

Sputnik and the Space Race

Key Words

paranoia	extreme fear or worry; an often irrational distrust of others
superior	better
tension	strain in a relationship; underlying conflict or hostility

When Sputnik, the world's first artificial satellite, orbited Earth on October 4, 1957, the Soviet Union was **ecstatic** and the United States was devastated. Sputnik, which in Russian means "Earth's traveling companion," was the first man-made object in outer space. It was a 184-pound satellite the size of a basketball, and it orbited Earth in an **elliptical** path once every 96 minutes for several months until it **disintegrated** upon reentry into Earth's atmosphere.

On the surface, Sputnik was a scientific accomplishment that advanced space exploration to an exciting new level. A closer look at Sputnik, however, reveals that the satellite was more significant as a symbol of political **tension** between the United States and the Soviet Union.

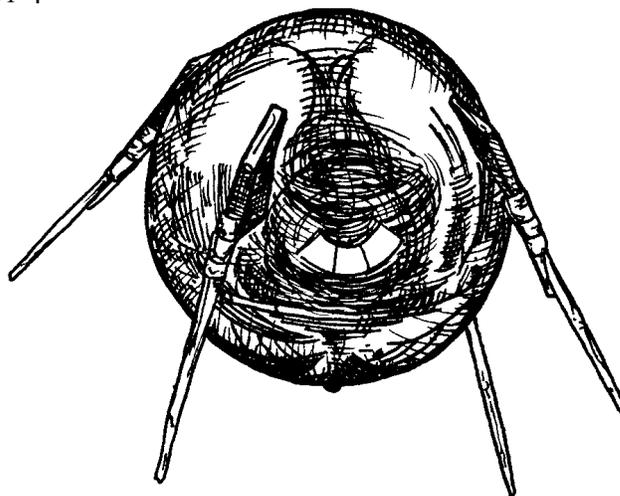
The Soviets launched Sputnik in the midst of the 45-year conflict between the capitalist United States and the communist Soviet Union known as the Cold War. These two superpowers did not coexist peacefully, because they both wanted to be the world's most powerful nation. Each constantly tried to outdo the other militarily, politically, and technologically. Meanwhile, an organization called the International Council of Scientific Unions declared that July of 1957 through December of 1958 would be an **optimal** time to launch an artificial satellite. Both the United States and the Soviet Union strived to be the nation to accomplish this feat.

The United States concentrated its efforts on a satellite called Vanguard, while the Soviet Union constructed Sputnik. With Vanguard far from ready, the successful launch of Sputnik in October sent a wave of shock and fear over the United States. In November, the Soviet Union **exacerbated** America's fears when it launched Sputnik II, a much bigger satellite that brought a dog named Laika into space. In December, the

United States attempted to launch Vanguard, but the satellite exploded seconds after takeoff. The space race had begun, and the Soviet Union was winning.

The triumph of the Soviet Union severely **heightened** Cold War **paranoia** in America. Americans figured that if the Soviets could launch satellites into space, they could launch military weapons at the United States. Many people saw Sputnik as evidence that the Soviet Union was technologically **superior**. For a number of Americans, this fear did not **subside** until the United States became the first nation to put a man on the moon in 1969.

The space race continued for many years, and the Cold War did not end until 1991. Since 1998, Russia and the United States, in conjunction with several other nations, have been partners in the International Space Station project. The International Space Station is proof that the cooperation of these two nations is a lot less complicated today than it was when Sputnik was in orbit.



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Comprehension Questions

Identifying the main idea

1. What is the main idea of the story?
 - a. Sputnik was proof that the Soviet Union was technologically superior to the United States.
 - b. Sputnik proved that it was possible to launch artificial satellites into space.
 - c. Sputnik symbolized the tension between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

Recalling a fact

2. How often did Sputnik make an elliptical orbit around Earth?
 - a. once every 96 minutes
 - b. once every 96 days
 - c. twice every 96 minutes

Getting meaning from the context

3. What does **heightened** mean in this story?
 - a. increased
 - b. stretched upward
 - c. made taller

Making connections within the text

4. Why did Sputnik II exacerbate America's fears?
 - a. Because Sputnik II carried dogs into space.
 - b. Because Vanguard had exploded just after takeoff.
 - c. Because the Soviet Union launched two satellites before the U.S. launched one.

Connecting the author's and the reader's ideas

5. Why did putting a man on the moon cause many Americans' paranoia about the Soviet Union to subside?

Developing vocabulary

6. Write the number for the word in column 1 in front of its antonym in column 2.

1. ecstatic	a. ____ increase
2. tension	b. ____ worst
3. optimal	c. ____ devastated
4. superior	d. ____ solidify
5. subside	e. ____ inferior
6. disintegrate	f. ____ relief

Attending to details

7. a. How many pounds was the first artificial satellite?

- b. How long did the Cold War last?

- c. What is one thing that was special about Sputnik II?

Processing information

8. How was Sputnik a symbol of political tension between the United States and the Soviet Union?

Finding supporting details

9. The United States and the Soviet Union did not coexist peacefully during the time of the space race. Write three facts from the story that support this statement.

Enrichment Activity

Sputnik began the space race between the United States and the Soviet Union. Read more about the space race, and write about at least three of the milestones that characterized it.