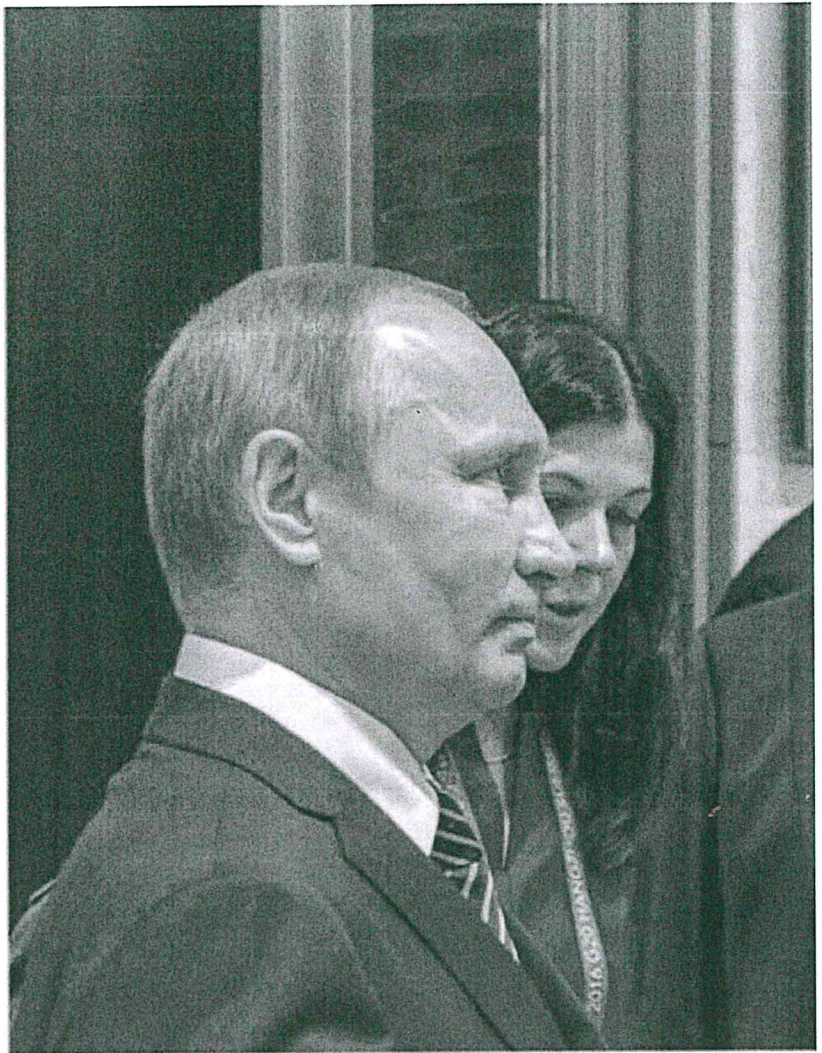


Are We Heading Toward a New COLD WAR?

Today's tensions between the U.S. and Russia under Vladimir Putin are reminiscent of America's standoff with the Soviet Union

BY CARL STOFFERS



Imagine waking up every day and fearing you might be wiped out by a nuclear bomb.

For almost a half century after World War II (1939-45), Americans and much of the world lived in legitimate fear of annihilation. The two Cold War superpowers—the United States and the Soviet Union—had built up arsenals of nuclear weapons and on more than one occasion had come close to using them. The stakes were high: The Soviets and their allies were trying to spread Communism around the world, and the U.S. and its allies were trying to stop them.

Then, after decades of staring each other down, something

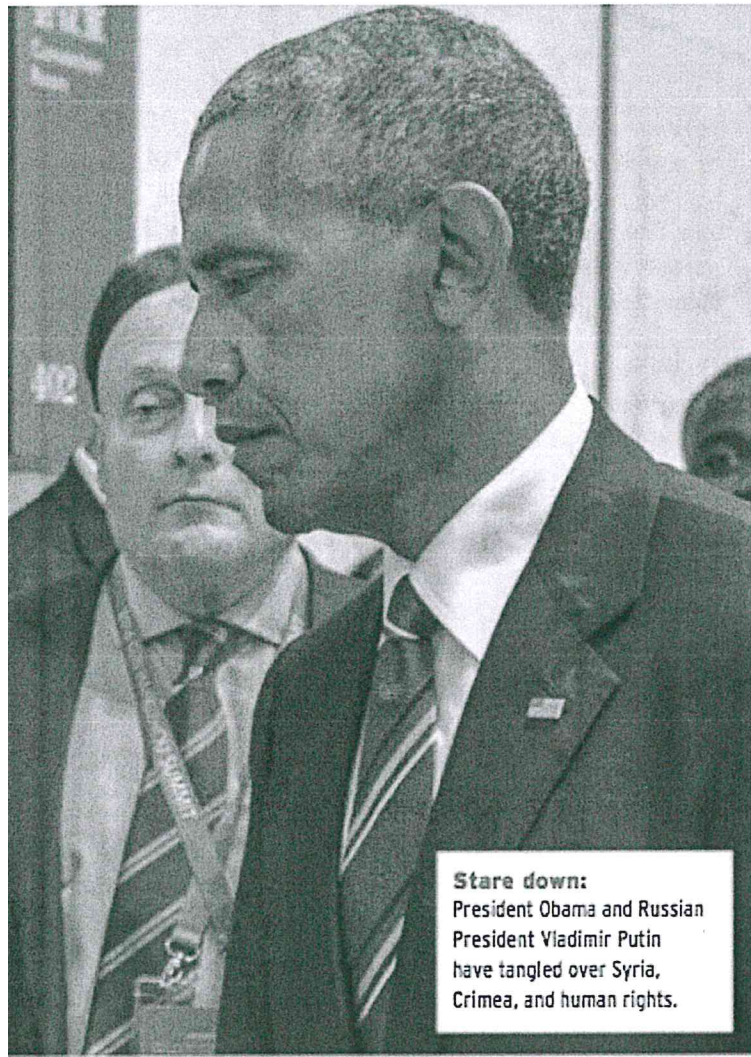
unexpected happened: The Soviet threat went away. In 1989, protesters in Germany tore down the Berlin Wall, the symbol of the Iron Curtain that had divided people under Communist and democratic rule in Europe. And two years later, in 1991, the Soviet Union* dissolved, leaving the U.S. as the world's sole superpower.

But today, 25 years since the Soviet collapse, the hope that democracy and freedom would prevail in the 15 former Soviet republics has largely evaporated. That's especially true for Russia, by far the largest and most powerful of the former Soviet republics. And the fear today is that the friction between the U.S. and Russia under President Vladimir Putin could result in a new standoff reminiscent of the Cold War.

"Putin sincerely believes that the end of the Cold War was a source of humiliation and misery for Russia and that the duty of any Russian leader is to erase that humiliation and restore Russia to some of the superpower glory of the Soviet Union," says Leon Aron, Director of Russian Studies at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington, D.C.

The original Cold War began in the embers of World War II. While the U.S. and the Soviet Union had been allies—along with France and Britain—in the war against Nazi Germany, the partnership disintegrated with Adolf Hitler's defeat. With Europe in ruins, Soviet troops occupied much of Eastern Europe and half of Germany. Soviet leader Joseph Stalin soon

ALEXEI DRUZHENIN/TASS VIA ZUMA PRESS; JIM McMANIS (MAP)



Stare down:
President Obama and Russian President Vladimir Putin have tangled over Syria, Crimea, and human rights.

installed Communist puppet governments that answered to Moscow. While the U.S., Britain, and France sought to rebuild Europe, Stalin declared that the Soviets were devoted to the destruction of the capitalist West. Former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill responded by famously proclaiming in a 1946 speech that an “iron curtain has descended across the continent.”

Stalin, one of history’s most brutal dictators, governed the Soviet Union ruthlessly, jailing or executing political dissidents, and forbidding free elections. At least 40 million people died from famine, persecution, and mass executions under his rule.

When the Soviets tested an atomic bomb in 1949—joining the U.S. as the world’s only nuclear powers—tensions greatly escalated and so did the threat that the Cold War would turn hot. The

Putin believes the duty of any Russian leader is to restore Russia to its superpower glory

two sides began a frantic arms race, eventually building 70,000 nuclear weapons. Beginning in the 1950s, American schools taught students

to “duck and cover” under their desks if they saw a nuclear bomb’s bright flash (which wouldn’t have helped much in the face of a real nuclear attack), and issued dog tags so their bodies could be identified.

“There was a real risk of things getting out of control and real miscalculations being made,” says Fiona Hill, a Russia scholar at the Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C. “The terror of it was very real.”

‘We Will Bury You’

The U.S. and the Soviet Union never declared war on each other, but in a series of “proxy wars,” they aided opposite sides as the struggle between Communism and democracy played out globally. In the Korean War (1950-53), North Korea’s forces, backed by the Soviets and Communist China, battled U.S. and South Korean troops to a bloody stalemate. It settled nothing, and the Cold War played on. In 1956, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev, who had taken power after Stalin’s death, casually told Western diplomats, “History is on our side. We will bury you.”

By the 1970s, many Americans, and much of the world, wondered if he could be right: Soviet-backed forces had defeated American forces in Vietnam, the U.S. economy was suffering from soaring inflation, and a criminal scandal known as Watergate had forced President Richard Nixon to resign in 1974.

But Khrushchev was wrong. America pulled out of its tailspin by the 1980s. In contrast, the Soviet leadership steered the U.S.S.R. toward oblivion. The regime imprisoned dissidents, crushed democratic movements in Czechoslovakia and Poland, and invaded neighboring Afghanistan in 1979 to prop up the Communist government against a growing insurgency. The Soviet Union began losing



Soviet missiles are paraded through Moscow’s Red Square in 1957 for the 40th anniversary of the Russian Revolution (above); students during a “duck and cover” nuclear attack drill in New York City, 1962 (below).



DETTMANNGETTY IMAGES (MISSILES); GRAPHICARTISTGETTY IMAGES (BUCK); AND COVER (BELL)

Timeline THE COLD WAR



British Prime Minister Winston Churchill (left), U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt (center), and Russian dictator Joseph Stalin



1945-47

Europe Divided

U.S., British, and Soviet leaders plan for postwar Europe at the Yalta Conference in 1945. Two years later, after the Soviets install Communist regimes across Eastern Europe, the Truman Doctrine (named for President Harry Truman) says the U.S. will protect nations from Communist aggression.

1948-49

Berlin Airlift

In June 1948, the Soviet Union blockades democratic West Berlin. The U.S. and its allies fly in supplies daily to keep the city from starving. The Soviets lift the blockade in May 1949.

1950-53

The Korean War

Communist North Korea invades South Korea in 1950. U.N. forces, led by the U.S., defend South Korea; China backs the North. The war ends in a stalemate, with 36,000 Americans killed.

1957

Sputnik

The Soviets send the first satellite into orbit, catching the U.S. off guard and launching the "space race." The U.S. ultimately "wins" when it lands the first men on the moon in July 1969.

support worldwide. Afghanistan became the Soviets' Vietnam. Backed by U.S. weapons and expertise, Muslims from Pakistan and the Middle East who viewed the Soviet invaders as infidels rushed into Afghanistan, killing more than 14,000 Soviet troops and wounding 50,000 more before Moscow withdrew in 1989.

At the same time, a dying Soviet economy was sinking under incompetent government control. State-run industries were no help, turning out broken tractors and allowing crops to rot in the fields for lack of trucks to get them to market. Bureaucrats decided what to manufacture, and people waited years to buy a car or get a phone—or they bribed someone to jump the line.

'Tear Down This Wall!'

In 1985, an energetic reformer named Mikhail Gorbachev took power. Sensing opportunity, President Ronald Reagan traveled in 1987 to Berlin, which had been divided for two decades by the Berlin Wall that separated Communist East Germany from democratic West Germany. Reagan stood on the West German side and declared: "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!" Gorbachev moved to thaw relations with the West, relaxed curbs on what people could say and read with a policy known as *glasnost*—or openness—and tried to fix the Soviet Union's calcified economy with free-market reforms known as *perestroika*.

"I still entertained illusions that the system could be reformed," he told *Time* magazine in 2003.

But it was too late. Communist diehards sabotaged Gorbachev's economic efforts, and daily life grew even worse.

"The chains were gone, but so was the food," *New York Times* reporter Serge Schmeemann wrote in 1991 from Moscow.

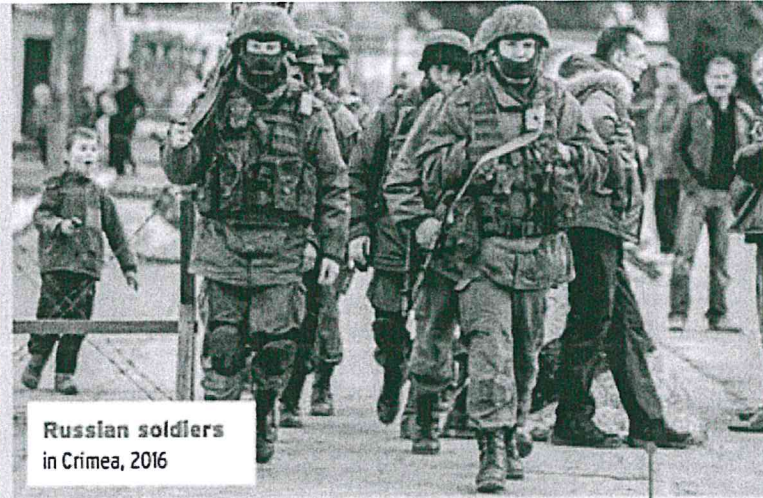
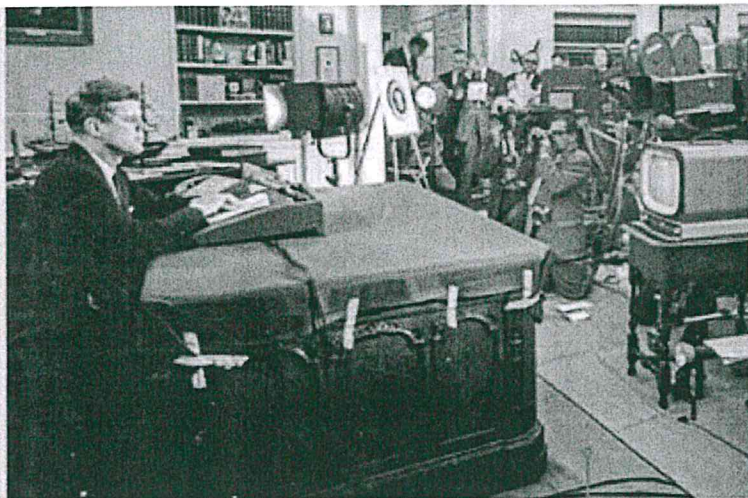
The end began in 1989, when Eastern Europe's puppet states allowed free elections and opened their borders. In Berlin, East Germany opened the gates to the Berlin Wall, and its citizens streamed out.

Russians soon began staging democracy protests too, and Gorbachev made more reforms, including allowing political parties other than the Communist Party. Then, in December 1991, Russia, the heart of the Soviet empire, proclaimed its independence from the Soviet Union, and Gorbachev soon bowed to the inevitable. On Christmas Day, the crimson hammer-and-sickle Soviet flag was lowered at the Kremlin, the seat of the government in Moscow. The white, blue, and red Russian tricolor took its place. The Soviet Union was no more. But what would replace it?

The peaceful world some envisioned, presided over by a benevolent America, never came to pass. Without a common Soviet enemy, many nations that once aligned themselves with the U.S. drifted away. The U.S. also became a prime target for the rage of groups left out of the new global order. In Afghanistan, the same Islamic militants the U.S. trained and equipped to defeat the Soviet army took power and turned that broken nation into a haven for Al Qaeda, the terrorist group behind the 9/11 attacks. Osama bin Laden, one of the young Muslims who fought the Soviets, became Al Qaeda's leader.

The fortunes of the former Soviet republics and satellite states have been mixed. Some of the eastern European nations that escaped Soviet control, like Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, are democracies with prospering economies. But many of the Soviet Union's former republics, especially

Putin has cracked down on civil liberties and press freedoms.



Russian soldiers
in Crimea, 2016

1961

Berlin Wall

To prevent its people from leaving, Communist East Germany builds a wall to separate itself from democratic West Germany and Western Europe.

1962

Cuban Missile Crisis

U.S. spy planes discover Soviet-built nuclear sites in Cuba. After a tense 13-day standoff with President John F. Kennedy, the Soviets remove the missiles.

1979

Afghan Invasion

Soviet troops invade Afghanistan. Aided by the U.S., Islamic fighters wage a 10-year guerrilla war against the Soviets, who withdraw in 1989.

1989/1991

Soviet Collapse

A bankrupt Soviet economy ultimately leads to the tearing down of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Two years later, the Soviet Union formally disbands.

TODAY

New Aggression

Russia annexes Crimea in 2014. Since 2015, it has backed President Bashar Al-Assad in Syria's civil war, opposing the U.S. Is a new Cold War ahead?

those in Central Asia, still have repressive governments.

Russia flirted with democracy in the 1990s. But it slipped back to strongman rule when Vladimir Putin—a former spy for the KGB, the Soviet Union's brutal intelligence agency—took office in 1999. Putin, who has ruled Russia ever since, has sought to return the nation to what he sees as its rightful place as a superpower.

A New Strongman

In 2008, Putin's government intervened in a war in the former Soviet republic of Georgia, and in 2014, it annexed the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea. Since 2015, Russia has taken an increasingly active and controversial role in the Syrian civil war by backing President Bashar Al-Assad's forces. It has supplied them with Russian troops and weapons, and has orchestrated airstrikes against rebel groups, some of which are supported by the U.S.

Partly because of Russia's aggressive foreign policy, tensions with the U.S. have increased, even after President Obama expressed a desire to "reset" relations in 2009. Obama and Putin's personal relations have been icy, at best (see photo, p. 18). Meanwhile, Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump has repeatedly praised Putin, calling him a strong leader, "far more than our president has been a leader," and even invited Russia to hack the emails of rival Hillary Clinton. (Trump later said he was joking.)

In Russia itself, some things have improved under Putin.

In the early days especially, oil money boosted the economy enabling many Russians to enjoy goods and services they could only have dreamed of in the Soviet Union. (The recent crash in oil prices has hit the country's economy hard.)

At the same time, government corruption has been a problem under Putin. He's given most of the big business contracts to his friends, many of whom are now billionaires (also known as "plutocrats"). And Putin has cracked down on civil liberties. There's virtually no free press in Russia, elections are rigged, and dissidents are sometimes jailed. In 2012, members of an

all-female punk rock group were put in jail for nearly two years for staging a protest against Putin in a Moscow cathedral. In some cases, dissenters are even murdered—reminding some people of the old Soviet days.

"There's a sense of helplessness, which Putin exploits," says Aron of the American Enterprise Institute.

Alex Cooley, a Russia expert at Columbia University in New

York, agrees, and he thinks that helplessness will make it unlikely for real democracy to come to Russia anytime soon.

"I don't think we'll have a moment like 1991 again unless there is some sort of really seismic geopolitical event or a complete economic collapse," says Cooley. "The early 1990s was the window, and it wasn't taken." •



With reporting by Michael Wines of The New York Times.