On Campus

Red Letter Days

How a professor from Russia raised class consciousness.

By
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September 23, 1948: Carl W. Ackerman, dean of Columbia's Graduate School of Journalism, welcomes 98 aspiring journalists to the University. We show up for the first day of class to find that a tricky exercise awaits us. The day is to be spent exploring New York City by subway.

When I arrived at Columbia College in 1952 as a sophomore transfer, the luck of the draw placed me in Professor Boris Stanfield's section in Contemporary Civilization II, a required Core Curriculum course. Stanfield was formerly a member of the Labor Ministry of the provisional government that ruled Russia from the abdication of the czar to the ascendancy of Lenin in 1917. He was short, stocky, and had a twinkle in his eye. He called the roll at the start of each class, and we were always "Mr." when called upon. I took two other courses with him — Labor Economics and Soviet Economics.

Professor Stanfield believed in class discussions rather than lectures; however, the exception to that rule was on March 6, 1953, the day following the death of Stalin. For many years afterward, I have thought of his insights and predictions that day as to what would happen in the Soviet Union. So much of what he forecast became reality. It was general knowledge then that there would be a power struggle in the Soviet Union between Lavrenty Beria, head of the NKVD (the secret police that later became the KGB), and Georgy Malenkov, secretary of the Communist Party, to succeed Stalin. But Professor Stanfield told us to keep our eyes on Nikita Khrushchev, who was not then well known to the public. Stanfield predicted that Khrushchev would eventually take over as both the head of state and the head of the Communist Party, which he did. At that time, the Soviet Union had a close

relationship with China, but Professor Stanfield predicted that it would fall apart and that in our lifetimes we would yet see the United States aligned with the Soviet Union in economic competition with China.

Professor Stanfield gave us personal insights into so many makers of history whom he had known personally or met. Yet, when we studied the chapter from Hitler's Mein Kampf, he apologized for not being able to tell us about him, as he had never met him. One day in the Soviet Economics course, he announced he was bringing to the next session of class Alexander Kerensky, arguably the most powerful minister in the Russian provisional government. None of us even realized that Kerensky was still alive. I regret to this day not getting Kerensky's autograph in my textbook. Years later, when Mikhail Gorbachev was signing autographs in New York for his then recently published book, I thought that I could have had the signature of the man who led Russia before the formation of the Soviet Union as well as of the man who essentially ended the Soviet Union.

Professor Stanfield also had a lighter side. On the first day of class in Labor Economics, he asked the 30 or so students, "Who here is prolabor?" About half the class raised their hands. He then asked, "Who here is antilabor?" A few more hands went up, after which he asked, "Who here is neutral?" The rest of the hands went up. He then said, "Prolabor, you already pass. Antilabor, you already fail. Neutral, there is hope for you!" I don't know how many he converted; however, everyone passed the course.

But it was his ability to cut to the chase that had the greatest effect on me. When responding to a question from him in class, if, after the first few words out of your mouth he knew you were headed in the wrong direction, he would say, "Enough of this intellectual masturbation!" and call on someone else. For blue book exams, he would write a number in parentheses next to each essay question. It was not the point value assigned to the question. Rather, it was the number of sentences we were allowed to write as our answer. And heaven help us if we had a run-on sentence. More than anything else, he taught me how to think and get to the point, how to listen to what is being said, and to speak only when I have something to add.

During my years at Columbia, I would read the Pogo cartoons by Walt Kelly, in the New York Post. I often think of the one I remember best that ran on Armistice Day (now called Veterans Day). Pogo says in the last frame (or words to the effect): "We have it all wrong. We should observe silence all year long so we can think of

something to say for one minute on Armistice Day.”

Boris Stanfield must have loved it. It summed him up completely.

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