

Beyond Pravda: Using Fiction and Personal Narrative to Assess History

Keeler Park

Philadelphia High School for Girls

Abstract

Beyond Pravda: Using Fiction and Personal Narrative to Assess History is a social studies unit that blends traditional history classroom approaches with fiction writing and personal narrative to engage students with the history of the Soviet Union and consider their own historical vantage point in the process. Throughout the unit, students will assess the accuracy of historical narratives through the study of Soviet literature and art, ultimately culminating in a narrative writing project where they will generate their own version of what it means to be from Philadelphia. By comparing the commonality of misunderstandings about the Soviet Union and their own home city, the unit seeks to instill within students the idea that purely objective histories are not possible and that arts and literature must be part of the study of history for a truly grounded understanding.

Unit Content

Social Studies classrooms have become very contested spaces in the past decade. From the political to the social— it feels to many that the social studies classroom has become a sort of front line in a battle for American cultural values.¹ These social and political battles have taken over so much of our contemporary discourse and have become so fraught that many social studies educators may be left wondering: what even counts as history anymore, what is there space for in my classroom? Moreover, they may feel conflicted about how to personalize history classes in such a tense cultural moment. On one hand, traditional history classrooms have been much maligned by students and media alike for being boring and impersonal, yet on the other, by asking students to step out of their comfort zone with history we risk drawing the ire of administrators, stakeholders, and even the federal government. This unit seeks to propose some solutions to the above issues to make the social studies classroom a place that can educate students authentically by allowing them to challenge existing narratives and draw from their own experiences as well.

The Problem with Tradition

History as a field of study is inherently tied to tradition. Whether students are learning about national/cultural traditions of past eras or teachers are drawing from time-

¹ Press, Associated. "Florida Requires Teaching Black History. Some Don't Trust Schools to Do It Justice." Florida Politics - Campaigns & Elections. Lobbying & Government., December 22, 2024. <https://floridapolitics.com/archives/713059-florida-requires-teaching-black-history-some-dont-trust-schools-to-do-it-justice/>.

tested curricula, it is fair to say that much of what goes on in social studies classes is preoccupied with how things have been done in the past. Of course, this is to some extent the nature of the subject; at the same time historians and educators alike have been questioning the dedication to tradition in history education for decades. Authors David Graeber and David Wengrow have discussed at length how traditional commonplace understandings of ancient peoples have severely limited our ability to engage with ancient cultures, often casting them as primitive simpletons.² Historian Kendra Field utilized personal narratives from her families experience in the post-slavery South in order to locate blind spots in the way we remember the story of Reconstruction in American history.³ Caroline Finkel's overview of the Ottoman world reveals how blurred lines between national myth and historical fact make a truly objective account of the Ottoman Empire nearly impossible when relying on traditional sourcing.⁴ A consistent theme across all of these very different works is that the stories we tell ourselves about the past are often mythologized, simplified, sanitized, or flat out wrong.

No teacher of social studies will be surprised by this idea— students are quick to ask questions about the exactness of the details we teach to reframe existing narratives. Are the stories of the founding fathers true, or mere legends? Was Martin Luther King Jr. truly a pacifist, or is that just a convenient portrayal to make him palatable to white, conservative America? Students might even ask: how much of our “history” is mere storytelling, and does objective truth really even matter? The answer to those respective questions are “a good amount” and “emphatically, yes!” However, without a change in how we deliver content to students, we will continue to end up arriving at these same essential and sometimes frustrating questions.

The good news here is that we know a great deal about what works and what doesn't work to get students to meaningfully engage with difficult questions. We know that Ferris Bueller-style, top down instruction is unlikely to produce much critical thought. Additionally, instruction that does not give students a personal stake in the discussion is less likely to connect with learners and lead to the outcomes we want. What *does* work is centering instructions around inquiry stances which allow students to explore their own ideas and values in relation to history. Inquiry stances require students to consider “what it means to generate knowledge, what counts as knowledge and to whom, and how knowledge is used and evaluated in particular contexts.”⁵ By centering history instruction around student inquiry, we can harness the questions outlined above to drive meaningful learning as opposed to being frustrated by their tendency to shut

² Graeber, David, and D. Wengrow. *The dawn of everything: A new history of humanity*. New York, NY: Picador/Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2023.

³ Field, Kendra Taira. *Growing Up with the Country: Family, Race, and Nation after the Civil War*. New Haven, CT: Yale Press, 2010.

⁴ Finkel, Caroline. *Osman's dream*. New York, NY: Basic Books, 2012.

⁵ Cochran-Smith, M., & Lytle, S. L. (1999). Relationships of knowledge and practice: Teacher learning in communities. *Review of Research in Education*, 24, 272.

discussions down. How exactly this will take place within this unit will be discussed in more detail in the coming sections.

Authoritarian Memory

While the history of 20th century authoritarianism is complex and multifaceted, it is rarely presented this way in classrooms. Authoritarian governments as well as the movements that gave birth to them are reduced and moralized in traditional materials to an almost cartoonish extent. For example, the World History textbook used by the School District of Philadelphia makes is written in way that presents democracy as a naturally occurring and universally good thing that emerged in post enlightenment Europe. Nations that did not adhere to democratization are treated with skepticism and frequently compared in a negative light to nations which did form democracies. The text book essentially ignores anything to do with authoritarian governments that doesn't have to do with militarism or suppression of out-groups.⁶ And to be sure, these are important features of authoritarian regimes, but they are not the entire story and students are left wondering how these governments came into power, why people went along with it, and whether or not it could ever happen again.

The Soviet Union in particular, which this unit will focus on, is given an especially crude overview. In the three total pages dedicated to the rise of communism and pre-WWII history of the Soviet Union, there is a brief overview of how communist economic theory works, a page focused on Stalin and his planned economy, and a page detailing the death totals from purges and famines.⁷ There is no explanation of the ideals of egalitarianism that inspired the Soviet movement, no discussion of the achievements in education that were made in education and literacy, and certainly no perspective of what life was like in the eyes of the every day people who lived their lives as Soviets.⁸ Though it is not our job or goal to sanitize the history of the Soviet Union or make apologies for its failures, the overly simplistic view of it students are given does little to engage them with actual history and is more akin to proselytizing than providing good history education.

Even when looking for sources outside of traditional textbooks, it can be difficult to get a gauge of what is real and what is narrative when it comes to Soviet history. Simply searching “Soviet Union” on YouTube yields many highly produced videos, many of which even link their sources. And yet if you spend time watching through them, you will quickly notice that most are made in an attempt to answer how and why the Soviet Union collapsed, to unpack how the Soviet Union compared to America, or how

⁶ Glencoe. Glencoe World history: Modern Times, reading essentials and note-taking guide. New York, NY: Glencoe McGraw-Hill School, 2009.

⁷ Glencoe. Glencoe World history: Modern Times, reading essentials and note-taking guide. New York, NY: Glencoe McGraw-Hill School, 2009, 799-801.

⁸ <https://www.marxists.org/history/ussr/government/1928/sufds/ch21.htm>

the legacy of the Soviet Union influences Eastern Europe today. All interesting perspectives, but again they fail to paint an objective picture of the experiences of the people that made up the Soviet world, instead favoring simplistic and trope-like retellings of history. Achieving a balanced perspective is incredibly difficult but entirely necessary, students of course need to know about the violations of human rights that occurred in the U.S.S.R. and all of its failures, but without contextualizing that information with the lived experience of Soviet people the picture will remain blurry and confusing to students.

Soviet Realities

The Soviet Union was founded in 1922 after a period of violent revolution and upheaval in Russia. It's early days can be characterized by the rapid industrialization, large scale cultural projects, and centralized planning that served as the backbone of society. It has been described as “a revolution from above” in the sense that the major movements of Soviet life were dictated from centralized authorities to an extent that is difficult for many westerners to understand.⁹ At the same time, no revolution can play out without the willing consent and action of at least *some* of the population— and this cannot be forgotten. By the 1930s the Soviet Union was making significant cultural achievements and rapidly advancing its formerly underdeveloped status. However the 1930s also mark some of the most brutally authoritarian years of Soviet life with mass famines and large scale purges of the Soviet citizenry. Undergirding all of this was the creation of the NKVD (The People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs) and the impact it had on personal freedom in the Soviet Union. Though huge gains in quality of life were realized for much of the population, these gains came at an undeniable cost. This double edged sword of progress would remain an important theme throughout the duration of the Soviet Union's existence.¹⁰

World War II marks perhaps the most memorialized chapter of Soviet history. During this period the Soviet people endured unimaginable conditions and sacrifices in order to repel invading Nazi armies and eventually win the war. Remembered as a crowning achievement and a mournful requiem, the experience of WWII would characterize the psychology of Soviet citizens for generations moving forward— even outlasting the existence of the Soviet Union itself.¹¹ As noted by Sheila Fitzpatrick, “World War II became central to the national myth of the new Russian Federation, just as it had been to the Soviet state that preceded it.”¹² This era, with all of its battlefield

⁹ Fitzpatrick, Sheila. “Stalinism.” Essay. In *The Shortest History of the Soviet Union*, 69–97. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2022, 69.

¹⁰ Fitzpatrick, Sheila. “Stalinism.” Essay. In *The Shortest History of the Soviet Union*, 69–97. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2022.

¹¹ Fitzpatrick, Sheila. “Introduction.” Essay. In *The Shortest History of the Soviet Union*, 1–9. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2022.

¹² Fitzpatrick, Sheila. “Conclusion.” Essay. In *The Shortest History of the Soviet Union*, 209–230. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2022, 227

heroism, is also full of smaller scale sacrifices— especially on the part of women, and for good reason plays a defining role in the narrative of Soviet history.

The post war period in the U.S.S.R. brought with it sweeping changes which ultimately culminated in the end of the Soviet world. After Stalin's death in 1953, Nikita Khrushchev assumed control and fundamentally altered Soviet history by revealing the crimes of Stalin and denouncing them. This opened up a period known as "the thaw" where it became acceptable— necessary even, for Soviet citizens to attempt to reconcile Sovietism with the horrors that its achievements were built upon. Though this period allowed for greater reflection and honest discourse, it did not last long and by the late 1960s the thaw had frozen back over. The 1960s are also characterized by significant increases in tensions between the U.S.S.R. and the United States, a fact which motivated many in the Soviet Union to make gains in fields like engineering, technological innovation, and energy production.¹³

In its final decades the Soviet Union found itself lagging behind the ever increasingly united Western world. With a slowing economy and a bureaucracy that had become entirely unwieldy, changes became necessary. People began to question the values of communism as "the generation that had fought for it was now dead or pensioned off," and younger generations were allured by consumerism in the West.¹⁴ Ultimately there was no singular event that caused the undoing of the U.S.S.R. but a series of errors and broken cogs that led to a rapid downfall.

Though "historians' narratives tend, by their nature, to make events seem inevitable," the fact is that the Soviet Union was not doomed to fail from its onset and was not the totalitarian boogeyman the West continues to portray it as.¹⁵ Understanding the complexity of such a place is difficult, especially when we live in an era that works hard to define democratic capitalism as an inherent good for the globe. These complicating factors are persistent and present throughout so much of the available resources for teaching about Soviet society, but it is clear that *something* needs to emerge to better inform an inquiry stance driven classroom. Perhaps the best resource at our disposal to achieve inquiry stances without reinventing the wheel is to draw from Soviet literature and personal narratives in order to fill in the gaps of personal and social history students may have for Soviet history. By combining literature and personal narratives, we can create a bottom-up understanding of life in the Soviet world to challenge the top-down narratives that dominate contemporary history classrooms.

¹³ Fitzpatrick, Sheila. "Introduction." Essay. In *The Shortest History of the Soviet Union*, 1–9. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2022.

¹⁴ Fitzpatrick, Sheila. "Introduction." Essay. In *The Shortest History of the Soviet Union*, 1–9. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2022, 3.

¹⁵ Fitzpatrick, Sheila. "Introduction." Essay. In *The Shortest History of the Soviet Union*, 1–9. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2022, 5.

Bottom Up History: Non Conformity, Conformity, and Communal Apartments

The literature of Eastern Europe has been long celebrated, and the Soviet Era did not mark a change in the output of high quality texts produced in the region. While socialist realism did prescribe a set of rules and expectations for literature which did create some limitations, there were many creative ways for authors to get around these limitations, and socialist realists produced great works in their own right, too.¹⁶ When creating a unit focused on the literature of Eastern Europe, perhaps the most difficult thing to do is choose a selection of texts small enough to be doable within a single unit. For this unit, there will be two selections focused on what conformity and non-conformity looked like in the Soviet Union, and one art installation with accompanying texts focused on communal apartment living.

The first major text that students will read for the unit is *Alyosha at Large* by Vasily Shukshin. The story focuses on the character of Alyosha, a sort of Soviet anti-hero, who takes nothing more seriously than his time away from work. Time where he can ponder about things and dedicate his entire day to his true passion: his sauna. Alyosha is portrayed throughout the story as loaf like and lazy by his fellow villagers, but deep and full of meaning by the author. Alyosha contributes to Soviet society, but he is careful to carve out space in his week to focus on his individual needs and passions. The story serves as an excellent example of how individualism can survive and even thrive in a collectivist society and is a strong counter to the idea that Soviet people did not live rich internal lives with their own personalized passions and desires. It also helps push back on the portrayal of Soviet working conditions as cold, calculated, and machine-like. Alyosha comes across as a simple man who enjoys simple pleasures and is probably like a lot of people you know in your everyday life.¹⁷ For these reasons, it will be the first major work of fiction students encounter in the unit.

After reading about how nonconformity to social expectations leads to a more rich internal life for Alyosha, we will turn our focus to a section of Abdullah Qahhor's *The Earthquake*. Part of a longer novella, the section we will read focuses on the character of Professor Sobir Salim, a Soviet who shows unquestionable commitment to Sovietism and a belief that the collectivist Soviet state is incapable of making mistakes. These feelings are quickly challenged when a colleague accuses Salim of committing a crime against the Soviet government. Salim is innocent of this crime, but we see that it doesn't matter. In spite of his conformity and commitment to Soviet values, and indeed *because* of his commitment to Sovietism as an infallible ideology, he ends up condemned to death. The story serves as a powerful example of how conformity to social expectations did not

¹⁶ Zhdanov, Andrei Aleksandrovich, H. G. Scott and Library of Theodore Dreiser (University of Pennsylvania). Problems of soviet literature : reports and speeches at the first Soviet writers' congress. Moscow ; Leningrad : Co-operative Publishing Society of Foreign Workers in the U.S.S.R., 1935.

¹⁷ Shukshin, Vasilii, John Givens and Laura. Michael. Stories from a Siberian village. DeKalb : Northern Illinois University Press, 1996.

always lead to a reward or social promotion in Soviet life. This helps to dispel the notion many students have that authoritarian governments always reward loyalists, or only punish dissenters. Moreover, the story reveals the motivation of Salim's neighbor to be a desire to sleep with Salim's wife, showing again how personal motivations could be used to advance one's personal life under the guise of collectivist behaviors.¹⁸ The story pairs very nicely with *Alyosha at Large* to give students a full exploration of social pressures and expectations that were felt by Soviet people.

The final work that this unit will focus on is not an individual text, but an art installation by artist Ilya Kabakov which will serve as the guide and inspiration for the culminating project of the unit. Kabakov's *10 Characters* exhibit debuted in New York City in the year 1988. The exhibit was a work of installation art where Kabakov fashioned a Soviet style communal apartment inside of a gallery. He built the apartment to be a scale accurate reproduction of real layouts from Soviet buildings, with ten small cramped rooms and a large kitchen area. Treating each room and its imagined inhabitant as the main artistic mechanism of the installation, he filled them with personal belongings, paintings, decorations, and written stories to give the viewer a sense of who the person was who's space they now occupied. Soviet art is often characterized in the West as anti-individualistic and political—*10 Characters* flies in the face of this characterization and is down right whacky. With rooms titled things like "The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away," "The Man Who Disappeared Into His Painting," and "The Man Who Flew Into Space," the rooms are wildly imaginative, full of life, and show the variety of idiosyncratic people that made up the Soviet Union.¹⁹ They do a great deal to humanize and normalize a people who have been thoroughly exoticized and othered by American culture.

While each of these sources draw from different moments in time and geographic locations in the U.S.S.R., they use fictional accounts to inform our sense of what it was really like to be a Soviet citizen. They all reveal contradictions, complications, and misunderstandings about what it meant to live for the Soviet cause, and many of these things in turn force us to reassess the history we thought we knew. Reorienting mainstream histories being a major theme of this unit, all of these texts will get students familiar with the concepts they need to consider the narratives that exist about where they themselves come from and how they can use fiction to speak truth to power.

¹⁸ Gabriel McGuire, Chris Fort, Naomi Caffee, Emily Laskin, Samuel Hodgkin, and Ali F. İğmen. *Tulips in Bloom : An Anthology of Modern Central Asian Literature*. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024. <https://research-ebsco-com.proxy.library.upenn.edu/linkprocessor/plink?id=b0d86024-996d-3524-a2ae-295234a6b790>.

¹⁹ Barton, Megan. "Ten Characters." Ilya & Emilia Kabakov, Ilya & Emilia Kabakov, 15 Sept. 2019, www.kabakov.net/installations/2019/9/15/ten-characters.

Restorying and Recentering

Whoever they are, students are likely to feel the pressure of expectations connected to the places they come from. Whether it's rural "farm kids," Hispanic students who don't speak English to one another in the lunch room, or kids from the "bad part" of a school district, the weight of stereotypes based on place affects us all. One of the overarching goals of this unit is to utilize fiction and personal narrative to push back on these place-based stereotypes and misunderstandings. This will first occur by studying the Soviet Union, but eventually the unit will culminate in them "restorying" their surroundings to push back on misconceptions people may have about them. This is especially important given that my students are from Philadelphia, a place often maligned as unfriendly, dangerous, and backwards.²⁰

We know that when students are able to restory their environment, they are given "opportunities to navigate their experiences of social injustice and resist exclusionary discourses and practices."²¹ Essentially, restorying is the reshaping of commonplace narratives to be more representative of the experiences of marginalized, diverse, or otherwise underrepresented people/experiences. Educational researchers Amy Stornaiuolo and Ebony Elizabeth Thomas have noted the usefulness of restorying as a means to engage students with what they call critical cosmopolitanism—critiquing and engaging with the blind spots within our narratives about diverse and multicultural societies.²²

The idea of critical cosmopolitanism is the link that will be used in this unit to tie the experiences of Soviet people and the students in my classroom. Though they are wildly different on many levels, both the Soviet Union and the United States (especially cities like Philadelphia) are intensely cosmopolitan places. No shortage of work was done by Soviet communists to champion their cosmopolitanism and openness to all people. The same can be said of American founding documents. Both of these cultures are, at least on the surface, dedicated to these ideals. Yet, through reading Soviet literature and experiencing the culture of the United States first hand, students will know that both of these societies failed to meet their goals. And this is where students restorying will come into the unit. Their final task for the unit will be to utilize the work they have read and their own experiences in order to restory Philadelphia (or wherever they feel is home to them) from a critical cosmopolitan perspective.

²⁰ Philadelphia, CBS. "Philadelphia Has Highest Murder Rate per Capita among Country's 10 Largest Cities." CBS News, CBS Interactive, 23 July 2021, www.cbsnews.com/philadelphia/news/philadelphia-highest-murder-rate-per-capita-countrys-10-largest-cities/.

²¹ Stornaiuolo, A., & Thomas, E. E. (2017). Disrupting Educational Inequalities Through Youth Digital Activism. *Review of Research in Education*, 41(1), 345.

²² Stornaiuolo, A., & Thomas, E. E. (2017). Disrupting Educational Inequalities Through Youth Digital Activism. *Review of Research in Education*, 41(1), 337-357.

Teaching Strategies

In this unit students will be required to engage in critical analysis of text, annotation, image analysis, and creative writing in order to explore history more deeply through arts and narrative fiction. Students will be guided through material with teacher led discussions to scaffold understanding, but as the unit progresses they will slowly be given more and more autonomy in how they interact with and analyze unit materials. In order to achieve this a number of instructional strategies will be employed. See the text below for a list of strategies, many of which have materials attached in Appendix A:

Direct Instruction

Throughout the unit and especially during the first week, teachers will rely on direct instruction at times to ensure a baseline understanding of Soviet history and how it is typically portrayed in the West. Direct instruction will occur primarily through lecture supported by slides and student note taking and will focus on establishing a traditional Western overview of Soviet life. More specifically, direct instruction will seek to establish the idea that because the Soviet Union was built upon the economic ideas of communism, communism came to dominate almost every aspect of public and private life.

Graphic Organizers

This unit will use graphic organizers consistently to help direct students thinking toward the intended goals of the unit/lessons. Graphic organizers help to promote productive discussions between students and are especially useful when comparing and contrasting ideas, cultures, and values. Cross cultural comparisons and contrasts will be a critical piece of the unit, so graphic organizers will be paired with most lessons or activities.

Idea Parking Lot

Idea parking lot's are a great tool to encourage students to ask questions collaboratively and reflect on their questions throughout a unit. Idea parking lot's are simple and easy to utilize— by placing a large sheet of paper labeled with a topic in a high visibility wall of the classroom, students write their questions or comments on a sticky note and post it for everyone to see. For this unit this will be especially useful as students questions will help them identify blind spots in the history we are examining, which they can in turn utilize to inform their own creative writing at the end of the unit.

Textual Analysis

During this unit students will read narrative fiction from several authors and artists. During their reading, they will probe the text and use annotations in order to look for details that open up lines of questioning and discussion into the portrayals of life for

people in the Soviet Union. Textual analysis serves as the backbone of the unit as well as being a helpful model for the type of writing they should be working towards at the end of the unit. Textual analysis is largely designed to be an independent activity which leads to collaborative close reading.

Collaborative Close Reading

A strategy for engaging students with poetry and literature, collaborative close reading/listening encourages students to think deeply about abstract content. Students will meet as a group, preferably in a comfortable setting where they can see and hear one another with few obstructions. Students will be given a printed version of a poems/text that will be discussed. Students will independently read a a portion of or the entire text selected by the teacher. After this period of independent reading, the teacher will read the relevant text aloud. Students will then be assigned specific sections of the text that they will be responsible for commenting on. After taking some time to gather thoughts, the teacher will lead students through a discussion of their comments on their assigned section. This process should start out relatively structured, but as students become more comfortable with the format discussions can become more freeform.

Image Analysis

Similar to collaborative close reading, image analysis uses a process of noticing, discussing, and reflecting in order to probe more deeply into content. This unit will make use of art and propaganda images throughout, and especially during the culminating assignment. Students will be shown a piece of art of propaganda by the teacher and then be allowed several minutes to look it over, choosing to focus on one specific domain of **people/place, color, aesthetic/style, medium**, or another key aspect of their choosing. After some reflection time has been given, students will come back together to add their thoughts to a collaborative discussion.

Journaling

Throughout the unit, students will finish lessons by writing in a thought journal. Journaling is designed to be free, open ended writing which is not checked for accuracy or detail by teachers but instead serves as a place for students to capture their thoughts, opinions, and ideas in real time. A major component of the unit will focus on reflecting on how historical narrative can mischaracterize the lived experiences of human beings, and so opportunities to journal on representation, experience, and how these things do/don't overlap will be strongly encouraged.

Creative Writing

As a culmination of the unit, students will write their own creative writing piece to “restory” what living in Philadelphia is like from the perspective of the people who

actually live here. During the unit we will read through and look over Ilya Kabakov's *Ten Characters* exhibition as a means to push back on the portrayal of Soviet life as dull, one note, and entirely centered on economic factors. Students will take inspiration from Kabakov's work, or the work of other authors who appear/are suggested in the unit to write their own piece. We will then assemble these pieces together into a larger "exhibition" to mimic the work of Kabakov and put our own spin on it.

Classroom Activities

Lesson 1: Introducing Soviet History

Objective: Students will describe key economic, social, and cultural features that define our historical memory of the U.S.S.R.

Lesson Context: This lesson will utilize direct instruction early in the unit as a means to establish a baseline understanding of Soviet history among students. For the first week of the unit, this is the main method for delivering and exploring content.

Materials and Resources:

- Soviet Union Intro Slides (Appendix B, Link 1)
- Modified Frayer Model (Appendix A, Figure 1)

Phase One: Begin the lesson by displaying on the board the prompt "in your opinion, which is more important: 1) personal freedom to pursue your happiness or 2) strong safety nets so that all people can have what they need to survive?" Give students time to think and write down their response, encouraging them to imagine which of these options would have more prominence in the country if they got to reshape it in their vision. Ideally, students should write a short paragraph outlining their response and rationale. Once students have had some time to write, take a vote by show of hands to get a temperature check on which side the room is leaning towards. Give a few students from each perspective a chance to explain their thoughts or rebut the ideas of the other perspective.

Phase Two: Have students take out the note taking materials, whatever that looks like in your classroom. Instruct them that, for the next few weeks they will be learning about the Soviet Union and the economic system of communism, where they will see the importance of the question they began the class by thinking through. Additionally, let them know that, while you will be providing an overview of Soviet history, students should bring a critical perspective to the classroom as one of the goals for the unit will be testing to see whether history books effectively capture the realities of Soviet life. Once students are ready, guide them through the Soviet Union Intro Slides in appendix B.

Phase Three: After guiding students through an overview of communism and the motivations of the Soviet Union, distribute a Frayer model to each student (appendix A, figure 1). Have students complete the Frayer model for communism and circulate the room as students work through the model. Remind students to think of communism from with an open-minded perspective rather than tropes that they may see in media or the news.

Phase Four: To close out the lesson, place a large sheet of sticky paper somewhere on the wall where it is visible to most or all students to serve as an idea parking lot. Distribute a sticky note to each student and have them write at least two questions they have about Soviet history or life in the Soviet Union. Inform them that throughout the unit, we will answer many of these questions as well as use them to supplement planned instruction. Once students finish writing their questions, they should place it somewhere on the idea parking lot so that it can be seen and referenced by other students. Optional: after class, look through the questions and organize them by theme/focus. This is not absolutely necessary but is helpful for informing future discussions and scaffolding ideas for students.

Lesson 2: Complicating Narratives About Soviet Life

Objective: Students will choose a piece of Soviet fiction to read in order to analyze the story for information that confirms or conflicts with the materials covered in the introductory stage of the unit.

Lesson Context: This lesson will follow several days of direct instruction which will establish the mainstream tropes about historical understanding of the Soviet Union. In this lesson, students will have a choice between two stories which will complicate those tropes through the actions of the characters and the portrayal of daily life in the Soviet Union. This lesson will essentially be repeated on the following day, with students reading the story they did not choose the day prior.

Materials and Resources:

- *Alyosha At Large* by Shukshin (Appendix B, Link 2)
- *The Earthquake* by Qahhor (Appendix B, Link 3)
- Soviet Literature Analysis Guide (Appendix A, Figure 2)

Phase One: Begin the lesson by having students list the top five personality traits that they think would be seen as desirable/useful in the Soviet Union. Giving them some time to brainstorm, remind them of the major themes and tropes that were introduced early in the unit like economic prosperity, egalitarianism, political identity, etc. After students have had some time to create their lists, have them share out answers and keep track of

everything they share on the board. After getting a handful down on the board, have students discuss and come to a consensus on the top three personality traits they expect to be useful or valuable in Soviet life. Keep these on the board throughout class.

Phase Two: At the front of the room (or whatever area you use as a sort of “home base”) have copies of the stories *Alyosha at Large* and *The Earthquake* stacked into two piles. Inform students that they will be choosing one of the two stories to analyze for the remainder of class, and that each story will give us a more personal account of what it was like to live in the Soviet Union. Remind students that as they read, they should be focusing on whether or not the experiences in the story confirm or conflict with the things they have learned in the unit so far. Next, distribute the Soviet Literature Analysis Guide for students to complete as they read. Once students have all chosen the story they want to read for the day, they may begin work.

Phase Three: As students read, circulate the room to provide individualized instruction and clarify any student misunderstandings. As students make progress, encourage them to think about their major noticings thus far, and whether or not the story adheres to what they would expect. Provide students with the majority of class time to read, then bring everyone back together to close out the lesson with a graphic organizer.

Phase Four: On the board or main display area, set up two T charts with “confirm” and “conflicts” on each side. Label each T chart with the title of one of the stories and have students shout out some of their major takeaways. Inform students that in tomorrow’s class, they will analyze the other story using the T charts on the board as guides for understanding to build on.

Lesson 3: Analysis of Kabakov’s *10 Characters*

Objective: Students will read about and analyze Ilya Kabakov’s art installation *10 Characters* in order to describe the nature of communal apartments and compare/contrast them with “blocks” of American cities.

Lesson Context: In this lesson, students will be introduced to the work of Soviet artist Ilya Kabakov, who educated American art fans about life in the Soviet Union and created many works which challenge our perception of what Soviet life was like. Students will already be familiar with some Soviet literature, and by now should be understanding that Soviet life was much less black and white than it is made out to be in American textbooks.

Materials and Resources:

- *10 Characters* exhibit materials and texts (Appendix B, Link 4)
- *10 Characters* Reaction Catcher (Appendix A, Figure 3)

- Apartments vs. Blocks Free Write (Appendix A, Figure 4)
- Chromebooks

Phase One: Begin the class by displaying on the board the statement “Agree or disagree, people in the Soviet Union were necessarily less individualistic than people in our own culture. Explain.” Give any additional explanation or detail as needed, but try to leave this question mostly up to however students decide to take it. Once all, students have recorded a response, allow a few students to share their thoughts. Drive the discussion towards the misconceptions that have already been uncovered about the Soviet Union and encourage students to be open minded about any preconceived ideas they may have brought to the classroom.

Phase Two: Pair students off into groups of two. Direct the groups to take out a Chromebook and access the exhibit link for *10 Characters*. Next, pass out a copy of the *10 Characters* Reaction Catcher and instruct students that, while they can work together and discuss the exhibit together, they should each be recording their own thoughts and ideas to be turned in at the end of the lesson. Students will have the next twenty minutes to explore the exhibit digitally and interact with the rooms and characters that most interest them. As students explore the exhibit, remind them of the overarching history of the Soviet Union that is taught in schools, and ask whether or not it corresponds to the things they see in Kabakov’s work and to what extent.

Phase Three: Once students have had appropriate time to explore the exhibit website, have some students share out the aspects they found most interesting along with a brief explanation of why. Ask students to consider whether or not they see any similarities between people in their neighborhood and people in Kabakov’s imagined communal apartment (it is a good idea here to encourage students to think about the quirky, strange, or otherwise interesting characters who frequent their neighborhood or block). Next, pass out the Apartments vs. Blocks Free Write and give students the remainder of the class period to work out their thoughts. Students should turn in their free write as the leave class, and it is a good idea to highlight some of their key ideas for them at the beginning of the next lesson.

Lesson 4: What Does It Mean to Be “From Philly?”

Objective: Students will read an article focused on Philadelphia in order to critique it for bias and reinterpret the article to be more accurate to lived experience.

Lesson Context: This lesson will follow students’ reading of Soviet literature and art. Here, the focus of the unit will transition away from the Soviet Union and onto representations of Philadelphia in the media. As students have seen in the unit, top down

histories rarely give a full picture of things, and here they will have a chance to put that knowledge to practice by analyzing a city they know intimately.

Materials and Resources:

- Article (Appendix B, Link 5)
- Article Reinterpretation (Appendix A, Figure 5)

Phase One: Begin class by displaying on the board the prompt: “list a few things/behaviors/giveaways that make it obvious someone was born and raised in Philly?” (Any other city/town could be substituted here). Encourage students to think about things that may seem silly, quirky, or even inconsequential alongside some things that may be more serious or important. This is a prompt that students should be able to list many ideas, so give them the space to think exhaustively. Once students are ready to share, keep a list on the board tracking each answer. Next, ask students how many of these things Philly is known for in the national media. Review the list, crossing off every item that students don’t feel is adequately represented in Philadelphia’s national reputation.

Phase Two: Remind students that while studying the Soviet Union they have seen a number of ways that historians and educators have misunderstood or poorly represented the reality of what living in the U.S.S.R. was like. Inform them that they have just proven the same can be said of Philadelphia, and they will be spending the next portion of class reading an article focused on a national media representation of Philadelphia. Distribute the article to students, letting them know that the article primarily looks at Philadelphia through a lens of poverty to define the lives of its citizens. Remind students that while parts of representations can be true or based in fact, they can also miss key aspects of experience—and that as they read they should annotate things that confirm or conflict with their own experiences. Once students have the article, give them ten to fifteen minutes to read and annotate.

Phase Three: Once students have completed their reading and annotation of the article, distribute the Article Reinterpretation worksheet to each student. Inform them that, as people who experience Philadelphia on a first hand basis every day, it is their task to rewrite/summarize the article from a perspective that is more accurate to the actual experiences and culture of Philadelphians. Allow students to write uninterrupted for ten to twelve minutes.

Phase Four: To wrap up class, have a few students volunteer to read a short passage from the reinterpretation of rhetoric article. Before the class ends, give each student a sticky note and direct them to the parking lot question on the board “what does being from Philly mean to you?” Have each student place their sticky note in the parking lot as they exit the classroom.

Lesson 5: Writing Project- “A Neighborhood”

Objective: Students will draft a work of fiction portraying the normal lived experience of a range of characters in order represent their neighborhood thematically and historically.

Lesson Context: This lesson will introduce and give students time to brainstorm the culminating writing project which will cap off the unit. By this point, students will have had their perceptions of the Soviet Union altered through short stories, will have engaged with Kabakov’s *10 Characters* exhibit, and will have been challenged to consider what overarching narratives exist about Philadelphia that are wrong. In order to tie all of this together, students will take inspiration from Kabakov’s *10 Characters* in order to create a “neighborhood” story.

Materials and Resources:

- Project Overview (Appendix A, Figure 6)
- Project Rubric (Appendix A, Figure 7)
- Brainstorm Guide (Appendix A, Figure 8)

Phase One: Begin the lesson by displaying on the board the prompt: “how did the stories we read about the Soviet Union reshape the way we understood Soviet history?” Engage students with a reflective discussion, prompting them to think back on all the major discussions that have taken place throughout the unit up to this point. Remind them that they have seen how misrepresentation is something that is hard to eliminate from historical memory, as they have seen in representations of Philadelphia in national media. Inform students that today they will begin working on a creative writing project that will bring all of the themes from the unit together to cap everything off.

Phase Two: Pass out the Project Overview and Project Rubric to students. Read through the assignment with students and answer any questions or concerns they may have. If this is a project that you have taught in a prior year, it is also a good idea to provide students with an example of strong student work. Encourage students to think about their own neighborhood, its places, its characters, and its emotional core. Students will be drawing from these things to write their own story showcasing Philadelphia.

Phase Three: Once students are clear on the assignment and have an understanding of their task, pass out the Brainstorm Guide to each student. Depending on your school, students may all come from a similar geographic location, however if they don’t, it’s a good idea to group students with peers who may live nearby to them to make the most of the discussion. As students work on the brainstorming, circulate the room to check in with them and ensure that they are clear in their understanding and making progress. It’s a good idea to prepare your own brainstorm based on your own experiences so that you can engage students meaningfully with examples as you circulate.

Phase Four: Once the end of class is nearing, pass out a sheet of lined paper to each student. On the paper, give them five minutes to write an internal dialogue of a character who will be in their neighborhood story. Encourage students to think more like an author than a historian and simply get lost in bringing their character to life. As students leave the room, they should leave their character study with you for review to ensure everyone is on the right track and making progress.

Note about the lesson: This lesson will merely begin the writing process for this project. It is important to note that how the actual drafting process for the story can be completed in a variety of ways and that each teacher should make their own decision about what that process should look like.

Resources

Press, Associated. "Florida Requires Teaching Black History. Some Don't Trust Schools to Do It Justice." Florida Politics - Campaigns & Elections. Lobbying & Government., December 22, 2024. <https://floridapolitics.com/archives/713059-florida-requires-teaching-black-history-some-dont-trust-schools-to-do-it-justice/>.

This article highlights the contested nature of content in social studies classrooms across America. Helps to inform the reasons for writing the unit and the idea that it is essential for us to help teach students frameworks through which they can analyze history for themselves.

Graeber, David, and D. Wengrow. The dawn of everything: A new history of humanity. New York, NY: Picador/Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2023.

In this landmark text, the authors provide numerous discussions and examples about how mainstream ideas about how ancient people lived are often wildly inaccurate. They make the case that being stuck in our present moment hinders our ability to think creatively about humanity's past. Serves as a basis for the theory of the unit.

Field, Kendra Taira. Growing Up with the Country: Family, Race, and Nation after the Civil War. New Haven, CT: Yale Press, 2010.

Field's history draws from personal narratives and family oral histories in order to reappraise common attitudes that existed across the South during Reconstruction. Her work makes it clear that there is a need in history writing to break from attempts at objectivity to uncover new questions about the realities of the past. Informs the theory of the unit.

Finkel, Caroline. *Osman's dream*. New York, NY: Basic Books, 2012.

A sprawling history of the Ottoman Empire in which Finkel consistently points to blurred lines between national history and cultural myth in order to question the possibility of an objective telling of the Ottoman story. Finkel demonstrates that the narratives we tell ourselves about the past can often inform our understandings of culture than can measurable records.

Cochran-Smith, M., & Lytle, S. L. (1999). *Relationships of knowledge and practice: Teacher learning in communities*. *Review of Research in Education*, 24, 272.

An article describing the importance of inquiry stances inside and outside of the classroom. Helps to inform the design of lessons within the unit and justify the alternative approach to studying the Soviet Union.

Glencoe. *Glencoe World history: Modern Times, reading essentials and note-taking guide*. New York, NY: Glencoe McGraw-Hill School, 2009.

Textbook used by the School District of Philadelphia.

<https://www.marxists.org/history/ussr/government/1928/sufds/ch21.htm>

Website which tracks statistics and achievements of the Soviet project. Specifically useful for looking up statistics about labor, education, and culture.

Fitzpatrick, Sheila. "The Shortest History of the Soviet Union." New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2022.

An incredible work which is both informative and concise. Fitzpatrick provides a direct telling of Soviet history which contains many of the lasting tropes alongside deeper facts and documents. For anyone seeking to teach this unit, or any unit about the Soviet Union, this book should be considered mandatory reading.

Zhdanov, Andreï Aleksandrovich, H. G. Scott and Library of Theodore Dreiser (University of Pennsylvania). *Problems of soviet literature : reports and speeches at the first Soviet writers' congress*. Moscow ; Leningrad : Co-operative Publishing Society of Foreign Workers in the U.S.S.R., 1935.

In this speech, Zhdanov outlines and introduces the literary movement of socialist realism that came to define much of the literature of the Soviet Union. He not only provides an outline of what good Soviet writers *should* do, but also lambasts western writers as examples of what not to do. Incredibly helpful for understanding Soviet culture from a historical perspective and makes the others texts in the unit much more surprising.

Shukshin, Vasiliĭ, John Givens and Laura. Michael. Stories from a Siberian village. DeKalb : Northern Illinois University Press, 1996.

One of the story collections from which unit texts are pulled. Shukshin's focus on rural people is starkly different from the industry and urbanization facing stories that made up socialist realism. Shukshin provides a visceral and detailed account of the lives of rural Soviets.

Gabriel McGuire, Chris Fort, Naomi Caffee, Emily Laskin, Samuel Hodgkin, and Ali F. İğmen. Tulips in Bloom : An Anthology of Modern Central Asian Literature. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024. <https://research-ebsco-com.proxy.library.upenn.edu/linkprocessor/plink?id=b0d86024-996d-3524-a2ae-295234a6b790>.

One of the story collections from which unit texts are pulled. Though unpublished, *The Earthquake* is a powerful story detailing how alignment with Soviet principles was not always a straight forward process and that in spite of the stated values of Sovietism, people acted in their own self interest frequently.

Barton, Megan. "Ten Characters." Ilya & Emilia Kabakov, Ilya & Emilia Kabakov, 15 Sept. 2019, www.kabakov.net/installations/2019/9/15/ten-characters.

Web page which contains a variety of links, images, and write ups about Ilya Kabakov's *10 Characters* installation which is a major focus of this unit. In his installation, Kabakov included a variety of whacky and subversive characters which complicated Westerners understandings of what it must have been like to live in the Soviet Union as well as to confirm some tropes about Soviet lifestyles. The exhibit is a primary inspiration for the culminating project.

Philadelphia, CBS. "Philadelphia Has Highest Murder Rate per Capita among Country's 10 Largest Cities." CBS News, CBS Interactive, 23 July 2021, www.cbsnews.com/philadelphia/news/philadelphia-highest-murder-rate-per-capita-countrys-10-largest-cities/.

Short article which is used for an assignment in a unit lesson.

Stornaiuolo, A., & Thomas, E. E. (2017). Disrupting Educational Inequalities Through Youth Digital Activism. *Review of Research in Education*, 41(1), 345.

Article focused on how authorship about history and the placement of students as generators of knowledge creates more student buy in and better outcomes. Informs the theory of the unit.

Appendix

Appendix A:

Fig 1- Modified Frayer Model	https://docs.google.com/document/d/1exUWrJw-Hb0hb9rPHhNR-RHLVind4cz-nLGN-gPP05U/edit?usp=sharing
Fig 2- Soviet Literature Analysis	https://docs.google.com/document/d/1iNZclXjqr40U8q6PvyFxFyLyzNPP6TuQk0OS_24OEBU-o/edit?usp=sharing
Fig 3- <i>10 Characters</i> Reaction Cathcer	https://docs.google.com/document/d/1mYKV3l7ZSFbyDolq-xiCCZsd7Ff6mBMRwSHhJzZch3Y/edit?usp=sharing
Fig 4- Apartments vs. Blocks Free Write	https://docs.google.com/document/d/14bGKVXcgYSnCgQLCZjDfO65XYJlX2Q1hYyV7muOIYH8/edit?usp=sharing

Fig 5- Article Reinterpretation	https://docs.google.com/document/d/1I9o9ITo_dT5LzUC3BUWXmZgiq1n8QimjZuib368BkV8/edit?usp=sharing
Fig 6- Project Overview	https://docs.google.com/document/d/1KjPdeJ2a7Mc0hKE_xONh8CQCEWa0fszjYnsoqS4kUCM/edit?usp=sharing
Fig 7- Project Rubric	https://docs.google.com/document/d/1FhceAfj07WfkU3c63e7XoMQGzhMM926OCE30JsRIDwY/edit?usp=sharing
Fig 8- Brainstorm Guide	https://drive.google.com/file/d/11vJTdKJqmXaLSWx3yh90UcnEEgfMzNjv/view?usp=sharing

Appendix B:

Soviet History Introduction Slides	https://drive.google.com/file/d/1zD74AFP7qDFmewDov5C1UCdW3qw4Tu3L/view?usp=sharing
<i>Alyosha at Large</i> , Vasily Shukshin	https://drive.google.com/file/d/1iiAR_kjC-aW8fdEtT2CLxVPzUiCXR3Ub/view?usp=sharing
<i>The Earthquake</i> , Abdulla Qahhor	https://drive.google.com/file/d/1gvvgg7Xucs1fqEyFDEjZ0lO-HhO5myxw9/view?usp=sharing
Kabakov's <i>10 Characters</i> Virtual Exhibit	https://www.kabakov.net/installations/2019/9/15/ten-characters
Philadelphia Article	https://whyy.org/articles/philadelphia-americas-poorest-big-city-poverty/