

Origins of the Cold War

Origins of the Cold War – Study Notes

1. Historical Context (Late 1940s)

Aspect	United States	Soviet Union
Political system	Liberal democracy; capitalist market economy	One-party communist state; centrally planned economy
War experience	Emerged as the sole superpower after WWII; huge industrial base, global financial influence	Devastated by war but gained territory in Eastern Europe; strong military despite huge losses
Strategic goals	Contain communism, promote free-market democracy, secure access to resources and markets	Secure “buffer zone” of friendly states, spread Marxist-Leninist ideology, protect against future invasions

2. Key Ideological Differences

- **Capitalism vs. Communism**
 - Private ownership & market competition vs. state ownership & planned economy.
 - **Democracy vs. One-Party Rule**
 - Competitive elections & civil liberties vs. centralized political control.
 - **Perception of security**
 - U.S. feared Soviet expansionism; USSR feared capitalist encirclement.
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3. Major Early Flashpoints (1945-1949)

Event	Date	Why it mattered
Yalta & Potsdam Conferences	Feb-Aug 1945	Set the stage for post-war division; disagreements over Poland and reparations.
Truman Doctrine	March 1947	U.S. pledged support to “free peoples” resisting subjugation – first formal containment policy.
Marshall Plan	June 1947	\$13-billion aid to rebuild Western Europe; Soviet saw it as economic coercion.

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Berlin Blockade & Airlift	Jun?1948 – May?1949	First major confrontation; demonstrated U.S. willingness to counter Soviet pressure in Europe.
NATO formation	April?1949	Collective defense pact among Western nations, solidifying the Western bloc.
Soviet atomic bomb test	Aug?1949	Ended U.S. nuclear monopoly, intensifying the arms race.

4. Structural Causes

1. Power Vacuum in Europe

- Collapse of Nazi Germany left a contested political landscape; both superpowers sought influence over the same territories.

2. Security Dilemma

- Each side's defensive measures (e.g., U.S. military bases, Soviet satellite states) were interpreted as offensive threats, prompting reciprocal buildup.

3. Economic Competition

- The U.S. promoted the *Bretton Woods* system (IMF, World Bank) to spread capitalism; USSR created the *Council for Mutual Economic Assistance* (COMECON) for its bloc.

4. Ideological Competition

- Both sides viewed the global order as a zero-sum game: the spread of one system implied the decline of the other.
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5. Theoretical Interpretations (Brief Overview)

School of Thought	Core Argument
Traditionalist (Realist)	Emphasizes power politics; the U.S. and USSR were inevitable rivals after WWII.

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School of Thought

Core Argument

Revisionist

Blames U.S. economic imperialism and the Marshall Plan for provoking Soviet resistance.

Post-Revisionist

Highlights mutual misunderstandings, security concerns, and domestic pressures on both sides.

6. Key Primary Sources to Consult

- **Truman Doctrine Speech** (March 12, 1947) – President Harry S. Truman, Washington,