

Development of the Cold War, 1949 to 1960

After the Berlin Blockade, the pattern of foreign relations as a 'Cold War' was set: the USA and the USSR acted as rivals in a competition for world domination.

The Korean War

The Korean War was another conflict which was part of the Cold War, and which – although very different in nature from the Berlin Blockade – was still 'war without war'. In the Korean War, Russia and America fought through other people – 'at arms length' – and thus avoided direct armed conflict.

Communism was growing in the far east, as well as in Europe, and after the Second World War both Korea and Vietnam were divided between Communists and non-Communists. The peacemakers solved both problems by simply drawing a line across both countries, giving the northern area to the Communists, and the southern part to the non-Communists. Korea was thus split at the 38th parallel.

In 1949, Kim Il Sung – the leader of north Korea, approached Stalin and Mao Zedong (the leader of China, which had turned Communist in 1949), and persuaded them to allow him to attack South Korea. When Syngman Rhee (the leader of South Korea) boasted that he would attack North Korea, the North Koreans attacked (25 June 1950). They easily defeated the South Korean army and by September 1950 had conquered all South Korea apart from a small area around Pusan in the south.

Truman was not prepared to see South Korea fall to Communism. Americans at this time held to the 'domino theory' – the idea that if one country fell to communism the rest would follow. In addition, in April 1950, American foreign policy had changed and become more aggressive – the American National Security Council had issued a report (NSC 68) recommending that America abandon 'containment' and start 'rolling back' Communism. But Truman did not attack directly; on 27 June he went to the United Nations and persuaded them to oppose the North Korean invasion. The UN forces, led by the American General MacArthur, landed in Pusan and Inchon in September 1950 and by October 1950 had pushed back the North Koreans almost to the Chinese border.

At this point, the Chinese got involved, and drove back the Americans. A front line was eventually established around the 38th parallel (where it had all began), although the war went on for another three years. Truman refused MacArthur's advice to use the atomic bomb. Russian troops went to help the communists, but they went as 'advisers' and dressed like North Koreans. In this way, Russia and America avoided direct war.

Eisenhower and Khrushchev

In 1953 Ike Eisenhower became President of America. He was well-known for saying that 'jaw-jaw [ie talking] is better than war, war'. He brought the Korean War to an end by threatening to use the atomic bomb if China did not stop fighting. The Chinese agree to a truce, which was signed on 27 July 1953.

In 1953 also, Stalin died. After a power struggle in Russia, he was replaced by Nikita Khrushchev. Khrushchev declared that the Cold War had to end, and be replaced by 'peaceful co-existence', and in 1956 he shocked the world by declaring that he wanted to destalinise the communist bloc, because Stalin had been a murderer and a tyrant.

Surely these two men, people hoped, could bring in a period of peace? In fact, the Cold War got worse. Khrushchev was still an ardent communist, and by 'peaceful co-existence' it soon became clear that he meant 'peaceful competition'. Khrushchev visited countries like Afghanistan and Burma and gave them economic aid if they supported Russia, and in 1955 he set up the Warsaw Pact (a military alliance of Communist countries) to rival NATO. Russia began an 'arms race' (in 1953, Russia developed the hydrogen bomb) and a 'space race' with America (in 1957 Russia launched Sputnik, the first satellite, and in 1961 Yuri Gagarin became the first astronaut to orbit the earth).

America too were becoming more aggressive. America joined the 'arms race' with Russia – in 1955, NATO set up a West German Army of ½ million men (this led to the formation of the Warsaw Pact). The Americans used U2 planes to spy on Russia. Inside America, Senator McCarthy led a 'witch-hunt' for 'Communists' (e.g. Charlie Chaplin was accused of being a Communist).

Poland and Hungary, 1956

Khrushchev worsened the Cold War in another way, too. By criticising Stalin, he destabilised the Soviet-bloc governments Stalin had set up in eastern Europe. There were riots in Poland in 1956, and Khrushchev had to send in Russian troops to help the Polish government put them down.

Worse was to follow in Hungary. There, in October 1956, students rioted and smashed statues of Stalin, and Imre Nagy became Prime Minister. From 29 October to 3 November 1956, the new government brought in democracy, freedom of speech, and freedom of religion. The Hungarians were encouraged by words of support from America. Finally, Nagy announced that Hungary was going to leave the Warsaw Pact. Khrushchev may have believed in peaceful co-existence, but he was not prepared to allow freedom to the Soviet bloc countries. At dawn on 4 November 1956, 1000 Russian tanks rolled into Budapest and re-established Soviet rule. At the time, it was thought that the Russian had killed 30,000 Hungarians, though it seems that a figure of 4000 is nearer the truth. Nevertheless, western Europe was horrified, and western leaders became even more determined to stop Communism.

As a result, 1955-1963 was the time of GREATEST tension in the Cold War.

The U2 Crisis and the Berlin Wall

Tension remained high throughout the late 1950s. The American and British presence in West Berlin was a huge problem for the Russians – particularly because hundreds of thousands of eastern Berliners were fleeing every month into West Berlin (this was an embarrassment for the Communists, never mind the large numbers of skilled workers they were losing). A Summit Meeting was arranged in Paris for 14 May 1960 to discuss Berlin and the arms race.

Nine days before the meeting, however, the Soviets shot down an American U2 spy plane. Although they claimed at first it was an off-course weather plane, the Americans had to admit it was a spy plane when the Russians produced the pilot, Gary Powers. As a result, the first thing Khrushchev did at the summit was to demand an apology from President Eisenhower. When Eisenhower refused, Khrushchev went home, and the summit collapsed. It was a very frightening time. If the two sides resorted to all-out nuclear war, their stockpiles of nuclear weapons guaranteed that all life on earth would be wiped out.