

Unit 9: Cold War and Contemporary Europe

Unit 9 runs from the ruins of 1945 to the present day. It covers the Cold War division of Europe, the rebuilding of the West, the fall of communism, decolonization, European integration, feminism, migration, globalization, and the cultural and demographic changes that made modern Europe.

AP European History

Cold War and Contemporary Europe

About 16 minutes to read

How to use this guide

Read it in order the first time. The unit is chronological at its core: rebuilding and the Cold War, the superpower standoff, then the fall of communism and everything that followed. Keep two timelines straight as you read: the Cold War timeline, from 1945 to 1991, and the integration timeline, from 1951 to the present. Exam questions often ask you to connect a cause in one decade to an effect in another, so note the dates as you go.

After the first read, use the trap boxes and the confusions table to review the distinctions the exam tests most often. Finish with the practice questions, then complete the recall check on the last page out loud and note any items you cannot explain yet.

What this unit is worth. Unit 9 sits in Period 4, 1914 to the present, which makes up about a fifth to a quarter of the AP exam, and Unit 9 carries roughly half of that period's weight. It is also the unit where everything converges: the Cold War, decolonization, integration, and social change all land here, so exam questions love asking you to connect them.

9.2 Rebuilding Europe

In 1948 the United States began funding the recovery of Western Europe through the **Marshall Plan**. The money rebuilt factories, railways, and farms, and it helped produce the long stretch of growth people called the **economic miracle**. Growth raised incomes, and rising incomes fed **consumerism**: the growing economic and cultural importance of consumer goods like cars, appliances, and televisions. The **Korean War** of 1950 to 1953 belongs in this unit as an early Cold War conflict, the kind of proxy war where the superpowers backed opposite sides without fighting each other directly.

Trap. The Marshall Plan was not only generosity. A prosperous Western Europe was harder for communist movements to win over, so recovery spending was also Cold War strategy. When a question asks why the United States paid for European recovery, the strategic answer matters as much as the economic one.

9.3 The Cold War

The **Cold War** was the post-1945 standoff between the U.S.-led West and the Soviet-led East: political, ideological, and military rivalry without direct war between the two superpowers. Churchill's phrase the **Iron Curtain** described the metaphorical division between communist Eastern Europe and democratic Western Europe. The American answer to Soviet expansion was **containment**, the policy of preventing the spread of communism wherever it appeared. The **Truman Doctrine** of 1947 put containment into words: the United States pledged to aid nations resisting communism, starting with Greece and Turkey. The **United Nations**, founded in 1945, was meant to give the world a forum for peace and cooperation, though the superpower rivalry limited what it could do. Underneath the diplomacy sat **nuclear weapons**, and the race to build bigger arsenals became the **arms race**, which made deterrence the logic of the whole standoff: neither side could use its weapons without inviting its own destruction.

Trap. Containment is the policy; the Truman Doctrine is one application of it. And the Iron Curtain is a metaphor for the political division of Europe, not a physical structure. The physical structure was the Berlin Wall, which came later, in 1961.

9.4 Two Superpowers Emerge

After 1945 the United States and the Soviet Union were the world's two **superpowers**, and Europe organized itself around their rivalry. The West built **NATO**, a military alliance formed in 1949 to deter Soviet aggression. The Soviet answer was **COMECON**, its economic organization for dominating Eastern Europe, and the **Warsaw Pact**, the Soviet-led military alliance that countered NATO. Note the order: NATO came in 1949, the Warsaw Pact in 1955, after West Germany joined NATO. When Stalin died, **Nikita Khrushchev** took power and launched **de-Stalinization**, moving away from Stalin's rule after 1956. The reforms failed to fix the economy, so revolts broke out in Eastern Europe, including Hungary in 1956, and each ended with Soviet rule reimposed. Rivalry also ran through crises and symbols. The **Cuban Missile Crisis** of 1962, a confrontation over Soviet missiles in Cuba, brought the world closer to nuclear war than at any other point. The **space race** turned exploration into another contest between the systems.

Trap. Do not treat NATO and the Warsaw Pact as simultaneous creations. NATO is 1949; the Warsaw Pact is 1955, a response. Questions that ask which came first, or what triggered the other, are testing exactly this sequence.

9.5 Postwar Nationalism, Ethnic Conflict, and Atrocities

When the Cold War's lid came off, old ethnic conflicts reignited. The breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s turned violent, and the wars there brought **ethnic cleansing**: the forced removal or murder of ethnic groups. The Balkans are the case the exam points to when it asks what happened to multiethnic states after communism fell.

9.6 Contemporary Western Democracies

Western Europe's democracies answered the war's wreckage with the **welfare state**: governments expanded social services such as health care and education, building safety nets that became a defining feature of postwar European life.

Trap. The welfare state is not socialism. These were capitalist democracies that taxed and spent heavily on public services. Calling the welfare state communist misses how Western Europe actually worked.

9.7 The Fall of Communism

Mikhail Gorbachev became Soviet leader in 1985 and tried to save the system with two reforms: **perestroika**, the restructuring of the economy, and **glasnost**, political openness. The reforms failed to rescue the USSR, and the openness let long-suppressed pressures surface. In 1989 the **Berlin Wall** fell, the opening that symbolized the collapse of communist control in Eastern Europe. Germany achieved **reunification** in 1990. In 1991 the Soviet Union itself underwent its **collapse**, ending the Cold War and its control over Eastern Europe. The aftermath split two ways. Czechoslovakia divided peacefully into Czech and Slovak states in 1993, the velvet divorce. Yugoslavia broke apart violently into ethnic states, the wars that produced the ethnic cleansing of topic 9.5. Together these events make up the **fall of communism**: the collapse of communist regimes across Eastern Europe at the Cold War's end.

Trap. Gorbachev did not set out to end communism. Perestroika and glasnost were attempts to reform and preserve the Soviet system; their failure is what brought it down. Also keep the dates separate: the Berlin Wall falls in 1989, the Soviet Union collapses in 1991. The fall of the wall in 1989 symbolized the collapse of communist control in Eastern Europe, while the Soviet Union itself ended in 1991.

9.8 Twentieth-Century Feminism

Feminism, the movement for women's political, economic, and social equality, reshaped Europe across the century. **Women's suffrage** came through feminist campaigning in Western Europe and through government policy in the East, a reminder that the same right arrived by different roads. The later twentieth century brought **second-wave feminism**, which pushed beyond the vote into work, family, and law. The **birth control pill** gave women new control over reproduction and changed the terms of the debate. **Simone de Beauvoir's** writing, including *The Second Sex* of 1949, gave the movement its philosophical backbone. **Margaret Thatcher**, Britain's first woman prime minister from 1979 to 1990, showed how far women had risen in public life.

Trap. Women's suffrage and second-wave feminism are different stages. Suffrage is the vote, won earlier in the century. The second wave is the later movement about equality in work, family, and social life. Do not collapse them into one event.

9.9 Decolonization

Decolonization is the process by which Asian and African colonies won independence, and it was slow. Woodrow Wilson's principle of **national self-determination** raised colonial expectations after World War I, but imperial powers resisted for decades, and Cold War alignments delayed things further as both superpowers courted new states. **Woodrow Wilson** himself belongs here as the American president whose Fourteen Points shaped the peace settlement. The cases run in sequence. The **Indian National Congress**, founded in 1885, led the independence movement through campaigns including Gandhi's nonviolent mass protests, and India won independence and partition in 1947. In Vietnam, **Ho Chi Minh's Viet Minh** fought the Japanese and then the French, defeating France at Dien Bien Phu in 1954; the Geneva Accords then partitioned Vietnam. In Algeria, the **National Liberation Front (FLN)** launched a guerrilla war against French rule in 1954 and won independence with the Evian Accords in 1962.

Trap. Wilson's words did not free anyone. Self-determination created expectations in 1919; independence came decades later, and only after long struggles. Also note the order of the cases: India in 1947 comes before Vietnam's partition in 1954 and Algeria in 1962. Sequencing questions reward knowing which independence came first.

9.10 The European Union

European integration began with a practical bargain: pool French and German coal and steel in the **European Coal and Steel Community** of 1951, so that the industries of war became shared industries of peace. The project grew into the **European Economic Community**, the Common Market created by the Treaty of Rome in 1957, and then into the **European Union** itself, formally established by the **Treaty of Maastricht**, which took effect in 1993. The EU is a transnational union pursuing economic and political integration, with institutions like the **European Parliament**, its elected legislative body. Integration has always pulled against **national sovereignty**. The **euro**, the EU's common currency, is one example of that tension, and not every member state uses it. **Brexit**, Britain's exit from the EU after the 2016 referendum, is the sharpest example: a member state deciding that the costs to sovereignty outweighed the benefits of membership. Beneath the institutions, integration promoted a **European identity**, a sense of shared belonging that coexists uneasily with national identities.

Trap. The EU is not Europe. Leaving the EU, as Britain did, is not leaving the continent. And the euro is not the same as EU membership: several EU members keep their own currencies. Questions that blur these lines are testing whether you know the difference.

9.11 Migration and Immigration

Postwar Europe needed workers. During the boom of the 1950s and 1960s, countries recruited **migrant workers** from southern Europe, Asia, and Africa; West Germany called them guest workers. When the economy turned down in the 1970s, the welcome faded and the same workers became targets of anti-immigrant agitation. **Postwar immigration** also changed Europe's religious makeup and reopened debates about religion's social role. **Anti-immigration parties**, extreme nationalist parties opposing immigration such as the French National Front, turned that agitation into votes.

9.12 Technology

New medical technologies, from birth control to fertility treatments to genetic engineering, extended life and gave people new choices, but they also raised moral questions that courts, churches, and parliaments are still arguing about.

9.13 Globalization

Globalization is the increasing interconnection of economies and cultures through communication and transportation technologies. After 1945 Europe imported American technology and popular culture, a process called **Americanization** that drew both enthusiasm and criticism. **New communication technologies**, the telephone, radio, television, computers, and the internet, multiplied connections and drove the process faster. Not everyone celebrated it. **Green parties** challenged consumerism and urged sustainable development, arguing that endless growth had costs the market did not count.

Trap. The migrant workers were invited first and resented later. The sequence is recruitment during the boom, backlash during the downturn. Reversing that order misses the economic logic the exam wants you to see.

9.14 Twentieth- and Twenty-First-Century Culture, Arts, and Demographic Trends

Postwar prosperity changed how Europeans lived. The **baby boom**, the surge in birth rates after the war that governments often encouraged, produced a huge generation. Rising incomes and new technologies produced **consumer culture**, the postwar culture of mass consumption. Note the distinction from consumerism in topic 9.2: consumerism there is the economic rise of consumer goods; consumer culture here is the way of life built around them. Culture also questioned itself.

Existentialism stressed individual freedom and meaning-making in an indifferent world.

Postmodernism questioned objective truth and traditional standards. The **revolts of 1968**, youth uprisings from Paris to Prague against bourgeois materialism and stale authority, showed the questioning in the streets. The **Second Vatican Council** of 1962 to 1965 redefined Catholic doctrine and the Church's relations with other faiths, while **civil rights movements** pressed for expanded rights for women and for gay and lesbian people. Demographics are shifting the other way now: **aging populations** are straining the welfare systems built for a younger Europe. Two notes on the art. **Cubism** (Picasso and Braque, fracturing subjects into geometric forms, as in *Les Femmes d'Alger* of 1907), **Surrealism** (the 1920s movement drawing on Freud's unconscious, from Dalí's melting clocks to Magritte's bowler-hatted men), and the **Bauhaus** (Gropius's 1919 German design school uniting art, craft, and technology, closed by the Nazis in 1933) belong to the earlier twentieth century, but the framework treats them as the cultural background of modern Europe. And **Solidarity**, the Polish labor movement founded in 1980, showed a Christian response to communism from inside the Eastern bloc.

Trap. 1968 is not 1989. The revolts of 1968 challenged Western materialism and Eastern rigidity while the Cold War was still frozen. The fall of communism came two decades later. Keep the protest wave and the collapse on separate timelines.

Confusions That Cost Points

PAIR	HOW TO KEEP THEM STRAIGHT
Containment vs Truman Doctrine	Containment is the overall policy of stopping communism's spread. The Truman Doctrine is the 1947 pledge that applied it, starting with Greece and Turkey.
NATO (1949) vs Warsaw Pact (1955)	NATO came first; the Warsaw Pact was the Soviet response, formed after West Germany joined NATO.
Iron Curtain vs Berlin Wall	The Iron Curtain is Churchill's metaphor for Europe's political division. The Berlin Wall was a physical structure, built in 1961 and opened in 1989.
Fall of the Berlin Wall (1989) vs collapse of the USSR (1991)	The wall is the symbol of communism's collapse in Eastern Europe. 1991 is the end of the Soviet Union itself.
Perestroika and glasnost	Reforms meant to save the Soviet system, not destroy it. Their failure caused the collapse they were meant to prevent.
Wilson's self-determination vs actual independence	The principle raised expectations after World War I. Independence came decades later, after long struggles.
EU vs Europe; euro vs EU membership	Leaving the EU is not leaving Europe. Several EU members do not use the euro.
Welfare state vs socialism	Capitalist democracies built welfare states through taxes and public services.
Migrant workers	Recruited during the 1950s and 1960s boom, targeted after the 1970s downturn.
Consumerism (9.2) vs consumer culture (9.14)	Consumerism is the economic rise of consumer goods. Consumer culture is the way of life built around mass consumption.
De-Stalinization revolts	Khrushchev's reforms prompted revolts like Hungary in 1956, and each ended with Soviet rule reimposed, not with liberation.
Decolonization order	India in 1947, then Vietnam's partition in 1954, then Algeria in 1962.

Practice Questions

Original questions written for this guide in the style of the AP exam. Answers and explanations are on the next page, so complete the questions before checking them.

1. The Marshall Plan is best understood as

- A. a military alliance formed to deter Soviet aggression
- B. a U.S. program funding Western Europe's postwar economic recovery
- C. the Soviet bloc's economic organization for Eastern Europe
- D. a trade agreement establishing the Common Market

2. Which statement about the Warsaw Pact is accurate?

- A. It was formed before NATO, in 1947
- B. It was the Soviet-led military alliance countering NATO
- C. It was the Soviet bloc's economic organization
- D. It dissolved in the same year the Berlin Wall fell

3. Gorbachev's policies of perestroika and glasnost were intended to

- A. dismantle the Soviet Union and end communism in Eastern Europe
- B. restructure the Soviet economy and open political discussion
- C. reimpose Stalinist controls over Eastern Europe
- D. reunify East and West Germany

4. Woodrow Wilson's principle of national self-determination had which effect on colonies after World War I?

- A. It granted immediate independence to European colonies
- B. It raised colonial expectations of independence
- C. It ended British rule in India within a decade
- D. It was rejected by every major colonial movement

5. Which of the following events happened first?

- A. The fall of the Berlin Wall
- B. The collapse of the Soviet Union
- C. The Cuban Missile Crisis
- D. The Treaty of Maastricht taking effect

6. Brexit is best described as

- A. Britain leaving the continent of Europe
- B. an example of the tension between national sovereignty and EU membership
- C. the dissolution of the European Union
- D. Britain's adoption of the euro

Answer Key

- 1. B.** The Marshall Plan was the U.S. program funding Western Europe's postwar recovery, launched in 1948. A describes NATO, the 1949 military alliance. C describes COMECON, the Soviet economic organization. D describes the European Economic Community, created by the Treaty of Rome in 1957.
- 2. B.** The Warsaw Pact was the Soviet-led military alliance that countered NATO, formed in 1955. A reverses the sequence: NATO came first, in 1949. C describes COMECON, not the Pact. D confuses 1989, the fall of the Berlin Wall, with 1991, when the Pact dissolved along with the Soviet bloc.
- 3. B.** Perestroika meant restructuring the economy and glasnost meant political openness; both were attempts to reform and preserve the Soviet system. A is the trap: Gorbachev did not set out to end communism, even though his reforms' failure brought it down. C is the opposite of what happened. D was a consequence of the collapse, not the intent of the reforms.
- 4. B.** Wilson's principle raised colonial expectations of independence after World War I; it promised nothing and granted nothing. A treats the principle as an act of liberation, which it was not. C compresses the timeline: Indian independence came in 1947, decades later. D overstates the opposite: movements seized on the principle rather than rejecting it.
- 5. C.** The Cuban Missile Crisis was 1962, decades before the others. A is 1989 and B is 1991; students who merge the fall of the wall with the end of the USSR sometimes rank them wrong. D is 1993, the latest of the four.
- 6. B.** Brexit, Britain's exit from the EU after the 2016 referendum, is the clearest example of the sovereignty debate inside the union. A confuses the EU with the continent. C mistakes one member's departure for the union's end. D gets the direction backwards: Britain never adopted the euro, and leaving the EU moved it further from that possibility.

One-Page Recall Check

- Explain what the Marshall Plan funded and why the United States paid for it.
- Describe the economic miracle and its connection to consumerism.
- Define the Cold War and explain why the superpowers fought proxy wars instead of fighting each other.
- Distinguish containment from the Truman Doctrine.
- Explain the Iron Curtain metaphor and how it differs from the Berlin Wall.
- Give the founding years of NATO and the Warsaw Pact and explain the sequence.
- Describe what COMECON was and whom it served.
- Explain de-Stalinization and what happened to the revolts it prompted.
- Name the closest the Cold War came to nuclear war and explain why.
- Explain what perestroika and glasnost were meant to do, and what they actually did.
- Separate 1989 from 1991: say what happened in each year.
- Contrast the breakup of Czechoslovakia with the breakup of Yugoslavia.
- Explain how Wilson's self-determination related to actual independence.
- Put India, Vietnam, and Algeria in chronological order and name the settlement tied to each.
- Trace European integration from the ECSC to the EU, naming the treaties.
- Explain the sovereignty tension in EU membership, using the euro and Brexit as examples.
- Explain the migrant worker sequence: recruitment, then backlash.
- Distinguish women's suffrage from second-wave feminism.
- Distinguish consumerism from consumer culture.
- Place Cubism, Surrealism, and the Bauhaus in time and say what each movement did.

Where to go next. Turn every missed item above into flashcards and drill them spaced out over several days rather than in one sitting. In Rycal, open the AP European History deck and work the Unit 9 cards. The deck covers the terms in this guide, and its practice questions target the same traps named here. If you have a test date, add it in the Test Planner. You can also start your next review with a Brain Dump, then check what you missed against this guide.

Key terms for this unit

Consumerism, Economic miracle, Marshall Plan, Korean War, Arms race, Cold War, Iron Curtain, Nuclear weapons, United Nations, Containment, Truman Doctrine, COMECON, De-Stalinization, NATO, Nikita Khrushchev, Superpowers, Warsaw Pact, Cuban Missile Crisis, Space race, Ethnic cleansing, Welfare state, Collapse of the Soviet Union (1991), Fall of communism, Mikhail Gorbachev, Perestroika and glasnost, Reunification of Germany, Breakup of Czechoslovakia, Breakup of Yugoslavia, Fall of the Berlin Wall, Feminism, Women's suffrage, Birth control pill, Margaret Thatcher, Second-wave feminism, Simone de Beauvoir, Decolonization, National self-determination, Woodrow Wilson, Algeria's National Liberation Front (FLN), Ho Chi Minh's Viet Minh, Indian National Congress, European Coal and Steel Community, European Economic Community (Common Market), European identity, European integration, European Union, National sovereignty and EU membership, Brexit, Euro, European Parliament, Treaty of Maastricht, Migrant workers, Postwar immigration to Europe, Anti-immigration parties, New medical technologies, Americanization, Globalization, Green parties, New communication technologies, Baby boom, Civil rights movements (women's, gay and lesbian), Consumer culture, Existentialism, Postmodernism, Revolts of 1968, Second Vatican Council, Aging populations, Bauhaus, Cubism, Solidarity, Surrealism.