



COLD CONFLICT

(Image: National Archives and Records Administration, 198923.)

Tensions between the United States and its unlikely ally in the Soviet Union persisted throughout World War II. Western Allied leaders did not forget the initial nonaggression pact made between Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin and Adolf Hitler in 1939. However, Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union and Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor necessitated an alliance between the United States and the USSR. As World War II transformed both the United States and the USSR, turning the nations into formidable world powers, competition between the two increased. Following the defeat of the Axis powers, an ideological and political rivalry between the United States and the USSR gave way to the start of the **Cold War**. The subsequent race for superior military power sparked an era of espionage, wars over the spread of **communism**, and a build-up of nuclear arms that threatened global annihilation.

While President Franklin Delano Roosevelt hoped to see a lasting peace emerge in the postwar world order, relations with the Soviet Union complicated that vision. Ever since the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, in which the Russian monarchy fell to Soviet forces, the spread of **communism** beyond Russia remained a persistent fear throughout the twentieth century. This fear was not unfounded, as Soviet leaders actively sought to infiltrate or target nations to advance the global influence of the USSR. Soviet efforts to claim territory in Europe following Germany's defeat fed into the belief that the USSR intended to expand **communism** across Europe.

By 1947, the United States adopted a policy of **containment** to restrict Soviet global power. This became a defining element of foreign policy in President Harry S. Truman's administration. Outlined in a speech delivered to Congress, what became the Truman Doctrine was an open promise of US support to any country threatened by the Soviet Union. This promise lasted throughout Truman's time in office and continued in the administrations that followed. The policy of **containment** later informed the "domino theory," which stated that one country falling to **communism** meant the surrounding countries were likely to fall as well. This policy ultimately pushed the United States to enter into wars in Korea, Vietnam, and other **Cold War** conflicts.

Mutual efforts to undermine their foe pushed the United States and the Soviet governments to plant spies within both the USSR and the United States to subvert policy, spy on intelligence, and seek out ways to hinder any effort at growing global power. While popular images of **Cold War**-era spies feature high-stakes missions, assassinations, and hidden recording devices that call to mind the world of characters like James Bond, these images were pulled from real-life acts of espionage. Many such gadgets, including poisoned pellets hidden in umbrellas or guns disguised as tubes of lipstick, emerged in the 1950s and 1960s. However, from the outset of the **Cold War**, acts of espionage between the United States and the USSR already existed.

Soviet espionage initially centered on stealing information related to the development of nuclear weapons. The Trinity test, in which the United States detonated a nuclear weapon for the first time, along with the use of two atomic bombs subsequently dropped on Japan, sent a clear message to the world that the United States held the most powerful bombs on earth. This gave the United States an undeniable advantage over other nations, and the USSR moved quickly to develop their own nuclear technology. Initially unsuccessful, the Soviets embedded spies in the United States to steal military secrets, including vital information that helped the USSR build and test their own nuclear bomb in 1949, only four years after the Trinity test. One of the most critical Soviet spies was Klaus Fuchs, a leading physicist who worked on the Manhattan Project and was a member of the Communist Party. After the Soviets tested their first nuclear bomb, the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) identified Fuchs as the Soviet source. Questioned in December 1949, Fuchs confessed to the deed. Another spy who worked on the Manhattan Project, Theodore Hall, stated he volunteered to pass information to the Soviets in order to equalize the global playing field. Unlike Fuchs and other Soviet spies captured

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Operation Paperclip team at Fort Bliss.
(Image: NASA, NIX MSFC-8915531.)

by the FBI, Hall was able to evade US authorities and never went on trial.

The **arms race** that came to define the **Cold War** also spurred other military and technological races between the two superpowers. In order to gain an edge over the Soviets, American military and intelligence agencies recruited scientists from Germany in a program initially called Operation Overcast, but later called **Operation Paperclip**. Established by the US Joint Chiefs of Staff in July 1945 and approved by President Truman in September 1946, over a thousand German scientists who were former members of the Nazi Party traveled to the United States to engage in research to benefit the United States in the **Cold War**. In particular, Wernher von Braun, who had helped develop the German V-2 rocket, worked with the US military to develop ballistic missiles. He also became a major scientist behind the Space Race that helped send Americans to the moon. This recruitment was not unique to the United States, however, as the USSR similarly sought out German scientists from the remnants of the defeated Nazi Party.

By 1946, an **"iron curtain"** fell across Europe, behind which all territory fell under Soviet control. Conflict between the USSR and other Western powers appeared inevitable. The following year, President Truman delivered a speech before Congress in which he stated that the United States would provide military and diplomatic assistance to any democratic nation under threat from internal communist parties or the expansion of Soviet authoritarianism. The Truman Doctrine outlined in this speech later led to the formation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1949, a military alliance

between the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and other Western European nations. Strengthened through the implementation of the Marshall Plan across Western Europe, member nations of NATO agreed to come to the defense of any member state that suffered an attack from any other power.

Although another global war appeared to be inevitable, the build-up of nuclear weapons in both the United States and Soviet Union helped to keep the **Cold War** from turning "hot." The knowledge that each superpower held a stockpile of nuclear weapons created a military doctrine of **mutually assured destruction (MAD)** in which an attack from one would cause the complete annihilation of one or both, if not more, countries. The **Cold War** featured moments of increased tension, but stopped short of all-out warfare between the superpowers. Conflicts connected to the **Cold War**, such as wars in Korea and Vietnam, proved devastating to military forces on both sides. These conflicts also disrupted the balance of power in several regions across the globe, the ramifications of which continues to influence military and national security policies to this day. The global standoff for dominance between the United States and the Soviet Union created in the aftermath of World War II affected all aspects of life in the postwar world. The domination of military strength, technological advances, and the very structure of present day global politics exist as by-products of these **Cold War** conflicts.