

The Origins of the Cold War

This chapter looks at the origins of the Cold War, which can be traced back to the Russian Revolution of 1917. This covers elements of the origins of the cold war you will not be familiar with. You need to consider the following questions throughout this chapter:

- How significant were the ideological differences between the opposing sides as a cause of the Cold War?
- To what extent did the USSR's foreign policy in the interwar years reflect its priorities of defence and regaining territory lost at the end of the First World War?
- In what ways were the war aims and ambitions of the USSR, US and Great Britain conflicting?

The ideology of the Cold War

Key question: How significant were the ideological differences between the opposing sides as a cause of the Cold War?

USSR Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, the name given to communist Russia and states under its control from 1922, also known as the **Soviet Union**.

Communism A political and economic system in which all private ownership of property is abolished along with all economic and social class divisions.

Capitalism An economic system in which the

production of goods and their distribution depend on the investment of private capital with minimal government regulation and involvement.

The term 'cold war' was used before 1945 to describe periods of extreme tension between states stopping just short of war. In May 1945, when the US and the **USSR** faced each other in Germany, this term rapidly came back into use to describe the relations between them. The writer George Orwell, commenting on the significance of the dropping of the atomic bomb by the US on Japan in 1945 during the Second World War (see page 44), foresaw 'a peace that is no peace', in which the US and USSR would be both 'unconquerable and in a permanent state of cold war' with each other.

The Cold War was a fundamental clash of ideologies and interests. Essentially, the USSR followed Karl Marx's and Vladimir Lenin's teachings (see pages 9–11) that conflict between **communism** and **capitalism** was unavoidable, while the US and its allies for much of the time saw the USSR, in the words of US President Reagan in 1983, as an 'evil empire', intent on the destruction of democracy and civil rights.

Capitalism and communism

1. In what ways did the ideologies of the opposing sides differ?

Communism

In the nineteenth century, two Germans, Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx proposed communism as an idea for radical social change. This system provided the foundations of **Marxism–Leninism** which, in the twentieth century, became the governing ideology of the **Soviet Union**, much of central and eastern Europe, the People’s Republic of China, Cuba, and several other states.

Marx argued that capitalism and the **bourgeoisie** in an industrial society would inevitably be overthrown by the workers or ‘**proletariat**’ in a socialist revolution. This initially would lead to a ‘**dictatorship of the proletariat**’ in which the working class would break up the old order. Eventually, a true egalitarian communist society would emerge in which money is no longer needed and ‘each gives according to their ability to those according to their need’. In this society all people would be completely equal and economic production would be subordinated to human needs rather than profit. Crime, envy and rivalry would become things of the past since they were based on greed and economic competition. So, in its essence, communism is profoundly hostile to capitalism.

Marxism–Leninism

In the early twentieth century, Vladimir Ilych Lenin developed Marx’s ideas and adapted them to the unique conditions in Russia. Russia’s economy was primarily agricultural and lacked a large industrial proletariat which would rise in revolution. Lenin therefore argued that communists needed to be strongly organized with a small compact core, consisting of reliable and experienced revolutionaries, who could achieve their aims of undermining and toppling the Tsarist regime. In 1903 Lenin and his followers founded the **Bolshevik Party**, which seized power in Russia in October 1917.

Just before the Bolsheviks seized power Lenin outlined his plans for the creation of a revolutionary state in an unfinished pamphlet, *State and Revolution*. It would be run by ‘the proletariat organized as a ruling class’ and would use terror and force against any organization or person who did not support it. In fact the state would be the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’, and would ‘wither away’ only once its enemies at home and abroad were utterly destroyed. Then, of course, the promise of communism would dawn where there would be no economic exploitation, crime, selfishness or violence.

Under the leadership of first Lenin, and then Josef Stalin, the USSR became an authoritarian, communist state where the state was in charge of all aspects of the economy; there were no democratic elections and freedom of speech was limited.

Marxism–Leninism Doctrines of Marx which were built upon by Lenin.

Soviet Union See **USSR**.

Bourgeoisie The middle class, particularly those with business interests, whom Marx believed benefited most from the existing capitalist economic system.

Proletariat Marx’s term for industrial working-class labourers, primarily factory workers.

Dictatorship of the proletariat A term used by Marx to suggest that, following the overthrow of the bourgeoisie, government would be carried out by and on behalf of the working class.

Bolshevik Party The Russian Communist Party which seized power in a revolution in October 1917

2. What were the clashes between the two ideologies?

Command economy An economy where supply and pricing are regulated by the government rather than market forces such as demand, and in which all the larger industries and businesses are controlled centrally by the state.

Parliamentary government A government responsible to and elected by parliament.

Representative government A government based on an elected majority.

Capitalism

Capitalism is an economic system in which the production of goods and their distribution depend on the investment of private capital with a view to making a profit. Unlike a **command economy**, a capitalist economy is run by people who wish to make a profit, rather than by the state. By the 1940s western economies such as the US, Canada and Britain were mixed – with the state playing an increasingly major role in key sections of the economy, but with private enterprise playing a large part as well.

Ideological clashes

Opposition to Marxism–Leninism in the USA and the western European states in 1945 was reinforced, or – as Marxist theoreticians would argue – even determined by the contradictions between capitalism and the command economies of the communist-dominated states.

Political systems

In the west there was a deep mistrust of communism as a political system, particularly its lack of democracy. The USSR dismissed democracy as a mere camouflage for capitalism and its politicians as its puppets. For Marxist–Leninists, democracy meant economic equality where there were no extremes between wealthy capitalists and poor workers and peasants. However, for the **parliamentary governments** of western Europe and the US, democracy meant the liberty of the individual, equality before the law and **representative government**, rather than economic equality under the dictatorship of the proletariat. Liberal or parliamentary democracy challenges the right of any one party and leader to have the permanent monopoly of power. It is, at least in theory, opposed to dictatorship in any form.

Religion

Marxism–Leninism was bitterly opposed to religion. One of its core arguments was that it was not an all-powerful God who influenced the fate of mankind, but rather economic and material conditions. Once these were reformed under communism, mankind would prosper and not need any religion. For Marxists religion was merely, as Marx himself had said, ‘the opium of the masses’. It duped the proletariat into accepting exploitation by their rulers and capitalist businessmen. During the revolution in Russia, churches, mosques and synagogues were closed down, and religion was banned.

In Europe, Christian churches were amongst the leading critics and enemies of communism. After 1945, Catholic-dominated political parties in western Germany and Italy played a key role in opposing communism. In 1979, the election of Pope John Paul II of Poland as head of the Roman Catholic Church led many in Poland to oppose communist government (see page 260).

Source A

An excerpt from *The Cold War, 1945–1991*, by John W. Mason, published by Routledge, London, UK, 1996, p. 71.

Fundamentally the cold war was a confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union, fuelled on both sides by the belief that the ideology of the other side had to be destroyed. In this sense ... co-existence was not possible ... The Soviet Union held to Lenin's belief that conflict between Communism and Capitalism was inevitable. The United States believed that peace and security in the world would only emerge when the evil of Communism had been exorcised [expelled].

3. What does Source A reveal about the nature of the Cold War?

The Soviet Union and the Western powers, 1917–41

Key question: To what extent did the USSR's foreign policy in the interwar years reflect its priorities of defence and regaining territory lost at the end of the First World War?

4. Why was there hostility between the US and Russia 1917–20?

Fourteen Points A list of points drawn up by US President Woodrow Wilson on which the peace settlement at the end of the First World War was based.

The Bolshevik Revolution in Russia succeeded against the odds but Lenin was initially convinced that victory within Russia alone would not ensure the survival of the revolution. An isolated Bolshevik Russia was vulnerable to pressure from the capitalist world; its very existence was a challenge to it. If communism was to survive in Russia, it had also to triumph globally.

This belief had a large influence on Soviet relations with the rest of the world.

Source B

An excerpt from 'Farewell Address to the Swiss Workers' by Lenin, April 1917, quoted in *Lenin's Collected Works*, Vol. 23, English edition (trans. M.S. Levin, et al.), Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1964, p. 371. *To the Russian proletariat has fallen the great honour of beginning the series of revolutions which the imperialist war [the First World War] has made an objective inevitability. But the idea that the Russian proletariat is the chosen revolutionary proletariat is absolutely alien to us. We know perfectly well that the proletariat of Russia is less organised, less prepared and less class conscious than the proletariat of other countries. It is not its special qualities but rather the special conjuncture of historical circumstances that for a certain, perhaps very short, time has made the proletariat of Russia the vanguard of the revolutionary proletariat of the whole world.*

5. What is the importance of Source B for understanding the aims of Russian foreign policy after the Bolshevik Revolution?

The US and Russia

One historian, Howard Roffmann, has argued that the Cold War 'proceeded from the very moment the Bolsheviks triumphed in Russia in 1917'. There was certainly immediate hostility between Bolshevik Russia and the US which, along with Britain, France and Japan, intervened in the Russian Civil War (1918–22) by helping the Bolsheviks' opponents, the Whites (see page 15).

This hostility was intensified by the ideological clash between the ideas of US President Woodrow Wilson and Lenin. Wilson, in his **Fourteen Points** of January 1918, presented an ambitious global programme that called for the **self-determination** of subject peoples, creation of democratic states, free trade and **collective security** through a **League of Nations**. Lenin preached world revolution and communism, repudiated Russia's foreign debts and nationalized all businesses in Russia, including those owned by foreigners.

However, the rivalry between these two embryonic superpowers which was to give rise to the Cold War after 1945, had not yet become acute. Despite playing a key role in negotiating the Treaty of Versailles, the US Congress refused to allow President Wilson to sign the peace treaty or for the US to join the League of Nations. Instead, the US retreated into **isolation** until 1941.

The Russian Revolution and Allied intervention

The Russian Civil War

Although the Bolsheviks had seized power in the major cities in 1917, they had to fight a bitter civil war to destroy their opponents, the Whites, who were assisted by Britain, France, the US and Japan. These countries hoped that by assisting the Whites, they would be able to strangle Bolshevism and prevent it spreading to Germany which, after defeat in the First World War in November 1918, was in turmoil and vulnerable to communist revolution by its own workers. If Germany were to become communist, the **Allies** feared that the whole of Europe would be engulfed in revolution. However, Allied intervention was ineffective and in 1919 French and US troops withdrew, and British troops were withdrawn in 1920. Only Japan's troops remained until the end of the Civil War in 1922. Intervention in the USSR did inevitably fuel Soviet suspicions of the Western powers.

The Polish-Russian War, 1920

At the **Paris Peace Conference** in 1919, British Foreign Minister Lord Curzon proposed that the frontier with Russia should be about 160 kilometres to the east of Warsaw, Poland's newly-created capital; this demarcation became known as the Curzon Line. Poland, however, rejected this and exploited the chaos in Russia to seize as much territory as it could. In early 1920, Poland launched an invasion of the Ukraine. This was initially successful, but, by August 1920, Bolshevik forces had pushed the Poles back to Warsaw. With the help of military supplies and advisors from France, Poland rallied and managed to inflict a decisive defeat on the **Red Army**, driving it out of much of the territory Poland claimed. In 1921, Poland signed the Treaty of Riga with Russia and was awarded considerable areas of the Ukraine and Byelorussia, in which Poles formed only a minority of the population.

6. How did Allied intervention after the Russian Revolution have an impact on subsequent Soviet foreign policy?

Self-determination Giving nations and nationalities the right to be independent and to form their own governments.

Collective security An agreement between nations that an aggressive act towards one nation will be treated as an aggressive act towards all nations under the agreement.

League of Nations

International organization established after the First World War to resolve conflicts between nations to prevent war.

Isolation A situation in which a state has no alliances or close diplomatic contacts with other states.

Allies In the First World War, an alliance between Britain, France, the US, Japan, China and others, including Russia until 1917.

Paris Peace Conference The peace conference held in Paris in 1919–20 to deal with defeated Germany and her allies. It resulted in the Treaties of Versailles, St. Germain, Neuilly and Sèvres.

Red Army The army of the USSR

Soviet foreign policy, 1922–45

7. To what extent was Soviet foreign policy based on the aim to consolidate the Soviet state?

Once the immediate possibility of a world communist revolution vanished, the consolidation of communism within the USSR became the priority for Lenin and his successors. This did not stop the USSR from supporting subversive activities carried out by communist groups or sympathizers within the Western democracies and their colonies. These activities were co-ordinated by the **Comintern**, which was established in 1919 to spread communist ideology. Although foreign communist parties had representatives in the organization, the Communist Party of Russia controlled it. In the 1930s, the USSR increasingly concentrated on building up its military and industrial strength.

Hitler and Stalin, 1933–41

The coming to power of Hitler and the Nazi Party in Germany in 1933 led to a radical change in Soviet foreign policy. Nazi Germany, with its hatred of communism and stated goal of annexing vast territories in the Soviet Union for colonization, presented a threat to the USSR's very existence. To combat this, Stalin, despite the ideological differences between the USSR and Britain and France, attempted to create a defensive alliance against Nazi Germany:

- In 1934, the USSR joined the League of Nations, which Stalin hoped to turn into a more effective instrument of collective security.
- In 1935, Stalin also signed a pact with France and Czechoslovakia in the hope that this would lead to close military co-operation against Germany. French suspicions of Soviet communism prevented this development.
- In September 1938, in response to Hitler's threat to invade Czechoslovakia, Stalin was apparently ready to intervene, provided France did likewise. However, Hitler's last-minute decision to agree to a compromise proposal at the Munich Conference of 29–30 September, which resulted in the **Munich Agreement**, ensured that Soviet assistance was not needed. The fact that the USSR was not invited to the Conference reinforced Stalin's fears that Britain, France and Germany would work together against the USSR.

Anglo-French negotiations with the USSR, April–August 1939 In March 1939, Germany invaded what was left of Czechoslovakia and, in April, the British and French belatedly began negotiations with Stalin for a defensive alliance against Germany. These negotiations were protracted and complicated by mutual mistrust. Stalin's demand that the Soviet Union should have the right to intervene in the affairs of the small states on her western borders if they were threatened with internal subversion by the Nazis, as Czechoslovakia had been in 1938, was rejected outright by the British. Britain feared that the USSR would exploit this as an excuse to seize the territories for itself.

Stalin was also suspicious that Britain and France were manoeuvring the Soviets into a position where they would have to do most of the fighting against Germany should war break out. The talks finally broke down on 17 August over the question of securing Poland's and Romania's consent to the passage of the Red Army through their territory in the event of war; something which was rejected by Poland.

Comintern A communist organization set up in Moscow in 1919 to co-ordinate the efforts of communists around the world to achieve a worldwide revolution.

Munich Agreement An agreement between Britain, France, Italy and Germany that the Sudetenland region of Czechoslovakia would become part of Germany

Lebensraum Literally living space. Territory for the resettlement of Germans in the USSR and eastern Europe.

Anglo-French

Guarantee In 1939, Britain and France guaranteed Polish independence, in the hope of preventing a German invasion of Poland.

Spheres of interest Areas where one power is able to exercise a dominant influence.

The Nazi-Soviet Pact

Until early 1939, Hitler saw Poland as a possible ally in a future war against the USSR for the conquest of *lebensraum*. Poland's acceptance of the **Anglo French Guarantee** forced him to reconsider his position and respond positively to those advisors advocating temporary co-operation with the Soviet Union.

Stalin, whose priorities were the defence of the USSR and the recovery of parts of the former Russian Empire, was ready to explore German proposals for a non-aggression pact; this was signed on 24 August. Not only did it commit both powers to benevolent neutrality towards each other, but in a secret protocol it outlined the German and Soviet **spheres of interest** in eastern Europe: the Baltic states and Bessarabia in Romania fell within the Soviet sphere, while Poland was to be divided between them.

On 1 September 1939, Germany invaded Poland, and Britain and France declared war on Germany on 3 September. The Soviet Union, as agreed secretly in the Nazi-Soviet Pact, began the invasion of eastern Poland on 17 September, although by this time German armies had all but defeated Polish forces. By the beginning of October, Poland was completely defeated and was divided between the Soviet Union and Germany, with the Soviets receiving the larger part.

8. What message is conveyed in Source D about the Nazi-Soviet Pact?

Source D

'Wonder How Long the Honeymoon Will Last?' A cartoon printed in US newspaper, the Washington Star, 9 October 1939.



Territorial expansion, October 1939–June 1941

Until June 1941, Stalin pursued a policy of territorial expansion in eastern Europe aimed at defending the USSR against possible future aggression from Germany. To this end, and with the dual aim of recovering parts of the former Russian Empire, Stalin strengthened the USSR's western defences:

- He signed mutual assistance pacts with Estonia and Latvia in October 1939. The Lithuanians were pressured into agreeing to the establishment of Soviet bases in their territory.
- In March 1940, after a brief war with Finland, the USSR acquired the Hanko naval base and other territory along their mutual border.
- Stalin's reaction to the defeat of France in June 1940, which meant German domination of Europe, was to annex the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania and to annex Bessarabia and northern Bukovina from Romania.
- In June 1941, Germany invaded the Soviet Union, and the USSR became allies with Britain against Nazi Germany, soon to be joined by the US.

The Grand Alliance, 1941–45

Key question: In what ways did the war aims and ambitions of the USSR, US and Great Britain conflict?

and Romania, as well as several states created in conquered areas.

Reparations Materials, equipment or money taken from a defeated power to make good the damage of war.

9. What were the aims of the Big Three?

In the second half of 1941, the global political and military situation was completely transformed. Not only were Britain and the USSR now allies against Germany but, on 7 December 1941, Japan's attack on the naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, brought the US into the war, as the US immediately declared war on Japan, an **Axis** power. In response, Germany and Italy both declared war against the US on 11 December. Germany was now confronted with the Grand Alliance of Britain, the US and the USSR, the leaders of which became known as the Big Three. The USSR was to suffer the brunt of the German attack and effectively destroyed the German army by 1945, but in the process suffered immense physical damage and some 25 million casualties.

The conflicting aims of the Big Three

As victory over the Axis powers became more certain, each of the three Allies began to develop their own often conflicting aims and agendas for post-war Europe.

The USSR's aims

By the winter of 1944–45, Stalin's immediate priorities were clear. He wanted security for the USSR and **reparations** from the Axis powers to help rebuild the Soviet economy. To protect the USSR against any future German attack, Stalin was determined to regain the land the USSR had annexed in 1939–40 and lost during the course of the war, including:

- land that the Soviet Union had annexed from Poland in 1939 (see page 16); in compensation, Poland would be given German territory that lay beyond the Oder River
- the Baltic provinces of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania
- territory lost to Finland in 1941
- Bessarabia and northern Bukovina from Romania.

Eastern Europe

In eastern Europe, Stalin's first priority was to ensure that regimes friendly to the USSR were established. By 1944, Stalin seems to have envisaged a post-war Europe, which for a period of time would consist of three different areas:

- An area under direct Soviet control in eastern Europe: Poland, Romania, Bulgaria and, for a time at least, the future Soviet zone in Germany.

- An 'intermediate zone', which was neither fully communist nor fully capitalist, comprising **Yugoslavia**, Austria, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Finland. The communists would share power there with the liberal, moderate socialist and peasant parties. These areas would act as a 'bridge' between Soviet-controlled eastern Europe and western Europe and the US.
- A non-communist western Europe, which would also include Greece.

Continued co-operation

Stalin wanted to continue close co-operation with Britain and the US even after the end of the war. In 1943, he dissolved the Comintern (see page 15) as a gesture to convince his allies that the USSR was no longer supporting global revolution. The British government saw this as evidence that Stalin wished to co-operate in the reconstruction of Europe after the end of the war.

US aims

In the 1950s, Western historians, such as Herbert Feis, argued that the US was too preoccupied with winning the struggle against Germany and Japan to give much thought to the political future of post-war Europe, since it assumed that all problems would in due course be solved in co-operation with Britain and the USSR. Yet this argument was sharply criticized by **revisionist** historians in the 1960s and 1970s, who insisted that the US very much had its own security agenda for the post-war period.

More recently, historian Melvyn Leffler has shown that the surprise Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, and the dramatic developments in air technology during the war, made the US feel vulnerable to potential threats from foreign powers. Consequently, as early as 1943–44, US officials began to draw up plans for a chain of bases which would give the USA control of both the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans. This would also give US industry access to the raw materials and markets of most of western Europe and Asia. Leffler argues that the steps the USA took to ensure its own security alarmed Stalin and so created a 'spiral of distrust', which led ultimately to the Cold War.

Source E

An excerpt from an article by Melvyn Leffler, 'National Security and US Foreign Policy' in *Origins of the Cold War*, ed. M.P. Leffler and D.S. Painter, published by Routledge, London, 1994, pp. 37–38.

The dynamics of the Cold War ... are easier to comprehend when one grasps the breadth of the American conception of national security that had emerged between 1945 and 1948. This conception included a strategic [military and political] sphere of influence within the western hemisphere, domination of the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, an extensive system of outlying bases to enlarge the strategic frontier and project American power, an even more extensive system of transit rights to facilitate the conversion of commercial air bases to military use, access to the resources and markets of Eurasia, denial of these resources to a prospective enemy, and the maintenance of nuclear superiority.

10. How important is Source E in explaining the cause of the Cold War?

Yugoslavia In 1918, the kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes was formed. In 1929, it officially became Yugoslavia. The Serbs were the dominating nationality within this state.

Revisionist In the sense of historians, someone who revises the traditional or orthodox interpretation of events and often contradicts it.

Tariffs Taxes placed on imported goods to protect the home economy.

Economic nationalism An economy in which every effort is made to keep out foreign goods.

Autarchic economy An economy that is self-sufficient and protected from outside competition.

Decolonization Granting of independence to colonies.

Atlantic Charter A

statement of fundamental principles for the post-war world. The most important of these were: free trade, no more territorial annexation by Britain or the USA, and the right of people to choose their own governments.

Economic aims

Much of US President Roosevelt's policy was inspired by the ideas of his predecessor Woodrow Wilson (see page 12), who in 1919 had hoped eventually to turn the world into one large free trade area. This would be composed of democratic states, where **tariffs** and **economic nationalism** would be abolished. The US government was determined that there should be no more attempts by Germany or Italy to create **autarchic economies**, and that the British and French, too, would be forced to allow other states to trade freely with their empires. Indeed, the US commitment to establishing democratic states meant that they supported the **decolonization** of the European colonial empires.

The United Nations

These ideas were all embodied in the **Atlantic Charter**, which British Prime Minister Churchill and US President Roosevelt drew up in August 1941, four months before the US entered the war. This new, democratic world order was to be underpinned by a future United Nations Organization (UN). By late 1943, Roosevelt envisaged this as being composed of an assembly where all the nations of the world would be represented, although real power and influence would be wielded by an executive committee, or Security Council. This would be dominated by the Soviet Union, Britain, China, France, and the US. For all his talk about the rights of democratic states, he realized that the future of the post-war world would be decided by these powerful states.

Britain's aims

The British government's main aims in 1944 were to ensure the survival of Great Britain as an independent Great Power still in possession of its empire, and to remain on friendly terms with both the US and the USSR. The British government was, however, alarmed by the prospect of Soviet influence spreading into central Europe and the eastern Mediterranean where Britain had vital strategic and economic interests. The Suez Canal in Egypt was its main route to India and British industry was increasingly dependent on oil from the Middle East. As Britain had gone to war over Poland, Prime Minister Churchill also wanted a democratic government in Warsaw, even though he conceded that its eastern frontiers would have to be altered in favour of the USSR.

11. To what extent had the Great Powers agreed on dividing up Europe into spheres of influence by the end of 1944?