

The History Guide

Lectures on Twentieth Century Europe

Lecture 14

The Origins of the Cold War

There are now two great nations in the world, which starting from different points, seem to be advancing toward the same goal: the Russians and the Anglo-Americans. . . Each seems called by some secret design of Providence one day to hold in its hands the destinies of half the world.

Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (1835)

THEY made it, of course; they drew the iron curtain across the middle of Europe, partly to stop us looking in, partly to stop their own poor wretches looking out enviously at the boundless goods and comforts on our side. Behind the iron curtain were the hapless peoples held captive by the grim-faced Russians and their stooges in office in the satellites; in front of it were ourselves, expressing sympathy for the captives but apologetically remaining very thoroughly armed, in however subdued a way.

Fred Inglis, *The Cruel Peace: Everyday Life and the Cold War* (1991)

The origins of the cold war are not really that difficult to uncover. Nor are these origins that complex. Here in the west we have the tendency -- not unusual, I suppose -- to place the entire responsibility of the cold war upon the shoulders of the Soviet Union. And so, there have been a few events which have shaped this response. For instance, when Mother Russia overthrew its tsar, made a [revolution](#), became the Soviet Union, unified itself under [Lenin](#) and created an ideological structure called communism, the United States could only react with fear and trepidation. The government could not accept the simple fact that a country could exist with economic and political principles so critically opposed to democracy and industrial capitalism.

By 1919 or 1920, the Red Scare had become an American reality. Through the manipulation of public opinion and repression and even physical force, anarchists, socialists and communists were clearly forced into retreat. Socialism or communism in the United States is simply an impossibility -- it is too European for American tastes. It always has been and perhaps always will be. True, there have been socialists and communists in this country well before 1917. And they exist today as well, but only as small pockets of supporters from whom we basically never hear a word. Americans fear revolution. Americans fear change -- real, fundamental social, economic and political change. And what really terrifies Americans are immigrants who desire change through revolution. Again, it's too European. This is an attitude which does have a history and I think if you study the atmosphere of the United States in the late 1840s and 50s you will discover why. In 1848, most European governments were under assault from the left. And when many of these individuals came to this country to escape political repression, they brought their ideas of revolution -- red ideas -- with them.

The French Revolution -- or something on the scale of the French Revolution -- could never have taken place in this country. Radicalism, true liberalism, a revolutionary frame of mind, is an impossibility on American soil. Review the last two centuries of American dissent or radicalism. You will soon notice that it is a history full of examples in which independent thought or direct criticism is most often met with the club or the stick. Meaningful dissent in the United States is an impotent force. Whether that dissent is homegrown or imported from abroad, the results have almost always been the same. So when we speak of dissent in this country today, it is perhaps better to speak of permissible dissent rather than true dissent.

When we turn to the more immediate and tangible causes of the cold war, we must begin with [World War Two](#) itself. On July 25, 1945, two months after Germany had surrendered, the Big Three -- [Winston Churchill](#), [Joseph Stalin](#) and [Harry Truman](#) -- met at [POTSDAM](#) in order to discuss the fate of Germany. By 1945, Stalin was the veteran revolutionary, a man who had held the reins of Soviet power and authority for nearly twenty years. Truman, on the other hand, had been President barely three months. The crucial issue at Potsdam, as it had been at Versailles in 1918 and 1919, was reparations. The Soviet Union, as to be expected, wanted to rebuild their near-destroyed economy using German industry. The United States feared it would have to pay the whole cost of rebuilding Germany, which in turn would help rebuild the Soviet Union. So, after all the discussions had ended, a compromise was reached and Germany was to be partitioned into four occupied zones. Britain, France and the United States would occupy parts of western Germany while the Soviet Union would occupy east Germany.

The main issue at Potsdam and for the next two years was who would control Europe. Britain had its chance, so too did France and Germany. Was it now Russia's turn? Or perhaps the United States? Few people ever questioned why Europe needed to be controlled in the first place but in the end, everyone wanted to avoid yet another war. Russia wanted Poland. Everybody wanted Poland. But especially Russia. Historically, Poland had always been the key state needed from which to launch an attack against Russia. The United States upheld the principles of self-determination, principles declared in Woodrow Wilson's [FOURTEEN POINT PLAN](#). For Wilson, nations should have the right to choose their own form of government. Of course, Wilson really meant was America's destiny to make "[the world safe for democracy](#)".

The Soviets viewed this demand as unacceptable for it indicated that the United States was really taking too heavy a hand in determining what nations ought to adopt what specific form of government. In response, Stalin went on to create what Winston Churchill, never at a loss for words, dubbed the [IRON CURTAIN](#). For Churchill:

from Stettin on the Baltic to Trieste on the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the continent. Behind that line lie all the capitals of the ancient states of central and eastern Europe -- Warsaw, Berlin, Prague, Vienna, Budapest, Belgrade, Bucharest and Sofia. From what I have seen of our Russian friends and allies during the war I am convinced that there is nothing they admire so much as strength and nothing for which they have less respect than military weakness.

By 1946, the United States and Britain were making every effort to unify all of Germany under western rule. The Soviet Union responded by consolidating its grip on Europe by creating satellite states in 1946 and 1947. One by one, communist governments, loyal to Moscow, were set up in Poland, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria. Stalin used Soviet communism to dominate half of Europe. Why Stalin did this might not be clear. Was he trying to build an international communist movement beginning in eastern Europe? Or, was he simply trying to protect his borders from any intervention on the part of the United States or the allies? The climax came in March 1948. A communist coup in Czechoslovakia overthrew a democratic government and the Soviet Union gained a foothold in central Europe.

Given the experience of World War Two itself, this division of Europe was perhaps inevitable. Both sides wanted their values and economic and political systems to prevail in areas which their soldiers had helped to liberate. If both sides had accepted these new spheres of influence, a cold war might never have occurred. But the nations of western Europe and the United States still had Hitler on their minds and they soon began to see Stalin as a similar threat.

With World War Two at an end by the end of the summer of 1945, the United States knew that the Soviet economy was in a state of near-collapse. The Soviet Union had lost at least 20 million souls during the war alone and perhaps another 20-30 million from Stalin's decade of purge trials. Thirty thousand factories and forty thousand miles of railroad tracks had been destroyed. All the industrialization that Stalin had promised and delivered to his people with the Five Year Plans had been lost. Truman realized this and remained confident that the United States was in the stronger bargaining position. He surmised that the Soviets had to come to the United States for much-needed economic aid. As early as January 1945, FDR had already denied the Soviet request for a six billion dollar loan. Lend-Lease proved no more effective. In the Spring of 1945, Congress agreed that they would not allow Lend-Lease for any post-war reconstruction in Russia. This was obviously a major shift in policy for under the [Lend-Lease Act of 1941](#), the United States had shipped enormous quantities of war materiel to the Soviets, including almost 15,000 planes, 7000 tanks, 52,000 jeeps and almost 400,000 trucks.

Overshadowing all these initial cold war issues of 1945 was the atomic bomb. The new weapon used at [Hiroshima and Nagasaki](#) in early August presented a whole new category of problems. Even friendly nations would have had difficulty resolving their problems -- given the state of American and Soviet affairs in 1945, the situation was positively explosive. The early history of the bomb is interesting. One would have thought that the Germans, with their V1 and V2 rockets, were far in advance of any developments by the Allies. But thanks to Hitler and the Nazis, from the early 1930s onward, there was a steady exodus of Germany's greatest scientific minds. They came to Cambridge in England or to the United States. [Albert Einstein](#) (1879-1955), [Max Planck](#) (1858-1947), [Werner Heisenberg](#) (1901-1976) had all pioneered the new physics upon which nuclear fission rested. The Hungarian [Leo Szilard](#) (1898-1964) and Danish scientist [Niels Bohr](#) (1885-1962) had worked on uranium fission in Germany before the war, but they left as well. In August 1939, Einstein wrote a [letter to FDR](#) urging him of the necessity to start work on a new super-weapon before the Germans had developed one themselves.

The Cavendish Laboratory at Cambridge became the most important British research center. It was at Cavendish that [Ernest Rutherford](#) (1871-1937) first achieved atomic disintegration in 1919 and where [James Chadwick](#) (1891-1974) identified the neutron in 1932. The first chain reaction uranium fission was achieved at the University of Chicago in 1942. A huge nuclear plant built at Oak Ridge, Tennessee, produced fissionable material in large quantities. Under the direction of [J. Robert Oppenheimer](#) (1904-1967)), the actual weapons development took place at Los Alamos in New Mexico.

During World War Two, Roosevelt and Churchill followed a policy that would ensure a nuclear arms race at war's end. Still, Stalin found out about the [Manhattan Project](#) and by 1943 had already begun development of a Soviet bomb. After the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the subsequent surrender of Japan, the United States developed a disarmament plan based on turning over all fissionable materials, plants and bombs to an international regulatory agency. The Soviets responded quickly with their own plan which stipulated nothing less than a total ban on the production of all fissionable material. They further added that all existing bombs would be destroyed. Wishing to preserve its monopoly on nuclear weapons, the United States continued to stress regulation and inspection by an independent agency. But the Soviets, in the hopes of neutralizing any United States advantage, insisted on immediate disarmament. Eventually an agreement was reached and the two sides agreed to disagree.

Another cause of the cold war revolved around a relatively new development in United States-Soviet relations. At the beginning of 1946, Truman decided that he was "tired of babysitting the Soviets who understand only an iron fist and strong language." Stalin responded in February with a speech stressing the basic incompatibility between Soviet communism and western democracy, thus inaugurating a new hard line policy. Frustrated, Washington found meaning in a crucial document known as the "[Long Telegram](#)." In 1946, the Soviet expert [George Kennan](#), sent an 8000 word telegram to Washington from Moscow. Kennan was a foreign service officer who knew Russia well. He understood their history, their culture and their language. Kennan explained the communist mentality in the following way. The Soviet's hostility to the west is rooted in the need to legitimize their bloody dictatorship -- they must therefore believe in the inevitable triumph of communism over the beast capitalism. The Soviets, Kennan continued, would exploit every opportunity to extend their system and therefore could not and would not be converted to a policy of harmony and cooperation. According to Kennan, Russia's policy was:

to undermine the general and strategic potential of major western powers by a host of subversive measures to destroy individual governments that might stand in the Soviet path, to do everything possible to set the major Western powers against each other.

But since the Soviets believed that they had history on their side -- history as understood by Marx's materialist conception of history -- the communists were in no hurry and would not risk major war. Met with firmness, Kennan went on, the Soviets will back off. Eventually published as "[THE SOURCES OF SOVIET CONDUCT](#)," in the journal *Foreign Affairs* and signed by "X," Kennan's observations quickly gave Washington its own hard line and for the next three decades or so American foreign policy could be expressed by one word: containment. In order to quiet Soviet ambitions, the United States now had to embark on a path of intervention, under the guise of containment.

There were two other administrative policies that also helped to shape the future of US-Soviet relations during the early stages of the cold war. Most western European Communist parties were at a peak in the years immediately following World War Two. The French Communist Party, for instance, won almost 30% of the vote in November 1946 elections. In Greece, Communist led guerrillas supplied from Yugoslavia, Bulgaria and Albania, posed a threat to the uninspired government of Greece. The Greek communists attempted to seize power in late 1944, when their tactics of mass slaughter turned off a majority of Greeks. But the communists fought back, aided by [Tito](#), not Stalin. Civil war eventually broke out in Greece in 1946 amid economic crisis. By January 1947, the British informed the United States that they could no longer supply economic aid to Greece or Turkey. Believing that the Soviet Union was responsible for Britain's pullout, the United States decided that they had to assume the role of supplying aid. The [TRUMAN DOCTRINE](#) of March 12, 1947 announced aid to Greece and Turkey in the stated context of a general war against communism. Aid in the amount of \$400 million was approved by the House and Senate by a margin of three to one. In many ways, the Truman Doctrine marked the formal declaration of the cold war between the United States and the Soviet Union -- it also solidified the United States' position regarding containment.

The Soviets accepted the Truman Doctrine's "two rival worlds" idea. It went along with the Marxist-Leninist notion of a world divided into two hostile camps -- one capitalist, the other communist. For Stalin, a final class struggle, determined by the laws of historical development, would mean certain Soviet victory.

In May came the American decision to "reconstruct the two great workshops," Germany and Japan. And on June 5, Secretary of State George C. Marshall gave a [SPEECH AT HARVARD](#) which would further harden the United States' position toward the Soviets. Marshall proposed a scheme of extensive aid to all European nations if they could agree on how to revive a working economy, "so as to permit," he wrote, "the emergence of political and social conditions in which institutions can exist." There's no doubt which institutions Marshall had in mind -- a free market

economy directed by forces not in Europe but across the Atlantic. Marshall even included the Soviets in his plan. But at a meeting in Paris the following month, the Soviets gave their response to the Marshall Plan by walking out. Neither Russia nor its satellite states would take up the offer. Meanwhile, as the Marshall Plan pumped US dollars into Europe, West German economic recovery began to trigger a general European recovery. The Soviets viewed this development as little more than a capitalist plot to draw the nations of eastern Europe into the American sphere of influence.

1947 was a crucial year in early cold war history. The forces of the free world, it seemed, were rallying to resist Soviet aggression, build up the defenses of the non-communist world and, tackle the problem of European economic recovery with massive assistance from the United States. That assistance grew to something like \$20 billion before 1951.

The issue of Soviet containment was also played out in 1949 with the creation of the [North Atlantic Treaty Organization](#) or NATO. The idea for something like NATO grew from general European fears of renewed Soviet aggression. Hitler was still on everybody's mind. Although Hitler was dead, was Stalin perhaps viewed as the next aggressor? Regardless of whether or not Stalin was hell-bent on world domination, the point here is that he was perceived to be an aggressor in the Hitler mold. Western Europe also needed some guarantee from the United States that they would be protected from any aggression while they began the slow process of economic recovery.

England, France and the Benelux countries (Belgium, Netherlands and Luxembourg) initiated the organization of what would become NATO by forming the Western Union in March 1948 to get the ball rolling. The main force behind the creation of NATO was not Truman, as you might have suspected, but the British Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin. By January of 1949, Truman called for an even broader pact which eventually would involve the United States, Canada and ten European nations. The North Atlantic Treaty was eventually signed April 4, 1949. NATO was created with the sole aim of protecting Europe from Soviet aggression, "to safeguard the freedom, common heritage and civilization of their peoples founded on the principles of democracy, individual liberty, and the rule of law." There were two main features of the Treaty. First, the United States made a firm commitment to protect and defend Europe. As stated in the Treaty, "an armed attack against one shall be considered an attack against all." Second, the United States would indeed honor its commitment to defend Europe. So in 1950, Truman selected [Dwight D. Eisenhower](#) (1890-1969) as the Supreme Commander of NATO forces. Four United States divisions were stationed in Europe to serve as the nucleus of NATO forces.

The American public embraced NATO because it offered a way of participating in world affairs and opposing Soviet power in a more indirect way. Americans no longer believed that world security would come through the United Nations -- itself a product of World War One -- but they still held on to the ideas of some sort of collective security with an ideological base. The Atlantic nations were said to be held together by both common interests as well as a common commitment to democracy and industrial capitalism. For western Europe, NATO provided a much-needed shelter of security behind which economic recovery could take place. In a way, NATO was the political counterpart of the Marshall Plan. For the United States, NATO signified that the United States could no longer remain isolated from European affairs. Indeed, NATO meant that European affairs were now American affairs as well.

Despite the apparent advantages of NATO, there were problems right from the start. Neither Britain nor France provided much in the way of military strength for a number of years. France was too heavily committed overseas, especially in Indochina and Algeria. And the British were in the midst of losing even more territories of their Empire. West German military presence in NATO was next to nothing. So, it was the United States which provided the entire muscle behind NATO. It was clearly an unequal partnership which at different times seemed to bother both Europeans and Americans. But what eventually counted, at least in the context of the late 1940s and early

50s, was not the ground forces under NATO control but the American "nuclear umbrella" acting as a deterrent against any Soviet temptation to attack. As it turned out, Eisenhower returned to Europe with tens of thousands of American GIs for the second time in a decade, this time to guard the enemy of World War Two against one of its former Allies. While this buildup continued, NATO forces remained outnumbered many times over by Russian ground forces. But what sustained Europe's spirit and perhaps deterred the Soviets -- who had very little intention of an armed attack on Europe -- was the assurance that such an attack would bring the United States, with its massive resources, into the war.

The western alliance embodied in NATO had the effect of escalating the cold war. Historians are pretty much agreed. NATO was created by an over-reaction of the western world to what they perceived to be Soviet aggression. Once again, Hitler was on everybody's mind. But Stalin was not Hitler. Furthermore, the Soviets were not Nazis. And in the end there was very little evidence of a Soviet plot to invade western Europe. All NATO really did was intensify Soviets fears of the West and to produce even higher levels of international tension.

As the rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union grew in the late 1940s and into the 50s, both countries began to rebuild their military forces. Following World War Two, American leaders were intent on reforming the military forces. There were two main goals policy makers had in mind. First, in the aftermath of [Pearl Harbor](#), the armed forces had to be unified into an integrated system. Such a policy of unification was required by the cold war itself. Second, there was also a need for entirely new institutions to coordinate all military strategy. In 1947, Congress solved both issues by creating the National Security Act. The results of this Act should be familiar to all of us today since it established institutions we know take for granted. The Act created first, a Department of Defense which would serve as an organizing principle over the army, navy and air force. Second, the Act created the [National Security Council](#), a special advisory board to the executive office. And lastly, the Act created the Central Intelligence Agency or CIA, which was in charge of all intelligence.

In 1949, American military planners received a rather profound shock: the Soviets had just succeeded in exploding an atomic bomb of their own. The bomb was a fission bomb, created by the disintegration of plutonium 239 mixed with uranium 235. By this time, however, nuclear technology had advanced so far that this sort of bomb, like the one that leveled Hiroshima, was as obsolete as a six-shooter. The first United States explosion of an H-bomb, or hydrogen bomb, took place in 1952. The Soviets announced the detonation of a similar thermonuclear device in August of the following year. This fusion bomb, the product of fusion at extreme temperatures of heavy isotopes of hydrogen, is many times more powerful than the A-bomb. In fact, since it operates by chain reaction, the only limit to its size is determined by the size of the aircraft which is carrying it. A bomber can carry a 100 megaton bomb. The Hiroshima bomb, which killed 80,000 souls in less than fifteen minutes, was about 1/700th as large as a 100 megaton bomb. Because the H-bomb was manufactured from one of the most common elements, enough bombs could be readily produced to destroy the planet several times.

Of course, who would want to do that? This was possibly the most dangerous period for nuclear war. The vast growth in the numbers and kinds of long range nuclear weapons meant the neither the United States nor the Soviet Union could hope to escape the ravages of thermonuclear war. Of course, the massive numbers of nuclear warheads produced actually resulted in a stalemate -- and this was good for everyone concerned. The world shuddered at the thought that the destiny of the globe was in the hands of two super powers, yet the logic of the "balance of terror" worked right from the start. Total war was too dangerous. It would destroy everything. There are no victors in thermonuclear war -- only victims.

In the wake of all these developments a new national defense policy was needed by the United States and it came with a policy document known as [NSC-68](#). NSC-68 was based on the premise that first, the Soviets were trying to impose absolute authority over the world and second, that the

United States had to face that challenge. What all this boiled down to was this: no more appeasement and no more isolation. NSC-68 raised defense spending immediately. While the 1950 budget had allocated \$13 billion for military spending (about one-third of the national budget and five percent of the GNP), the 1951 budget, dedicated \$60 billion for defense (about two-thirds of the national budget and more than eighteen percent of a rising GNP). In the end, NSC-68 stands as a symbol of America's determination to win the cold war regardless of cost.

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