

# Cold War

## | INTRODUCTION

Cold War, term used to describe the post-World War II struggle between the United States and its allies and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and its allies. During the Cold War period, which lasted from the mid-1940s until the end of the 1980s, international politics were heavily shaped by the intense rivalry between these two great blocs of power and the political ideologies they represented: democracy and capitalism in the case of the United States and its allies, and Communism in the case of the Soviet bloc. The principal allies of the United States during the Cold War included Britain, France, West Germany, Japan, and Canada. On the Soviet side were many of the countries of Eastern Europe—including Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, East Germany, and Romania—and, during parts of the Cold War, Cuba and China. Countries that had no formal commitment to either bloc were known as neutrals or, within the Third World, as nonaligned nations (see Nonaligned Movement).

American journalist Walter Lippmann first popularized the term *cold war* in a 1947 book by that name. By using the term, Lippmann meant to suggest that relations between the USSR and its World War II allies (primarily the United States, Britain, and France) had deteriorated to the point of war without the occurrence of actual warfare. Over the next few years, the emerging rivalry between these two camps hardened into a mutual and permanent preoccupation. It dominated the foreign policy agendas of both sides and led to the formation of two vast military alliances: the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), created by the Western powers in 1949; and the Soviet-dominated Warsaw Pact, established in 1955. Although centered originally in Europe, the Cold War enmity eventually drew the United States and the USSR into local conflicts in almost every quarter of the globe. It also produced what became known as the Cold War arms race, an intense competition between the two superpowers to accumulate advanced military weapons.

## || BACKGROUND

Hostility between the United States and the USSR had its roots in the waning moments of World War I. Soon after the Bolsheviks (later Communists) overthrew the existing Russian government in October 1917, Bolshevik leader Vladimir Lenin resolved to withdraw Russia from the war. In 1918 the United States, along with Britain, France, and Japan, intervened militarily in Russia. They did so to restore the collapsed Eastern Front in their war effort against Germany; however, to Lenin and his colleagues, the intervention represented an assault on Russia's feeble new revolutionary regime. In fact, the European powers and the United States did resent Russia's new leadership, with its appeals against capitalism and its efforts to weld local Communist parties into an international revolutionary movement. In December 1922 the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) was formed as a federal union of Russia and neighboring areas under Communist control. The United States refused to recognize the Soviet state until 1933. The deep ideological differences between the USSR and the United States were exacerbated by the leadership of Joseph Stalin, who ruled the USSR from 1929 to 1953.

In August 1939, on the eve of World War II, Stalin signed a nonaggression pact with German dictator Adolf Hitler. The two leaders pledged not to attack one another and agreed to divide the territory that lay between them into German and Soviet spheres of influence. Hitler betrayed the agreement, however, and in June 1941 he launched his armies against the USSR. Britain and the United States rallied to the USSR's defense, which produced the coalition that would defeat Germany over the next four years. This American-British-Soviet coalition—which came to be known as the Grand Alliance—was an uneasy affair, marked by mistrust and, on the Soviet side, by charges that the USSR bore a heavier price than the other nations in prosecuting the war. By 1944, with victory approaching, the conflicting visions within the alliance of a postwar world were becoming ever more obvious.

## ||| COURSE OF THE COLD WAR

### A The Struggle for Europe

Even before the defeat of Nazi Germany in May 1945, the United States and the USSR had become divided over the political future of Poland. Stalin, whose forces had driven the Germans out of Poland in 1944 and 1945 and established a pro-Communist provisional government there, believed that Soviet control of Poland was necessary for his country's security. This met with opposition from the Allies, and it was not long before the quarrel had extended to the political future of other Eastern European nations. The struggle over the fate of Eastern Europe

thus constituted the first crucial phase of the Cold War. Yet during this period, which lasted from 1944 to 1946, both sides clung to the hope that their growing differences could be surmounted and something of the spirit of their earlier wartime cooperation could be preserved.

While the United States accused the USSR of seeking to expand Communism in Europe and Asia, the USSR viewed itself as the leader of history's progressive forces and charged the United States with attempting to stamp out revolutionary activity wherever it arose. In 1946 and 1947 the USSR helped bring Communist governments to power in Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, and Poland (Communists had gained control of Albania and Yugoslavia in 1944 and 1945). In 1947 United States president Harry S. Truman issued the Truman Doctrine, which authorized U.S. aid to anti-Communist forces in Greece and Turkey. Later, this policy was expanded to justify support for any nation that the U.S. government considered to be threatened by Soviet expansionism. Known as the *containment doctrine*, this policy, aimed at containing the spread of Communism around the world, was outlined in a famous 1947 *Foreign Affairs* article by American diplomat George F. Kennan. Containment soon became the official U.S. policy with regard to the USSR.

By 1948 neither side believed any longer in the possibility of preserving some level of partnership amidst the growing tension and competition. During this new and more intense phase of the Cold War, developments in and around postwar Germany emerged as the core of the conflict. Following its defeat in World War II, Germany had been divided into separate British, French, American, and Soviet occupation zones. The city of Berlin, located in the Soviet zone, was also divided into four administrative sectors. The occupying governments could not reach agreement on what the political and economic structure of postwar Germany should be, and in mid-1947 the United States and Britain decided to merge their separate administrative zones. The two Western governments worried that to keep Germany fragmented indefinitely, particularly when the Soviet and Western occupation regimes were growing so far apart ideologically, could have negative economic consequences for the Western sphere of responsibility. This concern echoed a larger fear that the economic problems of Western Europe—a result of the war's devastation—had left the region vulnerable to Soviet penetration through European Communist parties under Moscow's control. To head off this danger, in the summer of 1947 the United States committed itself to a massive economic aid program designed to rebuild Western European economies. The program was called the Marshall Plan, after U.S. secretary of state George C. Marshall (see European Recovery Program).

In June 1948 France merged its administrative zone with the joint British-American zone, thus laying the foundation for a West German republic. Stalin and his lieutenants opposed the establishment of a West German state, fearing that it would be rearmed and welcomed into an American-led military alliance. In the summer of 1948 the Soviets responded to the Western governments' plans for West Germany by attempting to cut those governments off from their sectors in Berlin through a land blockade. In the first direct military confrontation between the USSR and the Western powers, the Western governments organized a massive airlift of supplies to West Berlin, circumventing the Soviet blockade. After 11 months and thousands of flights, the Western powers succeeded in breaking the blockade.

Meanwhile, in February 1948 Soviet-backed Communists in Czechoslovakia provoked a crisis that led to the formation of a new, Communist-dominated government. With this, all the countries of Eastern Europe were under Communist control, and the creation of the Soviet bloc was complete. The events of 1948 contributed to a growing conviction among political leaders in both the United States and the USSR that the opposing power posed a broad and fundamental threat to their nation's interests.

The Berlin blockade and the spread of Communism in Europe led to negotiations between Western Europe, Canada, and the United States that resulted in the North Atlantic Treaty, which was signed in April 1949, thereby establishing the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The Berlin crisis also accelerated the emergence of a state of West Germany, which was formally established in May 1949. (The Communist republic of East Germany, comprising the remainder of German territory, was formally proclaimed in October of that year.) And finally, the Berlin confrontation prompted the Western powers to begin thinking seriously about rearming their half of Germany, despite the divisiveness of this issue among West Europeans.

The death of Joseph Stalin in 1953 had a significant impact on the course of the Cold War. His successors, including Nikita Khrushchev, who ultimately replaced Stalin as Soviet leader, sought to ease some of the rigidities of Soviet policy toward the West, but without resolving the core issue: a divided Germany at the heart of a divided Europe. The Western powers responded cautiously but sympathetically to the softening of Soviet policy, and in the mid-1950s the USSR and the Western powers convened the first of several summit conferences in Geneva, Switzerland, to address the key issues of the Cold War. These issues now included not only the problem of German reunification, but also the danger of surprise nuclear attack and, in the background, the momentarily quieted but still unresolved conflicts in Korea and Indochina (for more information, see *The Cold War Outside*

*Europe* below). The 1955 Geneva Conference achieved little progress on the central issues of Germany, Eastern Europe, and arms control. However, on the eve of the conference the two sides resolved the issue of Austria, which had been united with Germany during the war and divided into American, British, French, and Soviet occupation zones in its aftermath. The signing of the State Treaty between Austria and the Allies established Austria's neutrality, freed it of occupation forces, and reestablished the Austrian republic. This period also saw fundamental change in one critical realm: Both the United States and the USSR came to recognize that nuclear weapons had produced a revolution in military affairs—making war among the great powers, while still a possibility, no longer a sane policy recourse.

Meanwhile, the struggle over Europe continued. West Germany was recognized as an independent nation in 1955 and was allowed to rearm and join NATO. In response to this development, a group of Eastern European Communist nations led by the USSR formed the Warsaw Pact. In the late 1950s Khrushchev launched a new series of crises over Berlin, and in 1961 the Soviet government built the Berlin Wall to prevent East Germans from fleeing to West Germany.

## B The Cold War Outside Europe

In 1950 the superpowers' involvement in Third World areas—limited previously to sporadic jousting—changed suddenly, as the USSR and the United States became entangled in an Asian war. In June of that year, Stalin appeared to endorse the plans of North Korean Communist leader Kim Il Sung to attack South Korea, assuming—according to documents that have since come to light—that the United States and other major powers would not get involved. This mistaken assumption led to the Korean War (1950-1953), which pitted American-led United Nations forces against the military forces of North Korea and China (which had become a Communist republic under the leadership of Mao Zedong in late 1949). The first armed conflict of the Cold War, the Korean War led to a major increase in defense spending by the United States. Because American leaders saw Stalin's actions in Korea as a potential precursor to aggressive movements in Europe, the war helped prompt the United States to turn NATO into an ambitious and permanent military structure.

In 1954, following the military defeat of France in its bid to reclaim Vietnam in the First Indochina War (1946-1954), the great powers assembled in Geneva with representatives from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia to negotiate an end to that conflict. Among other provisions, the resulting agreement, known as the Geneva Accords, provided for the temporary partition of Vietnam into northern and southern portions, with the Viet Minh (a Communist group seeking Vietnamese independence) concentrated in North Vietnam and the French and their Vietnamese supporters in the south. To avoid permanent partition, the accords called for national elections to reunify the country to be held in 1956. When the South Vietnamese refused to hold the elections because Viet Minh leader Ho Chi Minh was favored to win, the North Vietnamese began to seek the overthrow of the South Vietnamese government.

The Vietnam War, which began in 1959, pitted the Communist North Vietnamese and the National Liberation Front, a Vietnamese nationalist group based in South Vietnam, against the South Vietnamese. In 1965 the United States sent troops into Vietnam to fight alongside the South Vietnamese. A long and bloody conflict, the Vietnam War lasted until 1975. Before it ended, it spread to the neighboring countries of Laos and Cambodia, where it continued long after 1975. In Cambodia, the war brought to power the Communist movement known as the Khmer Rouge, led by Pol Pot, whose regime inflicted a genocidal massacre on the Cambodian people. Meanwhile, by the mid-1960s the Communist world had been dramatically reconfigured as the result of an increasingly bitter and open split between the USSR and China. The dispute stemmed in part from ideological disagreements but also reflected the intense rivalry of two former empires.

The most serious Cold War confrontation between the United States and the USSR that took place in the Third World—one that raised the specter of nuclear war—occurred in 1962. In the summer of that year, the U.S. government discovered that the Soviets were in the process of deploying nuclear missiles in Communist Cuba. In October the United States moved to block Soviet ships carrying missiles to Cuba. The resulting standoff, during which the world stood seemingly on the brink of ultimate disaster, ended with Khrushchev capitulating to the demands of U.S. president John F. Kennedy. From the Cuban missile crisis both sides learned that risking nuclear war in pursuit of political objectives was simply too dangerous. It was the last time during the Cold War that either side would take this risk.

In the early and mid-1960s the great powers even superimposed their competition on local conflicts in faraway Africa. In newly independent nations such as the Republic of the Congo (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo) and Nigeria, the United States and the USSR chose sides and lent military backing and other assistance to groups or leaders thought to be sympathetic to their interests. In the Middle East, the underlying conflict

between Israel and its Arab neighbors became entangled with maneuvering by the superpowers to push one another out of the region. The Arab-Israeli wars of 1956, 1967, and 1973 drew in the United States and the USSR, creating the possibility of escalation to a direct confrontation between them.

In the early 1970s the tenor of the Cold War changed. During the first administration of U.S. president Richard Nixon (1969-1973), the United States and the USSR sought to put their relationship on a different footing. While neither side abandoned its basic positions, the two superpowers tried to take the first steps toward controlling the costly nuclear arms race and finding areas for mutually advantageous economic and scientific collaboration. Détente, as this policy came to be called, collapsed in the second half of the 1970s, when the American-Soviet competition in the Third World intensified once again, this time during the civil war in Angola and the Somali-Ethiopian war over the Ogadēn region. During this phase of the Cold War, Communist Cuba played a significant role alongside the USSR, while the Chinese, now deeply wary of the USSR, participated on the side of the United States.

## IV END OF THE COLD WAR

The early 1980s witnessed a final period of friction between the United States and the USSR, resulting mainly from the Soviets' invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 to prop up a Communist regime and from the firm line adopted by U.S. president Ronald Reagan after his 1980 election. Reagan saw the USSR as an "evil empire." He also believed that his rivals in Moscow respected strength first and foremost, and thus he set about to add greatly to American military capabilities. The Soviets initially viewed Reagan as an implacable foe, committed to subverting the Soviet system and possibly willing to risk nuclear war in the process.

Then in the mid-1980s Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in the USSR. Gorbachev was determined to halt the increasing decay of the Soviet system and to shed some of his country's foreign policy burdens. Between 1986 and 1989 he brought a revolution to Soviet foreign policy, abandoning long-held Soviet assumptions and seeking new and far-reaching agreements with the West. Gorbachev's efforts fundamentally altered the dynamic of East-West relations. Gorbachev and Reagan held a series of summit talks beginning in 1985, and in 1987 the two leaders agreed to eliminate a whole class of their countries' nuclear missiles—those capable of striking Europe and Asia from the USSR and vice versa. The Soviet government began to reduce its forces in Eastern Europe, and in 1989 it pulled its troops out of Afghanistan. That year Communist regimes began to topple in the countries of Eastern Europe and the wall that had divided East and West Germany since 1961 was torn down. In 1990 Germany became once again a unified country. In 1991 the USSR dissolved, and Russia and the other Soviet republics emerged as independent states. Even before these dramatic final events, much of the ideological basis for the Cold War competition had disappeared. However, the collapse of Soviet power in Eastern Europe, and then of the USSR itself, lent a crushing finality to the end of the Cold War period.