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**COLD WAR EVENTS & CONFLICTS—1950-1991**

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| **EVENT** | **YEAR(S)** | **SUMMARY—WHAT HAPPENED** | **US ROLE / RESPONSE** | **USSR ROLE / RESPONSE** |
| The Korean War |  |  |  |  |
| Sputnik & the Space Race |  |  |  |  |
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| **EVENT** | **YEAR(S)** | **SUMMARY—WHAT HAPPENED** | **US ROLE / RESPONSE** | **USSR ROLE / RESPONSE** |
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**THE KOREAN WAR**

On June 25, 1950, the Korean War began when some 75,000 soldiers from the North Korean People’s Army poured across the 38th parallel, the boundary between the Soviet-backed Democratic People’s Republic of Korea to the north and the pro-Western Republic of Korea to the south. This invasion was the first military action of the Cold War. By July, American troops had entered the war on South Korea’s behalf. As far as American officials were concerned, it was a war against the forces of international communism itself. After some early back-and-forth across the 38th parallel, the fighting stalled and casualties mounted with nothing to show for them. Meanwhile, American officials worked anxiously to fashion some sort of armistice with the North Koreans. The alternative, they feared, would be a wider war with Russia and China–or even, as some warned, World War III. Finally, in July 1953, the Korean War came to an end. In all, some 5 million soldiers and civilians lost their lives during the war. The Korean peninsula is still divided today.

**The Two Koreas**

"If the best minds in the world had set out to find us the worst possible location in the world to fight this damnable war," U.S. Secretary of State Dean Acheson (1893-1971) once said, “the unanimous choice would have been Korea.” The peninsula had landed in America's lap almost by accident. Since the beginning of the 20th century, Korea had been a part of the Japanese empire, and after [World War II](http://www.history.com/topics/world-war-ii) it fell to the Americans and the Soviets to decide what should be done with their enemy's mperial possessions. In August 1945, two young aides at the State Department divided the Korean peninsula in half along the 38th parallel. The Russians occupied the area north of the line and the [United States](http://www.history.com/topics/states) occupied the area to its south.

By the end of the decade, two new states had formed on the peninsula. In the south, the anti-communist dictator Syngman Rhee (1875-1965) enjoyed the reluctant support of the American government; in the north, the communist dictator Kim Il Sung (1912-1994) enjoyed the slightly more enthusiastic support of the Soviets. Neither dictator was content to remain on his side of the 38th parallel, however, and border skirmishes were common. Nearly 10,000 North and South Korean soldiers were killed in battle before the war even began.

**The Korean War and the Cold War**

Even so, the North Korean invasion came as an alarming surprise to American officials. As far as they were concerned, this was not simply a border dispute between two unstable dictatorships on the other side of the globe. Instead, many feared it was the first step in a communist campaign to take over the world. For this reason, nonintervention was not considered an option by many top decision makers. (In fact, in April 1950, a National Security Council report known as NSC-68 had recommended that the United States use military force to “contain” communist expansionism anywhere it seemed to be occurring, “regardless of the intrinsic strategic or economic value of the lands in question.”)

“If we let Korea down,” President [Harry Truman](http://www.history.com/topics/harry-truman) (1884-1972) said, “the Soviet[s] will keep right on going and swallow up one [place] after another.” The fight on the Korean peninsula was a symbol of the global struggle between east and west, good and evil. As the North Korean army pushed into Seoul, the South Korean capital, the United States readied its troops for a war against communism itself.

At first, the war was a defensive one–a war to get the communists out of South Korea–and it went badly for the Allies. The North Korean army was well-disciplined, well-trained and well-equipped; Rhee’s forces, by contrast, were frightened, confused, and seemed inclined to flee the battlefield at any provocation. Also, it was one of the hottest and driest summers on record, and desperately thirsty American soldiers were often forced to drink water from rice paddies that had been fertilized with human waste. As a result, dangerous intestinal diseases and other illnesses were a constant threat.

By the end of the summer, President Truman and General [Douglas MacArthur](http://www.history.com/topics/douglas-macarthur) (1880-1964), the commander in charge of the Asian theater, had decided on a new set of war aims. Now, for the Allies, the Korean War was an offensive one: It was a war to “liberate” the North from the communists.

Initially, this new strategy was a success. An amphibious assault at Inchon pushed the North Koreans out of Seoul and back to their side of the 38th parallel. But as American troops crossed the boundary and headed north toward the Yalu River, the border between North Korea and Communist China, the Chinese started to worry about protecting themselves from what they called “armed aggression against Chinese territory.” Chinese leader Mao Zedong (1893-1976) sent troops to North Korea and warned the United States to keep away from the Yalu boundary unless it wanted full-scale war

**"No Substitute for Victory"?**

This was something that President Truman and his advisers decidedly did not want: They were sure that such a war would lead to Soviet aggression in Europe, the deployment of atomic weapons and millions of senseless deaths. To General MacArthur, however, anything short of this wider war represented “appeasement,” an unacceptable knuckling under to the communists.

As President Truman looked for a way to prevent war with the Chinese, MacArthur did all he could to provoke it. Finally, in March 1951, he sent a letter to Joseph Martin, a House Republican leader who shared MacArthur’s support for declaring all-out war on China–and who could be counted upon to leak the letter to the press. “There is,” MacArthur wrote, “no substitute for victory” against international communism.
For Truman, this letter was the last straw. On April 11, the president fired the general for insubordination.

**The Korean War Reaches a Stalemate**

In July 1951, President Truman and his new military commanders started peace talks at Panmunjom. Still, the fighting continued along the 38th parallel as negotiations stalled. Both sides were willing to accept a ceasefire that maintained the 38th parallel boundary, but they could not agree on whether prisoners of war should be forcibly “repatriated.” (The Chinese and the North Koreans said yes; the United States said no.) Finally, after more than two years of negotiations, the adversaries signed an armistice on July 27, 1953. The agreement allowed the POWs to stay where they liked; drew a new boundary near the 38th parallel that gave South Korea an extra 1,500 square miles of territory; and created a 2-mile-wide “demilitarized zone” that still exists today.

**Casualties of the Korean War**

The Korean War was relatively short but exceptionally bloody. Nearly 5 million people died. More than half of these–about 10 percent of Korea’s prewar population–were civilians. (This rate of civilian casualties was higher than World War II’s and Vietnam’s.) Almost 40,000 Americans died in action in Korea, and more than 100,000 were wounded.

**SPUTNIK & THE SPACE RACE**

After World War II drew to a close in the mid-20th century, a new conflict began. Known as the Cold War, this battle pitted the world's two great powers–the democratic, capitalist United States and the communist Soviet Union–against each other. Beginning in the late 1950s, space would become another dramatic arena for this competition, as each side sought to prove the superiority of its technology, its military firepower and–by extension–its political-economic system.

**Sputnik in Context**

By the mid-[1950s](http://www.history.com/topics/1950s), the U.S.-Soviet [Cold War](http://www.history.com/topics/cold-war) had worked its way into the fabric of everyday life in both countries, fueled by the arms race and the growing threat of nuclear weapons, wide-ranging espionage and counter-espionage between the two countries, war in Korea and a clash of words and ideas carried out in the media. These tensions would continue throughout the space race, exacerbated by such events as the construction of the [Berlin Wall](http://www.history.com/topics/berlin-wall) in 1961, the [Cuban missile crisis](http://www.history.com/topics/cuban-missile-crisis) of 1962 and the outbreak of war in Southeast Asia.

Space exploration served as another dramatic arena for Cold War competition. On October 4, 1957, a Soviet R-7 intercontinental ballistic missile launched Sputnik (Russian for "traveler"), the world's first artificial satellite and the first man-made object to be placed into the Earth's orbit. Sputnik's launch came as a surprise, and not a pleasant one, to most Americans. In the [United States](http://www.history.com/topics/states), space was seen as the next frontier, a logical extension of the grand American tradition of exploration, and it was crucial not to lose too much ground to the Soviets. In addition, this demonstration of the overwhelming power of the R-7 missile--seemingly capable of delivering a nuclear warhead into U.S. air space--made gathering intelligence about Soviet military activities particularly urgent.

**A New Urgency**

In 1958, the U.S. launched its own satellite, Explorer I, designed by the U.S. Army under the direction of rocket scientist Wernher von Braun. That same year, President [Dwight Eisenhower](http://www.history.com/topics/dwight-d-eisenhower) signed a public order creating the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), a federal agency dedicated to space exploration.

Eisenhower also created two national security-oriented space programs that would operate simultaneously with NASA's program. The first, spearheaded by the U.S. Air Force, dedicated itself to exploiting the military potential of space. The second, led by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the Air Force and a new organization called the National Reconnaissance Office (the existence of which was kept classified until the early 1990s) was code-named Corona; it would use orbiting satellites to gather intelligence on the Soviet Union and its allies.

**Space Race Heats Up**

In 1959, the Soviet space program took another step forward with the launch of Luna 2, the first space probe to hit the moon. In April 1961, the Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin became the first person to orbit Earth, traveling in the capsule-like spacecraft Vostok 1. For the U.S. effort to send a man into space, dubbed Project Mercury, NASA engineers designed a smaller, cone-shaped capsule far lighter than Vostok; they tested the craft with chimpanzees, and held a final test flight in March 1961 before the Soviets were able to pull ahead with Gagarin's launch. On May 5, astronaut Alan Shepard became the first American in space (though not in orbit).

Later that May, President [John F. Kennedy](http://www.history.com/topics/john-f-kennedy) made the bold, public claim that the U.S. would land a man on the moon before the end of the decade. In February 1962, John Glenn became the first American to orbit Earth, and by the end of that year, the foundations of NASA's lunar landing program--dubbed Project Apollo--were in place.

**Achievements of Apollo**

From 1961 to 1964, NASA's budget was increased almost 500 percent, and the lunar landing program eventually involved some 34,000 NASA employees and 375,000 employees of industrial and university contractors. Apollo suffered a setback in January 1967, when three astronauts were killed after their spacecraft caught fire during a launch simulation. Meanwhile, the Soviet Union's lunar landing program proceeded tentatively, partly due to internal debate over its necessity and to the untimely death (in January 1966) of Sergey Korolyov, chief engineer of the Soviet space program.

December 1968 saw the launch of Apollo 8, the first manned space mission to orbit the moon, from NASA's massive launch facility on Merritt Island, near Cape Canaveral, [Florida](http://www.history.com/topics/florida). On July 16, 1969, U.S. astronauts Neil Armstrong, Edwin "Buzz" Aldrin and [Michael Collins](http://www.history.com/topics/astronaut-michael-collins) set off on the [Apollo 11](http://www.history.com/topics/apollo-11) space mission, the first lunar landing attempt. After landing successfully on July 20, Armstrong became the first man to walk on the moon's surface; he famously called the moment "one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind."

**Conclusion of the Space Race**

By landing on the moon, the United States effectively "won" the space race that had begun with Sputnik's launch in 1957. For their part, the Soviets made four failed attempts to launch a lunar landing craft between 1969 and 1972, including a spectacular launch-pad explosion in July 1969. From beginning to end, the American public's attention was captivated by the space race, and the various developments by the Soviet and U.S. space programs were heavily covered in the national media. This frenzy of interest was further encouraged by the new medium of television. Astronauts came to be seen as the ultimate American heroes, and earth-bound men and women seemed to enjoy living vicariously through them. Soviets, in turn, were pictured as the ultimate villains, with their massive, relentless efforts to surpass America and prove the power of the communist system.

With the conclusion of the space race, U.S. government interest in lunar missions waned after the early [1970s](http://www.history.com/topics/1970s). In 1975, the joint Apollo-Soyuz mission sent three U.S. astronauts into space aboard an Apollo spacecraft that docked in orbit with a Soviet-made Soyuz vehicle. When the commanders of the two crafts officially greeted each other, their "handshake in space" served to symbolize the gradual improvement of U.S.-Soviet relations in the late Cold War-era.

**THE U-2 INCIDENT**

An international diplomatic crisis erupted in May 1960 when the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) shot down an American U-2 spy plane in Soviet air space and captured its pilot, Francis Gary Powers (1929-77). Confronted with the evidence of his nation's espionage, President Dwight D. Eisenhower (1890-1969) was forced to admit to the Soviets that the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) had been flying spy missions over the USSR for several years. The Soviets convicted Powers on espionage charges and sentenced him to 10 years in prison. However, after serving less than two years, he was released in exchange for a captured Soviet agent in the first-ever U.S.-USSR "spy swap." The U-2 spy plane incident raised tensions between the U.S. and the Soviets during the Cold War (1945-91), the largely political clash between the two superpowers and their allies that emerged following World War II.

**Peeking Behind the Iron Curtain**

Alarmed over rapid developments in military technology by his Communist rivals in the USSR, President Dwight D. Eisenhower, who served in office from 1953 to 1961, approved a plan to gather information about Soviet capabilities and intentions. High-altitude U-2 spy planes began making reconnaissance flights over the USSR in 1956, giving the U.S. its first detailed look at Soviet military facilities.

Eisenhower was pleased with the information gathered by the flights. Photographs taken by the spy planes revealed that Soviet nuclear capabilities were significantly less advanced than had been claimed by Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev (1894-1971). Eisenhower learned that the U.S., rather than suffering a shortage of weapons or a "missile gap," as many American politicians claimed, instead had nuclear forces far superior to those of its Cold War foe.

The Soviets were aware of the reconnaissance flights, because they could spot the spy planes on radar. For nearly four years, however, the U.S.S.R. was powerless to stop them. Flying at an altitude of more than 13 miles above the ground, the U-2 aircraft were initially unreachable by both Soviet jets and missiles. However, by the spring of 1960, the USSR had developed a new Zenith surface-to-air missile with a longer range. On May 1, that weapon locked onto a U-2 flown by 30-year-old CIA pilot Francis Gary Powers.

**Soviets Shoot Down U.S. Aircraft**

Winging through the thin atmosphere at the edge of space, Powers was carrying out the type of top-secret mission he specialized in: flying a U-2 spy plane over the USSR to photograph military installations. If all had gone according to plan, Powers' nine-hour flight would have taken him from Pakistan to a landing zone in Norway. Unlike previous U-2 missions, however, this one went terribly wrong.

As Powers flew over Sverdlovsk (present-day Yekaterinburg, Russia), a Soviet surface-to-air missile exploded near his plane, causing it to drop to a lower altitude. A second missile scored a direct hit, and Powers and his aircraft began to plummet from the sky. The pilot managed to bail out, but when his parachute floated to earth, he was surrounded by Soviet forces. Powers landed in the center of a major diplomatic crisis.

**Eisenhower Issues a Denial**

On May 5, Khrushchev announced that the Soviet military had brought down an American spy plane, but he made no mention of capturing Powers. Officials in the Eisenhower administration believed that little evidence of the plane's espionage mission had survived the crash, so they responded that the aircraft was merely a weather plane that had accidentally flown off course. The Soviet leader quickly disproved that story, however, by producing a photograph of the imprisoned pilot as well as evidence recovered from the wreckage that conclusively showed it was a surveillance aircraft.

The U-2 spy plane incident occurred at a crucial juncture in U.S.-Soviet relations. Eisenhower and Khrushchev were scheduled to join the leaders of France and Great Britain at a summit in Paris on May 14. The American president had hoped the Paris summit would yield new agreements on nuclear arms production and testing, but he recognized that the embarrassing U-2 crisis posed a potential obstacle to that goal.

**The Failed Summit**

Before the world leaders opened their Paris meeting, the Eisenhower administration took responsibility for the spy flights and admitted that the weather plane explanation was false. But the president's confession could not save the summit. The U-2 incident had convinced Khrushchev that he could no longer cooperate with Eisenhower, and the Soviet leader walked out of the Paris meeting just hours after it began. Soviet negotiators also abandoned talks on nuclear disarmament the following month. These events, which unfolded during Eisenhower's final year in the White House, brought a new chill to relations between America and the USSR and set the stage for further confrontations during the administration of Eisenhower's successor, John F. Kennedy (1917-63).

While world leaders squabbled about the spy flights, Powers remained in a Soviet prison. In August 1960, he was put on trial for espionage, convicted and sentenced to 10 years of confinement. He ultimately spent less than two years behind bars. Powers received his freedom in February 1962, when he and Soviet agent Rudolf Abel (1903-71) became the subjects of the first "spy swap" between America and the Soviet Union.

After returning to the U.S. and leaving the CIA, Powers eventually worked as a helicopter pilot for a Los Angeles TV station. In 1977, he died at age 47 in a helicopter crash and was buried at Arlington National Cemetery.

**Did You Know?**

*U-2 pilot Francis Gary Powers carried a tiny needle filled with poison so that he could take his own life if he faced capture. Powers chose not to use the needle when he was shot down over the Soviet Union in 1960, which led some critics to brand him a coward.*

**THE BAY OF PIGS INVASION**

On January 1, 1959, a young Cuban nationalist named Fidel Castro (1926-) drove his guerilla army into Havana and overthrew General Fulgencio Batista (1901-1973), the nation’s American-backed president. For the next two years, officials at the U.S. State Department and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) attempted to push Castro from power. Finally, in April 1961, the CIA launched what its leaders believed would be the definitive strike: a full-scale invasion of Cuba by 1,400 American-trained Cubans who had fled their homes when Castro took over. However, the invasion did not go well: The invaders were badly outnumbered by Castro’s troops, and they surrendered after less than 24 hours of fighting.

**Bay of Pigs: President Kennedy and the Cold War**

Many Cubans welcomed Fidel Castro's 1959 overthrow of the dictatorial President Fulgencio Batista, yet the new order on the island just about 100 miles from the [United States](http://www.history.com/topics/states) made American officials nervous. Batista had been a corrupt and repressive dictator, but he was considered to be pro-American and was an ally to U.S. companies. At that time, American corporations and wealthy individuals owned almost half of Cuba's sugar plantations and the majority of its cattle ranches, mines and utilities. Batista did little to restrict their operations. He was also reliably anticommunist. Castro, by contrast, disapproved of the approach that Americans took to their business and interests in Cuba. It was time, he believed, for Cubans to assume more control of their nation. "Cuba Sí, Yanquis No" became one of his most popular slogans.

Almost as soon as he came to power, Castro took steps to reduce American influence on the island. He nationalized American-dominated industries such as sugar and mining, introduced land reform schemes and called on other Latin American governments to act with more autonomy. In response, early in 1960 President Eisenhower authorized the CIA to recruit 1,400 Cuban exiles living in Miami and begin training them to overthrow Castro.

In May 1960, Castro established diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union, and the United States responded by prohibiting the importation of Cuban sugar. To prevent the Cuban economy from collapsing--sugar exports to the United States comprised 80 percent of the country’s total–the USSR agreed to buy the sugar.

In January 1961, the U.S. government severed diplomatic relations with Cuba and stepped up its preparations for an invasion. Some State Department and other advisors to the new American president, [John F. Kennedy](http://www.history.com/topics/john-f-kennedy), maintained that Castro posed no real threat to America, but the new president believed that masterminding the Cuban leader’s removal would show Russia, China and skeptical Americans that he was serious about winning the [Cold War](http://www.history.com/topics/cold-war).

**Bay of Pigs: The Plan**

Kennedy had inherited Eisenhower's CIA campaign to train and equip a guerilla army of Cuban exiles, but he had some doubts about the wisdom of the plan. The last thing he wanted, he said, was "direct, overt" intervention by the American military in Cuba: The Soviets would likely see this as an act of war and might retaliate. However, CIA officers told him they could keep U.S. involvement in the invasion a secret and, if all went according to plan, the campaign would spark an anti-Castro uprising on the island.

**Bay of Pigs: The Invasion**

The first part of the plan was to destroy Castro's tiny air force, making it impossible for his military to resist the invaders. On April 15, 1961, a group of Cuban exiles took off from Nicaragua in a squadron of American B-26 bombers, painted to look like stolen Cuban planes, and conducted a strike against Cuban airfields. However, it turned out that Castro and his advisers knew about the raid and had moved his planes out of harm's way. Frustrated, Kennedy began to suspect that the plan the CIA had promised would be "both clandestine and successful" might in fact be "too large to be clandestine and too small to be successful."

But it was too late to apply the brakes. On April 17, the Cuban exile brigade began its invasion at an isolated spot on the island's southern shore known as the Bay of Pigs. Almost immediately, the invasion was a disaster. The CIA had wanted to keep it a secret for as long as possible, but a radio station on the beach (which the agency's reconnaissance team had failed to spot) broadcast every detail of the operation to listeners across Cuba. Unexpected coral reefs sank some of the exiles’ ships as they pulled into shore. Backup paratroopers landed in the wrong place. Before long, Castro’s troops had pinned the invaders on the beach, and the exiles surrendered after less than a day of fighting; 114 were killed and over 1,100 were taken prisoner.

**Bay of Pigs: The Aftermath**

According to many historians, the CIA and the Cuban exile brigade believed that President Kennedy would eventually allow the American military to intervene in Cuba on their behalf. However, the president was resolute: As much as he did not want to "abandon Cuba to the communists," he said, he would not start a fight that might end in World War III. His efforts to overthrow Castro never flagged–in November 1961, he approved Operation Mongoose, an espionage and sabotage campaign–but never went so far as to provoke an outright war. In 1962, the [Cuban missile crisis](http://www.history.com/topics/cuban-missile-crisis) inflamed American-Cuban-Soviet tensions even further.

Fidel Castro is still Cuba’s symbolic leader today, although his younger brother Raúl (1931-) has taken over the presidency and serves as commander in chief of the armed forces.

## Did You Know?

*Castro’s regime was considered such a threat to U.S. interests that secret American operatives even tried to have him assassinated*

**CONSTRUCTION OF THE BERLIN WALL**

On August 13, 1961, the Communist government of the German Democratic Republic (GDR, or East Germany) began to build a barbed wire and concrete "Antifascistischer Schutzwall," or "antifascist bulwark," between East and West Berlin. The official purpose of this Berlin Wall was to keep Western "fascists" from entering East Germany and undermining the socialist state, but it primarily served the objective of stemming mass defections from East to West. The Berlin Wall stood until November 9, 1989, when the head of the East German Communist Party announced that citizens of the GDR could cross the border whenever they pleased. That night, ecstatic crowds swarmed the wall. Some crossed freely into West Berlin, while others brought hammers and picks and began to chip away at the wall itself. To this day, the Berlin Wall remains one of the most powerful and enduring symbols of the Cold War.

**The Berlin Wall: The Partitioning of Berlin**

As [World War II](http://www.history.com/topics/world-war-ii) came to an end in 1945, a pair of Allied peace conferences at Yalta and Potsdam determined the fate of Germany’s territories. They split the defeated nation into four “allied occupation zones”: The eastern part of the country went to the Soviet Union, while the western part went to the [United States](http://www.history.com/topics/states), Great Britain and (eventually) France.

Even though Berlin was located entirely within the Soviet part of the country (it sat about 100 miles from the border between the eastern and western occupation zones), the Yalta and Potsdam agreements split the city into similar sectors. The Soviets took the eastern half, while the other Allies took the western. This four-way occupation of Berlin began in June 1945.

**The Berlin Wall: Blockade and Crisis**

The existence of West Berlin, a conspicuously capitalist city deep within communist East Germany, “stuck like a bone in the Soviet throat,” as Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev put it. The Russians began maneuvering to drive the United States, Britain and France out of the city for good. In 1948, a Soviet blockade of West Berlin aimed to starve the western Allies out of the city. Instead of retreating, however, the United States and its allies supplied their sectors of the city from the air. This effort, known as the [Berlin Airlift](http://www.history.com/topics/berlin-airlift), lasted for more than a year and delivered more than 2.3 million tons of food, fuel and other goods to West Berlin. The Soviets called off the blockade in 1949.

After a decade of relative calm, tensions flared again in 1958. For the next three years, the Soviets–emboldened by the successful launch of the Sputnik satellite the year before and embarrassed by the seemingly endless flow of refugees from east to west (nearly 3 million since the end of the blockade, many of them young skilled workers such as doctors, teachers and engineers)–blustered and made threats, while the Allies resisted. Summits, conferences and other negotiations came and went without resolution. Meanwhile, the flood of refugees continued. In June 1961, some 19,000 people left the GDR through Berlin. The following month, 30,000 fled. In the first 11 days of August, 16,000 East Germans crossed the border into West Berlin, and on August 12 some 2,400 followed—the largest number of defectors ever to leave East Germany in a single day.

**The Berlin Wall: Building the Wall**

That night, Premier Khrushchev gave the East German government permission to stop the flow of emigrants by closing its border for good. In just two weeks, the East German army, police force and volunteer construction workers had completed a makeshift barbed wire and concrete block wall–the Berlin Wall–that divided one side of the city from the other.

Before the wall was built, Berliners on both sides of the city could move around fairly freely: They crossed the East-West border to work, to shop, to go to the theater and the movies. Trains and subway lines carried passengers back and forth. After the wall was built, it became impossible to get from East to West Berlin except through one of three checkpoints: at Helmstedt (“Checkpoint Alpha” in American military parlance), at Dreilinden (“Checkpoint Bravo”) and in the center of Berlin at Friedrichstrasse (“Checkpoint Charlie”). (Eventually, the GDR built 12 checkpoints along the wall.) At each of the checkpoints, East German soldiers screened diplomats and other officials before they were allowed to enter or leave. Except under special circumstances, travelers from East and West Berlin were rarely allowed across the border.

**The Berlin Wall: 1961-1989**

The construction of the Berlin Wall did stop the flood of refugees from East to West, and it did defuse the crisis over Berlin. (Though he was not happy about it, President Kennedy conceded that “a wall is a hell of a lot better than a war.”) Over time, East German officials replaced the makeshift wall with one that was sturdier and more difficult to scale. A 12-foot-tall, 4-foot-wide mass of reinforced concrete was topped with an enormous pipe that made climbing over nearly impossible. Behind the wall on the East German side was a so-called “Death Strip”: a gauntlet of soft sand (to show footprints), floodlights, vicious dogs, trip-wire machine guns and patrolling soldiers with orders to shoot escapees on sight.

In all, at least 171 people were killed trying to get over, under or around the Berlin Wall. Escape from East Germany was not impossible, however: From 1961 until the wall came down in 1989, more than 5,000 East Germans (including some 600 border guards) managed to cross the border by jumping out of windows adjacent to the wall, climbing over the barbed wire, flying in hot air balloons, crawling through the sewers and driving through unfortified parts of the wall at high speeds.

**The Berlin Wall: The Fall of the Wall**

On November 9, 1989, as the [Cold War](http://www.history.com/topics/cold-war) began to thaw across Eastern Europe, the spokesman for East Berlin’s Communist Party announced a change in his city’s relations with the West. Starting at midnight that day, he said, citizens of the GDR were free to cross the country’s borders. East and West Berliners flocked to the wall, drinking beer and champagne and chanting “Tor auf!” (“Open the gate!”). At midnight, they flooded through the checkpoints.

More than 2 million people from East Berlin visited West Berlin that weekend to participate in a celebration that was, one journalist wrote, “the greatest street party in the history of the world.” People used hammers and picks to knock away chunks of the wall–they became known as “mauerspechte,” or “wall woodpeckers”—while cranes and bulldozers pulled down section after section. Soon the wall was gone and Berlin was united for the first time since 1945. “Only today,” one Berliner spray-painted on a piece of the wall, “is the war really over.”

The reunification of East and West Germany was made official on October 3, 1990, almost one year after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

## Did You Know?

*On October 22, 1961, a quarrel between an East German border guard and an American official on his way to the opera in East Berlin very nearly led to what one observer called "a nuclear-age equivalent of the Wild West Showdown at the O.K. Corral." That day, American and Soviet tanks faced off at Checkpoint Charlie for 16 hours. Photographs of the confrontation are some of the most familiar and memorable images of the Cold War*

**THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS**

During the Cuban Missile Crisis, leaders of the U.S. and the Soviet Union engaged in a tense, 13-day political and military standoff in October 1962 over the installation of nuclear-armed Soviet missiles on Cuba, just 90 miles from U.S. shores. In a TV address on October 22, 1962, President John Kennedy (1917-63) notified Americans about the presence of the missiles, explained his decision to enact a naval blockade around Cuba and made it clear the U.S. was prepared to use military force if necessary to neutralize this perceived threat to national security. Following this news, many people feared the world was on the brink of nuclear war. However, disaster was avoided when the U.S. agreed to Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev's (1894-1971) offer to remove the Cuban missiles in exchange for the U.S. promising not to invade Cuba. Kennedy also secretly agreed to remove U.S. missiles from Turkey.

**Discovering the Missiles**

After seizing power in the Caribbean island nation of Cuba in 1959, leftist revolutionary leader Fidel Castro (1926-) aligned himself with the Soviet Union. Under Castro, Cuba grew dependent on the Soviets for military and economic aid. During this time, the U.S. and the Soviets (and their respective allies) were engaged in the Cold War (1945-91), an ongoing series of largely political and economic clashes.

The two superpowers plunged into one of their biggest Cold War confrontations after the pilot of an American U-2 spy plane making a high-altitude pass over Cuba on October 14, 1962, photographed a Soviet SS-4 medium-range ballistic missile being assembled for installation.

President Kennedy was briefed about the situation on October 16, and he immediately called together a group of advisors and officials known as the executive committee, or ExCom. For nearly the next two weeks, the president and his team wrestled with a diplomatic crisis of epic proportions, as did their counterparts in the Soviet Union.

**A New Threat to the U.S.**

For the American officials, the urgency of the situation stemmed from the fact that the nuclear-armed Cuban missiles were being installed so close to the U.S. mainland--just 90 miles south of Florida. From that launch point, they were capable of quickly reaching targets in the eastern U.S. If allowed to become operational, the missiles would fundamentally alter the complexion of the nuclear rivalry between the U.S. and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), which up to that point had been dominated by the Americans.

Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev had gambled on sending the missiles to Cuba with the specific goal of increasing his nation's nuclear strike capability. The Soviets had long felt uneasy about the number of nuclear weapons that were targeted at them from sites in Western Europe and Turkey, and they saw the deployment of missiles in Cuba as a way to level the playing field. Another key factor in the Soviet missile scheme was the hostile relationship between the U.S. and Cuba. The Kennedy administration had already launched one attack on the island--the failed Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961--and Castro and Khrushchev saw the missiles as a means of deterring further U.S. aggression.

**THE VIETNAM WAR**

The Vietnam War was a long, costly armed conflict that pitted the communist regime of North Vietnam and its southern allies, known as the Viet Cong, against South Vietnam and its principal ally, the United States. The war began in 1954 (though conflict in the region stretched back to the mid-1940s), after the rise to power of Ho Chi Minh and his communist Viet Minh party in North Vietnam, and continued against the backdrop of an intense Cold War between two global superpowers: the United States and the Soviet Union. More than 3 million people (including 58,000 Americans) were killed in the Vietnam War; more than half were Vietnamese civilians. By 1969, at the peak of U.S. involvement in the war, more than 500,000 U.S. military personnel were involved in the Vietnam conflict. Growing opposition to the war in the United States led to bitter divisions among Americans, both before and after President Richard Nixon ordered the withdrawal of U.S. forces in 1973. In 1975, communist forces seized control of Saigon, ending the Vietnam War, and the country was unified as the Socialist Republic of Vietnam the following year.

**Roots of the Vietnam War**

During [World War II](http://www.history.com/topics/world-war-ii), Japan invaded and occupied Vietnam, a nation on the eastern edge of the Indochina Peninsula in Southeast Asia that had been under French administration since the late 19th century. Inspired by Chinese and Soviet communism, Ho Chi Minh formed the Viet Minh, or the League for the Independence of Vietnam, to fight both Japan and the French colonial administration. Japan withdrew its forces in 1945, leaving the French-educated Emperor Bao Dai in control of an independent Vietnam. Ho's Viet Minh forces rose up immediately, seizing the northern city of Hanoi and declaring a Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) with Ho as president.

Seeking to regain control of the region, France backed Bao and set up the state of Vietnam (South Vietnam) in July 1949, with Saigon as its capital. Armed conflict continued until a decisive battle at Dien Bien Phu in May 1954 ended in French defeat by Viet Minh forces. The subsequent treaty negotiations at Geneva split Vietnam along the latitude known as the 17th parallel (with Ho in control in the North and Bao in the South) and called for nationwide elections for reunification to be held in 1956. In 1955, however, the strongly anti-communist Ngo Dinh Diem pushed Bao aside to become president of the Government of the Republic of Vietnam (GVN).

**Vietnam War: U.S. Intervention Begins**

With the [Cold War](http://www.history.com/topics/cold-war) intensifying, the [United States](http://www.history.com/topics/states) hardened its policies against any allies of the Soviet Union, and by 1955 President [Dwight D. Eisenhower](http://www.history.com/topics/dwight-d-eisenhower) had pledged his firm support to Diem and South Vietnam. With training and equipment from American military and police, Diem's security forces cracked down on Viet Minh sympathizers in the south, whom he derisively called Viet Cong (or Vietnamese Communist), arresting some 100,000 people, many of whom were tortured and executed. By 1957, the Viet Cong and other opponents of Diem's repressive regime began fighting back with attacks on government officials and other targets, and by 1959 they had begun engaging South Vietnamese Army forces in firefights.

In December 1960, Diem's opponents within South Vietnam--both communist and non-communist--formed the National Liberation Front (NLF) to organize resistance to the regime. Though the NLF claimed to be autonomous and that most of its members were non-Communist, many in Washington assumed it was a puppet of Hanoi. A team sent by President [John F. Kennedy](http://www.history.com/topics/john-f-kennedy) in 1961 to report on conditions in South Vietnam advised a build-up of American military, economic and technical aid in order to help confront the Viet Cong threat. Working under the "domino theory," which held that if one Southeast Asian country fell to communism, many would follow, Kennedy increased U.S. aid, though he stopped short of committing to a large-scale military intervention. By 1962, the U.S. military presence in South Vietnam had reached some 9,000 troops, compared with fewer than 800 during the [1950s](http://www.history.com/topics/1950s).

**Vietnam War Escalates**

A coup by some of his own generals succeeded in toppling and killing Diem and his brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, in November 1963, three weeks before Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, [Texas](http://www.history.com/topics/texas). The ensuing political instability in South Vietnam persuaded Kennedy's successor, [Lyndon B. Johnson](http://www.history.com/topics/lyndon-b-johnson), and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara to further increase U.S. military and economic support. The following August, after DRV torpedo boats attacked two U.S. destroyers in the Gulf of Tonkin, Johnson ordered the retaliatory bombing of military targets in North Vietnam. Congress soon passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, which gave Johnson broad war-making powers, and U.S. planes began regular bombing raids, codenamed Operation Rolling Thunder, the following February.

In March 1965, Johnson made the decision--with solid support from the American public--to send U.S. combat forces into battle in Vietnam. By June, 82,000 combat troops were stationed in Vietnam, and General William Westmoreland was calling for 175,000 more by the end of 1965 to shore up the struggling South Vietnamese army. Despite the concerns of some of his advisers about this escalation, and about the entire war effort as well as a growing anti-war movement in the U.S., Johnson authorized the immediate dispatch of 100,000 troops at the end of July 1965 and another 100,000 in 1966. In addition to the United States, South Korea, Thailand, Australia and New Zealand also committed troops to fight in South Vietnam (albeit on a much smaller scale).

**Strategy of Attrition in Vietnam**

In contrast to the air attacks on North Vietnam, the U.S.-South Vietnamese war effort in the south was fought on the ground, largely under the command of General Westmoreland, in coordination with the government of General Nguyen Van Thieu in Saigon. In general, U.S. military forces in the region pursued a policy of attrition, aiming to kill as many enemy troops as possible rather than trying to secure territory. By 1966, large areas of South Vietnam had been designated as "free-fire zones," from which all innocent civilians were supposed to have evacuated and only enemy remained. Heavy bombing by B-52 aircraft or shelling made these zones uninhabitable, as refugees poured into camps in designated safe areas near Saigon and other cities. Even as the body count (at times exaggerated by U.S. and South Vietnamese authorities) mounted steadily, DRV and Viet Cong troops refused to stop fighting, encouraged by the fact that they could easily reoccupy lost territory. Meanwhile, supported by aid from China and the Soviet Union, North Vietnam strengthened its air defenses.

By November 1967, the number of American troops in Vietnam was approaching 500,000, and U.S. casualties had reached 15,058 killed and 109,527 wounded. As the war stretched on, some soldiers came to mistrust their government's reasons for keeping them there, as well as Washington's claims that the war was being won. The later years of the war saw increased physical and psychological deterioration among American soldiers, including drug use, mutinies and attacks by soldiers against officers and noncommissioned officers.

Bombarded by horrific images of the war on their televisions, Americans on the home front turned against the war as well: In October 1967, some 35,000 demonstrators staged a mass antiwar protest outside the [Pentagon](http://www.history.com/topics/pentagon). Opponents of the war argued that civilians, not enemy combatants, were the primary victims and that the United States was supporting a corrupt dictatorship in Saigon.

**Impact of the Tet Offensive on Vietnam War**

By the end of 1967, Hanoi's communist leadership was growing impatient as well, and sought to strike a decisive blow aimed at forcing the better-supplied United States to give up hopes of success. On January 31, 1968, some 70,000 DRV forces under General Vo Nguyen Giap launched the Tet offensive (named for the lunar new year), a coordinated series of fierce attacks on more than 100 cities and towns in South Vietnam. Though taken by surprise, U.S. and South Vietnamese forces managed to strike back quickly, and the communists were unable to hold any of the targets for more than a day or two. Reports of the attacks stunned the U.S. public, however, especially after news broke that Westmoreland had requested an additional 200,000 troops. With his approval ratings dropping in an election year, Johnson called a halt to bombing in much of North Vietnam in March (though bombings continued in the south) and promised to dedicate the rest of his term to seeking peace rather than reelection.

Johnson's new tack, laid out in a March 1968 speech, met with a positive response from Hanoi, and peace talks between the U.S. and North Vietnam opened in Paris that May. Despite the later inclusion of the South Vietnamese and the National Liberation Front (the political arm of the Viet Cong) the dialogue soon reached an impasse, and after an election campaign marred by violence, Republican [Richard M. Nixon](http://www.history.com/topics/richard-m-nixon) defeated Hubert Humphrey to win the White House.

**Vietnam War Ends: From Vietnamization to Withdrawal**

Nixon sought to deflate the antiwar movement by appealing to a "silent majority" of Americans who he believed supported the war effort. In an attempt to limit the volume of American casualties, he announced a program of withdrawing troops, increasing aerial and artillery bombardment and giving South Vietnamese control over ground operations. In addition to this policy, which he called "Vietnamization," Nixon continued public peace talks in Paris, adding higher-level secret talks conducted by Secretary of State Henry Kissinger beginning in the spring of 1968. The North Vietnamese continued to insist on complete U.S. withdrawal as a condition of peace, however, and the next few years would bring even more carnage, including the horrifying revelation that U.S. soldiers had massacred more than 400 unarmed civilians in the village of My Lai in March 1968.

Anti-war protests continued to build as the conflict wore on. In 1968 and 1969, there were hundreds of anti-war marches and gatherings throughout the country. On November 15, 1969, the largest anti-war protest in American history took place in [Washington, D.C.](http://www.history.com/topics/washington-dc), as over 250,000 Americans gathered peacefully, calling for withdrawal of American troops from Vietnam. The anti-war movement, which was particularly strong on college campuses, divided Americans bitterly. For some young people, the war symbolized a form of unchecked authority they had come to resent. For other Americans, opposing the government was considered unpatriotic and treasonous. As the first U.S. troops were withdrawn, those who remained became increasingly angry and frustrated, exacerbating problems with morale and leadership. Tens of thousands of soldiers received dishonorable discharges for desertion, and about 500,000 American men from 1965-73 became "draft dodgers," with many fleeing to Canada to evade conscription. Nixon ended draft calls in 1972, and instituted an all-volunteer army the following year.

In 1970, a joint U.S-South Vietnamese operation invaded Cambodia, hoping to wipe out DRV supply bases there. The South Vietnamese then led their own invasion of Laos, which was pushed back by North Vietnam. The invasion of these countries, in violation of international law, sparked a new wave of protests on college campuses across America, including two at Kent State in [Ohio](http://www.history.com/topics/ohio) and Jackson State in [Mississippi](http://www.history.com/topics/mississippi) during which National Guardsmen and police killed a total of six student protesters. By the end of June 1972, however, after another failed offensive into South Vietnam, Hanoi was finally willing to compromise. Kissinger and North Vietnamese representatives drafted a peace agreement by early fall, but leaders in Saigon rejected it, and in December Nixon authorized a number of bombing raids against targets in Hanoi and Haiphong. Known as the [Christmas](http://www.history.com/topics/christmas) Bombings, the raids drew international condemnation.

**Legacy of the Vietnam War**

In January 1973, the United States and North Korea concluded a final peace agreement, ending open hostilities between the two nations. War between North and South Vietnam continued, however, until April 30, 1975, when DRV forces captured Saigon, renaming it Ho Chi Minh City (Ho himself died in 1969). The long conflict had affected an immense majority of the country’s population; in eight years of warfare, an estimated 2 million Vietnamese died, while 3 million were wounded and another 12 million became refugees. War had decimated the country's infrastructure and economy, and reconstruction proceeded slowly. In 1976, Vietnam was unified as the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, though sporadic violence continued over the next 15 years, including conflicts with neighboring China and Cambodia. Under a broad free market policy put in place in 1986, the economy began to improve, boosted by oil export revenues and an influx of foreign capital. Trade and diplomatic relations between Vietnam and the U.S. were resumed in the 1990s.

**USSR INVASION OF AFGHANISTAN**

Afghanistan hit the world's headlines in 1979. Afghanistan seemed to perfectly summarize the [Cold War](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/coldwar.htm). From the West's point of view, [Berlin](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/berlin.htm), [Korea](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/korea.htm), [Hungary](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/hungary_1956.htm) and [Cuba](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/cuba.htm) had shown the way communism wanted to proceed. Afghanistan was a continuation of this.

In Christmas 1979, Russian paratroopers landed in Kabal, the capital of Afghanistan. The country was already in the grip of a civil war. The prime minister, Hazifullah Amin, tried to sweep aside Muslim tradition within the nation and he wanted a more western slant to Afghanistan. This outraged the majority of those in Afghanistan as a strong tradition of Muslim belief was common in the country.

Thousands of Muslim leaders had been arrested and many more had fled the capital and gone to the mountains to escape Amin's police. Amin also lead a communist based government - a belief that rejects religion and this was another reason for such obvious discontent with his government.

Thousands of Afghanistan Muslims joined the Mujahdeen - a guerilla force on a holy mission for Allah. They wanted the overthrow of the Amin government. The Mujahdeen declared a jihad - a holy war - on the supporters of Amin. This was also extended to the Russians who were now in Afghanistan trying to maintain the power of the Amin government. The Russians claimed that they had been invited in by the Amin government and that they were not invading the country. They claimed that their task was to support a legitimate government and that the Mujahdeen were no more than terrorists.

On December 27th, 1979, Amin was shot by the Russians and he was replaced by Babrak Kamal. His position as head of the Afghan government depended entirely on the fact that he needed Russian military support to keep him in power. Many Afghan soldiers had deserted to the Mujahdeen and the Kamal government needed 85,000 Russian soldiers to keep him in power.

The Mujahdeen proved to be a formidable opponent. They were equipped with old rifles but had knowledge of the mountains around Kabal and the weather conditions that would be encountered there. The Russians resorted to using napalm, poison gas and helicopter gun ships against the Mujahdeen - but they experienced exactly the same military scenario the Americans had done in [Vietnam](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/vietnam.htm).

By 1982, the Mujahdeen controlled 75% of Afghanistan despite fighting the might of the world's second most powerful military power. Young conscript Russian soldiers were no match against men fuelled by their religious belief. Though the Russian army had a reputation, the war in Afghanistan showed the world just how poor it was outside of military displays. Army boots lasted no more than 10 days before falling to bits in the harsh environment of the Afghanistan mountains. Many Russian soldiers deserted to the Mujahdeen. Russian tanks were of little use in the mountain passes.

The United Nations had condemned the invasion as early as January 1980 but a Security Council motion calling for the withdrawal of Russian forces had been vetoed......by Russia.

America put a ban on the export of grain to Russia, ended the SALT talks taking place then and boycotted the Olympic Games due to be held in Moscow in 1980. Other than that, America did nothing. Why? They knew that Russia had got itself into their own [Vietnam](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/vietnam.htm) and it also provided American Intelligence with an opportunity to acquire any new Russian military hardware that could be used in Afghanistan. Mujhadeen fighters were given access to American surface-to-air missiles - though not through direct sales by America.

Mikhail Gorbachev took Russia out of the Afghanistan fiasco when he realised what many Russian leaders had been too scared to admit in public - that Russia could not win the war and the cost of maintaining such a vast force in Afghanistan was crippling Russia's already weak economy.

By the end of the 1980's, the Mujahdeen was at war with itself in Afghanistan with hard line Taliban fighters taking a stronger grip over the whole nation and imposing very strict Muslim law on the Afghanistan population.