

From peaceful coexistence to the paroxysms of the Cold War (1953–1962)

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http://www.cvce.eu/obj/from_peaceful_coexistence_to_the_paroxysms_of_the_cold_war_1953_1962-en-b5fbacee-b007-4a5c-a135-d10b06a6bf60.html



Last updated: 07/07/2016

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After the death of Stalin in March 1953, his successors adopted a more conciliatory attitude to the West. From 1955, Nikita Khrushchev, the new First Secretary of the CPSU, developed a policy of peaceful coexistence. Boosted by the advances that it had made in thermonuclear power and the space race, the USSR wanted to use the new climate of peace in the world to take the rivalry between itself and the United States onto a purely ideological and economic level.

In the United States, President Eisenhower had to make allowance for the risk of escalation and the hazards of direct nuclear confrontation with the Soviets. In 1953 he opted for the so-called 'new look' strategy. This combined diplomacy with the threat of massive retaliation. To complicate matters further, the United States was no longer the only country with nuclear weapons. It had to come to terms with technological progress made by the Soviet Union, which tested its first atomic weapon in 1949, with the first hydrogen bomb following in 1953.

The first tangible consequence of the new Soviet policy was the agreement on Austria in May 1955. The Austrian State Treaty officially put an end to the war in the Alpine country and gave it back its independence, subject to its permanent neutrality.

But despite certain encouraging signs, the distrust and ideological opposition between the two blocs continued. In Central and Eastern Europe, the populations of several satellite states attempted to cast off the Russian yoke, and the Cold War reached its peak in the early 1960s. In Europe, the status of the city of Berlin remained a major stumbling block for the two superpowers. The construction of the Berlin Wall in the summer of 1961 closed the last crossing point between West and East. Elsewhere in the world, the tension surrounding Cuba culminated in a trial of strength played out between John F. Kennedy and Nikita S. Khrushchev in October 1962 over the stationing of Soviet nuclear missiles on the island.

By the mid-1950s, East-West relations had certainly evolved and were characterised by the principle of peaceful coexistence, but the Cold War was not over and the ideological tensions between the two blocs prevailed.