

THE COLD WAR (1947-1991)

The **Cold War** was a state of geopolitical tension after [World War II](#) between powers in the [Eastern Bloc](#) (the [Soviet Union](#) and its [satellite states](#)) and powers in the [Western Bloc](#) (the [United States](#), its [NATO](#) allies and others). Historians do not fully agree on the dates, but a common timeframe is the period between 1947, the year the [Truman Doctrine](#), a [U.S. foreign policy](#) pledging to aid nations threatened by Soviet expansionism, was announced, and either 1989, when [communism fell in Eastern Europe](#), or 1991, when the [Soviet Union collapsed](#). The term “cold” is used because there was no large-scale fighting directly between the two sides, but they each supported major regional wars known as [proxy wars](#).

The Cold War split the temporary [wartime alliance](#) against [Nazi Germany](#), leaving the Soviet Union and the United States as two [superpowers](#) with profound economic and political differences. The USSR was a [Marxist–Leninist](#) state led by its [Communist Party](#), which in turn was dominated by a [leader](#) with different titles over time, and a small committee called the [Politburo](#). The Party controlled the press, the military, the economy and many organizations. It also controlled the other states in the Eastern Bloc, and funded Communist parties around the world, sometimes in competition with Communist [China](#), particularly following the [Sino-Soviet split](#) of the 1960s. In opposition stood the [capitalist](#) West, led by the United States, a [federal republic](#) with a [two-party presidential system](#). The [First World](#) nations of the Western Bloc were generally [democracies](#).

A small neutral bloc arose with the [Non-Aligned Movement](#), which sought good relations with both sides. The two superpowers never engaged directly in full-scale armed combat, but they were heavily armed in preparation for a possible all-out [nuclear world war](#). Each side had a [nuclear strategy](#) that discouraged an attack by the other side, on the basis that such an attack would lead to the total destruction of the attacker—the doctrine of [mutually assured destruction](#) (MAD). Aside from the [development of the two sides’ nuclear arsenals](#), and their deployment of conventional military forces, the struggle for dominance was expressed via proxy wars around the globe, [psychological warfare](#), massive propaganda campaigns and [espionage](#), far-reaching [embargos](#), rivalry at sports events, and technological competitions such as the [Space Race](#).

[The first phase](#) of the Cold War began in the first two years after the end of the Second World War in 1945. The USSR consolidated its control over the states of the Eastern Bloc, while the United States began a strategy of global [containment](#) to challenge Soviet power, extending military and financial aid to the countries of Western Europe (for example, supporting the anti-communist side in the [Greek Civil War](#)) and [creating](#) the NATO alliance. The [Berlin Blockade](#) (1948–49) was the first major crisis of the Cold War. With the victory of the communist side in the [Chinese Civil War](#) and the outbreak of the [Korean War](#) (1950–53), [the conflict expanded](#). The USSR and the USA competed for influence in [Latin America](#) and the [decolonizing](#) states of Africa and Asia. The [Hungarian Revolution of 1956](#) was stopped by the Soviets. The expansion and escalation sparked more crises, such as the [Suez Crisis](#) (1956), the [Berlin Crisis of 1961](#), and the [Cuban Missile Crisis](#) of 1962. Following the Cuban Missile Crisis, [a new phase began](#) that saw the [Sino-Soviet split](#) complicate relations within the communist sphere, while US allies, particularly [France](#), demonstrated greater independence of action. The USSR [crushed](#) the 1968 [Prague Spring](#) liberalization program in [Czechoslovakia](#), and the [Vietnam War](#) (1955–75) ended with the [defeat](#) of the US-backed [Republic of Vietnam](#), prompting further adjustments.

By the 1970s, both sides had become interested in making allowances in order to create a more stable and predictable international system, ushering in a period of [détente](#) that saw [Strategic Arms Limitation Talks](#) and the US [opening relations](#) with the People's Republic of China as a strategic counterweight to the Soviet Union. Détente collapsed at the end of the decade with the beginning of the [Soviet–Afghan War](#) in 1979. The [early 1980s](#) were another period of elevated tension, with the Soviet downing of [Korean Air Lines Flight 007](#) (1983), and the "[Able Archer](#)" [NATO military exercises](#) (1983). The United States increased [diplomatic, military, and economic pressures](#) on the Soviet Union, at a time when the communist state was already suffering from [economic stagnation](#). [In the mid-1980s](#), the new Soviet leader [Mikhail Gorbachev](#) introduced the liberalizing reforms of [perestroika](#) (“reorganization”, 1987) and [glasnost](#) (“openness”, c. 1985) and ended Soviet involvement in Afghanistan. Pressures for national independence grew stronger in [Eastern Europe](#), especially [Poland](#). Gorbachev meanwhile refused to use Soviet troops to bolster the faltering Warsaw Pact regimes as had occurred in the past. The result in 1989 was [a wave of revolutions](#) that peacefully (with the exception of the [Romanian Revolution](#)) overthrew all of the communist regimes of Central and Eastern Europe. The Communist Party of the Soviet Union itself lost control and was banned following an [abortive coup attempt](#) in August 1991. This in turn led to the [formal dissolution of the USSR](#) in December 1991 and the collapse of communist regimes in other countries such as [Mongolia](#), [Cambodia](#) and [South Yemen](#). The United States remained as the world's only superpower.