

CONFRONTING CURRENT EVENTS: TEACHING TO NON-MAJORS

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There is enormous difficulty teaching upper-level courses in history at a university that does not offer a degree in history. While one hopes that such institutions are few, many history departments are small, and the survival of upper-level courses in these cost-conscious times frequently depends upon our ability to attract non-majors to our courses. This might present few problems to colleagues with interests in popular culture fields, but difficulties exist for those of us who are traditional in both our fields of interest and in our approach to teaching. A course designed to train historical scholars might not have much appeal to a student shopping around for an elective. Or if the course is merely created to attract large numbers of people who want to know something (but not too much), the course will be worthless and the instructor embarrassed.

My solution to the problem has been to focus on twentieth-century history in my upper-level offerings. As a person trained in ancient history (Hellenistic Era), it took a long time (and a fair amount of retraining) to change fields so drastically. My university primarily produces business majors whose interest in Ptolemy the Greek is not as great as my own. Students will try a course if it appears useful, and they can be persuaded that it is useful to know something about the world they inhabit. While all history courses must have substance, offer information, enhance research skills, teach analytical reasoning, and so forth, they also must have students.

Relevance is perhaps not as trendy a watchword as it was a few years ago, but it is still on students' minds. It is hard to get more relevant than the lead story in the morning newspaper or on the evening television news, something students are more likely to be familiar with. Therefore, I try to combine current events with traditional course content. This is obviously easier to do in some courses than in others. Courses in Soviet history are especially easy to adapt to this approach. All students have heard of the Soviet Union, most are concerned about it, and some recognize that they have little information and perhaps should acquire more. In my one-semester Soviet history course I use three texts: *Russia: A History of the Soviet Period* (by Woodford McClellan), *The Russian Revolution, 1917-1932* (Shelia Fitzpatrick), and *Rethinking the Soviet Experience, Politics and History Since 1917* (Stephen F. Cohen). All have recent publication dates. The Fitzpatrick book, published in 1982, is the oldest and the last two are paperbacks. All are short. The Fitzpatrick and the Cohen book are about 160 pp. (They are also dense and complex, but no one notices that until they are hooked.) The course covers the usual topics: Begin with the Russian background and continue until the Gorbachev era.

Since Soviet history is usually taught in the fall semester, I spend time in the summer trying to decide what is likely to be a major continuing news story that can be used as the basis for a semester project. While the world does not always cooperate--the solidarity movement or the invasion of Afghanistan will not always occur during vacation periods--the Soviets are at least fairly dependable. Something will happen. In August of 1986 I was presented with a project that has worked well, and which with modifications could continue to work for several more years.

In its August 3, 1986, edition, *The Manchester Guardian Weekly* published the full text of a *Manifesto* issued by "The Movement for Socialist Reform" in Leningrad on November 21, 1985. The *Manifesto* issued in Samzidat form analyzes what the group sees as problems in Soviet society, and calls for the adoption of three political and six economic measures to solve the problems. While I have no idea of the identity of the manifesto's authors, it is a marvelous teaching tool. Students are usually fascinated by something written by the people of the country being studied. The eyewitness observer always seems to have more credibility than the textbook author. The *Manifesto* offers detailed statistics about Soviet society and its economy. It makes constant references to Lenin, the Socialist revolution, and to Marxist-Leninist science. In a short space, it provides an interesting summary of Soviet history and continuing problems. Students were required to master the content of the *Manifesto* and then to focus on the measures proposed to solve the problems outlined by the manifesto.

The authors of the *Manifesto* insisted that "The proposed programme of political and economic transformation is the highest creative development of Marxist-Leninist teaching on the State, based on the experience of socialist construction in the USSR and other socialist countries." Students were asked to consider the three political measures:

1. Press Freedom.
2. To stop persecuting people for their political and religious beliefs, and to guarantee the freedom of speech.
3. To provide the constitutional conditions for the creation of alternative political organizations.

They also were asked to consider the six economic measures:

1. To observe the purpose of existing economic laws.
2. To expand the rights of private enterprises on a fully self-supporting basis.
3. To offer opportunities for the development of private initiative in the sphere of services and the production of consumer goods.
4. To allow Soviet citizens to rent state land and farm machines and land for cultivation and to repay the state with a proportion of their crops. The surpluses of agricultural production will be the property of the lessee, and can be sold in the market place.
5. Not to obstruct the development of private holdings on collective farms, allotments and dacha cooperatives, or the sale to town-dwellers of unused peasant houses.
6. To create the conditions for the development of private trade.

Basically students were asked to analyze the content of the document, and to decide which (if any) of the proposals might be accepted by the Soviet government.

To give some common structure to the papers that would be written, students were required to discuss Stephen F. Cohen's definitions of reformism and conservatism as each applies to Soviet politics. Cohen argues that reformists see change as progress and an improvement of conditions without a shift in ideological

values, and conservatives see change as leading to disorder and to the possible destruction of such values. Students were to use Cohen's definitions as support for their arguments concerning the likelihood of acceptance of the nine measures.

The assignment required the production of a paper fifteen to twenty pages in length. Most students became so involved in the project that the papers were significantly longer than the requirement. By the fall of 1986 *glasnost* and *perestroika* were becoming familiar terms in the American vocabulary. Gorbachev was seen on television with fair regularity. The selection of the manifesto as the current events project was serendipitous. Students became involved in watching history being made.

As the course progressed and the students' understanding became more sophisticated, we could draw parallels between the current events and Bukharin or Khrushchev. We could discuss the role of Marxist-Leninist ideology in Soviet life. There was rarely a class in which someone failed to mention some aspect of the *manifesto*. It made what we were studying seem real and important.

Not only did using the *manifesto* truly enhance the course, but it had a result that I never anticipated. The course hasn't ended. The majority of the fifteen students were either graduating seniors or students who were taking their last history elective. When a particular course ends, I rarely see the students again unless we pass in the halls for a brief hello. I see these students all the time. They want to talk about what is happening in the Soviet Union now, and the retention of course information has been remarkable. Several graduates will talk to me on the phone. I used the *manifesto* in the spring of 1988 when the Soviet course was offered again. Since Gorbachev remained in control and *glasnost* and *perestroika* were still viable Soviet initiatives, we were able to study which manifesto measures were being implemented or modified. I expect the content of the manifesto to be current into the 1990s.

Having used other kinds of current events projects in other upper-level courses that I teach (Twentieth Century Europe and Modern England) as well as in the post-Reconstruction era U.S. history survey, I am convinced that it is an excellent strategy for capturing student interest. Beginning in the present with television news, and then explaining the present by searching for roots in the distant past, is not the way that I was taught history, and it is not the way that I expected to teach when I left graduate school in the mid 1960s. But it seems to work. I can teach all of the traditional substance of the history course to a more interested and involved audience by using current events as a springboard to the past.

An Update

Much time has passed since this article was first written, and I have just finished teaching the section of the Soviet history course to seventeen enthusiastic students. The assignment using the *Manifesto* remained the same but the results were dramatically different from those of the fall of 1986. Gorbachev has written his book, several authors have produced biographies of him, scholars are analyzing the changes in the Soviet Union, interesting elections have been held, Nationalities issues explode daily.

My seventeen students had much to choose from and most chose well. By and large the papers were excellent. On the last night of class each student made a two-minute, informal presentation of their best guess at the fate of Gorbachev's reforms.

I found the results fascinating. Fifteen predicted failure, two a possibility of success. As it became apparent that failure was the class consensus, students clearly tried to focus on points not yet covered. One student was outraged by the traditional view of the desirability of a non-working wife that is mentioned in the *Manifesto*, and took the position that those who wished to turn back the clock in one area were doomed to failure in all areas. But most felt that the reforms would not deliver change fast enough to meet expectations, and that as Soviet society grew more restless, the conservative bureaucracy would see a need to impose order and delay/destroy any progress made. Given the generally optimistic tone of most of the sources the students used, I found their conclusions to be particularly interesting. One of my students was a reserve officer and was particularly fascinated by the difference between what he learned either in class or through researching his paper and the frequent briefings given to him in his military role. He knew nothing of Russia's economic problems, productivity, technological backwardness, etc. While he, too, remained pessimistic about the future of Soviet reform, he wondered why he had received so much information about the Russian Superman who upon closer inspection seemed mythic.

With much more information available than had been available in 1986, we spent a lot of time focusing on Khrushchev and Gorbachev as post war reformers, and looking at change in the U.S.S.R. since 1985. The spring Soviet elections were timed perfectly for the course, as was the trouble in Georgia and the extensive western media coverage of these events. On the last class day, I gave each student a copy of George Kennan's testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (April 1989) announcing that the Soviet Union is merely "another great power like other great powers" and no longer "a possible . . . military opponent." Rarely does an era end so clearly in print.

My experiences this semester reinforced my beliefs in the usefulness of current events in history classes. Three students from my 1986 class called to talk about the elections in the Soviet Union and had clearly retained an interest in Soviet Studies. All three had read Gorbachev's book and were keeping up with events. It is the hope of every teacher that a particular course will mark the beginning of a continuing interest. The *Manifesto* remains an outstanding tool by which to achieve this goal. I will not offer the Soviet history course again until fall 1991, but I expect the *Manifesto* will spark as much student interest then as it did in the fall of 1986 and spring 1988 semester.

I am now working on a project for my U.S. history survey courses (1877 to the present) that will use Kennan's brief April statement on the end of the Cold War. Students will be asked to decide whether the policies of the Bush administration are responding to the issues outlined by Kennan and, if not, should the administration respond in the ways Kennan suggests. Not having a crystal ball, I have no idea what will happen. But something will happen (even the absence of movement is something), and that is all that is necessary to encourage students to use the present as a departure point for understanding the past.