

# MTV AND TRANSATLANTIC COLD WAR MUSIC VIDEOS

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## INTRODUCTION

In 1986 Music Television (MTV) premiered “Peace Sells”, the latest video from American metal band Megadeth. In many ways, “Peace Sells” was a standard promotional video, full of lip-synching and head-banging. Yet the “Peace Sells” video had political overtones. It featured footage of protestors and police in riot gear; at one point, the camera draws back to reveal a teenager watching “Peace Sells” on MTV. His father enters the room, grabs the remote and exclaims “What is this garbage you’re watching? I want to watch the news.” He changes the channel to footage of U.S. President Ronald Reagan at the 1986 nuclear arms control summit in Reykjavik, Iceland. The son, perturbed, turns to his father, replies “this is the news,” and flips the channel back. Megadeth’s song accelerates, and the video returns to riot footage. The song ends by repeatedly asking, “Peace sells, but who’s buying?” It was a prescient question during a 1980s in which Cold War militarism and the nuclear arms race escalated to dangerous new highs.<sup>1</sup>

In the 1980s, MTV elevated music videos to a new cultural prominence. Of course, most music videos were not political.<sup>2</sup> Yet, as “Peace Sells” suggests, during the 1980s—the decade of Reagan’s “Star Wars” program, the Soviet war in Afghanistan, and a robust nuclear arms race—music videos had the potential to reflect political concerns. MTV’s founders, however, were so culturally conservative that many were initially wary of playing African American artists; additionally, record labels were hesitant to put their top artists onto this new, risky chan-

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<sup>1</sup> American President Ronald Reagan had increased peace-time deficit defense spending substantially. See Chester Pach, “Sticking to His Guns: Reagan and National Security,” in W. Elliot Brownlee & Hugh Davis Graham (eds.) *The Reagan Presidency: Pragmatic Conservatism and Its Legacies*, Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003, p. 85-112; many MTV music videos are archived online. Because of the internet’s mutability, however, links to these videos may change. For Megadeth’s “Peace Sells,” see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rdEupVsL07E> (24.03.2013).

<sup>2</sup> There were, of course, exceptions, but MTVs early politicized videos largely focused on American issues of inner-city drug use, crime, and racism. See Rob Tannenbaum & Craig Marks, *I Want My MTV: The Uncensored Story of the Music Video Revolution*, New York: Penguin Group, 2012, p. 136-142; other musicians utilized MTV for fundraising purposes, such as “Farm Aid” for U.S. farmers or “Live Aid” for African food relief; see *Ibid.*, 211-215.

nel.<sup>3</sup> These constraints led MTV to promote European “New Wave” artists who soon filled daily playlists. The use of these artists triggered a transatlantic cultural exchange that transformed the channel’s look and sound. Because many of these videos were created in the shadow of escalating nuclear tensions, they expressed a uniquely international Cold War perspective to an American audience. In 1987, with the launch of MTV Europe, these cultural exchanges began to abate, and in the early 1990s MTV shifted its focus away from the all-music video format and towards original programming. Yet in its first decade, MTV allowed international pop artists—such as Frankie Goes to Hollywood, Peter Gabriel, Rush, Sting, Tears for Fears, and UB40—to invade American airwaves with music videos that conveyed international Cold War fears. In short, during the 1980s MTV became an important transatlantic conduit by which European artists made Cold War pop culture transnational.<sup>4</sup>

This essay shows how MTV enabled transatlantic Cold War cultural exchanges. To date, historians have added important insights into our understanding of the atomic age, especially on early Cold War culture, atomic anxiety, or grassroots antinuclear activism. Additionally, cultural commentators continue to examine how the 1980s influence modern politics and culture.<sup>5</sup> Yet most of these works are purely American in their perspectives. This essay extends both types of studies. It shows how in the 1980s, MTV music videos brought European Cold War perspectives into American homes. To show this transnational cultural exchange, first this essay briefly recaps MTV’s rise to cultural prominence, an ascent that coincided with the escalation of 1980s Cold War fears. Second, it examines European artists’ early Cold War-themed music videos.<sup>6</sup> In a medium still finding its way, many artists incorporated stock film footage, such as 1950s era atomic explosions, to provide an eerily appropriate backdrop during a decade of nuclear rearmament. Next, it looks at music videos created in response to the “Euromis-

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<sup>3</sup> Rob Tannenbaum & Craig Marks, *I Want My MTV: The Uncensored Story of the Music Video Revolution*, New York: Penguin Group, 2012, p. 1-30.

<sup>4</sup> E. Ann Kaplan, *Rocking Around the Clock: Music Television, Postmodernism, and Consumer Culture*, New York: Methuen, 1987, p. 1-2; on MTV’s early European look and sound, see Robert Christgau, “Rock ‘n’ Roller Coaster: The Music Biz on a Joyride,” *Village Voice*, February 7, 1984, p. 37-45.

<sup>5</sup> Cold War and Atomic culture, see Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb’s Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994; Spencer Weart, *The Rise of Nuclear Fear*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012; on 1980s culture, see Bradford Martin, *The Other Eighties: A Secret History of America in the Age of Reagan*, New York: Hill & Wang, 2011; David Sirota, *Back to our Future*, New York: Random House, 2011; on antinuclear activism, see Lawrence Wittner, *Confronting the Bomb: A Short History of the World Nuclear Disarmament Movement*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009.

<sup>6</sup> Of course, English-speaking groups, largely from Great Britain, had the most success on MTV, although there were exceptions, notably German artist Nena and her antinuclear hit “99 Luftballons”.

sile” deployment, in which American nuclear warheads arrived in Great Britain to bolster the North Atlantic Treaty Organization’s (NATO) deterrent against Soviet missiles in Eastern Europe. In response to the Euromissile threat many artists created videos critical of Reagan for an American audience. The final section examines music videos that commented on the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Cold War’s surprising end. Each of these sections suggests that during its first decade of existence, MTV provided European artists with a transnational conduit to express Cold War hopes and fears.

#### THE RISE OF MTV AND RENEWED NUCLEAR FEARS

MTV launched on August 1, 1981, but even after decades of experimentation with music videos, industry experts still considered the channel a risk. In the 1950s, Elvis Presley’s films paved the way for future pop videos. As television grew in popularity, pop groups began lip-synching in TV promo clips to boost record sales. By the late 1960s, artists and filmmakers—such as Bob Dylan and D.A. Pennebaker’s video for “Subterranean Homesick Blues”—were experimenting with the format. By the 1970s television stations began featuring music promo-clip shows to fill late-night programming gaps. Those unwilling to stay up late might use a new device, the Video Cassette Recorders (VCR), to capture the newest music videos. When market research finally suggested that specialty cable channels could be profitable, Music Television was born.<sup>7</sup>

MTV’s success was nothing short of meteoric. With a non-stop rotation of promotional videos punctuated with consumer product ads, MTV became the ultimate commercial channel. With a modest start-up cost of around \$20 million, MTV had already earned \$7 million in revenue before its second year of operation. By 1983, MTV promoted over two-hundred consumer products to the tune of \$20 million in revenue. By 1984, the channel’s revenue stream topped \$1 million per week, and MTV diversified with a second, adult-contemporary themed station: Video Hits-1 (VH-1). In only three years, MTV had become indispensable to the music industry, reaching over 30 million households. The channel’s success had transformed the music video from an auxiliary promotional gimmick into a ubiquitous part of pop culture.<sup>8</sup>

MTV’s success coincided with a new nadir in Cold War superpower relations. In December of 1979, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan confirmed for many hardlin-

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<sup>7</sup> Other specialty cable channels, such as ESPN and CNN emerged around this same time. See E. Ann Kaplan, *Rocking Around the Clock: Music Television, Postmodernism, and Consumer Culture*, New York: Methuen, 1987, p. 1-2; Gil Troy, *Morning in America*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005, p. 128-129; Tom McGrath, *MTV: The Making of a Revolution*, London: Running Press, 1996, p. 11-21; Rob Tannenbaum & Craig Marks, *I Want My MTV: The Uncensored Story of the Music Video Revolution*, New York: Penguin Group, 2012, p. 1-30.

<sup>8</sup> R. Serge Denisof, *Inside MTV*, London: Transaction Publishers, 1991, p. 1; Kaplan, *Rocking Around the Clock*, 2-3.

ers that communist plans for global domination were alive and well. Communist fears likely helped propel British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and American President Ronald Reagan to power, and these elections marked a return of conservative hard-line leadership on both sides of the Atlantic. The Reagan Administration especially talked tough about re-establishing American dominance in the Cold War. High ranking U.S. administration officials—including Deputy Under Secretary of Defense T.J. Jones, Vice President George H.W. Bush, and Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger—suggested that the United States could actually prevail in a nuclear war. America increased its aid to anti-Soviet “freedom fighters” in Afghanistan, and Reagan continued to talk tough well after his 1980 Presidential campaign. In short, during the early 1980s, the Cold War was again heating up.<sup>9</sup>

In the wake of these events, numerous European pop acts crafted music videos to express their Cold War fears. British artist Peter Gabriel provides one early example with his 1980 single “Games Without Frontiers.” This promotional video predated MTV, but it would later receive rotation on the channel and Gabriel would become an early music video innovator. “Games Without Frontiers” appropriates language from a British game show *It’s a Knockout*, a program which featured provincial teams of contestants in oversized foam costumes competing in schoolyard-type games. At season’s end, the winning team would represent Great Britain in a Pan-European contest against other nations in another program, *Jeux Sans Frontières* (or “Games Without Frontiers”). Gabriel’s lyrics personalize European Cold War nationalism: “Hans plays with Lotte, Lotte plays with Jane / Jane plays with Willy / Willy is happy again / Suki plays with Leo / Sacha plays with Britt / Adolf builds a bonfire, and Enrico plays with it.” These characters—played by children in the music video—represent nations, the exceptions being Enrico (as in Enrico Fermi, an early atomic scientist whose work helped to construct the atomic bomb), and Adolf (Nazi leader Adolf Hitler). The “Games Without Frontiers” video also includes footage from a symbolic parade float: a giant, demonic Ronald Reagan, adorned in an American flag-patterned suit and cowboy hat. The “Games Without Frontiers” video, then, is an early, artful allusion to Reagan’s Cold War militarism and the dangers of hyper-nationalism.<sup>10</sup>

Birmingham Reggae band UB40 provided a second video critique of Cold War bellicosity in “The Earth Dies Screaming.” With its title borrowed from a 1965 British sci-fi film, “The Earth Dies Screaming” features the band performing in front of 1950s era stock footage of nuclear tests and mushroom clouds. In cut scenes, a British working-class family lazily watches UB40’s video on TV. As the

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<sup>9</sup> George C. Herring, *From Colony to Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations since 1776*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 866-871; John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy during the Cold War*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 355-356.

<sup>10</sup> Peter Gabriel, “Games Without Frontiers,” *Play: The Videos*, Rhino/Wea, 2004, DVD; video online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GYUGXuTNSic> (25. 03.2013).

atomic apocalypse unfolds, this British nuclear family remains apathetic. The video's incorporation of Cold War atomic footage and 1950s nostalgia suggested a revival of early Cold War naïveté about nuclear weapons, as well as the band's dismay that many Britons approved of Thatcher-era cultural conservatism. The message was clear: 1950s fears had returned in the 1980s.<sup>11</sup>

In 1982, American artist Donald Fagen offered a similar observation about the return of 1950s atomic fears in "New Frontier." The video features a young couple that seeks privacy in the most iconic of early Cold War cultural relics: a backyard bomb shelter. As they descend into the shelter, Fagen sings: "Yes we're gonna have a wing ding / a summer smoker underground / it's just a dugout that my dad built / in case the reds decide to push the button down / we've got provisions, and lots of beer / the keyword is survival on the new frontier." While underground, the teenagers listen to jazz, dance, drink, and smoke cigarettes. Fagen could have simply used the bomb shelter as a symbolic space to contain emerging sexuality, but the "New Frontier" video complicates this metaphor with animated images of Russian Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs) heading to America. Is the new frontier sexual or apocalyptic? Despite this double entendre, the video's inclusion of mushroom clouds and Soviet sickles suggest the latter.<sup>12</sup>

As these examples show, in the shadow of rising Cold War fears, early 1980s music videos began to incorporate atomic imagery. 1950s stock footage of mushroom clouds or bomb shelters seemed eerily prescient in the wake of renewed calls for fighting and winning a nuclear war. Of course, this was a minor trend in MTV's early days, and atomic themes may have died down if not for a series of startling Cold War actions that culminated in 1983. By that year, videos began incorporating more specific and pointedly political critiques of Reagan's arms buildup and American militarism abroad.

### 1983 AND THE EUROMISSILE CRISIS

Because of numerous geopolitical events, 1983 marks the most alarming Cold War year since the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. In March 1983, Reagan accused the Soviet Union of being the "focus of evil in the modern world." That same month, he introduced his Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), a vague anti-ballistic missile

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<sup>11</sup> UB40, "Earth Dies Screaming" on UB40 Collection: Classic Videos & 21<sup>st</sup> Birthday Concert. EMI Europe Generic, 2002, DVD, found online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cWl69ZOINfE> (24.03.2013).

<sup>12</sup> Fagen's "New Frontier" video makes connections between Cold War containment and sexual containment that are best examined in Elaine Tyler May's *Homeward Bound: American Families During the Cold War, Revised and Updated Edition*, New York: Basic Books, 2008; Donald Fagen, "New Frontier," found online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qBruAooXPNU> (25.03.2013).

program that included putting lasers into space.<sup>13</sup> On September 1, 1983, the Soviet Union shot down Korean Airliner 007 (KAL 007), killing 269 civilians. In October, a suicide bomber killed 241 U.S. Marines stationed in Lebanon; soon after, U.S. armed forces invaded the Caribbean island of Grenada. The most alarming event, however, was the deployment of American nuclear warheads—the so-called “Euromissiles”—in Great Britain. The crisis began in 1977 when the Soviets deployed intermediate range ballistic nuclear missiles (IRBMs) throughout the eastern bloc. When West German chancellor Helmut Schmidt asked for support, NATO proposed a “dual track” response in which the U.S. would deploy its own nuclear missiles throughout Western Europe while simultaneously negotiating for arms reductions. Predictably, negotiations over these weapons broke down, and antinuclear protests sprung up in Great Britain, France, and Western Germany.<sup>14</sup>

These events, and especially the “Euromissiles Crisis,” influenced a wave of music videos that criticized Reagan and expressed nuclear fears on MTV. One early example comes from the Canadian rock trio Rush with their 1984 hit “Distant Early Warning.” Drummer and lyricist Neil Peart appropriated the song’s title from the “Distant Early Warning Line,” or the designation given to northern hemisphere radar stations tasked with detecting a Soviet nuclear launch. Peart’s lyrics make this connection clear: “Cruising under your radar / watching from satellites / take a page from the red book and keep them in your sights / Red alert, red alert.” Peart wrote the song during the band’s 1983 recording sessions, a period in which he followed the unfolding Euromissile Crisis in Toronto’s *Globe & Mail* newspaper. “1983 was a tough year...no question about it,” remembers Peart. “This was the time of the Korean 747 murders, the cruise missile controversies.” Peart’s lyrics were addressing “the threat of the superpowers...nuclear annihilation [and] having these giant missiles pointed at each other.”<sup>15</sup> The “Distant Early Warning” video has a similar, antinuclear theme. It begins with a child who, looking up from his sandbox, discovers a large bomber overhead. In homage to Stanley Kubrick’s 1963 film *Dr. Strangelove*, the boy soon finds himself inside the bomber, sitting on top of one of its nuclear missiles. As the missile launches, the boy rides

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<sup>13</sup> On different assessments of SDI, see Pach, “Sticking to His Guns: Reagan and National Security,” 85-112; Frances FitzGerald, *Way Out There in the Blue: Reagan: Star Wars and the End of the Cold War*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000, p. 16-19.

<sup>14</sup> Collins, *Transforming America*, 197-199; Samuel F. Wells, Jr. “Reagan, Euromissiles, and Europe” in Brownlee & Graham, *The Reagan Presidency*, 133-154; Lou Cannon, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime*, New York: Public Affairs, 2000, p. 274-275, 339-401.

<sup>15</sup> Neil Peart, “Pressure Release: The Grace Under Pressure Tour Book: <http://2112.net/powerwindows/main/GUPtourbook.htm> (26. 10.2011); “Innerview [sic] with Neil Peart,” Jim Ladd, 1984, transcribed by Will Collier: <http://2112.net/powerwindows/transcripts/19840400innerview.htm> (26. 10.2011).

it like *Dr. Strangelove's* Lieutenant Kong, waving his arms and howling while he descends to certain detonation.<sup>16</sup>

Many artists reflected on the Euromissile crisis by penning songs that emphasized Cold War empathy on a personal level. Depeche Mode's 1984 video for "People are People" is a prime example. The song's lyrics ponder the roots of Cold War hatred: "It's obvious you hate me / although I've done nothing wrong / I've never even met you / so what could I have done?" The song's repetitive chorus becomes a mantra attacking Cold War animosity: "People are people so why should it be / that you and I should get along so awfully?"<sup>17</sup> Other videos were more intimate in their pleas for Cold War personal co-existence. Elton John's 1985 hit "Nikita" details one man's infatuation with an unrequited Soviet love. The "Nikita" video features John infatuated with a female Soviet guard he sees "by the wall" standing with ten "tin soldiers in a row," an allusion to the video's Soviet border guards and Eastern Bloc checkpoints. The song's lyrics, "if there comes a time / guns and gates no longer hold you in / and if you're free to make a choice / just look towards the west and find a friend," laments blocked relationships from Cold War boundaries.<sup>18</sup>

The Euromissile crisis led German pop star Nena to pen an international hit with "99 Luftballons." This German-language single tells the story of how balloons caught in radar screens might trigger an accidental nuclear launch. While Nena's music video avoided specific antinuclear imagery, its popularity in America prompted an alternative, English-language version of "99 Red Balloons," which clarified for English-speaking audiences the dangers of nuclear alarmism. British artist Sting provided another popular antinuclear anthem with his 1986 single "Russians." Sting's lyrics lamented over the state of the Cold War during Reagan's tenure: "There is no historical precedent / to put the words in the mouth of the president / there's no such thing as a winnable war / it's a lie we don't believe anymore / Mr. Reagan says we will protect you / I don't subscribe to this point of view / believe me when I say to you, I hope the Russians love their children too."<sup>19</sup>

German group C.C.C.P.'s 1986 music video for "American-Soviets" made the best of a low-budget to express a similar empathetic Cold War message. The video

<sup>16</sup> On Rush's "Distant Early Warning" see <http://allmusic.com/album/grace-under-pressure-r17142> (26. 10.2011); music video online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OlyKwXND5xs> (25.03.2013).

<sup>17</sup> Depeche Mode, *Vol. 1 – Best of Videos* Neri Parenti, director. Mute Records, 2004, DVD; video online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MzGnX-MbYE4> (24. 03.2013).

<sup>18</sup> In 1979, John became the first western pop star to tour the Soviet Union, and likely this tour provided inspiration for the "Nikita." *Elton John: To Russia with Elton* DVD; "Nikita" video online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=89gohJzqNoM> (24. 03.2013).

<sup>19</sup> Nena's "99 Luftballons" found online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=14IRDDnEPR4> (24. 03.2013); Sting, "Russians," *The Dream of the Blue Turtles*, A&M, 1985. Compact Disc; video online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wHylQRVN2Qs> (24. 03.2013).

features the band performing on a large chessboard, with Soviet and American flags in the background. Lyrically, the song references to geopolitical conflicts in the Middle East, and suggests that the superpowers play chess to resolve their differences: “They both send their weapons into space / their people’s problems they seem to displace / the arms race is what they can’t negotiate / why ain’t it chess about what they debate? / What went wrong in the Gulf of Iran / Why did the Russians invade Afghanistan? / Why not save the money for the armaments / and be chess-partners in the tournament?” Behind the band, the flags rise to reveal two silhouettes—the first, representing Reagan, is adorned in a cowboy hat; the second, Gorbachev, wears a bowler hat. Instead of an arms build-up, however, these leaders are peacefully playing chess.<sup>20</sup>

Other artists downplayed personal empathy and instead attacked U.S. President Reagan directly. For example, in 1985 the British group Genesis had a huge hit with “Land of Confusion.” The video was memorable for featuring puppets from the British comedy show *Spitting Image*. It traces the dreams of a puppet-Ronald Reagan who has nightmares about global events spiraling out of control. Alongside Reagan, “Land of Confusion” includes puppet versions of Margaret Thatcher, Mikhail Gorbachev, Henry Kissinger, Ayatollah Khomeini, and even the fictional embodiment of 1980s American hyper-militarism, John Rambo. When Reagan awakens from his nightmare, he reaches for a button to summon his nurse, but mistakenly hits the “nuke” button instead, triggering a nuclear detonation outside of the White House. The video allowed a British pop group to express to American MTV viewers that their President was an inept leader not to be trusted with the bomb.<sup>21</sup>

British band Frankie Goes to Hollywood criticized Reagan in their song “Two Tribes,” with a video that incorporated British Civil Defense propaganda. In “Two Tribes,” the group warns that “When two tribes go to war / a point is all that you can score.” In addition to stressing the futility of nuclear war, they also lambaste Reagan as “cowboy number one / a born-again poor man’s son,” and not a leader fit for the nuclear age. The “Two Tribes” video also incorporates audio from the U.K. Civil Defense films series *Protect and Survive*, specifically the U.K. air defense warning siren. The effect is eerie: as the siren blares, the beat intensifies, and a narrator explains that “after you hear the air attack warning, you and your family must take cover.” This siren gives way to the heart of the video, a fight between a faux-Reagan and Soviet Premier Konstantin Chernenko. Reporters from across the globe cheer this slugfest on as dust—a likely allusion to radioactive fallout—flies from the ground. After a prolonged battle between these world leaders,

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<sup>20</sup> C.C.C.P. video for “American-Soviets” archived online at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ho053l0fUZ0> (24. 03.2013).

<sup>21</sup> Genesis’s “Land of Confusion” can be found on *The Video Show* Warner Bros., 2005, DVD.



others join in the fight; the nuclear war has apparently gone global. The video ends with a model globe exploding.<sup>22</sup>

“Two Tribes” was not the only video to incorporate British Civil Defense propaganda for an American video. In 1986, British group Tears for Fears released its fourth U.S. single, “Mother’s Talk”. Songwriter Roland Orzabal explained that the Euromissile crisis influenced his lyrics: “One thing that disturbed and frightened an awful lot of people...[was] the installment of American nuclear weapons in England,” remembers Orzabal.<sup>23</sup> “Right about the time I was finishing the lyric, the American nuclear missiles were being brought into England and a lot of people were quite scared about it—I certainly was—and therefore [Mother’s Talk] took on a nuclear flavor.” Orzabal’s lyrics are a response to his own nuclear fear and anger at apathy towards the Euromissile installations: “Some of us are horrified, others never talk about it, but when the weather starts to burn, then you’ll know that you’re in trouble, follow in the footsteps of a funeral pyre, you were paid not to listen now your house is on fire.”<sup>24</sup>

“Mother’s Talk” became the band’s fourth single from their hit album *Songs From the Big Chair*, and the group re-mixed the song and crafted a new video for its American release. The “Mother’s Talk” video criticized nuclear Civil Defense and the Cold War arms race.<sup>25</sup> It begins with a family adorned in 1950s-era clothing. As the wife irons, the husband reads his paper and their son watches television. Next, the TV screen fills with a billowing mushroom cloud, and the father’s newspaper bursts into flames. The nuclear war has started. In response the father follows British Civil Defense advice airing on television. He constructs an “inner refuge” for protection; he whitewashes windows to protect against “heat – flash” from an atomic blast; all the family members collect canned goods, supplies, and finally their dog, to await their fate. Having prepared for the worst, they smile and wave as the screen fades to white. The video’s message was clear: suggestions that prepared citizens could survive a nuclear war were naïve and dangerous.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Stephen Thomas Erlewine, “Biography: Frankie Goes to Hollywood,” online at <http://allmusic.com/artist/frankie-goes-to-hollywood-p4304/biography>, (27.06.2011); Frankie Goes to Hollywood, “Two Tribes,” *Welcome to the Pleasuredome*, Repertoire, 1984, Compact Disc.

<sup>23</sup> Peter Standish, “Tears for Fears: Big Hits from the Big Chair” in *Gavin Report*, 17 July, 1985, p. 13-14.

<sup>24</sup> *Tears for Fears: Scenes from the Big Chair*. Shock Exports, 2005, DVD.

<sup>25</sup> “Mother’s Talk” had numerous video iterations. The initial U.K. video version featured Orzabal reading newspapers that burst into flame—symbols of the Cold War heating up. This initial U.K. video, however, had a rushed appearance, suggesting the band’s urgency to release “Mother’s Talk” as a timely critique of the Euromissile deployment. For both videos, see *Tears for Fears: Tears Roll Down, Greatest Hits ‘82-’92*. Polygram Canada, 2003, DVD; for an earlier U.K. version online, see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R9cS7LaEAYY> (24.03.2013); for the U.S. video version online, see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6XWHQIalppA> (24.03.2013).

<sup>26</sup> Tears for Fears, *Songs from the Big Chair*. Polygram Records, 1985, Compact Disc.



*Screenshots from the U.S. version of Tears for Fears' "Mother's Talk." Awaiting a nuclear attack, a dutiful father follows the advice of Protect and Survive.*

### THE END OF THE COLD WAR

Videos inspired by the Euromissile Crisis began populating MTV, but by late 1986, the improving relationship between Reagan and Gorbachev led to a series of hopeful summits and a reduction in superpower tensions. By 1987, the United States and the Soviet Union had agreed to the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty, which removed a whole class of nuclear missiles from the European theatre. That same year saw the launch of "MTV Europe," a counterpart to the American all-music video station. It seemed that the era of transnational Cold War music videos might be over, but as the decade came to a close, a new theme emerged, one of hope and optimism sparked by the surprising fall of the Berlin Wall.

By decade's end, American artists began crafting Cold War-themed music videos with transnational themes; Billy Joel's "Leningrad" is a prime example. Joel had penned two previous Cold War anthems: "Allentown," a look at life in an American steel town, and "Goodnight Saigon," an ode to U.S. Vietnam veterans. "Leningrad," featured in the 1989 album *Storm Front*, was a ballad about Joel's own Cold War experiences with a Soviet counterpart named Victor. The song traces generational differences in separate Cold War spheres. While Victor "went off to school / and learned to serve his state / followed the rules / and drank his vodka straight," Joel's youth was quite different. A "Cold War kid in McCarthy time," he recalls that "Cold War kids were hard to kill / under their desks in an air raid drill." The "Leningrad" music video includes footage of such duck and cover drills, U.S. Senator Joseph McCarthy, and U.S. G.I.'s during the Korean War—a virtual best-of collection of early Cold War iconography.<sup>27</sup>

Joel's narrative continues through the Cuban Missile Crisis, a period in which Victor becomes a circus clown in Leningrad. Growing up in Levittown, Joel "hid in the shelters underground / 'til the Soviets turned their ships around / and tore the Cuban missiles down." Joel laments that "in that bright October sun /

<sup>27</sup> Billy Joel, "Leningrad" video online at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LgD\\_-dRZPgs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LgD_-dRZPgs) (24.03.2013).

we knew our childhood days were done.” In the “Leningrad” music video, each of these events is accompanied with archival footage, including Joel’s final question over his generation’s role in Vietnam: “I watched my friends go off to war / what do they keep on fighting for?” The song ends on an uplifting note. Joel travels to the Soviet Union and meets Victor in Leningrad. Victor, the Soviet clown, delights Joel’s daughter, and the two entertainers become friends. Previous calls for personal empathy, from Elton John, Depeche Mode, and Sting, seem to have been realized, and Joel concludes the song with the line: “We never knew what friends we had, until we came to in Leningrad.”

“Leningrad” suggested that personal relationships could overcome Cold War animosities, but British group Jesus Jones’ “Right Here, Right Now” reflected how real barriers to peace were breaking down by 1989. Faced with overwhelming pressures from East Germans fleeing over the recently opened Hungarian border, by 1990 the Berlin Wall toppled. The Cold War seemed to be ending, and European pop acts were creating more optimistic videos. Written by singer Mike Edwards, “Right Here, Right Now” reflects elation as the Berlin Wall tumbled: “I saw the decade end when it seemed the world could change, in the blink of an eye / and if anything there’s your sign...of the times.” The chorus concludes with: “Right Here, Right Now, there is no other place I want to be / Right Here, Right Now, watching the world wake up from history.”<sup>28</sup> The video features Edwards sitting on his couch, guitar in hand, watching events unfold on television, while behind him images—a map of Eastern Europe, U.S. President George H.W. Bush meeting with Mikhail Gorbachev, and the Berlin Wall being demolished—are projected larger than life. “Bob Dylan didn’t have this to sing about” brags Edwards, and why not? After decades of Cold War, it simply “feels good to be alive.” For its timeliness and ability to capture a generation’s feeling about the Cold War’s end, “Right Here, Right Now” has been called the perfect end of the Cold War song.<sup>29</sup>

If any song can compete with “Right Here, Right Now” for the most iconic Cold War anthem, it is the Scorpions’ “Wind of Change.” Easily the biggest international hit for this German rock group, the “Wind of Change” video opens with archival footage from Potsdamer Platz during the Berlin Wall’s construction in 1961. Like “Right Here, Right Now,” the video features footage of Gorbachev smiling and shaking hands with U.S. President George H.W. Bush, while songwriter Klaus Meine sings “the world is closing in / and did you ever think / that we could be so close, like brothers?” By the song’s guitar solo, the video shows the Berlin Wall being punctured; by song’s end we see the same Potsdamer Platz, but now the Berlin Wall is tumbling to the ground. “Winds of Change” reached the top ten on the

<sup>28</sup> “Right Here, Right Now” video online at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7z6dxQVhE8o&ob=av2e> (24. 03.2013).

<sup>29</sup> Similar high praise for ‘Right Here, Right Now’ can be found in Joshua Clover’s 1989: *Bob Dylan Didn’t Have This to Sing About*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009, p. 3-6.

American and British charts, and topped the charts in Austria, France, Germany, and Sweden. For the Scorpions, like so many groups before them, MTV had provided an effective means of conveying transnational Cold War popular culture.<sup>30</sup>

## CONCLUSION

In an insightful appeasement on early Cold War culture, historian Paul Boyer noted that “if a scholar a thousand years from now had no evidence about [the Cold War atomic threat] except the books produced by the cultural and intellectual historians of that era, he or she would hardly guess that...nuclear weapons existed.”<sup>31</sup> Since this assessment, Boyer and others have done much to show connections between the Cold War and popular culture. Cultural historians continue to reveal the Cold War’s lasting influence on film, literature, television, music, and even comic books. Music videos should also be included in such analyses. As these examples show, during the 1980s European artists created numerous Cold War-themed music videos. Yet these videos were not crafted solely for consumers in their own nations. Instead, through the conduit of MTV, these artists created politically-charged videos for an American audience. In doing so, these artists provided a transnational perspective on global Cold War concerns.

The era of transnational Cold War music videos was brief. From 1981-1986, these videos aired primarily on American MTV to an American audience. By 1987, with the establishment of MTV Europe, these cultural flows might have slowed, but the Cold War’s end prompted another wave of transatlantic music videos. By 1990, Cold War videos became a transatlantic phenomenon, with videos like Jesus Jones’ “Right Here, Right Now” and the Scorpion’s “Wind of Change” becoming #1 hits in numerous nations. In short, throughout the 1980s, Cold War fears shaped an emerging medium that evolved during a dangerous time. MTV allowed pop artists to express political opinions that transcended national borders. The extent to which Cold War-era music videos influenced opinions or enabled political change has yet to be ascertained. Regardless, these videos show that MTV helped to make the 1980s Cold War a transnational cultural affair.

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<sup>30</sup> “Wind of Change” video found in *Scorpions – A Savage Crazy World* Island/Mercury, 2002, DVD; video online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n4RjJKxsamQ> (accessed 03/24/2013).

<sup>31</sup> Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb’s Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1985, p. xv.

## ABSTRACT

**MTV and Transatlantic Antinuclear Music Videos**

When Music Television (MTV) premiered on August 1, 1981, the music industry was uncertain of its success. Hesitant to put their biggest stars on a risky new channel, record companies allowed European “New Wave” artists considerable freedom to create music videos and fill the channel’s playlists. MTV’s first decade was also the Cold War’s last, and the early 1980s were a period of heightened nuclear fears. American president Ronald Reagan’s hard-line rhetoric, arms buildup, military adventurism abroad, combined with the deployment of American nuclear warheads into Western Europe—the so-called Euromissile Crisis—led many European pop artists to craft music videos addressing Cold War fears. During the 1980s, MTV became a transatlantic conduit by which European artists expressed their fears to an American audience. With the creation of MTV Europe in 1987, those exchanges slowed, although by then Cold War tensions were abating. From 1981 until 1986, however, MTV allowed antinuclear culture to spread across national borders and express multinational Cold War concerns. With the fall of the Berlin Wall, European music videos expressed hope and elation to an American audience, and reaffirmed MTV’s importance in making pop culture transnational.