

**An Ideological Clash:
Shaping the Cold War and the New World Order**

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Introduction

“The great rule of conduct for us in regard to foreign nations is, in extending our commercial relations, to have with them as little political connection as possible.”¹ This assertion by President George Washington in his 1796 Farewell Address articulates the isolationist principle that substantially guided the United States of America’s (US) conduct in international affairs for over a century; isolationism advocates for minimal involvement in foreign countries’ political affairs and wars not involving domestic defense.² This essay approaches the causes of the Cold War from an American perspective, examining how conditions after World War II (abbreviated WWII) prompted a permanent shift in US foreign policy from its isolationist tradition towards interventionism. Specifically, it scrutinizes the cause and effect of early governance and foreign policy strategies employed by President Harry S. Truman in the US and Vozhd Joseph Stalin in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in the first front of the Cold War: Europe. By exploring how national security concerns in the US and the USSR precipitated the deterioration of American-Soviet relations, this analysis identifies two primary catalysts of the Cold War: the abrupt upheaval of the global order and the contrasting ideologies between the US and the USSR.

Background

The Cold War was the protracted geopolitical and ideological competition for supremacy between the US and the USSR from the end of WWII in 1945 to the collapse of the USSR in 1991, characterized by intense political and economic struggles, with an absence of direct military conflict. Understandings of the Cold War’s origins necessitate a comprehensive examination of the dynamics of US-USSR relations as WWII concluded.

The Bolshevik Party-led USSR, established in 1922 following the Russian Revolution of

¹ George Washington, “The Address of Gen. Washington to the People of America” *American Daily Advertiser*, September 19, 1796

² Eric A. Nordlinger, *Isolationism Reconfigured: American Foreign Policy for a New Century* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995)

1917 and subsequent civil war, emerged as the world's first communist state, significantly influencing global geopolitics.³ Despite initial optimism for the revolution's democratic ideals—with the proletariat (working class) majority resisting Tsar Nicholas II—the US harbored deep reservations toward the ascendant Bolsheviks due to their espousal of communism.⁴ Apprehensions regarding the USSR's attempted global propagation of Marxist-Leninist ideology prompted the US to withhold diplomatic recognition of the Soviet government until 1933. This divergence in ideologies seeded early mutual animosity that continued throughout the twentieth century.⁵

Germany's 1941 invasion of the USSR (despite the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact), however, prompted the US to temporarily overcome its opposition to the USSR's ideology and form the Grand Alliance with the United Kingdom (UK) and USSR, due to potential US domestic security implications of German control of Soviet resources.⁶ Nonetheless, despite this shared objective, divergent national priorities within the Grand Alliance strained their relations early on (e.g., timing of opening the second front).⁷

These underlying tensions erupted during 1944 and 1945 Allied negotiations on post-war objectives—principally the division of Germany and control of Axis-occupied Eastern Europe—notably during the Yalta Conference, Fourth Moscow Conference (in the absence of then President Franklin D. Roosevelt), and Potsdam Conference.⁸ Truman perfectly summed up the state of US-USSR relations in a diary entry made following his first meeting with Stalin at the Potsdam conference: “[Stalin] said he wanted to cooperate with US in peace as we had cooperated in War but

³ Leon Trotsky, *История русской революции*, [History of the Russian Revolution], trans. Max Eastman (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1932).

⁴ David S. Foglesong, *The American Mission and the “Evil Empire”: The Crusade for a “Free Russia” since 1881* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

⁵ James R. Schlesinger, “The Evolution of American Policy towards the Soviet Union.” *International Security* 1, no. 1 (1976): 37–48.

⁶ Foglesong, *The American*

⁷ Schlesinger, “The Evolution”

⁸ Mary E. Glantz, *FDR and the Soviet Union: The President’s Battles Over Foreign Policy* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2005)

it would be harder. Said he was grossly misunderstood in US and I was misunderstood in Russia.”⁹

Their fragile wartime alliance—characterized by mutual distrust, ideological rifts, and conflicting geopolitical ambitions—foreshadowed the ensuing Cold War conflict.

Great Power Rivalry: Differing Ideologies

The Cold War was foundationally an ideological conflict: a clash of the governance structures and economic paradigms inherent to American liberalism and those of Soviet Marxism-Leninism. Rather than through direct military confrontation, the nations measured their standing by their capacity to globally promote their systems in the “Free World” and the “Socialist Bloc.”¹⁰

Soviet Ideology: Marxism-Leninism, Communism, and Totalitarianism

In Karl Marx’s 1867 magnum opus, *Das Kapital: Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie*, he critiques the bourgeoisie’s exploitation of the proletariat under capitalism to maximize profits, conveying the basis of Marxism and Soviet ideology.¹¹ Marx envisages history as a predetermined path toward human emancipation through class conflict and the establishment of a communist society.¹² Concomitantly, the USSR advocated for global communism through proletarian revolution, as exemplified in Stalin’s statement that the October Revolution “created that powerful and open center of the world revolutionary movement around which it now can rally a united revolutionary front of the proletarians and the oppressed nations of all countries against imperialism.”¹³

The USSR’s governance structure was rooted in Marxism-Leninism, a variant of Marxism adapted to the challenges embattling the then Russian Empire by Vladimir Lenin, the leader of the

⁹ Harry Truman, *Diary Note of President Harry S. Truman for July 17, 1945*. Subject Files, 1939–1952. 976500, National Archives, Collection HST-AF: Alonzo Fields Papers

¹⁰ Geir Lundestad, “Empire by Invitation” in the American Century,” *Diplomatic History* 23, no. 2 (1999): 189–217,

¹¹ Karl Marx, *Das Kapital: Kritik Der Politischen Ökonomie* [Capital: A Critique of Political Economy], Trans. Edward Aveling, (London: Swan Sonnenschein, Lowrey & Co., 1887)

¹² Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx, *Manifest der Kommunistischen Partei* [The Manifesto of the Communist Party], trans. Samuel Moore, (London: Workers’ Educational Association, 1848)

¹³ Walter Bedell Smith, “Evaluation of Present Kremlin International Policies” in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1947, Eastern Europe; The Soviet Union*, eds. William Slany, (Washington D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1972).

Bolshevik Revolution and the inaugural head of the Soviet state.¹⁴ In his 1917 treatise, *The State and Revolution*, Lenin outlines his vision for a two-stage communist revolution, reliant on a vanguard party organized through democratic centralism to seize power on behalf of the proletariat and establish a single-party state to supplant capitalism, known as the “the dictatorship of the proletariat.”¹⁵ This incited the USSR’s one party system and legitimized the authority of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, shaping a totalitarian regime that controlled production means, suppressed dissent, and promoted collectivism with the aim of achieving a future classless and stateless communist society.¹⁶

American Ideology: Liberalism, Capitalism, and Democracy

The foundation of US foreign policy traces back to the Enlightenment ethos of “liberalism,” developed from the seventeenth century philosophical tenets of thinkers such as John Locke.¹⁷ Locke’s seminal work, *Two Treatises of Government*, promulgates certain inherent freedoms and inalienable rights for all individuals: life, liberty, and property. He advocates for limited governance, founded on mutual consent of the people, while advocating for non-interference in social affairs.¹⁸ Just as Marxism-Leninism was the philosophical underpinning of the Bolshevik Revolution, liberalism was the philosophical underpinning of the American Revolution.¹⁹ This ethos dominates the Declaration of Independence’s rhetoric, which states that “we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among those are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.”²⁰

¹⁴ Andrzej Walicki, *Marxism and the Leap to the Kingdom of Freedom: The Rise and Fall of the Communist Utopia* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995).

¹⁵ Vladimir Lenin, *государство и революция* [The State and Revolution] trans. Robert Service (Westminster: Penguin Publishing Group, 1993)

¹⁶ Walicki, *Marxism and the Leap*

¹⁷ David Engerman, “Ideology and the Origins of the Cold War,” in *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*: Vo. 2, eds. Melvyn Leffler and Odd Arne Westad (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010)

¹⁸ John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* (United Kingdom: Awnsham Churchill, 1689).

¹⁹ James Kloppenberg, *The Virtues of Liberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

²⁰ Thomas Jefferson, et al, “The Declaration of Independence,” July 4, 1776, The Thomas Jefferson Papers at the Library of Congress

American liberalism conceived liberty as a progressive force, synonymous with the proliferation of US influence; initially the US applied this concept on a domestic, continent-wide scale with Westward Expansion.²¹ Pairing these ideals with the theories of Adam Smith and later John Maynard Keynes, American liberalism aligned the expansion of market economies with the expansion of liberty.²² Truman's inaugural address on January 20, 1949 communicates the US' Cold War commitment to liberalism, affirming that "we believe that all men have a right to equal justice under law and equal opportunity to share in the common good. We believe that all men have the right to freedom of thought and expression. We believe that all men are created equal."²³

Mutually Exclusive Ideology

Despite historical precedent of nations sustaining diplomatic relations despite conflicting ideologies, the universalism of American liberalism and Marxist-Leninism, asserting the applicability of the societal models to all, rendered coexistence unattainable.²⁴ Truman's advocacy for the worldwide spread of American liberalism resonates in his inaugural address:

From this faith we will not be moved. The American people desire, and are determined to work for, a world in which all nations and all peoples are free to govern themselves as they see fit, and to achieve a decent and satisfying life. Above all else, our people desire, and are determined to work for, peace on earth—a just and lasting peace—based on genuine agreement freely arrived at by equals.²⁵

Stalin's endorsement of socialism as the key to establishing comprehensive peace reflects a similar perspective: "only under the reign of socialism can peace be fully established."²⁶

Moreover, a progressive outlook was inherent in both ideologies, perceiving history as inevitably advancing toward the proliferation of their respective ideology.²⁷ For example, in his

²¹ Engerman, "Ideology"

²² Kloppenberg, *The Virtues*

²³ Truman, Harry S. "Inaugural Address." Transcript of speech delivered at the US Capitol Building, January 20, 1949.

²⁴ Robert J. McMahon, *The Cold War: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003)

²⁵ Truman, "Inaugural Address"

²⁶ Joseph Stalin, *Марксизм и национальный вопрос* [Marxism and the National Question], trans. Carl Kavanagh (New York: International Publishers, 1935) ²⁷ Engerman, "Ideology".

²⁷ Engerman, "Ideology".

address Truman asserts that:

In due time, as our stability becomes manifest, as more and more nations come to know the benefits of democracy and to participate in growing abundance, I believe that those countries which now oppose us will abandon their delusions and join with the free nations of the world in a just settlement of international differences. Events have brought our American democracy to new influence and new responsibilities.²⁸

Conversely, Stalin prognosticated that:

Many now think that the general crisis of world capitalism will not affect America. That, of course, is not true. The crisis of world capitalism is developing with increasing rapidity and cannot but affect American capitalism... I think the moment is not far off when a revolutionary crisis will develop in America. And when a revolutionary crisis develops in America, that will be the beginning of the end of world capitalism as a whole.²⁹

Truman unequivocally rejects communism in his address: “the actions resulting from the Communist philosophy are a threat to the efforts of free nations to bring about world recovery and lasting peace.”³⁰ Stalin’s parallel convictions, documented in his statement that “it is inconceivable that the Soviet Republic should continue to coexist for a long period side by side with bourgeois [Capitalist] States. Ultimately one or other must conquer” in *Problems of Leninism* further accentuated their mutual exclusivity.³¹

Deeper Structural Cause: Upheaval of the International Order

In international relations, the term “international order” denotes the structured relationships among global actors.³² Following WWII, however, the previously dominant Eurocentric international order underwent profound disruption due to the extensive destruction wrought by the conflict, weakening the entrenched positions of European powers in global affairs.³³ As Dean Acheson, former US Secretary of State from 1949 to 1953, summarized in his memoirs, “the whole

²⁸ Truman, “Inaugural Address”

²⁹ Joseph Stalin, “Speech Delivered in the American Commission of the Presidium of the ECCI,” transcript of speech delivered on May 6, 1920

³⁰ Truman, “Inaugural Address”

³¹ Joseph Stalin, *проблемы ленинизма* [Problems of Leninism] (New York: International Publishers, 1934).

³² McMahon, *The Cold War*

³³ John L. Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997)

world structure and order that we had inherited from the nineteenth century was gone.”³⁴ The post-war decisions of Truman and Stalin reflect this disrupted world order and the impact of their ideological competition.

The USSR Post-WWII

The emergence of the USSR as a global power after WWII due to its military strength, territorial expansion, and strategic positioning. The USSR possessed a formidable military, including the foremost land force during WWII, which allowed it to liberate—and subsequently occupy—countries occupied by the Axis powers.³⁵ In addition, despite substantial losses, in critical economic and political spheres, with an estimated decline of 10–15 percent in its overall population, the USSR’s strategic position allowed it to assume a position of primacy, consistent with the geopolitical theories of Halford John Mackinder in his 1904 paper “The Geographical Pivot of History.”³⁶ Mackinder posits that control of Eastern Europe equates to control of the Heartland—a pivotal region at the center of the World Island (the interconnected continents of Africa, Asia, and Europe)—under USSR dominion. In his view, command over the Heartland, with its vast expanse, central geographic position, and abundant resources, epitomized the fulcrum for world power and a nation’s pursuit of a hegemonic global order.³⁷

Central to Stalin’s vision of postwar order was national security, driven by a desire to safeguard against future territorial violations.³⁸ Frank Roberts, the British Ambassador in Moscow, emphasized this factor in a March 1946 memo, stating, “There is one fundamental factor affecting Soviet policy dating back to the small beginnings of the Muscovite State. This is the constant striving

³⁴ Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation: My Years in the State Department* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1969), 112.

³⁵ Grigorii Kynin and Ioahim Laufer (eds.), *SSSR I germanskii vopros, 1941–1949: dokumenty iz Arkhiva vneshnei politiki Rossiiskoi federatsii* [The USSR and the German Question, 1941–1949: Documents from the Foreign Policy Archive of the Russian Federation] (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnie atnosheniia, 1996–2003), 3 vols.

³⁶ Francesca Gori and Silvio Pons (eds.), *The Soviet Union and Europe in the Cold War, 1943–1953* (London: Macmillan, 1996)

³⁷ Halford Mackinder, “The Geographical Pivot of History,” *Geographical Journal* 23, no. 4 (1904), 421–37

³⁸ Gaddis, *We Now Know*

for security of a State with no natural frontiers and surrounded by enemies.”³⁹ Consequently, in the immediate aftermath of WWII, Stalin pursued the establishment of pro-Soviet governments in critical Eastern European nations and aimed to extend Soviet borders to pre-revolution boundaries.⁴⁰ Stalin articulated this aspiration during discussion with US envoy Harry Hopkins in May 1945, recorded in a memoranda as stating “in the course of twenty-five years the Germans had twice invaded Russia via Poland...It is therefore in Russia’s vital interest that Poland should be strong and friendly.”⁴¹

Stalin’s pursuit of security-through-expansion manifested at Allied negotiations, where—notwithstanding significant dissent from the US—the USSR gained control or influence over portions of Poland, Finland, Romania, Germany, and the Balkans.⁴² Subsequently, the USSR took aggressive action to spread communism and its influence in Europe, including: repressing non-communists and installing Communist puppet governments in liberated regions of Poland, the Bulgaria, Romania, and Hungary (violating Yalta Conference agreements of free and unfettered elections in Eastern Europe); establishing an exclusive Soviet sphere of influence in its occupied sector of Germany; refusing to withdraw troops from Iran; and exerting aggressive pressure on the Turkey to concede the establishment of Soviet forces in the Black Sea Strait.⁴³ In 1946, Stalin pronounced that international peace was impossible “under the present capitalist development of the world economy.”⁴⁴

The US Post-WWII

In March 1945, Truman asserted that the US had “emerged from [WWII] the most powerful

³⁹ Frank Roberts to Ernest Bevin, “Mr. Roberts to Mr. Bevin,” Cold War on File, FO 371/56763, The National Archives of the UK, March 17, 1946.

⁴⁰ Lundestad, “Empire by Invitation”

⁴¹ Charles E. Bohlen, “Memorandum of 2nd Conversation at the Kremlin,” Document 25, *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers, The Conference of Berlin*. May 27, 1945

⁴² Vojtech Mastny, *The Cold War and Soviet Insecurity: The Stalin Years* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996)

⁴³ Naimark, Norman, “The Sovietization of Eastern Europe, 1944–1953,” in *The Cambridge History of the Cold War: Vol. I*, eds. Melvyn Leffler and Odd Arne Westad (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010)

⁴⁴ Joseph Stalin, “Election Speech,” Transcript of speech delivered at the Stalin Electoral District in Moscow on February 9, 1946,

nation in the world—the most powerful nation perhaps in all history,” signaling the US’ ascent as a preeminent world power.⁴⁵ The nation boasted a formidable military, possessing the world’s foremost maritime force and a monopoly on nuclear armaments. Moreover, the war saw the US ascend as the world’s largest and most robust economy, largely unscathed by physical destruction on its domestic front, thus maintaining an intact industrial base.⁴⁶ The US Gross National Product (GNP) surged by 60 percent during the war, and in 1945, the US economy accounted for 33 percent of the world’s gold reserves, 35 percent of gross world output, and 50 percent of its manufacturing capacity.⁴⁷ Its economic position empowered the US to spearhead post-war reconstruction initiatives, fortify infrastructure, and stimulate consumer demand. Further, leveraging abundant natural resources, particularly oil, proved pivotal in maintaining the country’s industrial might.⁴⁸ As Secretary of War Henry Stimson proclaimed, America had a “royal straight flush.”⁴⁹

Colonial Powers Post-WWII

The economic ramifications of WWII in Europe, coupled with the rise of anti-colonial resistance—whether nonviolent protests or insurgent groups engaged in armed struggles for independence—catalyzed decolonization in Asia and Africa.⁵⁰ UK Prime Minister Winston S. Churchill depicted postwar Europe as “a rubble heap, a charnel house, a breeding ground of pestilence and hate.”⁵¹ Alongside the human tolls, war-torn nations confronted formidable economic impediments that hindered reconstruction efforts, including inflation, substantial debt (primarily

⁴⁵ Harry S. Truman, “Radio report to the American people on the Potsdam Conference,” *Columbia Broadcasting System*, Washington D.C., August 9, 1945.

⁴⁶ Melvyn P. Leffler, “The Emergence of an American Grand Strategy, 1945–1952,” in *The Cambridge History of the Cold War: Vol. 1*, eds. Melvyn Leffler and Odd Arne Westad (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 67.

⁴⁷ Alfred W. McCoy, *In the Shadows of the American Century: The Rise and Decline of US Global Power* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017).

⁴⁸ Gaddis, *We Now Know*.

⁴⁹ Henry Stimson, “Stimson Diary Entries, May 14 and 15, 1945.” Diary. The Library of Congress Manuscript Division.

⁵⁰ John Darwin, “The Geopolitics of Decolonization,” in *Endless Empire: Spain’s Retreat, Europe’s Eclipse, America’s Decline*, eds. Alfred W. McCoy, Josep Fradera, and Stephen Jacobson (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012).

⁵¹ Winston Churchill. “Speech at the 1947 United Europe Committee Meeting.” Transcript of speech delivered at Royal Albert Hall, South Kensington, May 14, 1947.

owed to the US), trade deficits, payment imbalances, and depletion of gold and dollar reserves.⁵²

Fiscal costs of WWII are estimated at one trillion dollars, with extensive infrastructure damage exacerbating economic distress, precipitating a collapse in the European economy.⁵³

Prior to the war, around two-fifths of the world's land area was in colonies, dependencies, or dominions of Western European powers, predominantly the UK, France, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Portugal.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, post-war, nationalist movements gained momentum among colonial subjects, partly fueled by anticipation of increased freedoms following pivotal contributions to the war effort.⁵⁵ The occupations of former European colonies in East Asia by Japan, itself an imperial power, further destabilized the Western colonial system, depriving colonizers of their former prestige and fostering nationalist sentiments.⁵⁶ Moreover, the war exposed the contradictions inherent in advocating freedom abroad while suppressing independence movements in colonies.⁵⁷ As the devastation in Europe necessitated prioritization of post-war domestic reconstruction over colonial administration, the colonial powers lacked resources to devote to quelling uprisings.

Between 1945 and 1960, three dozen new states attained autonomy or outright independence.⁵⁸

The Greek Civil War emerged within this fractured world order, with the conflict and eventual US intervention serving as an instance where the diminishment of a colonial power's influence, rather than direct colonial rule, ignited a Cold War confrontation.⁵⁹ The power vacuum created from the cessation of German, Italian, and Bulgarian occupation of Greece, precipitated the

⁵² Barry Eichengreen, *The European Economy since 1945: Coordinated Capitalism and Beyond* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007)

⁵³ John Kenneth Galbraith, *The New Industrial State* (New York: New American Library, 1967)

⁵⁴ John Darwin, "The Geopolitics"

⁵⁵ McMahon, *The Cold War*

⁵⁶ Marilyn B. Young, "The Age of Global Power," in *Making the Forever War: Marilyn B. Young on the Culture and Politics of American Militarism*, eds. Mark Philip Bradley and Mary L. Dudziak (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2021)

⁵⁷ John Darwin, *The Empire Project: The Rise and Fall of the British World-System, 1830-1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009)

⁵⁸ Lundestad, "Empire by Invitation"

⁵⁹ Svetozar Rajak, "The Cold War in the Balkans, 1945–1956," in *The Cambridge History of the Cold War: Vol. I*, eds. Melvyn Leffler and Odd Arne Westad (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010)

clash between communist-led forces of the Democratic Army of Greece and the anti-communist government backed by UK aid.⁶⁰ As the UK's ability to aid Greece and Turkey economically and militarily waned, symbolizing the decline of its colonial influence, the US feared that absent US intervention, the communist forces would achieve power, allowing the USSR to expand its influence into the eastern Mediterranean and Middle East.⁶¹

On March 12, 1947, Truman addressed a joint session of Congress and requested \$400 million in assistance for Greece and Turkey, pledging political, military, and economic support to any nation threatened by communism and signifying a shift in US foreign policy from isolationism to interventionism.⁶² The Truman Doctrine articulated the core tenets of US Cold War policy: the Soviet Union as the epicenter of global communism; the spread of communism through invasion or subversion; and the US's obligation to protect nations from communist aggression.⁶³ In his address, Truman amalgamated two distinct “dangers” in US thinking: 1) the potential growth of Soviet power; and 2) the dissemination of a set of ideas antithetical to US values.⁶⁴

The International System Post-WWII

Military, economic, and geopolitical upheavals after WWII signaled the collapse of the former world order. These disruptions facilitated the ascent of the US and USSR as superpowers, each intent on establishing a new international framework consonant with its own imperatives and principles. The power vacuum engendered by decolonization expanded the battleground for their competition for influence and power, amplifying the conflict's significance and altering its composition.⁶⁵ Newly sovereign nations, often strategically positioned or endowed with substantial

⁶⁰ Melvyn Leffler, “Strategy, Diplomacy, and the Cold War: The United States, Turkey, and NATO, 1945–1952,” *Journal of American History* 71, no. 4 (1985)

⁶¹ Rajak, “The Cold War”

⁶² Harry S. Truman, “Transcript of President Truman’s Message to Congress,” Document 171; 80th Congress, 1st Session, March 12, 1947, Records of the United States House of Representatives, Record Group 233, National Archives

⁶³ Leffler, “Strategy, Diplomacy”

⁶⁴ McMahon, *The Cold War*

⁶⁵ Melvyn P. Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, The Truman Administration, and the Cold War* Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1992.

natural resources, found themselves at the epicenter of this ideological competition, presented with the choice to align with either the US or the USSR, influenced by ideological affinities, strategic advantages, or economic support.⁶⁶ Notable instances of nations gaining independence in the aftermath of WWII and subsequently emerging as pivotal actors in the dynamics of the Cold War include Korea, Angola, Cambodia, Indonesia, Chile, Vietnam, and Laos.⁶⁷

US National Security Concerns Post-WWII

The destruction of the global order coincided with heightened US national security concerns after WWII. The departure from the US' prior isolationist stance due to these fears significantly influenced the contours of subsequent Cold War dynamics; adherence to isolationism might have mitigated conflicts with the USSR, fundamentally altering the era's character.

The Japanese strike of Pearl Harbor destroyed the previous illusion of American invulnerability and convinced the US that its previously praised two-ocean barrier was an inadequate safeguard against external threats.⁶⁸ Consequently, the US grew resolute that no single nation or coalition of nations should be allowed to consolidate power in the World Island and its influential resources.⁶⁹ The Axis Powers' comprehensive control over significant portions of the World Island in the early 1940s enabled prolonged conflicts, global economic disruptions, egregious crimes against humanity, and posed a direct threat to the Western hemisphere.⁷⁰ US officials cautioned that a repeat of such comprehensive control would destabilize the international system again, thus posing a threat to the physical safety of the US. As such, any attempt of one nation or coalition of nations to expand their government or ideology in a manner that permitted control of Eurasia constituted a direct threat warranting intervention.⁷¹

⁶⁶ Gaddis, *We Now Know*

⁶⁷ Lefler, *A Preponderance of Power*

⁶⁸ Walter Millis (ed.), *The Forrestal Diaries* (New York: Viking, 1951)

⁶⁹ Young, "The Age"

⁷⁰ McMahon, *The Cold War*

⁷¹ Mervyn P. Lefler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, The Truman Administration, and the Cold War* Stanford, California: Stanford

Amidst socioeconomic distress and political upheavals that facilitated burgeoning communist governments and parties in Eurasia, US officials cautioned that these nations would align with and defer to the USSR, expanding its power and influence.⁷² Under Secretary of State Joseph Grew warned in June 1945 that “anarchy may result from the present economic distress and political unrest.”⁷³ Consequently, the US construed actions by the USSR as validation of an aggressive expansionist agenda, affirming apprehensions regarding a communist coalition, and compelling intervention due to direct threats to its national security.⁷⁴⁷⁵

This fear of permanent Soviet hegemony in Eastern Europe and the threat of Soviet-backed communist parties gaining power in Western Europe propelled the US to pursue the containment strategy outlined in Secretary of State George C. Marshall’s announcement of the Marshall Plan three months after Truman’s address.⁷⁶ In it, the US, for the first time, employed economic aid as a strategic component of US foreign policy, intending to supplant Soviet influence and avoid a repetition of its perceived mistakes of political disengagement and economic protectionism post-World War I.⁷⁷ The initiative—a thirteen billion dollar aid package to revitalize European nations, integrate economies, and stimulate consumption of US exports—sought to counter the deprivation, destitution, and disillusionment fostering communism’s ascendancy in postwar Europe.⁷⁸

While many Western European leaders welcomed heightened US involvement, Stalin prohibited Eastern European participation, fearing it would weaken his control over his satellite

University Press, 1992.

⁷² John L. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy during the Cold War* (rev. and expanded, New York: Oxford University Press, 2005)

⁷³ Joseph C. Grew, “Memorandum for the President,” Memorandum, June 18, 1945, Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers, the Conference of Berlin (The Potsdam Conference), Volume I, Document 466

⁷⁴ Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*

⁷⁵ Kennan, *Memoirs*

⁷⁶ William I. Hitchcock, “The Marshall Plan and the Creation of the West,” in *The Cambridge History of the Cold War: Vol. I*, eds. Melvyn Leffler and Odd Arne Westad (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010)

⁷⁷ George Marshall, “The Marshall Plan,” transcription of speech delivered at Harvard University on June 5, 1947

⁷⁸ Act of April 3, 1948, European Recovery Act [Marshall Plan], Enrolled Acts and Resolutions of Congress, 1789-1996, General Records of the United States Government; Record Group 11, National Archives.

states as, since 1945, Stalin had directed trade patterns in Eastern Europe, which under the pact, would be reintegrated with Western Europe.⁷⁹ Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov cautioned that the Marshall Plan would “divide Europe into two groups of states and create new difficulties in the relations between them.”⁸⁰ Indeed, the inclusion of Germany in the Marshall Plan eventually incited the division of Germany between the US-UK-France and USSR zones, establishing the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and the German Democratic Republic (GDR).⁸¹

Interaction Between Power Rivalry and Structural Causes

The fractured international system offered two messianic nations the opportunity to mold the world according to their ideology, their ambitions hindered only by their rivalry with each other. The US and USSR assumed roles as liberal and Marxist-Leninist hegemons, respectively, thereby orienting their foreign policy around these guiding principles.⁸² Exacerbated by national security concerns and competing for ideological supremacy, both sides perceived the advancement of the other’s ideology as a challenge to their power and a direct threat to national security.⁸³

As such, Stalin interpreted the Marshall Plan’s attempt to revive European economies and fortify its influence as a hostile maneuver and an initial move in a US offensive to encircle the USSR.⁸⁴ Minutes of a meeting between a Czechoslovak delegation and Stalin notes that Stalin believed the Marshall Plan’s attempt to reignite the European economy, “is in fact a question of isolating the USSR.”⁸⁵ In response, Stalin initiated a definitive shift in strategy to safeguard his Eastern European sphere of influence and thwart US efforts to consolidate an anti-USSR bloc in

⁷⁹ George Marshall, “The Marshall Plan”

⁸⁰ Vyacheslav Molotov, “Statement by Molotov,” transcript of speech delivered at the Final Meeting of the Three Power Conference on July 2, 1947

⁸¹ Naimark, “The Sovietization”

⁸² Engerman, “Ideology”

⁸³ Lundestad, “Empire by Invitation”

⁸⁴ Engerman, “Ideology”

⁸⁵ “Minutes of a Visit to Generalissimo J.V. Stalin on 9 July 1947,” printed in Bohemia: A Journal of History and Civilisation in East Central Europe 32 (1991), 134.

Western Europe.⁸⁶

The “two camp” thesis exemplifies this shift in policy, resulting in a new international Communist organization and harsher Communist tactics. Chief USSR delegate Andrei Zhdanov posited the two camp thesis, claiming that the Marshall Plan would serve as “a jumping off place for attacking the Soviet Union” and divide the world into “two camps.”⁸⁷ The Soviets established the Communist Information Bureau (COMINFORM) to organize communist parties in Europe to mobilize resistance to the Marshall Plan in Western Europe, aiming to consolidate Soviet control over its satellite nations in Eastern Europe where reactionary elements remained strong potential opponents.⁸⁸ The subsequent Sovietization and opposition to anti-communists in Eastern Europe, such as the Soviet-backed coup in Czechoslovakia epitomized the more aggressive Soviet stance within its sphere of influence.⁸⁹

The establishment of NATO in April 1949—a trans-Atlantic security pact between the US and eleven other countries—epitomizes the final early division of the US and the USSR in the Cold War’s first front in a military alliance to complement economic efforts at containment.⁹⁰ As the first mutual security and military alliance in American history, the treaty reflected the growing ties between Europe and the US and marked a final departure for US foreign policy from isolationism.⁹¹ The establishment of NATO spurred the USSR to create an alliance with the communist governments of Eastern Europe, formalized in 1955 by the Warsaw Pact.⁹²

These early Cold War developments highlight Stalin and Truman’s shared fear of encirclement stemming from the uncertain international system: the USSR feared Western ideological

⁸⁶ Vladimir O. Pechatnov, “The Soviet Union and the World, 1944–1953,” in *The Cambridge History of the Cold War: Vol. I*, eds. Melvyn Leffler and Odd Arne Westad (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010)

⁸⁷ “Text of Zhdanov’s Report on the International Situation,” RTsKhIDNI, f. 77, op. 3, d. 94,1. 15.

⁸⁸ Giovanni Procacci (ed.), *The Cominform: Minutes of the Three Conference 1947/1948/2949* (Milan: Fondazione Feltrinelli, 1994)

⁸⁹ Pechatnow, “The Soviet Union”

⁹⁰ Leffler, “Strategy, Diplomacy

⁹¹ Hitchcock, “The Marshall Plan”

⁹² Lundestad, “Empire by Invitation”

encroachment into Eastern Europe, while the US harbored concerns about Soviet expansionism through the dissemination of communism. The formation and consolidation of the US and USSR's spheres of influence mark the inception of the Cold War, vividly illustrating how ideological disparities and a disrupted world order precipitated this epochal conflict that dominated international affairs for nearly half a century.⁹³

Conclusion

The international power vacuum in the wake of WWII—a consequence of the collective post-war devastation in Europe, decolonization, and ascent of the US and USSR as superpowers—permitted the US and the USSR to expand their own ideologies, consonant with American liberalism and Soviet Marxism-Leninism, respectively, into the international arena. The strategic shift in US foreign policy from isolationism to interventionism due to national security concerns arising from the war constituted a pivotal shift that underscored this escalation. The ideological underpinnings of American liberalism, emphasizing individual rights and free market dynamics, and Soviet Marxism-Leninism, aspiring for a classless, stateless society through proletarian revolution, profoundly influenced governance, foreign policy, and perceptions of global influence. The incongruities stemming by the universality, progressiveness, and messianism embedded within these ideologies precluded amicable compromises, thereby causing the Cold War. Both the US and the USSR interpreted the ideological advancements of the other as direct challenges to their hegemony, fueling an unyielding pursuit of global dominance and the consolidation of their respective spheres of influence. In a contemporary landscape, the genesis of the Cold War, rooted in ideological discord and power struggle, serves as a cautionary tale, accentuating the potential repercussions of ideological and geopolitical competition in shaping and influencing modern relations between the US and China.

⁹³ Lundestad, “Empire by Invitation”

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