

CHAPTER ONE



The Cold War Ends

One of the most important events of the 1980s was the end of the Cold War. The Cold War was a long-running conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union (known today as the Russian Federation). It was not a traditional war. The military forces of the United States and the Soviet Union did not fight each other on a battlefield or launch missiles against each other. Instead, the Cold War was a struggle for power and influence.

The Cold War created constant tension between the United States and the Soviet Union. This tension trickled down to other nations around the world. Countries picked sides and threatened each other. Traditional warfare, with battles and soldiers and death, seemed like it could break out at any moment.

At the beginning of the 1980s the Cold War was in full swing. By the end of the decade, however, the conflict was over. The events that led to the end of the Cold War defined world politics during the 1980s.

Cold War Background

The Cold War began after World War II ended in 1945. The United States and the Soviet Union had been allies during the war. After the war both countries agreed to help rebuild and

manage war-torn parts of Europe. However, they had very different ideas about how this should be done. Both nations tried to enforce their own ideas. As a result, distrust grew quickly between the United States and the Soviet Union.

Because of this distrust, the two nations began developing powerful weapons. Neither country intended to attack the other. The weapons were insurance in case the other nation struck. Before long, however, the buildup got out of

THE SOVIET UNION AND THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION

The Soviet Union, seen here in red and brown, collapsed in 1991 and separated into fifteen separate countries. The area in red is known today as the Russian Federation.



American History by Decade: The 1980s



U.S. soldiers work on a missile launch vehicle. The United States created many powerful weapons during the arms race.

control. Each time one country developed a new weapon, the other rushed to create an even bigger and deadlier one. This situation was known as the **arms race**. Over time, both the United States and the Soviet Union created many powerful weapons. Some of these, such as nuclear missiles, had so much force that they could wipe major cities off the face of the earth. Each country used its weapons to scare the other country and keep it from attacking.

At the same time, the United States and the Soviet Union worked to gain influence in smaller nations around the world. By doing this, each country hoped to make its circle of “friends” bigger. In the Cold War world, more friends meant more power and therefore more security.

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The Early 1980s

By the early 1980s a deep divide existed between the United States and the Soviet Union. Many Americans believed all Soviets were bad people who might turn violent without warning. They also feared **communism**, the idea behind the Soviet form of government. In a true Communist society, all people are equal in every way. This sounds good in theory, but the reality was not so pleasant. Soviet leadership had to keep strict control over every part of its citizens' lives to enforce its rules. Many of the things that happened in the Soviet Union and other Communist nations seemed harsh and frightening to Americans.

In this atmosphere, Ronald Reagan was elected president of the United States. Reagan was elected partly because he had promised to lead America in a worldwide fight against communism. After Reagan took office in January 1981 he immediately began working to keep his promise. He spent billions of dollars on new weapons. One of these was an antimissile system that would orbit the earth. Reagan said it would be able to destroy any weapons the Soviets might shoot at the United States. This system was officially called the Strategic Defense Initiative, but it was soon nicknamed Star Wars.

Star Wars and Reagan's other military programs allowed America to gain the advantage in the arms race. This upset then Soviet leader



Soon after taking office, President Ronald Reagan spent billions of dollars on new weapons.

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Yuri Andropov, who worried that America's new weapons were a threat to world peace. He complained about Reagan's policies, saying, "Engaging in this [buildup] is not just irresponsible. It is insane."² Reagan shot back, calling the Soviet Union an "evil empire" and "the focus of evil in the modern world."³ Tensions soared, and war seemed to loom.

A technician conducts research on weapons for the Strategic Defense Initiative.

