

Topic: Cold War and the U-2 Incident

Historical Thinking Skills Assessed: Critical Reading

Grade Level: High

National History Standards

Era 9: Postwar United States (1945 to early 1970s)

Standard 2: How the Cold War and conflicts in Korea and Vietnam influenced domestic and international politics.

Using the Item: The question assesses students' ability to read critically to identify claims and synthesize information from two sources on the same topic.

Background: On May 1, 1960, a U.S. spy aircraft known as a U-2 was shot down while flying a covert reconnaissance mission over Soviet territory. When the plane did not return to base as scheduled, U.S. officials reacted by issuing statements in which they claimed that a weather research plane had gone missing over Turkey. In fact, the Soviets had recovered the downed plane and its pilot, Francis Gary Powers, and soon revealed the U.S. statements to be blatant fabrications. The incident occurred as the United States and the Soviets were getting ready to hold the Four-Powers Summit Conference in Paris, with an ambitious agenda that included the easing of tensions between the superpowers, divided Germany, and arms control. On the opening day of the conference, Nikita Khrushchev insisted that the United States apologize for the incident and publicly admit to conducting clandestine operations. President Eisenhower refused any such apology, and the conference was effectively over before it could even begin. The U-2 Incident was an important milestone in the Cold War relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union, demonstrating how a single event can help shape history.

Sources:

Brugioni, Dino A. *Eyes in the Sky: Eisenhower, the CIA and Cold War Aerial Espionage*. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2010.

"U-2 Overflights and the Capture of Francis Gary Powers, 1960." *Milestones: 1953–1960*. U.S. Department of State Office of the Historian. Accessed 9/26/14. <<https://history.state.gov/milestones/1953-1960/u2-incident>>.

Source 1

United States Note to the U.S.S.R., May 6, 1960.

The Embassy of the United States of America by instruction of its Government has the honor to state the following:

The United States Government has noted the statement of the Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, N. S. Khrushchev, in his speech before the Supreme Soviet on May 5 that a foreign aircraft crossed the border of the Soviet Union on May 1 and that on orders of the Soviet Government, this aircraft was shot down. In this same statement it was said that investigation showed that it was a United States plane.

As already announced on May 3, a United States National Aeronautical Space Agency unarmed weather research plane based at Adana, Turkey, and piloted by a civilian American has been missing since May 1. The name of the American civilian pilot is Francis Gary Powers, born on August 17, 1929, at Jenkins, Kentucky.

In the light of the above the United States Government requests the Soviet Government to provide it with full facts of the Soviet investigation of this incident and to inform it of the fate of the pilot.

Source: "State Department Press Release #249 Concerning U-2 Incident." May 6 1960. Christian Herter Papers. Abilene. Box 20, U-2 (1). *Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library, Museum, and Boyhood Home*. Accessed 9/24/14. <http://www.eisenhower.archives.gov/research/online_documents/u2_incident/5_6_60_No249.pdf>

Source 2

Soviet Note to the United States, May 10, 1960

The Government of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics considers it necessary to state the following to the Government of the United States of America.

On May 1 of this year at 5 hour 36 minutes, Moscow time, a military aircraft violated the boundary of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics ...The Government of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics naturally could not leave unpunished such a flagrant violation of Soviet state boundaries. When the intentions of the violating aircraft became apparent, it was shot down by Soviet rocket troops . . .

As Chairman of the U.S.S.R. Council of Ministers N. S. Khrushchev made public on May 7 at the final session of the U.S.S.R. Supreme Soviet, exact data from the investigation leave no doubts with respect to the purpose of the flight of the American aircraft which violated the U.S.S.R. border on May 1. This aircraft was specially equipped for reconnaissance . . . over the territory of the Soviet Union. It had on board apparatus for aerial photography for detecting the Soviet radar network and other special radio-technical equipment . . .

Pilot Powers, about whose fate the Embassy of the United States of America inquired in its note of May 6, is alive and, as indicated in the aforementioned speech of Chairman of the U.S.S.R. Council of Ministers N. S. Khrushchev, will be brought to account under the laws of the Soviet state. The pilot has indicated that he did everything in full accordance with the assignment given him . . .

Source: "State Department Telegram from American Embassy in Moscow to Secretary of State Transmitting Translation of Soviet Note Concerning U-2 Plane." Telegram. 10 May 1960. Christian Herter Papers. Abilene. Box 20, U-2 (1). *Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library, Museum, and Boyhood Home*. Accessed 9/24/14. <http://www.eisenhower.archives.gov/research/online_documents/u2_incident/5_10_60_State_Telegram.pdf>

Which of these two statements can be considered more reliable?

- A. Source 1 because it is an official statement of the United States Government (1)
- B. Source 1 because it corroborates the Soviet claim that the plane was shot down over the U.S.S.R.(0)
- C. Source 2 because it provides explicit detail about the aircraft equipment and mission (4) [answer cue]**
- D. Source 2 because the pilot corroborated the Soviet account (2)

Explanation

Official government statements are generally reliable, but not always; therefore “A” is not the best choice. Answer “B” is incorrect because the U.S. government was merely repeating the Soviet claim rather than corroborating it; in fact, their claim contradicted the Soviet claim. There is some merit in “D” because the pilot appears to corroborate the Soviet account; however, there is no evidence to prove what the pilot said. Answer “C” is the best response because the Soviets provide specific details that would support their account. **[Critical Reading]**

HISTORICAL THINKING SKILLS ASSESSMENT

Directions: Analyze the two sources and circle the response that best answers the question.

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