Teaching Contemporary Russia and Europe at the Secondary Level in the United States

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Young Americans grow up an ocean away from Europe, and most never leave their native land. They do not have the understanding or appreciation for people with different cultures, languages and polities that comes almost naturally to Europeans. They are amazed at the thought that practically anywhere at all in Europe, outside Russia, one is never more than five hundred miles away from some other country that has its own language, laws, history, currency and varying traditions of relationship with its neighbors over the centuries. It is usually the case that what young Americans know of Europe comes from a very few limited sources: school textbooks which emphasize that the forbears of today's Americans fled persecution and squalor in the Old World to Build up God's Own Country across the Atlantic; novels by Dickens and dramas by Shakespeare that are played out in a Europe vastly removed from the reality of today; and movies crafted not to inform the public but to attract it to the box office, often by reinforcing stereotypes or national caricatures. Here is a prime opportunity for us as educators and as members of the International Society for History Didactics to live up to our responsibilities in history education.

What young people in America 'know' about Russia is no better informed, in fact probably worse, since so few of them visit Russia and those that do generally get no farther in than Moscow and St. Petersburg. (I have tried to do what I can about that in my own way, having led several student trips to the former Soviet Union, stopping at Tallinn, Vilnius, Vladimir, Suzdal, Yalta, Samarkand, Bukahara and Tashkent, as well as Moscow and Leningrad.) For most young Americans Russia under Yeltsin remains very much a variant on the familiar Churchillian theme of "riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma."

As we come to the close of the twentieth century, America is to some degree distracted from the concentration upon Europe that has characterized her foreign outlook for much of the time since the outbreak of World War II. The Japanese War, the Korean War and the Vietnam War seemed to many to be uncomfortable aberrations form America's natural Eurocentric inclination. But now the rise of the Pacific Rim economies, China's headlong dash toward superpower status, and the closer involvement with Latin American implicit in the United States' commitment to the North America Free Trade Area – all betoken changes in the direction of America's primary concern. This is reinforced by the popular conception that Russia is no longer any threat at all (forgetting her vast and perhaps scantily guarded nuclear arsenal). The Cold War is over, and no one laments its demise, so – the thought is -- who's to worry?

But Americans must turn their attention back to Europe and to Russia, for the international debate over the enlargement of NATO surely highlights one of the most important questions – perhaps the very most important of all – in America's foreign policy since World War II. It is discouraging to find how very few Americans, young Americans in particular, have given the matter any serious thought at all. They may offhandedly agree with one argument that maintains that now is the time to bring the strong supporting hand of NATO to Central and

Eastern Europe, and then equally casually they may concur with the contrary line, that Russia cannot help but see an enlarged NATO on her doorstep as a threat to her own security, driving her to harden her inborn suspicion of the West and to build up her defences , so that the Bear will growl again.

It is of course essential for educators in the United States and elsewhere to inform young people of the history and changing nature of the Atlantic Alliance, if they are to acquire any worthwhile views on the subject. We must remember, of course, that the young people of today are the voters of tomorrow and the decision-makers of the day after that. They know naturally enough that NATO was constructed as the bastion of the West against the expansion of the Soviet Union. When Averell Harriman, U.S. Ambassador in Moscow during World War II, remarked to Stalin in conversation at Potsdam in 1945 how extraordinary it was to find the leaders of the three victorious powers meeting together in Berlin after all that their peoples had been through, Stalin replied with a touch of envy, "Tsar Alexander got to Paris" (*The World at War, vol.* 25 *Reckoning,* Thames Television, 1982). Forty-five years after that conversation Soviet Communism collapsed, and in 1993 Lord Carrington, former British Foreign Secretary and Secretary-General of NATO, said to me "Now that the Cold War is over, I can easily understand young Americans seeing no point to NATO." At the time NATO was described to me by a senior official at the headquarters in Brussels as a 'dinosaur in metamorphosis.' The change of emphasis since then, with NATO now set to look after its members' global interests, reaching in theory at least far outside the North Atlantic area, is indeed dramatic. This was at the hear of NATO's concern in the Balkans in recent years, when American leadership in NATO did at least put a stop for several years to the horrors of the Bosnian war with her sponsorship and implementation of the Dayton Peace Accords. Containment of a Balkan crisis is certainly a triumph for those who brought it off, in stark contrast to the runaway crisis in the selfsame Balkans that touched off World War I or the frailty of Central and Eastern European states that irresistibly whetted the appetite of Adolf Hitler, thereby hurling all of us into World War II. It is the desire to spread an essential stabilizing influence that impels the Clinton Administration today to seek the expansion of NATO into Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, with other new members to follow. But I am sure in my mind that very few young Americans know this or have very much stimulus in their lives either to find out about it or even to care at all.

Let us hope that the lesson has at least been learned by our leaders, and that the conflagration newly lit in Kosovo will be deliberately stamped out before it can spread in a doomsday senario through the neighboring states of Albania and Macedonia, and thence to Greece and even Turkey and Hungary.

It is really wondefully easy to generate enthusiasm, even excitement, about such topics as these in the secondary school classroom. Given their head, the young people I teach always want to debate, for example, whether Russia is really engaged in an irreversible process of transition into a truly constitutional democracy, or whether on the other hand the formidable and autocratic Bear of popular imagination will rise again, his growls to reverberate in every corner of the earth. Of course none of us can foretell the future, but I want to give young people the knowledge upon which alone valid judgements can be made, and a course in contemporary history is an obvious place to start, because, as Thomas Jefferson said, "History is the only laboratory we have in which to test the consequences of thought."

Students intending to pursue a career in medicine or engineering or many other fields may well find no opportunity for such study at university. Without a sense of the size, variety, strengths, challenges and anxieties of the European Union, and without their interest in the field of contemporary history having been sparked so that they can pursue it alone, they will surely find themselves at a disadvantage in the international dimension of their chosen field of professional expertise. Sir Lion Brittan, Vice President of the European Union, agrees, writing to me that "it is essential, I am sure, for the European Community to make a proper effort to be understood in the United States, and that process should begin in school."

The combination of detailed historical study and a constant eye on the newspapers can do more than anything else to provide the necessary enlightenment. For example, at first glance it may seem petty and chauvinistic for Greece to resent with acerbic vituperation the assumption of the name 'Macedonia' by the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia when it gained its independence: looks trivial. But it was explained to me by a Greek acquaintance in Thessaloniki that the region in question had never laid any claim to the name of Macedonia until Tito, with the connivance of Stalin, so named what had previously been known as Vardavska Dardania, in order to give leverage to any hypothetical claim that might be promoted in the future for the unification of Pan-Macedonia under Yugoslav auspices. This new state would include the northern province of Greece that includes the capital and the grave of Philip of Macedon, the father of Alexander the Great. Yugoslavia would gain access to the Aegean, and Bulgaria acould expect to absorb eastern Thrace, as she had before World War I. I cannot vouch for the accuracy of this story, but it opens many vistas, particularly in the context of our study of the uses and abuses of history.

It is time now to turn to the structure and methodology of my own course entitled *Russia and Contemporary Europe,* taught at the Shipley School, an independent college-preparatory school outside Philadelphia. This course is unique in the United States and almost certainly in Europe and Russia too, in that a whole year's course in secondary school is devoted to the history of Russia and Europe since World War II. I hope I have shown that the need is there. The period of history about which adults are often least informed is the period around the time of their birth. Their parents all have a good idea of it, having lived through these years, but historical accounts hardly reach the run-of-the-mill textbooks by the time the children are in school, so the students know very little. That is what in a modest way I am setting myself to correct.

My course in an elective for students in their last three year of high school, that is fifteen to eighteen. It opens with a study of Marxist-Leninist theory, for no one can hope to understand the history of the USSR without that background. Most useful has been *Masters of Political Thought,* vol.3: *Hegel to Dewey* (Houghton Mifflin, 1969) by Lane W. Lancaster. It is unsurpassed for its combination of long extracts from original texts by Marx, Engles, Lenin and Stalin, matched by passages of cogent analysis and exegesis. For the history of the USSR and Russia I use in the first place *Europe in Our Time: A History, 1945-1992* by Walter Laqueur (Penguin Books, 1992), then *The Decline and Fall of the Soviet Empire* by Fred Coleman (St. Martin's Press, 1996). Coleman's book, contentious and somewhat one-sided though it may be, deals with the years from Khrushchev to the present and is full of exactly the anecdotal information one expects from a journalist, which Coleman is. This has immediate appeal to young people. Finally there is *Russia 2010 and What It Means for the World* by Daniel Yergin

and Thane Gustafson (Random House, 1995), which sets us a series of scenarios for the future of Russia, eminently suitable for student debate.

Frankly, I have found it harder to select a book on Europe as a whole since 1995 that would catch and hold the students' interest. For years I used *Rebirth: A History of Europe Since the Second World War* by Cyril E. Black *et al.* (Western Press, 1992), but alas, that is no longer available. It set the scene will and provided a good balance between national and international coverage. Now I use Laquer's book, referred to above, and authoritative, even magisterial work, but less easy for young tyros to digest. It is a balanced and cautious book, factual and straightforward, but it does not reach out to the student reader.

My constant theme in the teaching of Europe since 1945 was given to me by Dr.Gûnter Renner, Direktor, Institût fûr Europaische Lehrerbildung, Europaische Akademie, Berlin: "Show it as an amazing success story. After World War II, Western Europe seized the opportunity to make future wars between and among its states impossible. Western Europe is the only place in which the sovereignty of states has been voluntarily relinquished. The standard of living there is now higher than in any other continent. Can the rest of Europe follow suit? Can North America? Can the world." If this seems unworkable, what are the alternatives?

My class reads newspapers. Every day each student takes *The New York Times,* and we read all the articles pertinent to Russia and Europe. Weekly we receive *The European,* an English language paper with sections on news, business, sport and lifestyle, preceded by hard-hitting editorials, useful for debate. And the students enjoy the coverage of soccer and fashions. The journal *Current History,* published in Philadelphia, makes for serious and stimulating reading. Articles I have found particularly valuable in recent years include *Why Yugoslavia Fell Apart* by Steven L. Burg (November, 1993), *The Islamic World and the Bosnian Crisis* by Tetsuya Sahara (November, 1994), and *The End of the Walesa Era in Poland* by Ray Taras (March, 1998).

A course whose full length has been devoted to recent history and contemporary issues can move logically forward into the future towards its conclusion. So, after a review of the deepening or widening hopes for the European Union, students read *Millenium: Winners and Losers in the Coming World order* by Jacques Attali (Times Books, 1991) and *Preparing for the Twenty-first Century* by Paul Kennedy (Random House, 1993). Future studies are really enthralling for people who will be living their mature lives in those very times, and in an academic setting such study is far removed from science fiction. It is in fact the theme of the concluding chapters of many modern histories, including *Europe in the Twentieth Century* by Ronald E. Stromberg (Prentice Hall, 1992.

The most rewarding and beneficial assignments I have given have been portfolios, in which students assemble over many weeks, even a year, newspaper and magazine articles with their own analysis, on a given subject, with maps they have drawn (two feet by four), either on the Balkans (the whole class), or on individual areas such as Scandinavia or the Mahgreb in relation to Europe, or on individual subjects such as family issues, health, the environment, transportation, the Swiss-Nazi gold controversy, or the influence of the United States.

Compiling portfolios has become one of the most successful features of the course: at

the beginning of the year current events seem to many students to be far removed from 'serious' history, but after a few weeks or months the two flow naturally together, and a connection can be drawn, for example, between de Gaulle's 1963 veto of Britain's entry into the Common Market and John Major's 1994 reciprocal veto of Jean-Luc Dehaene as a too-federative president of the European Commission.

Movies and videotapes provide a valuable change of pace and learning style. Among others, I recommend *The New Europeans* (Ambrose Video, 1992), which combines a flashy and magazine format with serious and challenging themes; *the World at War* (see above) for its visual descriptions of the heartrending physical and moral disintegration of Europe at the close of World War II; *The Wall: The Making and the Breaking of the Berlin Wall* (Educational Network, 1991); and *The Rise and Fall of Mikhail Gorbachev* (PBS Home Video, 1991).Above all else I recommend the remarkable series *Messengers from Moscow* (Pacem Distribution International, 1995), about which I would like to say a word. There are four videotapes in the series, each an hour long, but with pauses for discussion and elucidation each one can easily take three hours or more. The first, *The Struggle for Europe,* describes the attempt by Stalin and Molotov to take over all of Germany and hence to dominate all of Europe, with evidence aprovided in interviews with Molotov (1972, with his chosen biographer Feliks Chuyev), General Sergei Kondrashevsky, KGB 1947-1992, and others. The second tape, *The East is Red,* details how the USSR and China grew steadily further apart in the Stalin and Khrushchev years, with Mikhail Kapitsa, Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister, 1982-1986, and Liu Keming, Deputy Head, Soviet Desk, Chinese International Department, 1958-1962, among others giving testimony. The third, *Fires in the Third World,* concerns soviet influence in Cuba and Vietnam; here Vladimir Semichastny, Chairman of the KGB, 1961-1967, and Fyodor Machulsky, Chief, Chinese and Southeast Asia Intelligence, 1967-1975, and others speak out. The fourth, *The Center Collapses,* details in a way not, I believe, so readily accessible or so persuasive anywhere else in the West, the final decline of the Soviet Union from the Helsinki Accords to Reagan's Strategic Defence Initiative, with interviews with Marshal Viktor Kulikov, Commander-in-Chief, the Warsaw Pact Forces, 1976-1989 and Aleksandr Yakovlev, Politburo Member, Propaganda, Culture and Foreign Affairs, 1987-1991 among others.

This final tape provided the theme for a long paper the students write: "Did the Soviet Union fail due to outside pressures or from internal contradictions?"

Speakers who have addressed the class in recent years include Gennady Gerasimov, Gorbachev's chief spokesman on foreign affairs; Harvey Sicherman, President of the Foreign Policy Research Institute and aide to Secretaries of State Shultz, Haig and Baker; Prof. Pierre-Henri Laurent, founder of the European Community Studies Association; and Dr. Paul Mojzes, graduate of Belgrade Law School and the author of *Yugoslavian Inferno: Ethnoreligious Warfare in the Balkans.*

In conclusion, let me repeat my transcendent concern for the education of young people in the affairs and concerns that will direct their lives tomorrow. Surely we owe them that. I am reminded of the solemn words of U Thant on October 24, 1970 as he approached the end of his ten-year term as Secretary-General of the United Nations: "As we watch the sun go down, evening after evening, through the smog across the poisoned waters of our native earth, we must ask ourselves seriously whether we really wish some future universal historian on another planet

to say about us, 'With all their genius and with all their skill, they ran out of foresight and air, and food, and water, and ideas,' or 'They went on playing politics until their world collapsed around them,' or 'When they looked up, it was too late.' If the United Nations does nothing else, it can at least serve a vital purpose in sounding the alarm." This is indeed the theme of our conference this week, our responsibility in history education.

Abstract

Young Americans grow up an ocean away from Europe, and most never leave their native land. They do not have the natural understanding for different cultures that comes from geographical proximity, and in particular they know little about the plight of Russia today or such European concerns as the arrival of the Euro or the dangerous conflagrations in the Balkan. In our rapidly globalizing society it is an important responsibility of teachers to break into this ignorance.

I have designed and taught at The Shipley School in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania, USA, a prototypical course, unique in the world, in which a full year in secondary school is devoted to the history of Russia and Europe since the Second World War. The course opens with a retrospective study of Marxism-Leninism, Stalin and the Second World War. Then chronological and thematic studies of the history of the area since 1945, on the one hand, is balanced by almost daily analysis of international current events on the other hand.

College-level textbooks, newspapers, professional journals, many videotapes and discussions with visiting experts round out the course. This paper concludes with a detailed description of those instructional materials that have proved the most beneficial and successful.