



The Unsung Heroes of the Cold War: Pets?

What do dragonflies, dolphins, and dogs have in common? They're just a few of the animals who were used to help fight the Cold War, always unwillingly, and often unsuccessfully.



0:00

Official document titled 'The Cold War'; world map highlighting the USA, USSR, with pawn pieces as markers over Asia, Africa, and South America; spy in a fedora reading a newspaper that headlines 'Nuclear Destruction'; corkboard with events and animal pics pinned and centered around a note reading 'Cold War Animals' all of the items are interconnected by red yarn; two nuclear bombs with respective flags of the USA and USSR; top row of blue military icons representing the USA and bottom row of red military icons representing USSR.

1:09

TV showing a dragonfly on a branch; graphic of an insectothopter flying through trees and being blown to the ground by wind; robotic fish under water taking in water samples through its mouth; pinned pics of fish labeled 'Charlie the Robotic Catfish', drone labeled 'The Skeeter Drone', and newspaper cover titled 'Space Race'.

2:17

Illustration of Earth in space highlighting USA and USSR, blue and red satellites are on either side of the globe; red satellite labeled 'Sputnik 1 1957'; dogs overlaid on USSR map; pinned pic of Laika the Dog; Laika in a capsule in space; graphics of dogs Belka and Strelka orbiting the Earth and entering the USSR; globe surrounded by repeating dog face icons; icons of a monkey, rats, Yorick the Monkey, and Enos the Chimp

The Cold War, a period of tension between the USA and the USSR between 1947 and 1991, isn't as frigid as its name makes it seem.

While the two empires never came to physical blows, there was plenty of bloodshed across Asia, Africa, and Latin America as the US and USSR backed international proxy wars in place of direct military involvement themselves.

Still, the Cold War was largely made up of super-secret spies, immense propaganda campaigns, and the ever-present threat of nuclear destruction. But today, we want to focus on something a little different: the vast technological innovations that came about with the unwilling help of our furry and feathered friends.

One of the reasons there was no direct violence between the US and the USSR is because both powers had access to advanced nuclear weapons— meaning each side had the ability to completely annihilate the other, an idea known as Mutually Assured Destruction.

But that didn't stop both countries from pouring tons of money into their military arsenals in a massive arms race as a way to show off their prowess.

And in some cases, things got a bit...robotic. One animal-inspired invention in the Cold War era was a tiny listening device inspired by dragonflies, because of their stability and ability to glide through the air and hover near their target. It was an Unmanned Aerial Vehicle called an insectothopter, designed by the U.S with help from those dragonflies. It cost the US \$140,000, which is about \$2 million today. However, the insectothopter never actually got used for a mission since it was too easily blown off-course by crosswinds.

Still, all that money eventually paved the way for many robotic projects to come. In the post Cold War 1990s, for example, the CIA also designed two Unmanned Underwater Vehicles that looked like catfish designed to sneakily collect water samples. And these days, scientists in the UK are currently hard at work on the Skeeter drone, which is meant to be a lot like the insectothopter, but hopefully a little more wind resistant.

Animals did a lot more during the Cold War than just inspiring robots, though, especially as the space race got underway.

Building on the military technology of the arms race that would have been used to launch nuclear weapons, the space race saw both countries launching satellites and rockets into space— just to prove that they could.

After successfully sending the first satellite into orbit in 1957, the Soviet Union decided to try their luck sending living things into space. Enter Laika, a stray dog picked up off the streets of Moscow. But Laika's story is a sad one; she died within a few hours of takeoff after her capsule overheated. The Soviets purposefully misled the public about Laika's fate for a long time, because, well, it didn't make for good headlines. But in 1960, there was finally some good news: Two other dogs, Belka and Strelka, orbited the Earth and then returned safely.

All in all, the Soviets launched 71 dogs between 1951 and 1966, with many living to bark the tale. But they weren't the only ones sending animals into space. As early as the 1940s, the U.S. rocketed up rhesus monkeys and mice on suborbital



placed along a timeline between 1940 and 1960.

3:39

Pinned pic of newspaper cover titled 'Men Walk on Moon'; illustration of a waving astronaut on the moon next to an American flag with icons of various animals in the background; binoculars focused on city buildings and a spy in sunglasses and a fedora carrying a briefcase, the text 'Espionage' appears on screen; birds perched along powerlines; pigeon with a camera strapped around its chest; official CIA document stamped 'Classified' with text and images of birds.

5:07

Official document titled 'Acoustic Kitty' with text and cat images; illustration of a cat under a park bench with the text 'Twenty MILLION Dollars!'; cat walking off screen; pinned pics of a cat labeled 'Acoustikitty' and a dolphin; dolphin emitting sound vibrations toward a fish, and surrounded by icons of a gun, mine, camera, bomb, human figure.

6:13

Corkboard with events and animal pics pinned and centered around a note reading 'Cold War Animals' all of the items are interconnected by red yarn; map silhouette of the Soviet Union in red with color coded

missions, with tragic results: they kept dying on impact. But in 1951, a monkey by the name of Yorick survived a trip up to 236,000 feet and back, along with 11 unnamed mice. And ten years later, Enos the chimp successfully orbited the Earth, making him the first chimp to do so.

The animals of the space race helped set the stage for humans in space and for one of the most memorable achievements of the Cold War era. On July 20th, 1969, US astronaut Neil Armstrong was the first human to set foot on the moon, in a giant leap for mankind— and the other animals who helped along the way. But the animalian Cold War contributions didn't stop there. That's because the Cold War wasn't just about working on all of this fancy stuff. It was also about spying on all the fancy stuff the other guys were working on— also known as espionage. And once again, people turned to the animal kingdom for support, with some human-animal espionage operations turning out more successfully than others.

The idea of using animals as spies wasn't totally new. Since World War I, governments had used pigeons to gather secret information from across enemy lines, thanks to a unique superpower: these birds are really good at finding their way back home, no matter where you drop them off. In the Cold War, spies attached cameras to pigeons so they could go and record top-secret areas and projects, and then return home with the footage.

We know the USA's newly minted Central Intelligence Agency, or CIA, also employed other feathered friends, ravens who dropped bugging devices on windowsills, or migratory birds who place sensors detecting chemical weapons. But we still don't really know how successful all these bird plans actually were. The results of most of these missions are classified.

But the CIA didn't just stick to birds. In 1964, they implanted a microphone into a cat's ear, thinking it could help monitor conversations in places like public parks. They also embedded a small transmitter into the cat's skin and wove an antenna into its fur. The CIA called the project Acoustic Kitty, with the cat itself later garnering the nickname Acoustikitty.

The CIA spent a lot on this project — four years and around twenty million. But, to the surprise of no one who's ever met a cat, the project didn't go too well: Acoustikitty refused to follow any directions. So in 1967, the project was discontinued, Acoustikitty was never sent on any missions.

But spies from both sides had better luck with another kind of espionage animal: dolphins. Dolphins are smart, capable of diving really deep underwater, and they're also good at detecting submerged objects using echolocation. In the US, the Navy used them for everything from detecting mines, to delivering weapons, to taking underwater footage, to retrieving bombs, to detecting suspicious interlopers in their harbors.

The Soviet Union did pretty much the same thing, making dolphins and other marine mammals some of the most highly prized animal assistants of the Cold War.

In the end, the pigeons, dolphins, chimpanzees, and other animals of the Cold War helped make incredible contributions to science, technology, and military strategy around the world. Ultimately, the Cold War drew to a close when the



countries along the left side of the map; world map highlighting the USA, USSR, with pawn pieces as markers over Asia, Africa, and South America, and a banner along the bottom with icons of animals and human figures.

Soviet Union itself collapsed, becoming 15 smaller independent countries across Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

And while the Cold War didn't always look like other wars we're used to, one thing remained the same: it was orchestrated by those with power and fought by those without it. From the tiniest space mice to the human beings who died in proxy wars across the globe, the conflict had huge costs.

So when we think about the Cold War, it's good to remember all the lives, both human and animal, that were lost, and to recognize all their incredible contributions.