Russia and the United States: Perspectives from History—Choices for Today

Student Text

CHOICES PROGRAM
BROWN UNIVERSITY
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The Soviet Union existed for seventy years and contained fifteen republics. Each of these republics became an independent country when the Soviet Union disintegrated in 1991. Russia was the largest and most influential Soviet republic. The other countries are often grouped by their geographical region. Baltic States: Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia. Central Asia: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan. Caucasus: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia. Eastern European States: Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova.
Russia and the United States: Perspectives from History—Choices for Today

Introduction: Russia and the United States

Between 1947 and 1991, the United States and the Soviet Union (USSR) were locked in a struggle called the Cold War. The two superpowers built thousands of nuclear weapons capable of destroying civilization and extended their influence across the globe. The U.S.-Soviet rivalry drove the United States to create a worldwide network of alliances and a powerful military. Two generations of U.S. policymakers believed containing the spread of Soviet Communism and spreading capitalism around the world was their principal mission. The breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991 into fifteen independent countries marked the end of the Cold War and the beginning of a new era for U.S. foreign policy.

Today, Russia—by far the largest of the fifteen former Soviet republics—is a giant country. Russia covers one-seventh of the earth’s land and has huge reserves of oil, gas, minerals, and other natural resources. Russia took control of most of the Soviet Union’s powerful military as well as its permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia experienced nearly a decade of economic turmoil and political upheaval. Many Russians felt humiliated by their country’s decline from a mighty superpower to a struggling country with a weak economy and ineffective government.

A short period of optimism about cooperative relations between Russia and the United States in the early 1990s gave way to increasing tensions and disagreements between the two countries.

In February 2022, Russia began a full-scale military invasion of the country of Ukraine, its neighbor and a former member of the Soviet Union. The result has been the largest war in Europe since the Second World War. The war has led to the deaths of tens of thousands of people and forced millions of Ukrainians from their homes. The United States and its European allies see the invasion as an extremely serious threat to their security and have been supplying weapons and providing training to the Ukrainian military. There are concerns that the war could spread to other countries or even lead to the use of nuclear weapons. How to address the war in Ukraine and the U.S. relationship with Russia is a matter of serious debate.

In the coming days, you will consider the U.S.-Russia relationship and take part in this debate. You will read about the long history of relations that has varied between cooperation and hostility. You will consider how the fall of the Soviet Union has affected Russia’s political and economic development. Then you will consider U.S. policy toward Russia. You will grapple with the same questions that face U.S. policymakers:

• How do Russian policies affect the United States?
• What policies should the United States adopt to manage its relationship with Russia?
• Should the United States and Russia cooperate on issues like nuclear weapons, climate change, and terrorism?

Why Was It Called the Cold War?

The U.S.-Soviet conflict was called the Cold War because the two countries avoided direct military conflict with each other, which would have been a “hot war.” Instead, the United States and Soviet Union built up their nuclear weapon arsenals and threatened each other with annihilation should the other try to invade or launch an attack. The United States relied on the policies of “deterrence” (threatening overwhelming force to prevent potential attacks) and “containment” (using force and diplomacy to isolate and limit potential threats from the Soviet Union) during the Cold War. Both nations also engaged in wars and military interventions around the globe in order to aid governments they supported or overthrow those they opposed. In pursuing these policies, U.S. and Soviet officials attempted to force the other nations of the world to choose a side in this sweeping global conflict.
Russia and the United States: Perspectives from History—Choices for Today

Teacher Resource Book

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U.S. and Soviet Propaganda

**Objectives**

**Students will:** Analyze portrayals of the United States on posters made in the Soviet Union.

Assess a comic book that contributed to U.S. impressions of the Soviet Union.

Consider the role of propaganda in international politics.

**Required Reading**


**Videos**

Short videos that you may find useful for this lesson are available at <www.choices.edu/russia>.

- “What can art reveal about history or current events?” (Professor Ian Alden Russell)
- “How do you go about analyzing a work of art?” (Professor Ian Alden Russell)

**Resources**

A slideshow of the images used in this lesson is available at <www.choices.edu/russia>.

- “Soviet Posters of the United States” (TRB 18-21)
- “A U.S. Perspective of Communism” (TRB 22-25)

**In the Classroom**

1. **Focus Question**—Write the question “What is propaganda?” on the board. Have the class brainstorm; record their ideas. Can students give examples of propaganda from history or today? Is it possible to recognize propaganda? How? Play the short video “What can art reveal about history or current events?” by Professor Ian Alden Russell. Ask students to explain what Russell means when he says, “And those images weren’t truthful representations. They were interpretations.”

2. **Work in Groups**—Tell students they are going to analyze U.S. and Soviet artists’ representations of communism and capitalism. Play the video “How do you go about analyzing a work of art?” by Professor Ian Alden Russell to introduce students to a framework for analysis.

Divide the class into groups of three-to-four students and distribute the handouts to each group. (You might choose one of the posters to model the analysis method of description, deduction, and speculation with the whole class.) Groups should work through and discuss the questions pertaining to each source. Have one member of each group record their group’s responses on the worksheet.

3. **Share Conclusions**—Ask groups to share their findings and compare answers with the other groups. Invite students to share their impressions of “Soviet Posters about the United States.” What is the overall image of U.S. society depicted in the posters? How is the role of poverty and class in the United States presented? How is the Soviet Union portrayed?

Invite students to share their impressions of the comic book, “This Godless Communism.” How does this source portray Soviet communism?

What do each of these sources have in common? How are these sources different? What do students think was the goal of the authors/artists of these sources? What emotions do the sources try to convey? Was one of the sources more effective at achieving its purpose? Why?

4. **Make Connections and Discussion**—Ask students what impressions they hold of the Soviet Union. What has contributed to those impressions? Ask students how public perceptions may have affected international politics during the Cold War.

Ask students what impression they hold of Russia today. Ask them to identify the sources of these impressions. For example, are they news stories, social media, or popular culture? Are students aware of impressions that Russians have of the United States today? Does propaganda play a role in forming these impressions? Challenge students to identify an argument in support of the use of
propaganda by governments and one that argues against its use.

Remind students to use evidence and concrete examples from the images, their readings, and other sources to support their claims during discussion.

Extra Challenges

1. Persuasive Writing: Have students draft a short, evidence-based, persuasive essay about one of the Soviet posters or “This Godless Communism” in response to the prompt: “This source misleads more than it enlightens.” Students should write in the third person, and gather and cite evidence from the readings and other sources.

2. Art Analysis: Have students research propaganda posters of the Cold War using the internet. Tell them to choose a poster that they find interesting or compelling. Students should prepare a short presentation for the class in which they provide a very brief overview of the image. To describe the images, students should use the method of “description, deduction, and speculation,” as explained by Professor Ian Alden Russell in the video, “How do you analyze a work of art?”

Homework

Soviet Posters of the United States

Instructions: Soviet films, newspapers, and posters typically portrayed an image of the United States as a society dominated by inequality, racism, poverty, and violence. Look carefully at the poster(s) your teacher has assigned you. Answer the questions on the handout. Be prepared to share your answers with the class.

**Poster 1**

1. **Description**
   What do you see? Provide at least five details about the poster.

   a. 
   
   b. 
   
   c. 
   
   d. 
   
   e. 

2. **Deduction**
   a. What do the details you have noticed in the poster make you think about or feel?
   
   b. How do the details connect to what you know about relations between the Soviet Union and the United States?

3. **Speculation**
   a. What do you think the artist is trying to make you think about or feel?
   
   b. What political, cultural, or social ideas do you think the image is trying to show? What do you think the artist’s message is?
"Only rich people enjoy abundance there, and we want abundance for everyone."

"Around 20 million Americans don’t have the money to buy more than one liter of milk per month and six kilograms of meat per year."

Name: ____________________________

Poster 1

Prep. - Brown University Department of History • www.chioes.eu
1. Description
What do you see? Provide at least five details about the poster.

a. 

b. 

c. 

d. 

e. 

2. Deduction
a. What do the details you have noticed in the poster make you think about or feel?

b. How do the details connect to what you know about relations between the Soviet Union and the United States?

3. Speculation
a. What do you think the artist is trying to make you think about or feel?

b. What political, cultural, or social ideas do you think the image is trying to show? What do you think the artist’s message is?
Poster 2

“We spread life!”

“Two worlds—two plans”

“They sow death!”
A U.S. Perspective of Communism

Instructions: The Catholic Guild published Treasure Chest from 1946-1971. Treasure Chest was a comic book designed to inspire citizenship, morality, and patriotism. It was distributed in Catholic schools throughout the United States. Below is an excerpt from a 1961 issue depicting what life in the United States might be like if it fell under communist control. Read the excerpt and answer the questions on the handout. Be prepared to share your answers with the class.

Comic Strip: “This Godless Communism”

1. Description
What do you see? Provide at least five details about the comic.

a.

b.

c.

d.

e.

2. Deduction
a. What do the details you have noticed in the comic make you think about or feel?

b. How do the details connect to what you know about relations between the Soviet Union and the United States?

3. Speculation
a. What do you think the artist is trying to make you think about or feel?

b. What political, cultural, or social ideas do you think the comic strip is trying to show? What do you think the artist’s message is?
This GODLESS COMMUNISM

COMMUNISM! WHAT IS IT? HOW DID IT GET STARTED? WHERE IS IT GOING? THIS SCHOOL YEAR WE ARE GOING TO SEE WHAT MAKES COMMUNISM TICK BY TAKING A LOOK AT THE MAIN PARTS OF ITS HISTORY----WITH PARTICULAR EMPHASIS ON ITS HISTORY IN RUSSIA.

NOVEMBER 7, 1917----COMMUNISTS SEIZE PETERGRAD.

MODERN COMMUNISM CAME TO RUSSIA THROUGH VIOLENCE AND BLOODSHED. A REVOLUTION WAS DIRECTED BY A SMALL GROUP OF MEN WHO URGED THE PEOPLE TO ATTACK THEI REPRESENTATIVE GOVERNMENT. THE PEOPLE DID SO BECAUSE THEY THOUGHT THE COMMUNISTS WOULD HELP THEM LEAD A MORE COMFORTABLE LIFE. THE PEOPLE DID NOT REALIZE THAT FOR THIS PROMISE OF AN EASIER LIFE THEY WERE GIVING UP THEIR FREEDOM!
Since that fateful day in 1917, communism has grown by leaps and bounds. Today almost one third of the world is communist territory, and communist leaders have their eyes on the United States, too. The following story tells you what a family's life would be like in a communist United States.

Treasure Chest

This is the voice of your communist government speaking. Today, communist forces have completed the occupation of your country. The United States no longer exists. It is now the Union of Soviet States of America! Long live the U.S.S.A.!!

But a surprise awaits them at the church door...

It says the church property has been taken over by the government. They're going to make a communist museum out of it!

What do we do now, dad?

We should have done our thinking and praying before this happened, Bill. But it is never too late. Let's go to church and ask God's help.

Click!

The next day, many questions are answered...

And it says all the Catholic priests and sisters are being sent to a labor camp! Those who resist will be killed!

They can't do this! Let's write our representative in Washington!

But Bill, we don't have a representative government any more. We have to do what the communists tell us to do!
"...IN FACT, THE GOVERNMENT ISN'T EVEN IN WASHINGTON ANY MORE. IT'S BEING MOVED TO CHICAGO."

THEY'VE TAKEN OVER CHICAGO'S BIGGEST BUILDING WITHOUT EVEN ASKING!

"THE COMMUNISTS ARE DESTROYING MOST OF WASHINGTON."

AND MR. GIRARD TOLD ME THAT MOST OF OUR GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS HAVE DISAPPEARED!

ALL EXCEPT THOSE WHO HAVE ACCEPTED COMMUNISM!

WELL, I'LL SHOW 'EM. I'M GOING DOWN TO THE NEWSPAPER! WE'LL SEE ABOUT THIS!!

BUT AT THE NEWSPAPER, WHERE BILL WAS A COPY BOY....

THIS NEWSPAPER IS NO LONGER IN BUSINESS. ONLY THE OFFICIAL GOVERNMENT PAPER WILL BE PUBLISHED FROM NOW ON. AND ONLY THE GOVERNMENT TV AND RADIO STATION WILL BE HEARD.

AND ON HIS WAY HOME, BILL LEARNS MORE.

BILL, NEWSPAPER WORKERS AREN'T THE ONLY ONES. ALL BUSINESS CONCERNS HAVE BEEN TAKEN OVER, AND THE OFFICERS OF THE LABOR UnIONS HAVE BEEN REPLACED BY COMMUNISTS.