

Why did the Cold War

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Andrew Mitchell analyses the reasons why the 40-year stand-off between the USA and USSR came to an end in the late 1980s

Exam links

AQA A2 Triumph and collapse: Russia and the USSR, 1941–91

AQA A2 Aspects of international relations, 1945–2004

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Argument

An unequal struggle

Although both the USA and USSR were termed 'superpowers', the USA had a stronger, more effective economy, was ahead technologically and had fewer dissatisfied citizens. The Soviet 'command economy' was less responsive to new ideas, its people were restive and the arms race placed unsustainable strains on the economy.

US President Ronald Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in December 1987

When historians attempt to explain why the Cold War ended in the late 1980s, they frequently consider four important issues:

- economic pressure on the superpowers
- the loss of Soviet legitimacy
- the role of key individuals (notably Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev and US president Ronald Reagan)
- the impact of 'people power' in Eastern Europe

Economic pressure

The Cold War imposed huge economic pressures on the superpowers, particularly the USSR (Table 1). Indeed, by the 1980s the Soviet Union faced mounting economic problems due to the inefficiency of centralised state planning, the financial burden of maintaining the Soviet bloc, and the spiralling cost of the nuclear arms race. Consequently, many historians (including David S. Painter, Jeremy Isaacs and Taylor Downing) have argued that these serious

Table 1 Comparison of the Soviet and US economies, 1989

	USSR	USA
GDP (\$ million)	2,659,500	5,233,300
Population	291 million	250 million
GDP per head (\$)	9,211	21,082
Labour force	152 million	126 million

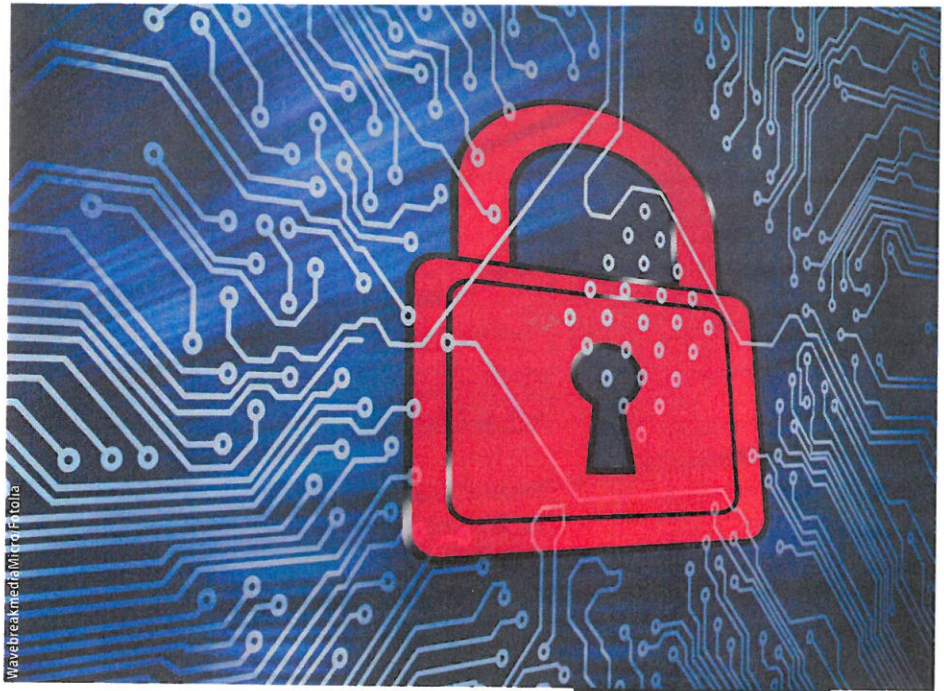


end?

An economy in decline

Why was the USSR in a weaker economic position than the USA by the 1980s?

- The Soviet economy was 50% smaller and less productive.
- Technologically, most Soviet economic sectors lagged behind those of the USA.
- The Soviets manufactured poor-quality products.
- The Soviet economy suffered shortages of essential materials.



Wavebreakmedia/Mirco Follma

economic difficulties prompted Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's **New Thinking** and compelled the USSR to opt out of an unsustainable Cold War.

Soviet economic stagnation

Throughout the Cold War, Soviet propaganda predicted that the USSR would overtake the developed capitalist economies of the West. As late as the 1980s, *Novosti*, the Soviet press agency, targeted the West with publicity material that projected an image of the USSR as an increasingly dominant, and economically developed superpower. In reality, the Soviet economy had been stagnating since the early 1970s, due to:

- the massive costs of the arms race
- unrealistic Five Year Plan production targets
- an over-concentration on heavy industry
- poor infrastructure
- a corrupt Soviet elite

Between 1967 and 1980, the annual growth rate for Soviet industrial output declined from 5.25% to 2%. The average annual increase in Soviet national income also contracted, falling from 3.4% (1961–75) to 1.1% (1976–90). Soviet economic problems were compounded in the 1980s by a downturn in world energy prices, which hit the USSR's oil and gas export industries.

Technology gap

Technologically, the USA was far more advanced than the Soviet Union, and it took steps to maintain its superiority in this field. A coordinated Western technology embargo, imposed on the Soviet bloc from 1950, was reinforced in 1974 when the USA banned the sale of advanced computers to the USSR and its allies.

In addition, the USSR's political system encouraged technological backwardness in the Eastern bloc. The Soviet state restricted the use of personal computers (PCs) and photocopiers in order to maintain its grip

on power and exert control over the population. By the early 1980s, there were some 30 million PCs in the USA. In contrast, the USSR possessed just 50,000 and, technologically, Russia's PCs lagged far behind the USA's. The US government's mainframe computers were more powerful than the corresponding Soviet systems. Consequently, technological inferiority in computing (and in other high-tech areas such as microelectronics and telecommunications) placed the USSR at a significant military disadvantage from the late 1970s onwards.

Burden of empire

The USSR was economically drained by its efforts to maintain the Soviet empire. With its huge reserves of natural resources in Siberia (such as oil, gas and metal ores), the Soviet Union, in theory, could have wielded enormous economic power. In reality, favourable trading policies with the East European satellite states, and other socialist allies, meant that the USSR did not benefit greatly from this potential wealth. These states received Soviet energy supplies and raw materials at significantly reduced prices and, in return, they supplied the USSR with poor quality industrial and consumer goods.

Cuba and Vietnam, for instance, received a total of \$4 billion and \$6 billion respectively in Soviet aid and oil subsidies between 1981 and 1986. The members of the Warsaw Pact were also given an annual Soviet oil subsidy of \$3 billion. These arrangements fostered relative economic backwardness throughout the Soviet bloc and helped to maintain low living standards in the USSR.

Arms race

The arms race imposed enormous financial strains on both superpowers, but the USSR was in a weaker economic position to sustain high levels of military spending. Soviet defence expenditure increased from

In 1974 the USA banned the sale of advanced computers to the USSR and its allies

New Thinking

Gorbachev's radical policy to strengthen the Soviet economy through restructuring (perestroika), restore communist legitimacy through greater openness (glasnost), and reduce military spending through arms reduction.

oil and gas Although Siberian oil production increased ten-fold (1970–84) and natural gas output rose from 9.5 million to 156 million cubic metres per annum, crude oil and natural gas prices dropped 90% and 50% respectively (1981–88).

Questions

- Why was the Soviet Union reluctant to introduce economic reforms before Gorbachev came to power?
- Why were citizens of the Soviet Union and Eastern bloc countries dissatisfied with their living conditions and political constraints?
- How important was the role of the arms race in bringing the Cold War to an end?

Leonid Brezhnev (1906–82) Brezhnev's relaxed attitude to corruption was conveyed by his remark 'nobody lives just on his wages'.

4% to 7% annually for most of the Cold War and, by the mid-1980s, about 25% of the USSR's gross domestic product (GDP) was channelled into its military budget. Mikhail Gorbachev, who became Soviet leader in 1985, concluded that only significant cuts in defence spending could finance vital reforms to improve economic and social conditions in the USSR. US military spending (as a proportion of GDP) averaged 10% in the 1950s, 9% in the 1960s, 5% in the 1970s (because of détente), and 7% in the 1980s. Having a bigger and more productive economy, the USA was able to allocate a smaller proportion of its resources to defence. Even so, during the Cold War, average annual US military spending amounted to \$298.5 billion (at 1996 dollar values).

Soviet loss of legitimacy

The 'loss of legitimacy' interpretation argues that the moral bankruptcy and illegitimacy of the Eastern bloc had seriously weakened Soviet communism by the end of the Brezhnev era (1982). This 'moral crisis' had several features including:

- corrupt communist elites
- populations disillusioned with Marxist-Leninist rule
- widespread official abuse of human rights
- rule by repression

According to this view, the Soviet system's lack of legitimacy triggered an internal collapse in the late 1980s which had two major consequences:

- The USSR and its satellite states were forced to abandon the Cold War.
- Rapid political change spread across Eastern Europe.

Historians who have emphasised this argument include John Lewis Gaddis and Michael Burleigh.

Privilege and corruption

Under **Leonid Brezhnev's** leadership (1964–82), a highly privileged and frequently corrupt communist elite emerged in the USSR. Soviet society was divided between those members of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) who enjoyed preferential status, and the rest of the population, who did not.

Within the CPSU, the bureaucrats who administered the state, known as the *nomenklatura*, experienced the trappings of office at national, regional and local level. Depending on their position within the Soviet bureaucracy, these functionaries had exclusive access to a range of privileges, including private country houses, official cars, private shops which supplied high-quality Western goods, luxury holiday resorts and private medical centres. Furthermore, many members of the *nomenklatura* took bribes, diverted government funds for personal gain, and gave state jobs to friends and family members. Privileged and often corrupt communist elites also ran the satellite regimes of the Soviet bloc.

A disaffected population

Ordinary Soviet citizens had to endure long working hours, poor quality housing, inadequately stocked shops, food shortages, and a lack of consumer goods and amenities. These deficiencies resulted in low worker productivity, a widespread black market,



Russian tanks in Budapest during the 1956 Hungarian uprising

and mounting social problems such as alcoholism (alcohol consumption quadrupled between 1964–82), divorce, suicide and mental illness.

Outwardly, most people conformed without enthusiasm, if only to avoid the attention of the security police. In private, many felt alienated from the Communist regime and the authorities were aware of this. Secret research conducted by the government in the 1960s revealed that few Soviet citizens embraced Marxism-Leninism as their world view.

Violation of human rights

From the mid- to late-1970s, the issue of human rights put the USSR on the defensive and gave the West the moral high ground. The Soviet Union signed the Helsinki Accords in 1975 because they confirmed the postwar division of Europe, but the agreement also committed the signatories to guarantee freedom of speech, protest and movement. The Soviet leadership calculated that they could contain the 'human rights' issue within the Eastern bloc — as Brezhnev stated, 'we shall decide what we implement and what we ignore'.

The Helsinki Accords encouraged Soviet and East European **dissidents** to speak out against human rights abuses behind the iron curtain. These criticisms connected with the experiences of ordinary people living in the Eastern bloc. Furthermore, the Helsinki watch committees and **Charter 77** were established to monitor Soviet compliance. Many Soviet bloc dissidents were jailed, harassed or exiled, and some were sent to labour camps. Others were diagnosed insane, drugged and held in mental institutions. Many **Soviet Jews** (known as *refuseniks*) were denied the right to emigrate to Israel or the USA.

Communist leaders generally ignored the Helsinki human rights provisions, fearing that greater freedom would undermine Marxist-Leninist ideology and the Soviet bloc. Thus, the Helsinki human rights agreement provided the West with a powerful ideological and moral weapon to use against the communist regimes.

Military might

Ultimately, the Soviet bloc was created and maintained by force. It was militarily imposed by the USSR on the peoples of Eastern Europe without their consent. From the outset, this clearly undermined its legitimacy in the West and for many living under communist control. Red Army interventions in 1953, 1956 and 1968 to keep satellite states such as East Germany, Hungary and Czechoslovakia in line merely reinforced the point. In 1982, President Reagan argued that the East European communist regimes had had 30 years to establish their legitimacy and hold free elections, but they had failed to do so because governments 'planted by bayonets do not take root'. The speed

Weblinks



An excellent range of material covering the end of the Cold War can be found at: www.casahistoria.net/cold_war.htm

Details of the Helsinki Accords can be found at: www.tinyurl.com/pqaxwc7

Further reading



Key aspects of the 'economic burden' interpretation are considered in the following books:

Isaacs, J., and Downing, T. (2008) *Cold War*, Abacus.

Painter, D. S. (1999) *The Cold War: An International History*, Routledge.

The following studies make interesting points about Soviet loss of legitimacy:

Burleigh, M. (2007) *Sacred Causes: Religion and Politics from the European Dictators to Al Qaeda*, Harper Collins.

Gaddis, J. L. (2005) *The Cold War*, Penguin.

with which the satellite regimes collapsed in the late 1980s, in the absence of Red Army protection, would seem to bear this out.

Assessment

On the positive side, the 'economic burden' and 'loss of legitimacy' interpretations highlight key structural factors that have an important bearing on the superpowers' ability to sustain their Cold War policies. These perspectives are particularly valuable for understanding Soviet behaviour since economic and moral factors influenced Gorbachev's radically new approach to Cold War relations. Furthermore, they widen the debate about the end of the Cold War beyond the influence of particular leaders by focusing on long-term trends.

On the other hand, it should be noted that until Gorbachev came to power, Soviet leaders continued with conventional Cold War policies even though the USSR's economic problems and loss of legitimacy were becoming more acute. Indeed, Reagan's 'overspend' strategy and 'evil empire' rhetoric appeared to have little effect on Soviet behaviour between 1981 and 1985. These two interpretations may also underestimate the relative importance of Gorbachev and Reagan as individuals in bringing about superpower accommodation after 1985.

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dissidents Prominent among those who opposed the Soviet regime were Russian physicist Andrei Sakharov and writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Czech playwright Vaclav Havel, and Anatoly Sharansky, founder of the Jewish movement.

Charter 77 A group of 242 Czech intellectuals and ex-government officials issued a charter calling on the authorities to observe the Helsinki Accords and the UN Declaration on Human Rights.

Soviet Jews Due to their campaigns for freedom to leave the USSR, and the resulting worldwide publicity, the number of Jews allowed to emigrate increased from 14,000 in 1975 to more than 51,000 in 1979.

'overspend' strategy President Reagan significantly increased US defence spending in the early 1980s to force the USSR to 'overspend' and so weaken itself economically in an attempt to keep up.