

DOCUMENTS

Interpreting Alternative Viewpoints
in Primary Source Documents

Reagan and the Fall of Communism

The role of Ronald Reagan's presidency in the final collapse of Soviet Communism and the Soviet empire.



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Teacher Introduction

★ *Using Primary Sources*

Primary sources are called “primary” because they are first-hand records of a past era or historical event. They are the raw materials, or the evidence, on which historians base their “secondary” accounts of the past.

A rapidly growing number of history teachers today are using primary sources. Why? Perhaps it's because primary sources give students a better sense of what history is and what historians do. Such sources also help students see the past from a variety of viewpoints. Moreover, primary sources make history vivid and bring it to life.

However, primary sources are not easy to use. They can be confusing. They can be biased. They rarely all agree. Primary sources must be interpreted and set in context. To do this, students need historical background knowledge. *Debating the Documents* helps students handle such challenges by giving them a useful framework for analyzing sources that conflict with one another.



*“Multiple,
conflicting
perspectives are
among the truths
of history.
No single
objective or
universal account
could ever put an
end to this endless
creative dialogue
within and
between the past
and the present.”*

From the 2011 Statement on Standards of Professional Conduct of the Council of the American Historical Association.

INTRODUCTION

★ *The Debating the Documents Series*

Each *Debating the Documents* booklet includes the same sequence of reproducible worksheets. If students use several booklets over time, they will get regular practice at interpreting and comparing conflicting sources. In this way, they can learn the skills and habits needed to get the most out of primary sources.

Each *Debating the Documents* Booklet Includes

- **Suggestions for the Student and an Introductory Essay.** The student gets instructions and a one-page essay providing background on the booklet's topic. A time line on the topic is also included.
- **Two Groups of Contrasting Primary Source Documents.** In most of the booklets, students get one pair of visual sources and one pair of written sources. In some cases, more than two are provided for each. Background is provided on each source. *Within each group, the sources clash in a very clear way.* (The sources are not always exact opposites, but they do always differ in some obvious way.)
- **Three Worksheets for Each Document Group.** Students use the first two worksheets to take notes on the sources. The third worksheet asks which source the student thinks would be most useful to a historian.
- **One DBQ.** On page 20, a document-based question (DBQ) asks students to write an effective essay using all of the booklet's primary sources.

★ *How to Use This Booklet*

1. Have students read “Suggestions for the Student” and the Introductory Essay.

Give them copies of pages 5–7. Ask them to read the instructions and then read the introductory essay on the topic. The time line gives them additional information on that topic. This reading could be done in class or as a homework assignment.

2. Have students do the worksheets.

Make copies of the worksheets and the pages with the sources. Ask students to study the background information on each source and the source itself. Then have them take notes on the sources using the worksheets. If students have access to a computer, have them review the primary sources digitally.

3. “Debate the documents” as a class.

Have students use their worksheet notes to debate the primary source documents as a class. Urge students to follow these ground rules:

- Use your worksheets as a guide for the discussion or debate.
- Try to reach agreement about the main ideas and the significance of each primary source document.
- Look for points of agreement as well as disagreement between the primary sources.
- Listen closely to all points of view about each primary source.
- Focus on the usefulness of each source to the historian, not merely on whether you agree or disagree with that source’s point of view.

4. Have students do the final DBQ.

A DBQ is an essay question about a set of primary source documents. To answer the DBQ, students write essays using evidence from the sources and their own background knowledge of the historical era. (See the next page for a DBQ scoring guide to use in evaluating these essays.)

The DBQ assignment on page 20 includes guidelines for writing a DBQ essay. Here are some additional points to make with students about preparing to write this kind of essay.

The DBQ for this Booklet (see page 20):

Did Ronald Reagan’s leadership and his ideas play a major role—or perhaps the most important role—in the fall of Communism in the Soviet Union? Why or why not?

- Analyze the question carefully.
- Use your background knowledge to set sources in their historical context.
- Question and interpret sources actively. Do not accept them at face value.
- Use sources meaningfully to support your essay’s thesis.
- Pay attention to the overall organization of your essay.

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★ *Complete DBQ Scoring Guide*

Use this guide in evaluating the DBQ for this booklet. Use this scoring guide with students who are already familiar with using primary sources and writing DBQ essays.

Excellent Essay

- Offers a clear answer or thesis explicitly addressing all aspects of the essay question.
- Does a careful job of interpreting many or most of the documents and relating them clearly to the thesis and the DBQ. Deals with conflicting documents effectively.
- Uses details and examples effectively to support the thesis and other main ideas. Explains the significance of those details and examples well.
- Uses background knowledge and the documents in a balanced way.
- Is well written; clear transitions make the essay easy to follow from point to point. Only a few minor writing errors or errors of fact.

Good Essay

- Offers a reasonable thesis addressing the essential points of the essay question.
- Adequately interprets at least some of the documents and relates them to the thesis and the DBQ.
- Usually relates details and examples meaningfully to the thesis or other main ideas.
- Includes some relevant background knowledge.
- May have some writing errors or errors of fact, as long as these do not invalidate the essay's overall argument or point of view.

Fair Essay

- Offers at least a partly developed thesis addressing the essay question.
- Adequately interprets at least a few of the documents.
- Relates only a few of the details and examples to the thesis or other main ideas.
- Includes some background knowledge.
- Has several writing errors or errors of fact that make it harder to understand the essay's overall argument or point of view.

Poor Essay

- Offers no clear thesis or answer addressing the DBQ.
- Uses few documents effectively other than referring to them in “laundry list” style, with no meaningful relationship to a thesis or any main point.
- Uses details and examples unrelated to the thesis or other main ideas. Does not explain the significance of these details and examples.
- Is not clearly written, with some major writing errors or errors of fact.

Suggestions to the Student

★ *Using Primary Sources*

A primary source is any record of evidence from the past. Many things are primary sources: letters, diary entries, official documents, photos, cartoons, wills, maps, charts, etc. They are called “primary” because they are first-hand records of a past event or time period. This *Debating the Documents* lesson is based on two groups of primary source documents. Within each group, the sources conflict with one another. That is, they express different or even opposed points of view. You need to decide which source is more reliable, more useful, or more typical of the time period. This is what historians do all the time. Usually, you will be able to learn something about the past from each source, even when the sources clash with one another in dramatic ways.

★ *How to Use This Booklet*

1. **Read the one-page introductory essay.**

This gives you background information that will help you analyze the primary source documents and do the exercises for this *Debating the Documents* lesson. The time line gives you additional information you will find helpful.



2. **Study the primary source documents for this lesson.**

For this lesson, you get two groups of sources. The sources within each group conflict with one another. Some of these sources are visuals, others are written sources. With visual sources, pay attention not only to the image’s “content” (its subject matter) but also to its artistic style, shading, composition, camera angle, symbols, and other features that add to the image’s meaning. With written sources, notice the writing style, bias, even what the source leaves out or does not talk about. Think about each source’s author, that author’s reasons for writing, and the likely audience for the source. These considerations give you clues as to the source’s historical value.

3. **Use the worksheets to analyze each group of primary source documents.**

For each group of sources, you get three worksheets. Use the “Study the Document” worksheets to take notes on each source. Use the “Comparing the Documents” worksheet to decide which of the sources would be most useful to a historian.

4. **As a class, debate the documents.**

Use your worksheet notes to help you take part in this debate.

5. **Do the final DBQ.**

“DBQ” means “document-based question.” A DBQ is a question along with several primary source documents. To answer the DBQ, write an essay using evidence from the documents and your own background history knowledge.

Did Ronald Reagan Bring Down the Soviet Union?

Just after World War II, the Soviet Union imposed Communist dictatorships on most of Eastern Europe. These governments allowed no real individual political freedom. Life in Eastern Europe became dull and uniform, and people were frozen in fear about speaking out or seeking reform of any sort. Yet in just a few months in 1989, these seemingly powerful dictatorships were overthrown in a huge popular upheaval that was for the most part peaceful.

It remained peaceful mainly because the Soviet Communist leaders by then had become either too weak or too unsure of themselves to use force to save their empire. And shortly after this big change in Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union's Communist state itself weakened and collapsed. By 1991, the Soviet Union was no more.

Why this happened is a complex question for which there is no simple answer.

For more than forty years, the United States acted to limit Soviet power around the world. This policy is known as "containment." U.S. leaders largely agreed that the Soviet Union was an aggressive state that had to be stopped. However, the huge nuclear arsenals of both "superpowers" made direct warfare between them almost impossible to imagine. Instead, the U.S. hoped that "containment" would check the Soviets and one day force them to change. This long stalemated rivalry is known as the Cold War—though in places like Korea, Vietnam, and elsewhere it often led to actual warfare among smaller states allied with one power or the other.

In 1981, Ronald Reagan began eight years as the U.S. president. He told Americans that he hoped to go beyond containment and end the Cold War. He promised to convince the Soviets to stop building more and more nuclear weapons. He also spoke out forcefully about what he called the "evil" of the Soviet totalitarian dictatorship. More directly than any other president, he called on the Soviets to reform their system entirely.

His efforts to stop the Soviet nuclear arms buildup first took the form of a battle over the medium-range nuclear missiles the Soviets had aimed at Western Europe. Even though millions in Europe protested, Reagan carried out an earlier U.S. promise to place medium-range missiles of its own there to counter the Soviet missiles. Later he announced a very costly program known as SDI, the Strategic Defense Initiative. This was a plan to develop ways to shoot down nuclear missiles in flight.

Many in America and Europe criticized Reagan harshly for these steps. Some said he was even more dangerous and warlike than the Soviets. But Reagan said his actions would force the Soviets to see that they could not afford to keep up an endless arms race. And in 1985, top Soviet officials did choose a more peaceful Soviet leader who did begin to work more cooperatively with Ronald Reagan. In time, agreements were reached to remove all the medium-range missiles in Europe and to work to reduce other nuclear weapons programs.

Mikhail Gorbachev was that new Soviet leader. Gorbachev soon started to reform his nation and open it up to the world. His efforts led directly to the upheavals of 1989 and the end of the Soviet Communist system.

Today, big arguments about Ronald Reagan continue. They often take the form of debates about how important he was in causing the Soviet Union and its Communist system to collapse. The documents in this booklet should help you think about this debate and take part in it. They may even help you decide for yourself which view of Ronald Reagan you think is correct.

Reagan and Communism Time Line

1940s

In his 1946 “Iron Curtain” speech, British wartime leader Winston Churchill warns of Soviet-imposed dictatorships in Eastern Europe. In 1947, the Truman Doctrine pledges the U.S. to aid all those fighting Communism. In 1948, the Marshall Plan seeks to rebuild Europe to lessen the appeal of Communism. In 1949, the NATO alliance is formed to counter the Soviet threat to Western Europe. Also in 1949, the Soviets test their first atomic bomb and Communists take over China.

1950s

The Korean War takes place (1950–1953). Fears of domestic Communist spying lead to the excesses of Joe McCarthy. The CIA helps overthrow unfriendly governments in Iran and Guatemala. The Soviets form the Warsaw Pact. In 1956, they brutally put down an uprising in Hungary. *Sputnik* in 1957 begins an era of U.S.-Soviet rivalry in space exploration and missile technology. Castro takes over in Cuba.

1960s

In 1960, John F. Kennedy is elected. He warns of a Soviet build-up of nuclear-armed missiles. In 1961 a U.S. assisted effort to overthrow Castro fails (the “Bay of Pigs” invasion). The first U.S. soldiers are sent to Vietnam. The Soviets build the Berlin Wall. In 1962, the Cuban Missile Crisis nearly results in a nuclear war. In 1963, the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty is ratified. In 1968, U.S. troop escalation in Vietnam reaches its peak. That year, Soviet troops also crush a move for reform in Czechoslovakia.

1970s

President Nixon begins to turn the Vietnam war over to South Vietnamese forces. U.S. troops are out of Vietnam by 1973, and the Communists take over there in 1975. Meanwhile, Nixon visits China. His policy of *detente* seeks to ease tensions with the Soviets. In 1972, a major arms control agreement, SALT I, is signed. In 1974, President Nixon resigns due to the Watergate scandal. In 1979, another major arms limitation agreement, SALT II, is signed. In 1979, the Shah of Iran is overthrown. Americans are seized in the Iranian Hostage Crisis. The Soviets invade Afghanistan.

1980s

President Reagan takes office in 1981. He warns of the failures and dangers of Soviet Communism. Also in 1981, Poland’s Solidarity labor union challenges Soviet rule. In 1983, Reagan counters Soviet intermediate missiles aimed at Europe by placing U.S. missiles there. He proposes his Strategic Defense Initiative, known as “Star Wars.” In 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev takes over in the Soviet Union. He calls for reform of the Soviet system and begins meeting with Reagan. In 1986, Reagan is hurt by the Iran-Contra affair, in which the U.S. sold arms to Iran to finance rebels fighting Nicaragua’s Communist government. In 1987, Reagan and Gorbachev agree to remove all medium- and short-range nuclear missiles. In 1989, Soviet troops withdraw from Afghanistan. Communist rule begins to be overthrown throughout Eastern Europe. In November, the Berlin Wall falls. The Soviet empire is at an end.

DOCUMENT 1

Visual Primary Source Document 1



Courtesy of the Library of Congress

Information on Document 1

This political cartoon by Mike Peters appeared in the *Dayton Daily News* in 1984. The Soviet leader then was Yuri Andropov. He was one of several aging and fairly rigid top Soviet leaders during Ronald Reagan's early years as president.

In 1983, the Soviets broke off arms talks when the U.S. deployed its medium-range nuclear missiles in Europe. In 1984, Reagan began early work on SDI, the missile defense program that came to be known as "Star Wars." Here, Reagan is seen with

his finger on a button ready to launch a war if Andropov provokes him. His words are from a well-known movie in which Clint Eastwood plays a police officer always ready to use force when provoked.

Andropov was followed as Soviet leader by the ill and aging Konstantin Chernenko, who also died a few months after taking office. Chernenko was the last of the Soviet "hardliners" with whom Reagan had to deal. When Chernenko died in March 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev was picked to take over.