



WHAT WAS THE COLD WAR?

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From the end of World War II, the United States and its Western European allies were involved in a nearly half-century long, titanic struggle with the Soviet Union known as “the Cold War.”

It was cold only in the sense that the Russians and the Americans never came to direct blows.

But it was certainly not cold for the Cubans, Koreans, Vietnamese, and others who got caught up in the Communists’ relentless drive to destabilize the free, democratic, capitalist world.

There were, to be sure, many morally complex moments during this long struggle, but the Cold War was, at its core, as clear a conflict of good versus evil as World War II had been. Just like that war, the Cold War was a death match between the forces representing freedom and the forces representing totalitarianism.

Because hundreds of thousands—perhaps millions—died in it, the Cold War can, with good reason, be described as ‘the Third World War.’

The instigator of this war was Josef Stalin, the mass-murdering dictator of Russia and of the many non-Russian peoples he had incorporated into what was known as the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, or Soviet Union for short.

Stalin knew that his Soviet armed forces could not take on the might of the free West. Instead, he decided to wage this fight through the use of proxies, and by a massive use of disinformation and misinformation.

His initial prey was Eastern Europe: the Baltic States—Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia—as well as Poland, Romania, Hungary, Bulgaria, and Czechoslovakia. Stalin had troops in all these countries at the end of the war. Despite what he promised American President Franklin Roosevelt at the Yalta Conference, the Soviet leader had no intention of removing them. And gaining control over their governments proved to be quite easy.

In March 1946, Winston Churchill famously declared that “From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the continent.”

When Stalin threatened both Greece and Turkey, President Harry Truman finally had enough. The so-called Truman Doctrine was born. The United States and its allies would not permit any further expansion of the communist empire.

The Cold War was on.

For the next five decades, and across four continents—Europe, Africa, Asia, and South America—the US and the Soviet Union battled for influence—sometimes overtly, like in Korea and Vietnam; and sometimes covertly, through their various spy agencies. But the moral lines of this battle never changed: the freedom of the West versus the communist tyranny of the Soviet East.

There are, nonetheless, as there were even at the time, those who argue that the Cold War was an over-reaction by the West: that the ambitions and strength of the Soviet bloc were greatly exaggerated; and that America, with its massive defense build-up, was just as responsible for the Cold War as was the Soviet Union. But this simply isn't true—as an immense amount of archival evidence from Russia, not available until after the Cold War ended, now proves.

Nikita Khrushchev, Stalin's successor, stated Soviet intentions plainly in 1956: "We will bury you!" he told the West. Nor would any amount of negotiation—"détente," as it was called then—have led to a just conclusion of the war.

The American diplomat George Kennan rightly warned that, short of becoming a Communist country, there was nothing the United States could do to gain the Kremlin's trust. The Soviets could not be appeased; only contained.

But even containment was an inadequate strategy. Yes, the Soviet Union could not have beaten the US in a head-to-head confrontation, but it didn't have to.

Victory in the Cold War would have allowed it—through intimidation and subversion—to dominate the globe, making Communism, rather than democracy and capitalism, the preeminent ideology.

There were many times during the five decades of the war that it seemed like this would be the case. But thanks primarily to the strong leadership shown by Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher, and Pope John Paul II, the Cold War ended not with a bang, but a whimper.

The Soviet Union was, at the close of the 1980s, to use historian Paul Johnson's description, "a bewildered giant"—economically bereft, militarily exhausted, no longer able or willing to enforce its will.

Communism had failed in every possible way—economically, politically, morally. It had tried to create a Utopia on earth and instead created hell for all of the nations that came under its sway.

Yes, the forces of liberty eventually won the Cold War. But this triumph offers little consolation to millions who died or suffered needlessly, through no fault of their own, for a never-viable and now badly discredited cause.

I'm Andrew Roberts for Prager University.