

Who was to blame for the Cold War?

In 1945 the Axis powers (Germany, Italy and Japan) were defeated by the 'Grand Alliance' of America, Great Britain and the Soviet Union. The war could not have been won without the military power and expertise of the USA and the manpower and sheer resilience of the USSR. Despite this, within weeks of victory, the 'Grand Alliance' was starting to disintegrate. While it is often the case that such alliances fail to survive their enemies' defeat, the 'Cold War' relationship which developed after the Allied victory in 1945 was highly unusual. Its causes have provoked fierce debate.

Background: conflicting ideologies

Ever since the Bolshevik revolution of 1917, the USA and Russia had embraced utterly opposing ideologies. Starting with the presidency of Woodrow Wilson (1913–1921), the USA became the vanguard of liberal, capitalist democracy while Russia under Lenin professed a dedication to the overthrow of capitalism through revolutionary communism.

As a result of these differences mistrust had grown. The USA perceived communism as a threat to its values and way of life. The establishment of a

dictatorship, involving ambitious propaganda and an increasingly brutal secret police, reinforced this view. Furthermore, in 1939, the Soviets had entered into an agreement with the Nazis under which Poland was annexed and divided between them.

Equally, the USSR could point to clear evidence of a threat to its way of life from the USA and its allies in western Europe. These countries had all sent troops to try to help defeat the communists in the Russian Civil War (1918–21) and had excluded the USSR from international diplomacy, including the Versailles treaties and, for a time, the League of Nations. Indeed, the motivation for Stalin's signing of the pact with the Nazis in 1939 had been his belief that the Western powers' failure to tackle Hitler's aggressive policies was motivated by a desire to see a Nazi-Soviet war in which Russia and Germany would destroy each other.

With this in mind, it is clear that there were some weaknesses behind the façade of the Grand Alliance. Nevertheless, it cannot be disputed that during the later years of the war, the USA and USSR had effectively put their differences behind them and proved that they were able to work together to achieve great success. When President Roosevelt, along with Winston Churchill, met with Stalin at Yalta in February 1945 to discuss postwar plans (see Source C),

● 1 What do Sources A and B reveal about the strength of the 'Grand Alliance' at the end of the Second World War.

SOURCE C

The Big Three, Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin, at the Yalta Conference in early 1945.

SOURCE A

Stalin, speaking at a dinner during the Yalta conference, 1945:

I want to drink to our alliance, that it should not lose its...intimacy, its free expression of views...I know of no such alliance of the three Great Powers as this...May it be strong and stable, may we be as frank as possible.

SOURCE B

Milovan Djilas, a member of the Soviet delegation, writing about Yalta in 1948:

In the hallway [at Yalta] we stopped before a map of the world on which the Soviet Union was coloured red. Stalin waved his hand over the Soviet Union and exclaimed, 'They will never accept the idea that so great a space should be red, never, never!'





SOURCE D

Changes in the leadership, Attlee, Truman and Stalin, Potsdam, July 1945

● 2 Source C is a photograph taken at the Yalta Conference in February 1945. Source D was taken 5 months later at Potsdam. How much can these sources tell us about the 'special' relationship of the Big Three?

they were able to agree upon many issues and relations were generally cordial, yet, within a year, the Cold War had started to take shape.

Why did the Alliance collapse so quickly?

In general terms, historians accept one of four interpretations regarding responsibility for the onset of the Cold War.

Interpretation 1

The USSR was primarily to blame

Historians who believe that the USSR caused the Cold War point to the persistent propaganda of world revolution that was employed by Stalin. Within the USSR Stalin frequently alluded to his belief in the inevitability of the collapse of capitalism and encouraged the Soviet population to believe that the USSR would one day control the globe. Clearly, by taking the words of the Soviet leader at face value, the West could be said to have every justification for feeling threatened.

Furthermore, Stalin is accused of attempting to take advantage of the fact that Roosevelt died before the end of the war. The leaders of the Grand Alliance met again (at Potsdam) to discuss the terms of the final peace for Europe in July 1945. Roosevelt had been replaced by Harry Truman, who was relatively young and inexperienced (see Source D), and Winston Churchill by Clement Attlee. It is argued that Stalin pushed Truman into a corner, refusing to compromise as he had at Yalta and failing to understand that Truman could not allow himself to be seen as weak in front of the US public. This caused relations to become strained and initiated the collapse of the alliance.

Stalin is accused of behaving in a paranoid fashion, for example by overreacting to the potential threat of the development by the USA of an atomic bomb (which was used in Japan in August 1945). Historians who highlight Soviet responsibility for the Cold War consider that these factors combined to motivate Stalin to behave in a highly confronta-

SOURCE E

President Roosevelt to William C. Bullitt prior to the Yalta meeting in 1945:

I have a hunch that Stalin doesn't want anything but security for his country, and I think that if I give him everything I possibly can and ask nothing from him in return...he wouldn't try to annex anything and will work with us for a world of democracy and peace.

SOURCE F

President Truman, writing to Secretary of State James F. Byrnes in January 1946:

Unless Russia is faced with an iron fist and strong language another war is in the making. Only one language do they understand — 'How many [army] divisions have you got?'...I'm tired [of] babying the Soviets.

tional manner. The principal form of provocation was the Soviet takeover of eastern Europe. For the USA and its allies in western Europe, who had fought against the Nazis partly to protect the independence of eastern Europe, this seemed to provide indisputable evidence of the USSR's plan for world domination. In addition, Stalin's actions over Berlin in 1948–49 were seen as highly provocative (see Sources H, I and J).

Interpretation 2

The USA was primarily to blame

Although the arguments about the USSR may appear convincing, there are many historians who argue that the Cold War was primarily caused by the actions of the USA. To counter the arguments of the first interpretation, these historians stress the importance of understanding the context for Soviet policy. In particular, they emphasise the fact that the Soviet Union lost over 20 million people during the Second World War, roughly one sixth of the entire population. The citizens and governments of the USA and UK both felt the impact of the loss of life caused by the war, yet, in contrast to the USSR, the USA and the UK suffered fewer than 1 million casualties between them. The magnitude of this difference, according to many historians, is too easily overlooked. Supporters of the second interpretation argue, therefore, that the USA should have been far more understanding about the concerns of the USSR and, in particular, should have been sympathetic towards Stalin's desire for a 'buffer' of friendly states between Germany and the USSR to guard against another attack.

While this may justify Stalin's desire for influence over eastern Europe, it does not excuse the nature of the takeover, which involved intimidation, subterfuge and murder. Nevertheless, some historians argue that Stalin felt he had little choice because of the attitude of the USA.

Roosevelt, before his death, had provided reassurances to Stalin that he understood the Soviets'

SOURCE G

Stalin speaking at the Potsdam conference:

The following should not be forgotten. The Germans made their invasion of the USSR through Poland, Romania, Bulgaria and Hungary. They were able to do this because these countries had governments hostile to the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union's loss of life in the war has been several times greater than that of Britain and the USA put together. The Soviet Union, anxious for its future safety, is trying to see that these countries have governments friendly to the Soviet Union. How can anyone, who is not mad, describe these peaceful hopes as a desire to expand our power?

concerns for their security, but Truman did not echo these at Potsdam (see Sources E and F). Many historians believe that Truman was concerned that he would be perceived as weak within the USA if he failed to stand up to Stalin. It can be argued that paranoia about communism was rife in the USA and that, while Truman did not necessarily share in it, he was undoubtedly concerned about the potential cost of appearing to be weak in the face of a communist threat. Truman can therefore be criticised for adopting a stance that was motivated by a desire to preserve his image. In doing so, he strained relations by encouraging Stalin to feel that the USSR had to act unilaterally.

Truman is accused of promoting policies that were extremely provocative. First, there has long been a debate about the reasons for the decision to use the atomic bomb to bring an end to the war in the Pacific. Some historians have suggested that

Truman's justification for this action (that it would save around 100,000 US lives) was dishonest, and that he was really motivated by a desire to scare Stalin with a display of the military power of the USA. Official papers released in 1995 (having been kept secret for 50 years) appear to show that Truman knew that his justification for dropping the bombs was untrue, which further supports this view.

Last, it could be argued that it must have been known that both the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan would heighten tensions, because they were clearly designed to weaken communism. From a Soviet perspective these were viewed as an indirect means of establishing an 'American empire' (sometimes called the 'invisible empire') of countries whose government and/or economy were entirely dependent on US support (see Source H).

The remaining interpretations are similar and both rely largely on the arguments already discussed, although the analytical emphasis differs.

Interpretation 3

The Cold War was the fault of both countries

Historians who support this view would agree with many, if not all, of the arguments above. However, instead of coming down on one side or the other these historians stress a synthesis between the two different viewpoints. They believe that both interpretations are valid, and that the Cold War was caused by the paranoia of both countries, their leaders' concerns to preserve their image, and their respective provocative action. In particular, they stress that the death of Roosevelt removed the person most able to bridge the divide between the two superpowers (see Source E).

● 3 To what extent do the statements of the three leaders in Sources E, F and G support the view that the USA was responsible for the Cold War?

● 4 Look at Sources I and J. To what extent did the Soviet takeover of Eastern Europe cause the Cold War?

● 5 Could the Cold War have been avoided? Use all the sources and your own knowledge to explain your answer.

SOURCE H

Events in Europe 1945–49

Event	Explanation	Significance
The Truman Doctrine, March 1947	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Guaranteed that the USA would support regimes that were threatened by Communist takeover ● The doctrine was part of Truman's policy of containment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Effectively stated that the USA would support military struggles against Communism — perceived by Stalin as a direct threat
The Marshall Plan, June 1947	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● A US programme of aid to help rebuild torn Europe ● Provided a market for US goods and trade 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Viewed as 'dollar diplomacy' by Stalin (i.e. buying loyalty) ● The USSR lacked the resources to compete
Soviet expansion in Eastern Europe, 1945–49	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● By May 1945 the Red Army had established a presence throughout Eastern Europe ● By 1947, Communist parties had been helped to victory in 'elections', despite lacking the support of the majority of the population in Eastern European countries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Viewed by the USA as evidence of the Soviet desire to achieve world Communism
The Berlin blockade and airlift, 1948–49	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● At Potsdam, the Allies had agreed a plan to divide and occupy Germany and its capital, Berlin, into four zones ● The USSR controlled the eastern part of Germany, which contained Berlin ● In 1948, Stalin attempted to force the Allies to leave Berlin by establishing a blockade ● In 1949, the Allies overcame the blockade via an airlift of goods 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The blockade was the first real flashpoint of the Cold War ● For the USA it served to confirm Stalin's expansionist intentions ● It also constituted a defining moment in the nature of the conflict — neither side was prepared to risk outright conflict
The situation by late 1949	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● In 1949 the USA led the formation of NATO, a military alliance whose members agree to defend each other if attacked 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● This formalised the division of Europe into the eastern and western blocs

SOURCE I

Communist-controlled countries allied to USSR in the Second World War

Communist-controlled countries which were enemies of USSR in the Second World War

----- 'Iron Curtain'

The Allies had given the USSR of the eastern sector of Germany. It was run by the USSR effectively under Red Army control until the creation of the German Democratic Republic in 1949

After the war the Communists joined the coalition government, then became outright leaders in 1947 when they forced the non-Communist leader into exile

A left-wing coalition won elections in 1945. In 1946 Communists became the largest single party, but still in a coalition. In 1948, when their position was threatened, they banned other parties and made Czechoslovakia a Communist one-party state.

Communists became the largest single party in the 1947 elections. They imprisoned opposition politicians, and attacked church leaders

In 1945 a Communist was elected prime minister within a left-wing coalition. In 1947 the Communists abolished the monarchy

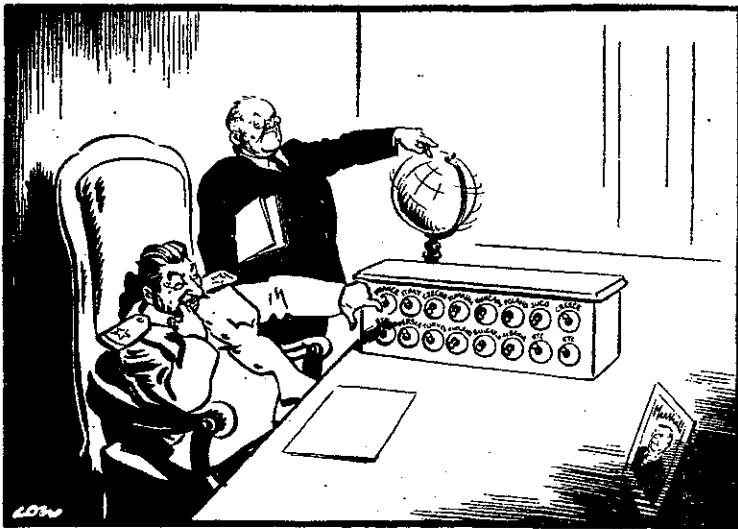
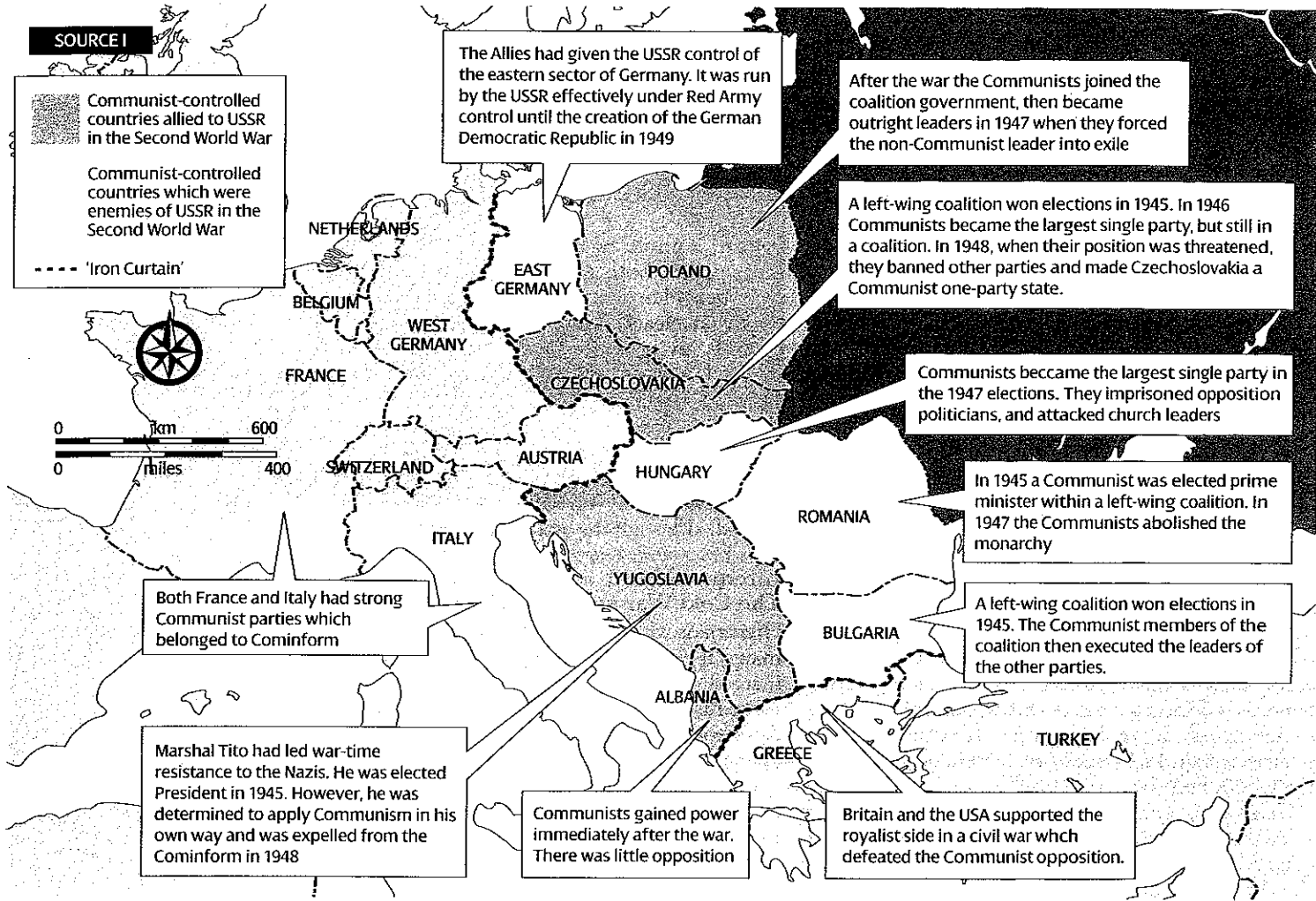
A left-wing coalition won elections in 1945. The Communist members of the coalition then executed the leaders of the other parties.

Britain and the USA supported the royalist side in a civil war which defeated the Communist opposition.

Communists gained power immediately after the war. There was little opposition

Marshal Tito had led war-time resistance to the Nazis. He was elected President in 1945. However, he was determined to apply communism in his own way and was expelled from the Cominform in 1948

Both France and Italy had strong Communist parties which belonged to Cominform



"WHO'S NEXT TO BE LIBERATED FROM FREEDOM, COMRADE?"

SOURCE I

Map of Soviet expansion into Eastern Europe

SOURCE J

A cartoon from the *Evening Standard*, published in March 1948

Interpretation 4 The Cold War was inevitable

The final interpretation agrees that the reasons discussed were crucial in causing the Cold War. However, instead of seeking to blame either side, these historians argue that the Cold War was unavoidable. The basis for this view is that neither country could have been expected to behave

differently and that the mutual misunderstanding and ideological barriers were too great to expect the Grand Alliance to continue. Those who believe that the Cold War was inevitable conclude that the Second World War made it clear that the world was dominated by two superpowers — the USA and the USSR — and that it was inevitable that these two powers would be rivals, regardless of the actions of their leaders or the beliefs of their people.

Conclusions

It could be argued that the Grand Alliance that proved victorious in 1945 had an ideal opportunity to make the world a safer place, particularly with the benefit of hindsight of the errors of 1918. However, such a view could be considered naïve, given the huge divergence in ideological beliefs and national interests of the newly established superpowers. Without a common goal or a common enemy, these divisions were quickly revealed. Clearly, there are strong grounds for various different views about the causes of the Cold War. Regardless of which of these one finds most convincing, it is beyond doubt that the continuation of the ideological barriers, the division of Europe and the burgeoning arms race provide many areas of debate for historians of the second half of the twentieth century.

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