

To what extent was
the cold war an
ideological struggle?



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The Cold War refers to the conflict that prevailed after World War Two between the two hegemonic powers in the world system at the time, the United States of America and the Soviet Union. The Cold War is named so due to the cold nature of conflict between the two nations, never coming into direct conflict with one another, but instead fighting proxy wars through their support of different sides in otherwise domestic conflicts. The differing ideologies of the two states and the political rhetoric used during the conflict has led to many commentators viewing the Cold War as an ideological struggle. The main question which arises from the study of the Cold War is whether it was in-fact an ideological struggle rather than a conventional struggle for security between the two hegemonic powers of the time. When one views the Cold War from a post-revisionist stance, it can be seen that it was not solely an ideological struggle between the Communist ' East' and the Capitalist ' West' but rather should be viewed as a conflict concerned with the balance of power and economic influence exacerbated by the ideological differences and rhetoric of the time along with other factors such as mis-interpretation and the question of leadership.

The Cold War should not be viewed in the rhetoric of the United States at the time, as a battle between the Liberal forces of the ' free world' and the oppressive Communist ideology, but as a struggle for security between the two hegemon powers at the time exacerbated by the deep routed ideological suspicions of either side, inhabiting itself in the misinterpretations of either sides foreign policy, each seemingly confirming the others suspicion.

However, this is not to say that ideology did not play an important role in aggravating the Cold War, but rather the conflict should be viewed in terms

of a struggle for security rather than as a battle between two opposing ideologies.

The procedure of peace-making following World War Two lead to the first area of dispute between the USA and the USSR on how best to achieve security, with the USA support of a universalist approach and Stalin's insistency on the establishment of spheres of influence. The Kremlin perceived that the only way to achieve security was through the establishment of spheres-of-influence, seeking the establishment of Soviet friendly regimes across eastern Europe. Historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. argues that this was very much in line with Stalin's primary goal of ensuring Russia's security remarking that " above all the Russians were determined to protect their frontiers"[1]. This idea of establishing a sphere of influence was not a novel goal of Stalin and cannot be viewed in terms of an ideological based dispute with its new enemy neither was it an exclusively Communist goal and by establishing this sphere of influence Stalin would in-fact be achieving an age-old dream of the tsars.[2]In 1939 Stalin agreed on the Soviet-Nazi Pact already setting out an agreement on the USSR's necessity to establish a sphere of interest as a major criterion in achieving security. Furthermore, it can be seen that if (as the United States feared) this was part of the USSR's goal of achieving a world communist revolution, the USSR would be unlikely to support the establishment of a western sphere of influence. In 1941 Churchill and Stalin agreed a sphere-of-influence deal supporting one another's claims for their own sphere of influence. If Stalin had been hellbent on the establishment of a world communist revolution he would be unlikely to support Britain's need for the control of Greece, and

would have seen the civil war that prevailed between the communist forces and the Greek army between 1946 and 1949 as an ideal opportunity to further his perceived goal of a global communist revolution.

For it can be seen that Stalin's continued importance placed on ensuring a sphere of influence should not be interpreted as a means for spring boarding a global revolution but out of what he viewed as necessity to ensure his power. Despite Stalin's apparent ideological dedication, it can be seen that Stalin's primary concerns were to consolidate power within the Soviet Union leading him to be inherently cautious in much of his policy. Historian Vojtech Mastny stressed this point in his work *Cold War and Soviet Insecurity* stating that "revolution was for him [Stalin] a means to power rather than a goal in itself"[3]. In their work *Inside the Kremlin's Cold War: From Stalin to Khrushchev*, Vladislav Zubok and Constantine Pleshakov argue that the reason for such abandonment of revolutionary goals was due to Stalin's achievement of power forcing him to act "according to geopolitical realities, national conditions, [and] the logic of power itself"[4]

The issue of security can also be seen as a major driving force in Stalin's opposition to the Bretton Woods Agreement, and the Marshall Plan of 1947. The USSR did not withdraw from the Bretton Woods Agreement on any ideological stance but rather over concerns their authority would be subordinated to that of the USA. When one reviews the documents written by Gerashchenko regarding the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, presented in Harold and Marzenna James' work 'The Origins of the Cold War: Some New

Documents', it can be seen that the main areas of discern for the USSR were <https://assignbuster.com/to-what-extent-was-the-cold-war-an-ideological-struggle/>

not ideological ones but concerns over apparent subordination to United States authority; “ In practice our participation in these institutions would increase their authority”[5]. Furthermore, it can be seen that Stalin’s opposition of the Marshall Plan should be viewed in regards to the issue of security in the Soviet sphere of influence. Stalin’s opposition to the Marshall Plan arises from the stance that he perceived it as an attempt by the United States to economically penetrate his sphere of influence by providing states with particular appeal to communism with funds in attempt to prevent further communist revolutions.

This necessity for security was also a major driving factor behind much of the United States’ policy, but in contrast to the USSR they perceived the only way of achieving this goal by the containment of Soviet influence and policy rather than the establishment of their own sphere of influence.[6]While this correlation between the appeal to security and the containment of Soviet influence may have ideological influences, it was not as simple as an opposition to the ideology of Communism. The United States’ goal of containment was primarily driven, like the policy of the USSR, by the concern for security and geopolitics rather than as a war against the ideology of Communism. For all the political rhetoric of the United States of presenting the conflict as a battle between the forces of the free world against the oppressive nature of Communism, the United States’ foreign policy was primarily driven by the need for security and promotion of its’ economic interests.

However, this is not to say that the ideological differences of the two powers had no influence in the hostilities that prevailed following the Second World
<https://assignbuster.com/to-what-extent-was-the-cold-war-an-ideological-struggle/>

War. It can be seen that in the USSR, the ideological stance point meant that any action of the United States was unlikely to be viewed in a pragmatic way based solely on the concerns of security. Stalin's dedication to the teachings offered by Marxists-Leninist's ensured that any action taken by the United States, or any capitalist nation alike, would be inherently viewed in a very negative light. The teachings of Marxism and Leninism, the base for the ideology of Communism, viewed capitalism and 'communism' as mutually exclusive in the world system and this deep rooted belief that the outside world remained hostile can be seen as a major driving factor in much of Stalin's insistency on the issue of security. Due to this deep routed belief in the ideology of communism that capitalism would only be appeased by the destruction of Marxism, Stalin and his associates were destined to view any foreign policy of the leading capitalist power, the USA in the light of an attempt to encircle and destroy the USSR.[7] However, one should question just how prominent ideology was in driving Stalin's actions. Although it can be seen that the Marxist-Leninist ideology gave Stalin a very suspicious view of the United States, when one examines much of the policy of the United States it would lead one to perhaps see reasoning behind this. While the security concerns and suspicions of Stalin perhaps had an ideological basing, it can be seen that he had very real rationale behind it. While Stalin's dedication to the revolutionary nature of communism, a global communist revolution, is questionable through the study of his foreign policy; the United States appeared to fulfil the role to which communist ideology ascribed to the capitalist system, seeking to limit its spread as much as possible.

The Marshall Plan of 1947 is an example of just this. By offering European nations grants and loans for its rebuilding following the Second World War. After a particularly harsh winter of 1946-7 the United States hoped to improve the conditions within much of Europe, which was leading many nations to see the capitalist system as failing and giving rise to the gaining popularity of the communist movements across Europe.[8]In fact, for all its talk of promoting the ideals of freedom and promoting Liberalism, the USA's commitment to opposing the spread of Communism would often take president over the spread of the ideals of freedom and the promotion of liberalism. For it can be seen that the United States support of Greece, Turkey, and South Africa, all in turn being included in what became known as the " free world", was not due to the nations appeal to the ideals of freedom and democracy but rather their acceptance of the capitalist economic system and their anti-communist sentiment. Th fact that the United States was to incorporate South Africa, a racially oppressive regime, into the ' free world' highlights the importance of anti-communism over its commitment to spreading the ideals of freedom. This leads one to question the motives for the United States aggression towards communism. The United States inclusion of authoritarian and oppressive regimes into the ' free world' leads one to believe that the United States policy was driven by purely economic factors, with its desire to open the world to free trade, providing the United States with new markets for its trade in goods and services. Furthermore, it can be seen that the USA's week commitment to the ideals of freedom and security leads one to question whether the Cold War was truly an ideological conflict or rather a power struggle between the two hegemonic powers of the time.

<https://assignbuster.com/to-what-extent-was-the-cold-war-an-ideological-struggle/>

In conclusion it can be seen that the Cold War should not be viewed as an exclusively ideological struggle between the forces of neo-liberalism and communism but should deny any single motive narrative. The Cold War was a result of a combination of factors, but should be viewed in the of a power struggle between the two major powers of the time motivated by the promotion of each sides interest with the two opposing ideologies of either side only serving to exacerbate the conflict. This is not to say that ideology played no role in the onset of the Cold War, but that the conflict should not be viewed in a solely ideological light.

Bibliography

1. Foner E. *Give Me Liberty: An American History*. 4th Ed. (W. W. Norton & Co., New York 2014).
2. Gaddis, J. L., ' The Emerging Post-Revisionist Thesis on the Origins of the Cold War' in *Journal of Diplomatic History* vol. 7 (Summer 1983).
3. James, H. & James, M. ' The Origins of the Cold War: Some New Documents' in *The Historical Journal* vol. 37, no. 3 (1994).
4. Mastny, V. *Cold War and Soviet Insecurity: The Stalin Years*. (Oxford University Press, New York 1996)
5. Schlesinger, A., ' Origins of the Cold War' in *Journal of Foreign Affairs* vol. 46 (October 1967)
6. Zubok, V. & Pleshakov, C. *Inside the Kremlin's Cold War: From Stalin to Krushchev*. (Harvard Univeristy Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1996)

[1]Schlesinger, A., 'Origins of the Cold War' in *Journal of Foreign Affairs* vol. 46 (October 1967) P. 29

[2]Schlesinger, A., 'Origins of the Cold War' in *Journal of Foreign Affairs* vol. 46 (October 1967) P. 31

[3]Mastny, V. *Cold War and Soviet Insecurity: The Stalin Years*. (New York, 1996)P. 12.

[4]Zubok, V. & Pleshakov, C. *Inside the Kremlin's Cold War: From Stalin to Krushchev*. (Cambridge, Mass., 1996) P. 62

[5]Gerashchenko, 1945 from *The Collection of Molotov*. Presented in James, H. & James, M. 'The Origins of the Cold War: Some New Documents' in *The Historical Journal* vol. 37, no. 3 (1994). P. 619

[6]Gaddis, J. L., 'The Emerging Post-Revisionist Thesis on the Origins of the Cold War' in *Journal of Diplomatic History* vol. 7 (Summer 1983).

[7]Schlesinger, A., 'Origins of the Cold War' in *Journal of Foreign Affairs* vol. 46 (October 1967) P. 47

[8]Foner, E. *Give Me Liberty: An American History*. 4th Ed.(New York, 2014). P. 900-901