USA vs USSR Fight! The Cold War: Crash Course World History #39

Crash Course: World History
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https://nerdfighteria.info/v/y9HjvHZfCUI

Hi, I'm John Green, this is Crash Course World History and today we're gonna talk about the Cold War, which actually lasted into my lifetime, which means that I can bore you with stories from my past like your grandpa does. When I was a kid, they made us practice hiding under our desks in the event of a nuclear attack, because, you know, school desks are super good at repelling radiation.

Past John: Mr. Green, Mr. Green! Right, remember in elementary school there was this special guest who'd defected from the Soviet Union, and he had--

John: Like this crazy Russian accent and he kept going on and on about how Reagan should spit in Gorbachev's face instead of signing treaties with him.

Past John: And I was like, whoa dude calm down. You're in a room full of third graders.

John: And then for like months afterward on the playground, we'd play Reagan-Gorbachev and spit in each other's faces. Those were the days. Sometimes I forget that you're me, Me from the Past.

Past John: Yeah, it's just really nice to talk to you and feel like you're lis --

John: You're boring. Cue the intro.

[intro plays]

So the Cold War was a rivalry between the USSR and the USA that played out globally. We've tried to shy away from calling conflicts ideological or civilizational here on Crash Course, but in this case, the "clash of civilizations" model really does apply. Socialism, at least as Marx constructed it, wanted to take over the world, and many Soviets saw themselves in a conflict with bourgeois capitalism itself. And the Soviets saw American rebuilding efforts in Europe and Japan as the U.S. trying to expand its markets, which, by the way, is exactly what we were doing.

So the U.S. feared that the USSR wanted to destroy democratic and capitalist institutions. And the Soviets feared that the US wanted to use its money and power to dominate Europe and eventually destroy the Soviet system. And both parties were right to be worried. It's not paranoia if they really are out to get you.

Now of course we've seen a lot of geopolitical struggles between major world powers here on Crash Course, but this time there was the special added bonus that war could lead to the destruction of the human species. That was new for world history, and it's worth remembering: It's still new. Here's the period of time we've discussed on Crash Course. And this is how long we've had the technological capability to exterminate ourselves. So that's worrisome.

Immediately after World War II, the Soviets created a sphere of influence in eastern Europe, dominating the countries where the Red Army had pushed back the Nazis, which is why Winston Churchill famously said in 1946 that an "Iron Curtain" had descended across Europe.

While the dates of the Cold War are usually given between 1945 and 1990, a number of historians will tell you that it actually started during World War II. Stalin's distrust of the U.S. and Britain kept growing as they refused to invade Europe and open up a second front against the Nazis. And some even say that the decision to drop the first Atomic Bombs on Japan was motivated in part by a desire to intimidate the Soviets. That sort of worked, but only insofar as it motivated the Soviets to develop atomic bombs of their own — they successfully tested their first one in 1949.

From the beginning, the U.S had the advantage because it had more money and power and could provide Europe protection (what with its army and one of a kind nuclear arsenal) while Europe rebuilt. The USSR had to rebuild itself, and also they had the significant disadvantage of being controlled by noted asshat Joseph Stalin. I will remind you, it's not cursing if he's wearing an ass for a hat. Oh, I guess it's time for the open letter.

An Open Letter to Joseph Stalin.

But first, let's see what's in the secret compartment today. Oh, it's silly putty. Silly putty: the thing that won the Cold War. This is exactly the kind of useless consumer good that would never have been produced in the Soviet Union. And it is because we had so much more consumer spending, on stuff like silly putty, that we won the Cold War. Go team!

Dear Joseph Stalin,
You really sucked. There was a great moment in your life, at your first wife's funeral, when you said, "I don't think I shall ever love again." And then later, you had that wife's whole family killed. Putting aside the fact that you're responsible for tens of millions of deaths, I don't like you because of the way that you treated your son, Yakov. I mean, you were really mean to him and then he shot himself and he didn't die and you said, "He can't even shoot straight." And then later, when he was captured during World War II, you had a chance to exchange prisoners for him, but you declined. And then he died in a prison camp. You were a terrible leader, a terrible person, and a terrible father.
Best wishes, John Green

Alright, let's go to the Thought Bubble.

Europe was the first battleground of the Cold War, especially Germany, which was divided into 2 parts with the former capital, Berlin, also divided into 2 parts. And yes, I know the western part was divided into smaller occupation zones, but I'm simplifying. In 1948, the Soviets tried to cut off West Berlin, by closing the main road that led into the city, but the Berlin airlift stopped them. And then in 1961, the Soviets tried again and this time they were much more successful building a wall around West Berlin, although it's worth noting that the thing was up for less than 30 years. I mean, Meatloaf's career has lasted longer than the Berlin Wall did.

The U.S. response to the Soviets was a policy called containment; it basically involved stopping the spread of communism by standing up to the Soviets wherever they seemed to want to expand. In Europe this meant spending a lot of money. First the Marshall Plan spent $13 billion on re-building western Europe with grants and credits that Europeans would spend on American consumer goods and on construction. Capitalism's cheap food and plentiful stuff, it was hoped, would stop the spread of communism.

The US also tried to slow the spread of communism by founding NATO and with CIA interventions in elections where communists had a chance, as in Italy. But despite all the great spy novels and shaken not stirred martinis, the Cold War never did heat up in Europe.

Probably the most important part of the Cold War that people just don't remember these days is the nuclear arms race. Both sides developed nuclear arsenals, the Soviets initially with the help of spies who stole American secrets. Eventually the nuclear arsenals were so big that the U.S. and USSR agreed on a strategy appropriately called MAD, which stood for "mutually assured destruction." Thanks Thought Bubble.

And yes, nuclear weapons were, and are, capable of destroying humanity many times over. But only once or twice did we get close to nuclear war: during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis and then again in 1983, when we forgot to give the Russians the heads up that we were doing some war games, which made it look like we had launched a first strike. OUR BAD!

But even though mutually assured destruction prevented direct conflict, there was plenty of hot war in the Cold War. The Korean War saw lots of fighting between communists and capitalists, as did the Vietnam War. I mean, these days we remember "the domino effect" as silly paranoia, but after Korea and especially China became communist, Vietnam's movement toward communism seemed very much a threat to Japan, which the U.S. had helped re-make into a vibrant capitalist ally. So the US got bogged down in one of its longest wars while the Soviets assisted the North Vietnamese army in the Viet Cong.

But then we paid them back by supporting the anti-communist mujaheddin after the Soviets invaded Afghanistan in 1979. Of course, as we now know, nobody conquers Afghanistan …unless you are the mongols. So after 10 disastrous years, the Soviets finally abandoned Afghanistan. Some of those mujahideen later became members of the Taliban, though, so it's difficult to say that anyone won that war.

But it wasn't just Asia: In Nicaragua, the US supported rebels to overthrow the leftist government; in El Salvador, the US bolstered authoritarian regimes that were threatened by left-wing guerrillas. The United States ended up supporting a lot of awful governments, like the one in Guatemala, which held onto power through the use of death squads. Frankly, all our attempts to stabilize governments in Latin America led to some very unstable Latin American governments, and quite a lot of violence.

And then there were the luke-warm conflicts, like The Suez Crisis where British and French paratroopers were sent in to try to stop Egypt from nationalizing the Suez canal. Or all the American covert operations to keep various countries from "falling" to communism. These included the famous CIA-engineered coup to overthrow Iran's democratically elected prime minister Mohammad Mosaddegh after his government attempted to nationalize Iran's oil industry. And the CIA helping Chile's General Augusto Pinochet overthrow democratically elected Marxist president Salvador Allende in 1973.

And lest we think the Americans were the only bad guys in this, the Soviets used force to crush popular uprisings in Hungary in 1956 and in Czechoslovakia in 1968.

So, you may have noticed that our discussion of the Cold War has branched out from Europe to include Asia, and the Middle East, and Latin America. And in fact, almost every part of the globe was involved in some way with the planet being divided into three "worlds." The first world was the U.S., Western Europe and any place that embraced capitalism and a more or less democratic form of government. The Second World was the Soviet Union and its satellites, mostly the Warsaw Pact nations, China and Cuba. The Third World was everyone else and we don't use this term anymore because it lumps together a hugely diverse range of countries.

We'll talk more about the specific economic and development challenges faced by the so-called "Third World countries," but the big one in terms of the Cold War, was that neither the U.S. nor the Soviets wanted any of these countries to remain neutral. Every nation was supposed to pick sides, either capitalist or communist, and while it seems like an easy choice now, in the 50s and 60s, it wasn't nearly so clear. I mean, for a little while, it seemed like the Soviets might come out ahead, at least in the Third World. For a while, capitalism, and especially the United States, seemed to lose some of its luster. The US propped up dictatorships, had a poor civil rights record, we sucked at women's gymnastics. Plus, the Soviets were the first to put a satellite, a man, and a dog into space. Plus, Marxists just seemed cooler, which is why you never see Milton Friedman t-shirts… until now available at DFTBA.com. I like that, Stan, but I'm more of a centrist. Can I get a Keynes shirt? Yes. That, now that's hot.

But Soviet socialism did not finally prove to be a viable alternative to industrial capitalism. Over time, state-run economies just generally don't fare as well as private enterprise, and people like living in a world where they can have more stuff. More importantly, Soviet policies were just bad: collectivized agriculture stymied production and led to famine; suppression of dissent and traditional cultures made people angry; and no one likes suffering the humiliation of driving a Yugo.

But why the Cold War ended when it did is one of the most interesting questions of the 20th century. It probably wasn't Ronald Reagan bankrupting the Soviets, despite what some politicians believe. The USSR had more satellite states that it needed to spend more to prop up than the U.S. had to invest in its Allies. And the Soviet system could never keep up with economic growth in the West. But, probably the individual most responsible for the end of the Cold War was Mikhail Baryshnikov. No? Mikhail Gorbachev? Well, that's boring. I always thought the Soviets danced their way to freedom. No? It was Glasnost and Perestroika? Alright.

But Gorbachev's Perestroika and Glasnost opened up the Soviet political and economic systems with contested local elections, less restricted civil society groups, less censorship, more autonomy for the Soviet Republics, more non-state-run businesses and more autonomy for state-run farms. Glasnost or "openness" led to more information from the west and less censorship led to a flood of criticism as people realized how much poorer the second world was than the first.

And one by one, often quite suddenly, former communist states collapsed. In Germany, the Berlin Wall came down in 1989 and East and West Germany were reunited in 1990. In Poland, the Gdansk dockworker's union Solidarity turned into a mass political movement and won 99 of the 100 seats it was allowed to contest in the 1989 election. Hungary held multiparty elections in 1990. The same year, mass demonstrations led to elections in Czechoslovakia. In 1993, that country split up into Slovakia and the Czech Republic, the happiest and most mutually beneficial divorce since Cher left Sonny.

Of course sometimes the transition away from communism was violent and painful. In Romania, for instance, the communist dictator CeauÈ™escu held onto power until he was tried and put before a firing squad at the end of 1989. And it took until 1996 for a non-communist government to take power there. And in Yugoslavia, well, not so great. And in Russia, it's a little bit Putin-ey. Ah! Putin.

But just twenty years later, it's hard to believe that the world was once dominated by two super powers held in check mutually assured destruction. What's really amazing to me, though, is that until the late 1980s, it felt like the Cold War was gonna go on forever. Time seems to slow as it approaches us, & living in the post-Cold War nuclear age, we should remember that the past feels distant even when it's near, and that the future seems assured — even though it isn't. Thanks for watching. I'll see you next week.

Crash Course is produced and directed by Stan Muller. Our script supervisor is Meredith Danko. Our associate producer is Danica Johnson. The show is written by my high school history teacher

Raoul Meyer and myself. And our graphics team is Thought Bubble. Last week's phrase of the week was "Justin Bieber" Thanks for that suggestion. If you'd like to suggest future phrases of the week, you can do so in comments where you can also ask questions about today's video that will be answered by our team of historians. Thanks for watching Crash Course and as we say in my hometown, Don't Forget To Be Awesome.