A Horse Derby, A Missed Connection, and Hiking through the Alps: John Dewey's 1928 visit to the Soviet Union

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After December 6, 1917, the government of the United States, led by President Woodrow Wilson, decided not to recognize the new government of Russia, which was led by the Bolshevik Party. Some of the reasons for this lack of recognition came from the Bolshevik government's refusal to honor prior debts owed by the Tsarist government and the seizure of American property. The next three presidents would continue this policy. For the next sixteen years, many Americans visited and wrote about the Soviet Union. Amongst those visitors was a delegation of twenty-five who visited the Soviet Union in the summer of 1928. Their stated purpose was to, “study methods of public instruction in Soviet Russia this summer.” The most influential amongst the twenty-five was John Dewey, a professor of philosophy at Colombia University and one of the leading educational reformers in the United States. In the time during and after this trip Dewey wrote a series of articles for the “New Republic” and later collected these articles and placed them in his book, *Impressions of the Revolutionary World*. This book also dealt with his travels to China in 1920, Turkey in 1924, and Mexico in 1926. This book does not tell the full story of the trip. By analyzing his letters that he sent during this time, one can recreate a partial itinerary of his daily activities and those that he met with. Those letters also reveal that this trip influenced not only the twenty-five educators from the United States but also had an impact on Soviet educators because they had the ability to finally meet the man that they had studied for so long. The United States Department of State was also interested in this trip and used it to learn more about the Soviet Union. The Department of State was also dealing with anticommunism at this time and this caused Dewey’s trip to be closely monitored. The New York Times and other newspapers reported on this trip and the aftermath of this trip can be seen through these reports. This trip impacted not only those within the Soviet Union but also the State Departments and the American public’s view of the Soviet Union.

**Historiography**

Academics have studied John Dewey in many ways. One of the most dominant revolves around his philosophical works and his work as an educational reformer. Within this body of works the issue of how to define progressive educational reform is key. Arthur Zilversmit’s *Changing Schools* defines progressive educational reform’s goal as the replace of the strict academic style of teaching that stressed obedience into an educational system that was more focused on the child’s development. They accomplished their goals for progressive education in a few experimental schools through a curriculum that was based around projects and activities, which emphasized learning from experience over learning from tedious memorization. By having students learn from experience, those same students were thought to have been more prepared to participate and shape society, rather than simply adapt to changes that were occurring due to technological improvements and many other factors. Zilversmit places Dewey within this movement as one of the most important reformers. This is due to Dewey’s many influential works including his most famous, *School and Society*. Zilversmit, though, is focused on the United States
and does not mention the interactions that John Dewey had with other nations. From 1920 to 1928 John Dewey visited revolutionary countries all over the world. The specific countries Dewey writes about in, \textit{John Dewey's Impressions of Soviet Russia and the Revolutionary World}, are Soviet Russia, Mexico, Turkey, and China. One of the underlying threads between these four countries is that they were all going through what was seen by Dewey as a rapid modernization and a turn toward a more democratic society. Jay Martin describes Dewey's visit in, \textit{The Education of John Dewey: A Biography}.\textsuperscript{6} Martin shows that John Dewey visited the London, Paris, and Berlin and viewed many art galleries and museums which Dewey enjoyed greatly.\textsuperscript{7} After an explanation of what occurred before John Dewey arrived in the Soviet Union Martin goes on to describe how John Dewey felt about the Soviet Union and how he had the opportunity to meet with Lenin's widow, Madam Krupskaya.\textsuperscript{8} While this explanation of what occurred during Dewey's trip goes much further than others it is still lacking in many details, such as the other people that Dewey met with and the ramifications this trip had for foreign policy between the United States and the Soviet Union. Rather than discussing this trip and the impact that that it had on Dewey, historians have instead focused on either the schools of the Soviet Union, and briefly mention that Dewey visited, or focus on how Dewey's visit influenced those in the Soviet Union. During the start of the Soviet Union's existence there were many questions that revolved around how to run a socialist nation. One of those questions was how to education the children of the Soviet Union. While the United States was wrestling with similar questions of how children should be educated the Soviet Union also had to deal with recovering from a revolution and a conversion to a new form of government. Authors such as Shelia Fitzpatrick, Larry Holmes, and Lisa A. Kirschenbaum have focused primarily on either specific school type or age group, and while they reference the theoretical changes that were occurring in Russian philosophy on education reform, they have also shown the reality of the educational system was in the Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{9} It was a system full of bickering over how to educate children and teachers that still followed the traditional gymnasium style of teaching from the old Tsarist regime, which during the Tsarist period it was used to educate the rich. This gymnasium style was much like the strict schools in the United States that Dewey was attempting to reform. Students would learn to read by being assigned books in class which they would read aloud and afterwards the teacher would ask them questions about what they read, this is just one example of how students were taught in the Tsarist monarchy and the Soviet Union.

John Dewey inspired those within the Soviet Union to reform their educational system. One of those key people that he inspired was Stanislav Shatskii. Shatskii was an educational reformer that had used the tools of progressive educational reformers before the Russian Revolution. He hoped to reform the school system so that he could gradually change the rest of Russia's institutes.\textsuperscript{10} William Partlett's \textit{Building Soviet Citizens with American Tools} focuses on Shatskii and his system of education, which was and still is considered one of the largest experiments in progressive education in the world. Shatskii, like Dewey, was also not alone in calling for educational reform in the Russia. Anton Makarenko was another reformer and has been compared to Dewey. Two articles that show this comparison are, "Anton Makarenko: The "John Dewey of the U.S.S.R."", by Thom Gehring, Fredalene B. Bowers & Randall Wright, and Robert J. Holtz’s article, “Makarenko and Dewey: Two Views On Overcoming Life Circumstances Through Education.”\textsuperscript{11} These articles do not explicitly state that John Dewey visited the Soviet Union but instead focus on his philosophical ideas and their influence. Irina Mchitarjan’s "John Dewey and the Development of Education in Russia before 1930-Report on a Forgotten
Reception” focuses on some of the main schools of thought within the Soviet Union and how they received John Dewey’s philosophies. Dewey would eventually be rejected by the Soviets due to disagreements on the goals of education. According to some in the Soviet Union John Dewey thought that the end goal of education was to, “create an environment that would foster the child’s growth.” Soviet educators were worried about Dewey’s lack of focus on class consciousness. V. V. Gorshkova shows that John Dewey’s rejection from the Soviet Union has not only created a historiographical silence within Russian academia, but has also caused academics to view Dewey as an opponent to the Soviet Union.

Who Invited John Dewey?

The American Society for Cultural Relations with Russia (ASCRR) was one of the key actors in organizing Dewey’s trip to the Soviet Union. John Dewey was one of the Societies vice presidents. A 1929 work entitled, The Soviet Union: Facts, Descriptions, Statistics, discussed how the All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (VOKS) was the parent organizations of the ASCRR. The author describes this parent organization as having been, “formed for the purpose of establishing closer relations between cultural and scientific bodies in the Soviet Union and those of foreign countries.” This goal of cultural and scientific exchange occurred through the exchange of books, reports, and periodicals. In the first nine months alone the ASCRR, received 41,040 volumes were received in the United States and 18,572. This exchange of books also took place during Dewey’s trip. In a letter sent on 27 July 1928 by N. Kiritchkov, he wrote that he was going to send Dewey a list of the latest publications of educational workers of USSR in foreign languages and besides I Shall try to send you a copy of Shtatzy’s report about ‘the Elementary School in Soviet Russia its theory practice’ which was written for conference of International of Educational workers, Leipzig, [Germany] 1928. You will find also the pamphlet of the Economical Section of the First Society For Cultural Relations Experimental Station, which is working in the line of study peasant’s budgets in the Kulga Section.

Aleksey Georgiyevich Kalashnikov, a physicist and mathematician who wrote several works that discussed the pedagogical process, sent Dewey a letter in which he discussed the sending Dewey the first two volumes of the encyclopedia that he was working on entitled, Pedagogicheskaya Entisklopediya. In the letter, Kalashnikov writes about the encyclopedia set and what Dewey would find within:

This Enciclopedy, composed in an article order but not in an alphabethic on includes the theory as well as practice of the soviet education. In the third—historical part of the first volume there is a division dedicated to pedagical ideas where we have put your portrait. Although not a very good one (pp 721-22). Your works, especially "School and Society" and "The School and the Child" have very much influenced the development of the Russian pedagogy and in the first years of revolution you were one of the most renoun writers.
Kalashnikov goes on to discuss how he disagreed with some of Dewey’s “philosophico-socialistic ideas of pedagogical theory,” but he goes on to say that Dewey’s work inspired him greatly. Kalashnikov hoped to keep in touch with Dewey in order to keep this conversation of education going.

The New York Times reported on this new society on 7 April 1929 in an article entitled, “Cultural Ties With Russia To Be Promoted In America.” This article describes the ASCRR’s work on creating a library of contemporary Russian music with the help of both Russian and American musicians. More importantly though the ASCRR is established as the best source of information on the Soviet Union. This article also describes how the citizens of both the Soviet Union and the United States were attempting to create student exchanges. The ASCRR reportedly planned their first trips for the fall of 1929. To facilitate this exchange the Society established the Service Bureau for Foreign Visitors to assist foreigners, “who go to the Soviet Union for purposes of research or study”, and to assist with, “arrang[ing] tours for visiting professors, scientists, etc.”

Almost a year earlier, the New York Times reported that approximately 200 individuals entered the Soviet Union during the summer of 1927 and that the Soviet government expected 5,000 to 6,000 to enter in the summer of 1928 in an article written on 24 June 1928 entitled, “Soviet Arranges Tours of Russia.” To assist with this influx of tourism the Soviet government created an official tourist agency named Russotourist. This agency created fifteen standard tours and expected visitors to take part in them. The second half of this New York Times article reported that a group of twenty individuals including John Dewey was expected to visit the Soviet Union in the summer of 1928. While the article mentioned the ASCRR as the primary organizer of this trip, the New York Times gave special focus to Anatoly Vasilyevich Lunacharsky, the People’s Commissars for Education from October of 1917 to September of 1929. The New York Times reported that “Dr. Dewey, whose writings have been translated into Russian and used as guides to the building of the new Soviet School system, has been personally invited by... Lunarcharsky, and will be the recipient of a warm welcome and of much official hospitality while in Russia.”

Lunacharsky’s goals fascinated Dewey because the schools that Lunacharsky helped create linked students to industrial work. However, the schools did not give students “mono-technical” training but instead instructed students in skills and ideas that students could use across many different industries and fields. The New York Times went on to report that John Dewey and his companions would stay in the Soviet Union for three weeks and gives a list of all of the individuals planning to attend this trip. The New York Times would publically report on this trip again on 14 May 1928 and mention that Dewey was a guest of honor hosted by the ASCRR it also mentions that Dewey was going to sail for Russia the next day. Officially though the group of educators left New York on 23 June 1928 and arrived in Gothenburg, Sweden where they planned to meet in order to reach Leningrad by rail. Dewey arrived in the Moscow on 13 July 1928 and once again, the New York Times reported on Dewey’s trip. What the New York Times failed to mention was that Dewey spent almost two months touring Europe and going to art museums in Paris and London. Another important aspect for the New York Times and its readers was whether the trip would have a report due to its unofficial nature. The New York Times reported on 21 June, two days before the Drottningholm departed for Sweden, that, “the delegation will be free to report on
its findings or not, according to its own vote.” If there was to be a report its sole responsibility would lay on the delegation of educators and not the Soviet government. This was in part due to the wish to avoid this trip appearing as a propaganda stunt. This trip to the Soviet Union was a public spectacle due to the mysterious nature of this new country and the difficulty that individuals had in getting in and those that attended had no deniability of attending.

John Dewey in the Europe and the Soviet Union

Dewey and his twenty-four fellow travelers arrived in the Soviet Union in July of 1928. Dewey though did not depart directly from the United States. Instead, Dewey took the opportunity to tour Europe and visit family friends. After spending eight days at sea on the George Washington Dewey arrived in Plymouth, England on the 27 May. Alongside him was his daughter in law Elizabeth. During this time, Dewey toured the art museums of London, Paris, and Berlin. After spending three weeks in Europe Dewey flew to Leningrad and arrived on 2 July. Dewey had five days until the others of his group would reach him and he spent his time exploring the art museums of Leningrad. The president of VOKS though was not happy with Dewey simply roaming the city and attempted to arrange even this unexpected series of events. The rest of the group reconnected with Dewey after a two-week train trip on 7 July. Dewey does not write about his time in Europe in his work and instead spends the whole time fixated on the Soviet Union. Within Dewey’s articles written for the New Republic, he made fleeting references to the individuals that he meet with including Stanislav Shatzky, Lunacharsky, Nadezhda Konstantinovna Krupskaya (Lenin’s widow), and to “liberal Russian educators.” While a whole book could be dedicated to all of the individuals that Dewey interacted with in the Soviet Union and the impact that he had on them this paper does not take this approach and instead focuses on a select few individuals and their interactions with Dewey. It must be noted that the majority of Dewey’s interactions revolve around Moscow because he spent 13 July to 14 August in Moscow.

One of the first individuals that are noted in Dewey’s correspondences from this time was P. V. Assaoultshenko. He was the chief manager for Horsebreeding and Studs and invited Dewey to the Great USSR Trotting Derby on 15 July. This short letter shows just one of the many attempts that the Soviet government went to entertaining the delegation of American visitors. Less than a week later on the 21 June Walter Duranty, a reporter for the New York Times, reported that the group of educators had gone to a party hosted by Mme. Kameneff, the sister of Leon Trotsky. At this party, the educators from the United States were given the chance to critique the Soviet Union and Duranty reported the party as a great success. Kameneff was reported to have said that:

We do not ask your praise, when you reach home, nor fear your blame, if you will do one thing only, tell your people the facts and let them judge. We know that our work is scarcely begun, know that there are many errors and shortcomings. But it is my hope that your visit may contribute toward sweeping away the cloud of prejudice that has long hidden this country from the American people and convince them that with all our faults we are genuinely striving to transform our backward nation into one of citizens of progress and
Lunacharsky made a similar speech and discussed how the American public should forgive the Soviet Union for stifling individual freedoms due to the “threat of war [that] hangs over us.” Both of these individuals were hoping that the Americans would give a favorable report.

One individual that had been following Dewey from before the Russian Revolution was Stanislav Shatsky, a Russian educational reformer. According to Elizabeth Dewey’s notes, Dewey had visited Shatsky’s station from 21 to 23 July. In a letter written on 23 July, Shatsky wrote that he would not be able to see the delegation depart because he had to go to a pedagogical conference. After noting how attentive his guests in understanding where Soviet education stood Shatsky wrote that, “this will allow you, upon your return to America, to dispel various misunderstandings in American society-[to define] our cultural tasks and their implementation. We must begin this great undertaking- the coming together of the more democratic nations of the world.” Shatsky had similar hopes and dreams to Lunacharsky and Kameneff but he added the idea of democracy to his short letter, something that Dewey would have greatly appreciated.

**American Reaction: State Department**

Americans across the nation were highly intrigued about the Soviet Union. The government of the United States was also highly interested and they were debating on whether or not to recognize the Soviet Union. Sherwood Eddy, a prominent Protestant missionary and educator, wrestles with the Soviet Union and whether or not to recognize the new nation in his 1931 book *The Challenge of Russia*. Some of the benefits that Eddy sees from the recognition of the Soviet Union include the fact that the United States recognized other nations that had ideological and other differences, such as Germany during World War I, the falling number of communists in the United States, the possibility of the improvement of trade, and finally the fact the United States and the Soviet Union may be able to work together to bring world peace. Throughout the rest of the book, Eddy explains life in the Soviet Union and attempts to inform Americans about the differences and similarities between the two nations. In his section on education and culture, he relies heavily on Dewey’s trip. Eddy primarily used Dewey to explain the general education situation in Russia as, “an experiment by all means the most interesting one going on upon our globe.”

Francis Ralston Welsh, a staunch anticommunist, also wrote about Dewey’s trip to the Soviet Union. Welsh though wrote about the trip before it occurred in his letter entitled, “Another Commission to Soviet Russia under the Auspices of the Communists’ American Society for Cultural Relations with Russia”, to the U.S State Department dated May 16 1928. In this letter he describes how:

> “The Communists’ “Bureau of Cultural Relations” of Moscow sent over here in the early part of 1927, Roman Weller, a Communist agent, to start propaganda organizations of the cultural relations type that would take in educators and those who thought themselves intellectuals...there was shortly thereafter formed the (sic) “AMERICAN SOCIETY FOR CULTURAL RELATIONS WITH RUSSIA.””
The American Society for Cultural Relations with Russia would go on to plan the trip for John Dewey and twenty-five others and said that the trip was a, “non-political mission of twenty-five American educators to study methods of public instruction in Soviet Russia this summer.” This promise of a non-political mission did not satisfy Welsh and he went to describe how Dr. K. G. Matheson, the president of Drexel, also went on a similar trip the year before. Welsh goes on to say that Matheson stated that, “if he believed that it was for Communistic propaganda he would take no part in it.” Welsh though was also suspicious of this trip and said that, “it does not show that Dr. Matheson has not been deceived about this expedition, which originated in the Bureau of Cultural Relations at Moscow, which is purely a propaganda organization.” In opposition to this Dr. K. E. Richter of the College of the City of New York informed Welsh that, “We are not a delegation to examine their schools with a view of bettering their educational system.. We are not to make a report to the Soviet Government.” Welsh attributes this stark contrast to the fact that Dr. Matheson was influenced by those that had organized the trip. Welsh also noted that Dr. Matheson’s position as president of Drexel would, “lend dignity and confidence to a mission of this sort among people who did not know its Communist origin.” He does not go on to explain who would know or not know the Communist “origin”. One can only assume that the only people that would know of this origin would be either close to those involved or close to the Soviet government.

Dr. Richter not only described Dr. Matheson’s past trip to the Soviet Union but Dr. Richter was also well informed about Dewey’s trip. Welsh describes how “” There is no secret about the group,” and [Dr. Richter] sends me a list of names, which at the date of writing, April 29, 1928 he stated he believed was final...in this group, John Dewey’s name is mentioned, but it is not stated, as in a press dispatch, that he is to head the mission.” Just as Dr. Matheson was able to add credibility to his trip to the Soviet Union, Dewey was to play a similar role. Dr. Richter also goes on to give a list of those going on the trip and their interactions with both the Soviet Union and Communist sympathizers.

John Dewey has one of the longest sections in this letter and Dr. Richter attacks him in many ways. Dewey’s crimes include his signature on a, “Communist Sacco and Vanzetti appeal”, his endorsement of “Norman Hapgood’s "Professional Patriots"”, his, support of “the teachers dismissed for their disloyal utterances”, his exposé in the Lusk Report. He goes on to list many more accusations of Dewey’s crimes, but the most intriguing statement though is Dr. Richter’s description of how Dewey was, “of course, an opponent of military training. The Communists oppose military training in the United States, but go in for it in Russia.” While the United States was not yet in a cold war with the Soviet Union they were still worried about the possibility of conflict and the necessity of creating a strong military. After supplying his evidence Welsh goes on to say that:

This American educators' mission to Russia, then, is simply one more move in the Communist propaganda game engineered by those who have proved willing tools of the Communists in the past and with various non-Communists drawn in to hide the Communist machinery working underneath.
Welsh’s largest fear was not Dewy himself, but the Communists who he thought were simply using Dewey as a way to earn some influential propaganda. His political beliefs did not allow him to fully comprehend the significance that this trip could have on Soviet educators as a way to spread American ideas of democracy. Rather Welsh saw the trip as a one-way interaction between the Soviet Union and the United States. This letter was taken seriously by the State department. On May 29 1928 the assistant Secretary of State, William Richards Castle Jr. wrote to Frederick W. B. Coleman, the minister to Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, from 1922 to 1931. In this brief letter Castle once again reiterates that the mission is non-political and arranged by the American Society for Cultural Relations with Russia. He is also given instructions to, “report currently to the Department any information which you may be able to obtain in regard to the impressions and activities of the persons named while in Russia.” This report was eventually given by the diplomat to Germany Jacob Gould Schurman to Frank B. Kellogg, the U.S Secretary of State on July 26, 1928. In this report Schurman describes how this group of, “well-known American educators and men of science have recently visited Russia on the invitation of [Anatoly] Lunacharsky, Commissar of Education, paying, however, their own expenses.” No mention of the American Society for Cultural Relations with Russia is given and the addition of the fact that the men paid their own expenses lends credibility towards the American visitors because they came of their own freewill and at cost to themselves. Dr. Lotus Delta Coffman, the president of the University of Minnesota, and Dr. James McKeen Cattell, one of the first professors of psychology in the United States, were reported to have described the situation within the Soviet Union in positive terms, “They found the people ill-clad but well-fed, and seemingly content. The Soviet efforts at universal education they described as gigantic and of the highest significance both morally and politically.” John Dewey made similar claims in his book, Impressions of the Revolutionary World, “Although fairly long lines are seen waiting at some shops, especially where food is sold, there are no marked signs of distress; the people are well nourished; theaters, restaurants, parks and places of amusement are thronged—and their prices are not cheap.” While the material conditions were important, the political situation in the Soviet Union was much more speculative:

Dr. Coffman, who makes the impression of being a shrewd and practical observer, is convinced that the future political structure of Soviet Russia will be shaped—over a long period of years...by this drastic departure from the illiteracy ... As the present leaders die off and the intensive efforts at education become effective, political evolution would be inevitable... though the cooperative state, practically without government, was deemed in Russia to be the ideal goal, it seemed more probable to him that the eventual evolution would be republican....

This hope of a new Soviet Union that would grow up to become republican just like the United States is similar to the already mentioned Sherwood Eddy. Both hope, just as John Dewey, that the United States and the Soviet Union would be able to cooperate with each other. The United States would eventually recognize the Soviet Union in 1933 under President Franklin D. Roosevelt.
Notes

5 Zilversmit, 1.
6 Martin, 350-358.
7 Martin, 352-353.
8 Martin, 355.
10 Dewey, Impressions of Soviet Russia, 64-65.
14 Mchitarjan, 124.
15 Mchitarjan, 124.
Features.

21 Society For Cultural Relations.


23 “Soviet Arranges Tours of Russia”, 1928.


30 Dykhuizen, 235-236.

31 John Dewey, John Dewey’s Impressions of Soviet Russia and the Revolutionary, 44, 123, 90, and 111.


33 Walter Duranty.

34 Walter Duranty.


37 Eddy, 118-125.

38 Eddy, 119.


40 Francis Ralston Welsh to U.S State Department, May 16, 1928.

41 Francis Ralston Welsh to U.S State Department, May 16, 1928.

42 Francis Ralston Welsh to U.S State Department, May 16, 1928.

43 Francis Ralston Welsh to U.S State Department, May 16, 1928.

44 Francis Ralston Welsh to U.S State Department, May 16, 1928.

45 Francis Ralston Welsh to U.S State Department, May 16, 1928.

46 Miss Katherine Devereux Blake, Emer. Principal, N. Y. City

Dr. J. McKeen Cattell, Editor of four scientific journals
President Lotus D. Coffman, University of Minn.
President Donald J. Cowling, Carleton College
Professor John Dewey, Columbia University
Professor Robert H. Gault, Northwestern Univ.
Professor Mary L. Hinsdale, Grand Rapids College
Florence Holbook, Principal, Chicago, Ill.
President Parke R. Kolbe, Polytechnic Institute, Brooklyn.
Dr. J. Kunitz, College of the City of New York
President K. G. Matheson, Drexel Institute, Phil.
Professor James K. Norris, Mass. Inst. of Tech.
President Geo. D. Olds, Amherst College
K. E. Richter, College of the City of N. Y.
President Walter Dill Scott, Northwestern Univ.
Miss Emily A. Stein, James Monroe High School, N. Y. City
Professor Lucy Textor, Vassar College
Professor Thomas Woody, University of Penn.
47 Francis Ralston Welsh to U.S State Department, May 16, 1928.
48 Francis Ralston Welsh to U.S State Department, May 16, 1928.
50 W. R. Castle? (for Frank B. Kellogg) to Frederick W. B. Coleman, May 29, 1928.
51 W. R. Castle? (for Frank B. Kellogg) to Frederick W. B. Coleman, May 29, 1928.
52 W. R. Castle? (for Frank B. Kellogg) to Frederick W. B. Coleman, May 29, 1928.