

Origins and causes of the cold war



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----- Why the iron curtain descended: origins and causes of the cold war ROHAN SINGH SEPTEMBER 2012 Name of University: The West Bengal National University of Juridical Sciences Subject: Political Science Date of Submission: 1st October, 2012. “ Why the Iron curtain descended”: A study into the origins and causes of the cold war INTRODUCTION On April 16, 1947, Bernard Baruch, former advisor to former U. S.

Presidents, Harry Truman and Woodrow Wilson came up with the term ‘ Cold War’ to describe the breakdown in relations between the two superpowers at the time-the United States of America and the Soviet Union. Historian Walter Lippman, his friend used it in the New York herald Tribune-which marked it’s introduction in popular media. This mutual antagonism between the two nations manifested itself, not in all-out war but in attacks through economic sanctions, proxy wars, the building of alliances propaganda warfare, enmeshed in an overarching principle of non-cooperation.

In this context, before delving into the causes, which this essay seeks to do, it is imperative to note that the fact that the two superpowers fought on the same side during World War II was nothing but a ‘ marriage of convenience,’ where they were united against the common enemy rather than on grounds of a common cause. The suspicions, ensuing due to the differences in ideology and motives on the global scale had not been occluded by any means, merely erased for the time being. ‘ THE BREAKDOWN OF ‘ THE MARRIAGE OF CONVENIENCE’

To fully understand the origins of the Cold War and the breakdown in relations, it is necessary for us to consider the Yalta, Potsdam and Tehran

conferences that occurred towards the dying stages of the Second World War. The Tehran Conference held in 1943 was attended by Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin and even though, the leaders went to Tehran with different goals in mind, the quintessential objective, which was to open a second front against Germany, was achieved. The 'big three' met again in Yalta in February, 1945.

Relations again seemed cordial and the three leaders agreed on various key points, such as the formation of the United Nations, punishment of the Nazi war criminals, the division of Germany and Berlin into four zones, the holding of free elections in Eastern Europe. Yet, there were perilous signs foreshadowing the origin of the Cold War as the three disagreed about what was to be done about Poland. Stalin's demand that the Soviet Union should be given all land east of the Oder-Neisse Line was not taken too favorably by the other two leaders.

When they met at Potsdam again in July 1945, relations were not so amicable. Various changes had taken place in the international stage since Yalta. Firstly, the Soviet Union's Red Army had taken control of the Baltic States under the pretext of liberating them. Secondly, both the United States and Great Britain had different leaders representing them. Attlee replaced Churchill and Truman replaced Roosevelt. Both the new leaders were far more suspicious of Stalin and his 'red agenda' than their predecessors had been. Fourthly, the Americans had already tested an atom bomb on July 16, 1945.

While Stalin was informed of this development at the conference, the motive behind the Manhattan Project was a manifestation of the suspicion the

leaders harbored towards the Communist as they wanted to ensure that Japan was invaded by them and not the Soviet Union. Truman also disagreed with Stalin's request for a 'Soviet sphere of influence' and kept on pressing for free elections in the liberated states of Eastern Europe, which Stalin objected to on grounds of Soviet security. The expansion of the USSR east of the Oder-Neisse line in Poland remained a topic of dispute.

The setting up of a government in Poland that recognized all three powers, termed as a 'Provisional Government of National Unity' (also known as the Lublin Poles), which effectively rendered the Polish government in exile a thing of the past was another source of conflict. WHO WAS TO BLAME FOR THE COLD WAR? : USA, USSR OR SIMPLE IDEOLOGY? Now, we come to the three schools of thought on the origins of the Cold War. The traditionalists, led by the eminent historian George Kennan believe that the Stalin and USSR were to blame, owing to their agenda, which involved expanding Communism and establishing control over all the Eastern-European states. In the 1960s and 1970s, Russian historians, who propounded the revisionist view believed that the United States were to blame for the war as the leaders had become paranoid about Communist aggression, whereas Stalin's motives were purely defensive and the establishment of his 'sphere of influence' in Eastern Europe was justified on grounds that USSR had suffered grave economic losses during the war and it seemed prudent to ensure that neighboring states weren't hostile.

This view became more popular during the 1960s and 1970s as the inherent paranoia regarding both the external and internal Communist Threat, better known as 'The Red Scare,' propounded by the Senator Joseph

McCarthyism subsided in the United States and people became exceptionally critical of American foreign policy with the emergence of the Vietnam War. The third view, which is accepted by most historians across the globe, including this author is the post-revisionist view, which says that it would be unfair to blame the origin of the Cold War on any of the sides without placing equal blame on the other.

Furthermore, to fully understand the causes behind the Cold War, we need to consider a multitude of factors. Firstly, the World War II had a detrimental impact on the economies of both Britain and France and neither of them were the superpowers they had once been. Thus, the USA and the USSR were now the remaining superpowers, two superpowers, which had starkly different and almost contradictory ideologies on government and economics. The Soviet system of government was a Communist one based on the Marxist principles of equality and the welfare state, which involved central planning at the expense of individual freedom.

On the other hand, the United States was a capitalist democracy, which espouses the ownership of private wealth, embedded in the pursuit of profits, at the expense of economic disparity. This also led to a breakdown in communication. Every act was construed by the other superpower to be a propaganda move to thwart the other. The Truman Doctrine, which vowed to provide military aid to European states from internal or external aggression and the Marshall Plan, largely responsible for the economic rebuilding of Europe were interpreted, perhaps rightly, by the Soviet Union as means of spreading USA's capitalist agenda.

Stalin responded to the 'capitalist expansionist' agenda of the Marshall Plan by setting up the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON) to economically aid the members of the Eastern Block. 'ACTION AND REACTION: COLD WAR CONFLICTS FROM 1945-1960' Each superpower wanted to spread their specific ideology and contain the other's, which resulted in a number of propaganda measures, alliances and proxy wars. The first major cold war conflict was the Berlin blockade and airlift of 1948-49.

Stalin cut off all transport links to West Berlin, which was under Allied Control, thus cutting off all food supplies to the city. Truman ordered an airlift with food supplies through B-52 bombers, thus ensuring that the population and autonomy of the zone were kept alive. In 1949, Stalin called off the blockade. The 'iron curtain'-which was a symbol of both ideological and physical division between Eastern and Western Europe became permanent and the arms race started to pick up pace.

The western nations were convinced of what a potential threat the Soviets could be, which prompted the USA to supplement its military deployment with political affiliations by signing the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in April, 1949, emphasizing the principle of collective self-defense. This, along with the rearmament of The Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany, which was in the Allied Zone) was met with the creation of the Warsaw Pact in 1955. The Soviets also set up a Communist Information Bureau (Cominform), which served as a forum that gathered all communist Eastern Bloc nations.

Throughout the 1950s, both countries continued to build up their military arsenal- of both conventional and nuclear weapons. This form of action and

reaction due to high levels of suspicion and hostility towards the other played a key role in laying the foundations of the Cold War that ensued. The final Cold War Conflict of the 1950s which laid down the foundation for the tension that would exist in a divided Europe for the next forty years was the Berlin Crisis, which ensued from 1958-61.

In 1961, The Soviet Union constructed a wall between east and West Germany in the heart of Berlin. Khrushchev claimed that it was an attempt to curb the expansion of western influence of fascist attempting to influence the mindset of the people of East Germany through brainwashing and coercion. However, most historians believe that it was simply an attempt to curb the exodus of many immigrants (a number that has been pegged at 3.5 million before the construction of The Wall) to West Germany, which was doing much better economically.

Throughout the Cold War, the war was a physical representation of the divide across the iron curtain and an emblem of the conflicts that it represented. CONCLUSION: THE END OF THE COLD WAR AND THE BEGINNING OF A NEW WORLD ORDER The years 1945-1960 laid down the foundations for the period of international and diplomatic tensions that would ensue between the two superpowers. While, all-out-war- never broke out, the two countries' policies of containment and brinkmanship brought them close to it on many occasions, such as during the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962.

Of course, the Cuban Missile crisis also helped in improving communication ties and kickstarted the process of arms limitation by the setting up of measures such as the Partial test ban treaty in 1963 and the Moscow-

Washington ' hotline. ' The period 1969-79 saw a thaw in relations between the two superpowers- a period known as ' detente', which ended with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. The end of the Cold War, which was marked by the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 led to a ' new world' order.

In this new era, there has generally been a decrease in inter-state conflicts but other threats to international peace such as conflicts of ethnicity, religion, militancy and terrorism are still rampant. Communal tensions in regions such as Sudan, Somalia and the Congo are latest epitomes of this form of conflict and to truly establish a framework of international peace it will be imperative for national governments, in conjunction with the United Nations to make addressing such issues a priority. BIBLIOGRAPHY Arthur Bliss Lane. I saw Poland betrayed: An American Ambassador Reports to the American People.

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