

## Topic page:

# Cold War

Ideological, political, and economic tensions from 1945 to 1989 between the USSR and Eastern Europe on the one hand and the USA and Western Europe on the other. The Cold War was fuelled by propaganda, undercover activity by intelligence agencies, and economic sanctions; and was intensified by signs of conflict anywhere in the world. Arms-reduction agreements between the USA and USSR in the late 1980s, and a reduction of Soviet influence in Eastern Europe, led to a reassessment of positions, and the 'war' was officially ended in December 1989.

The term 'Cold War' was first used by Bernard [Baruch](#), advisor to US President Truman, in a speech made in April 1947. He spoke about Truman's intent for the USA to 'support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures' (see [Truman Doctrine](#)).

### Origins

Mistrust between the USSR and the West dated from the Russian Revolution of 1917 and contributed to the disagreements which arose during and immediately after World War II over the future structure of Eastern Europe. The [Atlantic Charter](#), signed in 1941 by the USA and the UK, favoured self-determination; whereas the USSR insisted on keeping the territory obtained as a result of the Hitler-Stalin pact of August 1939. After the war the USA was eager to have all of Europe open to Western economic interests, while the USSR, afraid of being encircled and attacked by its former allies, saw Eastern Europe as its own sphere of influence and, in the case of Germany, was looking to extract reparations. As the USSR increased its hold on the countries of Eastern Europe, the USA pursued a policy of 'containment' that involved offering material aid to Western Europe (the [Marshall Plan](#)) and to Nazi-victimized countries such as Greece and Turkey. The USSR retaliated by setting up [Comecon](#) to offer economic aid to countries within its sphere of influence. Berlin became the focal point of East-West tension (since it was zoned for military occupational governments of the USA, UK, France, and USSR, yet was situated within what was then Soviet-controlled East Germany). This culminated in the Soviet blockade of the US, British, and French zones of the city in 1948, which was relieved by a sustained airlift of supplies (see [Berlin blockade](#)). In 1961 the East Berlin government began construction on the [Berlin Wall](#) to prevent the flow of East German people to the West.

### Increasing tensions

The growing divisions between the [capitalist](#) and [communist](#) worlds were reinforced by the creation of military alliances: the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) was set up in the West in 1949, and was followed in the East by the [Warsaw Pact](#) in 1955. Tensions between the two blocs increased significantly at a number of points during the following two decades, and were prompted on the one hand by the USSR's military suppression of anticommunist revolutions - the [East German revolt](#) in 1953, the Hungarian uprising in 1956 (see [Hungary](#), **the Hungarian national uprising**), and the revolt known as the [Prague Spring](#) in Czechoslovakia in 1968; and on the other hand by US participation in the [Vietnam War](#) (1961-75) and the [Cuban missile crisis](#) of 1962, during which the two superpowers came closer than ever before to nuclear war. The crisis was initiated by the siting of Soviet rockets in [Cuba](#) in October 1962, after which US President [Kennedy](#), by means of military threats and negotiation, forced the Soviet leader Nikita [Khrushchev](#) to back down and dismantle the missiles. During the 1960s the [non-aligned movement](#) appeared - a group of nations which adopted a position of strategic and political neutrality towards the USA which was accused of pursuing a policy of US [imperialism](#); and towards the USSR, who was seen to be promoting communist ideology through Soviet [imperialism](#).

During the late 1970s and 1980s, tensions between the two blocs were exacerbated still further: first by the USSR's invasion of [Afghanistan](#) in 1979 and the resultant war which continued until 1987; and then by the aggressive foreign policy pursued between 1981 and 1989 by US President Ronald [Reagan](#). In 1980 and 1981, for example, the USA supported the newly formed [Solidarity](#) trade-union movement in Poland, and in 1983, Reagan publicly referred to the USSR as an 'evil empire'. The major point of tension, however, arose with the increasing intensification of the arms race (see [nuclear warfare](#)), which placed heavy demands upon the economies of both countries, and was given a quite new direction by Reagan's insistence on militarizing space through the [Strategic Defense Initiative](#), popularly known as Star Wars.

### Détente

Chiefly because of his commitment to the Star Wars programme, Reagan also turned down a [disarmament](#) agreement proposed by Soviet leader Mikhail [Gorbachev](#) in 1986. However, a process of [détente](#) between the two superpowers had in fact been started as early as 1972, with the signing of the first Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT I) accord. The 'thaw' in East-West relations was further advanced in the 1980s by the 1987 treaty which pledged both NATO and the Warsaw Pact to remove all medium-range Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) from Europe, and then by the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan in February 1989, as well as by Gorbachev's resolve to drastically reduce the size of the USSR's conventional forces 1989-90.

After the opening of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the overthrow of the ruling regimes of Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania, and Hungary in the same year - which together heralded the beginning of the dissolution of the USSR itself - the end of the Cold War was formally declared in December 1989 at a summit meeting in Malta attended by Gorbachev and US President George Bush. The new relationship was further substantiated at the Paris Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE, from 1994 the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, OSCE) in November 1990.

### **Cultural aspects**

The Cold War also had an important impact upon Western, and in particular US, culture. Many US science fiction films from the 1950s onwards pitted US citizens against the forces of extraterrestrial 'evil empires', which have subsequently been interpreted by film critics as metaphors for the perceived threat of communist expansionism. In literature, the genre of the spy thriller was developed by writers such as John le Carré, and has since become enormously popular, particularly through the novels of Ian Fleming, the inventor of the British Secret Service agent James Bond.

### **tables**

[Cold War: key dates](#)

### **essays**

[Breaking with the Past: Britain from Attlee to Thatcher](#)

[Why did the Cold War Start?](#)

### **documents**

[Acheson, Dean: Tension Between the United States and the Soviet Union](#)

[Defence Committee: Berlin Airlift](#)

[British government: Soviet blockade of Berlin](#)

[Casey, William: The Growth and Strength of the Soviet Union](#)

[Dulles, John Foster: The Issues at Geneva](#)

[Dulles, John Foster: The Peace We Seek](#)

[Einstein, Albert: Peace in the Atomic Era](#)

[Eisenhower, Dwight: Peace in the World](#)

[Eisenhower, Dwight: An Atomic Stockpile for Peace](#)

[Fulbright, William: Foreign Policy - Old Myths and New Realities](#)

[Gruenther, Alfred: NATO, A Thriving Success](#)

[Hoover, Herbert: The Voice of World Experience](#)

[Kennedy, John: Cuban Missile Crisis Address](#)

[Kennedy, John: Ich Bin Ein Berliner](#)

[Marshall, George: European Unity \(The Marshall Plan\)](#)

[McCarthy, Joseph: Communists in Government Service](#)

[Nixon, Richard: The Kitchen Debate](#)

Oppenheimer, J Robert: The Open Mind

Powell, Colin: US Foreign Policy in a Changing World

Reagan, Ronald: Crusade for Freedom

Reagan, Ronald: Address on Communism (The Evil Empire)

Stevenson, Adlai: Has the USSR Missiles in Cuba?

### **weblinks**

Cold War Policies 1945-91

Federation of American Scientists, Nuclear Resources

Soviet Union and the United States

### **images**

Checkpoint Charlie, Berlin

## **Definition**

**cold war** from *Collins English Dictionary*

A state of political hostility and military tension between two countries or power blocs, involving propaganda, subversion, threats, economic sanctions, and other measures short of open warfare, especially that between the American and Soviet blocs after World War II (the **Cold War**).



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Chicago

*The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather guide*, s.v. "Cold War," accessed May 22, 2012, [http://www.credoreference.com/topic/cold\\_war/](http://www.credoreference.com/topic/cold_war/)

Harvard

'Cold War' 2010, in *The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather guide*, Helicon, Abington, United Kingdom, viewed 22 May 2012, <from [http://www.credoreference.com/topic/cold\\_war/](http://www.credoreference.com/topic/cold_war/)>

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