What was so unusual about the Cold War?

The common perception of the Cold War is that it was essentially a conflict between two opposing ideologies, communism and capitalism, commencing in 1945, and that it was overwhelmingly 'fought' between two superpower states, the USSR and the USA. While much of this claim is true, the Cold War was a considerably more complex affair in both origin and nature than this rather simplistic analysis suggests.

The term Cold War was journalistic and came into general use shortly after the end of the Second World War. It was adopted quickly by the world's media and served to simplify what was a highly complex set of relations between numerous nations, including not only the two superpowers and their satellites, but also a variety of so-called 'non-aligned' nations that frequently exploited tensions between the two superpowers in their own interests.

However, notwithstanding the role of ideologies and the post-Second World War circumstances, the Cold War had deep historical roots, showing continuity between post- and pre-war periods in terms of the strategic, military and economic ambitions of Russia/USSR and the USA, as well as other protagonists like Britain and France. Even wider causes can be identified that define the conflict in terms of centuries-old cultural, psychological and religious differences which collectively nurtured mutual 'we-they' suspicions and Rars.

1917-45: appeasers and hyenas

Historians have tried to make sense of the Cold War, offering a multitude of orthodox, revisionist and post-revisionist viewpoints. Some, like John Gaddis, have suggested that Cold War relations began in 1917 in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution. The intervention of leading Western capitalist powers, including the USA, Britain, France and Japan, in support of the anti-Communist White armies in the Russian Civil War convinced the Bolsheviks that the West was determined to destroy their fledgling state. For the Western powers, conversely, the emergence of the first Communist Party-led state and the subsequent formation of the Comintern were threats that they had to confront.

Although the USSR joined the League of Nations in 1934, Stalin, who had become leader of the USSR in 1928, was regarded with suspicion by Western leaders. They disliked the murderous purges that he unleashed in the 1930s against the Soviet people and his agitation in aid of the Republican Communist forces during the Spanish Civil War. Although France and Czechoslovakia signed pacts of mutual assistance with the USSR in 1935 out of strategic necessity, Poland, with its long and painful history of conflict with Russia, and Britain, with its anti-Communist governments, kept their distance, treating the USSR as a pariah state.

In any case, Stalin was a tricky customer to deal with. For all his public pronouncements against the rise of Fascism and Nazism in Europe, he had his own plans for territorial expansion and was searching for the best way of fulfilling them. Seeing that the Western powers were bent on appeasing the Fascist states in order to avert a war for which they were
far from ready, Stalin finally turned to Hitler, forging the Nazi-Soviet Pact in August 1939 to facilitate the expansionist ambitions of both dictators, who subsequently carried out another partition of Poland in September 1939. As the Nero York Times aptly reported in 1940, Stalin was 'playing the hyena to Hitler's lion.'

**Ideological designs or traditional statecraft?**

It is understandable, therefore, why there was mutual distrust between the USSR and the leading Western powers--Britain and France--during the 1930s. It is clear that Britain and France sought to maintain their traditional national positions. However, analysing Soviet foreign policy is much more problematic, given that the USSR's Marxist raison d'etre sought to destroy the 'capitalist' international system and replace it with a Communist world order. The failure of world revolution to materialise in the 1920s compelled the USSR to join the international system of nation states when it was admitted to the League of Nations in 1934.

Moreover, the contradictory policies of various Soviet institutions, such as the internationalism of the Comintern and the nationalism of the Ministry (Commissariat) of Foreign Affairs, served to generate a confused picture. The historian John Lukacs in his book, June 1941: Hitler arm Stalin, argues that, for Stalin, the strengthening of the state and of his own power were his main motives, even if these were done at the expense of Marxist principles. His adoption of a 'national in form, socialist in content' position during the 1930s suggests that he was moving away from classical ideological prescriptions. Yet conquest of a particular territory could have been a revolutionary act as much as an act of empire building or else, as historians Ronald Donaldson and Joseph Nogee argued, it could have been both.

It is generally accepted that Stalin expected and prepared for a major war between the capitalist Western powers, as the growth in the USSR's spending on military hardware during the 1930s shows. What is under debate, however, is whether Stalin's war (see box) was to be defensive or offensive and whether it was going to be a war of national conquest or a war to spread revolution.

**1941-45: another alliance of convenience**

The impression that one gets from most studies of the Cold War is that the 'alliance of convenience' struck between the USSR and the Western allies in the wake of Germany's invasion of" the USSR in June 1941 was unique; yet history shows that in many ways it was not. Agenda among the Great Powers had been converging and diverging for centuries, with states finding themselves in alliances one day and in opposition the next, as the fluctuating relations and imperial rivalry among Britain, the USA and Russia before 1917 and beyond serve to illustrate. Britain and Russia were allies during the Napoleonic war against France, for example, but 40 years later Britain and France fought against Russia during the Crimean War.

The so-called 'Grand Alliance' that was forged between the 'Big Three'--the USA, Britain and the USSR, was to map the future of the world but the common goal of defeating Hitler notwithstanding, each had specific national reasons for entering the Second World War. Britain fought to restore the balance of power in Europe, refusing to accept Hitler's repeated offers of peace as genuine. The USSR entered into an alliance with Britain because it was attacked by Germany, while the USA joined the alliance between the USSR and Britain because Hitler declared war on the USA after the Japanese pre-emptive strike on the US
Navy in Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941. Nevertheless, the primary aim of the USA was destruction of Japanese power in the Far East and the subsequent establishment of a global security system that would remove the causes of future wars, later embodied in the United Nations Organisation.

1945 and beyond

With the defeat of Hitler, there was no longer any 'glue' to hold the Grand Alliance together and, as relations among the great powers once again realigned themselves, it duly collapsed. Tensions between the Big Three, however, were already evident during the wartime conferences, not only between the USSR and the capitalist powers, Britain and the USA, but also between the two capitalist powers. This is demonstrated by President Roosevelt's objections at the Teheran Conference in 1943 to Churchill's insistence on preserving Britain's imperial hegemony.

Stalin was the most certain of the Big Three of what he wanted: personal security, national security and control of as much of Europe as was possible, for both ideological and other reasons. The US agenda was less clear. The USA certainly wanted to prevent another destructive war, but it was much less certain than the USSR about how to go about achieving this. US President Truman soon discovered that Roosevelt's faith in Stalin's promises to abide by wartime agreements had been misguided. Truman now faced the task of convincing an isolationist public and Congress of the need to contain the Soviet threat. His Truman Doctrine therefore referred to generalisations, aiming to sell the Cold War in simplistic yet emotive terms as a conflict between 'freedom' and 'totalitarianism'. The options for Britain were much more limited than they were for either the USSR or the USA. Britain had survived the war but was severely financially indebted to the USA and its empire was gravely weakened. It sought to salvage what it could of its imperial possessions, rekindling a rivalry with Russia in Iran and Turkey that dated back to the nineteenth century. Ultimately, however, it was left to the USA to contain Soviet 'imperial' ambitions in these areas. At best, Britain could try to influence the USA with talk of an Iron Curtain descending across the continent, but it could do little more.

As the Cold War matured, the factors sustaining it became increasingly complex. If one is to argue that ideology provided the great divisive force in the Cold War, then there were several ideologies: capitalism, communism, and different versions of both, as well as old and new imperialism. The USA, for instance, did not treat the Communist world as a monolithic bloc but sought to exploit internal cracks, as its wooing of both Yugoslavia and China serves to illustrate. Its hostility towards Britain's imperial interests during the Suez Crisis in 1956 exposed splits in the Western ideological front. The USSR was likewise prepared to court ideological foes like India and Egypt and confront like-minded allies such as China.

Despite the ideological undercurrents of the Cold War, each of the nation states involved, the chief protagonists, their satellites and the nonaligned states, pursued its own national interests even at the expense of ideology. Tensions between the main protagonists fluctuated during the postwar period. They were driven by a variety of determinants, of which ideology was merely one, alongside the economic considerations of states and individual enterprises; the interests of state bureaucracies and military complexes. Other determinants were long-standing imperial rivalries; even personal rivalry among national leaders; and, above all, fear of nuclear Armageddon. Apart from the last factor, what was new in all of that?
Further reading


Key points

* The origins of the Cold War were rooted in traditional relations between states going back centuries.

* Although ideology was a key determinant of Cold War rivalry, it was not the only one and arguably not the main one.

* Mutual suspicion was caused by age-long 'we-they' divides that were rooted in cultural, religious, economic and other factors.

* All the states involved in the Cold War pursued their own national interests, frequently contradicting their ideological positions.

* Cold War allies often fell out over conflicting national, as well as ideological, aims.

* Historians have debated the causes of the Cold War for years and still have not arrived at a consensus. It is unlikely that they ever will.

satellite nations: independent states tied to one of the superpowers.

'non-aligned' nations: states trying to pursue foreign policies independent of the superpowers.
orthodox viewpoint: places responsibility for the start of the Cold War on the USSR's expansionist foreign policy.

revisionist viewpoint: cites US industrial 'imperialism' as a significant cause of the Cold War.

post-revisionist viewpoint: argues that the origins of the Cold War lie in a complex array of causes.

Comintern: short for Communist International. Formed in Moscow in 1919 to coordinate revolutionary activity around the world; dissolved in 1943.

history of conflict: Poland was the subject of four partitions between Russia, Prussia and Austria, in 1772, 1793, 1795 and 1807-14. Much of Poland came under Russian rule.

pariah state: state whose actions are regarded as out of step with international norms of conduct.

other reasons: Stalin wanted control of Eastern Europe so that it could act as a 'buffer' against a potential invasion from the West.

Truman Doctrine: proclaimed on 12 March 1947, it stated that the USA would 'support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures'. Although the USSR was not directly mentioned in the speech, it was clear that Truman made it his target.

Iron Curtain: on 5 March 1946 at Westminster College, Fulton, Missouri, Churchill stated that, 'From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic an iron curtain has descended across the continent', describing the imposition of Soviet control on Eastern Europe.

Wartime diplomacy

Wartime conferences

The most important were meetings of the 'Big Three' at Teheran (1943), Yalta (February 1945) and Potsdam (July-August 1945), which planned the defeat of the Axis powers and postwar reconstruction.

Wartime agreements

These included agreements--broken by Stalin--to hold democratic elections in Eastern European and Balkan states. In April 1945 Truman castigated USSR foreign minister Molotov for USSR abrogation of the Yalta agreements on the composition of the Polish Communist government, enabling the installation of the (Ljublin) Poles rather than the Polish government in exile.
Questions

* What is meant by a 'we-they' divide?

* Since Stalin declared 'socialism in one country' and denounced Trotsky's call for worldwide revolution, what exactly did the West have to fear from Stalin in the 1930s?

* What might be the main grounds for arguing that ideology was more important to the Cold War than Slysz allows for?

Stalin's war

In Communism: a History, Professor Richard Pipes stated that Stalin had no intention to 'sit with folded arms' when war broke out; he intended to 'take the field, but ... be last to do so', waiting until the capitalist powers had exhausted themselves and then exploiting the military situation.

Other writers such as the former Soviet military intelligence officer, Viktor Suvorov in Icebreaker and Professor Albert Weeks in Stalin's Other War: Soviet Grand Strategy, 1939-1941, have suggested controversially that Stalin had been encouraging war in Europe, using Germany as an 'icebreaker' for Communist revolutions that would warrant Soviet 'liberation' invasions of conquered territories.

Although the icebreaker thesis has been challenged by many historians, some, like Israeli historian Martin van Creveld have argued that, although Stalin may 'not have planned to attack Germany in autumn 1941, it would be hard to believe that he would not have taken the opportunity to stab the Reich in the back sometime', whether from defensive or offensive motives.

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