

# The Red and the Black

— or who's got the moral fiber?

*Life* ran an interesting article last month—a comparison between high-school education in the United States and Russia. The cover was split to show a representative of each system: Johnny, a handsome, clean-cut, all-American, but unfortunately quite stupid youth; and Igor, a sneaky-looking lad, with mustache and leer—good commissar material for the next generation (just as Johnny will probably be a good congressional candidate).

The article first follows Typical John through a typical day at his typical American high school. After a wastefully large breakfast, he pauses only to read *L'il Abner* (his favorite), then leaps into his hot rod for a quick dash to the home of his latest teen-age queen. She's the cute-blonde, tight-Bermuda-shorts type—not too cheap-looking though, so she's probably a student leader (first to memorize the Pledge of Allegiance, etc.)

Once at Central High, John plunges into a hectic routine of degenerate fun. History, geometry, English—he's equally ignorant of all of them. He browbeats the teacher with witty comments on his ignorance, and the class laughs with him. But his real hour to shine comes during Club Period. Handsome and gregarious Johnny is president of a Hi-Y, Key Club, Service Club, and probably a secret fraternity, too. He mismanages all of them, but he's such a neat guy nobody cares.

After school John spends 100 percent of his time pursuing more teen-age queens, using the seductive charms of rock n' roll music, Pepsi-Cola, and miniature golf. (If he lives in New York City, he may take time off now and then for a rumble with the rival Hi-Y.) The conclusion is unavoidable: Johnny is a worthless wastrel; America's moral fiber is disintegrating.

Igor's daily pattern forms a Spartan contrast. Every cold Moscow morning he trudges several miles through the snow to a gray stone building, the local learning factory. There he spends long hours absorbing world history (revised Russian edition), foreign languages (especially English), and—most menacing of all—math and science.

One picture shows him sitting at a long bench, with several other drably-uniformed boys and girls. The teacher is a mannish-looking woman, the type that even Johnny would think twice about browbeating. On the

walls are voltmeters, Leyden jars, and other such exotica. Igor has his hand in the air and an anti-American gleam in his eye. Perhaps he's on the verge of another breakthrough for Russian science.

Igor belongs to only one club—the Young Communist League. Until recently Igor has had no time for women. Someone, however, has pointed out the necessity of carrying on the Russian race, so now he is quite often seeing one of the uniformed girls. Perhaps, if he's really a mad romantic at heart, he's building an electroscope to give her next Khrushchev's day.

Igor gets his big kicks, though, another way. Every evening he plays a game of chess with his buddy from the next tenement. Of course he usually wins. Moral of the story: Unless America gets serious about its high-school educational system, Igor and his friends will be taking over soon.

Bunk! Many of the people who come to Caltech, for instance, tend more to Igor than Johnny. And one of the most important things the school tries to do is break these people out of their isolation. I don't see how an engineer, mathematician, or scientist can be of much value to the community without an understanding of people. Our present high school system does a splendid job of providing this understanding. It's a case of understand or wither. Quite a few wither, but more understand.

Secondly: In the high schools I've seen (public schools, middleclass neighborhoods) the students have been more serious about their schoolwork than was apparent to the casual observer. (And I think *Life's* observer was pretty casual.) I can't believe that everyone in the Russian schools is an Igor, either. If they were, the U.S.S.R. would have cracked in half the first time somebody laughed at it.

Thirdly, and most important, I do believe our high schools are more fun than Russia's. Good. Any system that provides four enjoyable years for nearly everyone is well worth saving. Why should we be *ashamed* of the fact that our schools are more fun? This is real democracy. Not only a vote and a voice for everyone, but an enjoyable life, too. I say let Johnny keep his hot rod. He'll have plenty of time for the serious life.

—Brad Efron '60