The Cold War

Uneasy Allies

The end of World War II saw the defeat of the Axis powers in Germany and Japan and brought freedom and hope to many nations and peoples who had been invaded and conquered by them. The end of the war also brought an end to the uneasy alliance which had been formed between the democratic Western allies (Great Britain, France, and the United States) and the communist Soviet Union (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics or U.S.S.R.). The two superpowers—the United States and the U.S.S.R.—became enemies in 1945 because their beliefs and objectives were completely at odds. This philosophical conflict between the two countries came to be known as the *Cold War*.
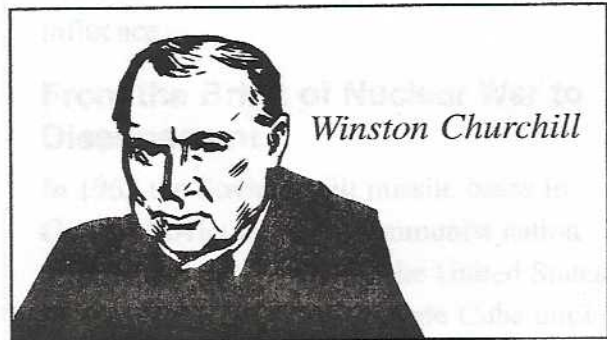
Soviet Areas of Influence

The United States and its democratic allies throughout the world were committed to the spread of democracy and self-rule among all nations, especially those nations liberated from *Nazi* oppression. (Nazis were members of Hitler's Nationalist Socialist German Worker's Party, which supported nationalism, militarism, and racism.) The Soviet Union, led by dictator Joseph Stalin, was determined to increase its territorial control and subject these nations to its own communist-controlled government.

In Europe the U.S.S.R. occupied Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, East Germany, Latvia, and Lithuania and encouraged a communist-controlled government in Yugoslavia. The Soviets increased their influence in Asia by supporting the communist takeover of China. Their efforts to expand communism and the Soviet Union's power were worldwide.

An Iron Curtain Comes Down

Winston Churchill, the great British war leader, declared that an "iron curtain" had come down between the democratic West and the communist Soviet empire in the East. The aggressive efforts of the Soviet Union were met by a policy of containment by the United States and its allies as they tried to keep communism from spreading to other nations. For the most part, the Cold War developed not as an actual shooting war but as a series of actions and reactions by each side as it tried to strengthen its position.

Winston Churchill

Armed to the Teeth

Both sides maintained strong armies, equipped with the most up-to-date weapons. Their navies were equipped with the best ships and most technologically advanced weapons and guidance systems. Their nuclear-powered submarines patrolled the oceans. Soviet and American air forces were stocked with cutting-edge military planes as each side sought to build the fastest and most destructive fleet of fighter jets.

Reading Passages

The Cold War (cont.)

Nuclear Weapons

The United States created the first atomic weapons as World War II came to an end. The only two atomic bombs ever used in warfare were dropped on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, bringing an end to the war. After the war, the United States and the Soviet Union began building and stockpiling nuclear weapons and the missiles and planes to deliver them.

The Soviets stole some of their technology from the U.S. and developed some on their own. Other major nations developed the technology also, and the *proliferation*, or rapid increase, of nuclear weapons became a major world concern. It became obvious that nuclear war was a serious risk to the entire planet since nations had stockpiles of materials that could destroy the world several times over. Intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) could carry nuclear destruction across the oceans in a matter of minutes.

Cold War Alliances

The United States and Western European nations established the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to form a barrier and a strong support system against potential Soviet aggression. Other organizations were created with allies in Asia and the Pacific. Member nations pledged to go to war to prevent the U.S.S.R. and its allies from extending its influence by force.

The Soviets created the Warsaw Pact, an alliance of its satellite Eastern European nations including Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Romania, to oppose the United States and NATO. The Soviets sent troops into Czechoslovakia in 1956 and Hungary in 1968 when those nations threatened to create independent, more democratic governments.

War by Proxy

The United States and the Soviet Union did not directly go to war against each other, but they were often involved in conflicts involving other nations. American participation in the Korean War was an effort by the United States to prevent the spread of communism in Asia. The Vietnam War was an effort by the Soviet Union and China to expand their sphere of influence and the U.S. to contain the spread of communism. The Soviet war in Afghanistan was another effort to extend communist influence.

From the Brink of Nuclear War to Disarmament

In 1962 the Soviets built missile bases in Cuba, a Soviet ally and communist nation located just 90 miles from the United States. The U.S. sent ships to blockade Cuba until the missiles and bases were removed. For a few intense days, nuclear war seemed very possible until the situation was finally resolved peacefully.

In 1969 the U.S. and U.S.S.R. began disarmament discussions, and a series of proposals and treaties finally led to a reduction in nuclear weapons in the 1980s. The end of the Soviet Union came about in 1991, and with its fall came the end of the Cold War.