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# The Cold War

World War I lasted from...1914 to 1918. World War II was longer: 1939 to 1945. Next came the Cold War, which...wait, 1945 to 1991?! That can't be right.

What was the Cold War, anyway?

It turns out the Cold War was less like a war and more like a rivalry. You see, after World War II, with most of Europe in ruins, the United States and Soviet Union emerged as the world's main superpowers. The two countries had been allies at the end of the war, but once it was over, a struggle for power and influence around the world began. This long rivalry became known as the Cold War.

The US feared the Soviets would spread communism. The Soviets feared the US would spread capitalism. They shared one belief: communism and capitalism could not coexist.

OK, so why "cold"?

Oh, because things never heated up into a direct conflict between the US and USSR...but that's not entirely true. Real wars did happen as a result of the Cold War.

Hold on, how did it get started?

After World War II, Joseph Stalin and the Soviet Union established communist governments throughout Eastern Europe. This isolated the Soviet Union from its former allies. Winston Churchill called this communist barrier the Iron Curtain.

The US thought communism might keep on spreading. Expanded Soviet power meant reduced American power, and communism threatened America's vision of a capitalist Western Europe. America responded with a policy called containment. The goal? Maintain influence throughout Europe and the world by stopping

Soviet expansion and keeping communism from spreading any further than it already had.

First came the Truman Doctrine: President Harry Truman committed to providing economic and military aid to any country facing communist uprisings.

Next, the Marshall Plan: a more than \$14 billion dollar economic recovery program to help rebuild Western Europe after a harsh winter and economic chaos increased support for communism.

The US also led the formation of NATO, a military alliance focused on containment.

The Iron Curtain reached all the way to Germany, which was split in half: the Soviets controlled East Germany, and the US, France, and England controlled West Germany. Berlin, Germany's capital, was also split, and the Soviets built the Berlin Wall to separate East and West Berlin. West Berlin ultimately became a symbol of democratic freedom in a communist region.

By 1950, the parameters of the Cold War were set: West vs. East, capitalism vs. communism.

OK, but that's only five years. What about the rest?

The Cold War was mostly a race to show strength. The US and USSR built up nuclear arsenals that could literally destroy all human life on Earth. This military strategy, known as mutually assured destruction, actually prevented direct conflict. Nobody wins if everybody dies, so neither side wanted to use its atomic bombs. Still, people around the world lived in constant fear of nuclear war. The US and USSR also continuously one-upped each other with innovations in space exploration and other technological advances.

After American nuclear secrets were stolen by Soviet spies, a panic called the Red Scare took hold. Fear that communist spies were embedded in the US kept the country on edge and ironically limited free speech in the name of freedom. People were accused of and arrested for communist ties, often incorrectly.

OK, what about the Cold War not being totally "cold"?

While there were no battles in Europe, the US and USSR funded and fought in proxy wars in Korea, Vietnam,

and Afghanistan. In a proxy war, more powerful countries instigate and support conflict in territories where they aren't actually fighting. During the Cold War, Soviet-backed communist forces faced off with US-backed anti-communist forces in the name of ideological influence.

So how did the Cold War end?

Soviet communism just couldn't keep up. Inefficient state-run agriculture led to famine and a repressive culture alienated citizens. The Soviet economy faltered.

In the 1980s, President Mikhail Gorbachev introduced more open political and economic policies. Freer flow of information showed people how bad the conditions they lived in were. Communist states began collapsing, and the Berlin Wall was torn down in 1989. By the end of 1991, the Soviet Union had dissolved into democratic states. The Soviets and Americans gave up most of their nuclear weapons, lessening the threat of nuclear war. The Cold War was over.

It was a long and expensive struggle that solidified the United States as the world's primary superpower. And to this day, the relationship between Russia and America is...not exactly warm.