

## Debating the end of the Cold War

The sudden end of the Cold War has produced a substantial amount of scholarly debate. Among the central questions are why and how did the post-1945 era come to such a rapid conclusion in the late 1980s, who won the Cold War and was the 'victory' worth its price? In general, the disagreements relate to the fact that different answers are given to one specific question: did internal or external factors play the key role in bringing down the Soviet Union and its empire?

Those stressing the external factors as central to the demise of the USSR essentially argue that the massive military expansion of the United States during the Reagan years and the president's vocal anti-communism prompted the Soviet leadership to respond in kind. However, given the dire state of the Soviet economy, its military build-up forced it to attempt to introduce internal reforms but these only revealed the bankruptcy of the Soviet state, which then collapsed. Another argument, which also emphasizes external factors, stresses the importance of the attempt by the United States and the West generally to engage with the Soviet bloc during the détente period. It contends that, alongside the military build-up, the growing links between East and West Europeans helped to undermine the legitimacy of totalitarian rule. In addition, it has been argued that with the advent of the information age, the Soviet bloc was economically and technologically lagging further and further behind the West and this forced it to change its isolationist policies in order to tap into 'capitalist' markets and know-how. For the various arguments, students should consult the essays in Odd Arne Westad (ed.), *Reviewing the Cold War* (London, 2000) and David Kotz and Fred Weir, *Revolution from Above* (London, 1997).

While all of the factors mentioned above were undoubtedly important in eroding totalitarian rule in the Soviet bloc, other observers have focused more upon the internal decline of the Soviet state. By the 1980s the USSR and its satellites in Eastern Europe, it is argued, lacked internal political legitimacy and had been forced to accept the existence of a permanent and growing black market. Decades of mismanagement could not be cured by Gorbachev's well-intentioned reforms alone but required a complete overhaul of the system, a fact that dissident groups advocated increasingly vocally.

What about the demise of the Cold War as an international system? While it can be partly explained as a result of one side's victory over another, some analysts have pointed to the relative decline of both superpowers. Indeed, one of the best-selling titles of the late 1980s was Paul Kennedy's *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (London, 1988), a book that essentially predicted the fall of the United States! While Kennedy was wrong in his prediction in this regard, the general point about the so-called 'imperial overreach' of the two superpowers during the Cold War still carries resonance. In a more recent book, *The Global Cold War* (Cambridge, 2005), Odd Arne Westad stresses the importance of the resentment caused by Soviet and American interventions in the Third World as an important cause for the demise of the USSR and the Cold War international system. Indeed, by the late 1980s, he contends that the Cold War division of the world had become increasingly irrelevant as a defining characteristic of the international system. Understanding the causes of its demise, however, provides important lessons for the twenty-first century.