

The Cold War (1945–1989) – Introduction

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Introduction

The Cold War was a lengthy struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union that began in the aftermath of the surrender of Hitler's Germany. In 1941, Nazi aggression against the USSR turned the Soviet regime into an ally of the Western democracies. But in the post-war world, increasingly divergent viewpoints created rifts between those who had once been allies.

The United States and the USSR gradually built up their own zones of influence, dividing the world into two opposing camps. The Cold War was therefore not exclusively a struggle between the US and the USSR but a global conflict that affected many countries, particularly the continent of Europe. Indeed, Europe, divided into two blocs, became one of the main theatres of the war. In Western Europe, the European integration process began with the support of the United States, while the countries of Eastern Europe became satellites of the USSR.

From 1947 onwards, the two adversaries, employing all the resources at their disposal for intimidation and subversion, clashed in a lengthy strategic and ideological conflict punctuated by crises of varying intensity. Although the two Great Powers never fought directly, they pushed the world to the brink of nuclear war on several occasions. Nuclear deterrence was the only effective means of preventing a military confrontation. Ironically, this 'balance of terror' nevertheless served as a stimulus for the arms race. Periods of tension alternated between moments of détente or improved relations between the two camps. Political expert Raymond Aron perfectly defined the Cold War system with a phrase that hits the nail on the head: 'impossible peace, improbable war'.

The Cold War finally came to an end in 1989 with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Communist regimes in Eastern Europe.

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