

THE COLD WAR: HOW DID IT START? HOW DID IT END?

THE COLD WAR WAS A CONFLICT AFTER WORLD WAR II BETWEEN THE U.S. AND SOVIET UNION. THE SUPER-POWERS NEVER FOUGHT EACH OTHER, BUT BACKED OPPOSITE SIDES IN “HOT WARS,” OFFERED AID TO INFLUENCE NEUTRAL COUNTRIES, AND COMPETED IN A DANGEROUS NUCLEAR ARMS RACE. IT LASTED 45 YEARS, BUT ENDED SURPRISINGLY FAST.

After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, the United States realized that the Atlantic and Pacific oceans could no longer protect the nation from an enemy’s air and sea power. American leaders concluded that the U.S. must have a military defense superior to all other nations and never again permit a hostile power to dominate Europe or East Asia.

When the Germans invaded the Soviet Union in 1941, it lost more than 20 million soldiers and civilians. Russia had also been invaded by Napoleon early in the 19th century and by the Germans in World War I. Soviet leaders concluded they must secure their national borders and never again suffer an invasion.

The capitalist U.S. and communist Soviet Union were allies in World War II. But their conflicting world views and national security concerns soon drove them into a Cold War.

How Did the Cold War Start?

In early 1945, American and Soviet armies pushed toward the Nazi capital of Berlin. The Soviets occupied the Eastern European countries of Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Romania, and the eastern part of Germany.

The chief Allied leaders (Franklin Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, and Joseph Stalin) met in the Crimean resort city of Yalta (in the Soviet Union) in February 1945. Roosevelt and Churchill agreed to recognize pro-Soviet governments in each of the



The three Allied leaders – Winston Churchill, Franklin Roosevelt, and Joseph Stalin (left to right) – sit for photographers at the Yalta Conference, February 1945. FDR died two months later.

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Eastern European nations as long as free elections were held.

In April 1945, Roosevelt died and Harry Truman, the U.S. vice president, became president. In July, the American and British leaders met again with Stalin, this time in Potsdam, Germany. Stalin wanted to permanently weaken Germany to ensure it would never again invade the Soviet Union. The three leaders agreed to divide Germany and Berlin into American, British, French, and Soviet occupation zones.

The next month, the U.S. dropped atomic bombs on two Japanese cities, which quickly led to Japan’s surrender. Stalin believed that the U.S. used the atomic bombs to intimidate the Soviet Union after the war. He called it “atomic blackmail.”

Truman and Churchill soon worried that Stalin wanted to expand Soviet power and communism into Western Europe. By early 1946, Truman had dropped Roosevelt’s plan to withdraw all American troops from Europe in two years.

Stalin believed that communism would eventually overcome capitalism. His top priority, however, was to secure the Soviet Union’s borders from attack. To protect his western border, he wanted not only a weak Germany but pro-Soviet Eastern European governments.

At first, Stalin was satisfied with communist and non-communist coalition governments. He believed the communists would gradually

operate from within to gain control of the powers of government.

In March 1946, Winston Churchill delivered a speech in the United States, warning that Stalin was rapidly transforming the Eastern European countries into communist states. He said, “an iron curtain has descended across the continent” that separated Europe between the democratic and capitalist West from the totalitarian and communist East.

In early 1947, a Greek communist minority was fighting a guerilla war against Greece’s government, which the British had long helped to defend. The British informed President Truman that they no longer could afford to provide military and economic aid to Greece or its neighbor Turkey.

Truman quickly decided to take on the role of defending Greece and Turkey in order to block possible Soviet control of this strategic area near the oil-rich Middle East. Truman and his advisers believed Stalin was behind the Greek communists. But Josip Broz Tito, the communist leader of neighboring Yugoslavia, was their chief supporter.

In March 1947, Truman addressed Congress and asked for military and economic aid, but no U.S. troops, for Greece and Turkey to prevent them from falling under Soviet control. “It must be the policy of the United States,” he declared, “to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside powers.”



A CIA map, prepared during the Cuban Missile Crisis, shows the range of the Soviet missiles stationed in Cuba: IL-28 (630 miles), SS-4 (1,020 miles), and SS-5 (2,200 miles).

Truman seemingly committed the U.S. to help defend “free peoples” anywhere with aid and possibly even troops. Such a commitment had never before been made by a U.S. president.

A few months later, U.S. diplomat and Soviet expert George F. Kennan gave a name to the policy Truman had announced. In a magazine article, Kennan analyzed Soviet behavior. “In these circumstances,” Kennan wrote, “it is clear that the main element of any United States policy toward the Soviet Union must be that of long term patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies.” Truman’s “containment policy” also became known as the Truman Doctrine.

In April 1948, Congress passed a massive program of economic aid for Europe to include Germany and even the Eastern European countries occupied by the Soviets. The Marshall Plan, named after Secretary of State George C. Marshall who proposed it, had two purposes. One was to assist Europe’s recovery from the destructive war. The other was to strengthen Western European governments, threatened by communists who appealed to many with promises of a better life.

Stalin viewed the Truman Doctrine and Marshall Plan as a threat. He feared these policies were an attempt by the U.S. to draw Soviet-occupied Germany and Eastern Europe toward Western Europe and away from Soviet control.

Stalin reacted by forbidding any of these countries, soon called “Soviet satellites,” to accept Marshall Plan aid. He also abandoned his policy of favoring coalition governments that included non-communists.

In February 1948, Stalin engineered the overthrow of Czechoslovakia’s coalition government, leaving only communists in power. Several months later he blocked all ground access to the American, British, and French occupation zones in Berlin. Truman countered with an airlift of food and supplies that within a year defeated the Soviet blockade.

In 1949, the U.S., Canada, and countries in Western Europe created NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization), a military defense alliance. Stalin then formed his own military alliance of Eastern European Soviet satellites called the Warsaw Pact.

By the end of 1949, Europe was

divided and Germany was split into two countries: West Germany, democratic and independent; East Germany, communist and controlled by the Soviet Union. The Cold War was well underway.

What Happened?

Beyond Europe

The Cold War soon expanded well beyond Europe. Communists won the Chinese Civil War in 1949, but Stalin had done little to help them.

The U.S. sent troops into the Korean and Vietnam “hot wars.” The Soviets aided the communist side in each case, but did not send any troops as the Chinese did in the Korean War.

The Cold War was also a war of ideas. The world divided along ideological lines into the communist bloc and the Western bloc. Each side proclaimed the superiority of its system of government and economic order. A number of unaligned nations, mostly in the developing world, declined to side with either superpower in their contest between capitalism and communism. But the superpowers often used economic and military aid in these countries to gain their support.

Nuclear Arms Race

The Soviet Union successfully tested an atomic bomb in 1949. The Americans and then the Soviets developed a more powerful hydrogen bomb.

Both superpowers eventually built thousands of long-, intermediate-, and short-range nuclear ballistic missiles. Each carried one or more warheads many times more powerful than the atomic bombs dropped on Japan.

Cuban Missile Crisis

In 1959, Fidel Castro led a successful communist revolution in Cuba. The U.S. trained anti-communist Cuban exiles to invade Cuba and overthrow Castro, but this operation failed.

Nikita Khrushchev, the Soviet leader, believed the attempt to invade Cuba was a new American strategy to overthrow existing communist governments. He decided to counter this by secretly placing nuclear missiles in Cuba aimed at the U.S.

President Kennedy demanded the missiles be removed. Khrushchev refused. During several tense days in October 1962, nuclear war became a real possibility. But Khrushchev backed down after Kennedy agreed to dismantle NATO missiles in Turkey aimed at the Soviet Union.

The Brezhnev Doctrine

Over the years, the Soviet Union tightened its grip on Eastern Europe. It crushed a revolt in Hungary in 1956. In 1961, the Soviets built the Berlin Wall, guarded by soldiers, to stop East Germans from escaping into free West Berlin. In 1968, the Soviets sent Warsaw Pact troops and tanks into Czechoslovakia to suppress a popular movement for Czech freedoms and restore Soviet control.

The Soviet leader, Leonid Brezhnev, announced that any attempt to overthrow existing communist governments would result in Soviet military intervention. This became known as the Brezhnev Doctrine.

Collapse of Détente

After the Cuban Missile Crisis, the fear of nuclear war brought on a period of better relations and negotiations between the superpowers called “détente” (relaxation). Detente led to the first treaty that limited nuclear missiles.

Détente began to collapse in 1979 when Brezhnev sent Soviet military forces into a “hot war” in Afghanistan to rescue a communist regime, fighting Muslim rebels. President Carter believed this was a new phase of Soviet communist expansion toward the oil-rich Persian Gulf region. He responded by greatly increasing U.S. military spending.

In December 1979, NATO installed new intermediate-range nuclear missiles in Western Europe that targeted the Warsaw Pact countries. This was in response to the Soviet Union’s earlier upgrading of Warsaw Pact missiles that targeted the NATO countries.

‘The Evil Empire’

Ronald Reagan was elected president in 1980 and immediately launched an aggressive foreign policy against the Soviet Union, which he called “the evil empire.” He aided anti-communist

Excerpt from Mikhail Gorbachev’s Address to the U.N.

December 7, 1988

The history of past centuries and millennia has been a history of almost ubiquitous wars and sometimes desperate battles, leading to mutual destruction. . . . However, parallel with the process of wars, hostility, and alienation of peoples and countries, another process, just as objectively conditioned, was in motion and gaining force: The Process of the emergence of a mutually connected and integral world.

Further world progress is now possible only through the search for a consensus of all mankind, in movement toward a new world order. . . . The world community must learn to shape and direct the process in such a way as to preserve civilization, to make it safe for all and more pleasant for normal life. . . . It is evident, for example, that force and the threat of force can no longer be, and should not be instruments of foreign policy

What does Gorbachev mean by “a new world order”?

fighters in Afghanistan, Nicaragua, and elsewhere. He proposed the Strategic Defense Initiative, called “Star Wars” by critics, which would provide a space-based nuclear missile shield against a Soviet attack.

Reagan backed the biggest peacetime military spending build-up in American history. His goal was military superiority over the Soviet Union.

How Did the Cold War End?

After being re-elected in 1984, Reagan backed away from his hard-line positions. Going against the views of some of his advisers, he said he wanted to negotiate with the Soviet Union. Reagan had experienced some scary moments in 1983 when the Soviets mistook a NATO nuclear weapons training exercise for a preparation for an actual attack.

In 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev was appointed the new Soviet leader. Gorbachev recognized that the Soviet economy, especially the civilian sector, had been weakening for a decade. This was largely due to the enormous cost of military spending and subsidizing the economies of the Eastern European satellites, Cuba, and other communist countries.

Gorbachev’s “new thinking” resulted in his introducing radical economic and political reforms that he hoped would save the communist system. He had in mind such things as private ownership of businesses, more production of civilian consumer goods, and multi-party

competitive elections. In foreign policy, he was ready to pull out of Afghanistan and negotiate an end to the nuclear-arms race.

Thus, in the mid-1980s, both superpower leaders were ready to talk. In 1986, they met for a summit meeting at Reykjavik, Iceland. Gorbachev proposed a 50 percent reduction in American and Soviet nuclear ballistic missiles and the total elimination of the intermediate missiles in Europe. Reagan shocked everyone, including his own advisers, when he came back with a counterproposal to phase out all nuclear missiles.

The two leaders failed to reach a “grand bargain” due to Reagan’s insistence on building his Strategic Defense Initiative, the space-based defensive missile shield. Gorbachev was concerned that such a “Star Wars” shield would enable the U.S. to attack the Soviet Union without fearing retaliation.

But the ice had been broken. The next year, Gorbachev and Reagan signed a treaty to destroy all intermediate nuclear missiles in Eastern and Western Europe. They also negotiated a system of mutual inspections, prompting Reagan’s famous caution, “trust, but verify.”

After the intermediate missile treaty, things began to move fast. Gorbachev ordered the complete withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan. He also withdrew Soviet support of communist revolutionaries fighting in Africa and other places.



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In December 1988, Gorbachev addressed the United Nations. He informed the world that the Soviet Union was going to reduce its armed forces by a half-million troops. In addition, the Soviets planned to withdraw 50,000 troops and 5,000 tanks from East Germany, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary.

In 1989, Gorbachev refused to send Soviet troops to protect Eastern European communist governments from mass demonstrations, demanding free elections. The communist governments of Poland, Hungary, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, and Bulgaria all quickly resigned without bloodshed. The Romanian dictator refused to resign and fled the capital. He was tracked down, given a quick trial, and shot by firing squad. Free multi-party elections soon followed, even in the Soviet Union itself.

On November 9, 1989, the Berlin Wall, a symbol of how the Cold War divided Europe, was knocked down by crowds of East and West Berliners. The sudden collapse of communist Eastern Europe surprised everyone. The Brezhnev Doctrine was dead.

One major piece of the Cold War conflict remained: the division of Germany, which had been the core of Stalin's national security policy. East and West Germany plus the four occupying powers signed a reunification treaty in 1990, making Germany whole again.

Gorbachev agreed that the reunified Federal Republic of Germany could become a NATO alliance member. He concluded Germany would be less dangerous to the Soviet Union in NATO than on its own where it might become a nuclear power.

After the Cold War Ended

The Soviet Union consisted of 15 "republics," all controlled by the central government in Moscow, Russia. After a failed attempt to overthrow Gorbachev by some military generals, Communist Party leaders, and KGB spy agency members, his authority faded.

Boris Yeltsin, the newly elected president of the Russian republic, abolished the Communist Party and on December 25, 1991, dissolved the

Soviet Union. Russia and the other Soviet republics like Ukraine then became independent countries that began to adopt democratic governments and capitalist economies.

In his resignation speech, Gorbachev declared, "An end has been put to the 'Cold War,' the arms race, and the insane militarization of our country, which crippled our economy, distorted our thinking, and undermined our morals. The threat of a world war is no more."

But is the Cold War really over? Vladimir Putin, the current leader of Russia and a former KGB officer, stated in 2005, "The collapse of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century."

In 2014, Putin ordered Russia's

military takeover of Crimea, a part of Ukraine heavily populated with Russians. In the past, he has complained about Poland and three former Soviet republics joining NATO. Putin views this and attempts to draw Ukraine and other Eastern Europe countries into the economy of Western Europe as a hostile "encirclement" of Russia, endangering its national security.

DISCUSSION & WRITING

1. What do you think was the main cause of the Cold War? Explain.
2. Who do you think played a more important role in ending the Cold War: Reagan or Gorbachev? Why?
3. Who do you think won the Cold War? Why?

ACTIVITIES

#1: Why Did the Cold War End?

We know how the Cold War ended, but *why* did it end after going on for nearly half a century?

1. Form small groups to discuss this question.
2. Each group will write a single sentence thesis statement in answer to the question.
3. Each group will then gather evidence from the article to support its thesis statement.
4. Finally, each group will present its thesis statement and evidence to the rest of the class.
5. Optional: The class may want to vote to choose the best thesis statement.

#2: 'Iron Curtain'

In March 1946, Winston Churchill, no longer prime minister of Great Britain due to Parliamentary elections, delivered his "Iron Curtain" speech in the U.S. A few days later, Soviet leader Joseph Stalin responded to Churchill's speech in an interview published in a Soviet newspaper.

Each student should have a copy of **Churchill vs. Stalin** (p. 9). Divide students into pairs.

Student instructions:

1. Read the excerpts from Churchill's speech and Stalin's response.
2. Using the documents as your source, explain how Churchill and Stalin have answered the following questions. Answer separately for each leader. Specifically cite passages from the documents as evidence for your answers. When citing evidence, quote particular passages (and state the number of the line the passages are on).
 - a. What explains the growth of Communist parties in Eastern Europe?
 - b. What should be the most important characteristic of the governments of Eastern Europe?
3. Using the main article and the documents, answer this question: Was Churchill's or Stalin's viewpoint more accurate about the situation in Eastern Europe? Explain.
4. Be prepared to report your answers, with reasons and evidence, to the class.

Churchill vs. Stalin

Excerpt From Churchill's 'Iron Curtain' Speech (1946)

1 [T]he people of any country have the right, and should
2 have the power by constitutional action, by free unfet-
3 tered elections, with secret ballot, to choose or change the
4 character or form of government under which they dwell;
5 that freedom of speech and thought should reign; that
6 courts of justice, independent of the executive, unbiased by
7 any party, should administer laws which have received the
8 broad assent of large majorities or are consecrated by time
9 and custom. . . .

10 A shadow has fallen upon the scenes so lately lighted by
11 the Allied victory. Nobody knows what Soviet Russia and
12 its Communist international organisation intends to do in
13 the immediate future, or what are the limits, if any, to
14 their expansive and proselytising tendencies. I have a
15 strong admiration and regard for the valiant Russian peo-
16 ple and for my wartime comrade, Marshal Stalin. There is
17 deep sympathy and goodwill in Britain . . . towards the
18 peoples of all the Russias and a resolve to persevere
19 through many differences and rebuffs in establishing last-
20 ing friendships. We understand the Russian need to be
21 secure on her western frontiers by the removal of all possi-
22 bility of German aggression. We welcome Russia to her
23 rightful place among the leading nations of the world. We
24 welcome her flag upon the seas. Above all, we welcome
25 constant, frequent and growing contacts between the Rus-
26 sian people and our own people on both sides of the Atlantic.
27 It is my duty however, for I am sure you would wish me to
28 state the facts as I see them to you, to place before you cer-
29 tain facts about the present position in Europe.

30 From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron
31 curtain has descended across the Continent. Behind that
32 line lie all the capitals of the ancient states of Central and
33 Eastern Europe. Warsaw, Berlin, Prague, Vienna, Bu-
34 dapest, Belgrade, Bucharest and Sofia, all these famous
35 cities and the populations around them lie in what I must
36 call the Soviet sphere, and all are subject in one form or
37 another, not only to Soviet influence but to a very high
38 and, in many cases, increasing measure of control from
39 Moscow. Athens alone . . . is free to decide its future at
40 an election under British, American and French observa-
41 tion. The Russian-dominated Polish Government has been
42 encouraged to make enormous and wrongful inroads
43 upon Germany, and mass expulsions of millions of Ger-
44 mans on a scale grievous and undreamed-of are now tak-
45 ing place. The Communist parties, which were very small
46 in all these Eastern States of Europe, have been raised to
47 pre-eminence and power far beyond their numbers and
are seeking everywhere to obtain totalitarian control. Police
governments are prevailing in nearly every case, and so far,
except in Czechoslovakia, there is no true democracy.

Excerpt From Stalin's Reply to Churchill in the Soviet newspaper *Pravda* (1946)

1 In the first place it is quite absurd to speak of exclusive
2 control by the U.S.S.R. in Vienna and Berlin, where there
3 are Allied Control Councils made up of the representatives
4 of four States and where the U.S.S.R. has only one-quarter
5 of the votes. . . .

6 Secondly, the following circumstance should not be for-
7 gotten. The Germans made their invasion of the U.S.S.R.
8 through Finland, Poland, Rumania, Bulgaria and Hungary.
9 The Germans were able to make their invasion through
10 these countries because, at the time, governments hostile
11 to the Soviet Union existed in these countries. As a result
12 of the German invasion, the Soviet Union has irrevocably
13 lost in battles with the Germans, and also during the Ger-
14 man occupation and through the expulsion of Soviet citi-
15 zens to German slave labor camps, about 7 million people.
16 In other words, the Soviet Union has lost in men several
17 times more than Britain and the United States together.

18 It may be that some quarters are trying to push into obliv-
19 ion these sacrifices of the Soviet people which insured the
20 liberation of Europe from the Hitlerite yoke.

21 But the Soviet Union cannot forget them. One can ask
22 therefore, what can be surprising in the fact that the So-
23 viet Union, in a desire to ensure its security for the future,
24 tries to achieve that these countries should have govern-
25 ments whose relations to the Soviet Union are loyal? How
26 can one, without having lost one's reason, qualify these
27 peaceful aspirations of the Soviet Union as "expansionist
28 tendencies" of our Government? . . .

29 Mr. Churchill wanders around the truth when he speaks of
30 the growth of the influence of the Communist parties in
31 Eastern Europe. . . . The growth of the influence of com-
32 munistism cannot be considered accidental. It is a normal
33 function. The influence of the Communists grew because
34 during the hard years of the mastery of fascism in Europe,
35 Communists slowed themselves to be reliable, daring and
36 self-sacrificing fighters against fascist regimes for the lib-
37 erty of peoples.

38 Mr. Churchill sometimes recalls in his speeches the com-
39 mon people from small houses, patting them on the shoul-
40 der in a lordly manner and pretending to be their friend.
41 But these people are not so simpleminded as it might ap-
42 pear at first sight. Common people, too, have their opin-
43 ions and their own politics. And they know how to stand
44 up for themselves.

45 It is they, millions of these common people, who voted Mr.
46 Churchill and his party out in England, giving their votes to
47 the Labor party. It is they, millions of these common people,
who isolated reactionaries in Europe, collaborators with fas-
cism, and gave preference to Left democratic parties.



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