

Origins of the Cold War, 1945 to 1949?

What was the Cold War?

For more than 40 years – 1945-1989 – the USSR was in conflict with the West. But that conflict never came to open warfare ('hot war'). Why? It was mainly because the existence of nuclear weapons made hot war MAD ('mutually assured destruction'). That was why the conflict stayed a 'cold war'; both sides tried to undermine and destroy each other, but they dared not let it go to actual fighting – that would have destroyed them.

Causes of the Cold War, 1945 to 1949

When you are thinking about the causes of the Cold War, the most important thing is to separate in your mind the long term underlying factors from the series of clashes and misunderstandings which actually triggered the breakdown in relations.

The USSR and the USA were separated by a huge ideological gulf. So the only thing that held the allies together was the need to destroy Hitler's Nazis. Given their underlying differences – when Hitler was finally defeated in 1945 – a Cold War was perhaps inevitable. The USA was a capitalist democracy; the USSR was a communist dictatorship. Both sides believed that they held the key to the future happiness of the human race. Neither was conflict new to the two sides. Stalin could not forgive Britain and America for helping the Whites against the Bolsheviks in the Civil Wars (1918-1921), and he believed that they had delayed D-Day in the hope that the Nazis would destroy Russia. In the meantime, Britain and America blamed the Nazi-Soviet Pact of 1939 for starting the Second World War. Also, the two sides' aims for Germany were different – Stalin wanted Germany to be ruined by reparations, and he wanted a buffer of friendly states round Russia to prevent a repeat of the Nazi invasion of 1941. Britain and America wanted a democratic and capitalist Germany as a world trading partner, strong enough to stop the spread of Communism westwards.

It is impossible to identify a time when the Cold War 'broke out'. After 1945, a series of clashes and misunderstandings meant that the ideological differences widened more and more into open hostility.

Yalta and Potsdam

Even at the Yalta Conference of February 1945 there were signs of conflict. The war was still going on, but it was clear that Hitler was going to be defeated, so the allies met to decide how they would organise Europe after the war. It was easy to agree to bring Nazi war-criminals to trial, admit Russia into the United Nations, and divide Germany into four 'zones', occupied by Britain, France, the USA and the USSR. But there was tension about two things: firstly, the kind of governments that would be set up in eastern Europe, particularly Poland (in the end the allies published a *Declaration of Liberated Europe* agreeing to set up 'democratic and self-governing countries' and to 'the holding of free elections as soon as possible'; the fact that 'democracy' and 'free elections' meant different things to the two sides was passed over). The second source of conflict – reparations – was postponed by agreeing to set up a commission to look into the matter.

When the three met at Potsdam (July 1945), Hitler had been defeated. Also Roosevelt (who had liked Stalin) had died and been replaced as US President by Truman, who was aggressively anti-Communist, and who had the atomic bomb (when Russia did not). Most of all, Stalin had recently ordered the non-communist leaders in Poland arrested. So at Potsdam, the tensions below the surface at Yalta – about eastern Europe and reparations – came out into open disagreement. The *Protocols* agreed at Potsdam merely repeated the agreements at Yalta, except that Russia was allowed to take reparations from the Soviet Zone, and also 10% of the industrial equipment of the western zones as reparations.

Salami tactics and the Fulton Speech

During the war, Stalin had trained eastern European Communists in Russia, and after Potsdam they returned to their own countries and began to take over. They took part in elections, and became government ministers, but then packed the army and police with communists, got non-communists discredited and arrested, and so took total control bit by bit – as Rakosi said in Hungary, 'like slicing salami'.

By 1946, observers in the west were becoming alarmed. George Kennan, an American embassy official in Moscow, sent a 'Long Telegram' saying that the Soviets had to be stopped. On 5 March 1946, Winston Churchill gave a speech in Fulton in America in which he said that eastern Europe was cut off from the free world by 'an iron curtain', and was 'subject to Soviet influence . . . totalitarian control [and] police governments'. The message was so clear that Stalin claimed that Churchill's speech was a declaration of war.

The Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan

Stalin had promised not to try to take over Greece, and he kept his word, but that did not stop Greek Communists trying to take over the government by force. A unit of British soldiers was stopping them, but in February 1947, the British informed Truman that they were pulling out. Truman acted. He sent American soldiers to Greece, and on 12 March 1947 he told Congress that it was America's duty to preserve freedom and democracy in Europe. The key basis to what became known as the 'Truman Doctrine' was 'containment' – the decision to stop any further expansion of communism.

In June 1947, the American General George Marshall went to Europe to see what was needed to stop the expansion of Communism. He returned with the impression that people were so poor that all Europe was about to turn Communist. Rather than a military option to stop Russia, Marshall recommended an injection of \$17 billion cash for aid, and to get the European economy going again. Prosperous, free people, he argued, would not turn Communist. At first, Congress hesitated to agree to send the money, but then – in February 1948 – Czechoslovakia turned Communist. The Czech Prime Minister, Masaryk, mysteriously 'fell' out of a window and hard-line Stalinists took over. In March 1948, Congress voted Marshall Aid to Europe.

In the west, the Cold War is often represented as America moving to defend freedom against Stalin's aggression. This is only partly true, and you will need to understand that Russian historians saw things very differently. Stalin did want a 'buffer' of states around Russia, but this had been tacitly agreed at Yalta, and it was Truman, at Potsdam, who adopted a new aggressive stance against Stalin. Russia did not send her army once into ANY eastern European state to turn it Communist – they all turned Communist of their own accord. Indeed, Stalin had promised to leave Greece alone, and he did so – it was America who intervened militarily in Greece. And Russia saw the Fulton speech as a declaration of war, and Marshall Aid as an act of war. All Russia did during this time was to set up Comintern (1947), a meeting of Communist eastern European states. By 1948, the USA and the USSR were involved in the 'Cold War'.

The Berlin Blockade

If the opening conflicts in the Cold War were about eastern Europe, the first direct confrontation of the Cold War arose out of the other source of disagreement between the allies – the treatment of Germany. During 1945-1948, Britain and the USA were trying to restore Germany. In January 1947, they joined their two zones together (called Bi-zonia: 'two zones'). On 1 June 1948, they announced that they wanted to create the new country of West Germany. And on 23 June 1948 they introduced a new currency into 'Bizonia' and west Berlin.

By contrast, during 1945-1948 Russia had been stripping the factories of east Germany of machinery to take as reparations. Western efforts to restore Germany were seen by Stalin as a direct attack. Berlin (like Germany) was divided into four sectors, but it was deep in the Russian sector of eastern Germany. On 24 June the Russians stopped all road and rail traffic into Berlin. Stalin said he was defending the east German economy against the new currency, which was ruining it. The western powers said he was trying to starve west Berlin into surrender.

Truman ignored General Clay, who wanted to invade east Germany (Truman did not want a 'hot war'). Instead, for 318 days, the Americans supplied West Berlin by air. More than a quarter of million flights carried 1.5 million tons of supplies. Stalin could have shot down the American planes, but he did not want to cause a hot war either. On 12 May 1949, he admitted defeat and reopened the borders.

In April 1949, the western Allies set up NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) as a defensive alliance against Russia, and in May 1949, America, Britain and France united their zones into the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany). In October 1949, Stalin set up the German Democratic Republic (East Germany).