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Schooling on the East-West Divide: Educational Weaponization
During the Final Phase of the Cold War

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Honors Thesis, Political Science Department, Macalester College
Advised by Professor Lesley Lavery
April 26, 2022

“There’s no such thing as neutral education. Education either functions as an instrument to bring about conformity or freedom.” (Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 1968).

Abstract

During the Cold War, the United States and Soviet Russia focused on spreading their distinctive ideologies across the globe, and in doing so, came in direct competition with one another. In this study, I employ content analysis of two major U.S. and Soviet education reports and reforms from 1983 to 1991, namely *A Nation at Risk* and *Fundamental Directions of General and Vocational School Reform*, to explore and illustrate how the two states wielded their youth as weapons in a battle for ideological supremacy. My findings add nuance to the conversation surrounding education as a method of state control.

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Acknowledgments

I owe so much to my advisor, Professor Lesley Lavery, who has offered me support, guidance, care, and insight throughout this long and challenging process. Thank you for standing by me and helping me see this project through. I am also grateful for Professor Ruthanne Kurth-Schai, who taught me educational philosophy and inspired my interest in the values and principles behind systems of schooling. I also want to express gratitude to Professor Paul Dosh for serving on my defense panel, asking all the tough questions, and encouraging my research. Thank you to the entire honors cohort—Cande, Rock, and Lucien—for always offering space to laugh and commiserate. Thank you also to my friend, Phia Holland, who convinced me to submit a thesis proposal the night before it was due. Without your encouragement, I would not have done this project. And finally, thank you to my roommate, Abby Young, for helping me practice my thesis presentation and always showing up to support me. I have so much gratitude for you all and feel so lucky to have you as my mentors, classmates, and friends.

Introduction

Nineteen eighty-three was a tumultuous year for the United States and Soviet Russia, marking a turning point in both their domestic affairs and international relations. In April, the National Commission on Excellence in Education (NCEE) published a report titled *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*, which painted a grim picture of American schooling and warned that the fabric of American democracy and security could unravel without major and immediate changes to the education system. The commission cited evidence from low graduation rates and test scores to illiteracy and poor international standing (The National Commission on Excellence in Education 1983, 11). While the United States was seemingly facing a crisis of education, Soviet Russia was struggling with major economic decline and insecurity in leadership. In the span of three years, from 1982 to 1985, Soviet Russia underwent three leadership changes, from Brezhnev to Andropov to Chernenko to Gorbachev. The various General Secretaries attempted to tackle the largest threats to the health of the union during their terms—environmental pollution, a declining economy, worsening health and alcoholism, and housing and food shortages (Hoffmann, 1984, 237). By the time Gorbachev rose to power in 1985, he saw the only path forward as one of extensive governmental change, implementing the fundamental reforms known as *glasnost* (openness) and *perestroika* (reconstruction).

While the two states were facing major internal hardship, the Cold War added another dimension to the struggle. In March of 1983, former President Reagan made a famous speech at a convention for the National Association of Evangelicals where he denounced the Soviet Union as an “evil empire” and described the conflict between the

two states as a struggle “between right and wrong, good and evil” (Reagan, 1983). His aggressive stance toward the Soviet Union renewed tensions that had lessened during the period of détente in the 1970s, leading to increased paranoia among Soviet leaders surrounding an imminent nuclear attack. In November of 1983, tensions reached what some historians deem “the most dangerous moment in the history of the Cold War,” when the Soviets suspected that the United States was plotting to launch a nuclear attack (Shane 2003). The incident occurred when the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) conducted its annual war game, Able Archer, which was a simulation of nuclear conflict between the East and the West. The Soviets believed that NATO was planning to initiate nuclear war under the guise of a war exercise, and in response to this intelligence, almost launched a preemptive strike against the United States. Nuclear war was narrowly avoided, but Able Archer marked the beginning of the final era of the two states’ bitter fight for global control. Due to heightened tension and competition during this period, I examine schooling as a front in the Cold War, specifically asking the question: Did the U.S. and Soviet Russia weaponize their education systems in an effort to win the Cold War? If so, how did this weaponization manifest? In the next section, I review the literature on civil defense and ideology as educational tools of war during the 1950s and 1960s. Then, I introduce my methodology, present my analysis, and draw conclusions to inform future research.

Chapter 1: Analytical Approach

The Cold War was not fought through direct combat between the United States and Soviet Russia, but rather, it became a war of ideas waged through espionage, technological innovation, media, economic aid, proxy wars, military coalitions, arms buildups, and of course, education (“The Cold War | JFK Library”, 2021). From reform initiatives such as *A Nation at Risk* and *perestroika* to potential nuclear conflicts like Able Archer, the 1980s represented a new phase of the Cold War that lasted until the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. This period is particularly interesting due to the lack of critical scholarship on educational policies and practices as tools of competition, especially in comparison to the attention paid to the subject during the space race in the 1950s and 1960s. However, looking back on this earlier time period can provide integral context for understanding the actions and intentions of the two states as they implemented later education reforms. In this section, I review the literature on the multiple fronts of the Cold War, education as a battlefield, and methods of educational weaponization, which motivates my hypotheses on later trends in Cold War education as a tool of war.

The Educational Front

In his article, “Korea and the Cold War,” Steve Estes argues that the United States and Soviet Russia fought the Cold War using espionage in “developed” countries and proxy wars in “developing” countries. The Korean War in the 1950s was the first of these proxy wars, where the United States joined capitalist South Korea in a war against

communist North Korea in an effort to stop the spread of communism through Asia. Kristie Macrakis adds another dimension to Estes' argument in her article, "Technophilic Hubris and Espionage Styles During the Cold War." Macrakis analyzes the combination of technology and espionage as a weapon of war, arguing that, while the United States won the Cold War, the East Bloc won the spy wars. The East Bloc's use of human spies proved to be advantageous, whereas the United States relied too heavily on technical means to learn about the communist state (Macrakis, 2010, 378). Because of their superior strategy, Soviet spies were able to infiltrate every level of American society with ease, including the CIA, science and technology sector, and the FBI. Though the two states made many efforts to win the Cold War through these battles for intelligence and military control, the educational battle had one of the largest direct impacts on the American and Soviet populations. Through educational reforms such as the Soviet *Fundamental Directions of General and Vocational School Reform* and the American Reform Waves 1 and 2 that followed *A Nation at Risk*, the United States and Soviet Russia weaponized their own people to bolster their economies, support their war policies, and diligently prevent outside attacks.

In the context of the Cold War, where ideology was at the forefront of the conflict, it was essential for the United States and Soviet Russia to foster national unity through education. However, this is not unique to the Cold War example, as it is common for nations to weaponize education to compete with each other. Such was the case in China at the end of their civil war in 1949. In his article "Education as a Tool of Power: An Analysis of the Schools of Red China Today," Del Weber examines how education was used by China's communist regime following the Chinese Civil War. Weber argues

that the Communist Party exerted control largely through the ministry of education, which held conferences with educators, published policy directives, implemented unified assignments and assessments, and provided the majority of school funding. In explaining why the Communist Party of China focused so heavily on education, Weber quotes Lu-Ting Yi, head of the Agitation and Propaganda Department of the Central Communist Party: “What people require education for is to wage the class struggle and the struggle for production. We believe there are only two kinds of knowledge in the world. One kind is the knowledge of the class struggle...the other kind of knowledge is the knowledge of the struggle for production...and philosophy is the summing up and generalization of the two kinds of knowledge” (Weber, 1960, 390). Yi describes the direct connection between education and politics and argues that they are inextricably linked. Weber also references Mao Zedong, the former President of the People’s Republic of China, who outlined a plan for combining education and labor to dissolve the class distinction between those who work and those who learn. Using these various tactics, leaders of the Communist Party of China utilized education as a tool for unifying and mobilizing the republic behind a common political cause. In this sense, education during wartime is a source of ammunition, and becomes integral to maintaining state control.

Clifford W. Patton expands further on Weber’s assertions in “Civilian Wartime Education in the Schools and Colleges,” focusing on American education during the final years of World War II. Patton argues that the content taught in schools is passed on to adults and helps shape the thoughts, feelings, and actions of entire communities. Because education is such an influential component of daily life, it is utilized in wartime to create a patriotic citizen with the ability to “acquire new economic concepts; to rethink his

individual relationship to democracy; to redefine his concepts of freedom; to understand new problems and new issues which develop as a result of conflict” (Patton, 1945, 285-286). While there are other avenues for fighting wars—such as the military and economy—these are not independent of the educational front. Instead, Patton argues that “schools must chart the course of battle, and then help fight it” (Patton, 1945, 286). The education system guides students down a carefully prepared path, aiding the war effort and ensuring an economically prosperous future.

Civil Defense

One of the key ways the United States and Soviet Russia utilized education as a weapon of war in an earlier era was through civil defense programs. In her article, “‘A Is for Atom, B Is for Bomb’: Civil Defense in American Public Education, 1948-1963,” JoAnne Brown argues that educators taught violent and mature civil defense concepts to children by “domesticating the bomb,” essentially framing atomic war as an ordinary fact of life and assimilating this idea into childrens’ daily routines. This domestication has deeply impacted the psyche of America’s baby boomer generation, teaching youth to “equate emotional maturity with an attitude of calm acceptance toward nuclear war,” which effectively replaced normal human responses to mass death, such as fear and horror, with tranquil patriotism (Brown, 1988, 90). Though Brown details the psychological impact of civil defense education on children, she stops short of naming the intent behind these programs.

Guy Oakes and Andrew Grossman take Brown’s assertion a step further in their study of American civil defense during the early years of the Cold War, “Managing

Nuclear Terror: The Genesis of American Civil Defense Strategy.” They argue that civil defense was a government effort to control the public’s response to nuclear war. Oakes and Grossman describe the civil defense establishment’s strategy for replacing the normal human response to nuclear war with inhuman behavior that benefits the state’s war effort. A panicked and terrified public was of no use to the government, so civil defense planners implemented programs that “required the American public to exhibit credible expressions of determination to fight a nuclear war,” which “included the design of a system of emotion management that would suppress an uncontrollable and dangerous terror of atomic weapons and foster in its stead a more benign and pliable nuclear fear,” (Oakes & Grossman, 1992, 361). The intent behind emotion management strategies was to create common consensus surrounding America’s role in the Cold War. The American government knew that a lack of broad domestic support for their national security strategy—which assured public safety through nuclear deterrence—meant their plan would be undermined and they would be less effective in containing a Soviet threat. Therefore, the true objective of civil defense programs was not to protect the American people, but rather to legitimize the American Cold War strategy of nuclear deterrence.

Similarly to the United States, one of the main intents behind Soviet civil defense was to maintain high public morale. In her article, “Seven Warning Signals: A Review of Soviet Civil Defense,” Joanne Gailer agrees with Soviet strategist Vasily Sokolovsky, that nuclear warfare could easily lead the general public to extreme panic. Gailer argues that, to counteract this undesirable reaction, the Kremlin implemented two strategies: “(1) they have created a service within the militia with the explicit purpose of preserving order and morale and (2) they continue to instill patriotism into the population and also the

readiness to bear hardships” (Gailer, 1969, 22). These strategies were achieved through civil defense education, which the Soviets presented as an honorable way to become a more upstanding citizen. To reinforce the importance of civil defense to children, the Soviets emphasized what the children had learned at school in other areas of their lives. For example, “in summer camps...pennants, citations, and buttons are awarded for excellence in drills and exercises,” and “there is occasional television coverage of the exercises so that the children can have the treat of seeing themselves on TV” (Gailer, 1969, 22). This portrayal of civil defense in Soviet society affirms what The Center for Defense Information, a non-profit organization based in Washington D.C., argued was the main intent behind the program. The organization asserts that Soviet civil defense was not intended to deter and protect against nuclear war, but acted “to instill and maintain garrison-state mentality and the belief that the leaders are protecting their people” (Geist, 2019, 226). While there was an absence of professional consensus around the effectiveness of civil defense, it was clear that both the United States and Soviet Russia used civil defense as an emotion management strategy and benefited from the results of the program.

Political Ideology

The second crucial way the United States and Soviet Russia weaponized education for an advantage in the Cold War was through mandated ideological curricula. In his article, “Literature in the Soviet School as an Everyday Ideology,” Evgeny Ponomarev expands on scholars’ descriptions of civil defense indoctrination by detailing another form of state control in schools—the study of ideology through literature.

Ponomarev argues that literature was the “principal ideological subject in Soviet schools,” and constituted the main avenue for the political indoctrination of schoolchildren (Ponomarev, 2018, 105). The Soviets implemented literature as an academic discipline in the mid-1930s, and an increasing emphasis on this area of study coincided with a shift in Soviet ideology from Lenin’s international revolutionary project to Stalin’s national patriotism project.

Literature was chosen as the principal ideological subject because of its unique ability to shape students’ views of the world. During lessons, students were often asked what decisions they would make if they were certain characters, effectively situating book characters within students’ moral landscapes and framing them as friends, enemies, and heroes. This restructuring of reality is a concept Ponomarev refers to as naïve realism, which allows the state to assert its agenda through literary study. Ponomarev argues that Soviet schools saw the literary process as a “weapon of social struggle and the revolutionary cause,” and by studying Russian literature, students were able to understand the history of revolutionary ideas and then enter into the revolutionary struggle themselves (Ponomarev, 2018, 108). By 1950, literary study had shifted away from reading books altogether, and instead, educators taught excerpts of texts included in textbooks and anthologies. They were expected to teach these literary excerpts with an animated performance, igniting a revolutionary spark in their students. Literature became more about emotional manipulation and less about intellectual development.

Similarly, U.S. educational efforts attempted to engage ideology for political gain. Following the *Sputnik* launch in 1957, the U.S. was faced with an educational crisis. While the government scrambled to improve math and science education and innovation,

policymakers acknowledged the importance of implementing anti-communist material in the curriculum. McCarthyism of the early 1950s had effectively eradicated the American communist movement, and even slightly left-leaning educators had altered their pedagogical approaches to avoid losing their jobs. The result was an educational shift to the right, though conservatives and liberals alike were responsible for the assault on leftist educators. Hartman (2008) argues that “the red scare assault on the Teachers Union symbolized a broad, anti-civil liberties consensus that spanned the political spectrum” (Hartman, 2008, 74). This attack on left-leaning pedagogy led to a severe lack of ideological education in American social studies classrooms.

Educators shied away from speaking about communism altogether for fear of scrutiny and punishment. But following *Sputnik*, American educational institutions recognized a needed shift in educational strategy. By 1961, the American Legion partnered with the National Education Association and the American Bar Association to promote courses comparing Soviet and American political systems. Textbook companies jumped at the chance to capitalize on a new market for anti-communist textbooks, and Florida’s legislature mandated “Americanism versus Communism” (AVC) classes with “a simplistic, binary approach, and little pretense of objectivity” (Scribner, 2012, 352). Following Florida’s lead, five states implemented policies similar to AVC and thirty-four other states mandated anti-communism education in social studies classes. Scribner quotes various writers’ observations of these classes, noting that they found the classes to present communism as “an intellectual, political, and moral challenge, so that students might lose their complacency and become intellectually aroused, so that the answers they reach will become and remain meaningful to them” (Scribner, 2012, 357). Though this

ideological education attempted to engage students in discussion surrounding political values, many students remained either uninterested or unconvinced by the curriculum. Scribner notes that “students writing about their experiences in Florida's AVC classes overwhelmingly dismissed them as propagandistic,” and the educational emphasis on critical thinking and pluralism undermined the effectiveness of these curricular efforts (Scribner, 2012, 360). While many scholars, including Scribner, Hartman, and Goodman, have deemed these anti-communist educational policies as failures based on their lack of success in appealing to students’ reason, they have still had a considerable impact on the general American consensus surrounding political ideology. Similarly to Soviet ideological education, the American curriculum appealed to the students’ emotions, leaving them with a visceral disapproval of the Soviet Union, but an inability to articulate why. In this sense, AVC and other ideological education succeeded in creating a general opposition to the Soviet way of life.

Though various scholars have analyzed the importance of education as a tool for implementing state values and ideology, they have not explicitly stated that education was wielded as an instrument of war. Additionally, there is a lack of research surrounding politicians’ articulation of this strategy, particularly during the final phase of the Cold War, from 1983 to 1991. Education was clearly weaponized by both states to win the Cold War, but in what ways was ideology transmitted? And how did educational methods shift during this later period of education reform? In this study, I will analyze prominent reports and policies from this era to gauge the way the U.S. and Soviet Russia used education as a war tactic. Through analysis of these key texts, I shed light on education as

a war strategy, illuminating the process through which American and Soviet youth became pawns in a battle of ideology.

Hypotheses & Methodology

Based on the literature, it is clear that the United States and Soviet Russia implemented similar educational tactics to mobilize their schooling systems as weapons of state control. However, the United States began with civil defense in the 1950s and taught very little about communism in schools. The shift to explicit ideological curriculum did not occur until the 1960s. In contrast, Soviet Russia's education system was founded in the 1920s on a strong ideological curriculum, and once the Cold War began, this educational strategy remained intact with only minor reforms.

Due to the scholarly agreement that the educational tactics of civil defense and ideology were weaponized as methods of state control, I develop three main hypotheses:

1. The United States and Soviet Russia used education as a weapon of war during the final phase of the Cold War, 1983 to 1991.
2. Because popular belief in the efficacy of civil defense had declined in both states by the 1980s, civil defense played a less significant role during this time period. Any remaining civil defense education was implemented as a method of state control and not a method of homeland defense.
3. The utilization of ideology as a weapon of state control adopted stronger emphasis on economic values throughout this time period given the urgent need of both states to demonstrate economic dominance and create a stronger school-to-labor force pipeline.

To test these hypotheses, I employ content analysis of two key documents, the American report *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*, and the Soviet policy *Fundamental Directions of General and Vocational School Reform*. I identify key themes from the documents by searching for the inclusion of specific categories: expression of the author's intentions, connection between state educational agendas and other societal sectors, international references and comparisons, and mention of political ideology and educational theory. Rather than impose strict guidelines for my analysis, I allow patterns and themes to emerge within these broader categories. After identifying the main themes for each document, I explore how the rhetorical strategies in key passages point to the weaponization of education to help fight the Cold War.

Given that rhetorical analysis requires the evaluation of specific vocabulary, the English-Russian language barrier is a limitation of this study. The Soviet policy document was originally written in Russian and translated into English, making the interpretation of tone and connotation even more subjective. Additionally, the number of case studies is limited by time constraints for this research project, making it more difficult to paint a picture of the larger time period from 1983 to 1991. I chose the documents in this study for their prominence and impact in the educational sphere, but including more policy documents as well as political speeches would certainly make this project more comprehensive. Despite these limitations, my analysis of *A Nation at Risk* and *Fundamental Directions of General Education and Vocational School Reform* is thorough and detailed, and when placed into context, speaks to the larger educational direction of the time period.

Chapter 2: A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform

My analysis begins with the 1983 publication of *A Nation at Risk* due to its formative influence on the way policymakers and the American public viewed schooling in the 1980s and beyond. The report warned of the erosion of the educational foundations of American society due to a “rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people” (The National Commission on Excellence in Education 1983, 9). Though Soviet Russia was never explicitly mentioned, several themes present throughout the report allude to the Cold War context, and more generally, highlight the motivation behind the report’s alarming message. The main themes include inflammatory war terminology, international comparison, ideological justification, and economic incentive.

The report notoriously opens with a war analogy: “If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war” (The National Commission on Excellence in Education 1983, 9). Though this is the only place that war is explicitly mentioned in the document, the conflation of educational setbacks with danger is an alarmist strategy that functions to unify the public behind essentialist educational policies that prioritize basic skills and assessments and shift away from more progressive models of education (Kaestle and Smith 1982, 392). Rather than addressing educational obstacles from an objective, rational standpoint, state actors employ inflammatory language to describe a threatening aggressor, or in this case, a hypothetical one, which creates public fear. Similar to the civil defense strategy utilized in earlier years, fear is only useful to the state if it can be constructively managed. In the 1950s and 1960s, public mayhem

surrounding the possibility of nuclear holocaust was channeled into a pliable nuclear fear by domesticating the bomb through civil defense programs. In the 1980s, fear was intentionally manufactured in *A Nation at Risk* to more effectively manipulate the public into supporting an agenda of federal educational reforms.

Following the overt weaponization of war terminology in the second paragraph, the National Commission on Excellence in Education (NCEE) more vaguely alludes to danger and solidifies a connection between educational reform and safety. The mention of Sputnik on both pages nine and eleven references a time of greater American educational achievement in the face of a threatening global competitor and is closely followed by a description of the global climate. The NCEE argues for the creation of a “Learning Society” dedicated to a set of values which encourage learning as a means for professional and personal fulfillment. The creation of this society is situated within the context of “a world of ever-accelerating competition and change in the conditions of the workplace, of ever-greater danger, and of ever-larger opportunities for those prepared to meet them” (National Committee on Excellence in Education 1983, 14). The global context suggests that the NCEE is referring to competition with the Soviets and other Cold War actors and is motivated by the economic recession of the time. Furthermore, education is later framed as the cornerstone of industry and military, as the NCEE describes the importance of education as the foundation for “a strong economy, and a secure Nation” (National Committee on Excellence in Education 1983, 16). The NCEE constructs a threatening problem and then prescribes the solution in the form of educational reform, effectively utilizing war terminology to unify the public behind federal intervention in education.

The second theme the NCEE emphasizes is international comparison. The committee outlines six key tasks of the report in the introduction, the second of which is to compare American education with schooling in other “advanced nations” (National Committee on Excellence in Education 1983, 7). The committee goes on to explain this choice when highlighting the risk facing American schools, describing how the United States is situated within a highly competitive and developed world. Americans use products and ideas to compete within this global context for international ranking and markets, but although our dominant position may have once been secure, “it is no longer” (National Committee on Excellence in Education 1983, 10). The identification of this risk is justified using statistical indicators that point to American education as a failing institution, specifically when measured against other industrialized nations. The committee describes declining student achievement, specifically reporting that “on 19 academic tests American students were never first or second and, in comparison with other industrialized nations, were last seven times” (National Committee on Excellence in Education 1983, 11). Their prioritization of international ranking functions to not only instill fear of failure and inspire support for federal educational reforms, but these comparisons encourage the American public to view other nations as competitors rather than collaborators. This outlook on other nations shapes the American conception of education, framing learning in terms of achievement and competition instead of growth and fulfillment.

Another section of *A Nation at Risk* outlines the committee's findings regarding expectations. The committee identifies ten deficiencies of American schools, noting structural elements such as grading, diploma requirements, college selectivity,

educational expenditures, and more. In terms of class requirements, the NCEE begins by describing the situation in other industrialized nations, specifically reporting that “courses in mathematics, biology, chemistry, physics, and geography start in grade 6 and are required of *all* students,” which amounts to around three times the number of class hours that American students dedicate to STEM subjects (National Committee on Excellence in Education 1983, 18). Furthermore, the NCEE finds that “compared to other nations, American students spend much less time on schoolwork,” solidifying the argument that American youth are out-worked and out-performed (National Committee on Excellence in Education 1983, 19). Therefore, these findings suggest that the government needs to create schooling environments where students can work harder and perform better, which once again, centers competition and achievement in the educational experience.

A notable aspect of the NCEE’s international comparisons is that the committee never directly compares U.S. educational performance to that of Soviet Russia. “Industrialized” and “advanced” nations are mentioned six times, but the qualifications for earning these labels are never explained. Additionally, Japan, South Korea, and Germany are all mentioned by name to reference the superior ability of other advanced nations to make automobiles, steel mills, and machine tools (National Committee on Excellence in Education 1983, 10). England is also directly referenced as an industrialized country with longer school days and school years, demonstrating a superiority in work ethic (National Committee on Excellence in Education 1983, 20). Interestingly, the Cold War context made communist countries the most threatening opposition to American achievement and dominance, but the only countries the NCEE measured U.S. performance against were other capitalist countries. The NCEE even

commissioned a research paper for *A Nation at Risk*—listed in Appendix C of the document as “A Summary Report on the Educational Systems of the United States and the Soviet Union: Comparative Analysis”—but never cited this paper directly to compare the two educational systems. Instead, the committee subtly drew from the paper’s finding that the Soviets possessed a much stronger orientation to the science and technology fields by pushing for increased attention to STEM courses in the United States (Ailes & Rushing 1980, 6). In this way, the Soviet-American comparison became a driving factor in the educational reform without being named as a legitimate American competitor. By assigning capitalist countries vague qualifiers that signify superiority, such as “advanced” and “industrialized,” the NCEE conveys approval for these countries and therefore legitimizes their economic and educational systems. In contrast, omitting communist countries completely from this report—despite high educational performance—is a tactic that delegitimizes their standings as globally competitive, “advanced” nations. Neglecting to include communist countries, such as Russia and China, subtly adds to the American sentiment that capitalism is associated with progress and development, while communism fails to yield educational results.

A comparison of educational attitudes and statistics supports the hypothesis that the omission of communist countries from *A Nation at Risk* is a delegitimizing tactic. To the United States, comparison signals competition, but a lack of comparison does not necessarily mean a lack of competition. For example, the NCEE praises other countries for their strength in areas where American schooling appears to be weak, but stops short of naming communist countries who excel in these areas. The report commends the English education policy that students spend “8 hours a day at school, 220 days per year,”

while describing how little American students attend school (National Committee on Excellence in Education 1983, 20). However, when the NCEE describes America's declining expectations around college standards and selectivity, they fail to mention that Soviet Russia is well-known for its ambitious attitude toward higher education. After Stalin's death in 1953, Soviet policy began to focus on undergraduate enrollment, and "the student body grew overall from 1 ½ million in 1953 to just over 5 million in 1978" (Matthews 1983, 101). As a result, "the USSR claimed to be among the world's leaders in this respect" (Matthews 1983, 101). Additionally, the NCEE cites low literacy rates as one of the main indications of risk, describing how "about 13 percent of all 17-year-olds in the United States can be considered functionally illiterate," and "functional illiteracy among minority youth may run as high as 40 percent" (National Committee on Excellence in Education 1983, 11). Comparatively, low literacy rates became a main focus of the Soviet education project in the early 1920s, after an 1897 census had reported that only about 21 percent of the population was literate (Timofeychev 2018). In 1920, former Premier of the Soviet Union, Vladimir Lenin, established the Extraordinary Commission for the Liquidation of Illiteracy (Cheka Likbez), and by 1930, universal primary education was introduced to the USSR, leading 40 million formerly illiterate people to learn to read and write (Timofeychev 2018). Though Soviet Russia set a global precedent for literacy programs, the NCEE chose to omit their successful education initiative from *A Nation at Risk*, most likely to avoid glorifying Soviet systems and policies. Here, a failure to name Soviet Russia as a competitor is a backhanded assumption of superiority.

The third theme the NCEE stresses is ideological justification. Throughout the report, education is constructed as a key element of American ideology, and educational failures are described as direct threats to the American ideology and way of life. For example, the NCEE cites President Reagan early in the report: “Certainly there are few areas of American life as important to our society, to our people, and to our families as our schools and colleges” (National Commission on Excellence in Education 1983, 9). The inclusion of this quote solidifies education as a core aspect of American culture. American values and ideology are then aligned with the purpose of education to depict America as a righteous society working toward the greater good. The NCEE makes this connection explicitly on the following page, writing, “a high level of shared education is essential to a free, democratic society and to the fostering of a common culture, especially in a country that prides itself on pluralism and individual freedom” (National Commission on Excellence in Education 1983, 10). By making education a requirement of liberal democracy, the broader concept of education is inextricably linked to liberal ideology to legitimize American values in a universal sphere.

To further explain the centrality of education to the American values of pluralism and individual freedom, the NCEE describes how the American public must have common understandings on difficult and complicated issues, and ironically quotes enslaver and founding father Thomas Jefferson: “I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them but to inform their discretion” (National Commission on Excellence in Education 1983, 10-11). The NCEE injects founding American principles

and democratic ideology into their analysis to create a deep association between American education and freedom. Freedom, however, is cleverly constructed as the opportunity for all children “to attain the mature and informed judgment needed to secure gainful employment, and to manage their own lives, thereby serving not only their own interests but also the progress of society itself” (National Commission on Excellence in Education 1983, 11). While freedom and employment are by no means equivalent, the concepts are framed similarly to make labor seem more desirable as the ultimate outcome of schooling. Labor is heavily emphasized in American education to help bolster the economy, which in the early 1980s, was faltering due to the global economic recession. Although there is no explicit connection to the Cold War through ideological rhetoric, economic references interwoven into ideological justification only aided the United States in their competition with other global superpowers.

The final theme, economic incentive, explores the connection between the Americans’ ideological justification and attempts to improve the labor force. The first major connection between education and the economy lies in the section titled “The Public’s Commitment,” where the NCEE reviews survey data to highlight the importance of education to the American people. Additionally, the committee outlines the high demands of the American public in regard to graduation requirements, which set strict expectations for the education system. They find hope for constructive reform in the citizens’ knowledge that “education is one of the chief engines of a society’s material well-being,” explaining that the government has a responsibility to nurture “the Nation’s intellectual capital” (National Commission on Excellence in Education 1983, 16). Here, learning is commodified by assigning economic value to measurable outcomes. Good test

scores are encouraged because they lead to good grades, and good grades are encouraged because they supposedly lead to good employment, but none of these standards necessarily lead to a good and happy life. The NCEE claims that education goes beyond economic incentive and encompasses the “intellectual, moral, and spiritual strengths of our people,” but this idea is not reflected in *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education 1983, 10). Instead, the commission focuses its thirteen indicators of risk on arbitrary educational standards and standardized testing data and does not mention other indicators of risk that explore student morale. Therefore, education is reduced to its economic value, and student welfare falls by the wayside.

Once again, the NCEE does not make a direct connection between education’s economic incentive and the Cold War effort, but it does not need to in order to mobilize the public behind education reform. Americans already felt the threat of impending nuclear war with Soviet Russia, so the NCEE only needed to reference threats to safety, international ranking, American ideology, and material well-being to ignite panic and spark an education reform movement. Times of heightened international conflict clearly require economic stability, but even more pressing is the desire for the United States to exhibit ideological, military, educational, and economic dominance in the international arena. The United States needs high student achievement on standardized tests and a strong school-to-labor force pipeline in order to engage in global struggles like the Cold War, which allow the state to police global ideology, exert military control over other nations, and secure wealth.

A Nation at Risk serves as a warning to Americans that the failure to meet certain educational standards makes the United States less internationally competitive and

therefore, less capable of being a global superpower. In this sense, the report is a prime example of how education is wielded as a weapon of war. We now know that the education reforms that followed *A Nation at Risk* began an era of increased standardized testing and federal intervention in schooling. We can reasonably infer that these policies worked in favor of the state's international agenda and did not offer American students an adequate educational experience.

Chapter 3: The Fundamental Directions of General Education and Vocational School Reform

Shifting focus to the East, Soviet Russia approached educational reform more bluntly. *The Fundamental Directions of General and Vocational School Reform* was a 1985 edict drafted by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) that kickstarted the state's final efforts to save the union through improved schooling. In the document, the Soviets name their ideological and political intentions explicitly. The Soviets aimed to mold citizens through what they viewed as a morally superior ideological framework. Their vision of an idyllic Soviet society is woven throughout the document as the party attempts to return to Vladimir Lenin's conception of schooling as a method for shaping the entire society; ideology, politics, labor, aesthetics, morals, and physicality are portrayed as overlapping concepts that form the general personality development of pupils. The development of individuals follows the Communist arc toward building a utopian collective society. These ideas are communicated by repeatedly defining and explaining the purpose behind Soviet education, conceptualizing education and ideology as inseparable phenomena, and affirming the centrality of labor to schooling and the society.

The CPSU first describes their intention for Soviet education reform as the "raising of work done in the school to a new qualitative level which matches the conditions and the requirements of developed socialist society" (Communist Party of the Soviet Union 1985, 159). This broad statement regarding societal requirements is followed by a specification of the three main areas for improvement: economic

advancement through increased technical training, assimilation and unification through stronger ideological curricula, and the affirmation of socialist values and principles through high academic achievement. These ideas are echoed throughout the reform, beginning with the Party's illustration of Soviet society and development in 1985. The CPSU describes the year as one of "profound transformations in all spheres of human life—in material production, social relations, and spiritual [and intellectual] culture" (Communist Party of the Soviet Union 1985, 158). Education is framed as a way of providing youth with "in-depth and sound knowledge of the scientific basics, to elicit the habits and ability necessary to put that knowledge to practical use, and to shape a materialistic world view (Communist Party of the Soviet Union 1985, 167). The Party depicts Soviet society as forward-thinking and developed, demanding a system of schooling that matches its peoples' commitment to rigor and high ideals. Economic, social, spiritual, and intellectual realms are explored as the necessary vehicles through which society can fully realize socialist ideology in the form of Communism. Therefore, the purpose of education lies in its usefulness for developing socialist ideology to improve the material and spiritual lives of Soviet citizens.

Furthermore, the CPSU clarifies these goals by attaching to them tangible measurements. For example, to bolster the Soviet economy, each citizen requires "an up-to-the-minute education; a high degree of intellectual and physical development; in-depth knowledge of the scientific, technological, and economic bases of production; and a conscientious and creative attitude toward work" (Communist Party of the Soviet Union 1985, 161). These are not necessary objectives for pursuing spiritual and intellectual growth, nor are they prerequisites to finding personal fulfillment through learning; the

CPSU outlines these reform goals to describe the ideal Soviet citizen. Such a citizen works in service of the state by concerning themselves with political economics to thoroughly understand state ideology. They demonstrate dedication to socialist ideals and contribute to society through labor or creative innovation to demonstrate “socialism’s historic advantage over capitalism” (Communist Party of the Soviet Union 1985, 160). The enumeration of these reform goals is explicit rhetorical evidence that highlights how education was used as a weapon of the state.

While there are aspects of *Fundamental Directions* that indicate education’s use as an instrument of war, there are also aspects that show an effort to improve the quality of schooling for Soviet students. One of the reforms is to extend elementary school from four years to five, attempting to “give the children a more thorough instruction in reading, writing, number skills, and elementary work habits, and to reduce the pupil workload while simultaneously facilitating the subsequent assimilation of basic knowledge” (Communist Party of the Soviet Union 1985, 164). Giving students more time to delve deeply into class content indicates a move away from the total optimization of youth labor. The CPSU also introduces the implementation of elective courses where students in grades eight through eleven have the opportunity to “pursue the in-depth study of individual subjects of their own choice, in the fields of physics and mathematics, chemistry and biology, and social studies and the humanities,” allowing space for students to explore their academic interests (Communist Party of the Soviet Union 1985, 165). Lastly, the Party outlines ways to improve conditions for native-language study in Soviet states, showing a new intention to protect Indigenous cultures and promote pluralism. While none of these initiatives explicitly aim to improve Soviet Russia’s

economic standing or make the state more competitive with capitalist countries, they do increase human capital and allow the Soviets to claim a moral high ground in comparison to other states. Therefore, these reform initiatives do not overtly point to education as a weapon of war, but subtly work to improve the Soviets' international position. Providing these opportunities for course flexibility, intellectual exploration, and native-language study demonstrates an effort to nurture student development while also adding to the state's educational artillery by building human capital.

Overall, there are many places in the text that describe the intent behind Soviet education. A common theme is intellectual improvement as a means of contributing more effectively to the socialist state. Individual intellectual advancement is framed in terms of the collective, demonstrating what can be achieved when personal accomplishments are channeled for societal improvement. It is unclear whether the Soviets truly valued the personal development of their students, or whether all attempts at holistic reforms had an ulterior motive. Although they claimed complete faithfulness to socialist ideology and Lenin's vision, various factors contributed to divergence from this agenda. That is, despite these details, Soviet Russia's poor economy clearly drives many of *Fundamental Directions*' reform initiatives, pointing to the use of education as a means of survival and international competition.

In addition to stating educational intentions, the CPSU is careful to conceptualize education and ideology as inseparable phenomena. In the first line of the reform, the CPSU describes their drive "toward the systematic and comprehensive optimization of developed socialism," and goes on to explain the teacher's role as that "of carrying forward the cause of the Great October [Revolution]" (Communist Party of the Soviet

Union 1985, 158). The CPSU creates a parallel between the desires of the Party and the teacher to establish the centrality of ideology to Soviet education and the entire society. The Party goes on to outline Soviet educational achievements in the first section of the document—titled “The school under the conditions generated by the optimization of developed socialism”—and credits socialism with society’s advancement towards these goals. Among the Soviet educational system’s accolades are “unprecedentedly extensive opportunities to acquire knowledge, to assimilate all of the wealth of spiritual [and intellectual] culture, and to manifest their [working people’s] talents and gifts” (Communist Party of the Soviet Union 1985, 159). The Soviets make societal and educational advancement synonymous with socialism to legitimize their agenda as a morally upright cause.

Education is further ideologized through the idolization of political actors in *Fundamental Directions*. Vladimir Lenin’s ideas are referenced a total of ten times in the document, usually to describe the driving motivations behind specific reform goals. The CPSU names Lenin as “the source of the Soviet system of public education,” and assigns the Soviet government the task of fulfilling his vision of a “unified, labor-based, polytechnical school” (Communist Party of the Soviet Union 1985, 159). The conceptualization and depiction of Lenin as a political and cultural deity legitimizes his vision of a fully realized communist state, which further legitimizes reform efforts that claim to advance Soviet society towards its ultimate goal. Therefore, Lenin’s inclusion in policy documents is used to garner widespread support from the Soviet people. This is even more evident later in the document, when the CPSU describes new efforts to enhance the upbringing of Soviet youth, citing Lenin’s assertion that “the entire

undertaking of the upbringing, education, and studies of contemporary youth must nurture in them a communist morality” (Communist Party of the Soviet Union 1985, 171-172). Though Lenin was long dead, his lasting presence in Soviet culture and politics mirrors that of the American founding fathers and works to create inseparable ties between ideology and education.

Another main avenue the CPSU uses to cement ideology in Soviet education is the construction of a threatening aggressor. In an attempt to reinforce public support for socialism, the CPSU warns of the threats facing a lackluster Soviet society. The Party begins by openly acknowledging the Cold War context, warning that “as the international situation grows increasingly grim, it becomes necessary to heighten our vigilance against the stratagems of imperialism’s aggressive forces, for which anything goes when it comes to assaulting socialism and which bank on the political inexperience of youth” (Communist Party of the Soviet Union 1985, 162). Their description of the problem focuses on opposing ideologies and militaries, while their self-identified weakness is poor political education. Therefore, the Party is able to create an ‘us versus them’ mentality to unite Soviet citizens behind education reform that centers political ideology. The CPSU goes on to prescribe a detailed solution, where humanities and social studies classes teach “the routes of revolutionary global renewal, the fundamental principles and historical advantages of socialism, and the reactionary, antipopular essence of capitalism” (Communist Party of the Soviet Union 1985, 170). Here, opposing ideologies are once again mentioned by name to create a clear moral divide between Soviet society and western societies, and to reinforce the protection of socialism using ideology centered education reform.

While the Soviets' insist on implementing a dominant political ideology in the classroom, their conception of ideological curricula limits the personality development they claim to value. In the third section of the document, titled "Enhancing the quality of the teaching and upbringing process," the CPSU outlines reform initiatives that focus on youth development. The Party argues for the importance of social studies and natural science curricula that "elicit in pupils steadfast materialist perceptions, atheist views, and the ability to explain natural and social phenomena correctly, in accordance with the principles of our world view" (Communist Party of the Soviet Union 1985, 170). The idea that a person's worldview—which is naturally subjective—can be incorrect because it does not align with the state's agenda is counterintuitive to the Party's commitment to personality development, as this approach limits youth agency and critical thinking skills. Personality development is therefore defined and restricted by the state, and the binary of right and wrong is projected onto youth through academic content. Therefore, *Fundamental Directions* pressures teachers and students to comply with the Soviet ideological agenda, serving the state's efforts to create a unified socialist society and an international socialist revolution.

Through these various methods—namely crediting socialism with societal advancement, idolizing political figures, constructing a threatening aggressor, applying educational theory, and forcing personality development that aligns with state ideology—the Soviet state creates an educational system built around socialism. By making education and ideology inseparable phenomena, the state creates a conveyor belt that transforms youth into ideal Soviet citizens ready to defend and develop socialist society. Although ideology might be the most important factor of Soviet education, the state also

values the material advancement of its society, which allows for its survival and for global competition with western countries. Therefore, labor becomes another pillar of Soviet curricula and one of the central purposes of socialist schooling.

The Soviet economic climate is first referenced near the beginning of the document, where the CPSU announces that “a transition to intensive economic development is presently under way,” and “broadscale and inclusive socioeconomic programs are being put into effect” (Communist Party of the Soviet Union 1985, 158). The CPSU mentions economic development early on to draw a clear connection between the requirements for a successful socialist society and the work of the schoolteacher. The Party goes on to explicitly state that schools are vehicles for societal change, writing, “the imposing tasks that arise as this century draws to a close and a new one begins will be tackled by those who are sitting in the schoolroom today” (Communist Party of the Soviet Union 1985, 158). Though schooling is already widely accepted as a method for improving the quality of life a state provides for its citizens, both economically and otherwise, the Soviets are careful to reinforce the connection between proper schooling, economic vitality, and protection of the Soviet lifestyle. By assigning schooling the task of saving the Soviet economy, along with preserving other sectors of society, the CPSU places a sense of urgency and importance on educational reform.

In *Fundamental Directions*, labor is mentioned 56 times and the economy is mentioned 24 times, more than ideology, capitalism, communism, and socialism combined. This is also more than triple the number of times these economic keywords appear in *A Nation at Risk*. The frequency that these concepts are explored suggests that, although Soviet schooling aims to develop the socialist state through ideological

instruction, the protection of power through economic development reigns supreme. This represents a key contradiction in the document, where Soviet legislators at once argue for student-centered reforms while limiting student autonomy through the implementation of labor requirements. The contradictory nature of the reform is merely a side effect of a contradictory state, which aims to revolutionize society into a socialist utopia while still attempting to compete in a global, capitalist system—creating a workforce crisis and resulting in economically driven educational reform. Therefore, there appears to be a desire within *Fundamental Directions* to bend the arc of schooling entirely by fully submitting to economic demands. The CPSU aims to “strengthen the polytechnical bent of educational content” by giving “more attention to practicums and laboratory exercises and to demonstrations of how the laws of physics, chemistry, biology, and the other sciences are applied in the technological context” (Communist Party of the Soviet Union 1985, 168). This represents a clear shift away from the Soviet literary emphasis of the early 1900s, and therefore, a shift away from the prioritization of ideological curricula. The CPSU affirms this transition, explaining that “socialist society has a visceral interest in seeing the younger generation grow up to be physically well-developed, healthy, full of vitality, and ready to work and defend the Motherland” (Communist Party of the Soviet Union 1985, 173). The Party’s focus on the physical aspect of youth development once again cements the connection they have drawn between labor and schooling, creating a system of education that nurtures the physical capabilities of youth as opposed to the mental.

Although some Soviet reform initiatives—such as the expansion of elementary education and native language learning—demonstrate a desire to nurture student curiosity

and well-being, the Soviets still allow the national economic situation to dictate the parameters of schooling. The CPSU states, “the ratios among the streams available for the further education of ninth grade graduates will be adjusted in accordance with the requirements of the national economy,” with the goal of doubling student enrollment in secondary vocational-technical training schools (Communist Party of the Soviet Union 1985, 164). This reform represents a blatant disregard for students’ academic interests and limits the potential for intellectual fulfillment through schooling. Rather than center students in their educational initiative, the Party demonstrates their loyalty to acquiring and maintaining state power, which is only further affirmed by their stated intent of replacing the universal general secondary education of young people with universal general vocational education (Communist Party of the Soviet Union 1985, 165). Though there is a stated desire to lower the minimum age restrictions for several occupations to help meet these goals, the Party places the responsibility of this decision on “young people, the parental community, and labor collectives,” showing restraint in at least one area to protect the integrity of schooling (Communist Party of the Soviet Union 1985, 165). Despite the contradictory nature of many of their reforms, the CPSU remains devoted to weaponizing schooling for the betterment of the economy, using schooling as a tool to preserve the state and fight the Cold War.

Overall, the urgent need for economic restructuring is portrayed as one of the driving forces behind the call for a “new and broader approach to the teaching and upbringing of the rising generation” (Communist Party of the Soviet Union 1985, 160). The CPSU outlines the specific tasks at hand: bringing the national economy to the forefront of scientific and technological innovation, automating the product sector,

increasing overall labor productivity, and producing a globally competitive output. Through the enumeration of these goals, the Party subtly places emphasis on improving two specific areas of schooling—STEM courses and polytechnical training. While they acknowledge the need for general education that prepares young people for learning at higher educational institutions, they prioritize schooling that orients youth toward “socially useful labor in the national economy,” regarding technical labor upbringing as a “crucial agent of personality formation and as a means of satisfying the national economy’s manpower requirements” (Communist Party of the Soviet Union 1985, 161). Here, labor is explicitly conceptualized as a central focus of not only Soviet education, but of youth character. The large emphasis placed on labor in both the personal and academic spheres demonstrates the Soviets’ desperation for a larger workforce. Therefore, education is utilized for the survival of the state, shifting attention away from intellectual fulfillment towards the economic usefulness of education.

Though not well known by name, *Fundamental Directions* represented a shift towards Gorbachev’s *perestroika* (restructuring), changing the organization of Soviet schooling and assigning to it a clear economic intent. In this way, the reform was an effort to reconceptualize education to meet the demands of a struggling state. When placed in context, the Soviet Union was tackling large tasks through their 1980s reform initiatives—namely, surviving through an economic recession and reaffirming their entire political ideology and system under the threat of war with the West. Because schooling is an effective way to instill political values in youth and shape their future participation in the workforce, education was weaponized to achieve the Soviet state’s political goals, making it an effective instrument of war. However, despite the CPSU’s best efforts, we

now know that the Soviet education system would fail to achieve this great feat in time,
and their state would dissolve within a decade.

Chapter 4: Comparing Weaponization

There are major similarities in the methods and intentions behind educational weaponization in the U.S. and U.S.S.R. Both *A Nation at Risk* and *Fundamental Directions* propose education reforms that center labor productivity, submission to state ideology, and international competition. While the United States held an advantageous economic position at the time, both states were struggling to reinvigorate their economies and assert their respective ideologies. The Soviets and Americans both utilized education as an instrument of state control, aiming to mitigate international threats and strengthen domestic resources by training the youth population to serve the state. This suggests that, despite their opposing ideologies, the Cold War context and desire to remain globally competitive took priority over ideological application in the classroom. I previously posed the questions: Did the U.S. and Soviet Russia weaponize their education systems during the final phase of the Cold War? If so, how did this weaponization manifest? In this chapter, I review my hypotheses and weigh them against the outcomes of my analysis, discovering new insights that prompt future research around applications of education theory.

While both states weaponized education to gain an upper hand—the Soviets primarily through ideology and the Americans primarily through economics—there was a striking transformation from the earlier threats to citizens' physical safety to a more contemporary threat to the safety of their values and lifestyles. Neither document mentioned civil defense programs, despite their earlier dominance in the educational rhetoric of the 1950s, as it was more widely acknowledged in the 1980s that duck-and-

cover drills would not protect Americans or Soviets from nuclear holocaust. Instead, there was an increased focus in both documents on threats to the two states' respective lifestyles and cultures. In *A Nation at Risk*, the NCEE argues that Americans need to understand how "individuals in our society who do not possess the levels of skill, literacy, and training essential to this new era will be effectively disenfranchised, not simply from the material rewards that accompany competent performance, but also from the chance to participate fully in our national life" (National Commission on Excellence in Education 1983, 10). Here, the loss of not only material well-being, but also of culture and community, is described as the major consequence of failing to implement education reform. Similarly, *Fundamental Directions* contains warnings of the fall of the socialist state if appropriate education reforms are not enacted. The CPSU argues that "the growth of ideological commitment, learning, and occupational proficiency among new generations of Soviet people" are necessary for "the deeper entrenchment of socialist democracy," without which, the Soviet way of life would fall to aggressive imperialist forces (The Communist Party of the Soviet Union 1985, 161-162). Once again, the state constructs a threat to its citizens' way of life, striking fear in the public and making them more reliant on the state to deliver solutions to the problems at hand. This scare tactic is effective in gathering support for federal and centralized state intervention in local schools: *A Nation at Risk* successfully led to the passage of education reforms that centered standardized testing and quantitative standards for intellectual growth, while *Fundamental Directions* was successfully implemented and restructured the relationship between the school and the workforce.

Despite the centrality of economics to both *A Nation at Risk* and *Fundamental Directions*, the Soviets and Americans diverged in their approaches to the topic. The Soviets placed a particularly large emphasis on economic development in response to the impact of the global recession. An example of this is their call for “pupil production brigades” and “inter-school production training centers,” which channel youth labor for economic gain, further solidifying a connection between schooling and productivity (Communist Party of the Soviet Union 1985, 176). On the surface, this approach has capitalist underpinnings despite the Soviet’s stated commitment to Leninist ideals. However, the lack of international focus in the Soviets’ economic reforms distinguishes their approach from *A Nation at Risk*.

Soviet attempts at economic renewal were nationally focused with the goal of meeting national labor requirements; in contrast, American efforts were globally focused with the goal of dominating international markets. Though the NCEE avoids explicit statements of economic intent in *A Nation at Risk*, they instead frame economic production in terms of global competitiveness. Specifically, the NCEE mentions a “steady 25-year decline in industrial productivity,” but quickly conceptualizes this economic loss in terms of international standings, asserting that “one great American industry after another falls to world competition” (National Committee on Excellence in Education 1983, 17). The suggestion that American industry and productivity is paling in comparison to other industrialized nations elicits fear in American workers, which allows the U.S. government to implement economic-centered education reform with less pushback. The difference in intent behind the two states’ economic rhetoric—with one focusing on international competition and the other focusing on national labor

requirements—indicates a presence of educational weaponization in the American case study and an absence of educational weaponization in the Soviet case study.

The Soviets' utilization of education for state control transforms into a weapon of state dominance when we consider the ideological factor. In *Fundamental Directions*, international comparison surfaced most frequently when considering the threats facing the socialist state. The CPSU mentions overcoming imperialist and capitalist forces several times, showing the state's explicit desire to assert ideological supremacy in a global sphere. Specifically, the party argues that social science pedagogy should clearly outline how "the concepts of communism will inevitably triumph" (Communist Party of the Soviet Union 1985, 170). This declaration points to not only the Cold War context, but to the Soviet desire to compete ideologically. Because Soviet education reform is built around this notion, *Fundamental Directions* clearly demonstrates educational weaponization for global ideological dominance.

While the CPSU is explicit with their competitive ideological intentions, the NCEE portrays American ideology as less of a competitive factor—conceptualizing ideology as merely a set of national ideals to aspire to. It is important to note this distinction between the two countries' ideological approaches; however, it is also important to acknowledge the global context that most likely caused this distinction. While the United States possessed an already globally dominant political ideology, the Soviets were still attempting to assert their ideology as a legitimate and respectable model at the international level. For this reason, capitalist nations benefited from the ability to attack the Soviets while rhetorically delegitimizing their political ideology, while the Soviets needed to consistently prove the efficacy of their ideology and state

through a more aggressive rhetorical comparison. Despite this context, the Soviets' rhetorical approach to comparative ideology demonstrates a weaponization of education in their attempt to win the Cold War.

Conclusion

In an almost paternalistic sense, states promise their citizens protection so long as they fall in line with state policies. Therefore, Soviet and American schools are transformed by policies that reduce education to the acquisition of basic knowledge, and the two states benefit from this schooling conveyor belt because it bolsters the national labor force and creates a docile citizenry who are socialized into the national culture and ideology. Through this system, schools become a place of social reproduction, shifting away from holistic practices that humanize and give agency to student populations. While educational weaponization manifested differently in the U.S. and U.S.S.R., the centrality of international competition to both reform documents illustrates a striking similarity. The U.S. approached education as a tool for building a competitive national economy, while Soviet Russia approached education as a tool for building a united citizenry in support of globalized communism. This thesis started as hypothesis-testing around educational weaponization, however, my analysis also speaks to scholarship on educational theory. Both *A Nation at Risk* and *Fundamental Directions* fail to engage purposely with theories of pedagogy and learning. However, through this lack of theoretical intentionality, the two states subconsciously engage with a globally dominant, Western approach to education—essentialism.

My comparison and analysis of U.S. and Soviet weaponization of education suggests that one possible explanation for a renewed essentialist movement in the 1980s lies in the purpose of the essentialist educational model, described in Ornstein's *Foundations of Education* as an effort "to educate the useful and competent person," as well as "transmit the cultural heritage and contribute to socioeconomic efficiency" (Ornstein 2006, 113). With emphases on the usefulness and competence of students, as well as their entrenchment in national culture and contributions to the national economy, essentialist theory clearly follows a competitive and productive model conducive to winning a war. Other models of education—namely those that align with the visions of progressivists and critical theorists such as John Dewey and Paulo Freire¹—take on the more difficult task of nurturing student well-being and instilling in youth the critical thinking and problem-solving abilities needed to tackle social issues.

In the midst of national crises, the U.S. and Soviet Russia both aimed to instill fear in their citizens to garner support for essentialist reforms, which afford more governmental control over schooling. For example, the NCEE describes the United States' decline in academic performance as akin to an act of war, using alarmist language to motivate popular support for *A Nation at Risk*. At the same time, the CPSU explicitly mentions capitalism and fascism as active threats to Soviet society, proposing *Fundamental Directions* as the primary way to protect Soviet ideals. As we saw with

¹ John Dewey published his first major work in 1938, a pamphlet titled "The School and Society," where he argued that schools should reflect the societies they exist within, and students should learn experientially. Essentialist educational philosophy was officially created the very same year, when William C. Bagley published "An Essentialist's Platform for the Advancement of American Education." Paulo Freire didn't come until later, publishing his best-known work, "Pedagogy of the Oppressed," in 1968.

earlier efforts to implement civil defense programs, the construction of aggressive threats is an effective method for garnering support for more intrusive policies. Voters repeatedly support federal intervention and more centralized government in the face of danger—such as with the passage of the National Defense Education Act after two world wars and the launch of Sputnik, or the implementation of No Child Left Behind in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks. Looking to the final era of the Cold War, we can infer that the global economic recession, among other state-specific factors such as Soviet leadership instability and low American educational performance, provided the crisis needed to spark a centralized essentialist educational campaign.

Despite the dominance of their essentialist reform agenda, Soviet Russia slightly differed from the United States in its engagement with educational theory. Noticeably missing from *A Nation at Risk* is a clear theoretical intent that explains how the reform proposal would create desired student outcomes. Essentialism is accepted without critical thought around how this theory shapes the schooling ecosystem. In contrast, Soviet Russia reverts to essentialism in their time of crisis, but not without first engaging with educational theory. Though the content of their reforms does not align with their stated theoretical intent, their awareness of divergent educational models signals a step in the right direction for global legislators. Specifically, the CPSU argues to “extirpate resolutely any manifestations of formalism in the content and methods of teaching and upbringing work and in school life and in the ways of evaluating pupil knowledge” (Communist Party of the Soviet Union 1985, 162). In educational theory, formalisms are school or societal norms that are considered to be objective but were formed with specific intentions or biases. Though educational formalisms are not necessarily negative,

“pernicious formalisms are ones that have been, often unconsciously introduced as schooling customs from a particular social class or cultural group and that cannot be reasonably expected to be the same for every child” (Rozycki 2005, 163). While pre-established customs might be simple and efficient to engage with in schools, these formalisms are left untouched and unchecked without critical community engagement. Though the CPSU appears to be more conscious of the way negative social biases infiltrate institutional structures, their condemnation of formalism is never followed up with concrete policy implementations that would help this declaration materialize. Therefore, the CPSU claims loyalty to one theory while enacting another.

The Soviet-American educational comparison suggests the need for a turning point in the way we conceptualize political ideology and the way we understand educational legislation. Though state-supported political ideology is widely believed to shape the structure of a given society, there is a lack of awareness surrounding the impact of international competition on a state’s engagement with ideology. Soviet Russia implemented similar essentialist-centered reforms that were proposed in *A Nation at Risk* despite the two states’ opposing values, which comments on the larger phenomenon that global competition funnels states into competitive educational models regardless of political ideology. In other words, the global domination of capitalism eliminates the ability for socialist states to truly be socialist—these states must compete in a capitalist world in order to survive, which effectively detracts from the implementation of their political ideology in schools and beyond. Despite their varying approaches to economic and ideological factors, the U.S. and Soviet Russia still wielded their education systems

as weapons of war, demonstrating the desirability of international dominance that is privileged over loyalty to ideology.

Looking forward, it is paramount that communities more thoroughly engage with their states' policymaking, demanding clarity around the process of applying desired ideologies in schools. The Soviet-American comparison demonstrates how ideology is lost in policy-making due to international competition, divorcing legislation from the peoples' political values and expectations. In order to envision a justice-oriented and student-centered approach to education, we must promote theoretical fluency in our communities. Building this knowledge and practice would improve our networks of accountability for those in power and center community needs in the curriculum. With a more developed awareness of educational theory, communities might more effectively engage in what Espinoza—an educational scholar focused on pedagogies of dignity—describes as “radical critique and social dreaming,” shifting schooling toward a more liberatory and community-centered model (Espinoza 2008). We have seen this critical and theoretical engagement with schooling in other historical periods, such as when the Black Panther Party initiated a movement for community-controlled education that challenged the white supremacist status quo in the 1960s and 1970s (Williamson 2005). Global educational history demonstrates how collective community responses to crises such as racism and war have successfully educated children in a liberatory tradition. Without a disruption to the continuous, politically constructed cycle of fear and increased state control, the biggest risk to our students will be the policies implemented to educate and protect them when crisis strikes.

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