



Causes of the Cold War

The 'Cold War' was a mixture of religious crusade in favour of one ideology or the other, and of the most ruthless power politics, striking out for advantage or expansion not only in Europe but all over the world.

PJ Larkin, *European History for Certificate Classes (1965)*
A student examination revision book.

The common concerns that had united the former allies (namely the fight against fascism and Nazi Germany) disappeared leaving only two radically different political, social, economic and ideological systems.

Donette Murray, *To What Extent was the Cold War a Struggle between Irreconcilable Ideologies?* (1999)
Donette Murray was a lecturer at the University of Ulster.

In many ways, Britain and America were natural enemies of the Soviet Union. So it is in fact easy to answer: 'Why did the USA-USSR alliance begin to break down in 1945?' As soon as the common threats of Hitler and Japan were removed, it was inevitable that the allies would fall out.

During the war, there had been growing tensions:

- For a long time, Stalin refused to join the United Nations;
- Stalin was angry that Britain and America kept delaying D-Day, believing it was a plot to allow Germany to weaken the Soviet Union;
- At the Tehran Conference (1943) Stalin and Churchill clashed over how much control Stalin would have over the countries of eastern Europe.

However, the 'Big Three' - especially President Roosevelt - knew that they had to stay allied until the end of the war, so they managed to patch up these differences. As soon as it was clear that the war was coming to an end, however, more and more cracks appeared in the alliance until it finally split apart altogether and the allies of the war became enemies.

This webpage concentrates on the UNDERLYING DIFFERENCES which made the Cold War inevitable. The following webpages look at the events which first strained and then destroyed the understanding between the powers.

1. What they believed ('Ideologies')

- The Soviet Union was a Communist country, which was ruled by a dictator and put the needs of the state ahead of personal human rights.
- The USA was a capitalist democracy which valued freedom and feared Communism.

Source A

One way of life is based upon the will of the majority, and is distinguished by free institutions, representative government, free elections, guarantees of individual liberty, freedom of speech and religion, and freedom from political oppression.

The second way of life is based upon the will of a minority forcibly imposed upon the majority. It relies upon terror and oppression, a controlled press and radio; fixed elections, and the suppression of personal freedoms.

A speech by President Truman of the US (1947)
Listen also to President Truman's [Inaugural Address in 1949](#) when he talked about the difference between democracy and Communism.

Links:

[Why did the USA and USSR become rivals 1945-1949?](#) - Historiography.

[History Learning](#) - list

Podcasts:

- Giles Hill on the origins of the Cold War

- BBC debate-podcast on the start of the Cold War

[Describe the events 1945-48 which plunged Britain and the USA into a Cold War with the USSR.](#)

[East v West](#) - a simple view

[Capitalism v Communism](#) - America v Russia: 1977 textbook account.

[How far was the Cold War an Ideological Struggle?](#) - Donette Murray suggests other factors were involved.

Spidergram:

- [Ideological differences](#)

Communism: a Russian joke

In a Soviet classroom, a little boy is asked to define capitalism.

'The oppression of man by man', he says. 'Good', says the teacher, 'and what is communism?'

The little boy replies: 'The opposite'.

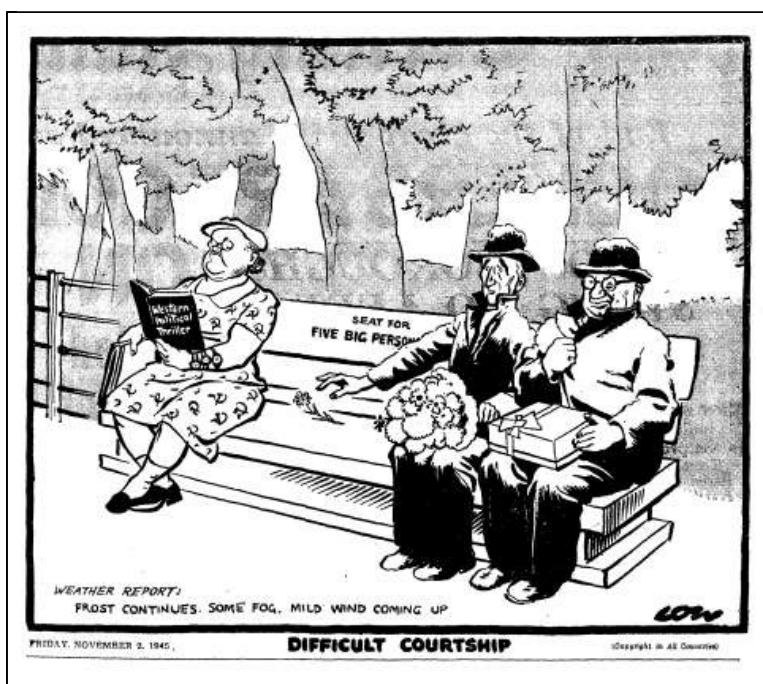
It was not just that the two ideologies were conflicting - they were militant and expansionist. They both believed that the alternative ideology was a threat to their own way of life, and that the only way for the world to be happy was for their particular ideology to take over the world. This mixture of ideological fear and aggression meant that in both America and Russia, their beliefs invaded and affected their foreign policies.

2. Aims

- Stalin wanted huge reparations from Germany, and a 'buffer' of friendly states to protect the USSR from being invaded again.
- Britain and the USA wanted to protect democracy, and help Germany to recover. They were worried that large areas of eastern Europe were falling under Soviet control.

This meant that the 'Big Three' found it difficult to get agreement at the Conferences (Tehran, [Yalta](#), [Potsdam](#)) which outlined the principles of the post-war peace.

And it proved impossible to get agreement on the details at the Conference of Ministers - set up after the war to agree the post-war settlement - and the Conference eventually broke down altogether:



Source B

This cartoon by the British cartoonist David Low was published in the Evening Standard on 2 November 1945, when a breakdown in relations at the Conference of Ministers had co-incided with a period of frosty weather in Britain. To try to overcome the quarrel, Britain and the USA had offered the Soviet Union a twenty-five-year treaty of alliance. The cartoon shows the three foreign ministers, Molotov (Soviet Union); Byrnes (USA) and Bevin (UK) are shown as her suitors. Molotov, dressed as a woman, is reading a book entitled: 'Western political thriller'.

[Click here for the interpretation](#)

3. Resentment about History

- The Soviet Union could not forget that in 1918 Britain and the USA had tried to destroy the Russian Revolution.
- Britain and the USA could not forget that Stalin had signed the Nazi-Soviet Pact with Germany in 1939.

These resentments were part of the underlying ideological gulf between the two sides, but they also provided weapons in the propaganda war which both sides waged against each other.

4. Events

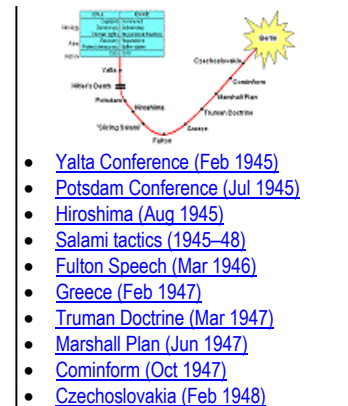
Activity:

For each of causes 1-3, explain how it might have caused relations between the USA and the USSR to become tense.

Ten Events which caused the Cold War

Against this background of underlying differences in ideologies, and aims, and historical resentments, there were a series of events which bit-by-bit broke down the alliance and turned the allies of the war into enemies.

Neither side trusted the other. Because they were so different, each side saw each event differently, and believed they were in the right ... and that the other side was in the wrong. So every action they took made them hate each other more:



So who was to blame for the Cold War?

Russian historians blamed Churchill (the British Prime Minister) and Truman (the American president, 1945–1953). They said Truman and Churchill wanted to destroy the USSR, which was just defending itself.

The Traditional View

At first, western writers blamed Russia. They said Stalin was trying to build up a Soviet empire.

The Revisionist View

Later, however, some western historians blamed America. They said Truman had not understood how much Russia had suffered in the Second World War.

The Post-Revisionists

Later still, historians think BOTH sides were to blame – that there were hatreds on both sides.

Most recently, historians agree that the Cold War was primarily a clash of beliefs - Communism versus Capitalism.

[nb you can find out about this in more detail by reading [this article](#).]

Source C

It is useless to try to discover who made the first move to break the alliance. It is impossible to trace the first 'broken promise' ... In this 'marriage of convenience', the thought that a divorce was inevitable had been in the mind of each partner from the beginning.

Written by the historian Isaac Deutscher, *Stalin* (1969)

Extra:

Working in twos, one pupil plays the part of a Russian historian, the other a western writer of the 1950s.

Talk about causes 1–4, the 'Russian historian' arguing that the Cold War was America's fault, and the 'western writer' saying that it was Russia's.