

Sputnik and the Birth of a New Era:
How a Small Satellite Changed an Entire Nation

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On one fateful night in October, 1957, with a group worried scientist, a gathering of politicians, and a nation of people holding their collective breath, something incredible happened. It was that moment that the Soviet Union gained the lead in the race to space. It was that moment that would be documented as a very unremarkable event that rocked an entire nation to its core. It was that moment that the first artificial satellite known as Sputnik was launched into the upper atmosphere where it remained only for a few months, but the effects of such a feat would be felt long after. Even though it was a small mark in the pages of history, the launching of Sputnik had many long-lasting effects on the people and the culture of the United States as well as our relations with the Soviet Union and how we saw them as a world power.

As the Cold War raged on in the Soviet Union, Sergei Korolev had his sights set on an alternate goal, space. He and his team at the Academy of Sciences of the USSR were working on a rocket capable of launching a satellite into the upper atmosphere. When Sputnik finally launched from Baikonur, Kazakhstan, the outcome was unexpected, “Never before had so small and so harmless an object created such consternation,” wrote historian Daniel J. Boorstin¹. The United States being such a prominent world power took a massive blow when they heard that the Soviet Union had surpassed them in the race to space. As Tiffany Reedy put it, “We never really thought of them as having technology that would be superior, so I think it caused us first of all to panic a little bit because we were worried about the implications of that.”² The United States was never prepared for this situation so the nation went into a “Sputnik Crisis”

¹ Baker, J.I. “Cold War Worries.” *Time Inc. Books*, September 30, 2016.

² Reedy, Tiffany. Telephone interview with the author. Pottsville, PA. October 16, 2016

where fear for everyone's safety was at an all time high. This kickstarted the science, technology, engineering, and math fields in schools, as well as prompting the United States to create its own space program known as the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. Although these new fields flourished because the ongoing crisis, the ongoing arms race caused the government to put new procedures into place, as Mrs. Reedy stated, "That's when you moved into the drills in your school, the duck and cover and the bomb shelters and it was just a different time in our country."³ The United States had sort of asserted itself as a world power after the Spanish-American war, and there was a large sense of competition sprouting from Sputnik as well. As stated in *Sputnik: The First Satellite*, "This small satellite truly changed the world and sparked a new enthusiasm in people everywhere for space programs and for advancements in technology."⁴

Even before the launch of Sputnik, tensions were already pretty high between the United States and the Soviet Union. There were many aspects of pop culture that contributed to the almost villainous persona we had placed on the Soviet Union. Songs, books, poetry, and movies all contributed to our image of them. As Mrs. Reedy thoughtfully put it.

There was a Doctor Seuss book about guns and butter and things like that. There were songs and movies like that. I always think of Rocky as one of my favorite examples when you have the Soviet flag unfurling it was the United States versus them , Rocky vs Ivan Drago. It was pretty pervasive it wasn't just on the news or the history books. People lived that out through pop culture through the 80s.⁵

³ Reedy, Tiffany. Telephone interview with the author. Pottsville, PA. October 16, 2016

⁴ Feldman, Michael. *Sputnik: The First Satellite*. (New York: Rosen Publishing Group, 2003.)

⁵ Reedy, Tiffany. Telephone interview with the author. Pottsville, PA. October 16, 2016

These few examples really show how much of an effect pop culture had on the American people. The Doctor Seuss book known as the *Butter Battle Book* depicts two warring nations that are participating in an escalating arms race.⁶ The book was quite controversial and was even banned in a few libraries because of its depiction of the arms race. There was also a poem written by the Governor of Michigan, G. Mennen Williams, expressing his displeasure with this event. The poem goes as follows,

Oh little Sputnik, flying high
With made-in-Moscow beep,
You tell the world it's a Commie Sky
And Uncle Sam's asleep.

You say on fairway and on rough
The Kremlin knows it all,
We hope our golfer knows enough
To get us on the ball.⁷

The governor of Michigan among many other citizens used literature and other sources to vent their unhappiness from the Sputnik crisis. The part in the poem that talks about a “made-in-Moscow beep” is referring to the beeping noise produced by Sputnik which could be heard on a HAM radio if tuned right. The fact that Americans had proof that the Soviet Union had indeed launched a satellite only fed the fires of fear further. When the governor refers to Uncle Sam being asleep he is insinuating the fact that America has been slacking off and that they just stood by and waited the Russians beat us

⁶ This book depicts two warring nations known as the Zooks and the Yooks. They are at war because one side eats their toast butter-side up and the other eats there's butter-side down respectively. Their hatred eventually erupts into war where both sides produces more and more dangerous weapons to the point where both sides eventually obtain a bomb that will surely bring about mutually assured destruction for both nations, except that both sides are waiting for the other to attack thus ending the book in a stalemate.

⁷ The Beat Begins: America in the 1950s. “Sputnik: The Satellite that Inspired Generations.” Accessed November 10, 2016. <http://www.plosin.com/beatbegins/projects/castell.html>.

to space. The poem then starts to enter into the realm of golf related metaphors which most likely refers to the fact that the president at the time, President Eisenhower, was a do-nothing golfer who would incorrectly manage his events. Finally, the phrase in the poem about getting on the ball most likely refers to the hope that NASA will hopefully land man on the moon in the near future. This poem is a great example of how much the Sputnik crisis affected our society and the way we lived. Books, poems, and even movies all had a huge impact on the American people.

The launch of Sputnik was at just the right time to take advantage of this hatred and stigma against the Russians. It allowed our feelings against the Russians to be prolonged as they had just beat us into space, and thus asserted themselves as the dominant world power. During the interview Mrs. Reedy spoke about the movie, *Rocky*, as being her favorite example of how the Russians were depicted during the Cold War. The *Rocky* movie was about an American boxer nicknamed Rocky, and the main fight was against a Russian man by the name of Ivan Drago. Mrs. Reedy described it as a sort of us versus them sort of portrayal. This movie along with the literary examples show how much the American people associated the Russians with the enemy and what they thought of the Cold War. As Mrs. Reedy stated “we're a very proud country and we kind of like to be on top of things so when somebody challenges us we kind of rise to the competition”⁸ This great feat of technology and engineering greatly challenged our superiority at the time.

⁸ Tiffany, Reedy. Telephone interview with the author. Pottsville, PA. October 16, 2016.

Our relations with the Russians have always been shaky since the time they became a communist controlled country. Because of this the United States refused to fight with the Russians in WWI. When the Cold War began the Russians became the enemy. When Sputnik launched and the Russians broke ahead in the Space race and the arms race our image of the Russians immediately changed. We saw them as a major threat and a nation that had the ability to strike at us from anywhere and anytime. “So I think it was humbling for the United States because here was Russia with some challenge to us.” stated Tiffany Reedy.⁹ These new developments in the Russian’s technology had put our place in the world into perspective. As David Hoffman stated, “I can’t think of a time where we were that afraid, even at Pearl Harbor, even at 9/11,” he stated, “It was a frightening time.”¹⁰ To suggest that the Sputnik crisis caused more fear than Pearl Harbor and 9/11 shows just how much people feared the Russians during this time. This action by the Russians prompted a greater focus on technology and science everywhere in the United States especially in the schools. Once the launch of Sputnik, the government believed that the Soviet’s education was of higher caliber than the United States. The schools adjusted their curriculums. Classes that did not exist were being taught, homework was being assigned by the hour, and the smarter kids had different classes. The schools changed along with everything else in this fearful time. Even though the fruits of this new focus provided us with the Explorer 1 satellite, the Russians were still ahead. The people of the United States were in constant fear from this new threat, and they still fear and dislike the Russians into the twenty-first century.

⁹ Tiffany, Reedy. Telephone interview with the author. Pottsville, PA. October 16, 2016.

¹⁰ CBS News. “How Sputnik Changed America.” Accessed November 11, 2016.
<http://www.cbsnews.com/news/how-sputnik-changed-america/>.

Our image of the Russians has not changed much in the many years before the launch of Sputnik, but with such a small insignificant little event our image of the Russians in our culture and among our people has dramatically changed. Sputnik brought many bad and unwanted fears, but it also helped us advance the STEM fields and pushed our schools to become more competitive and determined. That small satellite changed the world in many ways, but some changes that were made because of it helped boost the United States into the modern age. Sputnik does not seem very important in the history books, but the long-lasting effects it had on the American people, the United States, and its culture will show up wherever you look.

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