

# BBC Bitesize GCSE History – Cold War and Vietnam

## Episode 7 – The end of the Cold War

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

**Katie:** I'm history podcaster Katie Charlwood.

**Datshiane:** And I'm history graduate and TV and radio presenter Datshiane Navanayagam.

**Katie:** And this is Bitesize GCSE History.

**Datshiane:** This is the final episode in a seven-part series on the Cold War and Vietnam War. In this episode, we'll see how tensions finally ease through détente and how significant events like the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the USSR brought an end to the Soviet Union. Ok, let's get started. Katie is going to take us back to the 1970s to look at the causes for the end of the Cold War.

**Katie:** Absolutely. By the 1970s, both superpowers, the USA and the USSR, faced economic strains and sought to reduce the risk of nuclear war. Particularly after the events like the Cuban Missile Crisis. The USA was also dealing with the costly Vietnam War while the USSR faced economic challenges at home.

**Datshiane:** So those economic strains fed into a period of improved relations between the United States and the Soviet Union during the 1970s, aimed at reducing Cold War tensions. And this was known as détente.

**Katie:** Which is French for relaxation. And indeed it was.

**Datshiane:** Two key features of this détente were agreements to control nuclear arms and improve trade and diplomacy.

**Katie:** A win-win for both superpowers, who can now spend less money on weapons and more money trying to address problems in their own countries. The Soviet Union particularly wanted to improve living standards and have a better economy.

**Datshiane:** But Katie, it was also a win-win for planet Earth as the nuclear arms race slowed down.

**Katie:** In 1975, planet Earth looked up to space as American astronauts and Soviet cosmonauts met and shook hands in a symbolic gesture of friendship.

**Datshiane:** And also in 1975, another key agreement was signed, the Helsinki Accords. This saw the thirty-three countries of NATO and the Warsaw Pact come together to accept the post-war borders and agree basic human rights.

**Katie:** Fantastic! Sounds like everyone is getting on fine and we can all relax at last.

**Datshiane:** Not so fast. Unfortunately, things took a turn for the worse towards the end of the 1970s and into the 1980s.

**Katie:** I knew it was too good to be true.

**Datshiane:** In 1979, the American president, who was now Jimmy Carter, had a more suspicious view of the USSR, especially its record of human rights. And at the same time, the USSR began to replace its older nuclear missiles with newer ones.

**Katie:** Oh no, arms race alert!

**Datshiane:** Exactly. The USA responded by developing and deploying updates in its arsenal of nuclear weapons around Europe.

**Katie:** And then in December 1979, the USSR invaded Afghanistan.

**Datshiane:** For more details on the causes and events of the Afghan War, head over to the Bitesize website.

**Katie:** Also in 1979, American president Jimmy Carter announced a boycott of the Olympics, which were to take place in Moscow the following year.

**Datshiane:** By which time Ronald Reagan had now become president of the USA.

**Katie:** And in return, the USSR then boycotted the 1984 Olympics, which took place in Los Angeles.

**Datshiane:** Sounds like lots of boycotting going on there.

**Katie:** Yup, they weren't competing against each other on the track, but the only race they were competing against each other in was the new arms race.

**Datshiane:** President Reagan also took a hardline stance against the USSR, promoting a strong military buildup and the Strategic Defense Initiative, or SDI, which was also known as Star Wars.

**Katie:** Star Wars, like those fantastic science fiction films from that period?

**Datshiane:** Yes, because parts of the defensive system that Reagan promoted would be based in space.

**Katie:** So yet again, the ideological tension between capitalism and communism was leading the world back towards the Cold War. When will it end?

**Datshiane:** How about in the next section?

**Katie:** Let's get there now.

**Datshiane:** OK, in 1985 Mikhail Gorbachev became the Soviet leader and he introduced significant reforms in the USSR with the policies of Glasnost, or openness, and Perestroika, or economic restructuring. These were aimed at modernising the Soviet economy and society.

**Katie:** Those are Russian words, glasnost and perestroika. If it helps, as a memory aid, I think of the first part of glasnost as glass, which is transparent, like the policy to promote openness.

**Datshiane:** And perestroika?

**Katie:** How do you get your football team to score more goals? Get a pair of strikers.

**Datshiane:** If it helps you remember, use it.

**Katie:** Thanks to these policies and a personal rapport between Reagan and Gorbachev, Cold War tensions reduced and mutual trust was rebuilt.

**Datshiane:** A series of summits and meetings between Reagan and Gorbachev led to key agreements, such as the INF Treaty in 1987, which eliminated intermediate-range nuclear

missiles. However, the Cold War didn't just end because of Reagan and Gorbachev's actions. Opposition in the communist-controlled Eastern European countries was increasing, and this is seen most famously in Berlin.

**Katie:** It's always Berlin. Here it is again at the centre of the Cold War.

**Datshiane:** I mean, it's definitely a running theme.

**Katie:** In the previous episode in this series, we looked at how and why the wall was built and came to symbolise a division between communist East Berlin and capitalist West Berlin. Have a relisten if you need to.

**Datshiane:** By the late 1980s, growing protests in Eastern Europe, combined with economic struggles and demands for more freedoms, pressured communist governments. And in November 1989, faced with mass protests and pressure for democratic reforms, the East German government announced that citizens could cross the Berlin Wall freely. Let's hear from our time travelling reporter, Jordan, who we've sent back in time to that moment.

\*[cheering]\*

**Jordan:** There is excitement and disbelief as people gather along the Berlin Wall across the city. Just moments ago, the announcement came. East Germany is opening its borders. I'm surrounded by cheers and laughter, \*[SFX: hammering stone]\* the sound of hammers and chisels echoing as people begin to chip away at the concrete division of West and East Germany that has become a symbol of the Cold War. Colourful banners wave in the chilly air. I just met an East Berliner who told me, "I decided to leave my house and come into Berlin to take part in the protests." He described himself as a 'Mauerspechte', a wall woodpecker. As he ran off cheering, he shouted, "It's 1989, I am in Berlin just for freedom and unity." And that sentiment is clearly shared on both sides of the wall. After years of oppression, the fall of the Berlin Wall signifies a new era of hope and change. People are talking about reunification and the future filled with possibilities. The Cold War is starting to crumble, and the world is watching. This is Jordan reporting from Berlin in 1989. Back to the Bitesize Studio.

**Datshiane:** Thank you Jordan, at the Berlin Wall. This was a massive moment because the fall of the Berlin Wall marked the symbolic end of the Cold War and eventually it did indeed lead to German reunification in 1990.

**Katie:** Perhaps even more dramatic was the collapse of the USSR itself a year later in 1991. An exam question might ask you about this, so let's have a think about how we might tackle one. Datshiane, give me a question please.

**Datshiane:** Gorbachev's reforms were the main reason for the collapse of the Soviet Union. To what extent do you, Katie, agree with this statement?

**Katie:** That's one of those 'how much do you agree with the statement' questions. So, make sure that in your answer you say whether you do or don't agree and say why.

**Datshiane:** Press pause and give it a go yourself or listen on as we have a try.

**Katie:** So, the question here is asking specifically about Gorbachev's reforms. So, you must write about what you know about those and the extent that they led to the Soviet Union collapse. So maybe start there.

**Datshiane:** Ok, Gorbachev's reforms, perestroika and glasnost, they were intended to strengthen the USSR, but instead they led to greater demands for independence amongst Soviet republics, nationalist movements grew stronger and many republics declared independence.

**Katie:** That's a good start. Now write about some of the other reasons. How about the economic problems?

**Datshiane:** Ok, so the Soviet economy was in severe decline; the Cold War and the invasion of Afghanistan were a huge financial drain. They were unable to compete with the West and they struggled with inefficiency and a lack of consumer goods.

**Katie:** You're on a roll. Another reason, perhaps the fall of the Berlin Wall.

**Datshiane:** Yes, the collapse of communist regimes in Eastern Europe, symbolised by the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, inspired independence movements within the USSR and it made it difficult for Gorbachev to keep the Union intact.

**Katie:** And have you got anything else?

**Datshiane:** One more, in August 1991, there was a failed coup attempt by hardline communists, which further destabilised the Soviet government.

**Katie:** And of course that all-important conclusion.

**Datshiane:** Yes, the conclusion. So, in conclusion, I would agree that Gorbachev's reforms of glasnost and perestroika were the key factors in the collapse of the Soviet Union, but they must be seen in the context of a broader set of problems. Long-standing economic struggles, external pressures from the Cold War, the impact of the Afghanistan War and the rise of nationalism all combined to make the collapse inevitable.

**Katie:** Good answer. How did yours compare? If you didn't agree with this statement and think that there were other factors that were more important, that's ok. But you must say why. That's what the examiner wants you to do.

**Datshiane:** Quick memory test. As usual, three questions, five seconds to write those answers down. Here we go. What was the name of the period of the thaw in the Cold War in the early 1970s?

**Katie:** That would be détente.

\*[correct bell sounds]\*

**Datshiane:** What were the names of the key policies introduced by Gorbachev in the USSR?

**Katie:** Glasnost (openness), and my "pair of strikers" or perestroika (restructuring).

\*[correct bell sounds]\*

**Datshiane:** And Katie, when did the Berlin Wall fall?

**Katie:** The Berlin Wall fell on the 9th of November 1989.

\*[correct bell sounds]\*

**Datshiane:** You're excellent, Katie. You've aced it again.

**Katie:** Final summary for the final episode on the Cold War. Here goes. Tensions in the Cold War reduced in the 1970s period of détente due to economic strains in the USA and the USSR.

**Datshiane:** But they did heighten again in the early 1980s due to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the renewal of nuclear arms.

**Katie:** And then in the mid-1980s, Gorbachev's reforms and his relationship with President Reagan improved relations.



**Datshiane:** The Berlin Wall fell in 1989 and Germany was reunified in 1990.

**Katie:** And in 1991, the Soviet Union itself collapsed.

**Datshiane:** The Cold War was over. There's loads more on this and other Bitesize GCSE topics on the Bitesize website.

**Katie:** Thanks so much for listening to this series and good luck with your exam.

**Datshiane:** I've been Datshiane Navanayagam.

**Katie:** And I've been Katie Charlwood.

**BOTH:** See ya!