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The Cold War: an ideological conflict

Abstract: The Cold War was a conflict of competing ideologies, which consumed global politics throughout the 20th century. While it was ostensibly fought between the Soviet Union and the United States of America, the rest of the world was also forced to pick sides in this clash of superpowers. While weapons of mass destruction were stockpiled on both sides, many small wars were fought worldwide. This international conflict brought mankind to the brink and its impact is still being felt today.

Introduction: As the second World War drew to a close, the western powers no longer needed to ally themselves with the communist juggernaut, and relations turned frosty. As the allies marched towards Berlin in the eleventh hour of the conflict, it was obvious that control of post-war Europe was hanging in the balance. Germany itself was soon occupied by the Russians, the Americans, the French, and the British. Control of Berlin became the first flashpoint of the Cold War, as the Americans were reluctant to cooperate with the Russians, who were attempting to catch escaping Germans fleeing west to avoid them. Germany and the USSR had fought a particularly ruthless war, and many Germans were terrified of the treatment they were likely to receive in Soviet hands. While the western powers were determined to aid the Germans and install an independent government as soon as possible, Stalin immediately turned East Germany into a satellite state and plotted to oust the rest of the Allies. By June of 1948, the Soviets had introduced a blockade in Berlin, cutting off roads, railways, and lines of communication, in an attempt to starve American-held West Berlin into submission.

In response, the Western Powers took to the skies, dropping 13,000 tons of supplies from the air, in an event known as the Berlin Airlift. The USSR was ultimately forced to lift the blockade in 1949, but Berlin remained split down the middle, and it would stay that way until 1989. Across the rest of Europe, most western soldiers had gone home after Germany was defeated, but troops from the USSR never left eastern Europe. Soon, they installed pro-communist governments in many neighboring countries. The staggering onslaught of Soviet domination led British Prime Minister Winston Churchill to remark that an “iron curtain” had descended across the continent. Tensions were high and the Soviets soon successfully field-tested their own nuclear bomb in 1949. To protect themselves against the new enormous communist bloc, the western powers formed, an

alliance by founding NATO, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. A few years later, in 1955, the Eastern Block countries would sign the Warsaw pact, forming a coherent alliance of their own. As communism continued to spread across the globe, the Cold War began with a series of proxy wars fought in many different countries. Asia, soon became a major theater of war in the ideological battle between communism and the capitalist West. The defeat of Japan in World War Two had led to a major power vacuum in the region, causing chaos in several countries. In China, the country's nationalist army, led by Chiang Kai-Shek, was seriously weakened after fighting the Japanese, which gave the communists rebels, led by Mao Zedong, an advantage in civil war. The communists quickly won control of China in 1949, while the remaining nationalists were forced to flee to Taiwan, a territory still disputed to this day. Meanwhile, in nearby Korea, the country was split in half at the end of World War Two by Soviet and western troops who divided the country along the 38th parallel. Emboldened by Communist successes in China, the Communist North invaded the South, causing the US and 14 other western countries to send troops to support Seoul's government. The bloody conflict was complex and would end in a total stalemate by 1953. The same year, the ferocious Soviet Premier, Joseph Stalin, finally died, leading to a government policy shift in the USSR.

The new Soviet leader, Nikita Khrushchev, had been quietly critical of Stalin and he soon became one of the USSR most energetic and competent leaders. Under his tenure, the USSR would see a massive wave of technological change in a push to fight the culture war against the highly influential United States. One of Khrushchev's key achievements was pushing ahead in the Space Race, a technological war between the US and the USSR. The Space Race was fueled by early advances in rocketry that had taken place in Nazi Germany. After the war, both the Soviets and the Americans seized as much information as possible from German scientists. The Americans promised to "forget" any war crimes committed by Germans who worked for them while the Soviets simply kidnapped scientists when they found them. While initially the Soviets were used this stolen information to make missiles, when Khrushchev heard that the Americans were working on putting a satellite into space, he immediately created the Soviet Space Program. The Soviets would launch their first satellite, Sputnik one in 1957, infuriating the Americans who didn't launch their satellite, Explorer One, until 1958. While the Americans created the National Aeronautics and Space Administration -NASA- in 1960, the Soviets would continue to take the lead in the Space Race for quite some time, getting the first man Yuri Gagarin, into space in 1961. The race between two powers to improve technology would lead to many fiery accidents, as poorly tested equipment was used too early by both sides. Eventually, as Soviet progress slowed down in the late 60s under the new Soviet Premier Brezhnev, the Americans pulled ahead, landing on the moon in 1969. The early 60s represented not only the peak of the Space Race, it was the absolute peak of cold War tension-the Cuban Missile Crisis.

In the 50s, the small Caribbean country of Cuba has long been overdue a regime change and was experiencing severe social unrest. Still, the US was concerned that any overthrow of the ruling dictator, Batista, would result in a communist government. When the rebel guerrillas, led by Fidel Castro, took over Havana, America was extremely concerned. In 1961, the US launched the Bay

of Pigs Invasion to removed Castro, but it soon backfired. The attack failed, and Cuba responded by definitively siding with the USSR and officially declare itself communists. With Cuba on their side, the USSR moved some of its missiles to the island in 1962, when Americans got wind of this, a nail-bitingly tense stand-off ensued. President Kennedy responded with a live TV broadcast, during which he declared that if Cuba fired at the US, the US would fire at the USSR, plunging the world into an all-out nuclear war. The world held its breath as negotiations between the two powers continued. Eventually, it was agreed that the USSR would remove its weapons if the US did likewise, dismantling key missile sites in nearby Turkey.

Today the Cuban Missile Crisis is still the closest the world has ever gotten to a world-ending nuclear cataclysm. To halt the spread of communism, America would get involved in many more nations' politics, just it had with Cuba. The US forced regime change in several Latin American nations throughout the 20th century, including Guatemala in 1954 and Grenada in 1983. President Lyndon B. Johnson also invaded the Dominican Republic in 1965 to prevent a Communist dictatorship from arising when the country was experiencing political turmoil. President Johnson would gain a reputation as something of a war hawk during the Cold War, and he is famous for his involvement in the bloodiest of all the Cold War conflicts-Vietnam.

Vietnam was in much the same situation that Korea had been in, split between an American-allied South and communist North. Still, while America had initially been relatively hands-off about the conflict, by the mid 60s, it seemed as though the South would lose. In response to a series of attacks on the American military, President Johnson okayed the bombing of Vietnam in Operation Rolling Thunder before sending many more American soldiers to the country in the summer of 1965. The Vietnam war would become a humanitarian disaster, and it is still grimly remembered today for the extreme psychological damage it caused to those who fought in the conflict. Throughout the war, the Vietnamese communists used guerrilla tactics, taking advantage of the Vietnamese jungle to ambush the Americans at every opportunity. American soldiers often struggled to find the rebel Viet Cong or differentiate between them and their local allies. As the country celebrated lunar New Year in 1968, communist forces launched a wave of surprise attacks known as the Tet Offensive. In response, the Americans resorted to using napalm to flatten whole villages in a deadly rain of fire. After the Tet Offensive, a string of dramatic attacks carried out by the North Vietnamese, America's anti-war protests became deafeningly loud. American troops were increasingly removed from the country, hoping that the well-trained South Vietnamese would take over the fight. US President Nixon's government would intensify the bombing of Vietnam in the 1970s. The communists North and the Viet Cong would ultimately wipe out all resistance on the ground by 1975, bringing the hugely unpopular conflict to a close.

During the 70s, Cold War tensions eased slightly, as a desire for peace and security on both sides led to series of talks known as SALT, or the strategic Arms Limitation Talks. These diplomatic discussions aimed to get both the US and USSR to reduce the number of missiles they had on hand. President Nixon also opened up diplomatic relations with China in 1972. Despite being communist, the Chinese government did not see eye-to-eye with the Soviet Union and they were happy to forge a new business relationship with America. While it seemed as though the conflict

was cooling down, in 1979, the soviet union took the dramatic step of invading Afghanistan to support the communist coup that had broken out there.

The new disarmament deal, known as SALT II, soon collapsed, and the US responded by founding and supplying various rebel groups in the region, including extremist Islamic militias. By 1980 the election of Ronald Reagan had pushed Cold War politics to a fevered pitch once more. Reagan used fiery, bellicose language to describe the Soviet Union, and he ramped up the rhetorical bout America's War against the "Evil Empire." Reagan's return to Cold War paranoia was deeply polarizing, but he ultimately lived to see the USSR dismantled, which made him extremmaly popular with any people. Fortunately for Reagan, Mikhail Gorbachev became Soviet premier in 1985. Gorbachev was from a young generation, fed up with the lack of material progress the Soviet Union was making. The Soviets spent almost 30% of their budget on their military and breadlines. A lack of technological progress over the previous two decades meant that the USSR's living standards were dramatically worse than in the West. By way of a soloution, in the late 80s, Gorbachev introduced a series of reforms, known as Glasnost and Perestroika. He hoped to democratize the USSR, allow more free movement, free information, and access to more economic markets in a bid to improve living conditions for the Soviet people. Small private business enterpreses were suddenly permitted to re-introduce market competition, and the press was finally allowed to print criticism of the administration.

Conclusion: As free elections were slowly introduced across many levels of government, it became apparent that Gorbachev had created his own undoing. While Gorbachev sought to reform the USSR, he did not realize that he would ultimately destroy it. Countries that had been absorbed by the USSR long ago, such as Latvia and Lithuania, quickly formed independence movements. When free movement was announced between East and West Berlin, a crowd of locals smashed the Berlin Wall to pieces, after decades of division. The USSR's Eastern Bloc allies, including Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Hungary, Albania and Bulgaria, all threw out their communist governments during a spectacular wave of popular revolts in 1988-81. Gorbachev's uneasy compromise between a Communist system and a free-market economy began causing chaos, as many people wanted to embrace western-style capitalism as soon as possible. Gorbachev was soon ousted when Boris Yeltsin was elected Russian president in 1991. Yeltsin banned the Communist party, demanded more reforms, and allowed many countries to break away from Russia. During 1991, the Soviet union officially dissolved, and many democratic nations emerged from the rubble. The Cold War was finally over.

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