

History: The Cold War
Lesson 17 of 30

Worksheet:

Why did the Cold War intensify between 1950-1958?



What happened in the Cold War in the 1950s?

By the 1950s, the **Cold War had begun to transcend Europe** and, indeed, even the world. The decade 1950-1958 has been considered by some historians to be **one of the most intense of the Cold War**. From the advent of the **Korean War** at its start, to the heightening of the **arms and space race** by the end, the 1950s saw both superpowers becoming **more competitive** and dedicating more of their time and finances to **increasing their military capacity and technological prestige**.



What happened in the Cold War in the 1950s?

At times, the ruthless heights to which this race rose scared the superpowers. Consequently, the 1950s are also notable for the moments of **'thawing' tensions** that seemed to appear. For instance, the rise to power of **Khrushchev** in the USSR by 1955 and the election of **Eisenhower** in the USA in 1953 brought fresh hope that these leaders, who had openly talked of **peace and coexistence**, would work to **improve the relationship between the superpowers** and calm the Cold War. However, these good intentions amounted to little more than **short-lived improvements**, while promises of compromise and cooperation seemed to be more apparent than real. Nothing illustrated this more than the USSR's brutal **suppression of the Hungarian Uprising in 1956** or the **USA and USSR's use of space technology to create the highly destructive ICBMs** in 1957.



What happened in the Cold War in the 1950s?

This meant that, by 1958, **tensions** between the USSR and the USA and its allies had **reached terrifying heights**. Although deterred from using them, due to their extreme destructive power, both the USA and USSR had a **large amount of nuclear weapons** at their disposal. Both superpowers also held **incredible influence over countries in Europe** that relied on them for economic assistance and trade. Within their own countries, the USA and USSR had also both launched **clever propaganda campaigns** to **instil fear and hatred of the other**. Consequently, it was clear that by 1958 the **tensions of the Cold War had intensified** to a level that had **never been reached before**.



Why did the Cold War intensify between 1950-1958?

Cause 1: Events in Asia

In October 1949, **China became Communist** under the leadership of **Mao Zedong**. This was a major concern to the West, and particularly to the USA, because it now looked as though **Communism may begin to spread throughout Asia**. In February 1950, the USSR and Communist China agreed they would support other and signed the **Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance**. The signing of the **Treaty of Friendship** with China meant that the **balance of power had shifted in favour of the USSR** and the **USA began to fear that Communist powers would soon dominate Asia**. To increase tensions further, the **United Nations (UN)** refused to recognise the new Communist government of China. As a result, the **USSR boycotted the UN in protest** and refused to take part in any **UN** decisions. It was clear that **events in Asia had divided the USSR and the West even further**.



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Tensions also began to increase because of **events in Korea**. At the end of the Second World War, **Korea was divided at the 38th Parallel**; North Korea was controlled by a Communist dictator while South Korea was anti-Communist. **In June 1950, North Korea invaded South Korea**. North Korea's Communist allies, the USSR and China, supported this move and the **USA approached the UN to gain support for troops to be sent to support South Korea**. As the USSR was refusing to take part in any meetings of the **UN** Security Council, there was no opposition within the **UN** to the USA's proposal: **UN troops arrived in Korea in September 1950**.

The Korean War lasted for three years and ended in **stalemate**. Although the war was fought on Korean soil, it came to **represent a direct battle between the ideologies of the USSR and China, and the West**. Therefore, events in Asia led to the Cold War **intensifying** because they caused **divisions to become increasingly entrenched** and by 1953, it was very clear to both sides **the extremes to which the other would go** to either **protect or prevent the spread of Communism**.



Why did the Cold War **intensify** between 1950-1958?

Cause 2: The arms race and space race

During the 1950s, the **arms race escalated**. In 1952, the **USA developed its first hydrogen bomb**. This was an extremely powerful weapon with the potential to cause incredible destruction; it was **1000 times more powerful than the atomic bomb**.

However, the USSR was very quick to respond to the USA's testing of the H-bomb. Just one year later, **in 1953, the USSR also had a hydrogen bomb**, having tested it only a few months after the first American test. It was very clear to both superpowers that each would try to **rapidly match what the other had achieved**, increasing the intensity of the rivalry between them.



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By **1957**, both superpowers were also heavily invested in the **space race**. In **October 1957**, much to the dismay of the Americans, the **Soviets successfully launched a man-made satellite**, which they named ***Sputnik***, into space. The USSR also **launched a second, larger satellite** into space just one month after the first, in **November 1957**. ***Sputnik II*** carried **Laika** the space dog into space, leading the USSR to become the first country to send a living animal into space. In response to these Soviet achievements, the Americans started to **rapidly increase the amount of money that they were putting into space research**. This resulted in successes such as the **satellite *Explorer I*'s first successful orbit of the earth in 1958** and the founding of **NASA** by **Eisenhower** in the same year.



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However, these developments in space technology had also taken a darker turn. The superpowers both recognised the **military potential of space technology**. If a rocket could be fired into space, and launch a satellite, it could also be used to launch long-distance missiles. This led to both the **USA and USSR developing Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs)**, just months apart in **1957**. By 1961, the **USA had developed 63 ICBMs and the USSR had developed over 50**. Each superpower was now capable of **destroying the world a number of times over**.

At the same time, by **1958 the space race was far from over** and the early 1960s would bring an even more intense battle to see which country would be first to send a human into space and, later, the moon. Consequently, the arms and space race caused the Cold War to **intensify** because it led to the USA and USSR appearing **more threatening to each other** as they had **more destructive weapons**. It also **increased the competition between the superpowers** and caused US and Soviet leaders to prioritise technological supremacy over efforts to improve relations.



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Cause 3: The Hungarian Uprising

In **1956, Hungarians challenged communist rule** of their country. Hungarians wanted an end to their low living standards and the social and religious repression that they experienced under the rule of **Mátyás Rákosi**. On **23rd October 1956, a student demonstration in Budapest**, in which a statue of Stalin was toppled, **sparked the beginning of an uprising** in Hungary. Over the next two weeks, the popular leader, **Imre Nagy** was put in power and **started to introduce reforms**, Soviet troops withdrew from Hungary and **Nagy set out plans to withdraw Hungary from the Warsaw Pact**. Although beginning with such promise, the uprising went too far for **Khrushchev**, the leader of the USSR, to tolerate. On **4th November 1956, he responded brutally** by sending **200,000 Soviet troops and 6,000 tanks** to invade Hungary. As many as 20,000 Hungarians were killed. **János Kádár** became the new Soviet-supported leader of Hungary and began a repressive communist re-education programme. **Imre Nagy** was **arrested, imprisoned and executed** by hanging in 1958.



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The Hungarian Uprising, and particularly the USSR's brutal crushing of the rebellion, caused **tensions and distrust between the superpowers to increase**. For example, the USA and its allies **harshly condemned the actions of the USSR** and saw **Khrushchev** as a leader with whom they could not compromise and who was **willing to use brutal force to limit the freedoms** of people living in his sphere of influence. On the other hand, the Hungarian Uprising had revealed to **Khrushchev** how **unwilling the West was to get involved in Eastern European affairs**. **President Eisenhower's** failure to provide any form of direct support for the Hungarians had made it clear that he was **unwilling to risk peace** for the sake of an Eastern European nation. This appeared to **Khrushchev** as a **'green light' to do whatever he wished in Eastern Europe**, safe in the knowledge that the USA, its allies and even the **UN** would do little more than verbally **condemn** his actions. Therefore, the Hungarian Uprising caused the Cold War to **intensify** because it **ended the West's hopes that the USSR would loosen its systems of repressive control** over Eastern Europe and **deepened the sense of 'difference' and distrust** felt by each superpower towards the other.



Summary: Why did the Cold War **intensify** between 1950-1958?

Overall, the Cold War **intensified between 1950 and 1958** because, throughout the decade, the **USA and USSR continuously clashed** in their responses to different events. These clashes resulted in **tensions increasing**, which meant that the **relationship between the superpowers deteriorated rapidly**.



Concluding our enquiry

1. **Why** did the Cold War **intensify** between 1950-1958?

Overall, the Cold War intensified between 1950 and 1958 because... This resulted in...which meant that...

2. **When** was the Cold War at its **most intense** between 1950-1958?

From 1950-58, the Cold War was most intense in/when...This is because...



Glossary

Balance of power – the distribution of military and economic power among governments

Ballistic missile – a weapon that is initially fired by something and that has a long, arcing flight path, but then falls by gravity to its target

Condemn – to call wrong, evil or inadequate or to disapprove of

Entrenched – to establish firmly and unchangeably

Escalate – to increase in intensity, amount or size



Glossary

Intensify - to make stronger

Satellite – a spacecraft that is sent into orbit around a planet to gather or send back information

Stalemate – deadlock; an unresolved situation where no-one seems able to win

United Nations (UN) – an organisation of many nations started in 1945 to promote world peace and understanding

