

The struggle against Communism lasted longer than all of America's other wars put together.

The Forty Years' War

Photos courtesy Chuck Mordam via Warren Thompson





Escorting a Tu-95 "Bear" bomber down the Atlantic Coast was a fairly common Cold War mission and illustrates how close the Soviet Union and the US often came to a direct confrontation.



Some say the Cold War began even before the end of World War II, but Soviet leader Joseph Stalin officially initiated it when he attacked his wartime Allies in a speech in February 1946. The next month at Westminster College, Fulton, Mo., Winston S. Churchill, former British Prime Minister, made his "Iron Curtain" speech, noting that all the eastern European capitals were now in Soviet hands. The US Army Air Forces had demobilized much of its World War II strength even as Moscow provoked Communist Party take-overs in Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia in 1947 and 1948. Emboldened, the USSR began a blockade of the Western-controlled sectors of Berlin in spring 1948, intending to drive out the Allies. The newly independent US Air Force countered with a massive airlift of food and supplies into Berlin. C-54 Skymasters like the one at left earned their fame handling this mission.

The Soviet Union conceded failure in May 1949, and a C-54 crew made the Berlin Airlift's last flight on September 30, 1949. In the following decades, conflicts flared between the USSR and satellite countries. In this 1968 photo, Czechs carry a comrade wounded in Prague during the Soviet invasion to crush Alexander Dubcek's attempt at reform. Earlier, the Hungarians had risen up against the Communist regime and were also brutally crushed. The Czechoslovakian movement became known as the "Prague Spring," and Dubcek's program to free his country from Soviet control ended when forces of the USSR and four other Warsaw Pact nations overthrew Dubcek and installed a hard-line, pro-Moscow puppet government.



Charles E. Yeager via Robert F. Dorr



Just before the Berlin Airlift ended in 1949, the Soviet Union detonated its first nuclear bomb—much sooner than the Western world had anticipated. At the same time, attention turned to the Far East, as Mao Zedong proclaimed the People's Republic of China in September 1949. Just nine months later, North Korean Communists invaded South Korea. The Air Force entered the age of jet-to-jet combat during the Korean War, where the F-86 Sabre became its best-known fighter. USAF's hottest aircraft also served in Europe: At left in a photo taken in about 1955 is an F-86H from the 50th Fighter-Bomber Wing, Hahn AB, Germany, flown by Lt. Col. Fred J. Ascani, wing commander.



Knowing that the USSR now had nuclear capabilities, Gen. Curtis E. LeMay embarked on a major campaign to strengthen Strategic Air Command. SAC had been established in 1946, along with Tactical Air Command and Air Defense Command, in the post-World War II USAAF reorganization. Above and at right, the Boeing B-47 Stratojet, the world's first sweptwing bomber, symbolized the swift response and capability that characterized SAC. As an RB-47, the aircraft served in the vanguard of reconnaissance efforts in the Cold War, sometimes flying sensitive missions requiring a dash into Soviet airspace.

The arms race between the Soviet Union and the US escalated through the 1950s. Both sides produced an abundance of new weapons and aircraft types. In the US, the list included the "Century Series": the North American F-100, the McDonnell F-101, the Lockheed F-104, the Republic F-105, and the Convair F-102 and F-106. The Soviets produced the MiG series: MiG-15, MiG-17, MiG-19, and MiG-21.



via Warren Thompson

Global operations required range and—to maintain it—fuel. At right, in June 1951, a North American RB-45 Tornado became the first jet bomber to be refueled in flight by a KB-29. The KB-29s were converted B-29 Superfortresses. Boeing eventually outfitted more than 100 of the old bombers for the increasingly important air refueling mission.



Buick Butcher via Warren Thompson



Cold War interception in the cold: North American Aerospace Defense Command was activated in 1957 to integrate command of US and Canadian air defense forces. In its early years, it had custody of fighters, interceptors, surface-to-air missiles, control centers, and other facilities to guard against attack.

F-102 Delta Daggers (like those over Greenland at left) spearheaded Alaskan Air Command, where they were to join SAC bombers in responding to attack from the north. F-102s were the first supersonic, all-weather jet interceptors. The Distant Early Warning Line, a high-frequency electronic "fence" established in 1957, also stood guard up north. Stretching thousands of miles across Canada and Alaska, the DEW Line equipment, monitored by USAF and RCAF personnel, was said to be so sensitive that geese could set off its alarms.

This Douglas C-124C Globemaster II—predecessor to today's C-17 Globemaster III—prepares for a relief mission in 1963 into central Africa—then seen as an arena for East-West conflict. A move for independence from Belgium precipitated a civil war in the Congo, prompting a United Nations airlift of supplies, troops, and materiel and an evacuation of refugees. By the time the airlift ended in January 1964, Military Air Transport Service had flown 2,128 missions, transporting more than 63,000 passengers and more than 18,000 tons of cargo. This C-124C, from the 39th Air Transport Squadron, Dover AFB, Del., flew supplies into Leopoldville (today Kinshasa, Zaire).



Col. Albert A. Villasis via Robert F. Dorn



The US began a series of Cold War intelligence operations that would lead from the U-2 (above) to the Corona satellite reconnaissance programs to the SR-71 "Blackbird" and beyond. The gathering of intelligence made headlines in 1960 when Moscow announced that a U-2 piloted by Francis Gary Powers had been shot down over Soviet territory. A four-power summit in Paris on the tense Berlin situation was under way, but the U-2 incident caused the collapse of talks. This, combined with the West's continuing refusal to leave West Berlin, led Soviet Premier Nikita S. Khrushchev to order the building of the Berlin Wall in August 1961.



The U-2 also figured in the Cold War's most dangerous confrontation—the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. U-2 pilot Maj. Rudolf Anderson, Jr., was shot down by an SA-2 missile over Cuba while on a reconnaissance flight to document (as in the photo below, right) the suspected buildup of Soviet offensive ballistic missiles on the island, which had triggered the crisis. After an "eyeball-to-eyeball" confrontation with President John F. Kennedy, Premier Khrushchev agreed to withdraw the missiles. When this threat of war had abated, President Kennedy met with USAF Chief of Staff General LeMay and members of Major Anderson's reconnaissance team (l-r) Col. Ralph D. Streakley, Lt. Col. Joe M. O'Brady, and Maj. Richard S. Heyser.

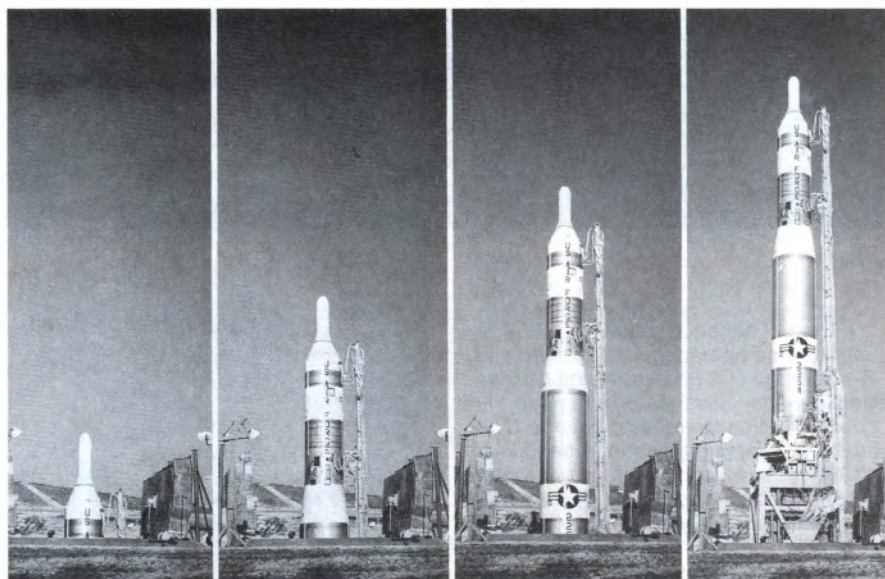




In the 1960s, the US became more deeply involved in Vietnam, also viewed as a cockpit of superpower rivalry. This T-28 Trojan, with markings of the South Vietnamese Air Force, was flown in the early 1960s, probably by a USAF pilot. A detachment of the 4400th Combat Crew Training Squadron, code-named Farm Gate, used armed T-28s, RB-26s, and SC-47s to train South Vietnamese in commando operations. These aircraft were also modified into fighter-bombers for use in counterinsurgency warfare.

A 97-foot, 110-ton intercontinental ballistic missile practices for liftoff from the original Titan I Operations Systems Test Facility at Vandenberg AFB, Calif.

This early Titan was housed in a concrete and steel underground silo hardened against nuclear attack and was raised to the surface by elevator for launch. Although the 1960s ushered in the era of nuclear ICBMs, the systems were never launched against an enemy. The first ICBM, Atlas, gained fame launching Marine Lt. Col. John H. Glenn, Jr., on the first US orbital space mission in 1962. Titans, after retiring from ICBM duty in 1987, now serve as expendable space-launch vehicles. The Minuteman ICBM, deployed more than 30 years ago, is still in service.



In February 1960, Gen. Thomas S. Power (left), commander in chief of SAC, described Soviet missile capabilities to the Senate's Space and Preparedness Committees. Joining him was Lt. Gen. Bernard A. Schriever (right), commander of Air Research and Development Command. Even as SAC's bomber and tanker fleet reached its peak, General Schriever was leading a military-industrial team that would field an intermediate-range ballistic missile (Thor) and three ICBM systems (Atlas, Titan, and Minuteman) in less than 10 years' time.



It was called the nuclear triad—US strategic deterrent forces, made up of ICBMs, SAC bombers like this B-52G, refueling from a KC-135 tanker (above), and Navy ballistic missile submarines. SAC received its first Stratofortress in 1955, where it became its primary strategic bomber. Other elements of USAF always on alert during the Cold War are symbolized by the EC-135 airborne command post crew at right, sprinting to their aircraft. EC-135s (later joined by E-4Bs) were on continuous alert from 1961 until 1990 in the Looking Glass system, which was to serve as an alternative means of command in case SAC headquarters at Offutt AFB, Neb., were destroyed.

By the 1970s, domestic and international political considerations led the US and USSR to conclude a strategic arms agreement in May 1972, putting a ceiling on the size of missile forces for the next five years, and a second treaty banning large nationwide antiballistic missile systems.



USAF photo by SSgt Jerry Eaker



Photo by Randy Jolly



Faced with the need to maintain dominant airpower, USAF developed weapons and created training systems that reflected the rigors of combat against first-class Soviet systems. USAF took delivery of its first McDonnell Douglas F-15 in 1974 and its first General Dynamics (now Lockheed Martin) F-16 in 1978, along with a host of improved missiles and precision guided munitions. Above is the first F-15 during testing. It opened an era of large yet maneuverable air-superiority fighters. At Nellis AFB, Nev., the first Red Flag exercise got under way in November 1975, marking the beginning of highly realistic training for combat aircrews against "Aggressor" squadrons who used Soviet tactics. Though they never faced off with Warsaw Pact forces, F-15s and F-16s proved superior in combat against Soviet equipment in the Persian Gulf War.



Photo by William A. Ford



In December 1979, Soviet forces invaded Afghanistan and became embroiled in their own futile, eight-year Asian land war. Inside the USSR, changes were taking place. Soviet President Mikhail S. Gorbachev and President Ronald Reagan signed a treaty in 1987 to eliminate intermediate-range missiles in Europe. After an attempted coup in 1991, Gorbachev resigned as leader and several republics declared their independence—including those with nuclear weapons, Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan. The Soviet Union broke up on December 26, 1991.

For the first time, Russian aircraft could fly near (and even over) US territory without USAF fighters scrambling on alert: At right, on a goodwill visit, a Russian Il-76 transport heads a formation of two Su-27 Flankers and two F-15s, on the way to Langley AFB, Va., from McChord AFB, Wash.



USAF photo by TSgt Steve Turner

Photo © Wreck / Uniphoto



Taking down the barbed wire: Before the Cold War could come to an end, a revolution took place where it had begun—in eastern Europe. By 1981, 9.5 million workers had joined Solidarity, the trade union in Poland working to establish a non-Communist government, and in June 1989 its candidates swept the parliamentary elections. In October 1989, the Communist Party in Hungary was formally dissolved (the last Soviet troops left the country in June 1991). The next month, the Communist Party leader—Todor Zhivkov—who had headed Bulgaria for 35 years, resigned. Also in November, tens of thousands of Czechs protested in the streets of Prague, demanding free elections and forcing the resignation of the country's Communist Party leadership.

In East Germany, nationwide demonstrations demanding reform forced the country's Communist leader, Erich Honecker, from office. The Berlin Wall came tumbling down. It was November 11, 1989. Perhaps because it happened in a city they had saved through a famous USAF mission, it was a special triumph for the Air Force. ■



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