russian art and architecture around the classroom and give students time to pore over them. Since much of Russia's art is seen in cathedrals and churches, I explain icon art: an icon is the representation of some sacred person, saint, or angel. Russians have respect for icons, but worship only God. We compare the works of Repin and Kustodiev, who idealized Russian family life, to Norman Rockwell's interpretation of life in the United States. We study other works of art that illustrate Russian history and life, such as Verechagin's *The Apotheosis of War*, and portraits of Catherine the Great by Borovidsky and of Peter the Great by de Gelden. With images of these historical figures in mind, students research and write biographies of them.

Other pictures can help students understand the U.S.S.R. Pictures of the magnificent Winter Palace and Catherine Palace are useful to stimulate discussion of the source of the wealth and labor needed to build the opulent palaces of the Russian nobility. Illustrations of Russian folk and fairy tales are appealing to children and, with the aid of an opaque projector, I use them as backdrops for plays based on Russian fairy tales. Finally, since cartoons are very popular in Russia today, we compare them with political cartoons in American newspapers and the satirical cartoons of *The New Yorker*.

Literature and Poetry

When our study of Russia moves into literature and poetry, I introduce students to the 19th century writers Pushkin and Tolstoy and explain that they are still widely read by educated Russians today. Tolstoy's short novels, *Childhood*, *Boyhood*, and *Youth*, about a boy of the 19th century nobility, provide excellent material for analyzing fictional characters. They portray

beauty and blemishes realistically, and appeal to people of any age.

I treat Tolstoy's *Childhood* as I do Alcott's *Little Men* and *Little Women*. Both writers present a fairly accurate historical record of the education and philosophical development of upper-class adolescents living in the same era in history. In class we read aloud a few humorous or sentimental passages, and students read further on their own. This is followed by class discussions about the similarities and differences between the books.

I also have students read Russian folk poems, called *biliny*, about tall tale characters, and compare them with the Paul Bunyan and Davy Crockett legends.

Students enjoy reading Pushkin's verses aloud, and I give them time to read in class. A favorite activity is dramatizing a short fable or fairy story. Students form groups for script writing, editing, advertising, creating costumes and scenery, and selecting appropriate Russian background music. The result can be dazzling.

Students relate best to stories about 20th century children like themselves. By having them read the stories of Kornei Chukovsky and Vera Panova, I can encourage them to see their Russian contemporaries as people—with problems very much like their own—rather than as faceless enemies.

Finally, I ask students to consider and discuss an interesting paradox: all the lovely works of Russian art, music, and literature were created by a people who lived in a hostile climate under harsh, restrictive governments, and who lived in constant fear of invasion.

Summing Up

By the time we conclude our unit on Russia, I feel confident that my students are able to distinguish between the Soviet government, which has existed for 60 years, and the people, whose cultural roots go back over 1,500 years. With such an understanding and by confronting their prejudices squarely when they arise, these students are more able to form their own positive but realistic attitudes about the Russian people.

A Russian Reading List

- The Soviet Viewpoint*,
Academician Georgi Arbatov
Real Peace, Richard M. Nixon
Khrushchev Remembers,
translated by Strobe Talbott
Nine Hundred Days, Harrison
Salisbury
*Russia: Broken Idols, Solemn
Dreams*, David Shi
Russia and the Russians, Kevin
Klose
Galina, Galina Vishnevskaya
The Nuclear Delusion, George
F. Kennan
Crime and Punishment, Fyodor
Dostoevsky
War and Peace, Leo Tolstoy
Moscow Women, Carola
Hanson and Karen Liden
*The Day Lasts More Than a
Hundred Years*, Chingez
Aitmatov
"Soviet Life," Soviet
Information Dept.,
1706 18th St., N.W.,
Washington, D.C. 20009.
"Problems of Communism,"
U.S. Information Agency,
Washington, D.C. 20547.
—Harriet Crosby and Ed Snyder
Surviving Together

Excerpted from Surviving Together: An update on Soviet-American Relations (Oct. 1984), an excellent compendium of articles and information on the Soviet Union published by the Friends Committee on National Legislation and the Institute for Soviet American Relations.

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