DETENTE AND A NEW COLD WAR

The years 1971 to 1979 were a time of detente between the United States and Soviet Union. Detente is a French word meaning 'relaxation'. In other words, relations between them improved. Why did this happen, and why did it not last?

Reasons for detente

During the 1960s both the USA and the Soviet Union had been in an 'arms race' against each other (see pages 16-17). By 1970 the Soviet Union had caught up with the USA. Its 1050 long-range missiles almost matched the USA's 1056. As they now had the power to destroy each other completely, there was no need to continue the race.

Each country had other reasons for wanting detente. The Soviet Union could not really afford the huge cost of the arms race. It needed to spend more on non-military needs, such as housing. It also wanted to increase its trade with the West and to share in the West's new technology. The United States wanted to end the unpopular Vietnam War (see page 31). If it was on better relations with the Soviet Union, the Soviets might help to restrain communist North Vietnam.

Both countries, therefore, were willing to make agreements with each other which would have been unthinkable ten years before. The first was an arms reduction treaty. By the SALT I Treaty (1972) they agreed to limit the number of ABMs (anti-ballistic missiles) and to freeze the number of their nuclear bombers and long-range missiles.

Further agreements followed in 1973-4, such as a ban on the testing of small nuclear weapons, and in 1975 they carried out a joint Soyuz-Apollo space flight. Also in 1975 they signed the Helsinki Accords, agreeing not to use force to change any country's border in Europe, and promising to respect human rights. In 1979 a SALT 2 Treaty put further limits on the number of missiles and bombers they could have.

The failure of detente

Despite these agreements, the two countries remained enemies. For example, they continued to back opposite sides in other countries' wars, such as the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, and they continued to spy on each other and to criticise each other's way of life.

In 1979, relations between them broke down again when Soviet forces invaded Afghanistan. They did so to stop the country's pro-Soviet communist government from being overthrown by rebels. The United States reacted by putting restrictions on Soviet trade, suspending the SALT 2 Treaty, and boycotting the 1980 Olympic Games in Moscow.

The 'New Cold War', 1980–85

This was the start of a new phase in the Cold War, and of a new arms race. When the Soviet Union started to replace its older missiles with modern SS-20 missiles, each with several warheads, the United States announced plans for several new kinds of weapon: in 1981 for a neutron bomb, which could kill people with radiation without damaging buildings; in 1982 for the MX (missile experimental); and in 1983 for the 'Star Wars' Strategic Defence Initiative to develop a defence umbrella of laser weapons in space (see picture). In Europe in 1983, US air bases were equipped with Cruise and Pershing missiles armed with nuclear warheads. By 1985 the two countries had around 10,000 nuclear warheads each, a fraction of which could destroy not only both countries but also most of the northern hemisphere.

This new arms race was accompanied by a new war of words. President Reagan, for example, denounced the Soviet Union as an 'empire of evil', while the Soviet Union boycotted the Los Angeles Olympic Games in 1984.

Gorbachev's 'new thinking'

In 1985 there was a change of leadership in the Soviet Union. Mikhail Gorbachev, the new Party Chairman, wanted to concentrate on the country's growing internal problems. He wanted, for example, to modernise industry and make it more efficient. This could only be paid for by a reduction in arms spending. Gorbachev therefore needed to ease tension with the USA, to halt the arms race, and to end the occupation of Afghanistan.

As a result of this 'new thinking' Gorbachev was more willing than his predecessors to talk to the United States, and he held a number of meetings with President Reagan. Results came quickly. In 1987 they signed an INF (Intermediate Nuclear Forces) Treaty, promising the elimination of all medium-range missiles in Europe within three years. With the Soviet Union giving up 3000 warheads, and the USA 800, this was the most dramatic step they had taken towards nuclear disarmament.

Task

Make a timeline for the years 1970 to 1990. Put the following events onto the timeline, using one colour for events to do with detente, a second colour for events to do with the New Cold War, and a third colour for events connected with Gorbachev's 'new thinking':

- Soviet invasion of Afghanistan
- Helsinki Accords
- US Strategic Defence Initiative
- SALT 2 Treaty
- US boycott of Moscow Olympics
- Soyuz-Apollo mission
- Cruise missiles deployed in Europe
- Soviet boycott of Los Angeles Olympics
- INF Treaty
- SALT 1 Treaty