

THE SINGING REVOLUTION



Subjects: History / Philosophy

The Soviet Union vs. Human Nature

Aim / Essential Question

How did the Soviet Union require changing the nature of people?

Overview

Many people regard human beings as having a fixed nature, and base their thinking about right and wrong on that nature. The Soviet Union, on the other hand, sought to create a new society based on a “new Soviet man”—a “selfless, better kind” of person. For the Soviets, the question would be: How to create such a society? If they couldn’t, did that mean there was something wrong with human beings or with the Soviets’ ideal? Are human beings as we know them incompatible with this “new man”?

Materials & Technology

- *The Singing Revolution* (Chapters 1, 2, and 3)
(from Disc One / Chapters)
- Soviet Propaganda Film
(from Disc One / Extra: Soviet Propaganda Film)
- Class set of handouts
(below)
- Any DVD-compatible player that will allow distinct chapters to be shown
- A television or video projection unit

Lesson Time: One 50-minute class period.

Objectives

Students will:

- Explore the concept of human nature.
- Explain the Soviet view of human nature.
- Compare and contrast the actions of the Soviet state and its propaganda.
- Evaluate the attempt to remake human beings.

Instruction

Opening: Bell Ringer / Do Now

Have students get into small discussion groups.

Write on the board:

- What do people mean by human nature?
- What are people’s natural desires and limitations?
- Do we have a purpose in life? What is it? Who decides?
- What does human nature have to do with right and wrong?

According to the Random House *Webster’s College Dictionary*, “human nature” is

- the psychological and social qualities that characterize humankind.
- the character of human conduct, generally regarded as produced by living in primary groups.
- According to *Wikipedia*, “human nature” refers to the distinguishing characteristics, including ways of thinking, feeling and acting that humans tend to have naturally.

- **What these characteristics are has been the subject of much debate, from Socrates to the Enlightenment to today.**

Activities:

1. Distribute the handout. Have students read the first quotation, taken from *The Singing Revolution* booklet. This will provide historical background on the Soviet invasion and occupation of Estonia, and introduce the idea that communism clashes with human nature. Explain to students that the Soviets believed that the State could dictate people's purpose. They believed that the Soviet ideal of society set the standard for morality. Human nature, the Soviets claimed, did not set a standard for morality; instead, the State had the right to reshape people, who had no purpose on their own.
2. Have students read section 2 of the handout, about the effort to overcome human nature to create a "New Soviet Man." Ask these discussion questions:
 - What are some traits of the Soviets' "new man"?
 - Are they "unnatural"?
 - Are these traits learnable?
 - How can the government reshape people?
3. Show students the Soviet propaganda film. Discuss the following questions as a class:
 - How do you respond to that clip?
 - How do you think you would respond to it, if you had been exposed to this propaganda constantly for years or decades?
 - What kinds of people did the Soviet Union want to create?
 - What purposes do the people you know work for? Are those natural purposes? That is, are those purposes in line with human nature? Why / why not?
 - For what purpose do the workers in the video work? Were the Soviets pursuing natural purposes?
 - Which purpose is a better incentive for people? Why?
4. Have students read section 3 of the handout, a 1924 reading from Leon Trotsky, a Soviet leader who later would lose out in a power struggle with Stalin. Point out that the passage illustrates how the Soviets thought they should change, rather than accommodate, human nature.
5. Ask students:
 - Who is to be doing the conscious building, directing, correcting, and mastering? (In practice, the answer was the State.) Remove parentheses
 - What are some natural feelings and instincts that people have? For Trotsky and the Soviets, our natural feelings and instincts,—“crude impulses of nature,”—form life blindly and give us no purpose.
 - If the ideal “new man” becomes the measure of people's worth, does it matter what the government does to real people in order to bring this ideal about?
6. Show clips about Soviet brutality
 - Disc 1, Chapter 1: “Open” (2:10-4:23)
 - Disc 1, Chapter 2: “WWII” (8:43-12:19 and 16:40-17:42) to illustrate the lengths to which the Soviets would go in the pursuit of their ideal.
7. Refer back to the statement from the clip that, “After 5,000 years on this land, Estonians almost ceased to exist.” Ask the students:
 - Why were the Soviets so much worse than earlier invaders?
 - What had motivated earlier invaders? (According to the film, they valued Estonia as a route between the Baltic Sea and Russia.)
 - What might the Soviets have done differently, if they had only wanted to exploit the resources and trading route, rather than transform the people?

8. Show clips which illustrate the aspirations of the Estonians and how these conflicted with Soviet goals: (Disc 1, Chapter 3: “Post WWII” (21:16-24:23 and 26:43-29:21). Instruct students to watch for the aspirations of the Estonians, and to consider how those aspirations illustrate the Estonian people’s “natural feelings and instincts” (referring back to Trotsky).
 - What did Estonians who were featured care about? [Possible answers: privately owned farms, desire to worship freely (Christmas tree), song, nation, culture, heritage, family]
 - Would Trotsky have characterized their efforts as “blind”? Would you?
 - Were these aspirations more consistent with human nature than the Soviets’ goals were?
9. If time permits, have students read section 4 of the handout. Ask students to consider what feelings and instincts collective farming violated. Answers may include people’s desire for freedom, and control over their own lives and projects. Stress again that people aren’t being allowed to work for purposes they care about, but rather to accommodate Soviet economic theories.

Close: Application/Summary

Ask students:

- How did the communist ideal require changing the nature of people?
- Was the Soviet ideal desirable?
- Was it practical?
- Was it appropriate?

Homework

Have students read the passages that were not read in class, and answer the accompanying questions. In addition to the questions with the passages, there is an essay question at the end of the readings.

Name _____

Date _____

Class _____ Period _____

Teacher _____

The Soviet Union vs. Human Nature

1. “The Soviet Union occupied Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania in 1940, at the beginning of World War II. The Soviets were quickly driven out by the advancing German army, but surged back in 1944 to swallow the Baltic nations into their wrenching 70-year experiment in Communism – nothing less than the attempt to change the spirit and nature of man on earth.”

- *The Singing Revolution* book, p 18

Q: Estonia spent decades occupied by the Soviet Union, during which time they were subjected to a Soviet attempt to remake the very nature of people. Do you think it is possible to remake people’s nature—human nature? Why / Why not?

A: _____

2. The Soviet Man was to be selfless, learned, healthy and enthusiastic in spreading the Socialist Revolution. Adherence to Marxism-Leninism, and individual behavior consistent with that philosophy's prescriptions, were among the crucial traits expected of the New Soviet Man. This required intellectualism and hard discipline. He was not driven by crude impulses of nature but by conscious self-mastery -- a belief that required the rejection of both innate personality and the unconscious, which Soviet psychologists did therefore reject. He treated public property with respect, as if it were his own. He also has lost any nationalist sentiments, being Soviet rather than Russian, or Ukrainian, or any of the many other nationalities found in the USSR. His work required exertion and austerity, to show the new man triumphing over his base instincts. - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_soviet_man

Q: Was the Soviet goal of remaking human nature a proper role of government? Why / Why not?

A: _____

Q: To what extent should a government go to force its people to change, to reflect that government’s view of the purpose of people’s existence?

A: _____

3. “Communist life will not be formed blindly, like coral islands, but will be built consciously, will be tested by thought, will be directed and corrected...”

“Man will make it his purpose to master his own feelings, to raise his instincts to the heights of consciousness, to make them transparent, to extend the wires of his will into hidden recesses, and thereby to raise himself to a new plane, to create a higher social biologic type, or, if you please, a superman.”

- Leon Trotsky, communist theorist

Q: In your own words, what does Trotsky say are the Soviets' goals?

A: _____

Q: Based on the propaganda video clip about workers, and the reading above, what methods did the Soviets need to use to achieve their goals?

A: _____

Q: Why do you think they were not successful?

A: _____

4. In the Soviet Union, [agricultural] collectivization was introduced by Joseph Stalin in the late 1920s as a way, according to the theories of socialist leaders, to boost agricultural production through the organization of land and labor into large-scale collective farms (kolkhozy). At the same time, Stalin argued that collectivization would free poor peasants from economic servitude under the kulaks. Ten million kulaks and members of their families were deported to Siberia and most of them perished there... -including 4 million children.

Stalin resorted to implementation of the plan by mass murder and wholesale deportation of farmers to Siberia. Millions of unfortunates who remained also died of starvation, and the centuries-old system of farming was destroyed in one of the most fertile regions in the world for farming, once called "the breadbasket of Europe." The immediate effect of forced collectivization was to reduce grain output and almost halve livestock, thus producing major famines in 1932 and 1933.

In 1932-1933, an estimated 11 million people, 7 million in Ukraine alone, died from famine after Stalin forced the peasants into the collectives, (Ukrainians call this famine "Holodomor"). Most modern historians believe that this famine was caused by the sudden disruption of production, brought on by collective farming policies and mass seizure of property. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Collective_farms

Q: What human feelings and instincts did collective farming violate?

A: _____

Q: What were the results of this forced collective farming?

A: _____

Essay: Some people believe that human beings have an unchanging nature. Others believe that human beings can be changed, and that the government has the authority and the power to remake human beings. Explain how these two groups' ideas about morality and government differ, and explain the way these two groups will treat people.