

Yalta and Potsdam

When it was clear that the allies would win, the Allied leaders met to discuss ways to prevent another world war. In February 1945, the big three - Churchill, FDR, and Stalin - had met at the Yalta conference and decided they needed a better peacekeeping group than the league of Nations to prevent war. In July, President Harry S. Truman, who had been vice president, but became president when FDR died in April, met with Churchill, Clement Attlee (also from Britain), and Stalin at the Potsdam Conference. They decided to divide Germany into four zones. The city of Berlin would also be divided in four. The US, the UK, France, and the Soviet Union would each control a quarter.

The Dropping of the Atomic Bomb

On August 6, 1945, the Americans dropped an atomic bomb on Japan on the orders of President Truman. The bomb's power came from a chain reaction of nuclear fission and immediately destroyed the city of Hiroshima. When Japan refused to surrender, the US dropped a second bomb on August 9, 1945, this time on Nagasaki. Tens of thousands of Japanese citizens died in the explosions and thousands more died later from exposure to horrible amounts of radiation. On August 14, 1945, V-J Day (Victory over Japan Day), the Japanese Emperor Hirohito signed a peace agreement accepting unconditional surrender. World War II officially came to an end. The bombs were developed in the American science program, The Manhattan Project, which was conducted secretly in the American desert. The bombs that were dropped were nicknamed Fat Man and Little Boy.

What makes a nuclear weapon nuclear?

The power comes from reactions in the nuclei of atoms of radioactive elements, which emit energy. When the particles collide, the result is so strong that a tiny amount of material can create a huge explosion. Atomic bombs, or "A-bombs" get their power by splitting the nucleus. Even more powerful hydrogen bombs, or "H-bombs" invented in the 1950s, fuse multiple nuclei together.

The Nuremberg Trials

In November 1945, in Nuremberg, Germany, the Nuremberg Trials began, trying Nazis for Crime Against Humanity. In the first round of trials, twenty-four Nazis were found guilty and twelve were executed. Over a hundred more were found guilty. A similar Tribunal, or court, was held in Tokyo, where Hideki Tojo and five other Japanese leaders were convicted and executed. These court cases are called the International Military Tribunal for the Far East.

Counting the Aftermath

At least forty million civilians are thought to have died during this time (some estimates are three times higher), plus at least seventeen million combatants estimated to have died in battle (again, new research put this number much higher), making it the deadliest military conflict in history. Nuclear weapons brought in a new era of threats and warfare.

Check Your Understanding Part 1

1. Which US President authorized the dropping of atomic bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki?
2. What program developed the bombs and where were they developed?
3. What were the Nuremberg Trials?
4. How were Japanese leaders punished after war?
5. What are the estimates on civilian and combatant deaths for WWII?

Post-WWII: The World after the World Wars

After WWII, the world faced a period of recovery and rebuilding. Alliances from the war didn't entirely fade, and a new "war" began. This "Cold War" divided the world again and changed the path of economic and political recovery across the globe.

Changes in Europe and the Middle East after WWII

Some Rivalries didn't end with the war. Some became even more serious. The differences between the US (the capitalist west) and the Soviet Union (the communist east) were hard to ignore.

Post WWII Alliances

After WWII, alliances formed, with the US and the Soviet Union acting as captain of each team. The US's side - Belgium, Luxembourg, France, the Netherlands, Great Britain, Italy, Denmark, Norway, Portugal, Iceland, Canada and the US - formed a pact in 1949 called the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The rival team formed the Warsaw Pact with much of eastern Europe in 1955. These pacts were military alliances that countries joined for security. Sort of a "you scratch my back, I'll scratch your back." (Only, scratching with diplomacy and/or guns and bombs).

Stopping the spread of communism

The US and Great Britain thought newly liberated nations in Eastern Europe should form their own governments. The Soviets feared that these new nations would be anti-Soviet, especially Greece, which was in the middle of a civil war. Great Britain provided financial support to Greek anti-communist forces until it ran out of money. US President Harry S Truman feared that Britain's withdrawal would lead to the creation of a Greek communist country, so he asked Congress for aid for Greece as well as Turkey in 1947. It was a lot of cash to spend on another country, but President Truman made a strong case for it in what is now called the Truman Doctrine. The Truman Doctrine said that the US should always support free people resisting Subjugation (the act of bringing under complete control) by armed minorities or outside pressure. The US would also provide aid to countries threatened by communism. That same year, US Secretary of State General George Marshall came up with the Marshall Plan. Marshall believed communism took hold in countries with economic problems, so he wanted to give impoverished countries money in the hopes that communism would fail. The Marshall Plan provided \$13 billion to rebuild Europe after the war.

The EEC Forms

The Soviet Union and its European Satellite states (the states dependent on the Soviet Union) refused to accept any funds from the Marshall Plan. The Satellites were subordinate to Soviet authority, so even if they wanted to accept the funds, they weren't allowed to. In 1949, they created the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON) to provide financial aid, but they didn't have quite enough cash to make it work. In Western Europe, an economic plan called the European Economic Community (EEC) was formed in 1957. Also known as the Common Market, and later called simply the European Community, or EC, the EEC consisted of France, West Germany (Germany was divided after WWII), Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, and Italy. The EEC encouraged economic cooperation among member nations. Britain, Denmark, and Ireland joined the EEC in the 1970s, and Greece, Spain, and Portugal joined in the 1980s. The EEC later gave rise to the European Union (EU) and it was dissolved into the EU in 2009.

The United Nations

The League of Nations was ineffective, but it laid the groundwork for the United Nations, or UN, which was officially formed in October 1945 to work for peace and human dignity. The original UN charter was signed by 50 countries, and today nearly 200 countries are members.

The Creation of Israel

After the Holocaust, many Jews sought a homeland to call their own. In 1947, the UN recommended the partition of British controlled Palestine to form a Jewish state. In 1948, by UN mandate, the state of Israel was officially formed. A Mandate is an authoritative command. The region that was formerly called Palestine, or Judea, had a mainly Muslim Arab population that was not happy with a new Jewish state taking control. Neighboring Arab countries attacked the newly formed Israel in 1948, but Israel fought back hard. Thousands of Palestinian Arabs fled the area and sought refuge in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, two Arab controlled lands. Arab forces attacked again in 1967 and this time Israel gained control of the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and parts of Syria and Egypt. The conflict between Palestine and Israel continues to this day, despite the efforts of many great thinkers. Peace and resolution have yet to come.

Check Your Understanding Part 2

1. _____ is a military alliance that formed between the Soviet Union and much of Eastern Europe in 1955.
 - a. The Truman Pact
 - b. NATO
 - c. NAFTA
 - d. Warsaw Pact
2. What was the full name of the Western military pact and the abbreviation?
3. Which of the following contributed aid toward rebuilding Greece and Turkey in 1947?
 - a. The Truman Doctrine
 - b. The Marshall Plan
 - c. The European Economic Community
 - d. The Warsaw Pact
4. List the countries that were involved in the Common Market
5. Explain the Significance of the Common Market economic plan.
6. For what reasons was the state of Israel principally formed?
7. How did Arab countries respond to the newly formed Israel?

The Cold War

The Cold War wasn't fought on a battlefield. It was a war of ideologies between Western democracies and Eastern communist countries over the question of communism. The "warring" countries had very different ideas about politics and economics - on one side were communists and the other side were capitalists. Communist countries in Eastern Europe were isolated from the West behind what Winston Churchill called an Iron Curtain in 1946.

The Division of Germany

After WWII, the Allied Powers divided Germany into four zones, each occupied by one of the major powers (Great Britain, France, the US, and the Soviet Union). Great Britain, France, and the US wanted to unify their Western sections into a West German state, but the Soviets disagreed. In June 1948, the Soviets set up the Berlin Blockade, preventing trucks, trains, and barges (and therefore food and supplies) from getting into the three Western zones of Berlin. The Western allies used the Berlin Airlift to deliver supplies to West Berlin by plane. Ten months later, the Soviets finally ended their blockade. In 1949, the Allies formally created West Germany, or the Federal Republic of Germany. Less than a month later, the Soviets set up an East German state called the German Democratic Republic. The capital, Berlin, was divided into East Berlin, under Soviet control, and West Berlin, with a democratic government. Berlin became a major Cold War source of conflict. East Berlin was much poorer than West Berlin, and many East Berliners escaped and took refuge in West Berlin. To stop this, in 1961 Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev built a wall dividing the city. The Berlin Wall came to symbolize the division and disagreement between communist and democratic superpowers. In October 1989, mass demonstrations forced the communist government to open its border. On November 9, 1989, the Berlin Wall was torn down, signaling the end of Soviet style communism. Germany's unification took place a year later.

Communism in China

In China, communism thrived. In 1945, there had been two Chinese governments: the nationalists in Southern China and the communists in Northern China. Civil War between the two sides ended in victory for communist rule under Mao Zedong. The People's Republic of China formed in 1949 and Mao Zedong became its first chairman. In 1958, Chairman Mao began a new program called the Great Leap Forward, which combined small farms into vast communes with more than 30,000 people living and working together. Communes are communities of people who live together and share work and finances. Mao promised more equal rice distribution. Communes fostered communal child care, so women could work the fields alongside their husbands. Chairman Mao hoped life in the communes would allow China to have a classless society, but the Great Leap Forward was a great big failure and caused one of the world's worst famines. By 1960, the government abandoned the program.

In the late 1970s, Communist Party of China leader Deng Xiaoping tried to move China toward a market economy (under the communist political system) in a set of reforms called the Four Modernizations. The Four Modernizations in agriculture, industry, national defense, and science and technology were intended to make China a major economic power. China's economy improved in the 1980s, when the country finally opened its doors to outside investment from countries like the US. When people went abroad and learned more about the West, some began to criticize the Communist Party and call for democracy, and were often put in prison as punishment for speaking up. In May 1989, protesters demanded an end to corruption. They wanted the Communist Party leaders to resign. In June, the protestors set up in Tiananmen Square in Beijing. Deng Xiaoping sent tanks and troops; between 500 and 2,000 people were killed. Even though China experienced political conflict, the country developed into one of the strongest economies in the world in the last several decades.

Korea and Vietnam

In Korea and Vietnam, there were divisions between communist and noncommunist governments that worsened into military confrontations. Before WWII, Korea had been a Japanese colony. The US proposed dividing Japanese occupied Korea on the 28th parallel. The Soviets helped communists take power in North Korea and the US supported the democratic government in South Korea. In June 1950, North Korean communist forces attacked South Korea. The United Nations put together a team of soldiers led by US General Douglas MacArthur, who had helped take Japan in WWII and had overseen its occupation, to help South Korea. When MacArthur tried to push the invaders out of South Korea, China sent troops to help their communist allies in North Korea. Eventually, the two sides agreed to disagree - they signed an armistice in July 1953 agreeing to stop fighting and keep the country divided. There is still lingering tension between North and South Korea today.

France had once colonized Vietnam as part of Indochina (present-day Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam). French involvement in Indochina continued after WWII until 1954, when a Vietnamese independence movement led by Ho Chi Minh defeated the French at the Battle of Dien Bien Phu. Like Korea, Vietnam was divided into a communist north and noncommunist south.

Communist rebels in South Vietnam called the Vietcong tried to unite the entire country under communist rule. Once more the US got involved, sending economic aid as well as military troops. The US was afraid of seeing a Domino Effect. They believed that if the communists won South Vietnam, other Asian countries would also fall (like dominoes) to communism.

The Vietnam War lasted for years, killing thousands of Americans and Vietnamese. The US launched an aggressive bombing campaign against North Vietnam called Operation Rolling Thunder, plus chemical warfare in which it sprayed the herbicide Agent Orange to destroy Vietnamese jungles (to clear terrain for soldiers) and crops. In spite of all its military power, superior equipment, and large numbers of troops, the US failed to defeat the North Vietnamese. Ho Chi Minh and the North Vietnamese waged guerilla warfare; they would attack before running or hiding in the jungle, and they built underground tunnels.

Antiwar movements in the US protested and called for an end to the war, especially after America troops killed Vietnamese civilians in the My Lai Massacre of 1968 and entered another country, Cambodia, in 1970 to back up air strikes. In 1973, the US withdrew its troops from South Vietnam. Fighting continued between the north and the south until communist forces captured the capital of South Vietnam, Saigon, and renamed it Ho Chi Minh City. IN 1976, they united Vietnam under communist rule.

The Arms Race and the Cuban Missile Crisis

Throughout this time, the US and the Soviet Union build up their armies and weapons just in case they had to go to war against each other. This buildup was known as the arms race. No battles were fought between the two countries during the Cold War, but the arms race led to advancements in airplanes, jets, tanks, and other weapons systems. Nuclear Weapons became increasingly dangerous as each side tried to outdo the other with deadlier and deadlier bombs, until each nation had more than enough bombs to destroy each other several times over.

In Cuba, communist leader Fidel Castro led a revolution of workers and peasants against the right wing dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista. Castro wanted to provide education, health care, and national land rights to the lower classes that Batista neglected in Cuba. Many of the sugar plantations were foreign owned. The US didn't like having communism so close to home (only 230 miles), so in April 1961, President John F. Kennedy (commonly known as JFK) supported an invasion of Cuba by exiled Cuban fighters to overthrow Castro. The Bay of Pigs invasion was a failure and ended in the surrender of the exiled fighters. Castro remained in power, enforcing communist rule in the country, and he turned to the Soviets for support.

WH Cold War

A year after the Bay of Pigs invasion, the US discovered Soviet missiles in Cuba, which could have ended up in a nuclear weapons conflict. Luckily, the Soviets agreed to withdraw their missiles after the US blockaded their fleet in the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962. Still, the fear of nuclear weapons being used was suddenly very realistic.

The Cold War Ends

The Cold War ended in the early 1990s thanks in part to reforms introduced by Mikhail Gorbachev, who became the leader of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1985. Gorbachev called for a radical restructuring of the Soviet economic and political system called Perestroika. He also supported Glasnost, a policy of perestroika that encouraged Soviet citizens to speak openly about the Soviet Union's strengths and weaknesses, which led to Soviet Republics demanding independence and the defeat of the Communist Party. In 1987, the Soviets and Americans agreed to eliminate intermediate range nuclear weapons. The Soviet Union dissolved in 1991. The arms race between the USSR and the US, and the Cold War were over at last.

Check Your Understanding part 3

1. Germany was divided into four zones after WWII. Who controlled these zones?
2. What was the Cold War really about? Was it a war in the traditional sense?
3. What was the arms race? Who was involved?
4. What was the Iron Curtain?
5. The Berlin Wall was built by _____ to divide the city in 1961.
6. _____ was responsible for China's failed Great Leap Forward.
7. What is the significance of Tiananmen Square?
 - a. It was the site of a major protest against communist party corruption
 - b. It marked the end of Deng Xiaoping's Four Modernizations.
 - c. It was the site of a major protest against democracy
 - d. It marked the beginning of the Vietnam War
8. Discuss why the US became involved in the conflicts between North Korea and South Korea and between North Vietnam and South Vietnam.
9. Which of the following was a result of the Bay of Pigs invasion of 1961?
 - . The Vietcong gained a major advantage over American troops
 - a. General Douglas MacArthur advanced into South Korea
 - b. Fidel Castro was removed from power
 - c. The exiled fighters surrendered to communist forces.
10. When did the Soviet Union dissolve?

