

Teaching About  
the U.S.S.R.

# The U.S.—Soviet Relationship: Time to Come in from the Cold

We need to exorcise comic book images of the Soviet Union from the curriculum and give students accurate, objective food for thought.

In the long run only he will achieve basic results in influencing public opinion who is able to reduce problems to the simplest terms.

—Joseph Goebbels

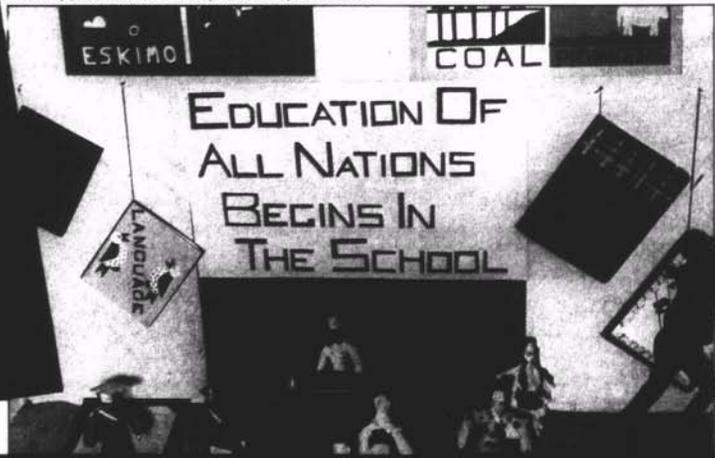
It's been a long time since I have thought of my friend Bill and our arguments about the relative strength of Soviet and American military forces. Bill was convinced the Soviet Union had overtaken the United States militarily and was just waiting for the right moment to launch an attack. I, on the other hand, put my faith in the good old U.S. Air Force. Bill moved when we were in 5th grade, leaving our argument unresolved.

During elementary school my political views were roughly those of Rambo ... or the moviemakers who gave us *Red Dawn*. The Soviet Union was bad. The U.S. was good. When we used to crawl under our desks or line up in the corridors during air raid drills, there was little doubt in my mind whose bombers might be racing toward the U.S. to spread death and destruction and pave the way for communist tyranny. Nothing I encountered in school challenged this view. In high school, when asked to write a report on the Soviet Union, I based my little treatise largely on a book entitled *Communism: An Evil Tree*, printed by the Catholic Archdiocese of Chicago. Recently, in a paper on ideology in school textbooks, one of my students wrote that in middle school her class was

studying other countries ... and each bore the name of the country as its title. Russia, however, was different. The cover of our text on Russia was austere in comparison to other books. The cover displayed only its title—*What I Know About Communism*. At the time I found it both funny and one-sided ... I still find the book one-sided, but no longer ... laughable ...

I doubt that my experiences and those of my student were unusual. Indeed, students are probably still likely to be served up a simplistic stew that reinforces, or at least does not help them seriously analyze, the pronouncements of their political elders and the news media about the Soviet Union.

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A superficial and simplistic treatment of the Soviet Union in the school curriculum would hardly distinguish it from any number of other topics. What makes its treatment of particular importance, however, is that for the lifetimes of most Americans, the Soviet Union has been labeled The Enemy. The Soviet Union has been called a threat to peace and freedom of sufficient magnitude to justify overthrowing democratically elected foreign governments, spying on our own citizens, making deals with drug smugglers, and spending over one-half of our federal budget on military and military-related expenses.

Despite the sharp differences in our political and economic systems, the Soviets share a common humanity with us. Fortunately, at the moment there are opportunities to build positively on our shared humanity. If we are to take advantage of these opportunities and learn to live together on this planet—and perhaps even contribute to the common good of all humankind—we need accurate information about each other.



## It is time to resolve to seek a more informed view.

This is not to say that we are to switch the Soviets from bad to good in our mental filing systems but, rather, to recognize that many of our images of the Soviet Union *are* stereotypes based largely on comic book portrayals of an "evil empire." It is time to

resolve to seek a more informed view. This month's "Contemporary Issues" feature will, I hope, contribute to proving Joseph Goebbels wrong by encouraging you to see to it that your school's curriculum about the Soviet Union doesn't consist of comic book images that discourage critical thinking. □

### Reference

Fox, Roy F. (March 1988). "Sensationspeak in America." *English Journal* 77, 3: 53. Quotation from *The Goebbels Diaries* by Joseph Goebbels, translated by Louis Lochner, Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1948.

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