

The Origins of the Cold War

Winston Churchill is reputed to have said that he would have done a deal with the devil to defeat Hitler in the Second World War. Joseph Stalin, the dictator of Communist Russia, probably fit the description, having presided over the deaths of tens of millions in the 1930s. Nonetheless, Stalin likely felt a similar ideological unease when Great Britain and the United States became his allies in the fight against Nazi Germany; Great Britain and the United States were two of the world's most influential capitalist countries, and they had both fought the Bolsheviks and funded the Bolsheviks' enemies during the Russian Civil War. The alliance worked well during the war. Once the Nazis had been defeated, however, things quickly fell apart.

Thus the Cold War – so called because the two sides never declared war on each other – between the Soviet bloc and the Western powers quickly became a global conflict. The Cold War happened partly because the two superpowers of the postwar world represented two starkly different ideologies: the democratic, capitalist United States against the totalitarian, communist Soviet Union. Both countries were committed to bringing their ideology to the rest of the world. Yet the Cold War also happened for more conventional reasons – control over resources and territory and disagreements between leaders. This section will examine the origins of the Cold War and discuss the events between 1945 and 1949, when the Soviet Union successfully tested the atomic bomb and the countries of the West joined in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

President Truman and the Bomb

Franklin Delano Roosevelt was taking a much-needed break at his cottage in Georgia on April 12, 1945, when suddenly he fell backwards out of his chair. When his attendants reached him, he complained of a massive headache. At 3:31 p.m. that day, FDR (as he was commonly known) died of a brain hemorrhage, and the United States went into mourning for the president who had led them through some of their toughest times – the Great Depression and the Second World War.

Roosevelt's vice president was a hard-working Missouri man named Harry S. Truman. Born in 1884, Truman was a farmer and had served in the First World War. Upon his return, he began a number of business ventures, all of which eventually failed. At the same time, though, he was steadily climbing the ladder of the Democratic Party. He was elected to the Senate in 1934. Ten years later, Roosevelt handpicked him as his next vice president, believing that Truman was someone behind whom all the wings of the Democratic Party could unite. He also expected that Truman would fade into the background, like most vice presidents before and since.

In the first few weeks of his vice presidency, Truman rarely saw FDR. Roosevelt didn't brief him on the atomic experiment or the change in American tactics overseas. Suddenly, less than five months into his term, Truman was leading the nation during one of the most difficult and crucial periods in American history. No other president had had to solve so many complex problems with so little preparation.

One of Truman's biggest decisions – one that historians still discuss today – was what to do about Japan. On May 5, 1945, shortly after Truman took over the presidency, Germany surrendered. Hitler committed suicide, and the Allies controlled Berlin. Yet Japan continued to fight, even though its forces had been steadily losing ground and most of its cities had been firebombed by American planes. American generals warned Truman that Japan might stubbornly refuse to surrender for another several months, and the fighting could cost 100,000 American lives.

The generals proposed an alternative plan for victory. Seconds before 5:30 a.m. on July 16, 1945, the Los Alamos night sky was suddenly illuminated with a blinding fireball. The test, code-named Operation Trinity, in which the first atomic bomb was detonated, had been successful, thanks to years of research and hard work, and an unlimited military budget between late 1942 and the summer of 1945. The generals suggested that if the United States dropped an atomic bomb on Japan, it would scare the Japanese emperor into surrender.

While the United States prepared for a ground invasion of Japan, military planners also outlined their ideas of where to drop an atomic bomb. They chose Hiroshima, an industrial and military center, as the first target. It (along with three other cities that the Americans considered bombing) was spared from the destructive bombing campaign that the Americans carried out against Japanese cities in the summer of 1945. In the absence of significant destruction, the American planners believed that they could get a good assessment of the atomic bomb's usefulness as a weapon.

On July 26, 1945, the Allies demanded that the Japanese surrender or risk destruction of their homeland. The Allied communiqué did not mention the atomic bomb, but it is likely that they had already agreed to use it if the Japanese refused to surrender. Two days later, the Japanese officially rejected the Allies' demand, and the Americans began preparations to drop the atomic bomb. Britain was also consulted; the Soviet Union was not.

On the morning of August 6, 1945, a B-29 bomber called the *Enola Gay* dropped a bomb code-named "Little Boy" over Hiroshima. The Japanese did not surrender quickly enough; they were considering terms for surrender when on August 9 the *Bockscar* dropped "Fat Man," another atomic bomb, over the port city of Nagasaki. On August 15, Japan surrendered. By the end of the year, more than 100,000 Japanese had died either from the blast or the radiation.

Historians also believe that Truman had another reason for agreeing to drop the atomic bombs – to showcase their destructive power to Russia. When the generals approached Truman with possible plans for the campaign against Japan, they also noted that Japan would likely have to be subdued in a joint Allied ground invasion. This meant that Russia would probably get a share of the spoils, namely, more territory in east Asia. On August 9, the day that the bomb was dropped on Nagasaki, the Soviet Union invaded Manchuria. By dropping atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the United States was trying to show that it was strong enough to end the conflict on its own terms and deny the Russians more territory.

An Iron Curtain

“From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic an ‘iron curtain’ has descended across the continent,” declared Sir Winston Churchill, the former British prime minister (he had lost an election the previous year), to a crowd in Fulton, Missouri on March 5, 1946. “Behind that line lie all the capitals of the ancient states of Central and Eastern Europe . . . and all are subject, in one form or another, not only to Soviet influence but to a very high and in some cases increasing measure of control from Moscow.”

Churchill’s speech was the first time that the American public had heard such a strident tone about the United States’ wartime ally. While the “Iron Curtain” speech is often considered a convenient starting point for the beginning of the Cold War, tensions between the United States and Russia had already been rising since early 1945, partly because of the perception that Russia was trying to extend its control over the eastern half of Europe. Churchill’s speech was a warning about something that had already begun and was continuing to develop. But the creation of the Iron Curtain was hardly a surprise to American leaders or to Churchill; they had effectively agreed to it during wartime conferences. The Cold War continued to intensify in the years after the Second World War, reaching a fever pitch in the Berlin airlift of 1948.

The United States emerged from the Second World War victorious and in good shape, with a prosperous economy. There had been no attacks of significance by Germans or Japanese on the continental United States; rather, massive wartime industrial and agricultural projects had made the country more productive than ever. The U.S. had lost 300,000 men in the Second World War; while this was a large number, it paled in comparison to the much higher losses of Germany, France, Russia, Japan, and China, and thus the disruption to the labor market of those countries was much greater. Also, in 1945 the United States was the only country to have the atomic bomb. Nonetheless, the prewar world had been destroyed, and Americans worried about the politics and economics of the postwar world.

The Soviet Union emerged from the war victorious but devastated. Part of the reason why the Soviets defeated the Nazis was the reconstruction (with much American assistance) of critical industrial plants far away from the front lines. On the basis of this feat, the economy had great potential, but after suffering millions of casualties and untold material destruction, the country needed time to reach that potential.

Among the Allies, the Soviet military had played the biggest role in defeating the Nazis, so they enjoyed a strong position on the European continent in 1945. Their armies controlled half of Europe all of Eastern Europe and one-third of Germany. They also had a strong position in Asia, and, as mentioned above, they moved into Manchuria just before the Japanese surrendered. Again, however, the army had been decimated and much of the territory it now held had been destroyed in the war; more time was needed to rebuild.

So that the Russians might have time to carry out this rebuilding effort, they hoped to construct a security perimeter in Eastern Europe in the event that Germany might rise again. Roosevelt, Stalin, and Churchill had met at Yalta (today in southern Ukraine) in February 1945 to make an acceptable peace. While they were together,

they agreed to divide Germany into four zones of occupation: one American, one British, one French, and one Russian. The country could be reunited down the road, but for now the German threat had to be neutralized.

There were other, more controversial matters on the table, too. Stalin wanted a ring of buffer states to protect him from a potentially resurgent Germany; he demanded control over Poland, Finland, and the Baltic states. Roosevelt understood Stalin's concerns, especially considering that the Russians had done most of the fighting and had suffered the most losses. Stalin had promised free elections in Poland to appease Roosevelt. Churchill, meanwhile, had proposed that Stalin could have Yugoslavia if Britain could ensure that Greece remained democratic. (British troops supported the Greek royalists in the civil war against the communists.) The British hoped that if they had influence in Greece, they could ensure the safety of the Suez Canal.

Truman, however, did not have a good relationship with Stalin. Roosevelt never discussed the postwar proposals with Truman; he only spoke with his inner circle of advisors. When the Allied leaders met again at Potsdam (a suburb of Berlin) in the summer of 1945, Truman was less conciliatory than his predecessor had been. He thought Stalin was a butcher and a thug, and made no secret of it.

Soon, the American foreign-policy establishment began to show signs of strain in its relations with the Russians. In February 1946, George Kennan, America's best foreign-policy expert on the Soviet Union, sent an exceedingly long telegram to the Treasury Department. In it, he offered a clear and concise understanding of Soviet foreign policy. The telegram proved very influential; it went to foreign-policy makers and was widely circulated throughout the government in 1946.

Two things, Kennan argued, motivated soviet power: traditional Marxist-Leninist ideology (as opposed to capitalism, free markets, and democracy) and security concerns. It was therefore safe to conclude that the goals of the Soviet Union were territorial expansion and the destruction of capitalism and democracy. The United States needed to confront this threat by the application of political and economic force to defend the core areas of Europe and Asia (Western Europe, Japan, and Manchuria).

This marked the birth of the "containment doctrine," which held that if the United States responded politically and economically to halt the Soviets' gains, it would be able to contain them. Communism, according to the doctrine, would fail from its own weaknesses. This set out a new path for American foreign policy; the United States would now intervene in any country where communists threatened to take power. Kennan's analysis promoted this "us versus them" mentality.

In the meantime, the Soviet Union was attempting to persuade the countries of Eastern Europe to establish friendly communist regimes. The Soviets could not control the countries directly with their own troops and govern the countries themselves, but they established Communist control through local communists. Moreover, the lingering presence of Soviet troops in the country helped.

The Soviets followed a similar procedure in each case. Upon freeing the country from Nazi rule, they installed a "popular democracy." At first, the country would have a coalition government with all parties. After a year, another coalition would replace the first, and the Communists would hold the power. The other parties were still included, but they were dominated by the Communists. This devious move usually went against

the voters' wishes. The Communists were generally somewhat popular, because in most cases they had led the resistance against the Nazis. Nonetheless, the people of Eastern Europe feared (correctly) that the Communists were agents of the Russian government. Only in Yugoslavia, where the Communist leader, Josip Broz (known simply as "Tito"), was well respected, did the Communists gain power because of widespread popular support.

The Eastern European Communists then pursued a program of social change. The economies in these countries were in terrible condition because of the Depression and the war, and the Communists sought to win popular support by addressing these problems. They nationalized key industries, beginning with those that Germans had owned previously. They also carried out agrarian reform. In Hungary, for example, 1% of the population owned 50% of the land before the Second World War. The government nationalized the land and redistributed it to the peasants.

The Communists were generally able to repair the economy, and in most cases even caused some economic growth. They never enjoyed a great deal of popular support, however. The countries enjoyed a degree of national autonomy, but they still lived under the threat of Soviet intervention. This helped the Communist governments survive; they became increasingly unpopular as Eastern Europeans were soon forced to sell goods to the Soviet Union at prices below world markets and pay artificially inflated prices for Soviet goods.

The Berlin Airlift

In the first years of the Cold War, Germany was center stage. The country had been divided into four zones of occupation, as had the capital, Berlin, which was otherwise far on the eastern side. In each case, the Soviet Union controlled the eastern half and the western half was divided between the United States, Great Britain, and France. The Soviets had initially agreed to permit supplies to enter Berlin from West Germany along a guarded highway on which there were no exits. As relations between the Soviets and the Western Allies worsened, however, the Soviets began to harass traffic travelling along this highway.

Finally, on June 24, 1948, the Soviets cut off all land traffic from West Germany into West Berlin. The city was quickly becoming a symbol of resistance to Soviet rule, and they hoped to starve it into submission. The Western Allies (the U.S., Britain, and France) needed to decide to either allow the city to fall to the Soviet Union or to protect it, possibly causing another war. Public opinion favored taking a stand, but the western governments were not ready to go to war.

Eventually, the Allies decided to create an "air bridge." They eventually made 200,000 flights and carried 1.5 million tonnes of goods to keep West Berlin functioning. The Soviets could have tried to shoot the planes down, but they were not ready to go to war either. Finally, in May 1949, the Soviets lifted the blockade and the highway to Berlin reopened.

Red Scare

As the United States entered the Cold War, its people began to grow concerned about the possibility that there were communists in their midst. Anyone, it was reasoned, could be a Communist infiltrator, and for several years American officials worked hard to exorcise any potential Communists from their midst. In the process, they accused many people falsely or without regard to context (during the 1930s, for instance, while the United States was mired in the Great Depression, some people had spoken warmly about Communism).

There were, in fact, many Soviet spies. In 1945, Igor Gouzenko, a cipher clerk at the Russian Embassy in Ottawa, smuggled 149 documents in his briefcase in order to expose a massive Soviet spy ring in Canada, the United States, and Great Britain. At first, no one took him seriously. He went to the papers, but they thought he was crazy. The next morning he went to the police and they turned him away. The minister of justice would not see him either. Finally he took his family to stay at the house of a friend, who just happened to be a retired officer in the Canadian air force. Gouzenko got the police to watch his apartment, and though they thought he was crazy, they agreed. Just about midnight, four Soviet agents broke into Gouzenko's apartment, and the police quickly confronted them. When the police asked what they were doing, the men responded that they were searching for documents stolen from the Soviet embassy. This confirmed for the police that Gouzenko was telling the truth; when his information became public less than a year later, it confirmed growing fears of the Soviet presence in North America.

Any activities that could be construed as subversive were suddenly suspicious. The American people were terrified of criticizing the government. Movies, radio shows, and comic books all talked about beating up on the Communists; the slogan "Better dead than Red" was popularized during this period. Some of the most paranoid Americans even believed the Soviets put fluoride (which is used to prevent tooth decay) in tap water to control them.

The hysteria helped to create a monster: Wisconsin senator Joseph McCarthy. Born in 1908, McCarthy lived in obscurity until after the Second World War. He was elected to the Senate in 1946 thanks to a smear campaign, and a legend (that he perpetrated) that he had been a tail gunner in the war. (He did serve in the war, but he didn't fly missions in a bomber.)

McCarthy remained essentially anonymous until February 9, 1950, when he delivered a famous speech in Wheeling, West Virginia. He waved a piece of paper as he talked, claiming that the paper contained the names of 205 Communists in the State Department. He accused Truman of being soft on Communists, and accused Secretary of State Dean Acheson of selling the State Department to them.

The senator accused various people of being Communists. Few dared to challenge him. Government officials and journalists feared his power, which grew amid the witch hunt. Government employees, teachers, professors, or anyone else with influence in society was suspected of collaborating with the "Reds"; many were subpoenaed to appear before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC),

which McCarthy headed, and had to answer uncomfortable questions about petitions they had signed or statements they had made in a different era.

McCarthy fell as swiftly as he rose, and the Red Scare eased afterwards. He began burning his bridges in 1953 when he declared that the Marshall Plan was a massive conspiracy. His final demise came in 1954 when he took aim at the U.S. armed forces. The armed forces counterattacked by accusing McCarthy and Roy Cohn, his chief counsel, of improperly using their influence to promote a friend. (Cohn was guilty, but McCarthy was proven innocent.) The televised exchange marked the end of McCarthy's power and the easing of the anti-Communist witch hunt.

In any case, the widely televised (and widely viewed) HUAC hearings lasted 36 days, and provided Americans with a great deal of exposure of the powerful senator. Once they had seen what he was about, they withdrew their support.

Summary

- Truman's decision to drop the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki quickly ended the war with Japan. It also was intended to send a message to Russia that the United States could impose its will on the world.
- The United States was the strongest economic power at the end of the Second World War, and likely had the strongest army. Their global ambitions – to bring democracy to all of the countries of the world – were blocked by the Soviet Union, which wanted to bring communism to the world. The resulting struggle is known as the Cold War.
- Much of Russia was destroyed in the Second World War, and millions of Russians died. The Soviet government therefore established a ring of friendly governments in Eastern Europe to act as buffer states against another German invasion.
- The first major conflict of the Cold War was the Berlin Airlift; when the Soviets blockaded Berlin, the Western Allies flew in supplies for several months until the Soviets relented.
- On the home front, some Americans fanatically searched out Soviet spies in all corners of public life. The ensuing frenzy nabbed some spies but also many innocent people.