

The Cold War Confrontation: 1947 - 1963

The time period between 1947 and 1963 was the most dangerous of the Cold War period when the two new superpowers - USA and USSR - almost came close in starting another world war, but skilful diplomatic manoeuvres and cooler heads prevailed in the end to negate the possibility of such a war.

This article will give details about the events that happened during this time period within the context of the Civil War Examination.

The Nuclear Arms Race

The destruction of Hiroshima (August, 6) and Nagasaki (August 9) in 1945 through the atom bombs demonstrated the prowess of a terrifying new technology to the world. Soon the former World War II allies would be racing ahead to develop their own nuclear weapons from that point on.

Until August 1949 the United States had a monopoly on the new weapon. With the explosion of the Soviet atomic bomb and the development in the following decade of thermonuclear bombs with ever greater destructive capacity, the strategic balance was altered. The more anxious each side became about its security, the more effort was put into stockpiling weapons capable of obliterating a great part of the globe.

With the developments of rockets in preference to long-range bombers as the means to carry nuclear weapons, the Soviet Union was able to bring the threat to bear on distant American cities. Equally, by 1956 it was calculated that the US nuclear arsenal could inflict 200 million casualties on the Soviet population

Dynamics of the Cold War Confrontation

In practice, the Cold War was conducted at a lower level of confrontation, using conventional weapons, political pressure and propaganda. During 1947 and 1948 the states of Eastern Europe - Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Bulgaria and Yugoslavia - all became communist and pro-Soviet. In reaction to Western efforts to reform the German economy, the Soviet Union attempted to blockade Berlin and force the West to abandon the city. Between June 1948 and May 1949, 275,000 flights were made to bring supplies to the Western zones of Berlin.

The Soviet decision to end the blockade heralded a shift in the German policy of both sides. The Western states set up the German Federal Republic to replace their zones of occupation in September 1949 and in October the Soviet zone became the German Democratic Republic.

In response to the communist domination of one half of Europe, the Western states set up the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in April 1949, which provided a framework for military co-operation in the face of a common enemy. US forces and equipment, including nuclear weapons, were stationed in NATO countries. In an effort to strengthen the alliance and to provide a clear military frontier in Europe, the Federal Republic of Germany was admitted to the NATO alliance in 1955.

Escalation of the Cold War Conflict

The first serious test of the new anti-communist alliance came outside Europe. In 1950 war broke out in Korea between the communist north and democratic south, following a partition agreed in 1948 between the United States and the USSR. US forces were dispatched to save the south and large-scale re-armament began. Under pressure the United States allies within Europe as well as other United Nation-states, gave assistance. The war dragged the newly communist China to one side of North Korea, and a long war of attrition set in until 1953. In this case, "containment" was shown to work and the Korean partition was reimposed.

During the 1950s both sides avoided an open confrontation. Each used the promise of arms, money and political pressure to win smaller states. Some countries decided not to join either superpower and formed the Non-Alignment Movement (NAM), with Egypt, India and Indonesia being the early members. Yet, they still had diplomatic relations with both the US and the USSR, and due to the socialist leanings of Egypt and India, the United States viewed the non-aligned states as 'Soviet Proxies'.

In the late 1950s, following the successful launch of the first space satellite, Nikita Khrushchev, Soviet Leader since 1956, embarked on a more aggressive strategy of expanding Soviet influence in the developing world. The strategy soon fell apart. The American fear of a "missile gap", prompted by the Soviet space programme, provoked a massive increase in US military procurement, which took the United States to a real lead in the arms race by the early 1960s.

The communist bloc was faced with its first serious crisis when China rejected Soviet collaboration in 1960. When Khrushchev tried to recover the Soviet position by putting pressure again on Berlin and by placing missiles in Cuba - thereby directly threatening the United States.

The Cuban Missile Crisis was the closest the two superpowers had come in unleashing nuclear armageddon. The pro-communist revolution that had occurred in 1959 in Cuba made it an ideal staging point for any future attack on the United States by the Soviet Union. In October 1962 Cuba was blockaded by the United States, rather than risk all-out war, the Soviet Union agreed to withdraw on October 26 with its missiles.

The Cuban crisis was the turning point of the Cold War. Realising how close they had come to a scenario for 'mutually assured destruction', the two sides agreed to a nuclear test-ban treaty (this would lay the groundwork for the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty), and the tensions between the two blocs began to give way slowly to a mood of detente

