The Cold War began in 1945, as World War II was ending. During the Cold War, there were constant tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union. But the two nations officially remained at peace. This is why it was called a "cold" war. Yet it was hardly a peaceful era.

The Nature of the Cold War

The Cold War was a power struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union. The two countries fought each other in many ways. They waged political and cultural wars. They backed different countries or groups in conflicts around the world. They engaged in a nuclear-arms race. They even competed in a race to dominate space.

The Cold War was also a contest between two opposing ways of life. The United States, Canada, and the nations of Western Europe were democracies. The people there had basic rights and freedoms. They were free to govern themselves. They owned industries and businesses.

The Soviet Union and its "satellite" nations (the nations it controlled) in Eastern Europe had a very different way of life. Their governments were Communist dictatorships. The people had few rights. And the state owned all the industries and businesses.

The Cold War Begins
During World War II, the Americans and the Soviets were allies. The Americans liberated Western Europe from Nazi Germany. The Soviets liberated Eastern Europe. By 1948, the Soviet Union had forced the countries there to have Communist governments. "An iron curtain has descended across [Europe.]" said former British prime minister Winston Churchill.

The United States fought to halt the spread of Communism. It introduced two plans. The **Truman Doctrine** (1947) provided military and economic aid to Greece and Turkey. The **Marshall Plan** (1948) provided economic assistance to the war-torn countries of Western Europe. These programs helped weaken Communist influences in Western Europe.

The Soviets countered the Marshall Plan with the Berlin Blockade. At the end of World War II, the Soviet Union had occupied eastern Germany and the eastern part of Berlin, the German capital. The United States, Great Britain, and France had occupied western Germany. They had also occupied the western half of Berlin. West Berlin, however, was surrounded by Soviet-controlled eastern Germany. The Soviets tried to force the allies out of West Berlin. In June 1948, they cut all road and rail traffic into the city. So the allies flew supplies in. This successful operation was called the Berlin Airlift. It brought the blockade to an end in less than a year.

In 1949, the United States and its allies formed the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Britain, France, Canada, and eight other nations joined. They signed a common defense treaty. Its purpose was to prevent Soviet aggression. In 1955, the Soviet Union and its Eastern European satellites formed the Warsaw Pact. This organization was meant to counter NATO.

The Cold War intensified in 1949. In that year, the Soviet Union tested its first atomic bomb. In China, the Communists under Mao Zedong won a long civil war. Mao brought the world's most populous nation into the Communist camp.

The Cold War turned hot in Asia in 1950. Communist North Korea invaded non-Communist South Korea. It did so with Soviet approval. The United States led the defense of South Korea during the Korean War. An armistice ended the war in 1953.

By this time, many Americans feared Communism. They thought that American Communists wanted to help the Soviet Union. A "Red Scare" took place in the late 1940s and the 1950s. Some Communists were forced out of government positions. But the Red Scare ruined the lives of many people who were not Communists.

**To the Brink of Nuclear War**

Joseph Stalin, the Soviet dictator, died in 1953. After that, Soviet-American relations improved. But that ended with the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962.

This was the Cold War's most dangerous moment. The two superpowers stood at the brink of nuclear war. But they engaged in two weeks of diplomacy to end the crisis.

**Vietnam and Détente**
After the Cuban missile crisis, the United States became more involved in Vietnam, in Southeast Asia. Like Korea, Vietnam had been divided into two countries. North Vietnam was supported by the Soviet Union. South Vietnam was supported by the United States. The United States fought a war to stop a Communist takeover of South Vietnam. This time it was not successful.

The Vietnam War was at its height in the late 1960s and early 1970s. At that time, Soviet-American relations actually improved, despite the Soviets' aid to North Vietnam. This period of relaxation of tensions between the superpowers was known as détente. The two sides signed treaties to limit nuclear weapons.

The End of the Cold War

Several crises ended détente. One was the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. But relations improved again in 1985. Mikhail Gorbachev, the new Soviet leader, wanted to end Cold War tensions. So did U.S. president Ronald Reagan. In 1987, the two leaders signed the first treaty to eliminate some nuclear weapons.

In 1989, popular discontent spread in Eastern Europe. The Soviet Union's Communist satellites collapsed one after another. The most dramatic event of that year took place in Berlin. There the East German people tore down the Berlin Wall. The wall had divided the eastern and western halves of the city for years. It had been a powerful symbol of the Cold War. By 1990, U.S. president George H. W. Bush was able to announce, "We have closed a chapter in history. The Cold War is over." The following year, the Soviet Union itself ceased to exist.

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