

Nuclear Arms Race

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The Cold War



Talking to reporters about atomic energy; sequential views. *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 29 December 1934.
Photo: courtesy AIP, Emilio Segrè/Archive; Archives

Not long after World War II ended in 1945, new hostilities emerged between the United States and the Soviet Union. Known as the Cold War, this conflict began as a struggle for control over the conquered areas of Eastern Europe in the late 1940s and continued into the early 1990s. Initially, only the United States possessed atomic weapons, but in 1949 the Soviet Union exploded an atomic bomb and the arms race began. Both countries continued building more and bigger bombs. In 1952, the United States tested a new and more powerful weapon: the hydrogen bomb. The Soviet Union followed with its own version in 1953.

Einstein watched with growing dismay as the two superpowers seemed to move closer and closer to nuclear war. Convinced that the only way to prevent the annihilation of humankind was to prevent all future wars, Einstein spoke out more fervently than ever in favor of international cooperation and disarmament.

A New Conflict

In the last decade of his life, Einstein dedicated himself to the cause of nuclear disarmament. "The war is won," he said in December 1945, "but the peace is not." The development of the atomic bomb and the subsequent arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union ushered in a new conflict: the Cold War. Einstein feared this battle would end with the destruction of civilization.

But Einstein never gave up his fight for peace. In the years between 1945 and 1955, Einstein was at his most active politically, frequently speaking and writing about his desire for peace through international cooperation and elimination of all nuclear weapons. Einstein was not alone in promoting these ideas—quite a number of leading scientists of the time shared his views—but international fame made Einstein one of the most effective representatives of the cause. Yet even Einstein could not reverse the political tide: The Cold War lasted for more than four decades.

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