



HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Canada and the Cold War, 1946–1991

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Historical Overview

The Cold War, lasting from around 1946 to 1991, describes a period of tension between the United States and the Soviet Union and their respective allies. The two superpowers never fought each other directly, but they and their allies clashed with and in countries supported and armed by their Cold War rival. As a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), an alliance formed in 1949 to defend western Europe against a possible Soviet invasion, Canada made substantial military contributions to collective security, including by garrisoning troops and airpower in Europe from the 1950s to the early 1990s. Several hundred thousand people served in Canada's armed forces during this time at home and overseas on duties related to the Cold War.

About the Cold War

The Second World War left a world tattered by war. Most of Europe was in ruins, and here and in other former battlefields, the United States and the Soviet Union, once wartime allies, could not agree about what shape a reformed world should take. Disagreements quickly emerged over places that had been occupied by the allies during the war, such as Germany in Europe, and Korea in East Asia. The Soviets, having been invaded twice in the first half of the 20th century, wanted a buffer zone made up of friendly satellite states across eastern Europe. As The Soviets asserted their control, sometimes violently, over these areas, former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill warned that an "Iron Curtain" had divided Europe. Observers coined the global economic, ideological, diplomatic, and military standoff as "the Cold War" as early as 1945 but the term was popularized in 1947.

To support the NATO, Canada committed substantial resources to rearm its military, which had shrunk considerably at the end of the Second World War. Beginning in 1951, a Canadian Army brigade was stationed in West Germany, which trained alongside allies for potential war with the Soviets. Canada also

stationed an air division in France and Germany (later consolidated in Germany), with fighter squadrons ready to scramble on short notice to protect NATO airspace.

Canada's home front was not untouched by the Cold War. The shortest route for nuclear bombers to reach the United States from the Soviet Union was over Canadian airspace. Over the course of the 1950s, Canada and the United States cooperated to create a network of radar stations across the Canadian north. The two countries also cooperated to create the binational North American Aerospace Defence (NORAD) agreement to monitor North American airspace and respond to intrusions by Soviet aircraft. In periods of extreme tension, Canadians lived with the knowledge that a nuclear war could break out between the superpowers and snuff out life as we know it.

The End of the Cold War

Happily, such an event never came to pass. By 1989, major cracks began to show in the Soviet bloc's stability. The fall of the Berlin Wall, the barrier installed by East Germany 28 years earlier to prevent its citizens from fleeing to the West, arrived after the rise of democracy movements in Eastern Europe that began to overturn their Soviet-allied dictatorships. Major instability within the Soviet Union led to its eventual dissolution into its constituent republics by 1991.

The Cold War ended without a large-scale direct confrontation between the superpowers. However, it also spawned many smaller "hot wars" where the superpowers' interests coincided with regional struggles, particularly in Africa and East Asia. Some of these conflicts, such as the Korean War and the Vietnam War, resulted in millions of casualties, and had a lasting impact on global stability. In others, greater conflict was avoided through the intervention of United Nations peacekeeping missions.

Though the Cold War ended peacefully, it was not without cost to Canadians. Hundreds of Canadian military personnel died over the course the Cold War in flight, at sea, and in training accidents related to Cold War readiness.