

THE COLD WAR

A Test of American Power and a Trial of Ideals

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The U.S. Navy destroyer *Barry* pulls alongside the Russian freighter *Anosov* in the Atlantic Ocean, November 10, 1962, to inspect cargo as a U.S. Navy reconnaissance plane flies overhead. The Soviet ship was carrying a cargo of missiles being withdrawn from Cuba at the conclusion of the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis.

The Cold War was first and foremost a war of ideas, a struggle over the organizing principle of human society, a contest between liberalism and forced collectivism. For the United States, the Cold War was the nation's first truly sustained engagement in Great Power politics, and it required Americans to confront, not always successfully, their contradictory impulses toward the outside world: the desire to stand apart and to champion liberty for other peoples—for reasons of both altruism and self-interest.

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The Cold War can be said to have begun in 1917, with the emergence in Russia of a revolutionary Bolshevik regime devoted to spreading communism throughout the industrialized world. For Vladimir Lenin, the leader of that revolution, such gains were imperative. As he wrote in his August 1918 Open Letter to the American Workers, “We are now, as it were, in a besieged fortress, waiting for the other detachments of the world socialist revolution to come to our relief.”

Western governments generally understood communism to be an international movement whose adherents foreswore all national allegiance in favor of transnational communism, but in practice received their orders from and were loyal to Moscow.

In 1918, the United States joined briefly and unenthusiastically in an unsuccessful Allied attempt to topple the revolutionary Soviet regime. Suspicion and hostility thus characterized relations between the Soviets and the West long before the Second World War made



British Prime Minister Winston Churchill gave a speech at Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri, March 5, 1946, that in a single phrase defined the Soviet influence over Eastern Europe when he said an "Iron Curtain" had fallen across Europe.

AP/WWP

them reluctant allies in the struggle against Nazi Germany.

With the defeat of Germany in 1945 and the widespread destruction the war had wrought throughout Europe, the United States and the Soviet Union represented competing and incompatible philosophies, objectives, and plans for rebuilding and reorganizing the continent. The Soviets acted from a combination of ideological commitment and geopolitical realism. The Soviet Army had, by any fair account, done the bulk of the fighting and dying on the European front and had liberated from Adolf Hitler's grasp much of Eastern and Central Europe. It soon became apparent that Moscow would now insist on communist regimes not only in those areas, but also other governments that answered directly to the Soviets, notwithstanding the wishes of Poles and Czechs, and not to mention the Romanians, Bulgarians, and other East Europeans.

The perspective from Washington was very different. American leaders now believed that U.S. political isolation from Europe after the First World War had been a huge mistake, one that possibly contributed to the rise of Hitler and nearly resulted in the continent's domination by a single, hostile power that could threaten U.S. national security. Now, with Soviet forces ensconced in half the

continent, and with communists strong in France, Italy, and, most important of all, Germany, U.S. policymakers again had reason to be wary.

The contrast between a liberal, individualistic, and relatively freewheeling United States and the centrally planned, politically repressive Union of Soviet Socialist Republics could not have been more stark, as the two began to compete for the allegiance of Europe and of the nations newly independent from colonial control.

THE COLD WAR IN EUROPE

The U.S. effort to "contain" Soviet power within its postwar boundaries encompassed two broad phases: the immediate effort to revive Europe economically and politically, and hence stiffen its ability and willingness to resist further Soviet gains, and, later, to maintain in a nuclear age the credibility of U.S. promises to defend its European allies.

Two early initiatives demonstrated U.S. resolve to rebuild and defend noncommunist Europe. In 1947, when Great Britain informed Washington it could no longer afford financially to support the governments of Greece and Turkey against communist insurgents, President Harry S Truman (1945-1953) secured \$400 million for that purpose. More fatefully, the Truman Doctrine promised an open-ended commitment "to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures." The following year, the Marshall Plan injected some \$13 billion of economic aid into West European economies. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), created in 1949, formally bound the United States to the defense of Western Europe in its first formal "entangling alliance"—a situation the first U.S. president, George Washington (1789-1797), had warned against.

NATO was a response to Soviet conventional military superiority in Europe. At the end of the Second World War, the United States conducted the most rapid military demobilization in history, contracting its army from about 8.3 million in 1945 to barely 500,000 by 1948. The Red Army maintained a much larger presence in the heart of Europe and was widely believed capable of swiftly overrunning Western Europe should Stalin or his successors so choose. In that event, U.S. military plans called for retaliation with atomic and, later, nuclear weaponry, but America's European allies—on whose territory many of those bombs would necessarily land—were understandably suspicious.

Once the Soviets acquired atomic (1949) and nuclear (1953) weapons of their own, many Europeans wondered



Germans from East and West stand on the Berlin Wall in front of the Brandenburg Gate on November 10, 1989. This moment symbolized the beginning of the end of the Cold War in Europe.

whether America would defend them against a Soviet attack if Moscow could, in turn, unleash a nuclear holocaust on American cities. Would Washington sacrifice New York to defend Paris, London, or Bonn?

Much of the Cold War in Europe revolved around this question. Soviet pressure on West Berlin—a Western enclave inside communist East Germany and hence militarily indefensible—was aimed to impress on West Europeans the precariousness of their situation. America’s responses to that pressure—including the 1948 Berlin Airlift, in which the U.S. Air Force delivered food and other necessities to the Soviet-blockaded city; President John F. Kennedy’s 1963 promise, “All free men, wherever they may live, are citizens of Berlin.... Ich bin ein Berliner;” and President Ronald Reagan’s 1987 challenge, “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall”—all attest to American recognition of Berlin as an important symbol of the transatlantic link and of American determination to defend its European allies.

The last great European Cold War crisis reflected another Soviet effort to split the Western allies. In 1975, Moscow introduced SS-20 missiles, highly accurate intermediate range weapons capable of hitting targets in Western Europe but not of reaching the United States. These invited West Europeans again to question whether America would retaliate for an attack on Europe and thus initiate a mutually destructive Soviet-U.S. nuclear war. The NATO alliance resolved to redress the balance by negotiating with the Soviets for the removal of all intermediate range weapons, but also by vowing to introduce into Europe U.S. Pershing

II and ground-launched cruise missiles if Moscow would not remove the SS-20s.

Many West Europeans opposed these countermeasures. They acted out of a variety of motives and beliefs, but the international communist movement also helped organize and encourage elements within this “peace movement,” hoping to force West Europeans to accommodate politically Soviet military superiority. After a climactic November 1983 vote in the West German Parliament, the new U.S. missiles were deployed.

In December 1987, President Ronald Reagan (1981-1989) and General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev (1985-1991) signed the Treaty on the Elimination of Intermediate-Range and Shorter-Range Missiles. The inability of the Soviet Union to split the United States and its West European allies was one decisive factor in how the Cold War ended.

THE COLD WAR ON THE “PERIPHERY”

In 1947, the American diplomat George Kennan enunciated the basic U.S. Cold War strategy: “a policy of containment, designed to confront the Russians with unalterable counter-force at every point where they show signs of encroaching upon the interests of a peaceful and stable world.” This policy in many instances conflicted with, and over time often trumped, Washington’s real desire to support decolonization and to align with the newly independent states emerging in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, an area that strategists sometimes referred to as the “periphery,” Europe remaining the central Cold War arena.

At the end of the Second World War, U.S. policymakers anticipated the breakup of the old European colonial empires and hoped to win the friendship of these new countries. The United States thus worked hard to prevent the reassertion of Dutch authority over Indonesia, even threatening in 1949 to withhold Marshall Plan aid until The Netherlands recognized Indonesian independence. For similar reasons, President Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1956 forced Britain, France, and Israel to end their respective occupations of the Suez Canal and Sinai Peninsula.

There was no consistent pattern to U.S. policy on the periphery, though. In some cases, as in the Philippines in 1986, Washington sided with popular forces, even against pro-U.S. regimes. In others, American leaders were quick to see communist influence behind nationalist movements and to view nations as “dominoes”: were one to “fall” under Soviet influence, its neighbors were presumed at risk to follow.

This “domino theory” lay behind America’s most catastrophic periphery intervention—Vietnam. After the Japanese surrender in 1945, French efforts to reassert colonial authority in Vietnam met with great resistance. U.S. policymakers were tempted to urge Paris to quit Indochina, much as they had helped push the Dutch out of Indonesia. But French leaders warned that the loss of their empire could result in the loss of France to communism. Washington was unwilling to take that risk. Step by step, beginning with support of the French, then gradually introducing American trainers and then troops—nearly 550,000 of them by mid-1969—the United States expended blood and treasure in the ultimately unsuccessful effort to prevent the communist regime in North Vietnam from absorbing the rest of that nation.

While the American record on the Cold War periphery was not above criticism, its Soviet rival was similarly active in efforts to spread its influence throughout the Third World, supporting dictators and interfering in local matters.

A LONG-TERM CONTEST

The containment strategy prescribed a long-term contest, what President Kennedy (1961-1963) called a “long, twilight struggle.” This was something new for a nation whose previous international engagements had been geared to overcoming specific, immediate challenges.

U.S. reaction to three early crises established that the Cold War was unlikely to end with a smashing military victory. President Truman’s 1951 decision to sack General Douglas MacArthur amounted to a decision to wage the Korean War to preserve South Korea and not, as the general wished, to liberate the North. Five years later, President Eisenhower (1953-1961) pointedly offered no tangible support when the Hungarian people rose up against their Soviet-imposed government and the Red Army troops that suppressed their revolution.

Finally, the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 established even more starkly the limits of direct conflict in a nuclear age. The Soviets sought to secretly introduce intermediate range missiles into Cuba, clearly posing a threat to the U.S. mainland. Even though the United States at this point still enjoyed overwhelming superiority in nuclear weaponry, outright war posed the threat of unacceptable damage. President Kennedy therefore concluded a secret trade, whose terms did not become known until many years later. In return for the extraction of Soviet nuclear missiles from Cuba, the United States agreed not to move against Fidel Castro’s communist regime there and, also, to retire, after a

decent interval, “obsolete” U.S. missiles based in Turkey.

The two “superpowers,” it appeared, learned different lessons from the Cuban Missile Crisis. Whereas, by 1980, the United States had mostly deferred further increases in nuclear weapons, the Soviets had launched a substantial buildup and offered no indication that they intended to slow the pace. Meanwhile, the introduction during the 1970s of Cuban armed forces into African conflicts and the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan—the first direct use of the Red Army outside Eastern Europe—convinced many Americans that the Cold War was not over yet.

THE COLD WAR ENDS

The reasons for the collapse of the Soviet Union remain hotly debated today. Nevertheless, a few observations are possible. One is that the substantial military buildup ordered by President Reagan raised the Soviets’ cost for maintaining their relative military power. Another is that Reagan’s proposed “Star Wars” missile defense shield threatened to shift the competition to the mastery of new technologies, an arena in which the Soviet Union—a closed society—was not well-suited to compete.

The Soviet command economy was already faltering. Whatever the ability of the communist model to successfully industrialize, the budding new world of information technologies posed insurmountable challenges to a society that closely monitored its citizens and supervised even their use of photocopying machines. Far-sighted leaders like General Secretary Gorbachev understood this. The reforms he introduced, but ultimately could not control, led to the breakup of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War.

From an American perspective, the 40-year conflict represented a victory of ideas. The United States paid a price, indeed a number of very substantial ones, for its victory. Most obviously, there were the huge expenditures of irreplaceable lives lost on battlefields and money spent on weapons of unimaginable force rather than on perceived more noble and equally pressing causes at home and abroad. There were political costs as well. The Cold War at times obliged Americans to align their nation with unsavory regimes in the name of geopolitical expediency.

There were, however, very real achievements of Cold War America. Most obviously, Western Europe and, no doubt, much of the world were rescued from the boot of Joseph Stalin, a murderous dictator barely distinguishable from the vanquished Adolf Hitler. Equally significant in an age of thermonuclear weaponry, the captive nations of the



AP/WIDEWORLD

A gentle reminder of the historic changes that have occurred in Russia: School children take a break from studies on a toppled statue of former Soviet leader Josef Stalin in a Moscow park in 1991.

Soviet Union were freed, without recourse to a general war of unprecedented destruction. And America's democratic institutions emerged intact—indeed, thriving—and the U.S. model of social organization, one that affords the individual the political, religious, and economic freedom to pursue his

or her dreams, retained its vigor as the nation entered a new millennium. ■

The opinions expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. government.