

RESOURCE LIBRARY
ACTIVITY : 1 HR

From Ally to Enemy: The American Perception of the Soviet Union from 1920 to 1950

Students analyze the changing perception of the Soviet Union in the eyes of American citizens from 1920 to 1950 by examining visual and written primary sources from the period.

GRADES

9 - 12+

SUBJECTS

Social Studies, U.S. History, World History

CONTENTS

5 Images, 3 PDFs, 1 Link

OVERVIEW

Students analyze the changing perception of the Soviet Union in the eyes of American citizens from 1920 to 1950 by examining visual and written primary sources from the period.

For the complete activity with media resources, visit:

<http://www.nationalgeographic.org/activity/ally-enemy-american-perception-soviet-union-1920-1950/>

Program

KILLING
KENNEDY

DIRECTIONS

1. Activate prior knowledge about American and Soviet relations.

Ask students to share what they already know about the Soviet Union. Prompt students to suggest that the Soviet Union was our ally in World War II and was at odds with America during the Cold War. Explain to students that they are going to assess this shift in relations by analyzing a series of primary sources, so they will be able to answer the question: How did the Soviet Union become the enemy of the United States?

Explain the learning objectives and skills addressed in the activity. Inform students they will be assessed at the end of the activity by analyzing a primary source they have never seen before. Remind students that active participation and engagement throughout the activity will ensure they have the historical knowledge and skills to analyze the new primary source at the end of activity.

2. Students analyze American propaganda from the 1920s.

Tell students that as a class they are going to use primary sources to examine how Americans felt about the Soviet Union and communism during the 1920s. Display the first political cartoon from the Resource Carousel, and review it with students. Ask the following questions and ensure students are recording answers in their notebooks.

- *In this political cartoon, what people, places, and things are represented? List all that you can identify.*
- *Analyze the items you identified above. What does each person, place, or thing symbolize? How do they indicate Americans' perception of the Soviet Union and communism?*
- *What message is the artist trying to convey about American and Soviet relations?*

Then, display the second political cartoon and instruct students to analyze it. Repeat the same questions above, and have students record their answers again. Allow students to first work on their answers independently. If you wish, students can then share their responses with a partner or small group. Review answers together as a class.

3. Have a class discussion about American perceptions of and attitudes toward the Soviet Union during the 1920s.

After students have reviewed both political cartoons, bring the class back together. Ask:

- *Based on the cartoons, how did Americans perceive the Soviet Union in this time period?*

- *Why did Americans have this attitude? What about the Soviet Union caused Americans to maintain a negative attitude?* [To answer this question, students need to connect to prior knowledge about Americans' perceptions of communism.]

4. Analyze photos from World War II to examine changing American attitudes toward the Soviet Union.

Project the first World War II photograph, an American soldier and a Russian soldier, for students to see. Tell students this photo was taken during the middle of World War II. Ask: *How does this photograph convey a different view than the cartoons we just analyzed?*

Then, project the second World War II photograph, The Big 3, for students to see. Tell students this photo depicts the leaders of Great Britain, the United States, and the Soviet Union meeting during World War II. Ask:

- *Why would these three leaders be meeting?*
- *Do these photos depict a different attitude that Americans held toward the Soviet Union? If yes, what is the attitude and how do many Americans feel at this point in time?*
- *Based on your knowledge of the period, what caused this shift in American attitudes toward the Soviet Union?*

5. Analyze Churchill's Iron Curtain speech.

Distribute the Iron Curtain and Cold War America worksheet to students and ask them to read the questions. Tell them they are going to read an excerpt from Winston Churchill's Iron Curtain speech, and then answer the questions they have just read. Ask students to read the speech, and then have them answer the guided questions on their worksheet. After working independently for 10 minutes, have students pair with a partner to review their answers and prepare for a whole class discussion.

6. Conduct a class discussion about Churchill's Iron Curtain speech and American perceptions of and attitudes toward the Soviet Union during the late 1940s.

Discuss student responses to the guided questions on the Iron Curtain and Cold War America handout. Ask a volunteer to describe the tone of Churchill's speech. Then, ask the following questions:

- *What attitude toward the Soviet Union does this speech highlight? Is it different from previous attitudes? If yes, how do many Americans now feel about the Soviet Union?*
- *Based on your knowledge of the period, what caused this shift in American attitudes toward the Soviet Union?*

7. Compare historical American viewpoints to answer the question: *How did the Soviet Union become the enemy of the United States?*

Review with students what they have learned so far about American perceptions of the Soviet Union during the 1920s, 1940s, and 1950s. Ask: *How did the Soviet Union become the enemy of the United States?*

Tip

Check for understanding throughout the lesson by asking students to summarize Americans' attitudes toward the Soviet Union at different points in time.

Tip

Facilitate student thinking by pushing the students to support their answers to the questions in Steps 2 and 5 with evidence from the primary sources. Avoid telling students the answers if they are stuck. Pose additional questions to support student thinking.

Modification

In Step 3, instead of photos, show selections from the 1944 American propaganda film *Song of Russia* to analyze the way Americans' attitudes toward the Soviet Union evolved over time. For selections and guiding questions, see the Other Notes in the Preparation section.

Formal Assessment

Explain to students they now need to test their ability to interpret and analyze historical sources by connecting these sources to their previous content knowledge. Display the Assessment primary source and have students analyze it by answering the questions on the From Ally to Enemy Assessment worksheet. Have students work independently to complete the assessment and collect their responses.

Collect students' From Ally to Enemy Assessment worksheets and check for accuracy in their responses using the From Ally to Enemy Assessment Answer Key.

Extending the Learning

Ask students to imagine they are advisers to President Truman at the end of World War II. As Truman's National Security Council, have students imagine they have heard Winston Churchill speak about the dangers of the Soviet Union's "Iron Curtain" as it spreads across Europe. Together, ask students to brainstorm potential measures the United States could take to stop the spread of the Iron Curtain. Potential responses include:

- Open warfare against the Soviet Union
- Nuclear deterrence
- Open a diplomatic relationship with the Soviet Union to discourage expansion
- Actively discourage the Soviet Union's expansion/development

After brainstorming, divide students into groups and assign each group one potential policy. Ask each group to brainstorm potential pros and cons of each policy choice. After groups work together to weigh potential pros and cons, call the class back together to review the policy choices.

After discussion, have students read George Kennan's "[Long Telegram](#)." This primary source document explains the American policy of containment toward the Soviet Union that became the formal policy of the United States under President Truman. After reading about and defining containment, ask students to compare containment with the policies they brainstormed together.

OBJECTIVES

Subjects & Disciplines

Social Studies

- U.S. History

- World History

Learning Objectives

Students will:

- define and describe Americans' attitudes toward the Soviet Union during three specific time periods by analyzing multiple primary source materials
- explain why Americans' attitudes toward the Soviet Union shifted during this period by supplying evidence from primary source materials to support explanation

Teaching Approach

- Learning-for-use
- Object-based learning

Teaching Methods

- Discovery learning
- Discussions
- Multimedia instruction
- Reading

Skills Summary

This activity targets the following skills:

- 21st Century Student Outcomes
 - Information, Media, and Technology Skills
 - Information Literacy
 - Media Literacy
 - Learning and Innovation Skills
 - Critical Thinking and Problem Solving
- 21st Century Themes
 - Global Awareness

- Critical Thinking Skills
 - Analyzing
 - Applying
 - Understanding

National Standards, Principles, and Practices

NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR SOCIAL STUDIES CURRICULUM STANDARDS

- **Theme 6:**

Power, Authority, and Governance

ISTE STANDARDS FOR STUDENTS (ISTE STANDARDS*S)

- **Standard 4:**

Critical Thinking, Problem Solving, and Decision Making

Preparation

What You'll Need

MATERIALS YOU PROVIDE

- Pencils
- Pens

REQUIRED TECHNOLOGY

- Internet Access: Required
- Tech Setup: 1 computer per classroom, Printer, Speakers
- Plug-Ins: Flash

PHYSICAL SPACE

- Classroom

GROUPING

- Large-group instruction

OTHER NOTES

Continuing the modification of Step 3, inform students that as they watch *Song of Russia* they need to examine the characters in the film and consider if this clip shows a change in the way Americans viewed the Soviet Union and communism. Play the film from time code 1:01 to time code 1:05. After watching the clip, lead a discussion, answering the following questions:

- *What happened in the clip? Summarize the characters and events.*
- *What decision did the two major characters reach at the end of the clip?*
- *Does this clip show that Americans' attitudes toward the Soviet Union had changed? Why or why not?*
- *If you believe this clip shows a new American attitude, what could explain this new attitude for Americans? Why had the Soviet Union become an American ally?*

If you have already taught about the 1920s Red Scare and students already understand that Americans held negative attitudes toward the Soviet Union and communism, you may choose to begin the activity at Step 3.

Differentiate the activity pacing based on students' skill levels. If students have practiced analyzing sources often, you may wish to move more quickly to reach Churchill's Iron Curtain speech.

BACKGROUND & VOCABULARY

Background Information

At the start of the 1920s, the first Red Scare swept across the United States. Communism became associated with foreigners and anti-American values. As a result, Americans grew increasingly hostile toward the Soviet Union during this time period. Yet at the start of World War II, Americans were forced to adjust their attitudes toward the Soviet Union as a result of the Soviet-American alliance against Hitler. Despite this temporary positive relationship, after World War II Americans became increasingly skeptical of what they saw as aggressive Soviet expansion across Europe and Asia. British Prime Minister Winston Churchill described the Soviet Union as an "Iron Curtain" descending across Europe. Despite being an American ally in World War II, the Soviet Union became the chief enemy of the United States in the second half of the twentieth century.

Prior Knowledge

["Basic understanding of capitalist and communist economic systems and the tension between the two","General understanding of causes of World War II, American entry into and position in the war, and Axis powers","General understanding of the outcomes of the Treaty of Versailles","Skills in making arguments supported by primary sources","Useful but not necessary: origins of the Russian Revolution and the creation of the Soviet Union following World War I"]

Recommended Prior Activities

- None

Vocabulary

Term	Part of Speech	Definition
alliance	<i>noun</i>	people or groups united for a specific purpose.
communism	<i>noun</i>	type of economy where all property, including land, factories and companies, is held by the government.
Iron Curtain	<i>noun</i>	phrase used to describe the divide between free-market economies of the West and communist economies of the East during the Cold War.
propaganda	<i>noun</i>	information or ideas specifically intended to help or hurt the cause of an organization.
socialism	<i>noun</i>	system of organization or government where all property, industry, and capital is owned by the community, not individuals.
Soviet Union	<i>noun</i>	(1922-1991) large northern Eurasian nation that had a communist government. Also called the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, or the USSR.

For Further Exploration

Reference

- [Modern History Sourcebook: A Bipolar World](#)

Websites

- [Armageddon Letters](#)
- [JFK Presidential Library and Museum: Campaign of 1960](#)

PARTNER



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