

## PASSAGE: THE COLD WAR

**SOCIAL SCIENCES: Adapted from the essay *The Cold War* by Laura Halstied (©2023 by Laura Halstied)**

Although the Soviet Union and the United States were allies during World War Two, when the war ended a rivalry between the two superpowers ensued, known as the Cold War. The Cold War was a decades-long period of tension and threat of war between the United States and its allies and the United Soviet Socialist Republic, also called the Soviet Union. The end did not happen overnight, but rather through a series of events that led to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

The Soviet Union's government was communist, and the economy was controlled by the government. This was a stark contrast to the democratic government and capitalistic economy of the United States. The United States viewed communism as a complete opposite of democracy and believed that communism would spread around the world. The president during this time, President Truman, vowed to support democratic countries that had been impacted by the war. The goal was to provide food, building materials, and money to countries that were geographically close to the Soviet Union and could potentially be taken over by communists. Also, after the war, the leader of the Soviet Union at the time, Joseph Stalin, refused to trade with countries that were not communist.

Economically, the Soviet Union developed "five-year plans" that controlled what and how much was produced. Citizens in the Soviet Union did not have a say in the supply and demand for goods which resulted in shortages of consumer goods, from food to vehicles. Germany was split into two parts, east and west. The west was controlled by the United States and Great Britain and the east was part of the Soviet Union. Many east German citizens fled to the west part of Germany due to better economic conditions. The Soviet Union placed a wall, known as the Berlin Wall, at the border of east Germany so citizens could not leave for the west.

The Soviet Union spent a large portion of its budget on the building of military arms, to keep in competition with the USA, but this caused the Soviet Union's economy to suffer, and ordinary citizens felt the strain. The Soviet Union had also spent around \$50 billion US dollars to take over Afghanistan from 1979-1986, a war they were not able to win, and Soviet troops left Afghanistan in 1989.

Some of the nations that were a part of the Soviet Union began to question if their country wouldn't be more successful outside of the Soviet Union. For example, Poland began to protest against the Soviet Union in the early 1980's because of food shortages and high prices. An organization called Solidarity was formed and although the group was banned and its leaders arrested, the United States secretly helped pay for the group to keep the movement alive. In 1989 Poland was allowed to have open elections which led to an anti-communist government. Hungary also held elections in 1989 and the result was the Communist party losing power in the government. Since the communist party no longer controlled Hungary, Soviet Union citizens living in East Germany were able to head to western Europe through Hungary for the first time since the end of World War II. This made the Berlin Wall ineffective in keeping citizens in the Soviet Union. On November 9, 1989, the Berlin Wall was taken down. East and west German citizens were able to visit one another for the first time since the wall had been erected in 1961.

The last leader of the Soviet Union was Mikhail Gorbachev. He knew that the Soviet Union was not competing with other countries economically and wanted to create changes that would strengthen the Soviet Union. To accomplish this goal, Gorbachev created two new policies, perestroika, and glasnost. These two policies would lead to the collapse of the Soviet Union. Perestroika means "reconstruction." Gorbachev

85 wanted to modernize and rebuild the Soviet  
Union by reducing the money spent on military  
arms to compete with the USA and instead focus  
on helping create businesses. Gorbachev's policy  
caused government spending to increase which  
90 led to high amounts of inflation, the rate at which  
the cost of goods increased. Perestroika also led  
to a few people gaining a lot of wealth, and most  
citizens were still poor. The Soviet Union's  
economy was worse off after perestroika than it

95 had been before the economic policy was  
implemented. Glasnost means "openness," and  
Gorbachev allowed the press to openly criticize  
the government for the first time since the Soviet  
Union's creation in 1922. This led to a high level  
100 of distrust from the citizens as they read about  
the problems the government was having in  
running the economy. All these issues played a  
part in the collapse of the Soviet Union which  
ended the Cold War after forty-five years.

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