

Transformation of the Cold War, 1960 to 1975

Superpower relations continued to worsen in the early 1960s, bringing the world to the brink of nuclear annihilation in 1962. Following the scare we all shared, there was a concerted effort to reduce tensions through to 1975.

The Berlin Wall

Germany, which had been divided into east v west since 1948, was a source of growing tension, particularly Berlin – similarly split, but bang in the middle of Soviet-dominated East Germany.

But Berlin was as much a problem to the Soviets as it was to the West. Much stronger economically than East Germany, West Germany provided jobs for tens of thousands of East Berliners, who daily crossed the border to work there ... and, increasingly, did not go back. By 1961, 1,800 people a day were fleeing to the West, and they included some of East Germany's brightest talent. This was not just a humiliation for communism, it was destroying East Germany's economy, and the East German leader, Walter Ulbricht had been pressing for Khrushchev to close the border since 1953.

Khrushchev was also concerned about West Germany, but for different reasons. He saw an existential threat in the placement of NATO nuclear weapons in West Germany, and was anxious to get the Western Allies out of West Germany – particularly out of West Berlin, which was a centre for NATO spies. In 1958 he proposed that all foreign armed forces leave Germany altogether, to be followed by a Peace Treaty between East and West Germany. Meeting the new, young US president John F Kennedy at the Vienna Summit in 1961, he tried to bully Kennedy into agreeing his Peace Treaty idea, even to the point of mentioning the possibility of war.

Kennedy had been elected on a promise to get tough on the Soviets. Returning shell-shocked to the USA, Kennedy gave a TV address publicly refusing the Peace Treaty idea of to back down an inch from West Berlin, and he increased US spending on armaments. Khrushchev met with Ulbricht and his Warsaw Pact allies, and on 13 August the Wall was constructed.

At first a Soviet triumph, long term it proved a propaganda gift for the West, as hundreds died trying to get across it; the Berlin Wall became a symbol of the failure of communism.

But it DID ease USA-USSR tensions over Berlin, which ceased to be a flashpoint.

How close to war did the world come over Cuba in 1962?

Meanwhile, the Americans were becoming more aggressive. In 1959, the Communist leader Fidel Castro took power in Cuba. Since Cuba was only 100 miles away from Florida, this was as much a problem for them as West Berlin was for the Russians. In 1961, the Americans elected a new President, John F Kennedy, who promised to get tough on Communism.

Initially, Kennedy's attempts to get tough went wrong. His actions at the Vienna summit had merely caused the Berlin Wall. When Castro made a trade agreement with Russia, the Americans stopped trading with Cuba; in retaliation, Cuba nationalised all American-owned companies. Then in April 1961 the CIA supported an attempted invasion of Cuba by anti-Castro Cuban exiles at the Bay of Pigs; it failed miserably, greatly embarrassing Kennedy. Even worse, as a result, in September 1961, Castro asked Russia for – and was publicly promised – weapons to defend Cuba against America. On 14 October 1962 an American U2 spy-plane took pictures of a nuclear missile base being built on Cuba.

Kennedy's advisers told him he had 10 days before Cuba could fire the missiles at targets in America. For the next fortnight, the world stood on the brink of global nuclear war. Fearing a military strike would lead to hot war, Kennedy decided to blockade Cuba. The Russian ships thought to be carrying missiles only turned back at the last minute. Most people in the West thought the end of the world was nigh.

Then (in the words of one US adviser) 'the other guy blinked': Khrushchev sent two telegrams – the first (26 October) offering to dismantle the sites if Kennedy would agree not to invade Cuba, and a second (27 October) demanding that American missile sites in Turkey be dismantled. Just at this moment, a U2 plane was shot down in Cuba, but Kennedy decided to ignore the incident.

Kennedy publicly agreed not to invade Cuba (and secretly agreed to dismantle the sites in Turkey). Later, because of this, Khrushchev claimed that he won the crisis. At the time, however, Kennedy appeared to be the victor, because the Russians had dismantled the Cuba sites. Soon after, Khrushchev fell from power.

Both leaders had had a fright. Kennedy and Khrushchev set up a telephone 'hotline' to talk directly in a crisis. In 1963, they agreed a Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. Although it took another 27 years, the Cuba crisis marked the beginning of the end of the Cold War.

The Prague Spring

Czechoslovakia had not, as had Poland and Hungary, revolted against the Soviet Union in 1956, but there was a spirit of discontent in the country about the government's economic failures (including a devaluation of 98% in 1953), and the lack of freedom. In July 1967 the Congress of the Union of Czechoslovak Writers demanded freedom of expression and democracy, and openly criticised the Communist government. Faced by growing criticism, at the end of 1967 the Czechoslovak President, Novotny, appealed to the Soviet Union for help.

The Soviet leader was Leonid Brezhnev, who had replaced Khrushchev in 1964. Instead of supporting Novotny, after a visit to Czechoslovakia he supported his removal, and Alexander Dubcek came to power.

In April 1968, Dubcek announced an 'Action programme' of reform, including freedom of speech, business, religion and travel (even to the West) ... and he promised a reduction in the powers of the secret police, and a new National Assembly (Parliament) where the Communists would not be the only Party. On 17 June Ludvik Vaculík's pamphlet, *Two Thousand Words* was published, calling for democracy and reform of the Czechoslovakian Communist Party.

Other Warsaw Pact countries were worried, complaining that the Czechoslovakian reforms were destabilising their own populations. At the Bratislava Conference (3 August 1968), therefore, Dubcek promised to suppress anti-communist movements in Czechoslovakia, and to stay in the Warsaw Pact.

Ten days later, Brezhnev called Dubcek to ask why the Czechoslovakian Press were still attacking socialism and the Soviet Union, and to warn him that 'new decisions' were being considered. On 20 August half-a-million Warsaw Pact troops invaded Czechoslovakia. Dubcek was replaced by Gustav Husak, and the Prague Spring was suppressed.

Was this a sign of détente/ *razryadka*? The USA and the West did nothing.

Détente (= 'relaxation' in French)/ *razryadka* (= 'reduction') in Russian

By the early 1970s, the USSR had caught the USA in the nuclear arms race, the Warsaw Pact was quiet after Czechoslovakia, France had signed a Trade Treaty and left NATO, and West Germany was seeking peace with both Russia and East Germany. Russia felt safe in Europe. However, a border clash with China had almost resulted in a nuclear war, and Russia was suffering economic decline and multiple social problems. Lenin had believed in *razryadka* and Khrushchev had realised that a nuclear war would be MAD; the time was right for a reduction in tension with the USA.

In the early 1970s, the USA was losing the Vietnam War, and needed Soviet influence with North Vietnam to help broker peace. Its economy was suffering 'stagflation' (= stagnation and inflation at the same time), and was being hit by the Oil Crisis. In 1969 the new President, Richard Nixon, officially gave up the USA's role as world-protector against communism, and stated the Nixon Doctrine that it was up to each country to defend itself against communism. Instead, he and his foreign adviser Henry Kissinger sought 'détente' with China and the Soviet Union.

In 1972 – after the ice had been broken when a US ping-pong team went to China the year before – Nixon went to China and signed the Shanghai Communique, promising peace, trade and cultural exchanges – and to drop the USA's support for Taiwan (which China wanted to conquer).

In the same year, Nixon went to Moscow and signed the *Basic Principles of Relations between the USA and the USSR*, promising peace, trade and cultural exchanges. Shortly after, the two countries signed SALT1, a treaty ending the construction of new ICBMs, followed by a Biological Weapons Convention and an Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. Three years later, American and Soviet astronauts docked their Apollo and Soyuz spacecraft together.

The high-point of détente was reached in 1975 when the USSR signed the Helsinki Accords, promising not only to respect the borders of 1945, but to respect human rights.