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ABSTRACT

This review of a 1981 interim report on the United States' and the Soviet Union's distortion of events in history and geography textbooks is intended to encourage educators in both countries to depict the other side more honestly, less aggressively, and more appreciative of each other's virtues and flaws. Organized into two major sections, "Alleged Soviet Distortions" and "Alleged USA Distortions," examples of major distortions and factual errors presented in U.S. and Soviet textbooks are given. For example, Soviet textbooks focus on American poverty, unemployment, inflation, crime, social inequality, racism, hedonism, and militarism; Soviet textbook reviewers hold that U.S. textbooks discredit the political system in the Soviet Union and the role of the Marxist-Leninist ideology, and undercut the achievements of the first socialist state in the world. It is concluded that if nuclear holocaust is to be avoided and peace be maintained, textbooks in the United States and the Soviet Union need to depict each other more honestly, less aggressively, and with fewer distortions. Moreover, the U.S./USSR Textbook Study Project, a step in the right direction, needs to be revived, enlarged, and ultimately to involve and affect more teachers and students in both countries. (LH)

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USA/USSR TEXTBOOK DISTORTION

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## USA/USSR Textbook Distortions

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During a 1977 thaw in USA/USSR relations, a team of educators from each country tried to uncover and correct false and inflammatory distortions in each other's history and geography textbooks. This worthy effort, halted by the chill that followed the 1979 USSR military intervention in Afghanistan, needs to be made again now when, many observers believe, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev appears likely to ease adventurism abroad while trying to solve domestic problems. If nuclear holocaust is to be avoided and peace endure, textbooks need to depict the other side more honestly, less aggressively, appreciating each other's virtues while recognizing its own and the other's flaws. In this context it helps to look again at a 1981 interim report on each country's textbook distortions and to consider how to rewrite textbooks more evenhandedly.<sup>1</sup>

### Alleged Soviet Distortions

All Soviet students follow the same curriculum in history and geography textbooks published in 53 languages for the USSR's many ethnic groups. They study history chronologically from grade 5 (age 12) and in grade 10 (age 17, their last high school year), they cover 1936 to the present. The Central Ministry of Education's purpose for teaching history is ideologically aimed toward:

Forming in youth a Marxist-Leninist world-view, deep ideological convictions, a clear, class-oriented approach to

phenomena of social life, Soviet patriotism, loyalty to proletarian internationalism, devotion to the Party's cause, the task of developing a Communist attitude towards work, a feeling of duty and discipline, and irreconcilability to bourgeois ideology.<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, the ideological purpose of the USSR's grade nine geography:

Ought to promote students' conviction about the tremendous advantages of socialism over capitalism, in the unlimited possibilities of socialism, and in its historic superiority over capitalism.<sup>3</sup>

An eighth grade Soviet history textbook stresses economic exploitation and adventure as motives for English migration to the American colonies, downplaying the search for religious freedom. The account continues:

During the revolutionary war, in the course of a bitter class struggle, power in the USA went from one class to another--from the landowning aristocrats to the industrial-trading bourgeoisie of the North, who ruled in union with the plantation slave-owners of the South.<sup>4</sup>

The Soviet view that the American Revolution was fought along social class lines is distorted. Some large landowners were loyalists, but many, including Washington and Jefferson, were patriots. Soviet textbooks omit or slight the role of religion and of political parties in American thought; barely mention such reform movements as Jacksonian democracy, populism, and the Progressive Movement; have little about how typical Americans live; contain little about family life, schools, churches and synagogues, recreation, work, and other common aspects of daily.

Soviet textbooks focus on American poverty, unemployment, inflation, crime, social inequality, racism, hedonism, and militarism. A world history book asserts: "It is not surprising that a typical trait of American society, which is founded on social inequality, should be violence and terror."<sup>5</sup> A geography textbook says: "Under the conditions of Capitalism one-third of Americans are unable to buy necessary food."<sup>6</sup>

Factual errors include the explanation for the Korean War, which began when North Korean soldiers attacked the south. Soviet tenth graders read:

Seeking to halt the building of socialism in the northern part of the country and suppress the national liberation struggle in the South, the South Korean puppets started a war against [North Korea] in June 1950 with the aid of American imperialism.<sup>7</sup>

Quoting the American saying, "The only good Indian is a dead Indian," a Soviet textbook tells of blankets infected by Indians with smallpox being given deliberately to other Indians, and concludes: "Thus, by the 19th century the American military was already using methods of monstrous bacteriological warfare."<sup>8</sup>

Soviet textbooks present the USA as a deceitful World War II ally, concerned with "the destruction of Germany and Japan as fundamental competitors and the confirmation of their own world domination."<sup>9</sup> Soviet goals were stated as "the destruction of fascism, liberation of enslaved peoples, and the restoration of democratic freedoms--the creation of conditions for a lasting peace."<sup>10</sup>

Soviet distortions include: the USA and England delayed opening a second front in Europe so that German and Soviet troops would destroy each other. Another: the USA imperialists blockaded Cuba in October 1962, prepared to invade "the Island of Liberty," and only "the hard line and decisive measures of the Soviet Union" avoided thermonuclear war. Omitted were the facts that the Soviets placed offensive missiles in Cuba and the Soviets backed down during the blockade. The Soviet student is led to believe that the USA intent to intimidate Cuba almost caused World War III. Another: Blacks receive less pay than whites; are not allowed in white schools, streetcars, buses, and restaurants; "White Only" signs abound; and Blacks are segregated in areas lacking basic sanitation and conveniences. Omitted is the substantial progress since the 1950s in race relations.<sup>11</sup>

Textbook images that young Soviets retain long after schooling ends are that the typical American can little influence public opinion, which serves the interest of the rich who run the USA; that great social inequality exists with one third of the people lacking sufficient food, medical care, and housing; that crime is common; that Blacks, native Americans, and other minorities are persecuted; that America is militarily powerful, aggressive, and spiritually weak. They believe that USA business and political leaders disapproved of the 1917 Russian revolution, tried several times to destroy the USSR, caused the 16-year delay in recognizing the USSR, deliberately helped arm Germany and Japan before World War II to attack the USSR, and finally entered the war because USA economic interests were threatened. The USA is depicted

as a reluctant ally who hoped Germany and the USSR would destroy each other, postponed a second front in Europe until the USSR had already broken the German Army, and then with Britain invaded Europe to claim war spoils and to manipulate the peace. Textbooks assert that the USA atom bombed Hiroshima and Nagasaki not to defeat Japan (Soviet intervention had already accomplished that) but to blackmail the USSR after the war, that World War II was a socialist victory, and that the USA imperialists have since tried to extend their domination which the USSR has resisted while maintaining peace, and that world victory of socialism is ultimately certain.<sup>12</sup>

#### Alleged USA Distortions

The USSR educator team noted the variety of USA textbooks and the technical accuracy of charts, maps, and other illustrations. But they found bias when USA textbooks, discussing the origin of the Russian state, refer to its "expansionism" and its economic and political "backwardness" as an "outlying European district." What USA textbooks call "annexation" by Russia of Ukrainian lands was in fact, the team said, the liberation movement of the Ukrainian people against the Rzecz Pospolita (1648-54), which led to reunification of the Ukraine with Russia.<sup>13</sup>

Peter I and Catherine II are overemphasized, according to the USSR team, to focus on the "westernization" of Russia and the expansion of its frontiers. Brutality against serfs under Peter I is hardly mentioned. Little mentioned too are the peasant revolts against social and national oppression led by K. Bulavin and E. Pugachev, nor the revolutionary-democratic movements of the 1860s and 1870s, nor the bourgeois democratic revolution of 1905-07. These are attributed condescendingly

and inaccurately, according to the Russian educator team, to the spread of "knowledge of Western democracy and freedom among the discontented elements of the Russian population."<sup>14</sup>

The Russian team considered USA textbooks biased in depicting the 1917 revolution "as a chance event caused by Bolshevik revolutionaries," referred to as a "small group of insignificant extremists" and "a narrow group of conspirators," ignoring the longtime and massive buildup of opposition to the Czarist regime by peasants and workers. USA textbooks charge incorrectly that Kaiser Germany financed exiled Bolsheviks and expedited their return through Germany as a way to create havoc and so eliminate Russia from the Allied side in World War I. Lenin, also maligned, they assert, is said to have "mistrusted the masses, the same people for whom he fought," and to have advocated "authoritarianism" in the party.<sup>15</sup>

Soviet educators found, regarding the "Great Patriotic War" (World War II), that USA textbooks disparage or are ignorant of "the significance of the greatest battles on the Soviet-German front, the main front on which the fate of the entire second world war was decided."<sup>16</sup> USA textbooks do not show, the Soviet team says, "that the primary burden of the war was borne by the USSR, which had to repel and destroy the main forces of the enemy even after a second front was established."<sup>17</sup>

Also labeled as false in USA textbooks: that German occupiers "were frequently hailed as liberators, especially in the Ukraine." And: "Just as a severe winter helped the Russians defeat Napoleon in 1812,...it now helped the Soviets in their battle with Hitler." USA textbooks, the Soviet team says, "persistently resort to the

hackneyed, anti-Soviet myths about the 'dictatorship of the party,' the 'absence of democracy,' and the 'dominance of autocracy.'<sup>18</sup> They conclude:

U.S. textbooks do everything in their power to discredit the political system in the Soviet Union and the role of the Marxist-Leninist ideology and to undercut the enormous achievements of the first socialist state in the world.<sup>19</sup>

#### Conclusion: What Can Be Done?

Can allegations of bias on each side be corrected? Can two such dissimilar political systems find common ground? The US/USSR Textbook Study Project, a step in the right direction, needs to be revived, enlarged, and ultimately to involve and affect teachers and students in each country, perhaps in an ongoing series of face-to-face meetings. Such academic exchanges are necessary to offset political confrontation and nuclear holocaust. The outreach for peace made by Samantha Smith, and the Soviet leadership's warm response to that Maine schoolgirl were wholesome. So too was the 1985 Minnesota students'-Soviet students' televised verbal exploration of the mutual desire for peace. Removing bias about each other from textbooks is a needed first step in reducing tension and in ensuring peace.

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