

Understanding the Origins of the Cold War: Key Factors and Influences

The Cold War was a struggle between two great superpowers (the U.S. and the Soviet Union) to deal with the aftermath of World War II. The two superpowers had very different ideologies and distrusted each other. Each tried to contain the other. They wanted to do so in a way that did not lead to another major conflict. The result: a cold war.

"Cold War"

[World War II](#) (a "hot war") might have been over. But, the lack of fighting did not mean we were at peace. There was a strained relationship between the world's superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union. And, this chill affected the world as a whole.

Superpowers

World War II led to a type of mutual destruction of many nations involved. The end result was two "superpowers" remaining: the U.S. and Soviet Union. These two superpowers headed a new alliance system: **NATO** (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) and the **Warsaw Pact** (Soviets and Eastern Europe). And, they became the two great Cold War rivals.

Competing Ideologies

Alliances sometimes involve "strange bedfellows." The United States and the Soviet Union ultimately were allies against a common enemy during World War II.

This was an alliance of convenience and necessity. It would end as soon as the war ended.

The two countries had very different ideologies, belief systems, and historical experiences. This led to [distrust and fear](#). The two sides saw the world differently.

Communist ideals dictated that the government control both business and personal life. They did this through censorship and totalitarian control. This was instituted in an attempt to create a more equal, classless society.

This philosophy is in direct conflict with democratic principles of First Amendment rights and free enterprise. As a result, there was no easy, diplomatic solution to alleviate the tensions between these 2 nations.

Decolonization

Each side wanted allies. **Satellite countries** are small countries that are economically or politically dependent on larger nations. The Soviets treated Eastern European nations as satellites.

After World War II [independence movements](#) took place and former colonies became sovereign nations. Some independence movements saw communism as a promising path. The United States feared new communist nations would lead to more, creating a **domino effect**. For this reason, a [communist Vietnam](#) would be a threat to the United States. This fear led the United States to enter the Vietnam War in order to **contain the spread of communism**.

Post-War Agreements and Disagreements

The United States, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union [met in February 1945](#) to address postwar issues. They agreed that Germany had to surrender unconditionally, Berlin (at least temporarily) would be divided into four zones, and Eastern Europe would be friendly to the Soviets.

The Soviets had an upper hand in the issue since they controlled the Eastern Front of World War II, and Soviet troops gained more and more control of the region. The U.S. and Great Britain demanded free elections be allowed in Eastern Europe after the war. This would not happen for 45 years.

The United States offered economic relief to Europe (including the Soviets) - the [Marshall Plan](#) - but also saw it as a wider means to stop communism.

The Soviets saw this as a threat and [refused to take part](#). Simply put, they went their own way, amping up the Cold War.

The Soviets tried to isolate all of Berlin (they controlled East Berlin) and this led to a great **Berlin Airlift** by the United States. Communist East Germany ultimately built a wall to keep people in. The **fall of the Berlin Wall** (1989) was a major symbol of the [end of the Cold War](#).

Final Thoughts

This discussion is a summary of the causes of events that are now history. The Cold War lasted for 45 years. It would be the root cause of many conflicts and competitions between the Soviets and the Americans.

Ultimately the Soviet Union would disband, leaving the United States the lone superpower. But another communist country was quickly gaining political and economic momentum. Will China prevail where the Soviets could not? Stay tuned.