

Cold War: An Overview

By Burleigh Hendrickson



The aftermath of World War Two shifted the global balance of power and created a bi-polar world led by two competing superpowers: The United States (US) and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). We call this global competition the Cold War.

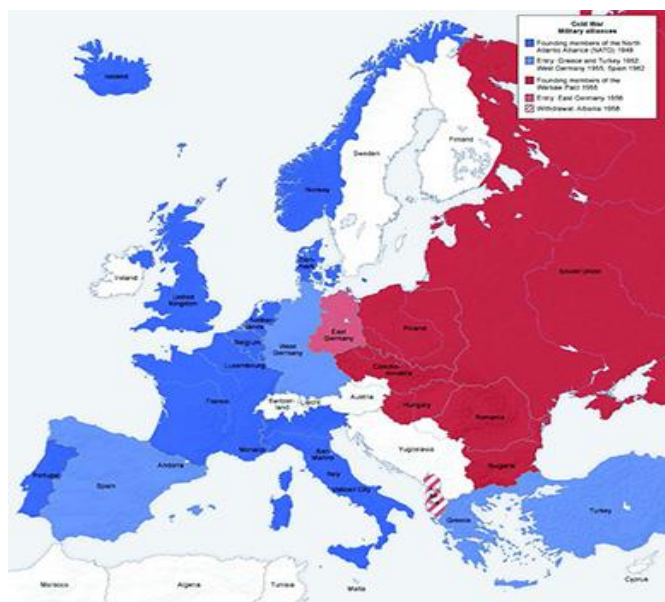
What was the Cold War?

The destruction of World War II reduced many European cities to rubble. It also led world leaders to seek new ways to protect against future attacks. While the United States and the Soviet Union had worked together to defeat the Axis powers, their partnership quickly turned to a 50-year-long confrontation. They disagreed about how to rebuild Europe, and their efforts to increase their own security often conflicted. This fierce conflict is called the "Cold War" since the two superpowers never directly engaged in combat ("hot war"). Instead, they increased their military capabilities, tried to expand their global influence, and undermined the other's way of life in the eyes of the world. While the United States believed in a capitalist system of free markets and multiple political parties, the Soviet Union was founded on a communist system controlled by a centralized state and a single political party.

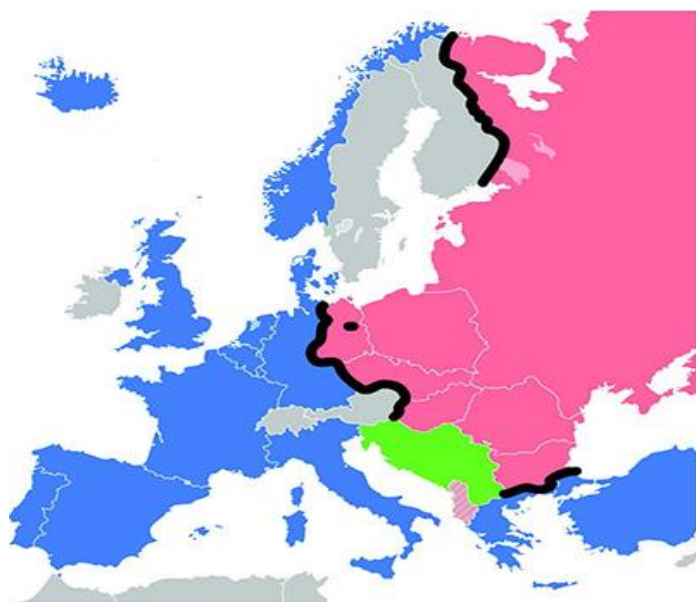
The Cold War came down to some basic differences between the world-views of the United States and the Soviet Union. Communist societies believed in redistributing wealth (taking from the rich and giving to the poor) and promoted workers and state-run economies. These resulted in low unemployment rates but sometimes led to the unequal distribution of consumer goods. They also viewed organized religion as dangerous. The US capitalist system let free markets determine the production and distribution of goods, and promoted freedom of religion. This led to more productivity but often created massive economic inequalities. Both sides also used propaganda to paint a negative picture of their enemies. From 1945 until the collapse of the USSR in the 1990s, these two nations competed for global influence in the areas of military, economics, politics, and even culture.

Three key features defined the Cold War: 1) the threat of nuclear war, 2) competition over the allegiance (loyalty) of newly independent nations, and 3) the military and

economic support of each other's enemies around the world. The United States showed its global military dominance when it dropped two atomic bombs on Japan to end the war. This act prompted the USSR to seek nuclear technology to discourage American aggression. The United States held other advantages as well. Having entered World War II late in the conflict, it lost far fewer soldiers and civilians. The USSR lost 8-10 million soldiers (25 million including civilians) yet the United States lost 300,000 in the war. While the Soviet Union faced a devastating invasion, most of the United States emerged unscathed from the war. Finally, the US economy expanded during the war as it made profits selling weapons and supplies to the Allied forces.



Map of Cold War military alliances. The Eastern Soviet "Warsaw Pact" areas are in red, and the Western NATO areas are in blue.



Map of Iron Curtain dividing the Eastern Bloc and USSR from Western Europe. The black dot in Germany represents the division between East and West Berlin.

A divided Europe

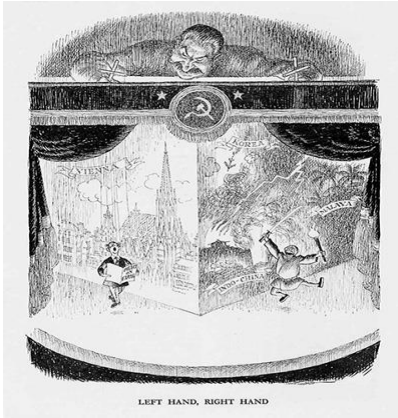
After a long history of enemy invasions, Soviet leader Josef Stalin wanted to expand its territory and build a buffer between the Soviet Union and Europe. He also wanted control in Central and Eastern European countries that the Soviets had helped liberate. As a result, Stalin quickly established strong communist parties that took power in Central and Eastern Europe (the Eastern Bloc). They took orders from the USSR. Meanwhile, the United States provided over \$12 billion in aid for rebuilding Western European nations who agreed to open trade.

This divided Europe, breaking trade networks and splitting communities between East and West. These economic divisions spread to separate military alliances in each zone. This further divided Europe along an imaginary line called the Iron Curtain. Travel and cultural exchange across the Iron Curtain became increasingly difficult. It separated previously connected communities and created new ones living either under a communist or capitalist system.

Germany became a Cold War battleground. East and West Germany had separate governments and capital cities. Families were separated based solely on where the lines were drawn. The city of Berlin became a microcosm (small-scale representation) of the Cold War, with British, French, and Americans controlling West Berlin while the Soviets controlled East Berlin. To prevent defections (people leaving one state for another), the communists built the Berlin Wall in 1961. It divided the city. They set up checkpoints to control border crossings. At some points, guards even had orders to kill unarmed East Germans seeking to cross illegally. The wall became the most important symbol of the Cold War.

The Cold War heats up around the world

The Cold War started in Europe. From 1945 to 1953, the USSR expanded its influence by creating the Eastern Bloc across states like Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary. Stalin set up puppet communist governments that he could control. He repressed anyone who resisted. The United States likewise began to meddle in the affairs of foreign nations where it feared communist regimes would gain control. This became known as a policy of containment.



A 1962 comic showing Stalin controlling puppets in Europe and Asia. By Manhhai, CC BY 2.0

In the 1950s, competition had spread to the Middle East, Asia, and Latin America, with each side trying to establish control. By the 1960s, the Cold War reached Africa. Many former colonies achieved independence from European empires (decolonization). These new nations sided with the Americans or Soviets to receive economic and military aid. Both superpowers supported dictatorships that came to power through violence and repressed their societies—all to gain an edge in the global Cold War.

Some of the most important Cold War conflicts took place in Asia. Communists took power in China in 1949, and the Americans feared other countries would soon follow. In 1953, Korea had been divided into two zones, with a communist government in the North and an American-leaning government in the South. To contain the spread of communism to South Korea, the US sent troops. The Chinese responded by sending their own troops to the border. The war killed nearly 5 million people but ended in a stalemate, leaving a divided Korea that remains today.

Perhaps no conflict illustrates the policy of containment better than Vietnam. Like Korea, Vietnam was divided into a communist north and pro-West south. To contain the communist north, the United States invaded in the 1960s. The Soviet Union sent money and weapons to the communist forces. By 1975, with the help of the Soviets and China, a small, poor nation defeated the strongest military superpower in the world. Over 58,000 Americans died in the conflict. The war divided Americans who were for or against the war. The US intervention in Vietnam exposed the hypocrisy of US policies that claimed to promote self-determination, and it inspired other small nations to determine their own futures.

After the Vietnam War, Cold War tension briefly decreased. The Americans' defeat in Vietnam, the threat of nuclear war, and new Soviet leadership led to open discussions between the sides. But much like the Americans had in Vietnam, the USSR intervened in Afghanistan in the 1980s. It wanted to ensure the victory of a communist-leaning group and sent troops to assist them. Just as North Vietnam received aid and military assistance from the USSR, the United States backed Soviet enemies in Afghanistan with money and weapons. Ultimately, the USSR was equally unsuccessful, and US-backed forces emerged victorious. After much infighting, Islamic extremists called the Taliban claimed power in the region, thanks to American aid.

The end of the Cold War

The Cold War finally ended in the 1990s. The USSR could no longer keep up with US military spending. Meanwhile, economic problems in the Eastern Bloc meant that goods were in short supply. To keep citizens from revolting, the new Soviet leader, Mikhael Gorbachev, proposed reforms to stimulate communist economies. The economic reforms were known as *perestroika*, or "restructuring." He also relaxed restrictions on freedom of expression, a policy called *glasnost*, or "openness." These reforms were too little too late.

In 1989, the most iconic symbol of the Iron Curtain, the Berlin Wall, which divided the German city, was torn down by Germans on both sides seeking to unify Germany. Similar waves of anti-communism spread throughout the Eastern Bloc. The end of the Cold War was marked by the disintegration of the USSR into over a dozen independent nations.



East and West Germans call for unification of the country and the removal of the Berlin Wall in the fall of 1989. By Sue Ream, CC BY 3.0.

Fear of a nuclear war likely prevented direct combat between the Americans and the Soviets. Though they did not engage in all-out warfare, the two superpowers supported many of each other's enemies in combat. They created a bi-polar system of global power that forced other nations to choose sides and ripped communities apart. The economic troubles created by the Soviet war in Afghanistan left the USSR unable to maintain control of the Eastern Bloc. Once self-determination was possible in the 1990s, many Eastern European countries chose a different path. They elected non-communist parties and joined the European Union. Outside of Europe, communists in places like Cuba and China have remained in power while other nations removed pro-US dictators. Whichever path nations have chosen since the collapse of the USSR, the Cold War has left a major imprint.