

Origins and responsibilities for starting the cold war essay sample



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Historians have debated and studied for decades who or what was responsible for the start of the cold war and continue to come up different results. We can place the blame on a number of actors and events. Was it Roosevelt, Churchill, Truman, or Stalin? The majority of historians place the blame on Stalin for several reasons which I will discuss. This essay will argue that not only Stalin, but Churchill, Roosevelt, and Truman all played a role in instigated the crisis. I will also address the question, using the individualistic aspect, of whether the cold war was inevitable and unavoidable as a result of conflictual ideologies.

The natures of communist and capitalist ideologies were themselves a major contributor to the start cold war. Alexis de Tocqueville claimed, “ There are now two great nations in the world, which starting from different points, seem to be advancing toward the same goal: the Russians and the Anglo-Americans... [E]ach seems called by some secret design of providence one day to hold in its hands the destinies of half of the world. 1” These two ideas were, by nature, destined to one day conflict. He predicted the bipolarity struggle but not necessarily the hostility one hundred years earlier.

Lenin said that communist revolutions would happen spontaneously. One of Stalin’s major flaws was that he discredited this and felt that communism must be a result of coercion. Even Nikita Khrushchev thought that after World War II that Europe would naturally “ embrace socialism” while capitalism collapsed. This was never the case, which angered Stalin. The Anglo-American sphere of influence would increase largely by consent, but the Soviets could only maintain themselves by coercion and expansion.

This asymmetry would bring the two ideologies into conflict after World War II, not simply because of their nature but also because Stalin was leading one of them. The power vacuum created after the war brought about a clash.

John Lewis Gaddis agreed, " when a power vacuum separates great powers, as did the US and USSR after WWII, they are unlikely to fill it without bumping up and bruising each other's interests. 2" The simple principles of the ideologies were a big contributor to the cold war; however, if we want to choose an actor, Stalin is most responsible. He made a fundamental mistake in ignoring many previous writings on communism.

The Lenin-Trotsky goal of world revolution claimed peaceful coexistence between capitalism and communism. As mentioned earlier, in the late 1920s, he would drop the idea that revolutions would arise spontaneously in other advanced industrial states, instead he came to see the Soviet Union as the center from which socialism would spread³. Stalin would then put not only the Soviet Union, but himself as the centerpiece to the expansion of communism. Moreover, it was Stalin's attempts at expansionism early during World War II and throughout the postwar that was a boiling point in the beginning of the cold war.

Many historians claim that the cold war was going on in Stalin's mind for many years. It was Stalin's disposition to wage cold wars: he had done so in one form or another throughout his life, against members of his own family, his closest advisors, old revolutionary comrades, against foreign communists and even against Red Army veterans⁴. Stalin was always paranoid and suspicious of democratic capitalists. His paranoia led to a military buildup to

further his expansionism. Another one of his flaws was that he relied on terror like no other western leader had in the past.

He pursued personal security while depriving it from others. He alone transformed the country into an extension of himself. He saw war and revolution as means to pursue his ultimate goal (no western leader associated violence with progress to the extent he did)⁵. By 1947 it became clear that he wasn't interested in multilateralism but first to balance the empires and then to "overthrow" the capitalists. Stalin's misperceptions and perceived threats led to him to overreact in many cases. The Soviets staged a coup d'etat in Czechoslovakia in February 1945. Communism was now fully integrated into the country.

It was an appalling event in the emergence of the cold war. The Berlin blockade is another example of Soviet expansionism that generated sufficient resistance from the US and its allies⁶. The other major actors cannot go without blame. Historians suggest Roosevelt played mind games with Stalin throughout the final years of WWII. However, Roosevelt was concerned with balancing. It appeared that throughout most of the post war talks that Churchill had taken a backseat to the games of Stalin vs. Roosevelt; however, after 1945 it is believed Roosevelt trusted Stalin.

Roosevelt's ambiguity, in the respect of leaving all of the post war decisions to Truman, was another reason to blame Roosevelt. The 1946 war of words escalated the cold war crisis (many agree it was the starting point). But it was an escalation because this conflict between ideologies had been happening all throughout World War II between the two states. In Stalin's

election speech he said, " It is time for the Soviets to look inward. " Greater expansionism of communism would soon follow. In March, during his Iron Curtain speech, Churchill announced publicly to the world, that " an iron curtain has descended across the continent.

This was the first real indication to the world that this bipolarity struggle had begun. The Long Telegram by Kennan also contributed, at least internally in the government, to as a significant instigator in the start of the cold war. He said the Soviets would exploit every opportunity to extend their system and therefore could not and would not be converted to a policy of harmony and cooperation. The policy of containment came out of this telegram which would shape foreign policy for a major portion of the cold war era.

It was later challenged by Acheson who thought military confrontation was the only way to stop the soviets. The Truman Doctrine in 1947 was the first real incarnation of containment policy. It included the idea of " two rival worlds. " Also during the beginning of 1946, Truman decided that he was " tired of babysitting the Soviets who understand only an iron fist and strong language. " This entire war of words was instigation for the cold war. To summarize, theoretically I would argue that it is somewhat difficult to place blame on a certain actor for the start of the cold war.

The two ideologies of capitalism and communism are conflictual by nature. The collision and conflict of these two ideologies was inevitable and unavoidable. The cold war would have happened regardless of which leader was in place. However, if not for Stalin, the cold war would not have escalated to the point it did in the late 1940s. Stalin's expansionism of

communism throughout Europe and Asia is a prime example of what led to aggression. Partial blame is also placed on Roosevelt, Churchill, and Truman by looking through 1946 and the war of words.