

LEARN ABOUT NUCLEAR WEAPONS

The Cold War

Peace involves so much more than absence of war and armed violence. Positive peace means all people can live a life of harmony and security. Even though open warfare does not exist, there are often structures in society that deprive some groups from harmony and security: domestic violence, racism, social and economical injustice or discrimination based on gender or sexuality are a few examples. During the Cold War, there was never open war between the US and the Soviet Union, but the term 'Cold War' makes clear it was far from a time of worldwide security and harmony.

The Cold War was a time of sharp opposition between the communist Soviet Union and the capitalist US and their respective allies. The Cold War stretched from the end of World War II until around 1990, with the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Sometimes two Cold Wars are described: a first one from 1945 to mid or late 1960' s and a second one from early 1980's, with a time of relative détente in between. The nuclear arms race, however, continued throughout the period. The so-called terror balance and the arms race between the two major blocks dominated the Cold War.

The relationship between the superpowers, the US and the Soviet Union, were frosty but never escalated into open war. The Cold War, however, put its mark on the international political situation during its 45 years. Armed conflicts in Africa, Asia, Central- and South America were often heightened by the two superpowers siding with one party each in a national or regional conflict, supporting these with guns and money.

The UN and the Baruch plan

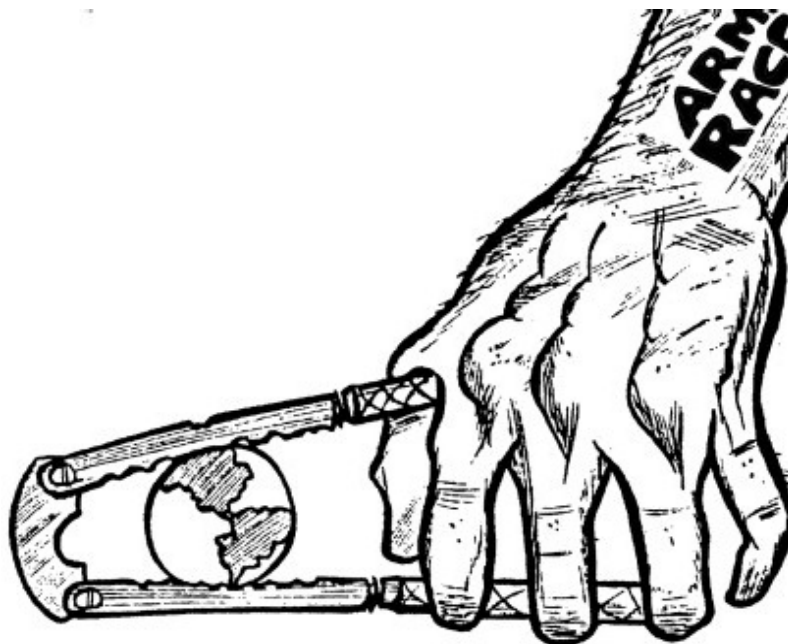
At the first UN General Assembly in January 1946, Member States adopted a resolution that created a commission tasked with planning and working for nuclear disarmament. The US laid down a plan for the abolition of nuclear weapons. It was named after the man who presented it, Bernard Baruch. The idea of the Baruch Plan was to put the use of nuclear power under international control. All the countries of the world were to be brought to agreement that nuclear power was to be used only for non-aggressive purposes. They were to promise never to acquire nuclear

weapons. Until the international control system was complete, the US would keep the nuclear weapons it already had.

The Soviet Union accepted the plans for an international control of nuclear power, but opposed one vital point of the Baruch Plan at. The Soviet Union wanted the US to destroy its nuclear weapons first. Only then would nuclear power be put under international control. The reason for this was that the Cold War between the US and the Soviet Union had already begun and the Soviet Union did not want to give the USA monopoly on nuclear weapons. The US and the Soviet Union would never agree about the proper order for abolition of nuclear weapons and the Baruch Plan was never realised. Instead, the Soviet Union performed its first nuclear test in August 1949.

Arms race, terror balance and MAD

Thus began the arms race between the two super-powers. The US and the Soviet Union kept a sharp eye on each other's nuclear arsenals. Each time the one was suspected of having increased its arsenal or acquired a new kind of nuclear weapon, the other state was soon to follow or, rather, exceed the other state's arsenal a little. This led to a mad arms race, that neither the US or the Soviet Union could stop – there would always be the risk that the enemy would have a larger, stronger and more advanced nuclear arsenal. Both states had their nuclear weapons targeted directly at each other's territories, ready to be launched within minutes.



During the Cold War, the nuclear weapon states applied a military doctrine called Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD). The doctrine assumed that both sides had enough nuclear weapons in their arsenals to annihilate the other part in the event of a hostile nuclear attack. The expected scenario was e.g. that the US attacks the Soviet Union with a smaller nuclear weapon. The Soviet Union would immediately respond with a larger attack, which would result in an even larger counterattack by the US.

The result would be exactly what the doctrine was called: Mutually Assured Destruction –absolutely mad. In fact, a large-scale nuclear war between the US and the Soviet Union would not have been limited to assured destruction of the two superpowers, but of all the world. The MAD doctrine also assumed that no one of the superpowers would dare to be the first to launch a nuclear attack, as both states had a so-called launch-on-warning system. Launch-on-warning means a warning system that detects an enemy nuclear attack before it reaches its target and thereby immediately launched a counterattack.

The MAD doctrine led to what is called the terror balance of the Cold War: the massive nuclear arsenals capable of annihilating both friends and enemies kept the superpowers from using their weapons. It was a balance on a thin thread that kept the world in constant fear: the terror balance. Although the Cold War ended almost two decades ago and the arguments for maintaining nuclear arsenals are now even less valid, disarmament in the US and Russia is proceeding slowly. Both states still keep parts of their nuclear arsenals on hair trigger alert – ready to be launched within minutes.

The Cuban Crisis, 1962

The Cuban Missile Crisis was a confrontation between the US, the Soviet Union, and Cuba during the Cold War. In Russia, it is termed the "Caribbean Crisis," while in Cuba it is called the "October Crisis." The crisis was one of the major confrontations of the Cold War, and is often regarded as the moment in which the Cold War came closest to a nuclear war.

The Cuban government had a close relationship with the communist leadership of the Soviet Union, after Fidel Castro's seizing power on the island after a revolutionary insurrection in 1959. In an attempt to overthrow the Castro regime, the US gave exiled Cubans military training. In April 1961, 1500 CIA trained Cuban exiles opposed to Castro landed at the Bay of Pigs. Cuba's military forces quickly terminated the invasion.

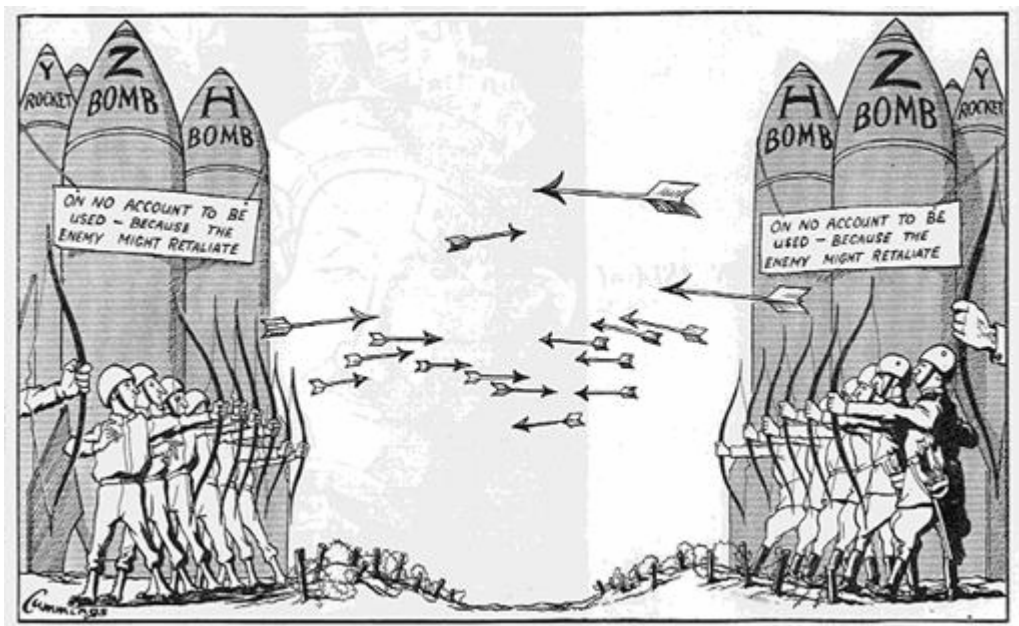
After the US invasion attempt, Fidel Castro sought military assistance from the Soviet Union. On 14 October, 1962, US spy planes took air shots over Cuba. The pictures revealed that the Soviet Union was building missile bases in Cuba. The bases would extend the range of Soviet nuclear missiles to reach far into the North American continent. The bases were estimated to be completed within 14 days, a development that the Americans obviously wanted to prevent. An air strike followed by another invasion was the first option, but the US feared counter measures that could escalate into full-scale nuclear war. A 13 day diplomatic conflict between the US and the Soviet Union took place. The world was waiting uneasily. Would the superpowers stick to diplomacy or was a nuclear war inevitable?

Despite the fact that some top US military officers favoured military intervention, American President John F. Kennedy chose another alternative: blocking all naval

traffic to Cuba, thereby preventing Soviet vessels from bringing more equipment to Cuba in order to complete the missile ramps. Since a blockade is considered an act of war, the US after discussing the issue within the OAS (Organisation of American States), decided to call it a quarantine instead. When Soviet naval ships reached the quarantine line, the situation was extremely tense. The world was at the brink of nuclear war, closer than ever. The Soviet ships, however, decided to turn around and return to the Soviet Union.

But the crisis was not over. The US considered the threat remained, since some of the missile ramps were believed to be finished. The political situation in the world was so tense there simply was no open solution. Soviet leader Nikita Chrusjtjov initiated a solution and the superpowers signed an agreement. The Soviet missile bases were to be dismantled, in exchange of a US promise never to attack Cuba with military means, and dismantle all US missile bases in Turkey.

Shortly following the crisis, a telephone "hot line" was established between the leaders of the superpowers in order to avoid starting a nuclear war based on premature conclusions, misunderstandings or pure mistakes.



Source: Daily Express, 24 August 1953, "Back to Where it all Started"