

## Cold War Teacher Background

*For Teachers: The tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union grew out of World War II. This lesson is a natural progression after learning about WWII, but if students haven't covered information about ideas such as the Allies and Axis powers, or if they do not have a good understanding about the nuclear bombs dropped on Japan then more information may be needed to fill in these gaps.*

During World War II, the United States and the Soviet Union worked together as allies to fight the Axis powers. However, the relationship between the two nations was tense. Americans were suspicious of Soviet communism (a political and economic system that calls for a government-controlled society where everything is shared equally) and concerned about Russian leader Joseph Stalin's harsh rule of his own country. *This is a very basic overview of the differences in ideologies and it may be beneficial to take time and look at the differences between communism and capitalism, especially if the students ask.* The Soviets resented the Americans' refusal to treat the Soviet Union as a real part of the international community as well as the United States delayed entry into World War II. The Russians had lost tens of millions of their people's lives during the beginning of the war and felt like the United States could have prevented some of that loss. After the war ended, these tensions grew into an overwhelming sense of distrust between the United States and the Soviet Union.<sup>1</sup> Because there was no direct fighting between the two powers, this tension is referred to as the "Cold War." *This is a very simplified explanation which doesn't refer to the times when the war got "hot" in Korea, Vietnam, or Afghanistan. Students may ask about these conflicts if they have heard of them or they may learn more in a later lesson on the decades of the 1960s and 70s. For the purposes of this lesson, the material is solely focusing on the relations between the Soviet Union and the United States, not any pseudo wars.*

A big part of the Cold War was the competition between the U.S. and the Soviet Union to produce destructive weapons. The first atomic bomb was detonated at a testing site in New Mexico on July 16, 1945. A few weeks later, two bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan, bringing an end to World War II. Afterwards, the United States government created two atomic testing sites on islands in the Pacific ocean where five additional atomic bombs were detonated. Tests in the Pacific, however, were expensive and far away from the scientific and technology centers in the United States where the bombs were developed. In 1950, President Harry Truman approved the testing of nuclear devices within the United States at the Nevada Test Site.<sup>2</sup> This site was chosen because of its low population, good weather conditions with wind that blew east (away from the heavily populated west coast) and hundreds of miles of flat, government-controlled land. Even though citizens who lived downwind of the test site were told that they would be safe, there were many strange cases of cancer and other diseases in these areas in the years following the tests. Sheep ranchers in Utah lost over 4,000 lambs and ewes which died of strange causes. They asked the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) to investigate the deaths and diseases, but the AEC reported that there was no connection between diseases and the radiation from nearby tests. Many court cases occurred during the next decades involving the

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<sup>1</sup> History.com Editors. "Cold War History," October 27, 2009.

<https://www.history.com/topics/cold-war/cold-war-history>.

<sup>2</sup> United States. *"The Forgotten Guinea Pigs"*, edited by United States. U.S. Govt. Print. Off. : for sale by the Supt. of Docs., U.S. Govt. Print. Off., Washington, 1980.

ranchers, cancer victims, and the AEC until 1990 when the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act (RECA) was passed which provided victims with sums of money as compensation. *There is a point at the end of the lesson to talk about the new developments of RECA. Be familiar with the information about the bill being voted on currently (2021) found here:*

*<https://le.utah.gov/~2021/bills/static/HCR018.html>. RECA, which the students read about in Document 10, will terminate in 2022. This bill that is currently being debated proposes to extend the period when citizens can file claims for RECA for another 23 years (through 2045).*

The Cold War influenced daily life in the United States in many ways. One common fear that citizens had was about nuclear war. U.S. citizens knew that a nuclear bomb could potentially fall at any moment. People built bomb shelters stocked with food in the case of nuclear fallout. Students in schools participated in nuclear fallout drills (like the fire drills we have today) where students would practice hiding under their desks to prepare in case a bomb went off. The fear of communism also had effects on American citizens. During the 1950s especially, people began to see communism as a threat in their own communities and began distrusting neighbors and coworkers. Anyone who seemed to sympathize with communists was suspicious.<sup>3</sup> The government began looking for people who were involved with communism in any way to identify spies. *This information on how citizens were affected by the Cold War should be the motivation for questions students may want to ask in their oral history interviews. The threat of communism and nuclear war were fears all throughout the country. Witnessing the nuclear tests or experiencing effects of the fallout are unique experiences to those who lived downwind and would also make for great oral interview topics.*

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<sup>3</sup> McBirney, Jessica. "The Cold War." CommonLit, 2017. <https://www.commonlit.org/texts/the-cold-war>.