



The Cold War and the Chamizal Dispute

*“Whether you like it or not, history is on our side. We will bury you”
- Nikita Khrushchev, Premier of the Soviet Union 1958 - 1964*

From 1945 and 1989 the world was divided by the Cold War between the United States and Soviet Union. It was an ideological war: U.S. democracy and capitalism versus Soviet Union communism.* But whereas a “hot war” involves two countries or peoples fighting directly against each other, the Cold War was an indirect war. The U.S. and the Soviet Union never fought it out on the battlefield or in the air because to do so would have been utterly MAD—Mutually Assured Destruction; both countries had nuclear warheads that could deplete an entire country of its population in a nanosecond. The Cold War is a dense topic that could be studied extensively. However, for those of us who do not have that amount of time or interest, this brief essay will introduce key concepts and events of the Cold War and how they relate to the Chamizal Dispute and Chamizal Convention of 1963.

Although the U.S., the Soviet Union, and Great Britain were allies in World War II, by the end of the war, there was severe tension between them. The Soviet Union had taken the brunt of the war, losing 25,000,000 citizens and soldiers (14 percent of the Soviet population) to Nazi Germany. The Soviet Union wanted to set up “puppet governments” throughout Eastern Europe to make sure that they would never be attacked again. The U.S. and Great Britain saw this as a threat, believing that the Soviet government was attempting to diffuse its gospel of communism throughout the world.

True to its word, the Soviet Union began setting up communist regimes throughout Eastern Europe. President Harry Truman reacted by calling on Congress for a \$400,000,000 foreign aid package to help Greece defend itself. Also, by Secretary of State George Marshall’s urging, the U.S. gave significant monetary aid to western European nations to repel communism.

At the same time that the U.S. was combating communism by giving money to Europe, the Berlin Blockade and Berlin Airlift occurred. At the end of World War II, Berlin had been divided in half, with East Berlin being occupied by the Soviet Union and West Berlin being controlled by the “West”. The Blockade started when the Soviet Union blocked railroad and vehicular traffic into West Berlin in an attempt to starve West Berliners. The Soviet Union hoped that West Berlin would succumb to them. However, the allies of France, Great Britain, and the U.S. solved the problem by flying airplane after airplane into West Berlin to feed the citizens. West Berlin actually ended up with a surplus of food! The Berlin Blockade ended up being an embarrassment for the Soviet Union.

During the Korean War (1950-1953) the U.S. military intervened directly. Similar to Berlin, Korea had been divided into two sovereign countries at the end of World War II—a communist north and free-republic south. In 1950 North Korea called for a unified, communist Korea, and



A stressed out JFK and U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara during the Cuban Missile Crisis.
Wikipedia Photo

* It must be noted that Soviet Union “communism” does not refer precisely to the dictionary definition of communism. Just like some of us draw a distinction between U.S. democracy and a true democracy, there was a difference between true communism (socialism) and Soviet Union communism.

attacked South Korea. The Soviet Union supplied North Korea with money, ammunition, and special fighter pilots. The U.S. did not want communism to spread anymore than it already had. As a result, thousands of U.S. troops fought alongside South Korean forces to keep the country “free.” By 1953, North Korea had been forced to retreat and the war ended. To this day, North Korea remains communist while South Korea remains a republic.

Another defining event of the Cold War was the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. It is widely regarded as the closest the superpowers ever came to nuclear warfare. The crisis started when communist leader Fidel Castro and his rebels overthrew the Bautista government and took power in 1959. The U.S. then trained a group of Cubans to oust him from office, but the coup failed. Castro, knowing the U.S. was already against him, allied his island nation with the Soviet Union. The U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) attempted several covert operations to oust Castro, but the missions failed again. It was at this point that a reconnaissance mission by the U.S. military discovered nuclear missiles in Cuba. After President Kennedy was notified about the nuclear warheads, several intense days of negotiations occurred between the U.S., the Soviet Union, and Cuba. Luckily, an agreement was met and the Soviet Union took its missiles out of Cuba. Catastrophe was thus avoided.

The same year that the Cuban Missile Crisis occurred, Kennedy met with President Adolfo Lopez Mateos of Mexico. The U.S. and Mexico were not on the friendliest terms and hadn't been for the past hundred years. The tension between the two nations was largely due to a section of land known as the Chamizal tract, which was located along the Rio Grande between El Paso and Ciudad Juarez. Due to the shifting course of the river, the Chamizal tract went from being on the Mexican side of the river to being on the U.S. side. Both nations claimed the Chamizal tract

as their own, and the land dispute was a thorn in their relationship for decades.

Kennedy visited Lopez Mateos to improve the relationship between the two countries. After all, if Mexico was an ally of the U.S., then Mexico would not be an ally of the Soviet Union. The two presidents decided on a plan of action to settle their border dispute: the Chamizal Convention of 1963. Through the Convention, the Chamizal tract was given back to Mexico. The Convention established a relationship of friendship, diplomacy, peace, and understanding between the two nations.

After the Chamizal Convention of 1963 settled the Chamizal dispute, the next major event in the Cold War was the Vietnam War, which occurred from 1959 to 1975. Similar to the Korean War, Vietnam was divided in two, a communist North Vietnam and a “free” South Vietnam. North Vietnam wanted to unite with South Vietnam, which meant turning South Vietnam communist. In 1964, Lyndon Baines Johnson sent tens of thousands of U.S. soldiers into South Vietnam to help defend the country from communist invasion. But even with all the U.S. troops and all the bombings in the Vietnam countryside, communism ran supreme. The U.S. withdrew its troops in the early 1970s and to this day Vietnam is a socialist (communist) state.

The Cold War is a titanic in the ocean of world history. It is often seen through a negative lens. For example, the Vietnam and Korean Wars are not exactly happy events in our history. However, a positive event in the Cold War is often overlooked: the peaceful resolution of a century-long border dispute between the U.S. and Mexico. Chamizal National Memorial promotes the idea that conflicts, no matter how big or small, can be resolved through diplomacy, not warfare. We can all learn from the many events of the Cold War, but most importantly we should dwell on and promote the good that came out of it.



A U.S. Air Force B-52 Bomber hits a Korean supply base, circa 1951.
Wikipedia Photo