

Grade 12 History: The Cold War Study Guide

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Free Study Resources for South African Matric Learners

1. Origins of the Cold War (1945-1949)

The Cold War was an ideological, political and economic conflict between the USA (capitalism, democracy) and the USSR (communism, one-party state). It never became a direct military conflict ("hot war") between the two superpowers.

Key Causes

- Ideological differences: capitalism vs communism
- Rivalry for global power after WWII left two superpowers
- Soviet expansion into Eastern Europe (creating "satellite states")
- Western fear of spread of communism (Domino Theory)
- Nuclear arms race: USA had atomic bomb (1945); USSR by 1949

Key Events 1945-1949

- Yalta & Potsdam Conferences (1945): disagreements over post-war Europe
- Iron Curtain speech by Churchill (1946): division of Europe
- Truman Doctrine (1947): USA support for countries resisting communism
- Marshall Plan (1947): US economic aid to rebuild Western Europe
- Berlin Blockade (1948-49): USSR blockades West Berlin; Western airlift
- NATO formed (1949); USSR forms Cominform, then Warsaw Pact (1955)

2. The Arms Race & Nuclear Deterrence

- MAD: Mutually Assured Destruction - both sides had enough weapons to destroy each other
- Space race: Sputnik (1957, USSR); Moon landing (1969, USA)
- Proxy wars: both superpowers fought through client states (Korea, Vietnam, Angola)

3. Key Crises

Korean War (1950-1953)

Communist North Korea (backed by USSR/China) invaded South Korea (backed by USA/UN). Ended in armistice; Korea remains divided at 38th parallel.

Cuban Missile Crisis (1962)

USSR placed nuclear missiles in Cuba; USA demanded removal; 13-day standoff; resolved diplomatically. Closest Cold War came to "hot war". Led to "hotline" between Washington and Moscow.

Vietnam War (1955-1975)

USA intervened to prevent spread of communism to South Vietnam. Despite military power, USA withdrew (1973). North Vietnam reunified Vietnam as communist state (1975).

4. End of the Cold War

- Gorbachev's reforms: Glasnost (openness) and Perestroika (restructuring)
- Fall of Berlin Wall (1989): symbol of end of Cold War
- Dissolution of Soviet Union (1991): 15 independent states
- USA emerged as sole superpower ("unipolar world")

TIP In exam essays: always provide historical context, use evidence, analyse causes and effects, and reach a substantiated conclusion. Avoid 'telling the story' - analyse events.