

Teaching About  
the U.S.S.R.

# The ESR-Soviet Collaborative Project

Seeking a "common ground through education," Educators for Social Responsibility has formed a partnership with the U.S.S.R. Ministry of Education to promote understanding between American and Soviet teachers.

*A teacher tells her students that a group of Soviet women will soon visit their classroom. A 12-year-old boy worries out loud that "they might be carrying bombs to blow up the school."*

*Sixth graders are startled to learn that children in the U.S.S.R. go to school. They are also convinced that the Soviet government tells the people what jobs they must take.*

*A New York Times poll finds that 46 percent of the newspaper's respondents believe American parents care more about their children than do Soviet parents.*

These are the kinds of stories that led Educators for Social Responsibility (ESR) to begin teaching about the Soviet Union. We recognized that students not only need accurate information, but, equally important, they need to examine their attitudes, assumptions, and feelings about the Soviet Union.

### Learning About Each Other

We endeavored to inform our Soviet Education Project with a variety of American and Soviet voices. Our research took us to diverse sources,

even to the Soviet Union itself. There, our contacts with the U.S.S.R. Ministry of Education and the Academy of Pedagogical Sciences resulted in the signing of a ground-breaking Memorandum of Cooperation between ESR and the Ministry in fall 1987.

**This program will help American and Soviet students and teachers to think critically about each other as well as themselves.**

This agreement initiated joint Teacher Leadership Institutes and the development of materials that enable American and Soviet teachers to teach about each other's countries and about U.S.-Soviet relations in ways that exemplify the realities of a nuclear world. According to Gregory Dmitriyev, the U.S.S.R. leader for the first institute, Soviet educators also want to learn from American teachers "the skills of democracy" considered vital to the success of *perestroika*. "This means giving teachers the right to introduce different points of view . . . teaching students how to think more independently," he explained.

At the first joint institute, "Teaching for New Ways of Thinking," held in Amherst, Massachusetts, during the summer of 1988, 20 Soviet and 20 American teacher-participants began development of the *Sourcebook for Teaching New Ways of Thinking: An American-Soviet Guide* and edited a co-produced videotape, *A Day at School in Washington, D.C.* The educational materials developed in this program will help American and Soviet students and teachers to think critically about each other as well as themselves, replacing stereotypes and caricatures with more informed views.

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ilarly, key ESR words like *dialogue* and *multiple perspectives* mean little to the Soviets.

Second, nothing in their experience has prepared Soviet educators for pluralism, critical thinking, independent decision making, or controversial issues. Mikhail Gorbachev recently underscored these difficulties: "We still lack political culture, we lack this culture to conduct the debate and respect the viewpoint even of a friend, a comrade . . . We will mature."

Third, how a discussion is framed determines what is explored. Before the largest issues between the two countries can be examined fruitfully, the "right" questions must be formed—questions that acknowledge the complexity of the issues, that are open-ended but not value-free, and that lead to the development of social consciousness. Forming such complex questions together is a demanding task.

## Creating Global Bonds

ESR's belief that the two countries share responsibility for the fate of the planet compels us, without slighting the depth of our differences, to promote a long-term search for common ground through education. This process is bound to be unsettling—education should be unsettling. But in a nuclear age of interdependence and mutual vulnerability, education should also help to create global bonds and so to develop the new ways of thinking and feeling that our planet requires. □

**Alan Shapiro** is Project Co-leader, ESR-Soviet Collaborative (Educational Project, 54 Florida Rd., Ridgefield, CT 06877). **Susan Alexander** is Executive Director, National Educators for Social Responsibility, 23 Garden St., Cambridge, MA 02138.

Future plans include an institute on "Critical Thinking in the Nuclear Age" to be held in 1989 in the Soviet Union and a third institute on "Teaching for Social Responsibility" scheduled for 1990 in the U.S. Over the next year, we will co-produce *A Day in the Life of a Soviet Teenager*.

## Exploring the Tasks Ahead

As Soviet and American educators work together, we discover formidable tasks. First, our vocabularies and concepts differ significantly. When Soviets talk about human rights or peace education, for instance, they have other ideas in mind than we do. Sim-

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Participants will find the conference's atmosphere relaxed. All scheduled events, including meals and wine & cheese social will be held at the Hotel Bessborough. Famous for its traditional elegance, the Bessborough is situated on the banks of the South Saskatchewan River in the Canadian prairie city of Saskatoon.

Participants are being encouraged to enroll now to take advantage of early registration benefits and team discounts. Enrollment is limited to 500. Early registration deadline is Feb. 1, 1989.

To register or for more information call Sheryl Mills at (306) 244-0139 or write Mills Consulting, 815 Colony St., Saskatoon, SK, Canada S7N 0S2.

The logo for Spectrum 2000 features the word "Spectrum" in a bold, italicized, sans-serif font. Below it, the year "2000" is displayed in a large, bold, sans-serif font. A stylized, curved graphic element arches over the "2000", resembling a signal or a wave.

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