

August 15, 1961

To What Extent was the Cold War a Struggle between Irreconcilable Ideologies?

This document originally appeared in the collection of essays edited by Peter Catterall, *Exam Essays in 20th Century World History* (Heinemann, 1999 - [available on Google books](#)).

This document was written by and is therefore copyright Donette Murray. It is an extract from her essay: *To What Extent was the Cold War a Struggle between Irreconcilable Ideologies?* It is important because she realises that ideology alone does not create wars - it needs other things to turn conflicting beliefs into actual conflict.

Ideology was particularly important for the Soviet Union as this was the foundation upon which the state had been built. In the West, too, many had long distrusted the USSR and the revolutionary threat articulated by the Bolsheviks. This traditional antagonistic attitude towards communism was matched, if not surpassed, by a deep-seated Soviet fear of capitalist society coupled with suspicion about the political intentions of its leaders. Increasingly, problems emerged for which no practical solution or compromise could be found. The American announcement of the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan linking financial support and military aid for Europe to the principles of freedom and democracy (and by proxy, capitalism) confirmed the ideological divisions opening up between the East and West. In a few short years since the end of the Second World War the cracks had become fissures. By the late 1940s it appeared as though conflict had always been inevitable.

Although the ideological gulf between the two superpowers was certainly wide and clearly important in creating an atmosphere conducive to low-level conflict and crisis, ideology alone does not offer an adequate and complete explanation for the Cold War. Numerous other factors also contributed to the growth of tensions and hostility between the two sides. One of the most important must be the fundamental belief that the ideology adopted by each side automatically predisposed them to follow a course of action that directly threatened the security of the other. This perception was fuelled by the activities of both blocs in the early days of the Cold War. Concerns over Poland, Austria and Germany soon extended to Berlin, Cuba, South-East Asia, Korea, Africa, the Middle East and even outer space. As tensions mounted, decision-makers on both sides came to perceive the struggle as an attempt – played out across the whole world – to control the overall balance of power. Policy, often simply a response to a move made by the other side, frequently became 'crisis-led' and succeeded in perpetuating the atmosphere of distrust and suspicion rooted in ideological differences. Moreover, economic problems and pressures on both sides contributed to government agendas that were guided by national and international economic demands. This in turn created a set of needs and problems that generated the heightened possibility of crisis and instability. It is also worth remembering that tension and confrontation fluctuated during the course of the crisis.

Another factor linked to this is the role of propaganda. Propaganda was the means by which governments 'sold' their policies, portrayed in a certain way in order to preserve internal cohesion and to maximise domestic support for foreign and defence policies. The demonisation of what was now regarded as the enemy heightened the sense that

... that the men regarded as the enemy recognized the sense that this was a mortal struggle – good versus evil – and strengthened the resolution of both sides to remain committed until victory was assured (and the other side vanquished). Finally, one additional factor that is worth considering is the role of individuals. The importance of individuals is often mistakenly overlooked in the desire to understand complex periods and trends in history. For example, the death of Roosevelt (who believed he could work with Stalin) and his replacement by Truman (who was much more suspicious of the Soviet Union) in 1945 almost certainly reduced any chance that might have existed for accommodation between the two superpowers. Indeed all of the major figures: presidents, prime ministers, soviet premiers and senior officials brought with them distinct attitudes and belief systems that directly influenced the course and substance of relations between the two blocs.

Thus, although ideology made some degree of conflict likely between the Capitalist West and Communist East, in actual fact the struggle was largely fought over issues such as global power and prestige, infused with a tradition of suspicion and perpetuated by government orchestrated propaganda, fuelled by economic and political instability