TITLE: Teaching History in Post-Communist Russia

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TEACHING HISTORY IN POST-COMMUNIST RUSSIA

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Abstract

Based on a month's investigation in Moscow just before the turn of the year this paper concludes that school principals and instructors are scuttling old interpretations and methods of teaching history in a battle for the younger generation. Old state, new private, and religious schools vary in method and substance from didactic ultra-conservative exposition based on pre-1917 texts preaching autocratic rule, intolerant Orthodoxy, and chauvinist Russification; to innovative open inquiry intent on training critical, independent-minded citizens of a democratic Russia in an interdependent world. The latter need help, and the paper ends with a number of informed suggestions for the forms such help could take.

American concern for the future evolution of Russia centers largely on the frenetic politics in Moscow and the ups-and-downs of market reforms. Yet, at the school level, another battle is going on for the minds and souls of the young generation. It is a battle we are unaware of, but it will affect Russia's future just as much as any present economic choices or political rearrangements.

The Ministry of Education is no longer in control. School principals and instructors are scuttling the old interpretations and methods of teaching history. Some offer innovative courses and approaches to train their students to become critically thinking and open-minded citizens of a democratic Russia in an interdependent world. But there are others who distrust plural-
ism and fear the challenges now at the turn of the century. They seek solace and security in resuscitating the fundamentals of Russian spiritual traditions with the help of textbooks published before 1917. D.I. Ilovaisky's text, which went through more than 40 editions before the October Revolution and had the official approval of the Imperial Ministry of Education, heads the list. Even in its heyday, this volume was regarded by both Russian liberals and the country's numerous minorities as a quintessential exposition of autocratic rule, intolerant Orthodoxy, and chauvinist Russification.

Ilovaisky's book is sold not only at the make-shift kiosks on streets and in subway entrances but is also stocked at bookstores specializing in school textbooks (Pedkniga). It has been republished in two editions: one, sporting an attractive cover, by a cultural foundation; the other, more spartan and cheaper, by Prosveshchenie, the main publisher of school texts that is still closely tied to the Ministry of Education.

Had I been in Russia for a quick visit, the sight of Ilovaisky would have struck me as more or less healthy evidence of pluralism, as an understandable and natural sign of the Russians' search for an identity after the ignominious collapse of the Communist system and of their empire. But I was in Moscow for a whole month, specifically to investigate the teaching of history in schools to get a sense of the post-Communist cultural and political self-perceptions.

I am happy to report that the school situation is not bleak.
The creative ferment going on is impressive. Both the "old" state and the new private or semi-private schools are firming up liberal education and offering instruction in hitherto neglected subjects, ranging from Greek and Latin to social psychology or Eastern philosophies. The urge and drive to upgrade the humanities is evident everywhere. One of Moscow's leading math and science high-schools has, for example, added a social studies division that provides both required and elective courses. Among the latter is a course on mythology that focuses on the political uses and misuses of myth-making.

These schools offer not only new subjects and new methodologies; they have also introduced a novel relationship between teacher and student. Knowledge is no longer handed down from on high; students are not treated as empty vessels to be filled with the required information but as persons whose minds and rights have to be respected. And the kids I talked to responded with enthusiasm to this "democratic," as they called it, dialogue between themselves and instructors.

I also visited a school run by a religious association. The atmosphere was warm and caring—the younger children got their vitamins. But it also was quite strict—girls wore no make-up, each class started with a prayer, and liturgy was read during lunch-time. The 9th-grade history lesson dealt with Peter the Great. His reforms have long been the subject of controversy. Did he bring Russia out of medieval stagnation and set it on the beneficial path of Western modernization? Or did he destroy
wholesome national traditions and start the country on the road of stifling bureaucratization?

At this particular class, however, there was no hint of the controversy or alternative interpretations. The teacher ridiculed Peter’s penchant for replacing perfectly serviceable Russian institutions and words with foreign transplants. And he delivered himself of a harangue against Peter crushing the power of the boyars—not because Peter did away with an early representative institution, but because any nation that tampered with its aristocracy courted disastrous consequences, as happened in Russia in the 18th century and again in 1917.

To be fair, I checked at another school run by a different religious organization. Here religious instruction is relegated to the Sunday school classes offered in most Moscow churches. The history teaching is done on a high professional level. From the 5th grade on—beginning with the early medieval epics and chronicles—the instructors train their students in the critical reading of original sources in order to forewarn them about the myth-making and falsifications than can go into the writing and teaching of history.

The evidence of pluralism, of the search for free expression, is heartening and to be welcomed. Yet by the end of the month, I felt that schools and teachers who work for open-ended pluralism, who strive to impart not just love and respect for their own country but also well-informed tolerance toward other peoples and cultures, could well use some additional help and
encouragement.

The Soros Foundation is already supporting the writing and publication of new history textbooks. But the need is greater than that. Innovative teachers and their students want to work independently to devise or broaden their curricula. They need an easily accessible social sciences library where they could browse, do research, get fresh ideas and solid information. At present they are almost without resources. The Lenin State Library (an equivalent to our Library of Congress or New York Public Library) is off-limits to people without higher education. The excellent Historical Library in Moscow admits high-school students only with strong recommendations. And even those who manage to get permission face long waiting lines and strained resources.

School libraries are pitifully inadequate, even in the top-ranking institutions that are equipped with computers. Some Russian emigr organizations are already opening free libraries in Moscow, simply making use of private apartments. The one I was able to check on offered materials that had a pretty conservative, religious and mystical slant.

Given this situation, it would make sense to support the democratic institution-building we hope for in Russia by making balanced, diverse reading materials available to the young generation and their teachers. The books need not all be in foreign languages or translations. Far from it. There are excellent Russian and Soviet historians whose works are not
easily available or too expensive.

For instance, the course of Kliuchevsky's lectures has been reissued, but at 50 rubles it's too expensive even for school libraries; and Platonov, another liberal pre-1917 historian, has not been reprinted. There are fine Soviet texts on Russian political and economic history (by Zayonchkovsky and Ananich, to cite just two names). And Yuri Lotman has written penetrating studies on Russia's cultural duality. The Humanities University, set up a few years ago by Yuri Afanasev to provide alternative, liberal education, has published a good two-volume history that stresses attempts to make Russia into a law-governed state, but again it is quite costly.

As for Western books, what is sorely needed are encyclopedias, some samplings of good history textbooks, works on anthropology, comparative politics, sociology, modernization theories, historiography and multiculturalism. I took along a dozen copies of our Federalist Papers in a Russian translation. The democratic parliamentarians in the White House were well familiar with it. But it was a most welcome novelty at all the schools I visited.

Surely, the Russians need much more than fast food outlets or computers to shape their democratic institutions and chart their new course. And especially the young need varied and nourishing food for the mind.