



What Was the Cold War?

From 1945 to 1991, the US and Soviet Union used propaganda, proxy wars, and economic alliances to reshape the post-World War II world. The struggle between these two superpowers may have been “cold” but there were plenty of heated clashes.

**0:00**

OER Project logo; text ‘What Was The Cold War? From allies to enemies’; outdoor clip of soldier in a field next to tanks as a military truck drives by; scenes of Soviet soldiers celebrating; post WWII map; soldiers riding on a tank; Joseph Stalin.

It’s April 1945, and the end of the Second World War in Europe. Russian troops, pushing into Germany from the East, meet American soldiers advancing from the West. The war is drawing to a close, and the allied soldiers meet on the Elbe River. Everyone smiles, hugs, and shakes hands. The soldiers dance, drink, and play music. While much of Europe, Asia, and North Africa lies destroyed, these men—Russian and American—hope that a brighter future awaits. It’s a future that turned dark only months later. Instead of free elections in the countries liberated from Nazi Germany—like Poland and Hungary—Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin, installs communist governments.

0:59

Winston Churchill delivering a speech; the building of the Berlin Wall; diplomatic assembly; world map illustrating Cold War policy of Containment; a shield-shaped logo of the US flag; military officers and government officials networking; soldiers on a tank; portrait of George Kennan.

Less than a year later, in March 1946, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill warns that an “iron curtain” had descended across Europe. It was marked in part by a physical barrier—the Berlin Wall that divided the former German capital into two parts. The Cold War had begun.

The United States and its allies, like Great Britain, pursued a policy of containment; not directly fighting the Soviets, but rather trying to keep communism “contained” within its borders it already had. Wherever communism seemed to be expanding, the US tried to block it—with money, alliances, and, sometimes, with military force.

The American diplomat, George Kennan, defined this policy when he wrote, “the main element of any United States policy toward the Soviet Union must be that of a long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies.”

2:05

Flag used by NATO; various flags flying; soldiers and officials walking into a building for a NATO meeting; military tanks; crowd of people protesting; map of the world zoomed in to the maps of the US and USSR; text ‘The Origins of the Cold War’.

In April 1949, the Western democracies signed an anti-Soviet alliance—the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, or NATO. Their goal: to establish a collective defense against Soviet aggression in Europe. The Soviets responded by gathering their communist satellite states into a counter-alliance, the Warsaw Pact, in May 1955. Their goal: to establish a collective defense against NATO aggression in Europe.

This was the Cold War, a global conflict without direct military confrontation, between two alliance systems. One led by the US and one by the USSR. For 45 years, these two superpowers struggled for supremacy, but refused to let tensions heat up for fear of nuclear catastrophe, which is where it gets its name: Cold War.

3:11

Images of streets in different countries; three pillars representing American Capitalism; people saluting; military parade; portraits of Joseph Stalin and Harry Truman; political posters; text ‘Proxy Wars’.

Why did the Cold War happen? Why did these two former allies turn into enemies? To some degree, it was an inevitable clash between two superpowers with different ideas about how the world should act. The United States championed a belief in democracy, capitalism, and individual freedoms. The Soviet Union, under Joseph Stalin, believed in communism, one-party rule, and a state-controlled economy. Some historians blame individual leaders—either the Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin, or US President Harry Truman—for starting this conflict.

Other historians believe the Cold War wasn’t really the fault of just one side. Instead, it happened because of mutual distrust. Each side thought it was defending itself from the other, but to their rivals, every move looked like aggression.

**4:12**

Cold War propaganda map; rocket launching; two men seated at consoles; massive explosion; portrait of Nikita Krushchev; map of USSR; aerial shot from the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Both the Soviets and the Americans claimed that their actions and alliances were defensive and designed to keep the peace. All the while, each was building a massive arsenal of nuclear weapons. By the mid-1960s, the two superpowers each had enough intercontinental ballistic missiles to destroy the other completely. This strategy became known as MAD, or Mutually Assured Destruction. But despite the danger, they still squabbled with each other.

Stalin's successor, Soviet Premier Nikita Krushchev, would complain in 1960 that: "The United States talks about peace but prepares for war. It surrounds the socialist countries with military bases, installs nuclear weapons on foreign soil, and calls this defense." But any American president could as easily have said the same about the Soviet Union. The most dangerous confrontation of the Cold War was the Cuban Missile Crisis.

5:13

Large ships at sea; military clips of Cuba during Cuban Missile Crisis; text 'Proxy War' with definition; soldiers on tank; military helicopters in flight; group of resistance fighters walking through mountains; plane being shot down; space craft.

This took place in October 1962, when the Soviet Union tried to place missiles 90 miles off the coast of the United States, and the world waited on the brink of nuclear war. Nevertheless, nuclear arsenals and MAD meant that, by and large, the US and USSR didn't confront each other directly. Instead, they fought proxy wars—wars fought through allies in other countries. The US and USSR armed and funded opposite sides in places like Korea in 1950 to 1953, Vietnam from 1955 to 1975, and Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989, turning local conflicts into part of the global Cold War.

These third-party wars weren't the only way the two sides fought each other. This was also a war of ideas, and propaganda played a huge role.

6:13

Bomber aircraft; side by side images of a political poster, people monitoring controls and televisions, and a man in front of a mic; a rocket; footprint on the moon; astronaut on the moon next to an American flag; ship's mast with an American flag flying; two men united, one is holding the USSR flag the other the Chinese flag; text 'Why did the US win the Cold War?'.

Each side used films, posters, radio, and television to convince people that their system was peaceful, modern, and just—and that the other side was dangerous and cruel. And in the propaganda wars, nothing was as effective as getting to the moon first. This Space Race was eventually won by the Americans in 1969.

Money and trade were Cold War tools as well. The US sent billions to rebuild Europe and allies through programs like the Marshall Plan, while the Soviets funded their own friends with trade deals and arms. For both sides, this aid wasn't just generosity—it was strategy.

7:04

Line graph titled 'Military Expenditure by Country' showing spending from 1914 to 1991, from \$0 to \$700 billion for the US and Russia; aviation and missile footage; store clerk at a counter; long line outside of a shop; consumers shopping; large Ronald McDonald balloon mid-air; footage of

All of this strategy was expensive, and those expenses are part of the reason why the war eventually ended. It was just too expensive for the Soviets, whose centralized economy couldn't handle doing two things at once: paying for the Cold War and providing what civilians needed for daily life. As a result, life in the communist countries was often difficult, with shortages of consumer goods and long lines for food, clothing, and luxury items.

The free market economies of the West were larger, more flexible, and more innovative. And they exploited cultural hallmarks—from Mickey Mouse to McDonalds—that appealed to the people of the Soviet Union



protests; Mikhail Gorbachev and Ronald Regan giving a speech.

and Eastern Europe. Across the countries of the Warsaw Pact, protest movements arose, calling for reform within communist leadership. By the late 1980s, these cracks would begin to widen. The newest Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, reacted by introducing a series of reforms to open up their command economy.

8:13

Massive line outside of McDonalds; crowds tearing down the Berlin Wall; Soviet flag flying; Mikhail Gorbachev and Ronald Regan signing documents; plaque at the Silent Heroes of the Cold War National Memorial; plaque commemorating the ending of the Cold War and tearing down of the Berlin Wall; pieces of the Berlin Wall; spinning globe.

But those reforms just created a bigger appetite for Western consumer goods. The Soviet leadership had unleashed forces they couldn't control. People began speaking freely, protesting, even demanding independence.

In 1989, the Berlin Wall—a concrete symbol of division—was torn down by joyous crowds. Once again, Americans and Soviets could meet in friendship. Within two years, in 1991, the Soviet Union collapsed. When the Cold War ended in 1991, it didn't mean the world would be at peace forever. It meant a great global rivalry—between capitalism and communism—had ended with because of the exhaustion of one side. The world that emerged would have new troubles and challenges to face. But for now, the great US-Soviet rivalry was over.