

A Bit Brisk: The Beginning of the Cold War

Picking up the Pieces

How does someone pick up the pieces of a broken life? This was the question that dominated the minds of Europeans; indeed, the entire world. Europe had been at the center of two worldwide wars that had taken the lives of over 80 million people. The cost of the damage in Europe was in the billions of dollars. Europe, which had been the center of power in the world for two thousand years, was broke and broken.

The seat of power is never empty. WWII saw the rise of two superpowers, countries who lead the world with rich economies and powerful militaries. These new superpowers were the USA and USSR (the new name for Russia).

USA was the new kid on the block, being less than 200 years old, in comparison to the European countries that were over a thousand years old. USA was a capitalist country. Capitalism is an economic system based on competition between businesses for people's money. People own and control the businesses, and the government mainly stays out of the way. The Americans had tried to remain isolated from world events, but found themselves pulled into WWI. After WWI, the Americans tried to isolate themselves again, having zero interest in the rest of the world unless it was an opportunity to make money. When the Japanese brought WWII to American soil, America decided to embrace the idea of being a leader in world affairs. By the end of WWII, the USA was the richest country in the world, with an extremely powerful military. USA wanted to be in the driver's seat, reshaping the world after the war to be democratic and capitalist.

The USSR rose as the second superpower. The USSR was the world's largest country and the only Communist country. Communism is an economic system where the government makes sure that everyone shares everything equally.

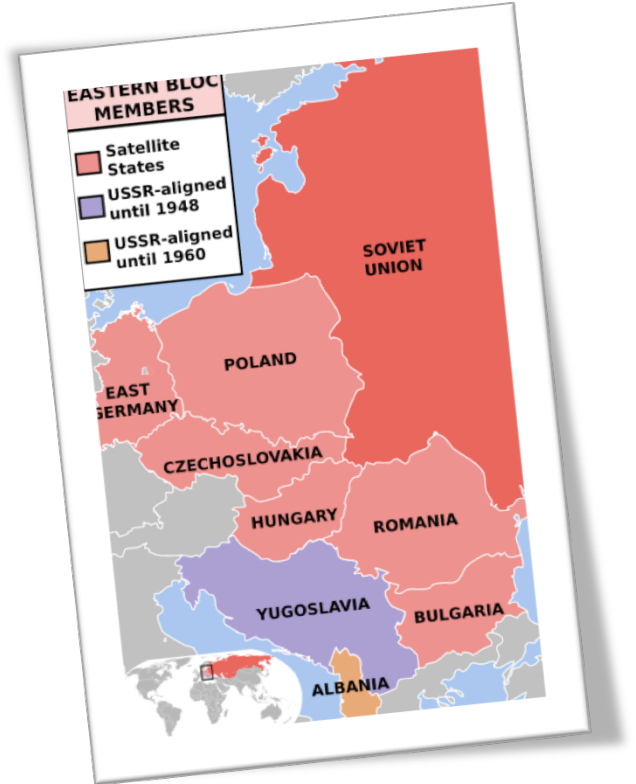
Communism also carries the desire to be spread around the world through violence and revolution. Coming out of the war, USSR lost more troops than any other country (26 million), but had almost singlehandedly stopped the Nazis and were the country to arrive in Berlin to force the surrender. This gave them a very strong seat at the table of discussing how post-war Europe was going to be shaped. Stalin had made his dream known before and during the war that the USSR and Communism would start WWII to control all of Europe and eventually the world, ending capitalism forever. The USSR was a rich country with a strong military that was taking every step possible to making Stalin's dream a reality.



Dividing Europe

Once the threat of Hitler was out of the way, there was immediate tension between USA and USSR. Mistrust and suspicion kept the two superpowers from working together. Joseph Stalin wanted to crush Germany's industry and to spread communism to the Eastern European countries... with the eventual aim of spreading it to all of Europe. Harry Truman felt that capitalism and democracy were the only way of quickly recovering from the war, and that all European countries should be allowed to choose who ruled over them. These two ideas clashed and were the beginning of a long series of conflicts.

USA and USSR joined together with 50 other countries in the creation of the United Nations, an organization of countries joined together to promote world peace and security. Both countries looked at this as an opportunity to have greater influence in the rest of the world. However, the two countries butted heads on everything else. USA wanted all European countries to have "free and fair" elections to decide on their government leaders, also known as "Self Governance". USSR at first disagreed, wanting to use the Eastern European countries a buffer or barrier between Western Europe and the USSR. Eventually, Stalin decided to allow the elections. However, the Stalin secretly sent the KGB (the USSR secret service) into the Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, and Albania to "convince them" to vote for the communist party in the elections. Amazingly, all the countries the USSR wanted to control all voted for the Communist party and for leaders who were friendly toward the USSR. This group of countries was called the Eastern Bloc.



As for Germany, it was divided up between the superpowers. The land each side had conquered by the end of the war became the dividing lines. USA and Britain controlled the western half of Germany (called Western Germany) and USSR controlling the eastern half (called East Germany) as a part of the Eastern Bloc. They also divided the capital city Berlin in half, the same way, with the USA/Britain getting the western half (called West Berlin) and USSR getting the eastern half (called East Berlin).

These became the new battle lines for an event we now know as the Cold War. A Cold War is when countries are hostile/mean to each other, but do not fire weapons or physically fight. There was the East vs West, USSR vs USA, Communism vs Capitalism. Each side believing they were correct and that the other side was evil. Each believing that their destiny was to control and dominate the rest of the world.

A Bit Brisk: The Beginning of the Cold War – Questions

- 1) What were conditions like in Europe after WWII?
- 2) What is a Superpower? Who were the two new superpowers?
- 3) The USSR used to be known as what country?
- 4) What was the ultimate goal of the USA?
- 5) What was the ultimate goal of the USSR?
- 6) What is the United Nations? What is the purpose of the United Nations?
- 7) What was the Eastern Bloc? What was the purpose of the Eastern Bloc?
- 8) What countries made up the Eastern Block?
- 9) How was Germany divided up after WWII? Why do you think they chose to do this?
- 10) What is a Cold War?
- 11) In what ways are USA & USSR similar? In what ways are they different?
- 12) Ask your family members who are older than 30 (Parents, Grandparents, Aunts, Uncles) what thoughts, feelings, or images come to mind when they hear the words: Communism and Soviet Union (USSR).