Test of the tactical nuclear weapon Small Boy at the Nevada Test Site, July 14, 1962. National Nuclear Security Administration.

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The Cold War

I. Introduction

Relations between the United States and the Soviet Union—erstwhile allies—soured soon after World War II. On February 22, 1946, less than a year after the end of the war, the chargé d'affaires of the U.S. embassy in Moscow, George Kennan sent a famously lengthy telegram—literally referred to as the Long Telegram—to the State Department denouncing the Soviet Union. "World communism is like a malignant parasite which feeds only on diseased tissue," he wrote, and "the steady advance of uneasy Russian nationalism . . . in [the] new guise of international Marxism . . . is more dangerous and insidious than ever before."[1] There could be no cooperation between the United States and the Soviet Union, Kennan wrote. Instead, the Soviets had to be "contained." Less than two weeks later, on March 5, former British prime minister Winston Churchill visited President Harry Truman in his home state of Missouri and declared

that Europe had been cut in half, divided by an "iron curtain" that had "descended across the Continent."[2] Aggressive anti-Soviet sentiment seized the American government and soon the American people.[3]

The Cold War was a global political and ideological struggle between capitalist and communist countries, particularly between the two surviving superpowers of the postwar world: the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). "Cold" because it was never a "hot," direct shooting war between the United States and the Soviet Union, the generations-long, multifaceted rivalry nevertheless bent the world to its whims. Tensions ran highest, perhaps, during the first Cold War, which lasted from the mid-1940s through the mid-1960s, after which followed a period of relaxed tensions and increased communication and cooperation, known by the French term *détente*, until the second Cold War interceded from roughly 1979 until the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. The Cold War reshaped the world and the generations of Americans that lived under its shadow.

II. Political, Economic, and Military Dimensions

The Cold War grew out of a failure to achieve a durable settlement among leaders from the Big Three Allies—the United States, Britain, and the Soviet Union—as they met at Yalta in Russian Crimea and at Potsdam in occupied Germany to shape the postwar order. The Germans had pillaged their way across Eastern Europe, and the Soviets had pillaged their way back. Millions of lives were lost. Stalin considered the newly conquered territory part of a Soviet sphere of influence. With Germany's defeat imminent, the Allies set terms for unconditional surrender. At the same time, deliberation began over reparations, tribunals, and the nature of an occupation regime that would initially be divided into American, British, French, and Soviet zones. Suspicion and mistrust were already mounting. The political landscape was altered drastically by Franklin Roosevelt's sudden death in April 1945, just days before the inaugural meeting of the UN. Although Roosevelt was skeptical of Stalin, he always held out hope that the Soviets could be brought into the "Free World." Truman, like Churchill, had no such illusions. He committed the United States to a hard-line, anti-Soviet approach.[4]

At the Potsdam Conference, held on the outskirts of Berlin from mid-July to early August, the Allies debated the fate of Soviet-occupied Poland. Toward the end of the meeting, the American delegation received

word that Manhattan Project scientists had successfully tested an atomic bomb. On July 24, when Truman told Stalin about this "new weapon of unusual destructive force," the Soviet leader simply nodded his acknowledgment and said that he hoped the Americans would make "good use" of it.[5]

The Cold War had long roots. The World War II alliance of convenience was not enough to erase decades of mutual suspicions. The Bolshevik Revolution had overthrown the Russian tsarists during World War I. Bolshevik leader Vladimir Lenin urged an immediate worldwide peace that would pave the way for world socialism just as Woodrow Wilson brought the United States into the war with promises of global democracy and free trade. The United States had intervened militarily against the Red Army during the Russian Civil War, and when the Soviet Union was founded in 1922 the United States refused to recognize it. The two powers were brought together only by their common enemy, and without that common enemy, there was little hope for cooperation.[6]

On the eve of American involvement in World War II, on August 14, 1941, Roosevelt and Churchill had issued a joint declaration of goals for postwar peace, known as the Atlantic Charter. An adaptation of Wilson's Fourteen Points, the Atlantic Charter established the creation of the United Nations. The Soviet Union was among the fifty charter UN member-states and was given one of five seats—alongside the United States, Britain, France, and China—on the select Security Council. The Atlantic Charter also set in motion the planning for a reorganized global economy. The July 1944 UN Financial and Monetary Conference, more popularly known as the Bretton Woods Conference, created the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the forerunner of the World Bank, the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD). The Bretton Woods system was bolstered in 1947 with the addition of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), forerunner of the World Trade Organization (WTO). The Soviets rejected it all.

Many officials on both sides knew that the Soviet-American relationship would dissolve into renewed hostility at the end of the war, and events proved them right. In 1946 alone, the Soviet Union refused to cede parts of occupied Iran, a Soviet defector betrayed a Soviet spy who had worked on the Manhattan Project, and the United States refused Soviet calls to dismantle its nuclear arsenal. In a 1947 article for *Foreign Affairs*—written under the pseudonym "Mr. X"—George Kennan warned that Americans should "continue to regard the Soviet Union as a

rival, not a partner," since Stalin harbored "no real faith in the possibility of a permanent happy coexistence of the Socialist and capitalist worlds." He urged U.S. leaders to pursue "a policy of firm containment, designed to confront the Russians."[7]

Truman, on March 12, 1947, announced $400 million in aid to Greece and Turkey, where "terrorist activities . . . led by Communists" jeopardized "democratic" governance. With Britain "reducing or liquidating its commitments in several parts of the world, including Greece," it fell on the United States, Truman said, "to support free peoples . . . resisting attempted subjugation by . . . outside pressures."[8] The so-called Truman Doctrine became a cornerstone of the American policy of containment.[9]

In the harsh winter of 1946–1947, famine loomed in much of continental Europe. Blizzards and freezing cold halted coal production. Factories closed. Unemployment spiked. Amid these conditions, the communist parties of France and Italy gained nearly a third of the seats in their respective parliaments. American officials worried that Europe's impoverished masses were increasingly vulnerable to Soviet propaganda. The situation remained dire through the spring, when secretary of state General George Marshall gave an address at Harvard University on June 5, 1947, suggesting that "the United States should do whatever it is able to do to assist in the return of normal economic health to the world, without which there can be no political stability and no assured peace."[10] Although Marshall had stipulated to potential critics that his proposal was "not directed against any country, but against hunger, poverty . . . and chaos," Stalin clearly understood this as an assault against communism in Europe. He saw it as a "Trojan Horse" designed to lure Germany and other countries into the capitalist web.[11]

The European Recovery Program (ERP), popularly known as the Marshall Plan, pumped enormous sums of capital into Western Europe. From 1948 to 1952 the United States invested $13 billion toward reconstruction while simultaneously loosening trade barriers. To avoid the postwar chaos of World War I, the Marshall Plan was designed to rebuild Western Europe, open markets, and win European support for capitalist democracies. The Soviets countered with their rival Molotov Plan, a symbolic pledge of aid to Eastern Europe. Polish leader Józef Cyrankiewicz was rewarded with a five-year, $450 million trade agreement from Russia for boycotting the Marshall Plan. Stalin was jealous of Eastern Europe. When Czechoslovakia received $200 million in American assistance, Stalin summoned Czech foreign minister Jan Masaryk to Mos-

cow. Masaryk later recounted that he "went to Moscow as the foreign minister of an independent sovereign state" but "returned as a lackey of the Soviet Government." Stalin exercised ever tighter control over Soviet "satellite" countries in central and Eastern Europe.[12]

The situation in Germany meanwhile deteriorated. Berlin had been divided into communist and capitalist zones. In June 1948, when U.S., British, and French officials introduced a new currency, the Soviet Union initiated a ground blockade, cutting off rail and road access to West Berlin (landlocked within the Soviet occupation zone) to gain control over the entire city. The United States organized and coordinated a massive airlift that flew essential supplies into the beleaguered city for eleven months, until the Soviets lifted the blockade on May 12, 1949. Germany was officially broken in half. On May 23, the western half of the country was formally renamed the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and the eastern Soviet zone became the German Democratic Republic (GDR) later that fall. Berlin, which lay squarely within the GDR, was

The Berlin Blockade and the Allied airlift that followed represented one of the first major crises of the Cold War. Here, a U.S. Navy Douglas R4D and a U.S. Air Force C-47 aircraft unload at Tempelhof Airport in 1948 or 1949. Wikimedia.

divided into two sections (and, from August 1961 until November 1989, famously separated by physical walls).[13]

In the summer of 1949, American officials launched the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), a mutual defense pact in which the United States and Canada were joined by England, France, Belgium, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Italy, Portugal, Norway, Denmark, and Iceland. The Soviet Union would formalize its own collective defensive agreement in 1955, the Warsaw Pact, which included Albania, Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and East Germany.

Liberal journalist Walter Lippmann was largely responsible for popularizing the term *Cold War* in his book *The Cold War: A Study in U.S. Foreign Policy*, published in 1947. Lippmann envisioned a prolonged stalemate between the United States and the USSR, a war of words and ideas in which direct shots would not necessarily be fired between the two. Lippmann agreed that the Soviet Union would only be "prevented from expanding" if it were "confronted with . . . American power," but he felt "that the strategical conception and plan" recommended by Mr. X (George Kennan) was "fundamentally unsound," as it would require having "the money and the military power always available in sufficient amounts to apply 'counter-force' at constantly shifting points all over the world." Lippmann cautioned against making far-flung, open-ended commitments, favoring instead a more limited engagement that focused on halting the influence of communism in the "heart" of Europe; he believed that if the Soviet system were successfully restrained on the continent, it could otherwise be left alone to collapse under the weight of its own imperfections.[14]

A new chapter in the Cold War began on October 1, 1949, when the CCP, led by Mao Zedong, declared victory against Kuomintang nationalists led by the Western-backed Chiang Kai-shek. The Kuomintang retreated to the island of Taiwan and the CCP took over the mainland under the red flag of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Coming so soon after the Soviet Union's successful test of an atomic bomb, on August 29, the "loss of China," the world's most populous country, contributed to a sense of panic among American foreign policy makers, whose attention began to shift from Europe to Asia. After Dean Acheson became secretary of state in 1949, Kennan was replaced in the State Department by former investment banker Paul Nitze, whose first task was to help compose, as Acheson later described in his memoir, a document designed to "bludgeon the mass mind of 'top government'" into approving a "substantial increase" in military expenditures.[15]

Global communism was shaped by the relationship between the two largest communist nations—the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China. Despite persistent tensions between the two, this 1950 Chinese stamp depicts Joseph Stalin shaking hands with Mao Zedong. Wikimedia.

"National Security Memorandum 68: United States Objectives and Programs for National Security," a national defense memo known as NSC-68, achieved its goal. Issued in April 1950, the nearly sixty-page classified memo warned of "increasingly terrifying weapons of mass destruction," which served to remind "every individual" of "the ever-present possibility of annihilation." It said that leaders of the USSR and its "international communist movement" sought only "to retain and solidify their absolute power." As the central "bulwark of opposition to Soviet expansion," America had become "the principal enemy" that "must be subverted or destroyed by one means or another." NSC-68 urged a "rapid build-up of political, economic, and military strength" in order to "roll back the Kremlin's drive for world domination." Such a massive commitment of resources, amounting to more than a threefold increase in the annual defense budget, was necessary because the USSR, "unlike previous aspirants to hegemony," was "animated by a new fanatic faith," seeking "to impose its absolute authority over the rest of the world."[16] Both Kennan and Lippmann were among a minority in the foreign policy establishment who argued to no avail that such a "militarization of containment" was tragically wrongheaded.[17]

On June 25, 1950, as U.S. officials were considering the merits of NSC-68's proposals, including "the intensification of . . . operations by covert means in the fields of economic . . . political and psychological warfare" designed to foment "unrest and revolt in . . . [Soviet] satellite

countries," fighting erupted in Korea between communists in the north and American-backed anti-communists in the south.[18]

After Japan surrendered in September 1945, a U.S.-Soviet joint occupation had paved the way for the division of Korea. In November 1947, the UN passed a resolution that a united government in Korea should be created, but the Soviet Union refused to cooperate. Only the south held elections. The Republic of Korea (ROK), South Korea, was created three months after the election. A month later, communists in the north established the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). Both claimed to stand for a unified Korean peninsula. The UN recognized the ROK, but incessant armed conflict broke out between North and South.[19]

In the spring of 1950, Stalin hesitantly endorsed North Korean leader Kim Il Sung's plan to liberate the South by force, a plan heavily influenced by Mao's recent victory in China. While he did not desire a military confrontation with the United States, Stalin thought correctly that he could encourage his Chinese comrades to support North Korea if the war turned against the DPRK. The North Koreans launched a successful surprise attack and Seoul, the capital of South Korea, fell to the communists on June 28. The UN passed resolutions demanding that North Korea cease hostilities and withdraw its armed forces to the thirty-eighth parallel and calling on member states to provide the ROK military assistance to repulse the northern attack.

That July, UN forces mobilized under American general Douglas MacArthur. Troops landed at Inchon, a port city about thirty miles from Seoul, and took the city on September 28. They moved on North Korea. On October 1, ROK/UN forces crossed the thirty-eighth parallel, and on October 26 they reached the Yalu River, the traditional Korea-China border. They were met by three hundred thousand Chinese troops who broke the advance and rolled up the offensive. On November 30, ROK/UN forces began a fevered retreat. They returned across the thirty-eighth parallel and abandoned Seoul on January 4, 1951. The United Nations forces regrouped, but the war entered into a stalemate. General MacArthur, growing impatient and wanting to eliminate the communist threats, requested authorization to use nuclear weapons against North Korea and China. Denied, MacArthur publicly denounced Truman. Truman, unwilling to threaten World War III and refusing to tolerate MacArthur's public insubordination, dismissed the general in April. On June 23, 1951, the Soviet ambassador to the UN suggested a cease-fire, which the U.S. immediately accepted. Peace talks continued for two years.

With the stated policy of "containing" communism at home and abroad, the United States pressured the United Nations to support the South Koreans and deployed its own troops to the Korean Peninsula. Though overshadowed in the annals of American history, the Korean War witnessed over thirty thousand American combat deaths and left an indelible mark on those who served. Wikimedia.

General Dwight Eisenhower defeated Illinois Governor Adlai Stevenson in the 1952 presidential election, and Stalin died in March 1953. The DPRK warmed to peace, and an armistice agreement was signed on July 27, 1953. More than 1.5 million people had died during the conflict.[20]

Coming so soon after World War II and ending without clear victory, Korea became for many Americans a "forgotten war." Decades later, though, the nation's other major intervention in Asia would be anything but forgotten. The Vietnam War had deep roots in the Cold War world. Vietnam had been colonized by France and seized by Japan during World War II. The nationalist leader Ho Chi Minh had been backed by the United States during his anti-Japanese insurgency and, following Japan's surrender in 1945, Viet Minh nationalists, quoting the American Declaration of Independence, created the independent Democratic Republic of

Vietnam (DRV). Yet France moved to reassert authority over its former colony in Indochina, and the United States sacrificed Vietnamese self-determination for France's colonial imperatives. Ho Chi Minh turned to the Soviet Union for assistance in waging war against the French colonizers in a protracted war.

After French troops were defeated at the Battle of Dien Bien Phu in May 1954, U.S. officials helped broker a temporary settlement that partitioned Vietnam in two, with a Soviet/Chinese-backed state in the north and an American-backed state in the south. To stifle communist expansion southward, the United States would send arms, offer military advisors, prop up corrupt politicians, stop elections, and, eventually, send over five hundred thousand troops, of whom nearly sixty thousand would be lost before the communists finally reunified the country.

III. The Arms Buildup, the Space Race, and Technological Advancement

The world was never the same after the United States leveled Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945 with atomic bombs. Not only had perhaps 180,000 civilians been killed, the nature of warfare was forever changed. The Soviets accelerated their nuclear research, expedited in no small part by "atom spies" such as Klaus Fuchs, who had stolen nuclear secrets from the Americans' secret Manhattan Project. Soviet scientists successfully tested an atomic bomb on August 29, 1949, years before American officials had estimated they would. This unexpectedly quick Russian success not only caught the United States off guard but alarmed the Western world and propelled a nuclear arms race between the United States and the USSR.

The United States detonated the first thermonuclear weapon, or hydrogen bomb (using fusion explosives of theoretically limitless power) on November 1, 1952. The blast measured over ten megatons and generated an inferno five miles wide with a mushroom cloud twenty-five miles high and a hundred miles across. The irradiated debris—fallout—from the blast circled the earth, occasioning international alarm about the effects of nuclear testing on human health and the environment. It only hastened the arms race, with each side developing increasingly advanced warheads and delivery systems. The USSR successfully tested a hydrogen bomb in 1953, and soon thereafter Eisenhower announced a policy of "massive retaliation." The United States would henceforth respond to threats or