

# BBC Bitesize GCSE History – Cold War and Vietnam

## Episode 3 – The Cold War in Europe

**Announcer:** BBC Sounds, music, radio, podcasts.

**Datshiane:** I'm Datshiane Navanayagam.

**Katie:** And I'm Katie Charlwood. And this is Bitesize GCSE History.

**Datshiane:** This is the third episode in a seven-part series on the Cold War and Vietnam War. In this episode, we'll be looking at the late 1940s and 1950s in Europe, as the growing distrust between the USA and USSR saw tensions continue... and the beginnings of an arms race.

**Katie:** We'll focus on the creation of NATO and the Warsaw Pact, the Berlin Blockade and Airlift and the uprisings in Hungary and later in Czechoslovakia.

**Datshiane:** So, Katie, you've got twenty seconds to tell me why Berlin was a flashpoint in the Cold War tensions.

**Katie:** Start the clock. After the War, the Allied powers divided Germany between themselves. Berlin sat in the Soviet Zone but as it was the capital city it was also divided. But, here's a big problem. The Allies could only access their zones by road, rail and three specific air corridors.

**Datshiane:** And stop the clock. Well done. Tensions between the Western Allies and the Soviet Union increased as they had conflicting visions for Germany's future. The West wanted a democratic and economically stable Germany; whilst the USSR wanted Germany weak and under Soviet influence to prevent future threats. In January 1948, hoping to boost economic recovery, the USA and Britain merged their zones in Germany into a single area called Bizonia; to which France merged their zone later. And they called it, Katie?

**Katie:** Trizonia?

**Datshiane:** Bingo! Well, this unification paved the way for the development of a distinct West Germany nation. And in 1948 they even introduced a new currency, the Deutsche Mark, in these zones to stabilise the economy and combat inflation.

**Katie:** But how do you think the Soviets would see this? Surely they would see it as a threat.

**Datshiane:** They absolutely did. They saw it as an attempt to create a strong Capitalist Germany. So, how do you think the Soviets responded?

**Katie:** Not very well, to say the least. The USSR blocked all land and water routes into West Berlin. Effectively cutting off food, fuel and other essential supplies to the two million residents in the western sectors, aiming to force the Allies out. Time to move on to the actual event and find out what happened next. West Berlin only had enough food for thirty-six days. But, with roads and rail access cut off, what could the Western Allies do? Move the blockades perhaps?

**Datshiane:** Well, they could but that would have been seen as an act of war.

**Katie:** Fly in supplies?

**Datshiane:** Spot on. They flew thousands of tonnes of supplies into West Berlin daily for nearly a year. Airlifting delivering essential items like food, coal and medicine.

**Katie:** And what about Stalin? What could he do in response?

**Datshiane:** Well, not much. Think about it. If he shot down the planes that would have been an act of war from the Soviet side. And anyway, he didn't think that the airlift could possibly work. In the Western Zones the Berlin citizens even helped troops build a new runway at the old airport, and they helped to unload the planes. There were still shortages though. But, at its height, there was a plane landing every minute.

**Katie:** The Berlin Blockade finally ended in May 1949 when the Soviets eventually backed down. It was costly for them as well, both economically and diplomatically. And it was obvious that it wasn't achieving its intended goal of gaining control over all of Berlin. So, what did it achieve?

**Datshiane:** Well, it deepened the divide between East and West Germany and it solidified the split between the USA and the USSR, setting the stage for future Cold War conflicts. However, there were no military or civilian casualties. The West had responded in a peaceful way to an aggressive act by Stalin.

**Katie:** The Berlin Airlift is an important event. Make sure you can give three causes as to why it happened and three consequences. Pause and rewind if you need a refresh.

**Katie:** Berlin would be a source of tension for years to come. In the aftermath of the crisis, in 1949, NATO was formed. It was, and still is, an alliance of Western Allied countries around the world for mutual defence. So, how did Stalin respond?

**Datshiane:** Well, in 1955 the USSR and its Eastern European communist allies created the Warsaw Pact as a collective defence against the West. It also solidified Soviet control over Eastern Europe.

**Katie:** The Cold War between the USA and the USSR was being fought in another way; and a way that was threatening the whole World. This is what's referred to as the nuclear arms race.

**Datshiane:** You could argue that the arms race began when the USA dropped atom bombs for the first time on the Japanese cities Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, which ultimately did end World War II.

**Katie:** And yes, this alarmed Stalin who knew the USSR needed to have their own nuclear weapons to keep them on an equal footing and for self defence. They successfully tested their own atom bomb in 1949. Now two nations had these destructive weapons, and throughout the 1950s, the USA and USSR continued to test more and more powerful bombs. Check out what these were on our timeline on the Bitesize website.

**Datshiane:** These weapons could have destroyed the world many times over. Yet, having nuclear weapons is also known as having a nuclear deterrent.

**Katie:** And what that means is a country would be deterred, or stopped, from using nuclear weapons because doing so would lead to the destruction of both sides.

**Datshiane:** That's mad! M-A-D. Mutually Assured Destruction. This fear of mutual destruction has kept both sides in a tense but ultimately non-violent standoff throughout the Cold War. There's just no point dropping a nuclear bomb if you're going to get one dropped on you. More on this in the next episode.

**Datshiane:** Stalin died in 1953 and was replaced by Nikita Khrushchev. The USA under Eisenhower hoped that with a new president in the Soviet Union the Cold War might thaw.

**Katie:** In 1956, Khrushchev delivered his so called 'secret speech' criticising the harsh rule of Stalin and promising reforms. This speech inspired hope in Eastern Europe that the USSR might allow more freedoms and lessen its control.

**Datshiane:** In fact, this speech encouraged Hungarians to call for change, including the withdrawal of Soviet troops, greater freedom of speech and reforms in leadership. And on October 23rd students held a large protest in Budapest demanding these changes.

**Katie:** As the protest grew, clashes broke out between demonstrators and the Soviet-backed secret police. When a statue of Stalin was torn down, violence escalated and Hungarians took to the streets fighting Soviet soldiers and calling for an end to Soviet control.

**Datshiane:** Let's go right back to our time-travelling Bitesize reporter Jordan who's in Budapest on November 4th 1956.

**Jordan:** I'm standing on the streets as the rumble of Soviet tanks grow louder by the minute. It was only yesterday that Prime Minister Nagy made the announcement that Hungary is withdrawing from the Warsaw Pact. But today one thousand tanks have rolled in crushing that hope under their treads. The Hungarian people are fighting back armed with whatever they can find. Barricades are going up and the smell of burning debris fills the air. And the Soviet response is brutal. Their tanks are rolling right over the cars and buildings. Just days ago Nagy had promised freedom and neutrality. "We will not abandon our sovereignty." he declared. But it seems the USSR isn't going to let Hungary go without a fight. It's a desperate situation with civilians caught in the crossfire. Thousands are fleeing but many are staying to fight to defend their country from what they see as an occupying force. This is Jordan, reporting from the heart of the Hungarian Revolution. Back to the studio.

**Datshiane:** Thanks, Jordan. The Hungarian uprising in 1956 was crushed by Soviet forces reaffirming the USSR's dominance in Eastern Europe. Nagy, the Hungarian Prime Minister, was put on trial and then executed. Khrushchev described the death as a lesson to all the leaders of Socialist countries.

**Katie:** Let's say an exam question asks you to write about the impact of the Hungarian Uprising on USSR and USA relations.

**Datshiane:** Well, because the USA didn't intervene, one consequence was that Khrushchev became more confident that the USA was unlikely to take military action in future protests. Another consequence was no other satellite state in Eastern Europe dared to challenge Soviet authority after the events in Hungary.

**Datshiane:** Back in Germany, by the late 1950s, more trouble was brewing.

**Katie:** Not Berlin again at the heart of Cold War tension?

**Datshiane:** I'm afraid so. And this continued. Thanks to money and aid from the Marshall Plan, West Germany had become more prosperous than East Germany. And it attracted skilled people like engineers, teachers and technicians. And the easiest way to move from East Germany to West Germany was through West Berlin.

**Katie:** In 1958, Khrushchev issued an ultimatum demanding that the Western Allies withdraw from Berlin and make it a 'free city' controlled by neither East nor West. This ultimatum was Khrushchev's attempt to force the Allies out, and close off the escape route through West Berlin.

**Datshiane:** The Western Allies refused Khrushchev's demand, seeing West Berlin as a symbol of freedom and a critical Cold War foothold. The USA made it clear that it would defend West Berlin's status.

**Katie:** And this ongoing crisis peaked in 1961 when the East German leader, Walter Ulbricht, backed by the Soviets, ordered a wall to be built to stop the flow of people from East to the West. The Berlin Wall solidified the division of Berlin and became a defining symbol of the Cold War.

**Datshiane:** It might be useful for us to write down the causes and consequences of the Berlin Wall.

**Katie:** So, the causes include: the migration of East Germans to the West searching for better opportunities; Khrushchev's free city ultimatum; longer term causes from the division of Germany after the war; and our old friend, those ideological differences between capitalism and communism. Alright, Datshiane, what about the consequences?

**Datshiane:** Well, on a personal level, the Wall physically divided East and West Berlin separating families, friends and communities. But the wall became a powerful symbol of Cold War division with West Berlin representing democratic freedom and East Berlin representing the communist oppression.

**Katie:** In 1963, the American President, John F Kennedy, visited Berlin where he was welcomed and gave a famous speech about freedom in which he said this:

**John F Kennedy:** All free men, wherever they may live, are citizens of Berlin. And therefore as a free man I take pride in the words, Ich bin ein Berliner.

\*[applause]\*

**Katie:** 'Ich bin ein Berliner' which means I am a Berliner, showing his solidarity with Berlin's citizens.

**Datshiane:** By the late 1960s, Cold War tensions had still not calmed down. And another East European country where people demanded change was Czechoslovakia. In 1968, there was an uprising referred to as the Prague Spring.

**Katie:** In Czechoslovakia Alexander Dubček was elected leader in 1968. He was committed to the Warsaw Pact but believed that communism shouldn't make life miserable. He wanted reforms to help improve people's quality of living and make it easier for Czechs to travel abroad. He also increased trade with the West. This was known as the Prague Spring.

**Datshiane:** These reforms did not go down well with the USSR. And the new leader, Leonid Brezhnev, order five hundred thousand Warsaw Pact troops to invade. For the next twenty years Czechoslovakia remained firmly under Soviet control.

**Katie:** There's more on the Prague Spring as well as the Hungarian Uprising and Berlin Wall at the Bitesize website. Head over there after the podcast. Summary time.

**Datshiane:** The Cold War period after the war in Europe saw tensions and uprisings including the Berlin Blockade and Airlift in 1949, the Hungarian Uprising in 1956 and the Prague Spring in 1968.

**Katie:** NATO, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, was formed in 1949 by the Western nations. In response, the Warsaw Pact was formed by the Communist bloc.

**Datshiane:** And, importantly during this period, a nuclear arms race between the USA and USSR developed and escalated. In the next episode we'll look more at that, as well as the Cuban Missile Crisis which brought the world to the brink of nuclear war.

**Katie:** On that spine-chilling note, thanks for listening.