

Cold War

ESSAY

Account for the origins of the Cold War to 1953

The beginnings of the hostile tension that culminated in the Cold War is was driven by the conflicting ideologies and battle for world supremacy between the Soviet Union and the United States. Following the end of WWII, the united front the two had against a common enemy disintegrated and relations between the two nations deteriorated as differences between the powers emerged in the period up to 1953. This rivalry manifested itself throughout the course of the conflict, most notably in the policy of containment, the Berlin Blockade, Chinese communism and the Korean War, early crises of which inevitably lead to the initiation of the Cold War. The driving force was largely blatant mistrust and competition for world dominance and superiority which culminated in heightened tension between the two nations, to the point at which nuclear was seemed immanent.

The antithetical ideologies between the USSR and USA were integral in fostering the hostility between the nations that were conducive to the Cold War. Aggressive foreign policies, national interests and uneasy relations all derived from incompatibility of the contradictory political systems. The United States was a liberal democracy with a capitalist economic system whereas the Soviet Union was a communist government, which was seen as an antithesis of these American ideals and tyrannical. The incompatibility of these political systems, resulted in the emergence of a desire for political dominance and global aspirations post WWII, evidenced in disagreements in the conferences at Yalta and Postdam, a contributory factor which resulted in the beginnings of the Cold War. According to historian John Lewis Gaddis, both nations resorted to *'underhand tactics and political strategy to limit the power of the other'*, leading to the adoption of the policy of containment by the United States. The goal of containment was to prevent Soviet expansionism and sphere of influence, particularly in countries such as Greece and Turkey in Eastern Europe and was imperative in determining the nature of the Cold War. Announced in the Truman Doctrine of March 1947, the USA shifted from a policy of isolationism in order, *"to support free people who are resisting the attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressure."* American intervention in Europe and anti-communist actions were integral in increasing tensions between the two nations, and as historian Eric Foner argues created, *"a set global military alliance directed against the Soviet Union"*, further severing ties between the nations. Moreover, the doctrine ensured an inauguration of the 'domino theory', which speculated that if one land in a region came under communist influence, surrounding countries would follow in a domino effect. This notion played a crucial role in dictating future foreign policy decisions, especially in the Vietnam and Korean War and further promulgating animosity between the superpowers.

The escalating tensions that culminated in the outbreak of the Cold War are evidenced in the initial confrontations between the two nations. The partition of Berlin, Germany post WWII amongst France, the USA, the British and the Soviet Union would prove disastrous and integral in the origins of the Cold War. As tensions between the two nations in late 1947 and early 1948 escalated, the Soviets' imposed a blockade on the Western bloc of Berlin, intended to *'starve the Westerners out of West Berlin'* and restrict vital resources reaching the 2.5 million people who resided there. In response, Operation Vittles was initiated, an airlift consisting of US, French and British forces that supplied 8000 provisions a day and resources to West Berlin. The airlift was a political masterstroke for the US, with its efforts *"winning her German public opinion and helping pave the way for the creation of the Federal Republic of Germany in September 1949"* (Painter) The US believed that Berlin was a successful

example of containment and showed their resolve to resist the further expansion of communism in Europe. However, as the first confrontation of the war, the relationship between the US and the USSR further deteriorated, as the blockade almost started another war. The crisis in Berlin brought both nations to the realisation they were fighting for world domination and further intensified the race to prevent the spread of competing ideologies and influences in another nations, and thus the origins of the Cold War were beginning to take shape.

Widespread fear of the opposing fear was manifested in the numerous political situations and events which ideologically driven. In October 1949, after three years of civil war the Chinese Communist Party rose to power in China, declaring the People's Republic of China on the 1st of October. Shortly after, party leader Mao Zedong travelled to the Soviet Union to sign the Sino-Soviet Treaty on the 14th of February, solidifying their alliance. Victory of the Chinese communists and their alliance with the USSR caused consternation in the West where the domino theory had seemingly begun, containment had failed and war appeared imminent. The Truman administration subsequently embarked on an arms buildup to counter the situation and the beginnings of the Cold War had substantiated and a real threat was apparent. Additionally Communist China, would prove integral in the Korean War of June 1950 where China would enter with the slogan, "*Help Korea, Down with US Imperialism*". At Yalta and Potsdam conferences of 1945, it was agreed that Korea would be occupied by US and Soviet troops after the defeat of Japan. Following the end of WWII, the USSR occupied the North above the 38th parallel, and the US occupied the South below the 38th parallel. Border clashes began thereafter and full scale war began when North Korean troops invaded South Korea. North Korea had Soviet advisors plan the attack, and had full support from the USSR and China. However, Stalin told Kim Il Sung that if the US intervened, the Soviets would be unable to support them. Truman stressed that US intervention was part of the policy of containment rather than US aggression as documented in a memo, "*It is important that our president takes the initiative in exerting vigorous leadership in foreign affairs... the world is sliding into chaos*". This policy led to the notion that it was the US's duty to involve themselves within political affairs as the protector of freedom, capitalism and democracy. Consequently, the US then entered the war, calling on member nations to assist South Korea - 16 countries responded. The USSR wanted a diversion from their activities in Europe; to weaken the US through a prolonged war, possibly one with China. Thus engagement in such conflict was significant in instigating the hostility and tension that would continue on in the Cold War period.

In all, the Cold War was fundamentally driven by the conflicting ideologies of both the United States and the Soviet Union and need to assert dominance on the international stage, which ultimately resulted in the early crises and emerging differences in the period up to 1953. The Cold War crises such as the policy of containment, Berlin Blockade, Communist China and the Korean War were the primary factors which drove the superpower rivalry between the USSR and USA to an unprecedented level that the Cold War had officially begun.

ATAR Notes essay



The superpower rivalry was highly significant in creating international tensions between 1945 to 1962, as it was this rivalry – principally driven by their ideological differences – that was the underlying factor of the entire Cold War conflict. Though the Cold War impacted and involved a variety of countries in various degrees, the driving force and principal agitators of the conflict were the two superpowers – the United States and the Soviet Union, who were locked in an intense battle for ideological and political superiority. This superpower rivalry manifested itself in many ways throughout the course of the conflict, most notably the policy of containment, the arms race and the early crises, all of which served to create and exacerbate international tension to the extent to which nuclear war seemed inevitable.

The containment policies adopted by both superpowers was driven by their need to assert ideological and political dominance over their rival on an international level, and thus greatly contributed to the creation and exacerbation of tensions between 1945 and 1962. According to John Lewis Gaddis “Both the United States and the Soviet Union ... embraced ideologies with global aspirations: what worked at home, their leaders assumed, would also do so for the rest of the world.” These “global aspirations” for ideological dominance led both superpowers to use underhand tactics and political strategy to limit the power of the other, the most critical of which was the US policy of containment (principles of which were also adopted by the USSR).

When the Truman Administration announced the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan (1947), stating that “The US should support free peoples throughout the world who were resisting takeovers by armed minorities or outside pressures,” it greatly exacerbated the international tensions already present after the Potsdam, Tehran and Yalta conferences, as it ensured the involvement, influence and impact of a greater number of nations other than the US and USSR. Countries – such as Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France and Greece – were encouraged to “pick a side,” a decision motivated by the financial potential offered through the Marshall Plan, along with the prospect of a powerful military and political alliance with the US.

As the US containment policy was seen by the Soviets to be a direct attack upon their freedom to expand their influence – denoting it as “economic imperialism” – it led to an increased effort on the part of the USSR to consolidate their power within Eastern Europe and diminish the influence of the US by adopting their own containment policies, further contributing to the aggravation of international tensions at the time. Organizations such as the COMECON and COMINFORM were formed by the USSR in order to ensure the continued economic and political dominance of the USSR within the region, thus leading to an increase in tensions between the superpowers, as it became clear that neither was willing to concede to the opposing ideology. Therefore, it is evident that the containment policies adopted by both the US and the USSR were intrinsically linked to their desire for ideological and political dominance over their rival, and therefore greatly contributed to the creation of tensions between 1945 and 1962, which were further exacerbated through the various international crises and hot conflicts that emerged.

The Cold War crises were driven by the superpower rivalry, and a need to assert dominance on the international stage, thus greatly contributing to the creation and exacerbation of tensions between 1945 and 1962. According to a 1948 memo to President Truman “It is important that our President takes the initiative in exerting vigorous leadership in foreign affairs ... the world is sliding into chaos.” This belief subsequently led to the notion that it was the US’s duty to involve themselves within the political affairs of other nations as the “protectors” of freedom, capitalism and democracy against their “aggressive” and “totalitarian” rival communism, which thus manifested itself through the Cold War crises, in particular, The Berlin Wall and the Cuban Missile Crisis. Both crises represent points at which the international involvement – other than the superpowers – within the Cold War was at its peak, as they represent points at which the superpowers stepped outside of their established spheres of influence, and thus aimed to

increase their international authority, under the guise, at least in regards to the Americans, of protecting “freedom.”

The Building of the Berlin Wall solidified Berlin as an international symbol of this ideological conflict, as it demonstrated to a global audience the extent to which the USSR was determined to maintain their influence within Europe. As a physical “Iron Curtain,” the Berlin Wall promoted greater tensions between the rival East and West, along with the horrific human rights violations – such as the shoot-to-kill order for those trying to escape over the wall – being conducted inducing an international outcry. These tensions were further exacerbated through the Cuban Missile Crisis, as the international proximity of the US to a communist nation – Cuba, only 780km from the state of Florida – heightened fears of a communist invasion, and once their superpower rival started to develop a nuclear base, nuclear war. Therefore, it is evident through the impact of the Cold War crises – particularly the building of the Berlin Wall and the Cuban Missile Crisis – upon the growing transnational hostilities of the Cold War that the superpower rivalry played a highly significant role within the creation of international tensions between 1945 and 1962.

The arms race was a physical manifestation of the superpower rivalry, as either side attempted to achieve militaristic superiority through the accumulation and growth of their nuclear capabilities, and thus greatly contributed to the creation and exacerbation of tensions between 1945 and 1962, to the extent where an international nuclear war seemed inevitable. Through the crises, many of which such as in Korea, Vietnam and Cuba either developed or almost developed into hot conflicts, it became clear that containment cannot be played through economic and political force alone, and that military action was required in order to maintain their international dominance. This led to, according to Hobsbawm “Both sides thus [finding] themselves committed to an insane arms race to nuclear destruction.” The arms race is the term used to describe the competition between the superpowers for superiority in the development and accumulation of weaponry, particularly in regards to their nuclear arsenals. In an effort to contain the opposing ideology and extend the influence of their own, both superpowers began to dramatically increase their defense expenditure and weaponry arsenals.

After China became communist, the National Council Memorandum in 1948 called for a build up in US conventional forces and 300% increase in the defense budget. The USSR on the other hand exploded their first hydrogen bomb at the same time as the China crisis, which further increased the already heightened tensions between the superpowers. Both superpowers also made a dramatic and rapid increase in their nuclear arsenals to the point where both superpowers had achieved nuclear parity. However, this did not just affect the superpowers, as this rivalry as brought about by the arms race greatly impacted upon other countries also, in particular Cuba, whereby the tensions became so great that an inter-continental nuclear war seemed inevitable, US President Kennedy stating that “Khrushchev has an opportunity now to move the world back from the abyss of destruction ... by refraining from any action which will widen or deepen the present crisis, and then by participation in a search for peaceful solutions.” Thus, the superpowers had no choice but to deliberately relax tensions during the D tente period. Therefore, it is evident that the arms race was driven by the superpower rivalry, as military and nuclear arsenals symbolised the strength, and therefore political and ideological dominance at the time, therefore greatly contributing to the creation and exacerbation of tensions between 1945 and 1962.

Therefore, through the interconnected nature between the superpower rivalry and other critical factors that contributed to heightened international tension during the period, such as ideology, containment and the arms race, it is evident that the superpower rivalry was highly significant as the underlying factor which caused and exacerbated the international tension between the period 1945 to 1962 and beyond.