

# Cold vs. Hot War: A Model for Building Conceptual Knowledge in History

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Students often report that social studies is their most boring and least favorite subject. As a child, Woodrow Wilson was bored by history, later describing his early studies as “one damn fact after another.” Of course, Wilson went on to become an eminent historian, but only after he learned to reach beyond the “closed catechism” of “questions already answered”<sup>1</sup> to the exciting themes and processes that gave those facts meaning. Central to Wilson’s discovery were questions that guide inquiry in the field, procedures that experts use to carry out this inquiry, and generalizations, principles or theories that frame the results of that process. Together, these big ideas comprise the conceptual backbone that holds the narratives of history together. Taking time to identify the big ideas in a lesson, unit, or course, insures that teachers do not drown students in too much minutiae. And coming to grips with essential concepts provides the best chance for students to construct deep knowledge structures that will transfer to contexts beyond the classroom.

## Conceptual Knowledge in History and Other Fields

Although concepts abound in history, it is often more difficult to provide concrete examples for students than it is in the physical sciences or even the social sciences. To help in this process, the teacher might wish to consider the nature of conceptual knowledge (CK) as it has been alternatively described by social studies experts:

- CK includes a set of analytical questions that guide inquiry within a structured discipline (e.g., “what conditions existed when Revolution A began and how does this compare with Revolutions B and C?”);
- CK includes the theories, prin-

ciples, or generalizations one can extrapolate from content within the discipline—the products of the disciplined inquiry (e.g., “components a, b, and c reflect a reasonable recipe for revolution in a society of type A”).

- CK involves habits of mind—in this case, a set of disciplinary dispositions and procedures held or employed by experts (e.g., “when studying a revolutionary event, never take a source of information at face value; always consider the perspective, motives, and credibility of eyewitness, contemporary, and secondary sources”).

As the process of framing questions, deriving generalizations, and forming

habits of mind unfolds, a by-product is the development of human intellectual constructions we call concepts. In history, a concept such as “revolution” is seldom black or white. Asking the right analytical questions leads to a continuum of generalizations about revolutionary conditions. Furthermore, it invokes a set of disciplinary processes which themselves exist along a continuum. For example, sources do not exist as simply credible or not credible; they are “more or less” credible relative to each other. By examining historical phenomena along dimensions such as these on a regular basis, students will develop a disposition for understanding human disagreement as it really exists, not as a simple either/or but as “degrees of dissent” ranging from “simple protest” and “riots” to “civil disobedience” and “insurrection” leading to “revolution.” Constructing an effective continuum for a complex series of events enables a teacher to guide students away from the rote learning of events toward a genuine understanding of historical processes.

In any field of inquiry, we come to understand what a concept IS in relation to what it IS NOT. For example, humans would never understand a phenomenon as basic as “light” if they never experienced “darkness,” even though light and dark exist as dichotomies only in theory.

In reality, they exist by relative degrees. In science, an object is not merely “buoyant” or “not buoyant.” It exhibits a degree of buoyancy based on certain attributes and under certain conditions. In geography, a peninsula is identifiable at least partially because it is not an island or a continent. In economics, a product is not merely “elastic” or “inelastic.” It responds to market forces along a continuum of elasticity. In political science, labeling people as simply “democrat” or “republican” sacrifices the complexity of each concept and loses the richness that such conceptual designations hope to convey. It is more beneficial to think along a continuum of ideological views, ranging from “radical” to “reactionary” with gradations of “liberal,” “moderate,” and “conservative” in between. Similarly, in the ebb and flow of social history, people can seldom be identified by such terms as “fundamentalist” or “progressive” without losing the rich textures of historical interpretation. It is more useful to identify the degrees to which people exhibit these characteristics in particular situations where one disposition is defined at least partly in reference to the other.

Once you train your eye, continuums appear everywhere in world history. Concept pairs such as pragmatic vs. visionary, or conservative vs. innovative, serve as valuable criteria for interpreting ideologies and evaluating the goals and policies of governments in different times and places. Another favorite of mine is comparing nation-states as relatively isolationist or internationalist in foreign policy as well as distinguishing different types of protectionist or imperialist practices. One of my students recently based a continuum around whether the Middle Ages should be viewed as a period of collapse where human progress was severely hindered, or a period where new values rose to prominence and Europe simply embraced a new lifestyle. In between these negative and positive poles, instances under investigation were interpreted as a relative mix of

both social decline and shifting values, depending on perspective. Another student exploring the Industrial Revolution in England established a continuum of wants and needs. This inquiry led to questions about whether needs lead to wanting more, or wants lead to needing more, and inspired a robust debate on the connections between invention, industry, expansion, advertising, and the notions of actual versus perceived demand. Finally, a middle school colleague often builds continuums by drawing parallels between romantic and classical impulses, gathering and domestication, self-sufficiency and specialization, monotheism and polytheism, totalitarianism and democracy, and republicanism and empire as means for building conceptual foundations beneath the content of his middle school world history courses.

### **The Conceptual Continuum**

By leading students to view concrete artifacts and events, as well as people and social phenomena, in terms of fluid conceptual categories, we enhance their ability to discriminate the qualities reflected by people in a given context. The more we practice this mental exercise, the more we enhance our ability to carry on substantive conversation about the content of the discipline in general and to transfer understanding to contexts outside a particular academic setting.

The “conceptual continuum” describes an array of classroom strategies designed to help teachers and students grapple effectively with big ideas without sacrificing inordinate amounts of time in the curriculum. The goal of the strategy is for students to take the “stuff” of history—people, places, and events as revealed through secondary texts, artifacts, and primary documents—and manipulate them until underlying concepts and organizational structures emerge and evolve into mental constructions. By observing these abstract constructions along a concrete dimension and then holding them at intellectual arms’ length, students are more likely to arrive at generalizations,

principles, and rules that provide the springboard for further learning. There is a nice byproduct of this process as well: students are more likely to remember the facts!

The following is a specific example of how a teacher can help students develop deep knowledge of the concept known as “Cold War” by collaborating with students as they build a “degrees of cooperation” continuum between the USA and USSR from 1942 to 1974.

### **Specific Example: Degrees of International Cooperation**

**Description:** The conceptual continuum has many variations, but the essential idea is that students are provided materials from which they must derive “anchor points” along a single discernible dimension and then place additional examples between them. In this case, the materials are short descriptions of events pertaining to U.S. – Soviet Relations between 1942 and 1974.

**Purpose:** Building conceptual continuums helps students and teachers identify the deep unifying structures that give meaning to facts and figures contained in course content. The secret to understanding a concept is to discriminate between what something “is” and what it “is not.” The concept “Cold War” in this exercise will be distinguished from related ideas such as “Peaceful Coexistence” and “Détente.”

### **When to use this Strategy:**

This strategy can be used to **begin** a unit on international relations (setting the stage for later content), in the **middle** of a unit (when the teacher wants students to see connections or build generalizations from among factual tidbits), or at the **end** of a unit (as a means to process or synthesize lots of information into a meaningful mental scheme, or as an applied assessment).

**Materials:** Student Handout—Graph of events for rating relative degrees of cooperation. The source used is “How We Got Here: Moments that Shaped



The Russian Vice Consul to New York, Vage Engibarjan, second left, speaks at the Cradle of Aviation Museum in Garden City, NY, Oct. 4, 2002. The museum commemorated the 45th anniversary of the launch of Sputnik. Looking on, left, is Paul Dickson, author of *Sputnik, The Shock of the Century*, and Vincent Suozzi, right, former mayor of Glen Cove, NY. A model of Sputnik is in the foreground.

U.S. and Soviet Views” *Time Magazine*, January 22, 1979. [www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,920031,00.html](http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,920031,00.html)

### Procedures:

1. The teacher selects three of the events, making sure they fall on various spots along the continuum he or she has in mind—in this case: “Degrees of International Cooperation.” The table on the facing page presents an example of three I have chosen, revised for student readability from the original *Time* article.
2. Divide students into triads and give each group a copy of the three event descriptions. *Do not tell them* the title you have in mind for the continuum. The objective is for them to discover a suitable descriptor for themselves. One event is distributed

to each student, who first reads and then summarizes his or her event for the group. Remind students they are to look for what the three events have in common even as they vary along a particular “dimension” or “continuum.” It is important to note that in this case, there is a discernible dimension and a relatively predictable set of student responses. The teacher facilitates the process of eliciting those responses. However, sometimes a continuum may be derived from raw materials where obvious “answers” are not apparent and the teacher serves as authentic collaborator with students.

*Adaptations:* The teacher may prefer having all students skim each description during a “read-around” activity. Also, to enhance visual and kinesthetic engagement, you may ask students to write names for the continuum on index cards and place them at end points on the table, with the

event descriptions located between them.

*Note:* It is assumed that the idea of a “continuum” has already been introduced and that students know the “rules” of this exercise, namely that some conceptual dimension is the target we are seeking and that we must name the “anchor points” (i.e., extremes) of the continuum. The first time you do something like this, a generic example or two should be used to describe both the concept and the process.

3. Survey the class and write various titles for the continuum on the board. Then ask a spokesperson from one group to come forward and describe their placement of “Stalingrad,” offering clarifications and inviting questions from the class as you go. Repeat this until “U-2” and “Nixon Détente” are also on the continuum. With three



events already placed, probe the class for possible terms to define the anchor points (e.g., “friends” and “enemies”). Guide the class to a consensus on names and fill in some intermediate terms if you can.

- Once a draft of the continuum is in place, distribute the entire article and assign one more event to each group. After the groups discuss their respective event, ask a different spokesperson to come forward, summarize the event, and place it on the continuum in relation to the first three examples.

**Table 1**

**The U-2**



**Description:**

On May 1, 1960, Pilot Francis Gary Powers climbed aboard his low-slung, black Lockheed U-2 high-altitude reconnaissance plane in Peshawar, Pakistan. As he traversed the Soviet Union at about 65,000 feet, supposedly beyond the range of Soviet interception and missiles, his infrared cameras photographed potential targets below. But above Sverdlovsk, according to the Soviets, a ground-to-air rocket brought down the U2; Powers parachuted to Earth unharmed. At first the U.S. claimed that the plane was on a weather reconnaissance flight and had strayed over the U.S.S.R. But Khrushchev had captured Powers, the wrecked plane and the film, which he mockingly brandished before the Supreme Soviet.

The Eisenhower Administration suffered the acute embarrassment of being caught lying. Two weeks later, at the previously arranged Big Four summit conference in Paris, Khrushchev demanded an apology. Eisenhower refused it, though he assured the Soviets that the overflights had been suspended. The summit collapsed in an atmosphere of anger and accusation. Later in the year, Khrushchev came to New York for a meeting of the UN General Assembly and left a vivid image in the world’s memory: as a Filipino delegate spoke, Khrushchev removed his own shoe and pounded it on the table.

**The Nixon Détente**



**Description:**

It was an encounter unlike anything the Soviets had ever seen. Vice President Richard Nixon, who had built a whole career on opposition to Communism, came to Moscow in 1959 to open the American National Exhibition, and there, amid the shiny appliances of a model kitchen, he got into an increasingly heated argument with Nikita Khrushchev. “You don’t know everything,” Nixon charged. Khrushchev retorted, “You don’t know anything about Communism except fear of it.”

The odd meeting helped persuade Nixon that he had a special knack for face-to-face bargaining with the Communists. As President, he decided, even in the midst of the Viet Nam War, to fly to Peking in February 1972 and open diplomatic discussions. Three months later he went to Moscow to reassure the Russians of their tremendous stakes in a Soviet-American partnership.

The point of Nixon’s trip was mutual self-interest: the President and Brezhnev signed an arms limitation agreement, both sides now seeming ready to scale down their profigate arms competition. They agreed to save money and pool information by embarking on a joint space venture—the Apollo-Soyuz linkup that came to pass in 1975.

**Stalingrad**



**Description:**

By the summer of 1942, the German armies had driven deep into Russia, and in August, General Friedrich Paulus’ Sixth Army closed in on Stalingrad on the Volga. The Soviets resisted fiercely. As fall and then the bitter winter set in, Paulus’ men inched into Stalingrad, fighting house to house. But like Napoleon, Hitler had come too far into Russia and reckoned with the Russian cold. The suffering and bravery of Stalingrad in that terrible winter became a new myth of an enduring Soviet Union. The Red Army, under Georgi Zhukov, managed to encircle Paulus’ 200,000-man army and batter it into submission. The German surrender on Feb. 2, 1943, was a turning point of the war.

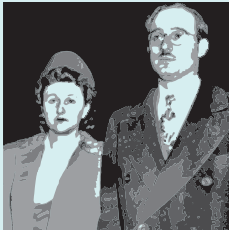
It was an urgent time of shared suffering and purpose. America delivered \$11 billion in arms, grain and other supplies to keep the Soviets going. Allied convoys bringing supplies into Murmansk and Archangel through the Barents Sea sometimes lost as many as three-quarters of their ships to German dive-bombers. Toward the end of the war, with the Americans rolling into Germany from the West and the Soviets from the East, Winston Churchill remarked: “I deem it highly important that we should shake hands with the Russians as far to the east as possible.” The Allies had to settle for the Elbe River, where Americans and Russians at last embraced on April 25, 1945.

Students from Tanja Christiansen's English class at Oppegard Upper Secondary School near Oslo, Norway, work on the Cold War continuum in 2010, when the author taught American Studies in Norwegian schools as a Fulbright Roving Scholar.



Table 2

### The Rosenberg Trial



#### Description

The U.S. monopoly on atomic power ended in 1949 when Americans learned, to their dismay, that the Soviets had cracked the secret. They suspected that spies were to blame. In April of 1951, Federal Judge Irving Kaufman looked down at the defendants. "Plain, deliberate, contemplated murder is dwarfed in magnitude by comparison with the crime you have committed," he told Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. "I believe your conduct in putting into the hands of the Russians the A-bomb... has already caused the Communist aggression in Korea ... and who knows but that millions more innocent people may pay the price of your treason."

The trial, falling in the midst of the Korean War and the red-baiting campaign of Wisconsin's Senator Joe McCarthy, embodied the polarizations and anxieties of the era. The Rosenbergs were executed at Sing Sing two years later.

### Sputnik



#### Description

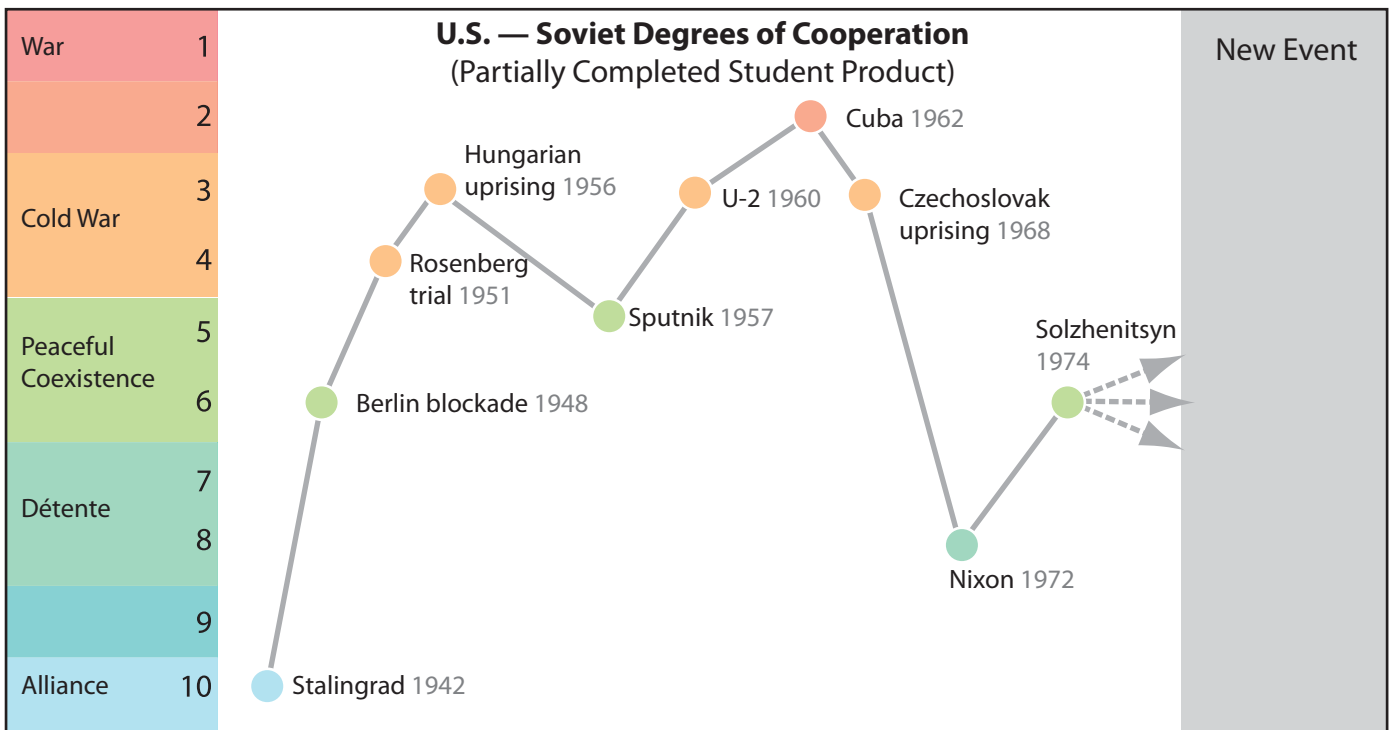
It was the Earth's only other satellite except the moon, a polished metal sphere the size of a beach ball, hurtling around the planet at 18,000 m.p.h. An NBC radio announcer that October in 1957 bade his audience: "Listen now, for the sound which forever separates the old from the new." And over thousands of radios, from somewhere in space, came an eerie beep ... beep ... beep.

The Soviet Union astonished the world with the sophistication of its Sputnik. The technological surprise plunged the U.S. into orgies of introspection. It prompted the National Defense Education Act to provide \$1 billion for more science teaching and student loans. The satellite gave the impetus to John Kennedy's promise four years later to put a man on the moon by the end of the 60s.

Here is a complete list of the events described in the original *Time* article, followed by two more examples of student handouts, revised once again for readability, in Table 2:

- Stalingrad
- The Berlin Blockade
- The Rosenberg Trial
- The Hungarian Uprising
- Sputnik
- The U-2
- Cuban Missile Crisis
- The Invasion of Czechoslovakia
- The Nixon Détente
- The Solzhenitsyn Affair

*Adaptation:* For visual enhancement, let students stand on the continuum holding placards with the name of each event (see photo).



Each student is given a unique event in U.S.—Soviet history that happened after 1974 (see “New Event” in final column). He or she should decide where it fits on the graph, and explain that decision in terms of the continuum. Students should consider what could have happened to cause this event to move up or down on the rating scale.

5. At some point (during or at the end of the exercise), flesh out the conceptual vocabulary you want students to use. It is almost always better to generate student vocabulary first in order to assess whether students have established a grasp of the conceptual categories. However, you may want to substitute some disciplinary jargon (such as “détente”), hopefully without destroying students’ sense of confidence at having discovered the conceptual dimensions on their own. General discussion about where to place words in relation to events will reinforce sub-concepts and the overall idea of “degrees of international cooperation.”

6. Since disagreements will remain following a class discussion, wrap up the exercise by asking each student to create a unique “graph” showing where the events would rank on the continuum, in their final opinion

(see sample graph). You may also ask them to demonstrate understanding by adding an additional event and asking students to independently decide and describe where they would place it on the continuum.

### Conclusion

Teachers have maintained a persistent debate over the relative importance of more or less dichotomous goals in social education. Such debates include concerns about breadth vs. depth, process vs. product, acquisition of skills vs. coverage of content, and construction of knowledge vs. inculcation of dispositions. It is more than mere coincidence that the views expressed during these debates exist along a continuum of perspectives. In just about any conversation in social studies, a conceptual dimension can be identified and placed on just such a scale.

As demonstrated here, the development of a conceptual continuum helps

students view a social or historical issue through a sort of lens or filter anchored by concepts that have special meaning to experts in a particular field, in this case world history. By leading students to view people, events, or other social phenomena in terms of these dynamic conceptual categories, we enhance their ability to carry on substantive conversation about the content of the discipline in general. 🌐

### Note

1. A good publication dealing with these issues is Tom Holt’s *Thinking Historically* (New York: College Board Publications, 1990).

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