The Soviet Union: What Should Textbooks Emphasize?

Overview: The Soviet Union was born out of the Russian Revolution that followed World War I. During the next 70 years it grew to become a world superpower leaving a number of marks on 20th century world history. This Mini-Q looks at several of those marks and asks which ones deserve special attention in a school textbook.

The Documents:

Document A: Growth of the Soviet Union (map)
Document B: Soviet Society and Economy by the Numbers (chart)
Document C: The Great Terror (chart)
Document D: Soviet Elections (cartoon and chart)
Document E: Military Strength (graphic)
Document F: The Space Race (poster and chart)
Document G: Olympics
Document H: Ballet

A Mini Document Based Question (Mini-Q)
The Soviet Union: What Should Textbooks Emphasize?

Every night in the late 1940s and early 50s, little Philip Roden, a Milwaukee schoolboy, would say his prayers:

*Now I lay me down to sleep
I pray the Lord my soul to keep
God's love stay with me through the night
And wake me with the morning light
God bless Mommy, Daddy, and Donny
And I hope the Russians don't attack.*

Like many people in America, fear of the Russians filled little Phil's mind. Birds pecking on the gutters were Russian machine guns. Air raid drills in school meant Russian bombers were in the air. It was all very scary.

The cause of this fear was the Soviet Union, of which Russia was the biggest part. The Soviet Union was a huge country that stretched completely across Phil's classroom wall map and seemed to be gobbling up countries like Poland and Czechoslovakia in eastern Europe and slowly digesting republics like Uzbekistan in central Asia. Its leader was a dictator named Joseph Stalin and he had a black moustache. Stalin believed in communism and everything we had been told about communism was bad - it didn’t believe in God, it didn’t let people own their own home, and it sent millions of people to prison camps in Siberia. The Soviet Union was our biggest enemy and everyone pretty much agreed it was a monster.

But was this really true? Is it possible there was more to the story? In 1939 Winston Churchill described the Soviet Union, and Russia in particular, as “… a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma.” If you peeled back some of that mystery what would you find?

Born out of revolution in 1917, the Soviet Union lived only 69 years. She fell apart in 1991 in large measure because her government-run economy did not work very well. Russia remains, of course, but the 15 Soviet Republics, including Uzbekistan, and the six satellite countries in Eastern Europe are all now independent countries.

But let's take a step back. For nearly four centuries Russia had been a monarchy ruled by a czar. In 1917, after three horrific years of war with Germany, riots led to revolution and Czar Nicholas II and his family were removed and eventually killed. The turmoil provided an opening for a revolutionary named Vladimir Lenin (1870 -1924) to overthrow a short-lived democratic government and replace it with a Bolshevik communist regime. Lenin was inspired by the teachings of a 19th century German philosopher named Karl Marx. According to Marx's reading of history, societies moved through certain stages - capitalism, then socialism, then communism. Capitalism was about greed and private ownership. Socialism, and especially communism, was about equal distribution of wealth and shared ownership. Social classes like rich and poor would disappear. After several years of civil war, Lenin's Bolshevik or Red Party was in enough control to begin their grand communist experiment. In 1922 the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (aka USSR, aka Soviet Union) was officially established.

The next 30 years was a mixture of economic success, political terror, and a devastating World War II. During that war the United States and the Soviet Union were allies fighting against Nazi Germany. However, after 1945 they became enemies, locked in the grip of a Cold War and the fear of nuclear holocaust.

Your task in this Mini-Q is quite straightforward. Examine the documents that follow and from the several possibilities available, pick those aspects of Soviet society that you feel deserve the most emphasis. In doing so, you will answer the question: What should textbooks emphasize about the Soviet Union?
Source: Map created from various sources.

Note: The Soviet Union consisted of 15 republics. Beginning with Russia in 1922, 14 other republics were added over the next 18 years. The Soviet Union dissolved in 1991 and all 15 republics became the independent countries they are today. The seven East European satellite nations were separate nations but came under Soviet control after World War II. They are not labeled on the map, but included East Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria and Albania.

Document Analysis

1. Including Russia, what were the 15 Soviet Republics?

2. What were the seven East European Soviet satellite countries?

3. After World War II in 1945, what would explain why Soviet leaders wanted a buffer of satellite countries between the Soviet Union and Germany?

4. What are the possible benefits and drawbacks to having a very large country?
Document B

Source: Chart created from various sources.

Soviet Society and Economy by the Numbers
(All figures are within 3 years of 1980 unless otherwise indicated)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Soviet Union</th>
<th>United States</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Area</td>
<td>8,649,000 square miles</td>
<td>3,794,000 square miles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>262,000,000</td>
<td>222,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time Zones</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Per Capita Income</td>
<td>$2,600</td>
<td>$12,530</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life Expectancy (Male)</td>
<td>64 (1972)</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life Expectancy (Female)</td>
<td>74 (1972)</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy Rate (1915)</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>93%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy Rate (1980)</td>
<td>99%</td>
<td>99%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physicians Per 100,000 People</td>
<td>346</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World War II Deaths</td>
<td>24,000,000 (14% of pop)</td>
<td>420,000 (.3% of pop)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radios</td>
<td>130 million</td>
<td>476 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV sets</td>
<td>80 million</td>
<td>142 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passenger cars</td>
<td>9 million</td>
<td>123 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cost of One Yard of Polyester Fabric</td>
<td>$7.50</td>
<td>$6.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gross National Product</td>
<td>1.47 trillion dollars</td>
<td>2.47 trillion dollars</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: In 1980 the Soviet Union was number one or two in the world in the production of steel, cotton, wheat, sugar, aluminum, gold, and oil.

Document Analysis

1. What evidence supports the claim that the Soviet Union was geographically huge?

2. What evidence supports the claim that the Soviet Union made great educational progress?

3. Americans are proud of their sacrifices in World War II. What might a Soviet citizen have said about that?

4. Which two or three of the above items should be emphasized in a textbook chapter about the Soviet Union? Explain your thinking.
Document C


**Note:** During the late 1930s Joseph Stalin applied the vast powers of the Soviet government to control real and imagined opposition to his rule. This control took the forms of mass arrests, imprisonment, forced labor, show trials, and executions. Roy Medvedev was a Soviet historian whose father died in one of Stalin's labor camps in 1941. In the late 1960s Medvedev had the courage to write one of the first Soviet histories that was critical of Stalin.

[The Great Terror was a matter of] the most cruel tortures, interrogations, [and] the fearful abuse of human dignity. ... If it was necessary to cut you to pieces, [Stalin’s people] cut you to pieces, if it was necessary to whip you, they whipped you...[they only had] to be ready to fulfill any order from above without question...The finest peasants [and] intellectuals were killed, broken, or corrupted...Mercy and dignity became hindrances to survival. A civil stand, a critical rational attitude to political developments meant definite destruction. ...[T]he fear which it instilled in our minds and souls still puts people’s consciousness in chains and paralyzes it...All of this generated constant fear of authority, alienated the human being from the state and made relations between them abnormal.


According to the declassified Soviet archives, during 1937 and 1938, the NKVD detained 1,548,366 victims, of whom 681,692 were shot - an average of 1,000 executions a day (in comparison, the Tsarists executed 3,932 persons for political crimes from 1825 to 1910 - an average of less than 1 execution per week).

**Note:** The NKVD included the secret police force that carried out Stalin's orders.

Document Analysis

1. Who was Joseph Stalin?

2. What was the Great Terror?

3. How many Soviet people are believed to have been killed by Stalin’s government during the years 1937 and 1938? What was Richard Pipes’s source?

4. How important is it to include an account of the Great Terror in a chapter on Soviet history?
Document D


**Note:** The Soviet Union remained a one-party communist nation throughout its entire history. Still, it was important to the government to maintain the appearance of democracy. To this end it went to great lengths organizing its elections, including sending hundreds of thousands of political workers to visit every Soviet home to encourage voting.

![Cartoon Image]

Soviet leaders Joseph Stalin (right) and Nikita Khrushchev

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Candidate</th>
<th>Votes</th>
<th>Percentage of Votes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leonid Brezhnev</td>
<td>174,734,459</td>
<td>99.99%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>185,422</td>
<td>0.01%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1979 Election Results for Leader of Soviet Communist Party

**Document Analysis**

1. Who are the two Soviet leaders shown in the cartoon?

2. How many political parties were allowed in the Soviet Union?

3. What do you think the two Soviet leaders shown in cartoon feel about the voting machine? Why do you think they feel this way?

4. What can be inferred about Soviet elections from the 1979 election results?

5. How could a textbook author use this document to argue that in writing Soviet history, political repression should be emphasized more than geographic or social and economic factors?
**Document E**

**Source:** Data from *Time* magazine, June 23, 1980. Unknown student artist.

**Note:** Military spending in 1980 dollars

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**Document Analysis**

1. How did the military budgets of the Soviet Union and United States in 1980 compare? Consider both dollars spent and percent of GNP. (Note: GNP is Gross National Product, which is the total value of goods and services produced in a country in one year).

2. Why might the Soviet Union have felt it had to spend more of its resources on the military than the United States did?

3. How did US and Soviet nuclear arsenals compare?

4. In a textbook, should Soviet military strength be emphasized more than its geographic expansion, social and political issues, and political repression?
Document F

Source: Soviet poster, late 1950s.

Note: The translation of the Russian on the poster is: “Fatherland! In the race for the stars, you are the first to sparkle above the earth. Glory to science, glory to work! Glory to the Soviet regime!”

New York Times Headline, October 5, 1957

SOVIET FIRES EARTH SATELLITE INTO SPACE;
IT IS CIRCLING THE GLOBE AT 18,000 M.P.H.;
SPHERE TRACKED IN 4 CROSSINGS OVER U.S.

Soviet Space Race Firsts

1957 Oct 4  Sputnik, the world’s first artificial satellite, is launched into space.

1957 Nov 3   Laika becomes the first dog in space.

1961 April 12 Cosmonaut (astronaut) Yuri Gagarin becomes first man to orbit Earth.

1963 June 16 Valentina Tereshkova becomes first woman to travel in space.

Document Analysis

1. What was the name of the first Soviet satellite to travel in space? On what date was it launched?

2. What were the names of the first Soviet male and female cosmonauts?

3. What is the English translation of the caption on the Soviet space poster?

4. What does the poster caption tell us about Soviet values?

5. Which is more important to emphasize in a textbook chapter, Soviet achievements in space or Stalin’s Great Terror? Explain your thinking.

Note: Soviet weight lifter Vasily Alexyev and gymnast Olga Korbut were both gold medal winners in the 1972 Olympics in Munich, Germany. They were Soviet and international superstars in their events. Cold War tensions led the United States to boycott the 1980 Summer Olympics in Moscow and the Soviet Union to boycott the 1984 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles.

![Image of Vasily Alexyev and Olga Korbut](image)

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<td>US</td>
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<td>91</td>
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<td>125</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Document Analysis

1. Of the eight Summer Olympics between 1952 and 1988 in which both the Soviet Union and the US participated, how many times did the Soviet Union win more medals than the United States?

2. What caused the US to boycott the 1980 Summer Olympics in Moscow and the Soviets to boycott the 1984 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles?

3. What might explain the great emphasis that the Soviet Union put on Olympic success?

4. Should a textbook chapter on 20th century Soviet history emphasize success in sports over areas like space, political oppression, or military power? Explain your thinking.
Under Soviet rule, classical ballet grew...into a vast continental network of schools, companies, and amateur performing groups, all controlled from Moscow...Ballet schools attached to the [world famous] Kirov and Bolshoi theaters grounded the system; talent scouts recruited children from the far corners of the country....Dance classes were available across the country....Amateur dance groups also performed locally, thus further spreading knowledge and enforcing the prestige of dance. By the mid-1960s...the Soviet Union had successfully established nineteen ballet schools across the country, offering serious nine-year courses fully sponsored by the state. No one could claim that the Soviets did not take ballet seriously.

Document Analysis

1. What were the names of the two leading Soviet ballet theaters?

2. How were young Soviet children recruited and trained to be ballet dancers?

3. What details support the author’s view that “No one could claim that the Soviets did not take ballet seriously”?

4. Should an author of a high school textbook emphasize a Soviet cultural achievement like ballet over geographic growth, social and economic conditions, political oppression, or military strength? Explain your thinking.