

Unit 8: Cold War and Decolonization, c. 1900–Present

Unit 8 covers the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, the spread of communism, decolonization across Asia and Africa, and the newly independent states that emerged. CED topics 8.1 through 8.8.

AP World History

Cold War and Decolonization

About 14 minutes to read

How to use this guide

Read it in order the first time because the topics build on each other. World War II shifts global power toward two superpowers, those superpowers struggle for influence through a Cold War, communism spreads within that struggle, colonies break away at the same time, new states deal with the consequences, and the Cold War ends when the Soviet system collapses. Exam questions usually present a development and ask you to identify which process it belongs to.

After the first read, use the trap boxes and the tables to review the distinctions that exam questions test 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. This unit carries 8 to 10 percent of the multiple-choice section on the AP exam. The terms here also connect to Unit 9, which continues the story of the post-Cold War world, so the patterns you learn now carry into Unit 9.

8.1 Setting the Stage for the Cold War and Decolonization

World War II rearranged who held power in the world. During the war, the victorious nations made major technological and economic gains that **shifted the global balance of power** in their favor. The result was that the **United States** and the **Soviet Union** emerged as the world's two dominant powers. This shift is what made the Cold War possible. No single dominant empire stood above them anymore. There were two.

At the same time, opposition to colonial and imperial rule was growing. **Anti-imperialism** in the years after World War II fueled nationalist movements and pushed European empires to give up their colonies. The result was the **dissolution of empires**. European colonial empires broke up as anti-imperialist movements forced imperial powers to withdraw, and states across Asia and Africa were restructured.

Trap. The shift in the balance of power and the dissolution of empires are related but not the same thing. The shift is about the two victors of World War II gaining technology and wealth until the United States and the Soviet Union dominated. The dissolution is about European colonial empires breaking apart under pressure from anti-imperialist movements. A question that describes America and the Soviet Union rising describes the first. A question that describes colonies forcing imperial withdrawal describes the second.

8.2 The Cold War

The Cold War was the decades-long struggle, roughly 1945 to 1991, between the capitalist, democratic United States and the authoritarian, communist Soviet Union. The two **superpowers** had unmatched economic, military, and political reach, and they competed for global influence through alliances, arms races, and proxy wars rather than fighting each other directly.

At the heart of the struggle was an **ideological struggle between capitalism and communism**. The capitalist side meant market economies, which in the American model were paired with democratic government. The communist side meant state-controlled economies under authoritarian rule, the Soviet model. This divide structured the power struggle across the globe.

Not every state chose a side. The **Non-Aligned Movement** was a coalition of states, many newly independent, that refused to align with either the American or the Soviet bloc. Led by figures such as **Sukarno** of Indonesia and **Kwame Nkrumah** of Ghana, it promoted alternatives to the existing economic, political, and social orders.

Trap. The Cold War was a struggle, not a direct war. The superpowers built alliances and raced for weapons and backed opposing sides in other countries, but they did not fight each other in open combat. When a question describes American and Soviet forces meeting on a battlefield, the answer is never "a battle of the Cold War" between the two superpowers directly.

8.3 Effects of the Cold War

The superpowers organized their competition into rival military blocs. **NATO**, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, was a United States-led military alliance of Western capitalist states formed for collective defense against the Soviet Union. The **Warsaw Pact** was the Soviet-led military alliance of communist Eastern Bloc states, formed as the counterpart to NATO.

ALLIANCE	LED BY	MADE UP OF	PURPOSE
NATO	The United States	Western capitalist states	Collective defense against the Soviet Union
Warsaw Pact	The Soviet Union	Communist Eastern Bloc states	The Soviet counterpart to NATO

The rivalry produced an arms race, and **nuclear proliferation** followed. Nuclear weapons spread to additional states during the Cold War as the United States-Soviet arms race raised the stakes of their competition.

The most visible form of competition was the **proxy war**. In a proxy war, the United States and the Soviet Union backed opposing sides instead of fighting each other directly. These wars were fought between and within postcolonial states in Latin America, Africa, and Asia. The **Korean War**, from 1950 to 1953, is the classic example. United States-backed South Korea fought Soviet- and Chinese-backed North Korea to a stalemate, while the superpowers armed opposing sides without fighting each other directly.

Trap. A proxy war always involves the superpowers backing opposing sides without direct combat. The Korean War fits because the United States backed South Korea while the Soviet Union and China backed North Korea, and American and Soviet forces never fought each other directly. If a question describes Soviet and American troops shooting at each other, it is describing something that never happened, so it cannot be a proxy war.

8.4 Spread of Communism After 1900

Communism did not stay inside the Soviet Union. The **Chinese Communist Revolution** brought communists to power in China in 1949. The revolution was driven by internal tensions and by resistance to Japanese aggression during World War II. It established the People's Republic of China under communist rule.

Once in power, the new government tried to reshape the whole economy through **state control of the economy**. The government directed national production and agriculture, often implementing repressive policies with negative consequences for the population. The clearest case is the **Great Leap Forward**, Mao Zedong's campaign from 1958 to 1962 to rapidly industrialize and collectivize China through intense state control. The course framework describes only negative repercussions for the population. The campaign produced a massive famine from 1959 to 1961.

The pattern extended beyond China. **Land and resource redistribution movements** arose within states in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. These movements sought to redistribute land and economic resources, and some advocated communism or socialism.

Trap. The Chinese Communist Revolution and the Great Leap Forward are two different developments a decade apart. The revolution of 1949 brought the communists to power. The Great Leap Forward of 1958 to 1962 was a later campaign to industrialize and collectivize through state control. When a question asks about how communists came to power in China, the answer is the revolution. When it asks about rapid industrialization and collectivization under Mao, the answer is the Great Leap Forward.

8.5 Decolonization After 1900

Decolonization was the process by which colonies in Asia and Africa gained autonomy or independence from imperial rule after 1900, accelerating sharply after World War II. It was driven by **anti-colonial nationalism**. Nationalist leaders and parties in Asia and Africa mobilized their peoples to demand self-rule, seeking varying degrees of autonomy within empires or full independence from imperial rule.

PATH TO INDEPENDENCE	HOW IT WORKED	EXAMPLES
Negotiated independence	The peaceful, diplomatic path. Colonies bargained with imperial powers for their independence.	India and the Gold Coast from the British Empire
Independence through armed struggle	The violent path. Colonies won independence by fighting their imperial rulers.	Algeria and Vietnam against France, Angola against Portugal

Decolonization also produced different outcomes. **Autonomy** meant self-government within or alongside imperial rule. **Independence** meant full sovereignty, free of imperial control. Many movements fell somewhere in between, and **regional, religious, and ethnic movements** challenged colonial rule and the inherited imperial boundaries. Colonial-era borders often ignored ethnic and religious divisions, and some of these movements advocated autonomy for their own group.

Trap. Keep the two paths to independence attached to their examples. Negotiated independence pairs with India and the Gold Coast. Armed struggle pairs with Algeria, Vietnam, and Angola. Questions often swap the imperial power or the method, so check both the colony and the empire named.

8.6 Newly Independent States

After colonial authorities withdrew, political boundaries were redrawn. This **redrawing of political boundaries** led to the creation of new states, and in some cases it produced conflict as well as population displacement.

Two redrawings show what that looked like. The **Partition of India** was the 1947 division of British India into the independent states of India and Pakistan. The redrawing of boundaries triggered mass population displacement and violent communal conflict. The **creation of the state of Israel** in 1948, amid the redrawing of political boundaries in the Middle East, likewise produced conflict and population displacement. **Population displacement and resettlements** became a feature of the period, as the millions displaced by the Partition of India and by the creation of Israel show.

New governments also had to take charge of their economies. In many newly independent states after World War II, governments took a strong role in guiding economic life. This **state-guided economic development** meant directing investment and industry to promote development.

The ties to empire did not vanish at independence. **Migration to imperial metropolises** moved former colonial subjects to the imperial metropole, the former colonizing country, usually settling in its major cities. These migrations maintained cultural and economic ties between the colony and the metropole even after the empires dissolved.

Trap. The Partition of India and the creation of Israel share a pattern but not a year. Partition was 1947. Israel was 1948. What links them is the redrawing of political boundaries producing both conflict and population displacement. When a question asks which development produced displacement along with new states, the answer is the redrawing of boundaries, with either event as the example.

8.7 Global Resistance to Established Power Structures After 1900

People resisted power in more than one way. **Nonviolence** was the practice of resisting injustice without physical violence, promoted as a way to bring about political change. Three figures define it for this course. **Mohandas Gandhi** was the Indian leader who promoted nonviolent resistance against British colonial rule and helped lead the movement that won India's independence. **Martin Luther King Jr.** was the American civil rights leader who used nonviolent protest to challenge racial segregation and demand equal rights in the United States. **Nelson Mandela** was the South African anti-apartheid leader who became the country's first Black president. The course presents Mandela as championing a nonviolent, negotiated end to apartheid in his later career. Earlier in his life he endorsed armed resistance and co-founded the ANC's armed wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe, in 1961.

Nonviolence was not the only response. Some states became **militarized states**, in which the military dominated politics and responded to the century's conflicts with force. That response often intensified the violence rather than resolving it, including through arms buildups and weapons trading. And some movements used **violence against civilians for political aims**, terrorism, as a deliberate strategy to achieve political aims.

Trap. Keep the three responses separate. Nonviolence used peaceful protest to demand change, as Gandhi, King, and Mandela did. Militarized states used force through military-dominated government and arms buildups. Violence against civilians used terrorism against noncombatants as a deliberate political strategy. A question that describes an attack on civilians is asking about terrorism, not nonviolence, even if the movement called itself a resistance.

8.8 End of the Cold War

The Cold War ended around 1991. The **end of the Cold War** came as several pressures combined. United States military and technological advances strained the Soviet Union's resources. The **Soviet invasion of Afghanistan** in 1979 became a costly, draining, and ultimately failed war that weakened the Soviet Union. Public discontent and economic weakness inside communist countries undermined the Soviet system from within.

The result was the **collapse of the Soviet Union**. The Soviet Union broke up in 1991 into independent states, and the Cold War ended with it.

Trap. No single cause ended the Cold War. American advances, the failed invasion of Afghanistan, and internal discontent and economic weakness all appear together in the explanation. A question that asks why the Cold War ended and offers only one of these as the complete answer is missing the others.

Confusions That Cost Points

PAIR	KEEP THEM STRAIGHT
Shift in balance of power vs. dissolution of empires	The shift is the United States and the Soviet Union rising to dominance through World War II gains. Dissolution is European colonial empires breaking apart under anti-imperialist pressure.
NATO vs. Warsaw Pact	NATO is United States-led and capitalist. The Warsaw Pact is Soviet-led and communist. They are counterparts, not the same alliance.
Proxy war vs. direct war	In a proxy war the superpowers arm opposing sides and never fight each other directly, as in Korea. They never fought each other in open combat during the Cold War.
Chinese Communist Revolution vs. Great Leap Forward	1949 brought the communists to power. The 1958 to 1962 campaign industrialized and collectivized through state control.
Negotiated independence vs. armed struggle	Negotiated pairs with India and the Gold Coast. Armed struggle pairs with Algeria, Vietnam, and Angola.
Autonomy vs. independence	Autonomy is self-government within or alongside imperial rule. Independence is full sovereignty.
Partition of India vs. creation of Israel	Partition was 1947 and Israel was 1948. Both came from redrawn boundaries and both produced displacement.
Nonviolence vs. militarized states vs. violence against civilians	Nonviolence uses peaceful protest. Militarized states use force through military rule. Violence against civilians uses terrorism as a strategy.

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.** Which development set the stage for the Cold War by leaving two dominant powers in control of world affairs?
 - A. The formation of the Non-Aligned Movement
 - B. The technological and economic gains of the World War II victors, which left the United States and the Soviet Union as the two dominant powers
 - C. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991
 - D. The creation of Israel in 1948

- 2.** A country joins a military alliance of Western capitalist states for collective defense against the Soviet Union. Which alliance has it joined?
 - A. The Warsaw Pact
 - B. The Non-Aligned Movement
 - C. NATO
 - D. An arms-control treaty

- 3.** In 1950, the United States began backing South Korea while the Soviet Union and China backed North Korea. The two superpowers never fought each other directly, and the war ended in stalemate in 1953. This conflict is best described as
 - A. a proxy war
 - B. a direct war between the superpowers
 - C. nuclear proliferation
 - D. an act of decolonization

- 4.** Which development brought communists to power in China in 1949, driven by internal tensions and resistance to Japanese aggression during World War II?
 - A. The Great Leap Forward
 - B. The Chinese Communist Revolution
 - C. The Korean War
 - D. The Non-Aligned Movement

5. A colony wins its independence by fighting French troops in a long war. Which path to decolonization does this describe, and which example fits?

- A. Negotiated independence, as in India
- B. Autonomy within the empire, as in the Gold Coast
- C. Independence through armed struggle, as in Algeria or Vietnam
- D. The Non-Aligned Movement

6. In 1947, British India was divided into the independent states of India and Pakistan, and the new boundaries triggered mass population displacement and violent communal conflict. This development is known as

- A. the creation of the state of Israel
- B. negotiated independence
- C. the Partition of India
- D. the dissolution of empires

7. In the United States, a leader used nonviolent protest to challenge racial segregation and demand equal rights. This description best fits

- A. Mohandas Gandhi
- B. Martin Luther King Jr.
- C. a leader of a militarized state
- D. a movement using terrorism against civilians

8. Which combination of factors best explains the end of the Cold War around 1991?

- A. United States military and technological advances, the Soviet Union's costly and failed invasion of Afghanistan, and public discontent and economic weakness in communist countries
- B. The formation of NATO
- C. Direct combat between American and Soviet forces
- D. The spread of nuclear weapons to additional states

Answer Key

- 1. B.** The technological and economic gains of the victors shifted the global balance of power, leaving the United States and the Soviet Union dominant. That is the stage-setter. A describes a response during the Cold War, not its cause. C ended the Cold War rather than starting it. D is a boundary redrawing, not the superpower story.
- 2. C.** NATO is the United States-led alliance of Western capitalist states formed for collective defense against the Soviet Union. A is the Soviet-led counterpart, which is the swap trap. B refused alignment with either bloc. D names a type of treaty, not an alliance. Arms-control treaties were real Cold War agreements, but signing one is not joining a military alliance.
- 3. A.** The superpowers backed opposing sides without fighting each other directly, which is the definition of a proxy war. B is the trap: the whole point of a proxy war is that the superpowers did not fight directly. C describes weapons spreading, not this conflict. D is about colonies gaining independence, not Korea.
- 4. B.** The Chinese Communist Revolution of 1949 brought the communists to power. A is the later 1958 to 1962 campaign to industrialize and collectivize, which is the sequence trap. C is the Korean proxy war. D was a coalition that refused alignment, not a revolution.
- 5. C.** Fighting imperial troops is independence through armed struggle, and Algeria and Vietnam against France are the examples. A is the peaceful, diplomatic path, the opposite. B confuses self-government within an empire with full independence. D is a coalition, not a path to independence.
- 6. C.** The 1947 division of British India into India and Pakistan is the Partition of India. A is the year-swap trap: Israel was created in 1948. B is the peaceful path India itself used, but the stem asks for the name of the division. D is the broader breakup of empires, not this specific boundary redrawing.
- 7. B.** Martin Luther King Jr. used nonviolent protest to challenge segregation in the United States. A is the place trap: Gandhi used nonviolence, but against British rule in India. C describes a militarized state, which uses force. D describes terrorism, which targets civilians, not nonviolent protest.
- 8. A.** The end came from the combination of American advances, the failed 1979 invasion of Afghanistan, and internal discontent and economic weakness. B happened decades earlier and built the Cold War, not its end. C never happened, which is the trap: the superpowers never fought directly. D raised the stakes of the rivalry but did not end it.

When you check your answers, note which distinction each miss came from. Make a flashcard for that distinction and drill it spaced out over the next few days instead of rereading the whole section. If you missed one of these questions, the same distinction is worth practicing again in Rycal, where the Cold War and Decolonization deck has flashcards for it and more practice questions use the same kinds of traps.

One-Page Recall Check

Say each answer out loud before you look back, and mark the ones you cannot finish. Anything you cannot say out loud yet belongs in your flashcard deck. In Rycal, add those items to the Cold War and Decolonization deck and let spaced review bring them back over the next few days.

- Explain how World War II shifted the global balance of power toward the United States and the Soviet Union.
- Define anti-imperialism and describe its effect on European colonial empires.
- State the dates of the Cold War and name the two superpowers and the ideology each represented.
- Explain why the superpowers competed through proxy wars instead of fighting each other directly.
- Describe what the Non-Aligned Movement refused to do, and name two of its leaders.
- Distinguish NATO from the Warsaw Pact by leader, members, and purpose.
- Define nuclear proliferation as it applied during the Cold War.
- Walk through the Korean War: sides, backers, dates, and outcome.
- Describe the Chinese Communist Revolution: year, drivers, and result.
- Explain what the Great Leap Forward tried to do, when, and what happened to the population.
- Distinguish negotiated independence from independence through armed struggle, giving an example of each.
- Distinguish autonomy from independence.
- Explain what the Partition of India produced, and give its year.
- Name the two other developments that followed the redrawing of political boundaries, besides new states.
- Explain state-guided economic development in newly independent states.
- Describe migration to imperial metropolises and what ties it maintained.
- Give one fact each about Gandhi, King, and Mandela, and note what was different about Mandela's early career.
- Distinguish nonviolence, militarized states, and violence against civilians for political aims.
- List the factors that ended the Cold War, with the years for Afghanistan and the Soviet collapse.

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 Cold War and Decolonization deck under AP World History. 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

Anti-imperialism, dissolution of empires, shift in the global balance of power, The Cold War, superpowers, ideological struggle: capitalism vs. communism, Non-Aligned Movement, NATO, Warsaw Pact, nuclear proliferation, proxy wars, Korean War, Chinese Communist Revolution, Great Leap Forward, state control of the economy (Communist China), land and resource redistribution movements, decolonization, anti-colonial nationalism, negotiated independence, independence through armed struggle, autonomy vs. independence, regional, religious, and ethnic movements, redrawing of political boundaries, Partition of India, creation of the state of Israel, population displacement and resettlements, state-guided economic development, migration to imperial metropolises, nonviolence, Mohandas Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, militarized states, violence against civilians for political aims, end of the Cold War