Post-War Rebuilding and the Cold War: Crash Course European History #41

Crash Course: European History
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===== (00:00) to (02:00) =====

Hi, I'm John Green and this is Crash Course European history.

So obviously the allies of World War II were a diverse bunch when it came to big questions like "whether democracy was good" and also "whether capitalism was good", but while fighting the total war that was World War II, they managed to hold themselves together as an alliance and negotiate with one another on the conduct of the war. But as we've seen again and again in history, once a shared enemy is vanquished, friends discover that maybe they aren't so friendly after all.

A post war conflict was brewing between the United States and the USSR which would come to be called the Cold War. So, in February 1945 as the war was drawing to a close in Europe and the defeat of Germany looked certain, allied leaders Franklin Roosevelt, Joseph Stalin, and Winston Churchill met at Yalta. This was followed by a final meeting at Potsdam outside Berlin in the summer of 1945 after Germany surrendered but before Japan surrendered that August. So Churchill and Stalin in Roosevelt's absence had already made tentative agreements to divide Europe into Eastern and Western zones, but at the Yalta Meeting the Big Three agreed that the Germans' surrender needed to be total and unconditional.

By that time, Soviet forces were within 40 miles of Berlin and the Soviets gained concessions from Churchill and Roosevelt on Soviet influence in Poland which had after all frequently been adversaries' main invasion route to Russia - unless you're the Mongols or the Japanese. Sorry, Stan, you ran the Mongol-tage too soon. But speaking of Japan, the United States was also keen to compromise with the Soviets because the US wanted help in defeating Japan.

Then at Potsdam the status of postwar Germany was finalized. The defeated nation was divided four ways among the three main powers and France.

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Berlin, deep in the Soviet zone, was similarly divided into four sections, and the agreement also decreed that German leaders would be tried and punished if found guilty which many eventually were at the Nuremberg Trials.

As Allied leaders hammered out these postwar arrangements their representatives created the United Nations to replace the League of Nations. The early alliance against the Axis has also called itself the United Nations and the name stuck as the title of a new institution for global cooperation because you know, branding is hard.

The idea for the United Nations is that it would, like the League, adjudicate disputes, but unlike the League, the UN would also be able to take collective action in case of aggression threatening member states both through international economic sanctions and via a truly global armed force which should never existed before.

The UN's ruling structures however were of course created via international negotiation, and during that process Stalin got the group to agree that any permanent member of the Security Council would have veto power. And even today, China, the US, the UK, France, and Russia are the five nations that can veto any measure put before the UN Security Council which has limited its power dramatically.

Still the UN created many important documents and guidelines in its early history, perhaps most notably the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which sought to enumerate the rights every human should have, including the rights to be free from slavery, torture, and the right to equal protection under the law.

After the war the Soviet Union and the United States emerged as powerful military states replacing the dominance of western European nations in global politics because those countries had collapsed economically and suffered massive destruction to their agriculture, transportation, and industrial capacity, not to mention loss of life. In contrast, the United States was less in harm's way during the war, and post war productivity boomed making the US the wealthiest country in the world.

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I mean the United States gained two-thirds of the world's total supply of gold through sales of military equipment and other products.

The USSR also became a militarized state with powerful weaponry but Soviet losses had been immense in the war, not just in terms of damaged infrastructure. I mean recent studies show the Soviet Union may have suffered as many as 47 million wartime dead, but it had growing industrial capacity, lots of natural resources, and of course was able to draw a lot of support from Eastern Europe. Many in Europe credited the USSR with having contributed the most toward defeating the Axis powers on the continent, but the costs, not profits like in the United States, had been huge. And even as the war ended, these two powers were already facing off.

Both of them racing in the last year of the war to take as much territory as possible and thereby to block the influence of the other. With victory declared, US president Harry Truman immediately cut off aid to the USSR whose people were literally starving due to the massive destruction, and the USSR believed that the United States was weaponizing food in an attempt to destroy their access to it. For their part, US diplomats interpreted the Soviet move westward as a step toward taking over all of Europe which seemed plausible on a couple levels.

First off, the world was just coming out of a war in which one state had tried to take over all of Europe, but also the USSR had forced the ejection of non-communist politicians from Soviet influenced governments in Eastern Europe. By 1950, communists backed by the USSR were more or less running major states in Eastern Europe such as Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary. That task was made easier for the USSR by the fact that the Soviet army still occupied much of Eastern Europe.

The USSR also began seizing industrial machinery from its zones of influence in Germany. Scientists, industrial workers, engineers, and other prized professionals were also taken forcibly to the USSR to help rebuild,

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and that violated the Allied plan that the eastern zone would provide agricultural products to the western zones, and the western zones would produce industrial products for the eastern.

And so the Allies decided to combine their zones and plan the creation of a West German state, partly to advance the recovery of Western Europe so that it wouldn't be susceptible to Soviet influence. The United States began sending vast funds and goods to help war-torn nations in the west rebuild in what would be formalized as the Marshall Plan in 1948.

From the Soviet perspective this seemed like a bribe to gain European support for America, which it sort of was, and the USSR was too impoverished by the war to provide similar bribes. It's also worth noting that throughout this period in Europe, communist parties did have some popular support. Many saw the Soviets as the major liberators from German fascism and felt that communists were attuned to the needs of the poor and hungry, while some argued that American capitalism seemed mostly to benefit the rich and well-fed.

So it wasn't as simple as "east communist, west capitalist" - it never is that simple. In June of 1948, Stalin fought back against the Marshall Plan with his only ace: a display of military might. He blockaded goods and aid from entering the city of Berlin which you'll recall was deeply in Soviet held territory. Americans, British, and other allies responded with a massive airlift of food and fuel nicknamed Operation Vittles. Now there is a good name for an operation.

At any rate Stalin claimed the entire city of Berlin as fully part of the Soviet zone of influence and expected the US bloc to give in, but instead the airlift continued to great publicity and with great success, leading the Soviets eventually to call of the blockade in May of 1949. Berlin became a divided city and eventually the wall that was built between the Berlins came to symbolize the tense and fractured world of the Cold War.

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And on both sides, governments didn't really present this to their people as a struggle for power or influence, instead it was publicized as a competition between good and evil.

When I was growing up, I was taught in school that Soviet communism was evil and kids in the Soviet Union were taught that American capitalism was evil. And so, amid that the vicious political aspects of the Cold War just kept accelerating.

In 1949, communists under Mao Zedong took over China while Stalin opened new purges, including ones against doctors charged with murdering citizens and Jews accused of disloyalty. And other purges occurred in newly communist Eastern European countries. In Czechoslovakia for example, Milada Horáková, a feminist middle class lawyer imprisoned by the Nazis was charged by the communist government with being among the professional agents of the American, English, or French imperialists. She was executed in 1950.

The United States also launched a massive hunt for communists, although with fewer executions. Also, very few communists were actually found, although tens of thousands of citizens were investigated and many innocent people lost their jobs for not cooperating in this harassment.

On both sides of the so-called Iron Curtain, fear became a dominant emotion - and there was much to fear. In 1949 the Soviets exploded an atom bomb of their own and both adversaries proceeded to develop ever more lethal nuclear weapons along with powerful rocketry. Budgets for weapons and other military capacity soared in the 1950s, and then in 1957 the Soviets sent the satellite Sputnik into orbit around the earth, moving the Cold War into space. In response, the United States launched a similar craft and also formed NASA to lead the American side in the space race.

Soon, military resources surged toward what they had been during World War II.

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And around this time, the division of the world into two camps was institutionalized geopolitically.

The Allied bloc organized their sections of Germany into the Federal Republic of Germany or West Germany in 1949, followed swiftly by the creation of an East German state, the German Democratic Republic. The US bloc also created the North Atlantic Treaty Organization or NATO in 1949 to bind together allies in Western Europe and in the world, such as Canada, to meet threats from the east. In 1955, the Soviet bloc formed a similar alliance in the Warsaw Pact.

Alright, let's go to the thought bubble.

The Cold War involved many facets of everyday life. For one, both sides sought to outdo the other in restoring the standard of living. Radio, television, household appliances, and motorized transportation held out the promise of longer, healthier lives full of travel and leisure, but ease came at the price of constant fear. Radio and TV regularly reminded audiences that the opposing bloc could blow them to bits or lethally poison the atmosphere with radiation.

In schools, including my elementary school in Orlando, Florida, nuclear attack drills were held, in which students would practice hiding under their desks as air raid sirens wailed. This was at once both terrifying - I had and retained an extremely strong desire not to die in a nuclear war - and also somehow ludicrous because I knew hiding behind my desk wouldn't save me. And there was also endless propaganda.

The United States launched Voice of America which broadcasts news and propaganda in 38 languages. The Soviets similarly transmitted messages about communist values and beliefs while trying to jam their opponent's airwaves.

Spy novels proliferated with Ian Fleming creating the dashing James Bond. Fleming's Russian counterpart, Yulian Simyonov, created his hero Max Otto von Stierlitz which so captivated Soviet pilots that they refused to fly when his work was playing on radio or television.

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But there was also cooperation.

To cite just one example, physicians and drug manufacturers from the west managed to get the newest vaccines to Hungary where a polio epidemic devastated children and young people in the 1950s. Such exchanges occurred despite governments efforts on both sides to instill hatred and fear.

Thanks, thought bubble.

So, the Cold War never materialized as an outright military conflict between the two so-called superpowers. When East Germans rebelled and Hungarians rose up in revolution in 1956, the United States did not intervene. Rather countries across Europe and other parts of the world were crammed with missile sites and army bases and their personnel and vast stores of weaponry. But there were "hot" wars, they were just mostly carried out via proxies in Africa, Asia, and Latin America which primarily devastated the states and people in those places rather than the Soviets or Americans themselves.

The Korean war that killed millions of Koreans between 1950 and 1953 was one such conflict that pitted US-backed forces against communist armed ones. Wars over Cold War ideology also occurred among competing forces during decolonization in Africa and Asia. And so, if you're able to shift historical perspectives, you realize that for many perspectives, the Cold War wasn't a "cold" war.

In 1949, British author George Orwell published *1984*, a novel based on life in impoverished London. Language had been turned into what today we would call *spin*, which Orwell knew well, having served in the office of propaganda during World War II. Televisions broadcast news of non-stop wars that produce constant anxiety, and it was forbidden to turn them off.

In poor neighborhoods, citizens cheered their armies and repeatedly spewed hatred for the supposed enemy. These days when we read 1984 we tend to focus on the surveillance stuff and for good reason, but it also captured the reality of life during what seemed like a never-ending conflict that perpetually threatened to be apocalyptic.

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Next time we'll dig deeper into everyday life during the Cold War as Europe recovered its footing and experienced 30 glorious years. As they say, "We're due for 30 glorious years after so many bad ones."

Thanks for watching. I'll see you then.

Crash Course is filmed here in the Jaden Smith Studios in Indianapolis, and it's made possible by all of our patrons at Patreon.com/CrashCourse. We have lots of other Crash Course for to view including a Crash Course on George Orwell's *1984.*

Thanks again for watching, and as they say in my hometown, "Don't forget to be awesome."