

# History essays - marshall plan berlin blockade



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## **Marshall Plan Berlin Blockade**

Do you agree that the two key episodes in the early evolution of the Cold War were the Marshall Plan and the Berlin Blockade?

The Marshall Plan of 1947 and the Berlin Blockade of 1948 both represent fundamental episodes in the evolution of early Cold War tensions. However, certain, perhaps more important, preconditions had to be met in the build up to these controversial affairs. The close of the Second World War saw Europe in desperate need of economic recovery.

Devastation was widespread through much of the continent, food and raw materials were short, production was lagging, and the problems brought about by refugees and displaced persons were as great as ever.

Further to this, Melvyn P. Leffker believes that not only Europe, but the entire world was filled with anarchic states worried about their security; the perfect environment, Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson believed, for “Communitic infiltration”. Leffker goes on to state that these early economic, social and political instabilities present in 1945, coupled with the Soviet pursuit into Eastern Europe (and eastern Germany), were the direct cause of the creation of President Truman’s Marshall Plan and the subsequent Berlin Blockade.

Historically, the traditional scholarly view of the Berlin Blockade often places it as the first major heightening of Cold War tensions. Examples of this are seen in work by George Kennan and Louis Halle. However, it can be argued that tensions between the two countries began to deteriorate by 1945. An

apparent fear of communism can be seen to be exacerbated by the conditions of post-Second World War Europe.

It is this fear which directly formed the basis of the subsequent break down in the war time Alliance and shift in foreign policy of not only America but also Soviet Russia. Second to this, the development of the atomic bomb and its use by the Americans on Hiroshima and Nagasaki was a key event in the tenuous build up to the Cold War and saw a further break down of relations between America and Soviet Russia. Seemingly, it was these events that sparked the following arms race between the two Superpowers which dominated the next 44 years.

Finally, the extension of Soviet influence in Eastern Europe along with their desire to expand this authority in pro-communist countries like Czechoslovakia, was perceived by the West as an overt act of hostility and aggression. Tensions between the two were escalated a long time before the implementation of the Marshall Plan, meaning surely that the events which occurred directly after the Second World War are more important in explaining the early evolution of the Cold War.

The importance of the Marshall Plan and the Berlin Blockade is also further questioned when considering the impact of the Korean War on Cold War tensions. The West perceived Soviet Russia as spreading the Cold War to the Far East by instigating the conflict, while Stalin's anger at the UN's decision to provide military aid proved vital to a further break down in relations.

Despite both the Marshall Plan and Berlin Blockade holding enormous significance in the early evolution of the Cold War, other factors exist which

go along way in explaining the roots of this extremely complicated international conflict.

The sudden death of Franklin Roosevelt in 1945 saw the end of what Daniel Yergin saw as a man who was easily America's most effective international statesman. The sudden burden placed upon the former vice president Harry Truman, saw American foreign policy shift from a tenuous alliance with Soviet Russia, to a complete reversal and subsequent breakdown of relations. While a change of personnel does not alone explain the Cold War, it was defiantly a factor which influenced the breakdown of the old wartime alliance.

Also crucial in this collapse in relations, is the apparent Soviet suspicion that America had opted to let the Russians bear the brunt of the war effort, to insert themselves only at the last minute in order to influence the following peace settlements and dominate Europe.

However, historians such as John Lewis Gaddis dispute this claim, citing other military and strategic calculations for the timing of the Normandy invasion. Nevertheless, relations between the two Superpowers were defiantly in ruins by early 1945. The question of reshaping Europe after the war again caused the situation to heat up.

Both sides held extremely dissimilar ideas regarding the establishment and maintenance of post-war security. The Americans tended to understand security in situational terms, assuming that, if similar constitutional democracies and trading environments were established all around the

devastated European countries, differences could be resolved peacefully through international organisations.

However, Soviet leaders tended to understand security in terms of space. This logic was bought about by Russia's historical experiences, given the regularity with which the country had been invaded over the last 150 years. It was for this reason that the Soviets subsequently occupied Eastern Europe in the years after the war, proving what Melvyn Leffler believes to be vital to international relations. The conferences of Yalta in February and Potsdam July 1945, saw the emergence of serious difference in opinion over the future development of Germany and Eastern Europe.

It was here where Stalin was first informed of America's nuclear ambitions and one week after the end of the Potsdam Conference, the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki led to further conflict between the Soviet Union and the United States. Shortly after the attacks, Stalin protested to US officials over Truman offering the Soviets little real influence in occupied Japan.

The importance of this early breakdown in relations between the two Superpowers can not be underestimated. With relations at an almost unworkable situation by August 1945, surely the months following the end of the Second World War play a vital role in the early evolution of the Cold War.

The apparent fear of communism from the allied West is often sighted by most Cold War historians as the main driving force behind not only the break down in relations between America and Russia, but also the subsequent drive behind the Marshall Plan and Berlin Blockade.

Although there were efforts to maintain an impression of cooperation until 1947, President Truman's initiation of the Truman Doctrine clearly marked a definite end of the alliance and the formal acceptance of the containment strategy that would dominate U. S. thinking throughout the Cold War.

Initiated by George Kennan in 1946, the strategy called for the United States to contain communism within its current areas of control. The continuity of the strategy of containment can be seen in the Korean War from 1950 to 1953, the Vietnam War in the 1960s and 1970s, and the Grenada Invasion in 1983, all standing as examples where the United States actively tried to stop the spread of communism.

While there were other national security issues that the United States had to deal with in the second half of the twentieth century, the idea of containing communism was never too far removed and seemingly goes a long way in explaining the early evolution of the Cold War.

The Marshall Plan was an apparent economic extension of the Truman Doctrine which sought to extend economic aid to all devastated European countries. At the end of the Second World War, starvation and economic crisis threatened to overtake many European nations. Most peoples' means of subsistence had been totally destroyed. There was a slump in production and a subsequent disruption in trade relations. The threat of a second Great Depression loomed large, and Germany was one of the hardest hit areas.

Most German cities had been all but obliterated, and transportation systems lay in ruins. Refugees fled from East to West in search of a government stable enough to provide them with even the barest daily essentials. The

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Allied West took it upon themselves to prevent an economic crisis in aiding to rebuild the most devastated areas as quickly as possible. Similarly to the Truman Doctrine, the main driving force behind this move was a fear of the spread communism throughout an economically unstable Europe.

The Plan attempted to solve this problem by economically stabilising Europe in order to subsequently reduce this threat of communism; a move which “orthodox” historians (such as John Snell and Herbert Feis) see as ideologically provoking Soviet Russia through aggressive policy. Roger Whitcomb is in line with this theory and believes that prior to the summer of 1947, Stalin still hoped to pursue some sort of détente with the West.

He goes on to sight the Marshall plan as the major turning point in the Cold War, saying that it “radically changed Stalin’s calculus” from a policy of self preservation to one of confrontational unilateral action in favour of Moscow’s interests. However, although the Marshall Plan provided the means for this turning point, which would seemingly add to the episodes importance in terms of the early evolution of the Cold War, it is in fact the very nature of Europe at the time which acted as the chief catalyst in explaining this shift Soviet in policy.

The unstable political, social and economic conditions throughout Europe presented both sides with an almost unavoidable situation of conflict. It was in this environment that the Western powers felt compelled to design the details of the Plan in such a way that it would stabilise Europe, but only at the cost of provoking a confrontation with Russia.

In a way, the clash of the two powers was inevitable when considering the environment in which it occurred. In terms of the importance of the Marshall Plan, it is clear to say that its influence can not be underestimated as it was an episode which saw a major deterioration of international relations.

Berlin fell well within Soviet-occupied East Germany, but the city, like the whole of Germany, was divided into four occupational zones under the authority of the Allied Control Commission. In March 1948 the Allies decided to unite their occupation zones by creating a single currency in West Germany (and in West Berlin).

The Soviet government perceived the new Deutsche Mark as a threat to the East German economy and, in June 1948 Soviet forces began a blockade of all rail, road, and water traffic through East Germany to West Berlin, attempting to push the western powers out of the city.

Stalin believed that the only way in which the Soviet Union could protect themselves from the West was to seize control of a divided Germany. In order to do this Stalin had to exercise control over the eastern half of Berlin, making it a secure zone from which to operate. Roger Whitcomb believes that this response was a predictable occurrence when considering the previous decimation of relations between the two powers and the subsequent impact of the Marshall Plan. The USA and Britain responded, however, by sending food and other vital supplies into the city by air.

Tensions mounted as Soviet and Allied forces built up in the occupied zones. The Soviets finally ended the blockade after countermeasures from the West, including a ban on exports from the Eastern bloc. Berlin had become a pawn

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in the game of politics, policies, ideologies and propaganda and when the Socialist Unity Party of German lost the election of 1946 to the Social Democrats, Russian interests in East German were severely hampered.

The Berlin Blockade represented a significant episode of early Cold War evolution, as the decision to isolate Berlin was one which could have easily resulted in major military confrontation; the very fact that it did not, highlights the nature of a post-Second World War international environment where a major war would not be in the interest of either America or Soviet Russia.

The invasion of South Korea in 1950 saw a further heightening in cold war tensions and is believed by S. J. Ball to “symbolise how close the Cold War came to ‘hot war’”. The United Nations involvement in the affair marked what Russia and North Korea saw as unjust involvement in a matter which did not concern an international arena. Soon after the outbreak of war, the UN made a call for hostilities to end which involved the support of all of the organisations members.

The resolution was unanimously passed in the Security Council mainly due to the fact that the Soviets were absent, upholding their boycott after protesting that the Chinese seat should be transferred from the (Kuomintang-controlled) Republic of China to the Communist People's Republic. With the Soviets absent and unable to veto the resolution, and with only Yugoslavia abstaining, the UN voted to aid South Korea. The resolution led to direct action by the United States, whose forces were joined by troops and supplies from 15 other UN members.

However, the United States provided 50% of the ground forces (South Korea provided most of the remainder), 86% of the naval power, and 93% of the air power. The Soviet Union and its allies challenged the resolution on grounds of illegality since a permanent member of the council (the Soviet Union) was absent from the voting. Against this, the view prevailed that a permanent member of the Council had to explicitly veto a resolution in order to defeat it. The North Korean government also did not concur, arguing that the conflict was a civil war, and therefore not clearly within the scope of the UN. In 1950, a Soviet resolution calling for an end of hostilities and withdrawal of foreign troops was rejected.

The Korean War is yet another example of strained tensions between America and Soviet Russia. However, it differs from both the Marshall Plan and the Berlin Blockade by it being the first time that the conflict spilt over onto an international stage. The United Nations decision to intervene in what can easily be seen (and was by North Korea and Soviet Russia) as a civil war and simply not a matter for the UN, has made some revisionist historians sight the action as “ a U. S. operation behind a blue international fig leaf”. The episodes significance in the early evolution of the Cold War can not be underestimated. It represents a situation where tensions between the two Superpowers were once again strained and this time tested on an international arena.

The Marshall Plan of 1947 and the Berlin Blockade of 1948 both represent fundamental episodes in the evolution of early Cold War tensions. However, certain, perhaps more important, preconditions had to be met in the build up to these controversial affairs. The breakdown of the old war time alliance

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between America and Soviet Russia can be seen to have begun in early 1945 with the death of Franklin Roosevelt. Although this switch in personnel does not begin to explain the reasons for the Cold War, it goes a long way in accounting for the beginnings of the end of the Alliance.

Secondly, the apparent fear of communism in the West was exacerbated by the economic and political instability in Europe at the end of the Second World War. It is these two different political ideologies which typify the divide between capitalist East and communist West. Also, it is these instabilities in Europe which again play a key role in the subsequent formation of the Marshall Plan in 1947, Berlin Blockade in 1948 and the inevitability of the subsequent conflict which dominated the majority of the latter half of the twentieth century.

The fact that tensions between the two were escalated a long time before the implementation of the Marshall Plan surely means that the events which occurred directly after the Second World War are more important in explaining the early evolution of the Cold War. The importance of the Marshall Plan and the Berlin Blockade is also further questioned when considering the impact of the Korean War on Cold War tensions.

It represented the first time that the conflict spilt over onto an international stage, and is also believed to be the closest the Cold War has ever become to a 'hot war'. Despite both the Marshall Plan and Berlin Blockade holding enormous significance in the early evolution of the Cold War, other factors exist which go along way in explaining the roots of this extremely complicated international conflict.

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