“Duck and Cover: The Effects of the Cold War on Education”

By:

Chelsie Beck, Raelyn Helsop, Karen Schnurr, Kristen Weidenmuller
The Cold War’s Effect on Students

The Cold War was an ideological arms race between the Soviet Union and the United States of America, lasting from the end of World War II through to the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Cold War dramatically affected education on numerous levels. Students such as Diane Hess felt its effects in the classroom.

Raelyn Heslop: What school level were you in when you can most vividly remember events that had to deal with the Cold War?
Diane Hess: I would have to say the earliest I can remember is elementary school.

RH: Where and when did you attend elementary school?
DH: Pioneer Elementary in West Covina, California, during the years 1962 and 1968.

RH: What kind of subjects in your school were placed in favor over others?
DH: “There was a lot of emphasis placed on math and science more than anything else, and in talking with your Uncle Greg, who is eight years older than me, let’s see he would’ve been in junior high when I was in elementary school, he said that in junior high there was a large emphasis placed on machine shop and the science clubs.”

RH: How were certain aspects in the curriculum, such as history, covered in your classes?
DH: “History was very pro-American. My teacher Mr. Soden, really talked up America and how great it was and all of the great accomplishments that America had achieved over the last century and stuff like that.”

RH: What kind of views were held in your school and community concerning the threat of Communism?
DH: “Uh, let me think for a minute. We were taught that communism was bad and that there were certain ways on how to see if someone was a communism and what to do if we ever saw one. For the life of me I can’t remember how.”

The Government Steps In

While responsibility of education was generally left in the hands of state and local governments, the Cold War as well as the launching of Sputnik prompted more involvement on a governmental level in the running and organizing of America’s education. In 1958 Congress passed the National Defense Education Act. The NDEA was passed “to help ensure that highly trained individuals would be available to help America compete with the Soviet Union in scientific and technical fields…” This act held many components. The NDEA provided loans for college, improvement in math, science, and foreign language classes, graduate fellowships, and vocational training. While the original goal and mission for the Department of Education was to ensure equal opportunities of education to all students in the United States, it soon changed as a response to the ever growing fears of the Cold War. The idea of the federal government being an active part in education began to extend beyond the attempts to create more highly educated students. A new agenda and curriculum formed that wanted to teach the children about the dangers of communism. In July of 1962 at a National Governor’s Conference, a committee was established and set up on cold war education. The sole purpose of said committee was to ensure the “development of a clearer understanding of the nature of communism” as well as to prepare the “American youth to deal with the menace of communism…” Senator Thomas Dodd of Connecticut in a speech given at the Conference of Cold War Education believed “that many of the blunders and defeats of the postwar period can be traced back to the simple fact that our understanding of communism was inadequate.” Under the belief that by teaching the “history and meaning of freedom” as well as “the history and meaning of communism” to the students within the education system, America might begin to combat the influences of communism as well as stop it in its tracks.

Teachers on the Frontline

Teachers began to feel the pressures of altered teaching requirements and noticed changes within their students from behind their desks.

Raelyn Heslop: Our first question is where and when did you teach?

Doctor Rimby: Okay, I taught from 1976 through 1981 at Governor Mifflin High School in Shillington Pennsylvania, that’s the suburb of Redding. And I guess you could say that’s the tail end of the Cold War.

RH: What age level did you teach?

DR: Uh, tenth graders in world history and eleventh graders in U.S. history.

RH: Were there any changes in curriculum that you witnessed regarding the advances in the cold war?

Chelsie Beck: Or how you taught about Russia?

DR: Okay, one of the things I noticed, although this was not formally part of our curriculum, is that after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan…[the cold war] seemed much more real to the students and so… they were a lot more interested and there was a lot more class discussion when we got to that then what there had been earlier. … The Cold War started to thaw for a while in the seventies and I guess we could say it got colder after that invasion… That was the difference I saw and those weren’t formal curriculum changes and let me say nobody ever bothered me, parents or, or administrators, or anybody about how I chose to teach the Soviet Union. But what I found… there were different levels of student interest, and whenever anything happened in the world students were... understandably more interested then.

RH: Did you use like any media tools …?

DR: Uh, yeah, there again I only taught high school for six years, I can’t say that there was a lot of change. …What I had available to me and I really appreciated this, is that at this point in time you only had three TV networks, and National Geographic would periodically do TV specials on different parts of the world, and they would often do the Soviet Union because there was interest in that. So I had a lot of those kinds of materials available to me…. I also found the news magazines and the newspapers were the… best teaching materials because the Soviet Union was always in the news. Newsweek Magazine was very good, for example: …I think the second or third year that I taught there was a Russian Jewish physicist…. on trial for apparently treasons for giving out state secrets… he was what the Soviets called a “refusnik”, he wanted to immigrate to Israel and because he had all of this high level… classified scientific information they refused to give him an exit visa. And was on trial and there were constantly articles about that in Newsweek. So we sort of used that as a case study as civil liberties or the lack there of in the Soviet Union. …

CB: One thing I was wondering about was regarding… how you taught communism did that change because was it more seen as teach communism as bad…[and] democracy is good. Was that strongly emphasized in text books and reading material or what you taught specifically?

DR: Um, I had a really bad set of text books. So my way of dealing with this was to use the text book as little as possible and to use a lot of out side resources. Films, newspapers, magazines, and my way to deal with it was to… get the kids the information and let them make up their own mind. I was to educate not propagate… I had had… six credits of Czarist Russia Soviet History as a undergrad student, I was really interested in that. And my thought was, is, you can’t make a judgment about a system if you don’t understand it. So I would teach… Marx theory from a Marxist point of view and then let students make up their own [mind], and… is what [is] in the Soviet Union really Marxism as Marx taught it and make up your own mind about it.

CB: Okay

DR: And I never had any sort of interference about how I taught this.

RH: When you took that class at the University was it unbiased or a biased view from [how] they were teaching it. Were they teaching it from a Russia is bad [point of view]?

DR: No it was…, we’re going to give you all the perspectives and you make up your own mind as the best college courses are. But if I had gone to college… in the fifties…or early sixties, I might have had a different experience. I will tell you, in 1976 uh, the school district still required me to sign a loyalty oath.

Shippensburg University and the Cold War

Elementary and middle schools were not the only schools effected. Universities also underwent dramatic changes in the curriculum taught as well as the federal aid that was provided in the form of loans and grants. More of a variety of classes began to be offered at universities including new languages, Russian being the most popular. In the Shippensburg University campus newspaper The Slate languages were often advertised and aimed towards students. One article stated “Perhaps if more people knew Russian, some solution might be reached for the threatening force of communism.”

The fear of the Soviet Union threatened the American way of viewing the country. Universities began to seek aid to improve their science and math programs in order to combat the communist and Soviet Union threat within their school. The plea was that “In the world today, Russia is an ever threatening shadow to U.S. supremacy in any field you could mention… For a few dollars extra (a piece) each year we can educate and insure our country with security.”


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RH: What kind of procedures were implemented to help guard against the threat of a communist attack?

DH: “A siren would go off and as students we were taught to get under our desk and cover our heads with our hands to protect us from a nuclear explosion.”

RH: In hindsight, what kind of psychological repercussions did all of these procedures have on you?

DH: “Well, I can remember a time when you were little and I was working up at Parker and Henifin. I took my lunch break right next to this factory up there and a large siren blasted to alert some worker or the whole building for something. My body just kind of froze up and my first initial reaction was to try and cover myself somehow in the car. Any kind of loud siren like that kind of takes me back to those days.”
Raelyn Heslop, Chelsie Beck, Kristen Weidenmuller, Karen Schnurr
Oral History Transcript
Interview with Dr. Rimby of the Shippensburg University History Department
16 March 2009

Raelyn Heslop: Our first question is where and when did you teach?
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DR: Okay, one of the things I noticed, although this was not formally part of our curriculum, is that after the invasion - the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan uh, people were you know, it seemed much more real to the students and so um, yeah they were a lot more interested and there was a lot more class discussion when we got to that then what there had been earlier. Um, there were a lot of ways, you know the Cold War started to thaw for a while in the seventies and I guess we could say it got colder after that invasion so there was- That was the difference I saw and those weren’t formal curriculum changes and let me say nobody ever bothered me, parents or, or administrators, or anybody about how I chose to teach the Soviet Union. But what I found is you know, there were different levels of student interest, and whenever anything happened in the world students were I think understandably more interested then.
CB: What types of changes to teaching methods were there concerning history, social studies, and math and sciences? So, what were you guys trying to get out?
RH: I don’t know, um.
DR: You’re probably thinking about Sputnik and again that all would have been before my time, I wasn’t even in the public school system yet when the-
CB: So they didn’t have like specific procedures like if you taught about hiding under the desk?
DR: Yeah, when I went to school as a child we had that.
CB: You had that.
DR: And we weren’t doing and we didn’t do that after 1963, after the Cubin Missile Crisis. We didn’t do any of that when I was a teacher
RH and CB: Okay
RH: Did you use like any media tools to try to convey- well I guess this is all pertaining to that. Well, after the Cold War officially ended was there any change to the teaching methods? I mean like before it was kind of, not necessarily non-existent, but afterwards was there a change to the way you taught that?
DR: Uh, yeah, there again I only taught high school for six years, I can’t say that there was a lot of change. What I did, what I had available to me and I really appreciated this, is that at this point in time you only had three TV networks, and National Geographic would periodically do TV specials on different parts of the world, and they would often would do the Soviet Union because there was interest in that. So I had a lot of those kinds of materials available to me and uh, I also found the news magazines and the newspapers were the best, best teaching materials because the Soviet Union was always in the news. Newsweek Magazine was very good, for
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RH: Did you notice more emphasis in the schools placed on math and science during this time like there were more abundances of math clubs or science clubs?

DR: No, no I think there again if we had you been talking about the Sput- you know, earlier in time in the Sputnik era we would have seen more of that, but that was- any changes they made there, they would have made you know around the time I went to elementary school and so I wasn’t you know, I wasn’t seeing that.

CB: One thing I was wondering about was regarding like how you taught communism did that change because was it more seen as teach communism as bad you know, [and] democracy is good. Was that strongly emphasized in text books and reading material or what you taught specifically?

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RH: They did?

DR: Yeah.

CB: Professor Dieterich-Ward said that he had to sign o e in like 1993 or something like that to teach at the University of Michigan. So did you have to sign that to teach here?

DR: No, to teach high school.

CB: Just to teach high school?

DR: Yes.