

# End of the Cold War

*Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!*

—Ronald Reagan, speech in West Berlin, Germany, June 12, 1987

**Essential Question:** What caused the end of the Cold War?

**P**ower structures continued to change in the 1980s and 1990s. President **Ronald Reagan's** appeal to Soviet leader **Mikhail Gorbachev** came two years before the Berlin Wall fell in 1989. Two years after the fall, a coup ousted Gorbachev from power. The Soviet Union collapsed and the Cold War was over. The U.S.-Soviet Union rivalry that had dominated the world stage for nearly five decades ended. Governments in only a few countries, such as China, North Korea, Cuba, and Vietnam, still called themselves communists. Political alliances changed, and economic interactions among nations expanded.

## The Final Decades of the Cold War Era

Despite the persistent mistrust between the two countries, diplomatic relations between the United States and the Soviet Union were maintained—albeit inconsistently at times—during the last decades of the conflict. Proxy wars and support of opposing sides in international conflicts remained standard for both nations. These conflicts reinforced the fundamental disagreement between the capitalist United States and the communist Soviet Union. Agreements between the superpowers to limit nuclear weapons played a key role in ending the Cold War. However, the path to a thaw was not always steady. (Connect: Describe the similarities in the competition between world powers in the Cold War and during the imperial era. See Topics 4.4 and 4.5.)

**Détente and a Colder War** After resolving the crises of the 1960s, which included the Bay of Pigs and the Cuban Missile Crisis, the relationship between the superpowers improved in the following decade. This period of time was called **détente**, a relaxation of strained relations between nations.

One symbol of détente was the visit of President Richard Nixon to the Soviet Union in 1972. Nixon and Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev signed the **Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT)**, designed to freeze the number of intercontinental ballistic missiles that each power could keep. To play one power against the other, Nixon also visited China that year. It was the first visit by an American president in the existence of communist China.

Détente served both the U.S. and Soviet needs at the time. The Soviet Union faced challenges during the late 1960s and the 1970s.

- Economically, the USSR was in a crisis. It was no longer growing. Central governmental controls prevented farmers and manufacturers from deciding what to grow or make and what to charge for it. Foreign trade was extremely limited.
- Eastern European Soviet bloc countries were bucking for reforms and freedom from Moscow's direct control. The Soviet military violently put down the Prague Spring, a liberation movement in Czechoslovakia.
- Russia faced skirmishes with China along their shared border—a reflection of the troubled relationship between the two communist countries.

The United States also faced difficulties. President Nixon was mired in the Vietnam War, a costly and unpopular conflict. The American economy was suffering as well. The possibility of establishing relations with China would, Nixon knew, open potential new markets to the United States and at the same time press a bit on the strained Soviet-Chinese relationship. Détente could help the United States maintain its containment policy and might ease tensions between the superpowers.

As a result of détente, the United States started to sell excess stores of American grain to the Soviet Union, where drought had created a shortage. This benefitted American farmers, who now had access to a new, large market for goods, and the struggling people of the Soviet Union. However, after the Soviets invaded Afghanistan in 1979, U.S. President Jimmy Carter halted the grain shipments. This action marked the end of détente.

**Soviet-Afghan War** The Soviets invaded Afghanistan to prop up that country's communist government against Muslim fighters. Estimates of Afghan civilian deaths vary from 562,000 to two million. Millions of Afghans fled to Pakistan and Iran, and many within the country became homeless. Ultimately, the Soviet army could not conquer the guerrilla groups in the rough terrain of Afghanistan. Soviet legitimacy was undermined and new forms of political participation in Afghanistan developed. As the Soviet Army withdrew in 1989, a civil war continued in Afghanistan. While the collapse of the Soviet Union would not occur until 12 years after the Afghan War began, the war put immense stress on the Soviet Union's centralized economic system and left Soviet leadership vulnerable to reform.

**Reagan and Gorbachev** During the presidency of Ronald Reagan (1981–1989), tensions between the Americans and the Soviets increased even further. Reagan referred to the Soviet Union as the “evil empire” and sent military aid, including weapons, to support the Afghans. The Soviet Union resented this overtly militaristic move.

In addition, by the early 1980s, the United States and the Soviet Union had more than 12,000 nuclear missiles, each one pointed at the other side. Not



only would the superpowers destroy each other with a nuclear exchange, but the rest of the world would also be destroyed—seven times over.

In light of this growing tension, Reagan declared that the United States would create a missile defense program he called the **Strategic Defense Initiative**, or **SDI**. Dubbed “Star Wars” (after the internationally popular 1977 film) by critics, the system would supposedly destroy any Soviet nuclear missiles that targeted the United States or its allies. Lacking such a system, the Soviets would be unable to keep U.S. missiles from hitting targets in the Soviet Union. The Soviets saw this move as the beginning of an arms race in space. While it was not an immediate threat that required a quick response, it worried liberal and moderate Soviets who wanted reforms. They saw it as a long-term economic concern and one that strengthened the hand of Soviet conservatives. The Soviets objected loudly to Reagan’s plan.

**The Thaw** The increase in tensions during the 1980s led to other nations believing that they must choose sides between the superpowers. Non-aligned nations hoped they would not experience a nuclear holocaust that the two nations caused.

In this tense atmosphere, Mikhail Gorbachev, a more progressive Communist than previous Soviet leaders, came to power in 1985. He favored **perestroika**, attempts to restructure the Soviet economy to allow elements of free enterprise, and **glasnost**, the policy of opening up Soviet society and the political process by granting greater freedom. Reagan and Gorbachev met three times in two years. The two men liked each other and, despite tough negotiations, created a working relationship that ultimately delivered results.

In 1987, the Soviet Union and the United States agreed on a new nuclear arms treaty. The **Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF)** restricted intermediate-range nuclear weapons. Around the world, people could breathe a cautious sigh of relief as the world’s two superpowers reduced the risk of nuclear war. The INF and other U.S.-Soviet agreements quieted some of the more bellicose Cold War supporters in both countries. With less pressure from Soviet conservatives, Gorbachev could more easily implement political and economic reforms in the Soviet Union.



**Source:** Edmund S. Valtman / Library of Congress

The man is Mikhail Gorbachev, who looks on sadly at a symbol of the Soviet Union, the hammer and sickle, broken into pieces.



## The End of the Soviet Union

One aspect of Gorbachev’s reform program was an end to economic support for the Soviet satellites in Eastern Europe. He also implied that the Soviet Army would no longer come to the rescue of communist regimes in Eastern Europe. In effect, economic reform in the Soviet Union provided greater freedom to other communist countries. Once people in these countries got a small taste of freedom, they wanted more. As a result, democratic reform movements swept through Eastern European nations in 1989. The Berlin Wall was torn down. In October 1990, East and West Germany reunited as one country.

**The Spread of Reforms** With most of the Eastern European nations caught up in democratic reforms, it was not long before the Soviet Union was also swept into the movement. Lithuania, Georgia, and other Soviet republics began to overthrow their rulers and declare independence. The Warsaw Pact dissolved. Gorbachev’s reforms ultimately led to his political downfall and the end of the Soviet Union in December 1991. Among the former Soviet republics that became independent countries, Russia emerged as the strongest. The Cold War had ended.

**New Challenges** The decline of a superpower presented opportunities and several challenges. Political alliances changed, and economic interactions among nations expanded. With this new openness, particularly with regard to trade, the world became more interconnected than ever before. This interconnectedness produced greater wealth for some but hardships for others. The post-Cold War world had to grapple with new democracies, vast economic inequality, ethnic conflict and genocide, terrorism, environmental degradation, and global epidemics.

KEY TERMS BY THEME		
<b>GOVERNMENT:</b> Global Ronald Reagan Mikhail Gorbachev détente Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT)	perestroika glasnost Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF)	<b>TECHNOLOGY:</b> Military Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI)