

Détente: The endgame

Who ended the Cold War?

The article discusses two schools of thought over the ending of the Cold War, the first being that the hardline stance of Ronald Reagan put pressure on the ailing Soviet economy and forced them to call off the arms race, while the second claims that the new Soviet Leader's bold vision sent the USSR to its end.

Washington and Moscow in 1985

- Gorbachev came to power in March 1985; Reagan was already in his second term as President
- 1970s détente had already lost effect, US administration building up arms again in an attempt to deter Soviet expansion and push against the Soviet economy into meltdown
- Reagan developed the Star Wars program which would nullify USSR nuclear weapons and allow for US to deploy theirs without fear of retaliation, as well as stepping up anti-Communist rhetoric (the USSR is inherently evil)
- Meanwhile Soviets were governed by thinking that military might was crucial to prevent a repeat of 1941 Nazi invasion, thus being committed to keeping up with the arms race no matter what the cost was
- 1985 saw Gorbachev become general secretary of the Communist Party of the USSR, was someone who had strong views on nuclear weapons and had his views shaped by the internal needs of the USSR, wanting to make it more technologically advanced and economically efficient, as well as being an advocate of "new political thinking" (interests of human race > interests of socialism as nations were interdependent)
- Objective of strategic parity with US had harmed domestic aims
- Ideological shifts led to Gorbachev attempting to create a new atmosphere of dialogue and co-operation

The four summits, 1985-1988

- Geneva, November 1985; agreement that nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought. Reversed the arms race and resurrected détente
- April 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster; massive anti-nuclear sentiment in the USSR. Reducing nuclear danger was of ultimate importance
- Reykjavik, October 1986; Gorbachev offered 50% strategic arms cut, Reagan went one better and suggested complete abolition of nuclear weapons by the 1990s
- Washington, December 1987; historic INF treaty that pledged to destroy both intermediate and short-ranged land-based missiles and their launchers, but differences remained over nuclear testing, Star Wars, Afghanistan and human rights

- Soviet forces left Afghanistan in February 1988 and Reagan exchanged final INF documents in June 1988

The endgame: December 1988-October 1990

- December 1988 UN visit by Gorbachev saw him announce unilateral troop reductions by 0.5 million in Europe within two years
- Gorbachev set out his vision of a world dominated by universal human values + argued that all countries had the right to choose their own socio-political system
- Popular revolutions in Eastern Europe in 1989 occurred without Soviet intervention, giving the US confidence that Gorbachev would not use force
- November 1989; Fall of the Berlin wall spelt end of the Iron Curtain in Europe
- Malta, December 1989; "buried the Cold War at the bottom of the Mediterranean", confirmed by German reunification in 1990

Understanding the End of the Cold War

- The Cold War was a global ideological conflict based in accumulating sense of mistrust and suspicion between the USA and the USSR
- Role of the two leaders was crucial in ending the Cold War: in spite of their ideological differences, they were able to establish a rapport that overcame 40 years of mistrust and suspicion and persuaded their own countrymen that the other side could be trusted. Gorbachev's rethinking of Soviet ideology was crucial, leading them to desire co-operation with the US + Reagan supported the USSR and redefined their image in the eyes of the US public
- The article surmises that the end of the Cold War was brought about by the presence of Gorbachev primarily, but required someone like Reagan on the other side to contribute as well