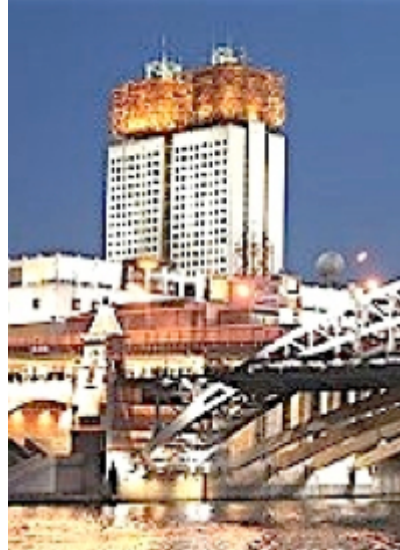




Written by [Bruce Walker](#) on February 16, 2011

Survey Shows Glaring Ignorance of Basic Science Among Russians

A spokeswoman for the Russian government, Olga Kamenchuk, reports that VsTIOM, the state's polling organization, has found an astounding level of ignorance among Russians about basic facts of science. As an example, one-third of Russians polled believe that the sun revolves around the earth (not vice versa), and an equal number believe that the earth is the center of the solar system. Also, most Russians polled, 55 percent of them, believe that all radioactivity is man-made.



Does this indicate that the Russian state has a very low level of education? In one sense, yes: Russians have a profound level of ignorance, and this descent began during the Soviet era. One of the greatest scientific frauds in human history was "Lysenko" genetics. The quack pseudo-scientist Lysenko persuaded Stalin that acquired characteristics could be transmitted through inheritance, a notion that fit well with the Marxist view of Soviet science.

Consequently, the Lysenko Reforms were pressed upon every university, research facility, and academician. Those who refuted Lysenko's false science could expect the OGPU, the Lubyanka and the Gulag.

It did not matter how many years of education Soviet students took with such an ideological attitude toward science. This totalitarian control helps explain why the Soviet Union, which routinely turned out much larger numbers of scientists and engineers than America (a fact which perennially frightened many Americans), could barely advance in science and technology at all and why it relied upon spies stealing U.S. science to copy American breakthroughs in technology. It also helps to explain why Tsarist Russia, which was much freer, produced large numbers of first-rate scientists in spite of a laxer attitude toward government developing the physical sciences through public education.

Americans have come to believe, because they have been instructed so, that structured statist educational systems are the way to produce an educated people. But history speaks otherwise. The great scientist and polymath Benjamin Franklin never attended school at all, as far as is known. Satirist and literary genius Samuel Clemens left school as soon he could. Brilliant industrialists and innovators such as Henry Ford and Andrew Carnegie had scarcely any schooling at all. Likewise, many



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contemporary pioneers of modern industry do not have college degrees.

Even the idea of education as “academics” is misplaced, and statisticians who pine for the “academy” forget that the first and truest such body was the Academy of Plato, a highly unstructured, wholly independent, and free group of study whose principal interest was an explanation of truth. The layers of educational bureaucrats, chancellors, department heads, presidents, and professors who reign as members of a nobility in American education are as far from the Academy as the staid, numbing text of modern colleges is from the lively, brilliant wit of old Ben Franklin or Mark Twain.

The Russian people, two decades after the putative fall of Communism, are still blindingly ignorant — as are Americans, who are not well informed, even though nearly all children go through high school these days and a vast number attend college. Americans, for example, do not have any idea about how much the top ten percent of Americans pay of the total tax burden or how much the bottom 50 percent of taxpayers pay of that burden — remembering that those who do not pay taxes are not even included.

Polls over the years have shown that [Americans also lack basic knowledge](#) about American history, and that the gaps in knowledge tend to reinforce a negative image of our nation. A February 2008 study reported that one-quarter of American teenagers thought that Columbus sailed to the New World after 1750, only half of these teenagers knew that Job in the Bible was known for his patient suffering, only about half knew roughly when the Civil War was fought, and only one-quarter could identify Hitler as the German chancellor during the Second World War.

The same is true in other nations. In [March 2008](#), a study of Germans revealed that only 35 percent knew that the Federal Republic of Germany (what has come to be called “West Germany”) was formed in 1949, and only one-third knew when the Berlin Wall came down (a similar number did not know when the Wall was constructed). When President Reagan visited Germany more than 20 years ago, West German college students not only did not know that the Soviets signed a non-aggression pact with Hitler, but when confronted with that salient fact, they denounced it as Western propaganda.

When education becomes a state function, then it is almost inevitable that learning will be conformed to fit the purposes of government and those who manipulate government for their own ends. Often this means “dumbing down” populations. Russia’s Prime Minister Vladimir Putin probably does not want his subjects too well informed. Such thinking would affect the teaching of history, economics, religion, and politics, of course, but it would also affect physical sciences.

The myth of manmade global warming, for example, can be helped along if people really believe that the earth is the center of the solar system and that the sun, just as if it were another planet, revolves around the earth. The relative unimportance of the sun in this befooled interpretation of astronomy makes sunspots less important and means that what humans do on the earth really might upset the whole system of planets. Similarly, if humans make radioactivity, then any harmful effects of radiation can be attributed to them (and thus require more government power to control their reckless behavior).

In short, not everyone sees an interest in people being well educated. In America over 80 years ago, social engineers such as John Dewey wrote openly about how to use state-run education to condition all students (who would become the workers and the parents of the future) to think along similar lines. These ideas percolated through Europe and Asia and tied public education to enlightenment. The consequence is the calamity of hundreds of millions of young adults with college degrees around the world who assume that those degrees actually mean something. Often, in fact, these young graduates have not been trained to be anything really valuable. Their resentment — after enduring years of



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education in high school and college which was supposed to make them members of the elite, only to find that no one much wants them — is a disaster. Who alone can use them? Movements built upon cadres in socialist revolutionary groups.

Beyond that, the large group of apolitical people, such as these Russians in the February 2011 poll, who have all received a high school and often a college education, really know very little. Even language itself has been put into a food processor and turned into a gooey mess: what did these Russians think the word “solar” in solar system meant? Before adoption of the Copernican Theory, Ptolemy had not proposed a solar system but rather a mathematical calculation of the movement of all the nearby heavenly spheres which had perceptible cycles (the very term “planet” simply means “it moves”). His calculations were very sophisticated and effective, except for a few anomalies. Ptolemy, in short, was much farther along in his thinking than the notionally well-educated people of modern Russia.

If America expects a well-informed public, it must first ask who really wants a well-informed public and who would prefer the people to be ignorant? The answer to that question often answers all the other questions about the U.S. systems of education and how well they really work.

George Orwell gave a hint of how he thought the state would view real education in his acclaimed novel, *1984*: “Ignorance is Strength” was one of the three unchanging truths of the part of the world known as Oceania.

Photo: Headquarters of the Russian Academy of Sciences in Moscow.



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