Legacy of Stalinism in Modern Russia: Historical Trauma, Memory and Forgetting

Russian/American students’ Telecollaboration.

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Transformative Instructional Initiative:
Globalizing your Curriculum

This assignment connects students with their virtual peers in Russia via internet to study and assess the legacy and memory of Stalinism. It’s a part of the course work in the HIST 4860 class History of Russia in the 20th and 21st centuries in the Fall 2012, 36 students

Objectives

1. Students will develop an understanding of Stalinism and validity of different historical interpretations.
2. This learning activity is designed to incorporate global perspectives in our class and develop intercultural awareness. Students will demonstrate ability to communicate effectively across cultures.
3. Students understand cultural and historical background of different views on Stalinism.
4. Students will construct their own conceptual conclusions.

Activities

First, through reading, lectures, and discussions students acquire necessary knowledge of modern debates on Stalinism in historical and political studies. Literature and helpful links to available resources on Memory of Stalinism are provided by the instructor. Students search for additional literature. [in September- November]

Second, each student (individually) should find and contact Russian student/resident(s) who speaks English via email/Facebook/www.interpals.net, etc. and obtain consent to participate in questionnaire about memory of Stalinism in contemporary Russian society. Negotiate the date. [at the end of September].

Third, student construct the questionnaire for Russian peers to review their knowledge and view on Stalinism. Students submit the questionnaire to Instructor for approval and evaluation. [end of October]

Fourth, Students collect data from their Russian peers using their interview tool [beginning of November]

Fifth, Students summarize and analyze the answers and put them in context in the paper. At the beginning they review set for the poll (how many participants, who, age, gender, etc.), then - write a narrative describing and analyzing the Russian view and level of knowledge about Stalinism among Russian young generation. [End of November]

Facilitating activities

Professor’s Instructions and Consultations.
Class discussions.
Students’ group work in class on construction of the questionnaires.

Methods

Questions from the students’ questionnaires:

• Name, age, gender, occupation, location.
• Presentation of Stalinism in Russian school,
• Family history (do you know who were your relatives in the 1930-40s?),
• Would you support Stalin in elections in 1936?
• Would you volunteer to defend your country in war in 1941;
• What contribute to your image of Stalinism: movies, historical (text)books, fiction, family stories;
• Do you participate/organize commemoration events,
• Do you know how many were victims of Stalin’s repressions and WWII in the USSR.
• Evaluate Stalin’s historical role in the government, war and repression
• Do you support limited access to the archives of Stalin’s period?
• Do you see Stalin’s politics (in: Religion, Agriculture, Industrialization, Culture, Military mobilization) as productive (or cruel/useful/human/forced by circumstances)?
• Was anyone in your family personally affected by Stalin’s policies? Negatively? Positively?
• Have you ever been told by a family member about life under Stalinism? What have you been told?
• What do you know about your relatives in the 1930s through the 1940s?
• How do you feel Stalinism has been portrayed throughout Russian films? What about accurate/inaccurate presentation?
• Do you know anything about experience of your relatives in the Red Army during WWII?
• What books have you read to get better understanding of Stalinism?
• What do you feel were positive results of Stalinism?
• How do you feel Stalin should be remembered? A victorious leader, effective manager or cruel dictator?
• Do you feel Stalin did more good or more bad for Russia and its people?
• How (what key words) would you define Stalinism for your children/students?
• Your opinion about secret police during Stalinism?
• Are you proud of your country today?
• Are you politically active? How do you participate in politics? Do you vote?
• Are Stalinism and socialism synonyms?

Students’ Research Findings

In their research, students found in Russian young people:
• “Controlled” memory, partial amnesia.
• Relatively one-sided knowledge about Stalinism.
• Limited knowledge of family history.
• Tendency to embellish and justify Stalin’s politics.
• Articulated national identity.
• General open-mindedness with very rare examples (2) of caution in communicating with Americans.

• “Memory and history continue to be conflicting ideologies in modern Russia today. Historians have worked endlessly to uncover the repressions and allow the public to form educated opinions regarding the Soviet part, but powerful politicians continually fight this trend in order to preserve a united country, to move forward while still grasping [just] some of the nostalgic past.” (K.B.)

Benefits of the assignment
following the students’ feedback

• Enhanced cultural awareness through the first experience of direct virtual contact with young Russian people.
• Better understanding of cultural and historical background of different views on politics and national history.
• Significantly enriched knowledge about Modern Russian history.
• Chance to understand their own values in contact with different views.
• Chance to plan and conduct their own research project.

• “The most creative project I’ve ever undertaken.”
• “A great experience to converse with others from a very different culture – it has enriched my worldview”

Assessment

10% questionnaire + 30% final paper = 40% of the final grade in the class

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