The Soviet Union: What Should Textbooks Emphasize?

Document A: Growth of the Soviet Union (map) Content Notes:
- The total territory of the Soviet Union at its greatest was 8,649,500 square miles, making it by far the largest nation in the world. The modern nation of Russia, which was the biggest part of the Soviet Union, currently covers about 6,600,000 square miles. Russia is now the largest nation on Earth and easily outdistances other countries closest on the list, including Canada (2nd; 3,855,100 square miles) and the United States (3rd; 3,717,813 square miles).
- The projection of the map in Document A removes much of the distortion one gets in the more common Mercator projections.
- Soviet control over its satellites in Eastern Europe was largely formalized in 1955 by a treaty known as the Warsaw Pact, which was signed mainly as a response to the formation of NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) in 1949. NATO bound the United States and Western European nations in a security alliance, primarily to guard against a possible attack from the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union formed the Warsaw Pact after West Germany joined NATO. Besides the Soviet Union, the members of the Warsaw Pact were Poland, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, and Albania. The Warsaw Pact disbanded when the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991.

Document B: Soviet Society and Economy by the Numbers Content Notes:
- During the first two decades of the Soviet Union, one of the main goals of the Communist Party was rapid industrialization. To improve the military, Stalin placed an emphasis on heavy industry, such as steel, coal, and tool production. Industry in the Soviet Union increased dramatically in a short amount of time. For example, steel production between 1929 and 1937 increased from 4 to 17 million tons. Also, new industries were started, including the automobile industry.
- The Soviet Union suffered more deaths during World War II than any other nation has ever suffered in a war. Approximately half of the Soviets killed during the war were civilians, who died due to famine, oppression in German forced labor camps, and direct violence from battles and indiscriminate brutality.
- The consumption of alcohol, particularly vodka, was a central part of Soviet life. During the 1980s it was estimated that alcohol-related problems cost over $8 billion in productivity. There had been some efforts to curb drinking, but the most successful ones were applied by the last Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, who placed strict curbs on the sale and production of alcohol. Alcoholism has remained a major problem in Russia since the breakup of the Soviet Union.

Document C: The Great Terror Content Notes:
- Roy Medvedev was born in Tbilisi, Georgia (USSR) in 1925. His father was a professor who was arrested by the Stalin regime in 1938 and who died in a labor camp in 1941. He became one of the leading dissident historians in the former Soviet Union and is especially known for his 1969 book on Stalinism, Let History Judge. He was expelled from the Communist Party, but remained committed to many of the original communist goals and later served as a politician and adviser to the reforming Soviet premier Mikhail Gorbachev.
- In 1934, the Soviet government established a system of labor camps called the Gulag. Political prisoners and rich farmers called Kulaks were often sent to Gulag camps, where they were forced to do hard labor in horrible working conditions. Stalin hated the Kulaks because they supported private property and opposed collectivization. The exact total of Gulag deaths is not known, but some experts estimate that at least two million people died in these camps by the end of World War II.
- During the Great Terror, Stalin conducted a series of purges. A purge involved the arrest of a massive number of people who supposedly were a threat to the communist system. In reality, people could be arrested for no reason whatsoever. Indeed, sincere loyalty to the Communist Party and Stalin proved to be no protection against a purge. Members of the Communist Party, including many high officials in Stalin's administration, were often arrested in droves. A person who was arrested faced harsh interrogation and then was either executed or sent to a labor camp.
**Document D: Soviet Elections (cartoon and chart) Content Notes:**

- The goal of the Communist Party in the Soviet Union was to eventually establish a society that was somewhat democratic. In this ideal society, all citizens would be involved part-time in running the government. In reality, though, the communists set up a totalitarian system that was the opposite of this ideal. With totalitarianism, the state, under the control of a dictator, regulated all aspects of society, including all media, education, employment, and health care. Also, the government expected artists and writers to create propaganda that supported the system.
- In the Soviet Union, the top policy-making body of the Communist Party was called the Politburo. Lenin established the Politburo in 1919 and firmly con- trolled this group until his death. When Stalin rose to power, he replaced many Politburo members with handpicked associates to establish his own control of the body.
- There were only eight national leaders during the almost seventy-year history of the Soviet Union. Vladimir Lenin was the first, serving from 1922-24. Joseph Stalin's enormously influential reign lasted from 1924-1953. Georgy Malenkov followed Stalin (1953-55) and then Nikita Khrushchev led the USSR during the height of Cold War tension with the United States from 1955-64. Leonid Brezhnev then had another long tenure from 1964-82 and he was followed by Yuri Andropov (1982-84), Konstantin Chernenko (1984-85), and finally Mikhail Gorbachev (1985-1991). All but Khrushchev, Malenkov, and Gorbachev died in office. During the same period, the United States had 13 presidents.

**Document E: Soviet Military Strength (graphic) Content Notes:**

- Americans frequently mentioned the "missile gap" during the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. The term referred to the real or perceived degree by which the US trailed the USSR in nuclear weaponry. This was a broadly accepted notion from about the late 1950s onwards and it gained particular prominence from its use by Senator John F. Kennedy during his successful campaign for the presidency in 1960. Some historians now argue that the missile gap did not actually exist or that it was wildly and knowingly exaggerated, especially in the 1960s.
- The Soviet focus on military strength was a significant concern among millions of American citizens throughout the Cold War, and this was reflected in much of the popular culture. Among the notable examples of this are the 1964 movie, Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb, and the 1983 song "Russians' by Sting.
- One megaton is equivalent to one million metric tons of TNT. The combined 10,000+ megaton force of the Americans and Soviets in 1980 noted on the chart was approximately equal to one million times the power of the "Little Boy" atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima, Japan by the United States in August, 1945.

**Document F: The Space Race (poster and chart) Content Notes:**

- The launch of Sputnik was one event in the broader competition between the USSR and US to develop nuclear technology. When the Soviets launched Sputnik it was a surprise because before that, the Soviets always seemed to be reacting to American developments rather than innovating themselves.
- The surprise launch of the Sputnik space satellite by the Soviet Union sent shock waves throughout American society. It led millions to fear that the Soviets had "taken the lead" from the United States and that they would be able to attach missiles to satellites and gain a military edge over the US. Within four months, the US had successfully launched its own satellite into space.
- Yuri Gagarin, only five feet two inches tall (which helped him fit into a tight space capsule), was the overwhelming choice to serve as the pilot for history's first man-in-space mission. He made his successful flight on April 12, 1961. Less than a month later, Alan Shepard became the first American in space.
- Valentina Tereshkova was born on March 6, 1937, in central Russia. Tereshkova became the first woman in space on June 16, 1963. It would be another 19 years until another woman made such a mission and another year after that until an American woman, Sally Ride, would travel in space.
- Since 1993, the US and the Soviet Union have partnered in several space exploration projects. Soviet Union Mini-Q.
Document G: Olympic Success (photos and graph) Content Notes:

- The Soviet Union took great pride in its successful Olympic teams. The USSR did not begin competing in the Olympic games until 1952, but it was the leader in overall medals and gold medals from 1952-1988. Soviet athletes were often selected at very young ages and groomed for Olympic glory at respected training facilities. Although it was inconsistent with expressed communist ideology, elite Soviet athletes received pay and perks not available to the common Soviet citizen.
- The Soviet athletes featured on the magazine covers are weight lifter Vasily Alexyev and gymnast Olga Korbut. Alexyev won gold medals at the 1972 Summer Olympics in Munich, Germany and the 1976 Olympics in Montreal. He also reigned as the world weight lifting champion every year from 1970-77. The six foot one inch, 350-pound Alexyev was enormously famous and beloved in the USSR not only for his lifting, but for his gruff, charismatic personality. Injury forced his retirement in 1980 and he continues to live in Russia.
- Olga Korbut won the gold medal in gymnastics at the 1972 Olympics in Munich. During that year, she became the first woman to successfully perform a backwards somersault on a balance beam during competition. Her more acrobatic style greatly influenced the sport.

Document H: Excellence in Ballet (photo) Content Notes:

- Bolshoi is the Russian word for "grand." The Bolshoi company was first formed in 1776 and soon became recognized for its excellent productions of plays, opera, and dance. In 1877 Russian composer Pyotr Tchaikovsky's 'Swan Lake' debuted at the Bolshoi Theater, which was built in 1825. The cultural prestige of Russian dance increased after Stalin's reign, as companies of the Bolshoi toured internationally. In 1974, Mikhail Baryshnikov—who was among the Bolshoi's top male ballet dancers, choreographers, and dancers—defected while on a tour of Canada in order to escape the stifling lack of opportunity and freedom in the Soviet Union. He later became the artistic director of the American Ballet Theater in New York and enjoyed a successful acting career in the United States.
- The prestigious Kirov Ballet Company is actually named the Mariinsky Ballet, but it is typically known internationally by its Soviet-era name of Kirov. It was founded in the mid-18th century in the Russian city of St. Petersburg, which was called Leningrad through most of the Soviet Union's existence. The name Kirov comes from the Russian revolutionary leader Sergey Kirov, who was assassinated by Stalin loyalists in 1934 for criticism of Stalin.
- Jennifer Homans, the author of the 2010 book Apollo's Angels on the history of ballet, is the dance critic for The New Republic. Before becoming a writer, Homans was a trained dancer in ballet and other techniques. She has a Ph.D. in modern European History from New York University, where she also works as a professor of the history of dance.