

Teaching About  
the U.S.S.R.

# The Educational Challenge of Gorbachev's *Perestroika*: What Do We Know? What Can We Teach?

In this optimistic period of *glasnost*, educators face a challenge: to provide students accurate, objective information about the Soviet Union and to emphasize our similarities but not minimize our differences.

Since his accession to leadership in the Soviet Union in March 1985, Mikhail S. Gorbachev has proposed a series of reforms widely affecting social, cultural, economic, and political life. Gorbachev's initiatives have touched everything from the drinking habits and work discipline of individuals to the structure of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the management of the national economy. Whether or not these reforms are finally implemented and no matter what course they might eventually take, their very existence has already had a profound impact. Soviet commentators, including Party leaders, are referring to the Gorbachev program as "revolutionary," a term not used lightly in the Soviet Union. This is clearly a momentous time.

## The Challenge of Change in the Soviet Union

For Soviet society, the changes taking place appear both exhilarating and disquieting. Gorbachev has proposed publicly to open and democratize the Soviet system of socialism. He has replaced a large number of Soviet Party and governmental figures. He has rescinded much of the political past, condemning not only the failure

and corruption of his immediate predecessor, Leonid Brezhnev, but also, with renewed vigor, the entire structure of socialism created under Stalin. Gorbachev has called for a return to the goals of Lenin, a reexamination of the foundation of Soviet socialism, a reevaluation of the direction of the Soviet economy, and a restructuring (*perestroika*) of Soviet society.

At the same time, Gorbachev has told the populace directly and indirectly that they must expect to work harder, be more accountable, and an-

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tipate further difficulties before things will improve. And, as if to prove the point, critics are taking advantage of the more open political atmosphere (*glasnost*) to claim that the Soviet economy is now worse off than before. Indeed, there are visible problems not only in the economy but in the wider fabric of Soviet society including unrest among the many and varied nationalities that make up the U.S.S.R., from Central Asia to the Baltic Republics. The greater the visibility of such problems, the more visible will be the success, or failure, of proposed solutions. It is by no means clear where the limits of political and economic tolerance will be drawn.

## The Challenge to American Education

For those who study and teach about the Soviet Union, Gorbachev's initiatives also create uncertainty. In some respects, it is almost as trying for Americans, who have witnessed and responded to the same problems of Soviet society that Gorbachev is now addressing, as it is for Soviet citizens to adapt to these changes. For Americans too, these events are both exhilarating and disquieting. In both real and symbolic terms, the Soviet Union has been the principal rival of the United States

for over 40 years, manifesting values and a way of life that are demonstrably contrary to the professed values and life of American society. In a postwar setting of sometimes intense Soviet-American confrontation, it has therefore been imperative that we know about the Soviet Union.

In the past, meeting this responsibility was complicated by the absence of complete, accurate, or unbiased information about Soviet affairs, let alone access to the Soviet Union itself. Today it seems complicated by another problem, an abundance of information and little to help us interpret its meaning and import. Thus, the prospect for change toward a more open and dynamic Soviet system, though certainly welcome to most Americans, is also a challenge. How do we address the prospect of such profound change? How do we know whether it is real or some political illusion? What in fact do we know, and what does it mean for learning and teaching about the Soviet Union?

### How to Approach the Gorbachev Reforms

The Gorbachev reform program raises the two familiar concerns of curriculum development—determining what is to be presented (the acquisition of knowledge) and determining how to present it (the dissemination of knowledge). With regard to the first concern, what to present, we can take guidance from the Gorbachev program itself. Though not structured so simply, the Gorbachev initiatives include three elements that are educationally relevant:

1. a call for review of the underlying goals of Soviet socialism;
2. a call for reexamination of Soviet history from Lenin to the present to determine how the Soviet Union has reached its current status;
3. a call for a series of measures necessary to implement socialist goals within Soviet society today (i.e., *perestroika*).

Translated into curriculum objectives, these three elements yield useful prescriptions.

First, students need to understand the philosophical underpinning of So-

viet socialism. Whatever Gorbachev has set out to do, it is not and will not be to transform the Soviet Union into a society like that of the United States. Students ought to understand the difference between Soviet socialist values and those of the United States. Of particular note in this area is Lenin, his life and his impact on the formation of the Soviet Union (see Medish 1988, Meyer 1984, and Wolfe 1984 in "Resources" box).

Second, students need a working knowledge of the history and development of the Soviet Union, especially during the Stalinist period. Gorbachev has concentrated on having a more forthright appraisal of the Stalin period as a condition of supporting and advancing *perestroika*. Students must therefore be able to recognize the reference points of Gorbachev's program—Stalin's industrialization and collectivization drive, the purges of the mid-1930s, the establishment and maintenance of a dictatorial and closed Party system. It is at these points that Gorbachev contends the Soviet Union was diverted from its authentic goals (see Bialer 1986, Medish 1988, Meyer 1984, and Nove 1969 in "Resources" box).

Third, students need to be familiar with the political, economic, and social structure of the Soviet Union today. To follow the development of the Gorbachev initiatives, students should learn to describe:

... certainly my generation cannot recall a time of such great activity and great interest. People are discussing . . . everything that's happening in the country . . . And that means an end to stagnation, an end to apathy. This is a turbulent time, a turbulent sea in which it is not easy to sail the ship, but we have a compass and we have a crew to guide the ship. And the ship itself is strong.  
—Mikhail S. Gorbachev

In *The Washington Post*, May 22, 1988

1. the basic political structure of the Soviet Union: a noncompetitive single-party system in which the Communist Party of the Soviet Union is the predominant political force;

2. the basic outline of the Soviet economic system: a centrally planned, national command economy based on output accounting and quantitative measures of achievement;

3. the basic characteristics of Soviet society: a highly structured system socialized to espouse a collectivist approach to performance and problem solving (see M. I. Goldman 1987, Medish 1988, Nove 1969, and Smith 1988 in "Resources" box).

With regard to the second concern of curriculum development, how to present the material, there are two common problems when addressing the Soviet Union. At one end of the spectrum is the need to ensure that information about the Soviet Union is presented objectively and accurately without the tendency toward stereotypes that has characterized much of the information about the Soviet Union in the past (a problem present in more than equal measure in the Soviet characterization of the United States). Today, *glasnost* has helped reduce to some extent the acceptance of one- or, at best, two-dimensional characterizations of Soviet society.

At the other extreme is the need to avoid the tendency to present the Soviet Union as if it were identical to the

## Resources

### Books

- Bialer, S. (1986). *The Soviet Paradox*. New York: Vintage.
- Colton, T.J. (1986). *The Dilemma of Reform in the Soviet Union*. Rev. ed. New York: Council on Foreign Relations.
- Doder, D. (1988). *Shadows and Whispers: Power Politics Inside the Kremlin from Brezhnev to Gorbachev*. New York: Penguin.
- Goldman, M.F., ed. (1988). *Global Studies: The Soviet Union and Eastern Europe*. 2nd ed. Guilford, Conn.: Dushkin.
- Goldman, M.I. (1987). *Gorbachev's Challenge: Economic Reform in the Age of High Technology*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Gorbachev, M.S. (1987). *Perestroika*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Hough, J.F. (1988). *Russia and the West: Gorbachev and the Politics of Reform*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Institute for East-West Security Studies. (1987). *How Should the United States Respond to Gorbachev's Challenge? A Report of the Task Force on Soviet New Thinking*. New York: Institute for East-West Security Studies.
- Mandelbaum, M., and S. Talbott. (1987). *Reagan and Gorbachev*. New York: Vintage.
- Medish, V. (1988). *The Soviet Union*. 4th ed. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall.
- Meyer, A.G. (1984). *Leninism*. 4th ed. New York: Random House.
- Nove, A. (1969). *An Economic History of the U.S.S.R.* New York: St. Martin's.
- Smith, G.B. (1988). *Soviet Politics: Continuity and Contradiction*. New York: St. Martin's.
- Vaillant, J.G., and J. Richards III. (1985). *From Russia to U.S.S.R.: A Narrative and Documentary History*. Wellesley Hills, Mass.: Independent School Press.
- Wolfe, B.D. (1984). *Three Who Made a Revolution: A Biographical History*. New York: Stein & Day.

### Periodicals

- "The Gorbachev Era." (July 27, 1987). *Time*.
- Gross, N. (November-December 1987). "Glasnost: Roots and Practice." *Problems of Communism* XXXVI: 69-80.
- Hough, J.F. (July-August 1987). "Gorbachev Consolidating Power." *Problems of Communism* XXXVI: 21-43.
- "The Risks of a New Revolution." (October 19, 1987). *U.S. News and World Report*.
- Shulman, M.D. (1988). "The Superpowers: Dance of the Dinosaurs." *Foreign Affairs* 66, 3: 494-515.

Because of the nature of changes taking place in the Soviet Union, both *Foreign Affairs* and *Problems of Communism* will provide a reliable source of up-to-date information on current developments (in addition to weekly newsmagazines—*Time*, *Newsweek*, *U.S. News and World Report*). It is also advisable to consult a national newspaper with good coverage of the Soviet Union (e.g., *The Christian Science Monitor*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Post*).

United States. The Soviet Union is not "just like" the U.S.; the Soviet people are not "just like" Americans; and Soviet life is not "just like" life in America. Ironically, the present situation carries the risk of increasing rather than reducing this problem. With greater access to information and to the Soviet Union itself, there is a greater inclination to project the familiar—American life and experience—onto the unfamiliar—Soviet life and experience. The increasing opportunities for hosting Soviet visitors and visiting the Soviet Union will contribute to understanding the critical differences in the two societies as well as identifying similarities (and bridging some of the gaps between them).

### The Challenge for the Future

It is too soon to conclude just what impact developments in the Soviet Union will have. Because the problems to be addressed are indeed complex, specialists tend to be pessimistic about Gorbachev's chances for success. He seeks no less than the transformation of an entire nation of 280 million people, covering one-sixth of the earth's surface, representing over a hundred different nationalities—a nation that for decades has been directed from the center by an aging, entrenched, and stagnant bureaucracy. He must restore vitality and maintain political and social control. It is hard not to be a pessimist before such a task.

This much we know. First, although the environment of Soviet politics and economics may appear complex, the reasons underlying Gorbachev's program and its objectives are not. Gorbachev wants simply to make Soviet society work, not by Western or American standards but by the socialist standards that brought the Soviet Union into being. Second, Gorbachev sees the absolute necessity for the Soviet Union to attain a sufficiently high level of technological capability to meet its own domestic needs and to compete with the advanced nations of the world. Third, however clear and straightforward his goals, it is the complexity of political and economic environment, dominated by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, that will determine the success or failure of the enterprise. For the present, it is important to recognize that the scope of debate and discussion about reform in the Soviet Union is still far greater than the reality. In presenting the development of *perestroika*, one must be cautious to separate what is being promised from what has been delivered.

Yet what if Gorbachev does succeed? For the United States, an economically healthy and socially dynamic Soviet Union could well mean both a more complex society with a clearer stake in a peaceful world order and a more formidable competitor. In such a setting, it will be more important than ever that we have a clear and complete understanding of the Soviet Union—politics, economics, culture, and society. That, quite simply, is Gorbachev's challenge to us. □

1. A new program is now being negotiated by the Office of the President's U.S.—Soviet Exchange Initiative and the Soviet Ministry of Education that seeks to exchange some 1,500 high school students between the two countries. For information, write: Office of the Coordinator, President's U.S.—Soviet Exchange Initiative, USIA—Room 751, 301 4th St., N.W., Washington, DC 20147.

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