

Teaching History in Soviet secondary schools

Our country at present is witnessing a remarkable increase of public interest in history, historical subjects are regularly featured in newspapers and magazines, in the repertory of theatres, in scientific discussions, films and in the public mind. People buy up tremendous editions of expensive reprints dealing with 18-19 th century history, now being published in the USSR by state and cooperative publishing houses. Very popular are books written by foreign historians. Huge editions of the works of famous Russian Historians are bought up overnight.

Soviet sociologists attribute the unusual historical "renaissance" to the fact that our country has reached a turning-point in its history. During such periods there is a greatly increased interest in past history. The past in many ways determines the future.

The present interest in history has also been stimulated by the fact that sharp ideological battles are raging around its interpretation. Some take from the past only that which suits their outlook. Others say: enough of selfexposure and washing our dirty linen in public, we must look forward rather than backwards. Such a view, however, denies the truth about the past, but often fails to understand the process of change taking place today.

History journals and socio-political magazines publish much material dealing with-historical personalities from new points of view, often revealing the so-called "black spots" of our recent history. Some people are alarmed by the zeal with some magazines are publishing such exposures. The historian B. Iskanderov comments in this connection as follows: "We do not need "sterilized" history - it simply does not exist. Another matter ist the doubtful quality and unnecessary sensational character of some publications.

But this need not alarm us. The scum will disappear and the truth will remain".

Because of the enormous new interest in our past history, sociologists and historians are attempting by surveys to establish the actual level of historical knowledge among the people at large.

Unfortunately, it is not very high. One such sociological survey among working adults revealed very poor knowledge of events which they had studied in school history classes. For example: 27,5 % of those questioned did not know when the Kulikov Battle took place; 19,2 % gave incorrect answers to the question as to when the Second World War began; 14 % did not know the date of the battle of the Kursk Bulge. Not much better were the results to questions dealing with historical personalities: substantial knowledge about Alexander Nevsky was admitted by 32,4 % of those questioned; 27,9 % about B.K. Blyukher; 13 % about I.D. Papanin, and 9 % about Andrey Rublyov. Asked as to whether they could defend their viewpoint of historical events in a discussion with opponents only 7,8 % answered in the affirmative, 1/3 in the negative and 53,6 % admitted to partial ability or declined to answer altogether.

Very often even people with college diplomas (higher education) are skeptical about their knowledge of history. What is the reason for this situation?

The main reason is obviously the unsatisfactory level of history teaching in our schools. As taught in our schools, history is to a great degree ideologically slanted. It is still conducted according to the principle established by the historian M.N. Pokrovsky, i.e., "History is politics directed to the past".

The principle emphasis has been placed on study of political

and economic processes - the class struggle, mass movements, etc. History of ideas, the condition and role of both the common people as well as famous personalities receives very little attention. This dry approach leaves no room for dealing with the weaknesses, vacillations, moral aspiratins^o and searchings of history's leaders. This leads to the depersonalization of history. The study of history loses its importance as a builder of morality, as the collective memory of past generations.

The tendency to dehumanize history education is most evident in the underestimation of cultural history, which is taught periodically only as a supplement to the main materials (usually not more than 4 - 5 lessons per year).

The courses in 20th century suffered greatly from distortions, half-truths, abstractness, dogmatism. In many ways these study courses still bear the imprint of the out-dated conceptions prevalent during the Stalin period.

The school programme does not take into account the most recent advances in historical research (although research institutes have also been negatively affected by "administration" of ideology).

Controversial questions are not raised for discussion even in the 9 + 10 grades. Only one interpretation is accepted as "correct", the one presented in the text-book. The existence of one official text-book also tends to add to the defects of the programme by limiting the pupil to a restricted quantity of information.

It is not a secret that school children receive a great deal of information about social life, about historical events from the mass media; they compare this information with that received from text-books and from their teachers. This often results in a loss of confidence in the official history courses, a non-critical skepticism, a negative attitude toward their teachers as conveyors of official propaganda.

At present we are witnessing the results of many years of neglect of the history of culture. The 4-5 lessons per school year devoted to this subject are presented in a rather primitive manner. The material is usually based on the theory that in pre-revolutionary class society there existed two cultures: that of the exploiting class, serving as an instrument of oppression of "immortal works of art and literature". It is no wonder that on finishing school, pupils are unacquainted with the language of culture and have no interest in acquiring it. The serious consequences of this situation can be seen in the neglect by people in authority of our cultural heritage, the decline of cultural and historical monuments.

We create the most modern atomic energy plants, space technology, but are unable to preserve the invaluable collections of books in our leading libraries. This is without doubt a reflection of inadequate state of education in the humanities in our schools. This is often the subject of debate in our parliament.

Another problem, according to specialists in the methodology of teaching history, is the total lack of such methods as comparative history, the use of analogy, statistics, reconstruction, etc. Without a grasp of such methods of educational technology and historical, no person, professional or non-professional, can develop his thinking abilities.

Our textbooks in general history suffer from eurocentrism - those on USSR-history suffer from Russo-centrism. As an example in the textbook "history of the USSR" for the 7th grade, out of 42 chapters only two deal with the history of non-Slavic peoples, and these usually "begin" with the end of the 19th century.

Clearly, the teaching of history is affected by the contradictions existing in our society today. The calls for perestroika in this field are becoming louder and louder.

The demands for a fundamental reform of history education resounded from above and from below. They are based on the realization that our country is in need of people capable of active participation in the creation of a new democratic society. Such people must have an adequate knowledge of our country's history.

What shall we teach and how shall we teach? During the period of stagnation we usually waited for special decisions from above - from the Party and government. Today these problems are being raised and discussed widely by state and public figures, by scientists, historians, teachers and the press.

At present, our teachers are engaged in the study of several new conceptions of history education published in pedagogical journals and developed by specialists in didactics, and pedagogical methodology. These programs - the product of new social initiatives are being heatedly discussed in our schools. These programs contain many common principles for reforming the teaching of history in our schools. The most important of these principles is the humanization of history. The subject of historical science is man (in one infinite sequence of generations) and if we speak about its humanization we understand the word literally - making it human. To humanize history means also to increase interest for historic personalities.

In order to understand this idea one must have a clear view of the recent situation at Soviet Schools. In the process of studying history pupils mostly learned different historical laws and also methods of solving historical problems with a help of abstract schematic notions until now. It often happened that names of certain people who had done great service to our country and our culture simply vanished from the history books when they were reprinted. This situation was highly characteristic of the history courses on the Soviet period. The names of people who had played an outstanding role in Soviet history were banned from their pages as a result of the one-sided interpretation of events. Not very long ago all books dealing with the period of the October Revolution still

could contain only certain names fixed by Stalin in his days.

I remember how in 1938 when I was a pupil of the 4th form we were ordered to hand in our text books of history and then, after a few days, got them back with some pages glued together. Those were the pages with the portraits of "enemies of the Soviet people" - our outstanding military leaders: Tukhachevsky, Blukher, Egorov.

Today the authors of the new conception of historical studies in the USSR as well as the authors of new textbooks consider social and psychological portraits, political and intellectual biographies as a very important element of historical courses. They also think that the biographical and illustrational material should include not only positive but also negative facts and, thus so to say, "negative" personalities must also find their place in historical studies.

One of the most important tasks of the humanization of our history is not to refuse our national ideals but see them together with the human ideals common to all mankind.

The present system of teaching sociologized history develops in pupils a stereotyped way of thinking which makes them able only to find the prefixed place for each new fact in the scheme they learned beforehand. Such pupils very soon lose any interest for historical science as the process of real understanding as a matter of fact, is thus soon coming to an end. In other cases pupils come to the conviction that there are two kinds of history: one highly schematized, which they learn at school, and the second, alive, they learn from books, films, mass-media. This is the way of forming a double thinking, duplicity and, as its inevitable result, conformism or nihilism.

The main goal of teaching history, in the opinion of the authors of the new conception, is to form historical cons-

ciousness, to develop a historical way of thinking.

Education by history aims also at furnishing young people with clear social guide-lines, reliable methods of independent analysis of historical events, helping them to master specific historical instruments for historical knowledge, i.e. the comparative historical method, the method of analogy, the statistic method, the method of reconstructing the whole from its parts and some more. -

As more emphasis is placed now on the humanitarian aspects of secondary education, teaching history can be regarded as one of the moral regulators of social life. Some teachers believe that teaching history can counterpoise the technocratic trends in the society.

Due to the changing aims of teaching history it also acquires new content and is first of all to be determined at present by new approaches in science and methodology in history.

The science of history now is living through a period of considerable theoretical renovation due to the introduction of new concepts and ideas. This calls for reviewing of a number of categories.

I think you are perfectly aware that in Soviet secondary schools the history of mankind both in past and in future is viewed through the prism of Marx's doctrine of socio-economic formations based on the change of the mode of production (primitive communal, slave-owning, capitalist and communist). Anything that runs counter to this scheme is being ignored.

The theory of formations which existed for decades made our understanding of historical process too narrow, excluding many phenomena that failed to comply with the scheme. The point is we must clear this theory of deformations so that it could encompass the developments of the twentieth century.

That is why we need a new approach to the notion of progress in history, Today it is unquestionable that our vision of mankind's development should be enriched by the civilizations approach.

The combination of these two approaches to systematising historic material will enable us to reflect the development of mankind both in vertical spiral-like plane and in horizontal one that lets us see various societies at various stages. Revealing all the diversity and contradictions of the historical developments is very important for overcoming black-and-white vision of history in school.

Until now we viewed the historical process in one dimension, that is: anything that took place at a certain period was regarded as a reflection of objective regularity. But humanising approach to teaching history calls for showing all the diversity (most deeply rooted in social sphere) and all the facts of the historical development.

To overcome dogmatism we must show the effects of complex trends in different spheres. Let me give you just one example. The new textbook for the 10th form is rather successful from the point of view of the content and in analysing the collectivization in agriculture in the Soviet Union it gives both Stalin's concept of agricultural development in socialist principles and Bukharin's concept. Naturally such a structure of the book provides an opportunity to show the pupils why the country developed in such a way and why historical possibilities were not put into practice.

Now a few words about the structure of teaching history: Traditionally there are three steps of school education. Experts developing the concept of education consider it necessary to study an introductory course of history where much attention should be given to the history of the republic or region. At the second step the main events in world and national history from ancient time till 1917 are systematically studied. The third step covers the basics of the sub-

sequent national and world history (sometimes united in one course).

Here are some basic principles for the new structure of teaching history.

1. The main principle is chronological arrangement of material. In recent 10-15 years the linear principle predominated in teaching history, that is each period of national and world history was studied once, without being repeated at the next stages of education. The balance of linear and concentric approaches to history teaching is one of the most important problems. Soviet school used a concentric method in the '30s-'60s and a linear method in the '70s-'80s. The linear one allows to structure the programme economically and logically in accordance with basic science. But on the other hand it deprives senior pupils of the opportunity to analyse some important periods of history. These drawbacks can be overcome at the second and third stages through introduction of facultative courses, including Ancient and Middle Ages History.

2. At present there are two independent courses of national and world history that contain roughly equal amount of material. This calls for promotion of links between the two courses, but often these two courses remain "lying on two different shelves". Now the trend to unite the two courses in one is gaining strength. It is increasingly feasible when the history of the 19th and 20th centuries is taught in senior grades, as that was the time when economic, political and cultural links between nations developed more rapidly, reducing the isolation between the peoples and developing new cultural norms. In this respect Marx's idea that world history is the result of centuries-old social development appears quite true.

Since the beginning of capitalist era anthropological unity of mankind transforms into a cultural and historical unity. This is reflected in the growing understanding among nations

and awareness of humanitarian, global burning problems.

3. Systematic selection of material for history lessons should be combined with fragmentarity.

Now let us analyse suggested variants of history lessons curriculum.

Variant 1 To preserve the existing structure, that is the two separate courses of national and world history and division of material according to socio-economic formations and teaching the history of the republic within the framework of national history.

In that case we'll have to overcome some drawbacks, such as:

- overloading and predominance of knowledge nomenclature;
- strict linearity that doesn't give senior pupils an opportunity to return to the course of ancient history and history of the middle ages;
- insufficient attention to the history of peoples inhabiting the USSR;
- strict division into two courses (national and world history).

I believe that the following changes may help overcome the above-mentioned drawbacks:

1. A different character of studies at the primary stage, when the existing course of "Episodes of Soviet History" can be replaced by such courses as "Our Motherland - the USSR", "History of our Republic" or "World Around Us".
2. The course may be relieved of about 25 per cent of the material and some additional material selected with a wider use of the fragmentary approach.
3. To ensure revision of ancient and middle ages history (including national history) in senior grades it is necessary to work out special programmes of inter-disciplinary character, such as "major milestones of world civilization development", "history - man - culture", "history and culture of Soviet peoples", "nature - man - society", "modern world" or "global human problems".

4. Introduction of integrated world history course in the graduation and the pre-graduation forms.
5. The history of union and autonomus republics may be made a separate subject.
6. Elementary ancient and middle ages (till the 17th century) history may be abandoned and new courses introduced, for example "history in painting, events and characters", "countries and nations" and "pages of world civilizations' history".

Variant 2 This variant is based on concentric doctrine with the whole course of history from ancient times till our days being taught in concise form in 5-9 grades. In 10-11 grades optional subjects are introduced, national and world history among them.

Variant 3 History is taught linearly in 5-11 grades without separating the national and the world history. Structurally the programme may be based on formations, civilizations, cultures and personalities principle. This variant provides for a wider horizontal characteristic of society.

Variant 4 The history of continents, countries and nations taken as a whole, both "horizontally" and "vertically" at the time of exuberant growth of this or that civilization.

Variant 5 History in scenes and characters. The old systematic lectures on history are abandoned and descriptions of epochs and periods of history, ethnographic unities, classes and strata of society are given alongside characters, public psychology, historical conscience, culture and morality characteristics. This variant makes it possible to use documents and evidence provided by contemporaries as the main source of information for senior pupils.

Apparently there is no need to go on describing other variants as you have already got an idea of the pluralism among the Soviet historians.

The concepts I spoke about were published in the press and are being widely discussed by teachers, historians and all who take interest in school life. Also discussed are different suggestions for the development of differentiated history teaching to meet the interest of pupils having a turn for history to develop their creative abilities.

Differentiated approach can be translated into life through facultative courses and specialised classes or schools with more attention to this subject. Facultative courses are to give special training to help enter higher educational establishments, prepare school students for their future work and provide general cultural and humanitarian training. These courses may take up such topics as ancient Greek culture; Renaissance culture; Peter the Great's innovations; technological developments in the 19th and 20th centuries; utopian socialism; the Great French Revolution; 1848 revolutions in Europe; civil war in 1812; October Socialist Revolution; history of Russian architecture; space exploration history; geographical discoveries and others. They should not take more than 20-30 hours a year so that the same pupils could at the same time attend another facultative course.

There may also be larger in terms and wider in the subjects covered. They will not be meant for further historians alone and will call for additional work at seminars, conferences, libraries, museum, archives, etc. This type of courses may take up such subjects as revolutionary movement in Russia (2 hours a week); history of arts (1 hour); history of culture; history of international relations in the 20th century; history of technology and others.

The idea of differentiated approach is becoming increasingly popular in the Soviet Union and the number of specialised schools with history study is increasing. The transition from dogmatic to creative teaching requires changing all the methods. The main principles of the new style of work are:

1. Greater use of the method of dialog instead of monolog.
2. Accelerating the development of the creative, independent activity of pupils. The greater use of the methods of discussing, debates, seminars and conferences.
3. Encouraging the emotional factor as a part of creative learning. In this regard much attention is to be paid to using varied teaching aids.

Now I'll touch upon another very important problem, that is teaching history of union republics. The increasing importance of the problem is determined by the growing ethnic consciousness of our people and sharpening ethnic relations in the USSR. All the union republics are displeased with the ratio of the "history of the USSR" course, taught in all Soviet schools and the course of union republics' history included in it, that existed until recently.

Today both the center and the republics decided that the latter need special courses of their people's history. Quite recently I attended a special conference of didactic historians of all the republics where the problems arising from that decision were discussed. Obviously every republic has its own peculiarities in working out a concept of teaching history.

About 2-3 years ago Party apparat representatives and government officials would blame as nationalists anyone who would violate the official curriculum on their own will and change the ratio of time devoted to the history of federation and the history of republics, while now this is the case for all the republics and is regarded as normal.

In many republics the introductory course is devoted to the history of native republic (Armenia, Latvia, Estonia, Moldavia, etc.) and attempts are made to unite the history of their republic and country with the world history in one course. The Baltic republics are most active in restructuring their history teaching.

A comprehensive restructuring is being carried out in Estonia. The introductory course gives information on human beings, nature, relations between the people, family and society and continues with telling who we are and who the neighbouring peoples are. Starting from the 6th grade world history is taught on the example of native people and in the 11th form a comprehensive course of Estonian history is taught. Estonian experts believe that though world history textbooks give all the topics systematically, it is impossible to cover them all and the teacher is to choose, for example in the 6th form he is to choose one country when the history of China, India or Japan is studied. The optional courses taken up here deal mostly with neighbouring countries (history of Baltic and Scandinavian peoples). Latvians have a similar concept of teaching history.

These republics are after complete independence from the center in this respect and like some other republics try to have textbooks on federation's history written by their own authors and Latvia and Estonia already publish their own textbooks. It is noteworthy that courses of ethnic history in union republics cover the history of their compatriots living abroad. In Armenia the course is named "the history of Armenian people" and provides information on the life of Armenian people forced by the genocide policies to leave their country.

Some experts at the historians' conference suggested that foreign specialists be invited to participate in the work at separate chapters of the textbooks. There is one more problem connected with covering histories of smaller peoples living in union republics and some questions arise as to how it is necessary to familiarise the pupils with the history of other nationalities living nearby and whether regional textbooks are worth working at. There will be answers to the questions in due time.

The changes in teaching history in Soviet secondary schools imply a radical re-orientation of the subject, pursuing new tasks and ending ideology approach. History must not be subordinate to any ideology, this view is shared by many historians. But this will depend on the general political situation in the Soviet Union. Many public movements and political parties emerge in our country today, but some Party officials and their followers in government educational establishments don't give way.

The Communist Party of the Soviet Union is also living through a very complicated stage of development on the eve of its 28th congress. However history teachers are rather slow in the uptake to assume new ideas, as this development is to some extent hampered by the educational authorities.

There are many objective problems as well, as revision of traditional historical ideas and values has never been easy and painless. But I do believe that the new generation of our children will know the whole truth of their history and will be able to study the history of states and the history of Man and this history will teach them being critical about all the accumulated social experience, teach them live in a free undivided world.

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