Albert Sabin and the Cold War

**Rationale:** The Cold War is well known as a tense and fearful time in United States history. Lasting nearly 50 years, the Cold War saw two ideologically opposed countries fight to gain international power and control. In America, fear of the Soviet Union was great and those who appeared to be aligned with or sympathetic to communism or the U.S.S.R. were arrested, persecuted, and ostracized. The concept of the two countries working together on any endeavor would be difficult for many Americans to imagine. This is what makes the collaboration of America’s Dr. Albert Sabin and the U.S.S.R.’s Dr. Mikhail Chumakov on the oral polio vaccine all the more remarkable. In the 1950s the fear of polio was one of the few things that may have outweighed either country’s fear of each other. Sabin and Chumakov would work together in Eastern Europe to administer the oral polio vaccine to millions of people in the U.S.S.R. (which had recently seen large scale epidemics of the disease). This lesson should be completed after students already know the basics of the Cold War. While most studies focus on the differences and rivalry between the two countries, this lesson offers a cases study in which the two opponents were able to work together in attempts to completely eradicate a deadly disease from the world. It could even be seen as a minor turning point in the thawing of the Cold War.

**Subject:** United States History

**Grade Level:** High School

**Length:** 1-2 periods

**Ohio Social Studies Standards**


The United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (U.S.S.R.) emerged as the two strongest powers in international affairs. Ideologically opposed, they challenged on another in a series of confrontations known as the Cold War. The costs of this prolonged contest weakened the U.S.S.R. so that it collapsed due to internal upheavals as well as American pressure. The Cold War had social and political implications in the United States.

**Content Statements:**


**Objectives**

1. Students will understand the article, “Birth of a Cold War Vaccine.”
2. Students will be able to describe the importance that Sabin’s work with Soviet scientists had on ending polio.
3. Students will create a piece of writing that describes different attitudes people had in regards to Americans and Soviets working together to destroy polio.

**Assessments**
- Students will analyze the article “Birth of a Cold War Vaccine” in order to answer questions that will describe the importance of the U.S. and Soviet Union working together to eradicate polio.
- Students will create a piece of writing that demonstrates their understanding of Sabin’s work on the oral polio vaccine with the U.S.S.R. during the Cold War.

**Introduction**

Ask students questions about American attitudes in regards to the Soviet Union and communism. Examples of questions include:
- How did Americans feel about the Cold War?
- How did the Cold War affect people’s lives?
- What were Americans views towards communism?
- Do you think Americans and Soviets could work together?
- What would the American public think about Americans helping the Soviet Union?

Asking these questions will encourage students to get into the mindset of people living during the Cold War.

**Procedure**

1. Have students create a timeline of events or a concept map of major ideas to help remind them of the important aspects of the Cold War that have led up to 1960. Some examples may include:
   - End of World War II
   - Truman Doctrine, Marshall Plan
   - Policies of Containment
   - Second Red Scare/McCarthyism
   - Korean War
   - Conflict in Vietnam
   - Launch of Sputnik Satellite
   - Examples of countries becoming communist (China, Cuba, etc.).

   This can be done as a class and is just meant as a brief reminder of what was going on in the world during the Cold War.

2. Explain that despite the fact that the U.S. and U.S.S.R. were enemies there were instances where the two worked together. The class will be looking at the example of the collaboration between Albert Sabin and Mikhail Chumakov to eradicate polio in the U.S.S.R. and to prove that Sabin’s vaccine was safe for use in the U.S. and around the world.

   To give students additional background, *Polio: An American Story* by David M. Oshinsky, provides more information on Sabin’s process and collaboration with the Soviets, on pages 250-254.

   The Albert B. Sabin Archives also have a wealth of letters sent between Sabin,
Chumakov and others. Reading aloud or talking about a few of these letters could also be useful in showing how well Sabin and Chumakov were able to work together. Some resources from the archives (http://drc.libraries.uc.edu/handle/2374.UC/664209) that relate to Sabin’s work in the Soviet Union can be by using search terms such as “Russia,” “Soviet Union,” and “Chumakov, Mikhail.”

These additional resources will provide students with a fuller understanding of the historical and scientific background of Sabin’s clinical trials in the U.S.S.R.

Throughout this lesson, students will be examining why, in the middle of the Cold War, Sabin and Chumakov were able to work together.

3. Students will read the article “Birth of a Cold War Vaccine.” As they read, have them answer the questions on the worksheet. These questions will help them to better understand the importance of Sabin’s work in the U.S.S.R. and the significance of these studies to both modern medicine and history.

After students have completed the article go over the questions to make sure students have a good understanding of Sabin’s work in the Soviet Union.

4. Have students think critically about how different people may have felt and reacted to the collaboration between Russia and America to eradicate polio, by completing a RAFT exercise. The acronym RAFT stands for:

- **Role:** the person writing
- **Audience:** who they are writing to
- **Formation:** the format the writing is in
- **Topic:** the subject of the writing

A few examples of possible RAFTs include:

- **R** = Albert Sabin
  - **A** = Colleague in the U.S.
  - **F** = Letter
  - **T** = Working in the U.S.S.R. on the polio vaccine

- **R** = American citizen
  - **A** = Readers of a newspaper
  - **F** = Letter to the editor
  - **T** = Their opinion on American and Soviet scientists working together.

- **R** = Reporter
  - **A** = Paper readers
  - **F** = Article
  - **T** = Sabin and Chumakov working together
- R = A Soviet mother whose child has polio
- A = No one
- F = Diary entry
- T = Having a child with polio, wanting a cure

The teacher can use these and create other scenarios as well. Assign an equal number of students to each RAFT prompt. Students should use the article they read and the questions they answered, as well as previous class materials on the Cold War to help them write their RAFT.

While writing their RAFT students may want to look at additional information that will give them a better idea of the times. Students can search the Sabin Archives to find various documents and letters that could be useful. A few specific documents that may be helpful include:

- A letter where Amos Christie describes what it is like being in Russia as an American [http://drc.libraries.uc.edu/handle/2374.UC/673930](http://drc.libraries.uc.edu/handle/2374.UC/673930)
- A report on a meeting in Moscow between U.S. and Russian scientists [http://drc.libraries.uc.edu/handle/2374.UC/695548](http://drc.libraries.uc.edu/handle/2374.UC/695548)
- A Department of Defense document detailing steps that needed to be taken to travel to Russia [http://drc.libraries.uc.edu/handle/2374.UC/689825](http://drc.libraries.uc.edu/handle/2374.UC/689825)

A RAFT exercise allows students to demonstrate what they have learned and what they are thinking about a subject. It also encourages them to take a historical perspective on a topic or issue and to think more critically by assessing different views.

**Closure**
Instruct students to complete an exit slip based on a prompt such as: What is the most important thing you learned today. Collect the exit slips before students leave.

**Resources Used**
- “Birth of a Cold War Vaccine” article
- “Birth of a Cold War Vaccine” questions
- The Albert B. Sabin Archives [http://drc.libraries.uc.edu/handle/2374.UC/664209](http://drc.libraries.uc.edu/handle/2374.UC/664209)
- Polio: An American Story

**Citations**

“Birth of a Cold War Vaccine” Questions

Why were Americans as fearful of polio as they were of the Cold War?

Why couldn’t Sabin conduct tests of his vaccine in the United States?

What did Stalin and the Soviet government do that made polio epidemics so bad?

What issues did Russian virologists face when they visited America?

What were some difficulties that Sabin faced while working in the Soviet Union?

Why would people in the Soviet Union be opposed to doing a giant clinical trial with Sabin’s vaccine?

How did many Western scientists respond to the success of the oral polio vaccine trials in Russia?