

History Books

By David Chandler

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In a recent Times opinion piece (Dec. 28), Robert Gillette brings us up to date on what Russian school children are being taught about history. It is addressed to "Westerners who believe that East-West tension and the arms race are rooted in fundamental misunderstandings between the people of different social systems." That sounds nice, but where does it lead?

The focus of his critique is a history textbook used by fourth graders in Russia entitled, "Stories About the History of the USSR," by T. S. Golubeva and L. S. Gellerstein. The 250 page text describes the life of factory workers in capitalist countries in images commonly associated with the industrial revolution: child labor, slave wages, long hours, hot, stuffy, noisy, and dangerous conditions, and harsh, uncaring employers. It concentrates on Soviet heroes "who struggled for the freedom and happiness of the people." It hails World War II as the "Great Patriotic War", as far as Russia is concerned, while underplaying the U.S. role and questioning our motives in unleashing atom bombs on an already defeated Japan. It omits the embarrassment of Stalin's purges and treads lightly on the politically uncertain ground of evaluating Soviet leaders since Lenin. The postwar world is treated as a "smooth march toward socialist prosperity." Gillette concludes saying that "For [Russian] parents who know something about the world, and many do, such textbooks are as frustrating as they are troubling. Gently and subtly, those parents work at home to correct and supplement the official curriculum without directly disputing it."

Fourth Grade! After recovering from the shock of the reading expectations placed on fourth graders in the Soviet Union, I am sure we can all agree that what Mr. Gillette has described is a highly biased, ideological rendition of history. Capitalism works a lot better in the U.S. today than it did in the early days of the industrial revolution. Stalin's crimes were real, whether the Russians like to face them or not, and the U.S. really did have something to do with defeating Germany and Japan. (Interestingly, the Russians are not alone in disputing the need to have bombed Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Western historians have recently renewed that debate as well.)

Yes, the Russians mix their ideology with their history. We have heard it many times. There is no excusing it. It's bad for superpower relations. It hampers the search for truth. Yet something about Mr. Gillette's critique seems ingenuous. If his concern is really the reduction of East-West tensions through greater mutual understanding, why this display of Russia bashing rather than offering a little insight into the Russian mind set? Is there no shred of truth, mixed in with all that ideology? Is there nothing we can learn from the Russian viewpoint? Do our own textbooks really provide a better model?

Last night I borrowed one of the textbooks currently used for teaching U.S. History in a local high school. I wanted to refresh my memory of my own high school days. The text I am looking at now is entitled, "Two Centuries of Progress: United States History," published by Laidlaw.

The book in front of me allocates a mere twelve pages to "The Organization of Industry and Labor," covering the period from 1859 to 1900. How did industry grow? "The Federal Government aided business with a high tariff. Local governments offered land for factories and

low taxes to businessmen. But of most importance, neither the Federal Government nor local governments tried to regulate businesses." (Period. No elaboration. No critical analysis. On to a new topic.)

What about the big time capitalists? "The rise of the American steel industry was largely the result of the work of one man--Andrew Carnegie. Beginning with ownership of a small steel plant in 1873, Carnegie built his business into an empire. In 1901 he helped form the giant United States Steel Corporation. This one company made one-fourth of all the steel made in the United States." (Period. Thank you Andrew Carnegie. No questioning. No encouragement of critical thinking. On to J.D. Rockefeller and Standard Oil.)

What about the laborers? Karl Marx saw capital and labor in mortal struggle. In Russia it led to Revolution. How did America escape the same fate? This would seem to be a key question, but our text does not even acknowledge the context. Instead, it simply cites some abuses in the workplace and narrates the rise of unions as a natural balance to the power of big business. There are occasional hints of violence, but again out of context: "The best known Socialist union was the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW or Wobblies). At times its members used violence to get what they wanted. The IWW reached its peak strength just before World War I. But the union went into decline when it would not support America's entry into the war." (Period. How boring! These were obviously bad people. Violence is so un-American. And so is opposing war. No mention of the fact that some of the key leaders were silenced by being imprisoned for up to 10 years for publicly denouncing the war.)

Reading on, we find the barest hints of the labor struggles that took place. There are four sentences about the Haymarket Riots, two sentences about a strike at Carnegie's steel plant, and one sentence mentioning the Pullman strike. In none of these cases are the issues even mentioned. This is like summarizing the civil rights movement of the 60's by saying, "There once was a riot in Watts." It is all too sanitary. Masked behind the innocuous words are long years of civil strife and a lot more bloodshed than most Americans ever dreamed. (For a vivid account of these years try reading Howard Zinn's "A People's History of the United States.") The real issues behind all the bloodshed? The eight hour day, child labor, and basic provisions for the health and safety of workers. Nineteenth century Americans, saw the dark side of capitalism, but our school children would never know it.

To most of us it does seem bizarre to see modern capitalism equated with conditions in the Industrial Revolution. But is even that really a total lie? Don't these same conditions still exist where capitalism has free reign among powerless people? Industrial conditions in many third world "democracies" in Latin America and some parts of Asia seem like the nineteenth century all over again. We really need go no farther than downtown Los Angeles to find examples of worker exploitation, especially among immigrant populations. Wherever the worker is at the mercy of the employer with no effective recourse, we are back to the same economic dynamics that prevailed a century ago. The answer may not be Communism, but certainly the answer is not to close our eyes.

What does our text say about the Russian Revolution and its social impact in the United States? "In the United States distrust and fear of what were called 'radical' ideas grew. Few people were sure just what ideas were radical. But by 1918 any unusual views about political, economic, or social

change were looked upon as being dangerous and un-American." (The reader never does learn from the text what ideas are "radical," either then or now. He is never asked to consider why radical ideas had appeal to some and were feared by others, or how suppressing radical ideas squares with the freedom of thought supposedly underlying our specialness as a "free" nation.)

Needless to say, the Russian role in World War II is hardly hinted at. A less than attentive reader might even miss which side the Russians fought on. Not only would an American high school student using this text not know that Russians call it the Great Patriotic War, they would not understand what would prompt such emotions. One would never guess from the text that for every American soldier killed, over 40 Russians died, half of them civilians. There is no picture of the devastation of their land and cities while our own homeland escaped unscathed, except for Pearl Harbor and a few Pacific islands. Perhaps if we were conscious of Russia's history of repeated invasions from the West, dating back to Napoleon, we could understand their paranoia and give some credibility to their perceived need to maintain a strong defensive posture, even a buffer zone in Eastern Europe. We don't have to agree with their methods, but it would help to understand where they are coming from.

How does our text stack up? Free of ideology? Helpful to the cause of mutual understanding and peace? Hardly. To be fair, I have seen much better high school texts, and granted, this one is a bit out of date. It dates from 1977, but it is still in use in a local high school, presumably because the pages haven't fallen out. In any case, I took American history way back in 1965. This text brings back memories of the way history was taught when I was in school.

One change I notice in this and other text books since I was in school is the self conscious scraping together of tidbits about Blacks, Native Americans, Latinos, Asians, and women. Their inclusion is something to be applauded, but they deserve more than parenthetical mention. The truth demands more. These people are real. If they can be relegated to the margins, the central strand of the story is somehow false. History is the story of who we are. We as a people own a heritage built on some high ideals. But it is also built on aggression, greed, genocide, slavery, bigotry, exploitation, and abuse of human rights. The word "Americans" includes both the abusers and the abused. If we shy away from confronting the full truth about who we are, who are we to judge the Russians for minimizing their blemishes? Truth is a prerequisite for lasting peace. Ideological distortions stand in the way of truth, and hence of peace.

I can only hope that American parents and teachers who know something of the world, and many do, can gently correct the disturbing ideological bias of textbooks such as these.