

Mini-Essay 2

Which country was most responsible for starting the Cold War, the USA, or the USSR or both?

The Cold War was an ideological and political struggle between the United States of America and the Soviet Union that lasted for the bulk of the 20th century following World War II. From being allies of necessity in that conflict against the axis powers of Nazi Germany and Japan, both emerged as paranoid and opposing superpowers in a world that was weary of war but also open to influence and persuasion in a way that it had never been before. This essay will examine causes of the Cold War and determine whether the United States or the Soviet Union were the most responsible party for creating the stalemate that dominated international politics and the foreign policy of these two states for generations.

The Traditionalist theory of the Cold War is that the conflict began as the Soviet Union engaged in expansionist actions in Eastern Europe that led the United States to counter their threat on behalf of both Western Europe's and their own interest. In the wake of World War II, the Soviet Union had become the dominant force in Eastern Europe as their massive army fought back the Nazi forces all the way to Berlin across the lands that the Germans occupied. After the fall of Berlin, the Soviets' Red Army maintained a large presence in Eastern Europe and helped exert political pressure on the countries they inhabited. The Soviet Union wanted to avoid the possibility of a third attack on their territory after the damages that were inflicted upon them in World War I and II. To do this, the Soviets aimed to create a series of buffer states in Eastern Europe, a "cordon sanitaire" which they could control through installing "friendly" Communist governments. The first such government installed was the one in Poland as in 1944, after beginning to liberate the country, "Moscow

ignored the existence of the Polish government-in-exile in London and set up a pro-Soviet, Marxist oriented, provisional government” (The Coming of the Cold War, 1983, p. 2), often known as the Lublin Government after its’ capital. Similar strategies were also pursued in Romania and Bulgaria (The Coming of the Cold War, 1983, p. 8), whilst pressure was put on Turkey to cede the Dardanelles to the Soviet Union (The Coming of the Cold War, 1983, p. 13) to provide them access to a warm-water port on the Mediterranean – which was a long-standing goal of the Soviet Union. This appeared to be far more than just protection of the Soviet territory, with far stronger methods being used than simply building an alliance. It was clear that the Soviet Union was interested in creating at least a strong sphere of influence if not engaging in outright expansion.

This Soviet strategy of creating buffer states in Eastern Europe worried the United States and Western Europe, as they believed that it was an expansionist move to ultimately take control of Europe for themselves. Despite Soviet assurances to the contrary, the voracity of their attempts at controlling Eastern European governments, for instance in stating that if there was no Communist government in Romania that the Soviet Union “would not be responsible for the continuance of Rumania [sic] as an independent state” (The Coming of the Cold War, 1983, p. 2), whilst maintaining significant troop levels in those states deeply worried the United States into taking indirect action against the Soviets and furthering the chain of events that led to the Cold War.

President Truman thus “concluded that the Soviet Union was a ‘world bully’ that would expand its’ sphere of influence with little regard to international agreements unless confronted by the West.” (The Coming of the Cold War, 1983, p. 4) This was the driving force behind the US’ Marshall Plan to Western Europe, by which \$17

billion in aid was promised to European countries that accepted American trade. Aid from this plan was offered to Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, but refused as a means of external influence on what the Communist countries believed should be a closed system. This showed the United States that the Soviet Union was not interested in allying with their post-WWII vision for Europe and that their goals may not align.

However, the Revisionist theory of the Cold War suggests that it was the United States' own policies that caused the Cold War by forcing the Soviet Union into defensive action to protect themselves from a perceived threat. This theory suggests that Stalin and the Soviet Union were acting as defensive realists in their attempts to create buffer states in Eastern Europe – as they perceived a strong threat of further invasion from the West, perhaps backed by a hostile and power-consolidating United States. Having lost “between 20 and 24 million people in the war, more than 10 per cent of its population” (The Coming of the Cold War, 1983, p. 6) the country had undergone major upheaval and was in no position to be drawn back into conflict, but despite this they felt the need to protect themselves.

In response to Winston Churchill's famous “Iron Curtain” speech in 1946, Stalin criticised what he perceived as “the Hitler-like ‘racial theory’ that the English speaking peoples ‘should rule over the remaining nations of the world’” and feared that the true meaning of Churchill's speech was “a call to war with the Soviet Union.” (The Coming of the Cold War, 1983, p. 10) When the Marshall Plan was implemented for Western Europe it was further evidence to the Soviets that the United States were intent on maintaining Western Europe as part of their sphere of influence and preparing to expand further themselves. The Soviets did not see the United States as a benevolent power, as attempts in 1943 and 1945 by the Soviets

at securing a development loan from the United States were denied, with the latter being “lost” by the US State Department and “found” in 1946. (The Coming of the Cold War, 1983, p. 7) With these actions it is understandable that the Soviet Union felt a threat from or at least mistrusted the United States.

There is also evidence available from a number of the United States’ main policy makers at the dawn of the Cold War that they viewed their relationship with the Soviet Union as irreconcilable because of ideological reasons, which perhaps became a self-fulfilling prophecy. Secretary of State James Byrnes categorised the Soviet Union’s ideology as only understanding “how many divisions have you?”, while Senator Homer Capehart likened the US attempts at negotiation with Stalin and the Soviet Union with “Chamberlain and his umbrella appeasement of Hitler.” (The Coming of the Cold War, 1983, p. 8). These both categorise the Soviets as militaristic and expansionist at their core. It was President Truman’s advisor George Kennan that described the differences between the United States and the Soviet Union most succinctly, stating that the “Soviet world view... [was]... based on the ultimate irreconcilability of capitalism and socialism. Peaceful coexistence was impossible.” (The Coming of the Cold War, 1983, pp. 9-10) The United States and Soviet Union were doomed to conflict with the accusatory way in which they viewed each other and despite actions to appear conciliatory, the evidence from key decision-makers show that there was little goodwill towards the other state, particularly in this instance from the United States.

In practice, it is certain that both the United States’ and Soviet Union’s actions contributed to the heightened tensions that caused the Cold War to develop. The Soviet Union was as forward in creating an Eastern European buffer as the United States was in maintaining a Western European buffer, and as both viewed each

other's actions as aggressive rather than defensive. This escalated the political and militaristic positioning of both states into what became the Cold War.

Bibliography

The Coming of the Cold War (1983) Melanie Billings-Yun.