

Speaking Freely In the Soviet Union's Autocratic Government

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Grade Level: Middle

Duration of lesson: 2 class periods

Overview:

The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution that guarantees the freedom of speech can often be taken for granted. As American citizens we have the right to speak freely without the fear of censorship. Around the world, and certainly throughout history, this has not always been the case. In this lesson students will specifically examine portions of the constitutions of the United States and former Soviet Union to identify what each says about the freedom of speech. The two countries make for an interesting comparison since each experienced similar formative events in their histories, but ultimately ended up with vastly dissimilar effects on the rights and privileges of its citizens.

At the core of this lesson students will have to investigate what were the stated purposes and structures of the two governments? How do these affect how much control the government needs to exert over its citizens, especially pertaining to the freedom of speech? Primary source documents presenting real-life examples of issues surrounding the freedom of speech in both countries will be examined and analyzed by the students.

Content Standards:

Era 9: Postwar United States (1945 to early 1970s)

Standard 2: How the Cold War and conflicts in Korea and Vietnam influenced domestic and international politics

Historical Thinking Standards:

Standard 3: Historical Analysis and Interpretation

- A.** Compare and contrast differing sets of ideas.
- B.** Consider multiple perspectives.
- C.** Analyze cause-and-effect relationships and multiple causation, including the importance of the individual, the influence of ideas.
- D.** Draw comparisons across eras and regions in order to define enduring issues.

· Students will be able to show why freedom of speech was not protected by the government of the Soviet Union.

Content Narrative

The people of America were engaged in a revolutionary war in 1776 against a monarch. The people of Russia were engaged in a revolutionary war in 1917 against a monarch. The victorious leaders of both countries established plans for new governments that they hoped

would correct problems of the past. In 1789 the leaders of the American colonies constructed a constitution, stating a purpose for government, providing for checks and balances, plus voting rights limited to property owners. Freedom of speech was included, which was an individual right that had been previously trampled by the king. The Russian leaders also constructed a constitution following their revolution and stated a purpose for government and provided limited voting rights. The Soviet government included no checks on central power. The Soviet government did promise freedom of speech to individual citizens and gave the organs of the press and media “to the people” (articles 2.14 and 2.15).¹

Purpose of government.

The authors of new government in America and in Russia had to determine why they needed government and who it should serve. The U.S. Constitution states the purpose of government as follows.

We the people of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United State of America.²

The authors of the U.S. Constitution described ideals to be achieved: a more perfect Union, justice, domestic tranquility, and the blessings of liberty. They mentioned the need to achieve common goods such as defense and general welfare. Citizenship, however, was only indirectly referred to in the original U.S. Constitution. The Constitution gave states the right to fix voting laws. During the first 75 years, the states typically gave white male property-holders over the age of 21 the right to vote. By the 1850s most white men could vote regardless of property ownership. With no protections guaranteed in the Constitution, African Americans, whether slaves or not, immigrants, and women did not have the right to vote. In 1857, the Supreme Court ruled in the Dread-Scott Decision that African Americans, enslaved or not, could never be U.S. citizens.

¹ <http://www.marxists.org/history/ussr/government/constitution/1918/index.htm>

²U.S. National Archives & Records Administration (NARA), *U.S. Constitution (1787)* < <http://www.archives.gov/national-archives-experience/charters/constitutiontranscript.html>> {accessed August 1, 2007}.

Only after the violent Civil War and the subjugation of the South, did the 14th Amendment, passed in 1866, define a more or less universal citizenship: "All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside." A few years later, the 15th Amendment gave African American males the right to vote. American women, however, would have to wait four decades to receive that right to vote, guaranteed in the passage of the 19th Amendment in 1920.

For African Americans, however, despite Constitutional amendments, their ability to exercise their full citizenship was still a long way off. Jim Crow laws in many parts of the country denied African Americans access to schools, parks, jobs and housing because of local laws, rules and regulations that discriminated based on race. Jim Crow laws were backed up by local law enforcement, social practice and vigilante organizations such as the Klu Klux Klan which used violence to ensure the segregation of African Americans from white society. After a vigorous and at times violent struggle for full rights in the 1950s and 1960s, African Americans won a clear Constitutional mandate for equal citizenship with the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. In short, it took a hundred years after the passage of the 14th Amendment and nearly two centuries after the founding Constitution, for U.S. law to guarantee full and equal citizenship to the nation's inhabitants regardless of gender, race and ethnicity.

In the Soviet Union, the new Soviet Constitution of 1918 also did not guarantee full citizenship to all inhabitants of the former Russian Empire. Instead of discrimination based on gender, race and ethnicity, the Soviet Constitution denied citizenship based on class. The reason for this discrimination was justified in founding mission of the Constitution:

Russia is declared to be a republic of the Soviets of Workers', Soldiers', and Peasants' Deputies. All the central and local power belongs to these soviets. The Russian Soviet Republic is organized on the basis of a free union of free nations, as a federation of soviet national republics.

The purpose of the Constitution was to establish a socialist state that ensured a radical redistribution of power and economic resources from the wealthy to the working classes.³

With this passage, the authors of the Soviet constitution abolished private property and gave to peasant farmers, free of payment, land they had farmed for generations. The authors of

³ Decrees And Constitution Of Soviet Russia, (New York: The Nation Press, Inc., 1918), p.6.<
<http://www.marxists.org/history/ussr/government/constitution/1918/index.htm>> {accessed August 17, 2007}

the Soviet constitution of 1918 determined that establishing socialism would not be possible immediately and they declared a transition period that required a “dictatorship” to work toward abolishing the economic power of wealthy and propertied classes. The mission of the dictatorship was to introduce socialism in order to eliminate the exploitation of people under the capitalist system. The end objective of the government would be to eliminate class divisions in society

Communism, in Marx’s view, provided for the means of production to be owned by all of the community. There would be no class divisions; no ruling class presiding over the workers. People would contribute to society according to their own ability. They would be provided for according to their own individual needs.⁴ Marx wrote that capitalism supported an economically dominant social class. He saw this as an evil in society and in government and believed that no economically dominant class should control the state.⁵ Marx wrote that a communist revolution was needed in urban, industrialized areas. Lenin was highly influenced by Marx, but did not think a communist revolution should be limited to the cities. Though Russia was largely agrarian, Lenin, together with a small group of revolutionaries, went forward to seize power and organize the entire country to achieve the Marxist vision.⁶

In sum, the revolution responded to the call of Karl Marx in his Communist Manifesto of 1848 that “Workers of all countries, unite.”⁷ Following Marx, the Russian Bolsheviks expected that other industrialized nations of Europe would join the revolution. The Russian revolutionaries understood that communism in one country would fail because that country would be economically isolated and because communism as a theory was based on the assumption of surpluses from industrial production that could be shared out to all working people equally across nations. The mission of the new government was to encourage communist revolutions throughout Europe. Thus, the dictatorship was established as a waiting period until the rest of the workers of Europe rose up in revolution.

In order to establish a socialist government and socialist economy, Lenin and his Bolshevik Party outlined in the Constitution who could participate in the society and how they

⁴ Ibid, p. 208.

⁵ Ibid, p. 212.

⁶ Philip W. Cannistraro and John J. Reich, The Western Perspective: A History Of Civilization In The West (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1999), p. 1031.

⁷ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, The Communist Manifesto: A Road Map To History’s Most Important Political Document, ed. Phil Gasper (Chicago: Haymarket Books: 2005), p. 89.

would participate. The Bolsheviks did not accept the idea that individual rights were more important than those of the group. Workers would only be successful if they worked together, not for their own individual interests but as part of a collective, the great army of free labor. The 1918 constitution included workers and peasants, men and women, as full citizens. It excluded the “former capitalist classes,” those who employed hired labor to make a profit, persons living on non-laboring income such as interest from capitalist investments or returns from property, private traders and commercial middle men, monks and clerics, employees and agents of the former police corps, or Okhrana, members of the Tsar’s family; the mentally ill, the insane, persons under guardianship and persons convicted for crimes of greed and immorality.⁸ These classes made up about 20% of the population. The remaining 80% were given full rights as citizens. This was a higher percentage of the population that could vote than in the United States at the same time.

Provisions for voting were included in the Soviet constitution, but there would not be free elections. Bertrand Russell inspected voting activities in the early Soviet Union at Lenin’s invitation. In the city, voting was by a show of hands, so that all who voted against the government were marked men. There was only one party, the Communist Party. Typically, there was only one candidate for which to vote. Russell asked people in the countryside how elections occurred. People responded that if they elected a non-communist representative he would not be able to get a pass on the railway so could not attend the county or provincial ugeriya council or “soviet” in Russian.⁹ Despite Constitutional guarantees, most of the formal power to pass laws and select leaders was held by the Communist Party.

Distribution of Power.

American revolutionary leaders agreed to a balance of power. The Constitution distributed power across three parts of the U.S. government. Article I of the Constitution assigned legislative powers to Congress, consisting of a Senate and a House of Representatives. Article 2 vested executive power in the president of the United States. Judicial power was assigned to the Supreme Court and other inferior courts, according to Article 3. In this way,

⁸ Decrees And Constitution Of Soviet Russia (New York: The Nation Press, Inc., 1918), p. 14-15.

⁹ Bertrand Russell, The Practice And Theory Of Bolshevism (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1964).p.40.

there were checks on the power of each part of government and no single part held all of the power.¹⁰

This system of checks and balances was not a new idea. John Locke presented a theory of government in 1690 showing a way to avoid the increasingly centralized power of monarchs in his era.¹¹ A letter from his friend Lady Mordaunt captured the scene for Locke. She wrote to him following the English revolution of 1688. She wished he was in England as the old government collapsed. She enthusiastically described this as a time not for just mending the old, but of creating a totally new government. She wanted Locke to give them a “right scheme of government” to replace the old.¹² Distributing power was an innovative idea that Locke shared. He observed that humanity was frail and apt to grab power. For this reason, it was a problem if a government allowed the same people to make laws who also had the power to enforce them. For example, they may be tempted to exempt themselves from the laws they made. Or, they may write the laws to suit their own private advantage.¹³ While the Americans picked up this idea in the late 1700’s, as a way to combat the centralized power they saw in the English monarchy, it did not serve the needs of the Soviet revolutionaries in the early 1900s.

In creating their new government, the Soviet revolutionary leaders chose to concentrate power in the hands of one part of government, the Communist Party. They rationalized this imbalance of power as a temporary measure and led by workers, “the dictatorship of the proletariat.”

The all Russian Central Executive committee was the supreme legislative, executive, and controlling organ of the Russian Socialist Federal Soviet Republic.¹⁴ A visitor to the Soviet Union in 1920, Bertrand Russell describes a system of voting for various representatives. These would serve on groups where all candidates would have to support the goals of the revolution,

¹⁰ U.S. National Archives & Records Administration (NARA), *U.S. Constitution (1787)*, <<http://www.archives.gov/national-archives-experience/charters/constitutiontranscript.html>> {accessed August 1, 2007}.

¹¹ John Locke, “The Second Treatise,” in *Two Treatises Of John Locke*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge: University Press, 1966), p. 285.

¹² Lady Mordaunt Letter To John Locke, January 31, 1689 in *Two Treatises Of John Locke*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge: University Press, 1966), p. 45.

¹³ John Locke, “The Second Treatise,” in *Two Treatises Of John Locke*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge: University Press, 1966), paragraph 143-144, p. 382.

¹⁴ *Decrees And Constitution Of Soviet Russia* (New York: The Nation Press, Inc., 1918), p. 8.

communism. They also must defer to the “presidium” consisting of nine men who had all of the power.¹⁵

Lenin, the leader of the Soviets’ all-powerful Soviet Council of Workers and Soldiers’ Deputies, was no admirer of western-style democracy. The purpose of his dictatorship was to introduce socialism using the theories of Karl Marx. The long-range strategy of the Bolsheviks was to have a small group overthrow the government in order to get rid of capitalism and implement the communist system. At this point they would control the resources of the government. They would use education and propaganda to teach the people about communism and they would nationalize every part of the economy as a way of bringing about communism. Eventually, all signs of capitalism and private property would be gone. At that point, there would be no more need for government because the workers would be in complete control. The state would then, in theory, dissolve. There would be perfect liberty.¹⁶

The Soviet Union’s original constitution was rewritten several times, each to reflect the progress toward total socialism. The so-called “Stalin Constitution” of 1936 abolished the limitations on citizenship established in the 1918 Constitution. This new Constitution gave universal citizenship to all inhabitants of the nation, regardless of class, economic position, ethnicity, religion and gender. Legal guarantees, however, mattered little in the face of major economic and political changes that were occurring in the 1930s. In the late 1920s Stalin initiated state-led industrialization and collectivization drives, both of which increased central and dictatorial power.¹⁷ Stalin forced farmers to join collective farms in 1929.

He then stepped up state intervention in the economy through central planning in order to ratchet up industrialization to build up Soviet defenses. Stalin and other Soviet leaders greatly feared invasion from capitalist countries. The fear was grounded. In Germany, Adolf Hitler was openly talking about taking over the Soviet Union. Stalin used ideology and state-led fear campaigns to justify cultural isolation from the West. None of these steps were decided on in the Central Executive Committee, but in the much smaller body called the Politburo which was the

¹⁵ Bertrand Russell, The Practice And Theory Of Bolshevism (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1964).p. 40.

¹⁶Ibid, p. 95

¹⁷ Johan P. Arnason, The Future that Failed: Origins And Destinies Of The Soviet Model (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 95.

supreme body of the Communist Party. Stalin's became the chief leader of the Politburo. This move marked a shift from oligarchy to dictatorship, not by the proletariat, but by one man.¹⁸

The Soviet Union was not genuinely Marxist. Marx and Engels proposed that workers would run the society. However, in the Soviet Union, the state owned the economy and a small group of privileged people controlled surplus wealth that came from the labor of workers.¹⁹ Instead of socialism, Stalin guided the country to a state-led capitalism. The Soviet Union Constitution of 1977 announced that in the USSR "a developed socialist society has been built."²⁰ Was this the point at which the Bolshevik plans to eliminate central power was realized? Apparently not.

This more recent constitution offered more rights and privileges for citizens. But, it still included a primary, controlling power. Article six provides that the nucleus of the political system is the communist party.²¹ "Power is sweet and few men surrender it voluntarily," observed Bertrand Russell.²² He did not believe that the Bolshevik plan to eliminate governmental power, once all signs of capitalism were gone, would ever occur. He was right. Eventually, in 1991, the conservative communists were discredited. The Soviet Union collapsed and a new constitution for the Russian Federation was approved in 1993.²³

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¹⁸ Ibid, p. 97-98.

¹⁹ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, The Communist Manifesto: A road Map To History's Most Important Political Document, ed. Phil Gasper (Chicago: Haymarket Books: 2005), p. 27.

²⁰World Factbook, *Soviet Union Constitution Adopted on: 7 Oct 1977* <<http://www.servat.unibe.ch/law/icl/r100000.html>> {accessed August 2, 2007}.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Bertrand Russell, The Practice And Theory Of Bolshevism (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1964).p. 40.

²²Ibid, p.100.

²³ Robert L. Maddes, Constitutions Of The World (Washington: CQPress, 2001), p. 292.

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Vocabulary

Authoritarian-requiring absolute obedience to authority.

Communism- a social plan where all means of production are jointly owned by all citizens. Citizens share labor and the products of labor.

Constitution-the act or plan for setting up (constituting) something, such as a new government.

Dictator-a ruler having absolute authority and supreme jurisdiction over the government of a state.

Freedom of Speech- Freedom of expression, such as spoken, written, artistic, or musical forms of expression.

Oligarchy-a small group of people having absolute authority and supreme jurisdiction over the government of a state.

Proletariat-the poorest class of working people. In the time of Karl Marx, this was the class of people who worked in factories or otherwise survived by selling their own labor.

Procedures

Motivation:

Distribute "Freedom of Speech" (RS #1) for student completion. Review student examples with the class to develop a common understanding of the freedom of speech (10-15 minutes).

Procedures:

Day One

1. Hand out "Purpose of Government" (RS #2). Review background statement and directions. Working in small groups (3-4 students per group) have students read the quotes on the handout and restate the main ideas in their own words (10-15 minutes).
2. Distribute "Structure of Government" (RS #3) and review background statement and directions. Tell groups to read the statements and complete (10-15 minutes).
3. Give out "Power of Government" instructions for foldable organizers (RS #4). Model the beginning steps for completing each. This will organize student notes and become the basis for a writing activity at the end of the lesson (20 minutes).
4. Have Students create 1 three flap foldable organizer and 1 one flap foldable organizer from the directions in RS #4 (20 minutes).

Day Two

5. Regroup students into their same groups as the previous day and ask students to review the work they have completed, including the two organizers and foldables.
6. Distribute "Compare personal freedoms" (RS #5). Review background information from anticipation guide on meaning of freedom of speech. Working in their groups, students will read the quotes on the handout and answer the questions (10-15minutes).
7. Hand out "Freedom of Speech Case: Minersville School District v. Gobitis" (RS #6). Explain that the letter they see was written by a school child, who did not think he should be required to recite the Pledge of Allegiance. Ask students to guess how old they think the boy was as the time. (Don't tell them the answer. They will discover this in their reading). In groups, have students read Billy's letter and answer the questions. Review the responses (10-15 minutes).
8. Give out "Billy's Story" (RS #7) and handout of "Questions for freedom of speech cases" (RS #8). Instruct students to only complete the questions related to Billy's story at this time. Ask students to quietly read the handout and answer the related

- questions on the inside of their three-flap organizer, from the day before (Students may compare answers). Review responses (25 minutes).
9. Distribute political cartoons (RS #9 and RS #10). These give insight into free speech in the Soviet Union. Ask that students answer the questions at the bottom of each picture. Review responses (15 Minutes).
 10. Tell students to answer the related questions about the political cartoons found on RS #8. Students should record answers on their one flap organizer - USSR Authoritarian Government from Day 1 (15 minutes).
 11. Homework: Distribute "Somebody Wanted In" (RS #11) and have students complete this using their class work and readings from RS #6, #7, #9 and #10. Model the first entry. Explain that there can be more than one "somebody" in a conflict so they may find more than one person or group to talk about. (10 minutes)

Closure: Students share answers to their "Questions for Freedom of Speech Cases" from their completed foldable organizers.

Assessment:

The completed foldable organizers will serve as an assessment for this lesson.

GENERAL PROVISIONS OF THE CONSTITUTION OF THE RUSSIAN SOCIALIST FEDERAL SOVIET REPUBLIC, 1918

<http://www.departments.bucknell.edu/russian/const/18cons01.html>

This is the first constitution of the Russian Socialist Federal Soviet Republic, 1918, in the early days of communist rule. This document defines the government's purpose, and how that purpose will be carried out. Students should focus on the government's purpose. It was to make the transition from the old regime to a powerful, all –Russian Soviet that was to eliminate the exploitation of men by men and ensure that the society was not divided into social classes. The purpose of this government was to change the way society was organized. Students should notice that the transitional government leaders were to be chosen through and by the communist party, alone. Power is concentrated in one, supreme body controlled by the communist party. There was no separation of powers within the government. Students should also note the restrictions on political opposition, particularly with regard to freedom of the speech. Power continued to be held by the communist party in the several constitutions which followed this one.

THE CONSTITUTION OF THE UNITED STATES, 1789

http://www.archives.gov/national-archives-experience/charters/constitution_transcript.html

The Constitution of the United States, 1789, defines the government's purpose and how that purpose will be carried out. Students should notice that the Constitution states that its purpose is to form a more perfect union, ensure domestic tranquility, provide for common defense of the people, and their welfare, and to ensure that the people enjoy the benefits of liberty. The purpose

of this government is to serve the people. Students should notice that this is not a transitional or temporary constitution. Rather, it is meant to be a permanent statement. This constitution continues to be in effect, today. It is amended from time to time. Power continues to be separated among the three main branches of government. Freedom of Speech is specifically protected in the First Amendment.

Minersville School District v. Gobitis (sic)

<http://memory.loc.gov/mss/mcc/016/0001.jpg>

This document is the handwritten letter sent by Billy Gobitas to the Minersville School District in 1935 to explain why he refuses to salute the American flag. Gobitas, who was ten years old at the time, states that he does "not salute the flag because I have promised to do the will of God." Students should carefully read Billy's argument that he is acting on his religious belief. He states that the salute and pledge ceremony violate an instruction from the Bible. Students should also notice details that provide some clues about Billy's age and education. For example, he writes in cursive without the benefit of lined paper, so the sentences slope slightly. It appears that the comma after the salutation is missing, but the letter is carefully correct in most regards. Students might speculate as to whether a parent helped Billy complete this task.

Billy's Story

<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/treasures/trr006.html>

This summary of Billy's story tells the details of the famous free speech case, *Minersville School District v. Gobitis (sic)*, launched by a ten year old school boy. Students should focus on the incident that launched this case, on Billy's reasons for refusing to participate in the salute to the American flag and the pledge, and on how his case was decided at various levels of government. Students should reflect on the reasons behind the Supreme Court's decision in 1943 to reverse a previous decision and finally decide in favor of Billy. Students should analyze how separation of powers among the executive, legislative and judicial branches contributed to Billy's eventual victory. Students should also recognize the role of the First Amendment in the final decision.

Now He Tells Us (1961)

<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?pp/PPALL:@field%28DOCID+@lit%28acd1996002758/PP%29%29>

This political cartoon pokes fun at the Soviet government's famous lack of tolerance for criticism. The figures on the park bench, dressed in tatters amid the weather, are voices from the early days of communist rule commenting on the traditional lack of tolerance for dissent. Students should connect this theme to the original Soviet constitution which clearly places all power in the hands of a single, supreme Soviet authority. Freedom of speech was not provided for. These men considered themselves patriots but suffered because they criticized the government.

Stalin as a book critic (1953)

<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?pp/PPALL:@field%28DOCID+@lit%28acd1996003538/PP%29%29>

This political cartoon shows the approaching execution of Professor Yaroshenko, as he walks up steps of stacked, written documents to the scaffold. A soldier urges him on with a bayonet. The case of Professor Yaroshenko represents those of many authors who did not follow the strict instructions of Stalin, the powerful Russian leader, to teach complete obedience to the supreme Soviet leader. The artist shows that Stalin executed the writer because Stalin did not like what Yaroshenko had to say. The soldier seems to have his eyes covered, blindly following orders. Students should note that the soldier forces the condemned man to walk on the documents which may represent "truth." Students should connect this cartoon to the provisions of the Constitution of 1918 specifically placing all power in the hands of the communist party and in a single supreme power within the government. Without the separation of powers, as provided for in the U.S. Constitution, there was no limit to the power that Stalin wielded over writers and the press. There was no freedom of speech.