

**COLD WAR (1947-
1991): RUSSIA'S IRON
CURTAIN IN EASTERN
EUROPE**



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Description

Through the use of various primary and secondary sources, including a full text reading of the Yalta Agreement from 1945, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain the basics behind how the Russians came to dominate Eastern Europe in the last days of the Second World War, why Russian leaders (especially Stalin) insisted on the creation of a buffer zone between Russia and the West and how and why the Soviet sphere of influence collapsed in the late 1980s. Using this knowledge, students will then analyze the moves taken by current Russian President Vladimir Putin in sending troops into the Crimea, theorizing as to whether Putin's moves might signal the beginning of a new Iron Curtain and perhaps the opening of a new Cold War with the West.

Subjects

World History
European History

Grade Level

11-12

Duration

90 minutes

Tour Links

- Iron Curtain Monument, Budapest
- Berlin Wall Memorial, Berlin
- Soviet Memorial, Berlin
- Freedom Square, Budapest
- Friendship Arch, Kiev

Essential Questions

- What was the "Iron Curtain" in Eastern Europe? Who popularized the phrase? Were there any real manifestations of the "curtain"?
- What were Stalin's motives for creating the "Iron Curtain"?
- How did Soviet officials maintain control behind the "Iron Curtain"?
- How and why did the "Iron Curtain" fall in 1991?

Academic Summary

Winston Churchill, former British Prime Minister, Excerpts from a speech delivered on 5 March 1946 at Westminster College, Fulton, Missouri

From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the Continent. Behind that line lie all the capitals of the ancient states of Central and Eastern Europe. Warsaw, Berlin, Prague, Vienna, Budapest, Belgrade, Bucharest and Sofia, all these famous cities and the populations around them lie in what I must call the Soviet sphere, and all are subject in one form or another, not only to Soviet influence but to a very high and, in many cases, increasing measure of control from Moscow. Athens alone -- Greece with its immortal glories -- is free to decide its future at an election under British, American and French observation. The Russian-dominated Polish Government has been encouraged to make enormous and wrongful inroads upon Germany, and mass expulsions of millions of Germans on a scale grievous and undreamed-of are now taking place. The Communist parties, which were very small in all these Eastern States of Europe, have been raised to pre-eminence and power far beyond their numbers and are seeking everywhere to obtain totalitarian control. Police governments are prevailing in nearly every case, and so far, except in Czechoslovakia, there is no true democracy. Turkey and Persia are both profoundly alarmed and disturbed at the claims which are being made upon them and at the pressure being exerted by the Moscow Government. An attempt is being made by the Russians in Berlin to build up a quasi-Communist party in their zone of Occupied Germany by showing special favors to groups of left-wing German leaders. At the end of the fighting last June, the American and British Armies withdrew westwards, in accordance with an earlier agreement, to a depth at some points of 150 miles upon a front of nearly four hundred miles, in order to allow our Russian allies to occupy this vast expanse of territory which the Western Democracies had conquered.

...I do not believe that Soviet Russia desires war. What they desire is the fruits of war and the indefinite expansion of their power and doctrines. But what we have to consider here to-day while time remains, is the permanent prevention of war and the establishment of conditions of freedom and democracy as rapidly as possible in all countries. Our difficulties and dangers will not be removed by closing our eyes to them. They will not be removed by mere waiting to see what happens; nor will they be removed by a policy of appeasement. What is needed is a settlement, and the longer this is delayed, the more difficult it will be and the greater our dangers will become.

From what I have seen of our Russian friends and Allies during the war, I am convinced that there is nothing they admire so much as strength, and there is nothing for which they have less respect than for weakness, especially military weakness. For that reason the old doctrine of a balance of power is unsound. We cannot afford, if we can help it, to work on narrow margins, offering temptations to a trial of strength.

George Kennan, deputy chief to the US mission in Moscow, Excerpts from a telegram to US Secretary of State James Byrnes, 22 Feb 1946

At bottom of Kremlin's neurotic view of world affairs is traditional and instinctive Russian sense of insecurity. Originally, this was insecurity of a peaceful agricultural people trying to live on vast exposed plain in neighborhood of fierce nomadic peoples. To this was added, as Russia came into contact with economically advanced West, fear of more competent, more powerful, more highly organized societies in that area. But this latter type of insecurity was one which afflicted rather Russian rulers than Russian people; for Russian rulers have invariably sensed that their rule was relatively archaic in form fragile and artificial in its psychological foundation, unable to stand comparison or contact with political systems of Western countries. For this reason they have always feared foreign penetration, feared direct contact between Western world and their own, feared what would happen if Russians learned truth about world without or if foreigners learned truth about world within. And they have learned to seek security only in patient but deadly struggle for total destruction of rival power, never in compacts and compromises with it.

... Russians will strive energetically to develop Soviet representation in, and official ties with, countries in which they sense strong possibilities of opposition to Western centers of power. This applies to such widely separated points as Germany, Argentina, Middle Eastern countries, etc.

In international economic matters, Soviet policy will really be dominated by pursuit of autarchy for Soviet Union and Soviet-dominated adjacent areas taken together. That, however, will be underlying policy. As far as official line is concerned, position is not yet clear. Soviet Government has shown strange reticence since termination hostilities on subject foreign trade. If large scale long term credits should be forthcoming, I believe Soviet Government may eventually again do lip service, as it did in 1930's to desirability of building up international economic exchanges in general. Otherwise I think it possible Soviet foreign trade may be restricted largely to Soviet's own security sphere, including occupied areas in Germany, and that a cold official shoulder may be turned to principle of general economic collaboration among nations.

With respect to cultural collaboration, lip service will likewise be rendered to desirability of deepening cultural contacts between peoples, but this will not in practice be interpreted in any way which could weaken security position of Soviet peoples. Actual manifestations of Soviet policy in this respect will be restricted to arid channels of closely shepherd official visits and functions, with superabundance of vodka and speeches and dearth of permanent effects.

... Efforts will be made in such countries to disrupt national self-confidence, to hamstring measures of national defense, to increase social and industrial unrest, to stimulate all forms of disunity. All persons with grievances, whether economic or racial, will be urged to spelt redress not in mediation and compromise, but in defiant violent struggle for destruction of other elements of society. Here poor will be set against rich, black against white, young against old, newcomers against established residents, etc.

... Where individual governments stand in path of Soviet purposes pressure will be brought for their removal from office. This can happen where governments directly oppose Soviet foreign policy aims (Turkey, Iran), where they seal their territories off against Communist penetration (Switzerland, Portugal), or where they compete too strongly, like Labor Government in England, for moral domination among elements which it is important for Communists to dominate. (Sometimes, two of these elements are present in a single case. Then Communist opposition becomes particularly shrill and savage.

... In summary, we have here a political force committed fanatically to the belief that with US there can be no permanent modus vivendi that it is desirable and necessary that the internal harmony of our society be disrupted, our traditional way of life be destroyed, the international authority of our state be broken, if Soviet power is to be secure. This political force has complete power of disposition over energies of one of world's greatest peoples and resources of world's richest national territory, and is borne along by deep and powerful currents of Russian nationalism. In addition, it has an elaborate and far flung apparatus for exertion of its influence in other countries, an apparatus of amazing flexibility and versatility, managed by people whose experience and skill in underground methods are presumably without parallel in history. Finally, it is seemingly inaccessible to considerations of reality in its basic reactions. For it, the vast fund of objective fact about human society is not, as with us, the measure against which outlook is constantly being tested and re-formed, but a grab bag from which individual items are selected arbitrarily and tendentiously to bolster an outlook already preconceived. This is admittedly not a pleasant picture. Problem of how to cope with this force in [is] undoubtedly greatest task our diplomacy has ever faced and probably greatest it will ever have to face. It should be point of departure from which our political general staff work at present juncture should proceed. It should be approached with same thoroughness and care as solution of major strategic problem in war, and if necessary, with no smaller outlay in planning effort. I cannot attempt to suggest all answers here. But I would like to record my conviction that problem is within our power to solve--and that without recourse to any general military conflict.

On 25 Apr 1945, Soviet and American troops met up at the Elbe River in Central Germany. Western Allied forces, led by soldiers from the United States and Great Britain, had surged across Europe from the Atlantic after the D-Day landings less than a year earlier, meeting fierce, and yet crumbling resistance as they marched steadily eastward. Soviet forces, on the other hand, were in the process of completing a long, brutal and bloody campaign against German armies in their drive westward, one that over the previous three years had cost the Red Army

millions of lives in their drive towards Berlin. Two days later, commanders from the two armies met and arranged a staged photograph showing solidarity and friendship. There were celebrations all along the front. The war in Europe would be over within days. After years of hardship, death and destruction, peace had finally come to the continent.

Looking back at photographs of the soldiers and officers from that day on the Elbe, it is hard to understand why, less than a year later, the two great superpowers would find themselves in an armed standoff that would dominate world affairs for the next half century. The threat of nuclear annihilation and radiation fallout would govern everything from geopolitical decisions to school drills for over four decades. Walls, barbed wire and guard towers went up. Missiles and tanks stood at the ready year after year, waiting for the attack each side was sure would inevitably come. Eastern Europe, controlled from Moscow under the Soviet sphere of influence, would find itself locked behind an "Iron Curtain" where individual freedoms would often be pushed aside in favor of Russian security. As the two camps settled into what became known as the "Cold War", each side blamed the other for mistrust and aggression. Two generations of people on both sides grew up with a sense of mistrust and hatred for people who had once been allies. As time wore on, many on both sides looked back to those days in 1945 when the world seemed so much simpler, but unfortunately in an age of nationalistic propaganda, such analyses focused largely on blame and how evil the other side had been.

Today that threat is gone ... or is it? In the late 1980s, a series of economic crises rocked the USSR. Overspending on the Soviet military, a problem since the early days of the 1960s, finally caught up with the communist regime. Western ideas of capitalism and individualism broke the government's hold on the minds and hearts of Soviet citizens across Eastern Europe. Marches and speeches in Berlin, Poland and Hungary were broadcast live around the world via new technologies. In November 1989, the Berlin Wall, a 28-year-old solid, stone barrier and the very tangible and hated symbol of Russia's "Iron Curtain", suddenly and without warning opened its gates. Hard-line communist governments across Eastern Europe resigned or agreed to call for unrestricted elections. By 1991, with the collapse of the Soviet system and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the nations of Eastern Europe declared their independence.

Today, in an age where the biggest threats appear to come from radical terrorists rather than nuclear superpowers, few Americans under the age of 40 know or remember much about the Cold War or the Iron Curtain. To many, those days are ancient history, belonging not to the daily discussion, but rather to the pages of a world or western history textbook with the likes of the Roman Empire, the Age of Enlightenment and Tsarist Russia. History has a funny way, however, of reminding people of its relevance.

On 27 February 2014, Russian military forces stationed in Crimea Province of Ukraine seized a number of provincial government buildings and surrounded Ukrainian army and air bases on the peninsula. To many of the region's citizens, the Russians were seen as heroes and liberators. Unlike the days of the Cold War, in today's high-tech information-driven world, events halfway across the world unfold live via Facebook and Twitter. Within minutes of the takeover, images of Russian troops confronting Ukrainian forces were streaming and being tweeted across the country and around the globe. Many Americans and Western Europeans were shocked at Russia's moves. News services scrambled to make sense of the events happening before their eyes. Seen through the eyes of history, however, Putin's moves should hardly be surprising. Is simply trying to recreate the Russian sphere of influence, another "Iron Curtain"? Can today's moves in the Crimea be seen through the lens of 1945-46, when then Soviet Premier Stalin created a de-facto empire in Eastern Europe to insulate Russia from a western invasion? Why did Stalin and later Russian leaders feel that they needed to close their borders? Why did the Soviets create a closed economic system, one where Russia could control and subjugate its neighbors?

It is easy for many westerners to look back with amusement at the Iron Curtain and the Cold War. Old videos showing students practicing nuclear drills where they would crawl under their school desks seem foolish given what we understand about the destructive power of those weapons.

The Soviet system eventually collapsed under its own weight. Today most westerners view its abuses with disgust and horror, but perhaps that is the very view Putin counts on. Through the use of various primary and secondary sources, including a full text reading of the Yalta Agreement from 1945, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain the basics behind how the Russians came to dominate Eastern Europe in the last days of the Second World War, why Russian leaders (especially Stalin) insisted on the creation of a buffer zone between Russia and the West and how and why the Soviet sphere of influence collapsed in the late 1980s. Using this knowledge, students will then analyze the moves taken by current Russian President Vladimir Putin in sending troops into the Crimea, theorizing as to whether Putin's moves might signal the beginning of a new Iron Curtain and perhaps the opening of a new Cold War with the West. Has the old Russian Mama Bear finally awakened from its hibernation?

Objectives

1. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain the historical reasons behind Russian insistence on the creation of buffer states in Eastern Europe in the last days of World War II.
2. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain how Soviet dominance over Eastern Europe led to the Cold War.
3. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain how and why the Soviet Sphere of influence in Eastern Europe collapsed in the late 1980s.
4. Students will theorize as to whether recent Russian moves into the Crimea and Ukraine signal an attempt by the Putin government to recreate a Soviet-style sphere of influence.

Procedures

I. Anticipatory Set

- Handouts – Copies of the primary sources and readings from the websites listed. (5 min)

II. Body of Lesson

- Lecture / PPT – The Iron Curtain (20 min)
- Video – The Iron Curtain (15 min)
- Independent Activity – Students read the sources and articles on Soviet dominance of Eastern Europe in the wake of the Second World War. (20 min)
- Suggestion: Have the students read some of the articles for homework to prepare for class discussion.
- Suggestion: Break students into groups and assign different articles to each group.
- Suggestion: AP/Advanced students should concentrate on primary sources.
- Group Activity – Socratic Discussion: How and why did Soviet leaders gain control of Eastern Europe in the wake of World War II? Why did Stalin feel he needed a "buffer zone" for Russia? Is Putin trying to recreate the old Soviet buffer zone? (20 min)

III. Closure

- Assessment – Essay / DBQ: Explain in detail the basics behind how the Russians came to dominate Eastern Europe in the last days of the Second World War, why Russian leaders (especially Stalin) insisted on the creation of a buffer zone between Russia and the West and how and why the Soviet sphere of influence collapsed in the late 1980s.
- Follow-up assignment – Debate: Using knowledge gained in this lesson plan, analyze the moves taken by current Russian President Vladimir Putin in sending troops into the Crimea, theorizing as to whether Putin's moves might signal the beginning of a new Iron Curtain and perhaps the opening of a new Cold War with the West. Has the old Russian Mama Bear finally awakened from its hibernation?

Extension

On tour: Iron Curtain Memorial, Budapest, Hungary

While on tour, students in Budapest can visit the Museum of Terror. Directly in front of the museum is a monument to those who suffered behind the Iron curtain.

On tour: Friendship Arch, Kiev, Ukraine

While on tour, students in Kiev can visit the Friendship Arch where they can see for themselves a visible symbol of Russian and Ukrainian unification. Constructed in 1982 during the Soviet Era, the Arch is made of titanium and is 164 ft. in diameter. A bronze statue of Russian and Ukrainian workers sits under the arch, along with a granite monument depicting the Pereyaslav Council of 1654. The monument sits behind the National Philharmonic Society of Ukraine and on top of the right bank of the Dnieper River.

Web Links

Lesson Plan Websites

- www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/coldwar/documents/episode-1/kennan.htm
Telegram from George Kennan to the Secretary of State, 22 Feb 1946 (primary source)
- www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/coldwar/documents/episode-2/05.pdf
Notes from the Yalta Meeting (primary source)
- <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/wwii/yalta.asp>
The Yalta Agreement – full text (primary source). From the Avalon Project at Yale University.
- www.nationalchurchillmuseum.org/sinews-of-peace-iron-curtain-speech.html
Churchill's "Iron Curtain" Speech (primary source) – full text version of the famous speech given by Churchill in 1946 from the National Churchill Museum
- http://www.latimes.com/opinion/commentary/la-oe-mcmanus-column-ukraine-cold-war-20140305_0,3886094.column#axzz2v7mjCsZ9
The Dawn of Cold War II (Op Ed article) – from Doyle McManus, Washington columnist and foreign policy expert for the Los Angeles Times, 05 Mar 2014
- www.johndclare.net/Basics_ColdWar.htm
The Cold War 1945-1963 (website)
- www.johndclare.net/cold_war6.htm
Salami Tactics: The Soviet Takeover of Eastern Europe (website)
- www.bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebitesize/audio/history/pdf/the_start_of_the_cold_war.pdf
The Start of the Cold War (PDF worksheet) – produced for schools from the BBC
- www.thenagain.info/webchron/world/yaltaconf.html
Yalta Conference of 1945 (website)
- <http://historum.com/european-history/67179-behind-iron-curtain.html>
Behind the Iron Curtain (website)
- <http://www.muhsd.k12.ca.us/cms/lib5/CA01001051/Centricity/Domain/527/15.1%20The%20Iron%20Curtain%20with%20Pair%20Share.ppt>
The Iron Curtain (PowerPoint) – from Merced Union High School District (CA)
- www.johndclare.net/cold_war7_ppt.pps
Iron Curtain (PowerPoint). Outstanding PowerPoint from John D. Clare, retired history teacher and author of over 70 history books from the United Kingdom.
- www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1
Reading like a Historian: Primary Source Documents (video). Great 2-minute video on how to incorporate primary sources into the Common Core and history classes. From Shilpa Duvoor of Summit Preparatory Charter High School in Redwood City, CA. Highly recommended for teachers.
- www.youtube.com/watch?v=gUgoWPe2hPc
The Origins of the Cold War: Yalta and Potsdam (video). 7-minute video specifically designed to explain the basics to students. Highly recommended for all students and teachers.
- www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/why-russia-is-flexing-muscle-crimea/
Why Russia is flexing its muscle in Crimea (video) – from PBS
- www.youtube.com/watch?v=J9UkOyBiRf4
Cold War – 2- Iron Curtain 1945-1947 (video). This 45-minute video is probably too long for most in-class showings, but it is well worth it. The video here is Part 2 of a 24-part series on the Cold War produced by CNN, a series that received international acclaim when it originally aired in 1998-99. CNN is re-airing the series in 2014. An excellent resource for AP/Advanced students studying the Cold War.
- www.youtube.com/watch?v=S2PUIQpAFAQ
Churchill's "Iron Curtain" Speech (video). Outstanding 3-minute video from the BBC. This is a great resource for all students and teachers.

Background Information

- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iron_Curtain
Iron Curtain – Wikipedia article
- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yalta_Conference
Yalta Conference – Wikipedia article
- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eastern_Bloc
Eastern Bloc – Wikipedia article
- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soviet_Union
Soviet Union – Wikipedia article
- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_F._Kennan
George F. Kennan – Wikipedia article about the US diplomat and historian who is best known as the "Father of Containment." Many of his concepts regarding Soviet expansion in Eastern Europe later became US policy.
- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cold_War
Cold War – Wikipedia article

Other Relevant Passports Lesson Plans

- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/germany/cold-war-fall-of-the-berlin-wall-1989
Cold War (1947-1991) – Fall of the Berlin Wall 1989
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/russia/nato-vs-warsaw-pact
Cold War (1947-1991) – NATO vs. Warsaw Pact
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/russia/cold-war-iron-curtain
Cold War (1947-1991) – Russia's Iron Curtain
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/czech/prague-spring-of-1968
Communist Czechoslovakia (1948-1989) – Prague Spring of 1968

Key Terms

- Cold War
- Containment
- Eastern Bloc
- Iron Curtain
- Sphere of Influence
- USSR
- Yalta Conference of 1945

