

History

The Start of the Cold War

by AJ Powell | 1 Comment | 10 min read

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The Cold War... Decades of suspicion, decades of ideological hate, decades of a real threat to the world and life as we knew it...

There really is so very much that could be said on this one topic alone, and to talk about it all in-depth would take forever... So instead, we will begin the conversation here by focusing this analysis on a very basic explanation to the “drive” that caused the Cold War to begin. It really boiled down to two things; each nation's independent social ideology (that is, the social psychology responsible for the way each saw the post war problems in their own mindset), and unfounded suspicions as a result of inaccurate information, lack of information, and lack of willingness to offer information.

This is a historical analysis that discusses the very basics to the start of the Cold War. In reading this analysis, it is important to ask, what lessons can we learn from this period of the past that we might see

repeating themselves today, why are these lessons still so very important, and what lessons can we take with us on our own path? We will discuss this bit of history for the purpose of discovering such thoughts, and we will start by asking three particular questions for which to guide the analysis:

1. How did it start?
2. What were the driving forces that forced a divide between the East and the West?
3. What players were a part of the problem, and how did their actions or inactions instigate the drive for the Cold War?
4. And finally, Could it have been avoided?

Now, these questions are guides, and the reason is that, upon conclusion of our assessment, we will ask a series of entirely new questions designed to prompt critical thinking, and then use this new knowledge to apply towards our own advancement of self-improvement.

Upon conclusion of this analysis, take a few moments to carefully consider the questions at the end, **then share your thoughts in the comments below** so the community may benefit from open discussion.

The simple fact of the matter is...

The Second World War had barely ended in Europe when the “Cold War” began...

During World War Two, there was a sense of shared camaraderie for the sake of winning the war that prevailed over the Allied Forces, yet this was merely a means to an end. The praises each side gave mention to the other was for show more than the real feelings each shared in bond. In truth, the great powers (England, France, America, Russia, etc.) had always played the game of *risk* in response to attempted gain of dominance, and at the end of WWII, two “Great Powers” suddenly advanced in status to “Super Powers” practically overnight. At opposite ends of the political spectrum and foundational ideology in socialized structures, The United States and the Soviet Union had quickly entered into a game of death filled with proxy wars spanning decades that would see the destruction of entire nations and cost hundreds upon hundreds of millions of lives for the sake of power, influence, and the spread of Communism, versus the new policy of containment and the spread of Democracy, all wrapped up into the Arms Race known as the Cold War. A war that was a game of chess on the world stage, filled with silent rage and distrust, to see who could overpower who, out-maneuver and out-produce the other side, infiltrate, spy, and gather more secrets than the other, and most importantly, who would become the greatest power of all – a World Power.

To Communists, the end of WWII was a frightening ordeal. America had learned how to manufacture death from the atom, and the fall of Axis Powers suddenly created an awareness of Allied encroachment from all sides. The very foundation of Soviet beliefs pitted Capitalism as the enemy – as defined by Marx and Lenin – and by ideology alone, had therefore placed the powerful United States as enemy *de facto* number 1. Of course, we can also say that the Russians themselves were mostly responsible for the manufacture of their own distrust. After all, they limited their own access to foreign information, and most had next to zero clue how the U.S. system of government actually worked. On the other side of the pond, the United States also entered into a sudden realization... Russia was both massive and firmly entrenched in political opposition to the west. Regardless of the fact that both sides maintained very little factual knowledge about the other in the beginning stages of the Cold War, that in no way negates their emerging positions taken up after the surrender of Germany in May of 1945.

At the end of the war, Russians occupied nearly all of Eastern Europe. From the Balkans and surrounding the Black Sea, up through Czech and Poland, all the way up into Scandinavia along the Baltic. Meanwhile, the Americans, as the leaders and most powerful part of the Allied advance, took hold of large sections of Western Europe combined with France and Great Britain. Zones were promptly setup for the purpose of providing oversight and Germany was nearly immediately divided. Unfortunately, this was so hastily done that no one took the time to consider long-term political side effects and divisions that would come about as a result. The four Great Powers were supposed to equally administer the affairs of post war Germany, yet it was the emergence of the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. as Super Powers after the fact that truly carved a divide

between East and West. Not only did this divide play out in conflicts around the world later on via a series of proxy wars and secret engagements, but back in Germany, disagreements consistently saw retaliatory efforts from each of the 4 as they tried to decide on their own courses of action in response to the Potsdam Conference occupational policies. As a result, tensions on all sides increased slowly over time.



Foreign secretaries attend a meeting at the Cecilienhof Palace during the Potsdam Conference. British foreign Minister Ernest Bevin is in foreground; Secretary of State James Byrnes is at right; Soviet foreign minister Vyacheslav Molotov is on the left, upper side of table.

30 July 1945

Source: National Archives

Harry S. Truman Library (NLHST)

Series: Photographs Relating to the Administration, Family, and Personal Life of Harry S. Truman, compiled 1957 – 2004, documenting the period 1849 – 2004.

The Potsdam Conference is an important event that clearly highlights the opposing positions created due to social ideology. Both Churchill and Stalin showed just how power-hungry their mentality was as products of their very culture. Each were perfectly content on dividing the world into *Sphere's of Influence* for the purpose of, once again, advancing their own nations power and control over the world. They came to the table without so much a consideration of other possibilities at first, instead thinking it perfectly acceptable to decide the rest of the worlds fate to the gain of power by their own nations control. Yet this was seen as, not only wrong, but insulting to the social ideology of the Americans, who instead believed in independent self-determination (the idea that each nation has the right to control its own independent affairs separate from the influence of outside forces, and that outside forces have zero right to control or maintain any authority to the internal affairs of an independent state) (of course, it is also important to note that, even the U.S. violated its own ideological beliefs about self-determination countless times throughout the entirety of the Cold War whenever the U.S. felt it best to do so or advantageous to U.S. interests and gains). In the end, by the following year in 1947, while the drafting of peace treaties were mostly successful, the end to the majority of East / West cooperative efforts came to a close when Russia refused to accept the U.S. position. Russia

wanted empire-like control over many other nations, the U.S. (and others) said “no”, each nation should maintain its own autonomy in a democratic fashion.

Back in the U.S., Russian refusal to accept democracy outside of its control or influence was seen as an idea of Russian backed world threats of Communist expansion. On the other side, Russia refused to accept the U.S. attempts to hold it at bay, while at the same time, the idea of the U.S. maintaining full control over atomic energy was a threat simply due to imbalance. Both sides were set on courses that purposely created friction and confrontation with each other, and as such, cooperation was nearly impossible. By the end of the conference, Western suspicions of Communist plots to take over Western Europe and spread influence led to refusal of Russian demands for reparations which would only destroy Germany in much the same fashion as it did after the first World War. Though Russia really had no intentions of taking over Western Europe or fighting with Western Nations, they did see the Americans as the worlds newest Imperialists, and felt consolidation of their own powers was a necessity for survival. In the end, long story short, both sides – firmly entrenched in suspicion of the other – pitted their efforts against each other, the Berlin Blockade began, and the Cold War started...

Questions to Ponder:

1. Why is this important to history?
2. Explain some of the reasons why the Cold War began and who made up the opposing sides.
3. Can you give a brief summary of how the tension rose in occupied Germany and exploded on to the scene called “the Cold War”?
4. What lessons can we learn from these past events that apply to our advancement of “Globalized Leadership”?
5. How do you think you could apply those lessons to your own professional environment today?
6. Can you think of events in recent history that share similarities found within this analysis?
7. What are the effects?

Post YOUR replies in the **comments section below** so the community can discuss these thoughts openly.

Reference:

Gilbert, Felix and Large, David C. (2009). *The End of The European Era – 1890 to the Present*. Sixth Edition. W.W. Norton & Company, New York | London.

Featured Image Information:

Britain’s new Prime Minister, Clement Attlee, with President Truman and Marshal Stalin at the Potsdam Conference in Berlin, 1 August 1945. Clement Attlee with President Truman of the United States and Marshal Stalin of the Soviet Union at the Potsdam Conference in Berlin, shortly after winning the British General election in 1945. Standing from left to right are Admiral Leahy, Ernest Bevin, James Byrnes and Vyacheslav Molotov.

The last of the war-time summit conferences was held at Potsdam, outside Berlin from 16 July to 2 August 1945 and the results of the British General Election were announced while it was in session. Churchill and Eden initially headed the British delegation and were accompanied by Attlee who was leader of the opposition at the start of the conference but Prime Minister for the final sessions.

Taken: 1AUG45 – Lockyear W T (Capt), Malindine E G (Capt), No 5 Army Film & Photographic Unit.

Source: Imperial War Museum – RELEASED.

Cold War Communism Containment Democracy Great Power Historical
Analysis History Ideology Russia Super Power Suspicion United States World Power

About the author



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AJ is a retired U.S. Army NCO who served in both the U.S. Navy and U.S. Army. He is a combat veteran, and has participated in contingency operations around the world. AJ is the Owner of Veteran Leadership Solutions, the Founder and Editor in Chief of The Warfighter Journal, and is a published Sociological Analyst, Researcher, Guest Lecturer, and Public Speaker. He is a graduate of Pennsylvania State University with a focus on Sociology and a science degree in Organizational Leadership, and is published in the field of sociology. AJ is an inductive analyst; public figure; researcher/writer; aviator; a certified advanced operational diver; professional instructor, trainer, mentor, and adviser; snowboarder; motorcycle rider; world traveler; he enjoys long distance endurance events, and much more.