The Cold War

The Cold War was a period of heightened tension between the communist world, led by the Soviet Union, and the capitalist West, led by the United States. This period, which began soon after World War II, brought with it the rise of nuclear weapons as a global threat, the Space Race, and several proxy wars. The Cold War ended in the late 1980s, when communist regimes in Eastern Europe collapsed and the United States and the USSR signed a series of arms reduction agreements.

QUICK FACTS

Federal Republic of Germany—Often referred to as "West Germany" during the Cold War, it was established in 1949 as a Western-style democracy with a market-based economy. The Federal Republic of Germany still exists today and now includes East Germany, which it absorbed during reunification in the 1990s.

German Democratic Republic—Often referred to as "East Germany" during the Cold War, it was established as a hardline socialist state in the model of the USSR. East Germany was home to a highly sophisticated and repressive security force called the Stasi.

A "cold" war—The US and the USSR never engaged in direct combat but competed for influence across the world, thus the "cold" war. However, they fought each other indirectly through proxy wars.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST AND THE GERMAN QUESTION

During the Second World War, the Soviet Union entered into an alliance with the Allied Powers. Together with the United States, Britain, and other Western capitalist nations, the Soviet Union defeated Nazi Germany.

When the war ended in 1945, the Allied Powers occupied Germany. The Soviet Union controlled Germany's northeast, while the US, Britain, and France divided the western and southern regions into zones of occupation. The capital, Berlin, was also divided between the three powers.

Disagreements between the three Western nations and the Soviet Union over what to do with postwar Germany appeared almost immediately. The Soviet Union, which suffered much greater casualties than the other allies during the war, wanted to decide the fate of Berlin and feared Western plans to reunite Germany—a country that had recently invaded and devastated the USSR.

Negotiations broke down and in 1948 the USSR announced that the highway and rail lines connecting West Germany to Berlin would be closed. West Berlin was effectively cut off from the rest of the world. In response, the US began flying supplies into West Berlin, bypassing ground transportation. This operation, known as the Berlin Airlift, helped force the Soviet Union to relent and reopen supply routes.

The next year, the Western powers helped establish the Federal Republic of Germany, which would come to be known as West Germany. The Soviet Union responded by establishing the German Democratic Republic, a socialist state based on the Soviet model. As east-west tensions rose in the ensuing years, East Germany built a wall dividing East Berlin from West Berlin. The Berlin Wall became one of the defining symbols of the Cold War.

The Berlin Wall divided the city until 1989, the year communism began to fall in Eastern Europe.

The Berlin Wall was a symbol of the Cold War.

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THE IRON CURTAIN

As it became increasingly clear that there would two German states, one based on Western capitalism and one based on Soviet-style communism, the USSR and the United States began a competition to spread their influence to other countries, a conflict that would dominate global politics for decades.

After the war, the Soviet Union also occupied the states of Eastern Europe, such as Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Romania. The USSR installed new communist governments in these countries—undemocratic regimes that would persist until 1989. In 1946 British Prime Minister Harry Truman delivered a famous speech in which he said that an "iron curtain" had descended across the continent.

NEW ALLIANCES FORM

As tensions rose over the fate of Germany and communist regimes formed in Eastern Europe, western allies feared further encroachment into Europe by the USSR. In 1949, they formed the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, or NATO. The alliance was meant to resist further Soviet military and ideological advancement. In response, the USSR and its new satellites in Central and Eastern Europe formed the Warsaw Pact. This standoff served as the basis of the Cold War.

THE NUCLEAR ARMS RACE AND THE SPACE AGE

In 1945 the United States shocked the world by dropping two atomic bombs on Japan. Soviet spies infiltrated the US nuclear weapons program, and the USSR embarked on its own atomic project at the end of the war. In 1949 the Soviet Union detonated its first atomic bomb. The event accelerated a nuclear arms race between the US and the USSR, with each developing increasingly destructive weapons.

These new weapons required sophisticated delivery systems. The two countries began developing rockets, based on stolen German designs, that could carry large nuclear warheads across the world.

To show their growing capabilities, the US and the USSR began sending rockets into space. The USSR was first, launching the Sputnik satellite in 1957 and sending Yuri Gagarin to space in 1961 atop a modified intercontinental ballistic missile. The space race was in full force throughout the 1960s as the countries competed to send the first humans to the moon. In 1969 the US triumphed with Apollo 11.

Meanwhile, the two countries continued to stockpile nuclear weapons and develop new missiles. The two sides came dangerously close to apocalyptic nuclear war in 1962 during the Cuban Missile Crisis, when the USSR attempted to deliver nuclear weapons to Cuba in response to US missile deployments in Turkey.
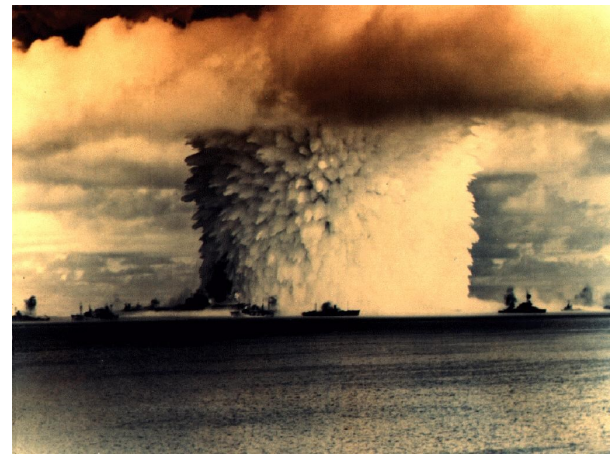
QUICK FACTS

Yuri Gagarin—In April 1961 the Soviet Union sent the first human to space, Yuri Gagarin. The US followed with Alan Shepard in May.

Cuban Missile Crisis—In October 1969 the USSR began sending nuclear weapons and launch systems to Cuba in response to US missile deployments in Italy and Turkey. The 13-day confrontation brought the two nations to the brink of nuclear war. The Soviet Union backed down when the US agreed to remove its missiles. The US deployment had been kept secret, and thus the USSR's capitulation looked like a major victory for US President John F. Kennedy.

Mutually Assured Destruction—MAD was a doctrine that held that a nuclear strike by one side would provoke a response by the other, leading to the destruction of both.

Détente—A period during the 1970s when tensions between the US and the Soviet Union temporarily eased and the two countries participated in a number of negotiations and summits. Hostilities resumed in the early 1980s during the Soviet-Afghan War and the presidency of anticommunist hardliner Ronald Reagan.

More resources for educators are available on the [Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies website.](#)

Cold War Europe
- NATO states
- Warsaw Pact states
- Other communist states
- Non-aligned states

0   500 miles
0   500 kilometres

PROXY WARS AND COMPETITION FOR INFLUENCE

The USSR and the US never entered into direct military conflict. Doing so would have risked escalation into all-out nuclear war and mutual destruction. However, the two countries participated in several proxy wars during the Cold War. The USSR supported communist revolutionary groups throughout the globe, while the US attempted to contain communism's expansion to other countries.

Shortly after the end of World War II, civil war broke out in China. The Soviet Union provided aid to communist revolutionaries, while the US supported nationalists with military supplies. Neither country entered the conflict directly, however.

The first major conflict of the Cold War was in Korea in 1950, when the Soviet Union and China supported a communist government in the north and the US military intervened on behalf of the non-communist south. The war ended in stalemate in 1953, when Korea was split into the Democratic People's Republic of Korea to the north and the Republic of Korea to the south. That divide persists to this day.

A similar conflict began to break out in Vietnam in the late 1950s. The United States provided military advisors to assist the government in South Vietnam and eventually invaded on its behalf, fighting communist forces in the north. China provided the bulk of communist support to North Vietnam, while the USSR played a lesser role due to souring relations with Beijing. The US withdrew in 1973 and communist forces captured the capital in 1975, ending the war.

The Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979, fighting to install a communist government. The US provided support to insurgent groups, known as the mujahideen. The USSR fought the costly war for nearly 10 years before withdrawing in 1989 as the Cold War was coming to an end.

US President John F. Kennedy meets Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev in Austria, a country that remained neutral during the Cold War. The two leaders narrowly avoided nuclear war during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

DISCUSSION IDEAS

What were the causes of the Cold War? Could the conflict have been avoided?

Why did the US and the USSR fight proxy wars during the Cold War? Did they achieve their goals by participating in those conflicts?

Why did Germany become divided? Split students into groups representing the victorious allies and ask them to discuss ways to solve the German question. Ask students to consider their country's interest in the outcome.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The Cold War Museum — Available: http://coldwar.org/

Gaddis, John Lewis. *The Cold War: A New History.* Penguin Books, 2006.

Remnick, David. *Lenin's Tomb: The Last Days of the Soviet Empire.* Vintage, 1994.

"The Space Race" — 2005 documentary film produced by the BBC.

"The Cold War" — 1998 television documentary series produced by Pat Mitchell and Jeremy Isaacs.

More resources for educators are available on the [Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies website.](#)

USEFUL LINKS

[CIA World Factbook:](#)

[BBC Country Page:](#)

[National Geographic:](#)

[Kyiv Post English](#)