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## The Nature of the Cold War

### TIMELINE

- 1917 Nov:** Bolshevik Revolution in Russia
- 1918 Jan:** US president Woodrow Wilson delivers his 'Fourteen Points' speech
- 1919 Mar:** Comintern founded
- 1941 Aug:** Atlantic Charter issued
- 1942 Jan:** Declaration by United Nations (UN) agreed
- 1943 Nov:** Tehran Conference
- 1945 Apr:** UN established
  - Aug:** US drops A-bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki
- 1950 Jun:** start of Korean War
- 1955 Apr:** Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) founded
- 1956 Oct:** Suez Crisis
  - Nov:** Hungarian Uprising crushed
- 1960 Jul:** start of crisis in the Congo
- 1961 Sep:** Belgrade Conference of NAM
- 1965 Apr-Sep:** Kashmir dispute between India and Pakistan
- 1967 Jun:** Arab-Israeli War
- 1971 Oct:** Communist China recognised by US as official representative for China in UN
- 1973 Oct:** Arab-Israeli War (Yom Kippur War)
- 1974 Apr:** revolution in Portugal
  - Jul:** Turkey invades Cyprus
- 1975 Nov:** civil war begins in Angola
- 1978 Mar:** Israel invades Lebanon
- 1979 Dec:** Soviet forces sent into Afghanistan
- 1980 Jul-Aug:** Olympic Games in Moscow
- 1984 Jul-Aug:** Olympic Games in Los Angeles
- 1989 Apr-Dec:** collapse of regimes in Eastern Europe
- 1991 Dec:** collapse of the USSR and the end of the Cold War

### Introduction

Before dealing with the origins and development of the Cold War, it is necessary to establish the most significant features of its nature. Most historians consider that the Cold War ended in either 1989 or 1991, so for most students it is a phenomenon that ended before they were born. Some political commentators and historians saw the Cold War like a massive chess game, with major implications not just for those 'playing the game', but also for the rest of the world. Some people even believed the Cold War would lead to the destruction of the entire world. Certainly there were occasions on which nuclear weapons were deployed during the various crises that marked the different stages of the Cold War. Some of those involving US nuclear weapons are shown in **Source A**.

Outlining the main aspects of the nature of the Cold War is not straightforward, especially as historians do not always use the term in the same way. However, something most historians agree on is that, for much of the time, the Cold War presented itself as a regional and global contest between two rival states and their respective allies: the USA and the West *v.* the USSR and the East. How this rivalry varied over time, and the broader effects it had on different aspects of 20th-century life and history, will be examined in the following pages.

#### KEY QUESTIONS

- What is meant by the term 'Cold War'?
- What were the main phases of the Cold War?
- What were the main features of the Cold War?

### Overview

- After the Second World War, a Cold War developed between what became known as 'the East' and 'the West'. This Cold War is considered to have ended, at the latest, in 1991. Historians, however, disagree over exactly when it started and the dates of its different phases.

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- Historians also disagree over the essential nature of the Cold War, so there are many different explanations for the phenomenon.
- Part of the Cold War involved a contest between two superpowers – the USA and the USSR. However, not all historians see this as a contest between equals.
- There were many aspects to the Cold War, including a propaganda war based on the different ideologies of the two superpowers.
- The Cold War affected many aspects of politics and society in the countries involved, particularly the operation of the United Nations (UN).
- Other features of the Cold War included: an arms race; cultural, scientific and sporting competition; spying and covert activities; and public fears about a Third World War.

SOURCE A

Incidents in which US strategic nuclear forces were involved, 1946–73.

Incident	Date
US aircraft shot down by Yugoslavia	November 1946
Inauguration of president in Uruguay	February 1947
Security of Berlin	January 1948
Security of Berlin	April 1948
Security of Berlin	June 1948
Korean War: security of Europe	July 1950
Security of Japan/South Korea	August 1953
Guatemala accepts Soviet bloc support	May 1954
China–Taiwan conflict: Tachen Islands	August 1954
Suez crisis	October 1956
Political crisis in Lebanon	July 1958
Political crisis in Jordan	July 1958
China–Taiwan conflict: Quemoy and Matsu	July 1958
Security of Berlin	May 1959
Security of Berlin	June 1961
Soviet emplacement of missiles in Cuba	October 1962
Withdrawal of US missiles from Turkey	April 1963
Pueblo seized by North Korea	January 1968
Arab–Israeli War	October 1973

Blechman, B. and Kaplan, S. 1978. 'Force Without War'. Washington, DC, USA. The Brookings Institution. p. 48. Quoted in Halliday, F. 1989. *The Making of the Second Cold War* (2nd ed). London, UK. Verso. p. 50.

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2.1 What is meant by the term ‘Cold War’?

SOURCE B

The Cold War was a period of intense antagonism between the two superpowers – the United States and the Soviet Union – lasting from 1945 to 1991. Because there was no direct armed conflict between the two continental giants the description ‘Cold War’ remains an accurate one. Now that it is over, and we know the outcome, it is tempting to re-define this period of recent history as the ‘long peace’.

Mason, J. 1996. *The Cold War: 1945–1991*. London, UK. Routledge. p. ix.

This quotation from John Mason’s introduction seems to summarise the essence of the Cold War; however, it actually raises several more complicated issues. These include:

- definitions of the main characteristics of ‘Cold War’
- the actual starting date
- the meaning of the term ‘superpower’.

Perhaps the most contentious point is the suggestion that the period 1945–91 can be seen as the ‘long peace’. While this description may arguably be applied to Europe and North America, and to relations between the USA and the USSR, the inhabitants of many countries in Asia, the Americas and Africa might question the application of the word ‘peace’ to their experience of the Cold War in the 20th century.

Interpretations of ‘Cold War’

The term ‘cold war’ had been used before 1945 to describe situations characterised by extreme international tension between states, but which avoided tipping over into ‘hot wars’ (those in which direct fighting took place).

After 1945 – and especially after 1947 – the term was quickly applied to the deteriorating relationship between the USSR and the USA/the West. In this context, it is particularly associated with US journalist Walter Lippmann (see 4.3, What were the main points of tension in Europe from 1947 to 1949?).

When considered in relation to the events of the second half of the 20th century, the term ‘cold war’ has a dual meaning:

- a ‘cold’ in the sense that relations between the main protagonists were paralysed or frozen, and so not friendly or ‘warm’
- b ‘cold’ in the sense that although relations were bad, they were not so bad as to have led to a full-blown ‘hot’ war in Europe. However, it should be remembered that at different times this ‘cold’ war also involved very bloody ‘hot’ wars between the main players’ allies in regions beyond Europe.

One problem faced by students studying the Cold War is that different historians mean slightly different things by the term. Some use it in a broad sense – referring to the tensions and conflict between the two camps throughout the whole post-war period from 1945 to 1991. However, some even argue that the name ‘Cold War’ refers to the globalised

**QUESTION**

What do you understand by the terms ‘Cold War’ and ‘superpower’?

**Fact:** ‘Cold War’ was a term first used by the 14th-century Spanish writer Don Juan Manuel, who distinguished between ‘hot’ and ‘cold’ wars when describing the conflict between Christendom and Islam. In 1893, the term was used by Eduard Bernstein, a German Marxist leader of the socialist SPD, to describe the arms race that was developing between the new state of Germany and its neighbours, Britain, France and Russia, during the late 19th century.

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or international social conflict between capitalism and communism that had existed since the Bolshevik Revolution of November 1917. This idea will be considered in Chapter 3.

Other historians apply the term only to particularly tense periods in the years following 1945. In this sense, the name ‘Cold War’ refers to phases that are halfway between the two extremes of all-out ‘hot’ war and **détente** (periods of accommodation, cooperation and agreements).

Applying the name ‘Cold War’ to the *whole* period between 1945 and 1991 can give the false impression that relations between East and West during this time remained essentially the same. In fact, there were significant variations in East–West relations with regard to aspects such as threats of direct conflict between the main protagonists, ‘hot’ wars around the regions of the world, the arms race and cooperation.

As discussed below, there is much disagreement about when the Cold War started so this book will examine the history of the years 1946 to 1991 by dividing it into five periods, as follows:

- 1 1946–53 The First Cold War
- 2 1954–68 Fluctuating Relations
- 3 1969–79 Détente
- 4 1979–85 The Second Cold War
- 5 1985–91 The Final Stages

**détente:** This is a French word which means a lessening of tensions and an increase in cooperation. It is normally applied to the period 1969–79, although there were several other attempts between 1945 and 1991 to improve relations between East and West.



Figure 2.1 The main stages of the Cold War, 1941–91

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2.2 What were the main phases of the Cold War?

As we will explore in Chapter 3, historians disagree about the origins of the Cold War. They also differ in their interpretation of the conflict’s time-scale and the chronology of its different phases – not only when it began (suggested dates include 1917, 1943, 1944, 1945, 1946 and even 1948), but also when it ended. Some argue that it ended in 1989, with the collapse of the Eastern European states and the various international agreements. Others consider the date of its official ending to be 1991, when the USSR itself collapsed.

Most historians, however, accept that there was a First Cold War, which began sometime after the end of the Second World War and which ended at some point in the 1950s. Debate continues over whether a further one or two periods of the Cold War followed.

The important thing to grasp is that while there has been a continuous underlying rivalry and mistrust, which led to tensions and conflict between two different economic and social systems since 1943 (or even 1917), there have been fluctuations throughout the period and the process, with periods of relaxation and improved relations – often referred to as a **thaw** or ‘détente’.

**thaw:** This refers to a lessening of tensions in Cold War relations, compared to a previous period of hostility. It is particularly associated with the years 1953–55, immediately following Stalin’s death.

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Most historians would accept the summary of the essential nature of the 20th-century Cold War put forward by the US historian Anders Stephanson:

- Both sides appeared to accept for most of the period that, ultimately, coexistence with the other political and social system was impossible, and so were determined to weaken each other by any means short of all-out war – including the establishment, training and arming of terrorist groups.
- As a result of what was increasingly a bi-polar conflict – at least until the 1950s, when the emergence of Communist China made it a multi-polar one – there was an intense arms race between the USA and the USSR, and their allies, involving both conventional and nuclear weapons.
- As part of this ‘cold’ conflict, both sides suppressed or sought to control their internal dissidents, the ‘enemy within’, and were often prepared to ally themselves with regimes and movements that conflicted strongly with their stated political ideology and beliefs.

However, according to historians such as Fred Halliday, the Cold War periods proper had some additional aspects. Halliday identified six main features:

- 1 conventional and especially nuclear weapons build-up and arms race
- 2 intense propaganda, including the suppression of accurate or balanced information in both competing states; in particular, the West tried to depict the USSR as a ‘totalitarian’ equivalent of Nazi Germany, while the USSR painted capitalism as an inherently warmongering system
- 3 no common ground or successful negotiations, and a deep division between the two camps across the ‘**Iron Curtain**’
- 4 conflict between capitalism and communism, which often spilled over into developing countries
- 5 tightening of controls and repression of dissidents in both camps
- 6 East–West conflict was paramount.

**Iron Curtain:** This is the term used to describe the boundary between capitalist Western Europe and communist Eastern Europe. Winston Churchill described this divide as extending from Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic. As the Cold War intensified, the frontiers – especially in Germany – became physical and visible to both sides.



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**Figure 2.2** Italian soldiers arrest communist activists during the strikes and demonstrations against the Marshall Plan in 1948

**QUESTION**

How do you think this photograph relates to the West's claim to have a greater tolerance of political dissidents than that shown by the USSR?

## Détente

Détente can be seen as having seven main features:

- 1 a retreat from the all-out arms race
- 2 repeated public calls for peace
- 3 a pursuit of agreed levels of armament – although no substantial disarmament occurred, some limits were set on the arms race
- 4 a greater tolerance of the other social order, and more interest in and accurate information about its character
- 5 agreements on the Developing World and Europe – achieved by summits, long-running conferences and visits by heads of state, events which were in marked contrast to the paralysis of the frozen hostility of the Cold War
- 6 attempts by the West in particular to extricate itself from Developing World confrontations, and to attempt to draw a line in the face of the revolutionary forces it had been combating
- 7 looser emigration controls in the Eastern bloc in the early 1970s, following on from the internal 'thaw' that started in Russia following the death of Stalin.

Overall, during such periods of détente, there were attempts by both sides to separate the various international tensions that had periodically been bound together by the long-standing conflict between the rival social systems of East and West.

**QUESTION**

What were the main features of the periods during the Cold War known as the 'thaw' and 'détente'?

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**Figure 2.3** This map shows the alliances of the USA and the USSR in the 1950s. At this time, the USSR felt ‘surrounded’ by Western allies

**QUESTION**

Look at the map. Does it suggest that the security fears of the USSR in the decade following the end of the Second World War were justified?

**NATO:** This is the military alliance organised by the West in response to the perceived threat from the Soviet Union, following its takeover of Eastern Europe and the Berlin Crisis of 1948–49. Initially, the Western European states had formed the Brussels Treaty Organisation in 1948, but this became the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) when the USA joined and assumed leadership in January 1949.

The rival ‘camps’









As we have seen, the most obvious signs of the Cold War proper were the division of Europe by the Iron Curtain between East and West, an ideological contest, and an arms race which at times seemed to threaten nuclear annihilation. This was accompanied by the emergence of two hostile political and military alliances – the West’s **NATO** (1949) and the East’s **Warsaw Pact** (1955).

As the Cold War developed, the ‘conflict’ widened, drawing in many other countries. Both sides were keen to establish alliances, although the USA was really the only superpower able to construct a truly global network. As we will examine later, several historians thus see the Cold War as essentially an unequal contest from its very beginning.

Direct ‘hot war’ between the two superpowers was avoided, but there were many international crises during the Cold War, and several vicious ‘hot wars’ involving the allies, or ‘client states’, of the rival superpowers in the so-called **Third World**.

The Cold War also had an impact on various international institutions, especially the United Nations (UN).

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		NATO	Warsaw Pact
Armed forces 		8 million	7.7 million
Tanks 		16,000	38,000
Bombers 		2,260	1,600
Submarines 		292 (incl. 32 nuclear)	507 (incl. 12 nuclear)
Cruisers 		66 (1,107 escorts)	30 (189 escorts)
Battleships and aircraft carriers 		76	0
Intercontinental ballistic missiles 		450	76
Medium-range ballistic missiles 		250	700

**Warsaw Pact:** This was the defensive military alliance formed six years after the formation of NATO. Technically known as the Warsaw Treaty Organisation (WTO), it was established shortly after West Germany was allowed to join NATO and rearm in May 1955. This alarmed the USSR, prompting an alliance with its satellite states in Eastern Europe.

**Third World:** This term was at first used to describe those countries in the Americas, Asia and Oceania, and Africa and the Middle East that were economically un- or under-developed. The First World was made up of economically advanced capitalist states in the West (Europe and the USA), while the Second World encompassed those states (mainly European) in the communist bloc. More recently, the term ‘Developing World’ has replaced the use of ‘Third World’.

Figure 2.4 The relative strengths of the two military alliances in 1963

SOURCE C

Ever since World War II, when America assumed a leadership position in the capitalist world, nuclear weapons have been seen as the symbol and effective guarantee of that role, as the bastions of US security in the conflict with the USSR. ... US security throughout the 1950s and 1960s rested upon a real superiority. ...

US government officials [in the 1980s] deny they are pursuing military superiority. Instead the talk is of ‘modernisation’ ... of ‘restoring the balance’ when the word ‘balance’ refers to a previous *imbalance* in the USA’s favour.

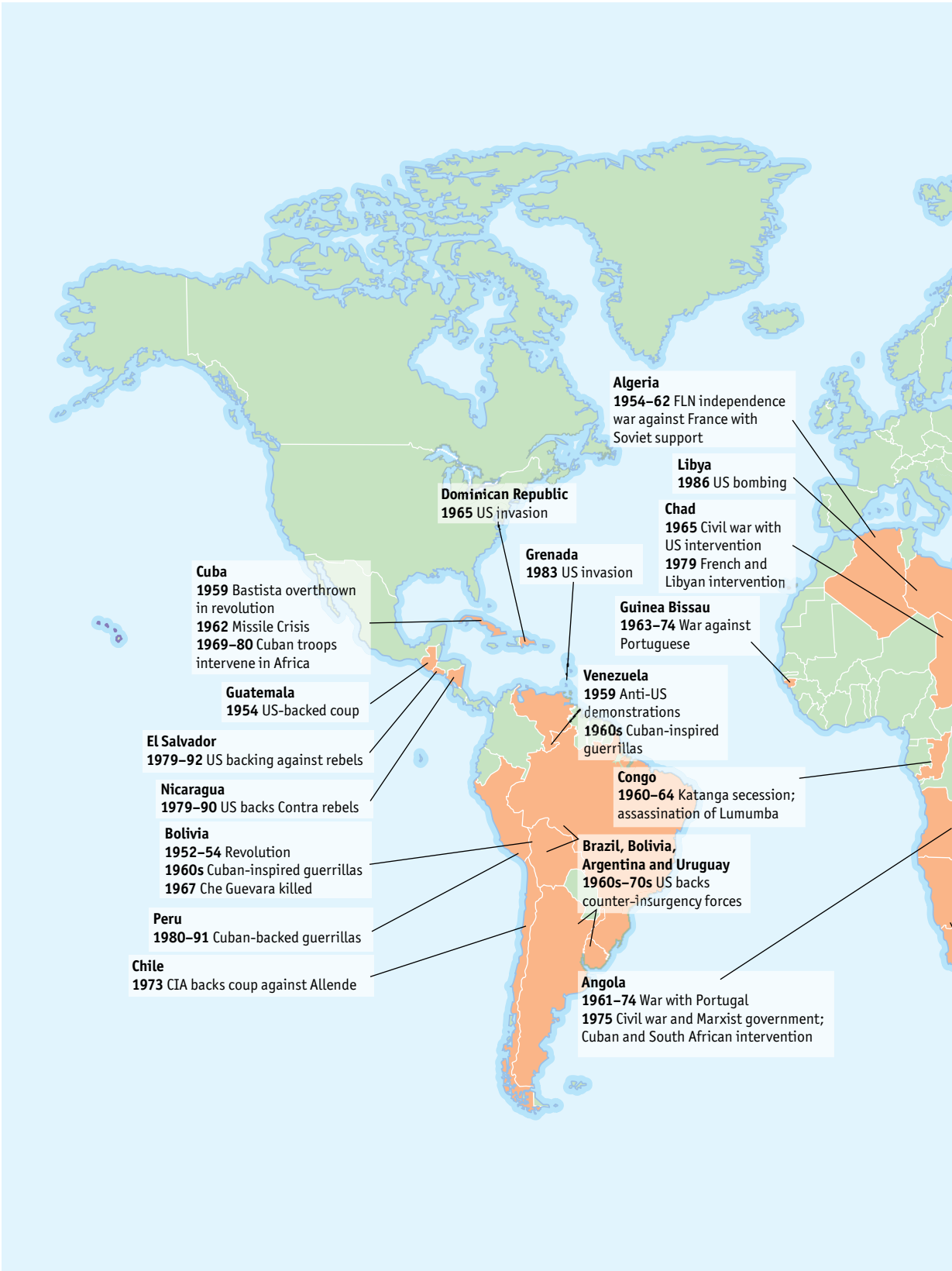
Halliday, F. 1989. *The Making of the Second Cold War*. London, UK. Verso. p. 48.



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**QUESTION**  
Look at the map, figure 2.3, again and compare it to the map here. Why might the US have been concerned about some of the developments shown by these sources?



**Figure 2.5** This map shows some of the Cold War conflicts and interventions in the Developing World, 1952–89

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