

The Roots of the Cold War

The Cold War was a period of geopolitical tension between the Soviet Union and the United States involving their respective allies after World War II. Although neither came to an open confrontation, both sought to influence world affairs through alliances, political intervention and conflicts between other nations.

This article will analyse the origins of the Cold War within the context of the IAS Exam.

Cracks in a Fragile Alliance

The defeat of the Axis states in 1945 depended on the survival of an unlikely alliance between the democratic Western states and the communist Soviet Union. They were united by a common hostility towards Hitler and Nazi Germany but by little else. The long history of tension and mistrust between the Soviet Union and the Western World began to resurface as the victory over the Nazis drew closer

The most serious issue was the political future of the reconquered lands. Though the Allies had agreed not to reach a separate peace with any of the Axis states, Britain and the United States accepted Italian surrender in 1943 without Soviet involvement. Stalin took this as a pretext to act on his own in the liberated states of Eastern Europe. As they were occupied one by one by the Red Army, the Soviet Union excluded Western intervention and set out to create a system of satellite states friendly to Soviet interests.

The alienation and mutual between the erstwhile allies would come to the fore regarding the future of two nations in particular: Poland and Germany

Settlement of Poland and Germany

Though the Western Allies recognized that there was little they could do to prevent Soviet domination in Eastern Europe, there were two states in whose fate they had a real political interest: Poland and Germany.

Poland for which Britain had ostensibly gone to war in 1939 was the subject of tense negotiation at the Tehran Conference in November 1943. It was agreed that Poland must relinquish the areas seized by the Soviet Union in 1939 and should be compensated instead with territory carved out of Eastern Germany. The settlement was confirmed at the Potsdam Conference in July 1945, by which time a pro-Soviet Union government had been installed in the Polish capital of Warsaw. Although the Soviet Union paid lip service to the idea of establishing a popular democracy in Poland, in practice Polish communism was ruthlessly promoted. An election in 1947 returned a communist majority and Poland came firmly within the Soviet sphere of influence.

The German question was equally delicate. The Allies had agreed to divide Germany into Allied zones of occupation in 1943. The demarcation lines were observed with vehemence by both sides, even though their respective forces had arrived at rather different points by the end of the war. It was agreed not to impose a peace settlement similar to the Treaty of Versailles in 1919. Reparations were seized instead, mainly by the Soviet Union and German political and military leaders were put on trial at Nuremberg in November 1945 before an international military tribunal composed of the four victor states (United States, Britain, France and the Soviet Union). Germany was completely disarmed.

There was however no agreement, however, on the future political shape of Germany. Co-operation between the zones was limited until in 1947 Britain and the United States created a joint area, known as Bizonia, which they began to see as a foundation of a new German state. With the Soviet Union vehemently opposed to a US-dominated capitalist state in Central Europe, the German issue became a symbol of the wider conflict looming between communist East and capitalist West.

The Cold War Begins

The conflict between the communist and capitalist ideologies became all the more apparent by 1946. On March 5 of that year, in Fulton Missouri, British PM Winston Churchill told an American audience that an "Iron Curtain" had descended across Europe, separating the democratic peoples of the West from the new communist bloc. The hopes which had been expressed by US statesmen for 'one world' after the war based on self-determination and economic freedom were replaced by fears of a new polarization christened by American journalist Walter Lippmann the "Cold War".

Soviet leaders were equally anxious about the new world order and saw US ambitions as every bit as imperialist as those of European fascism. In 1946 Stalin ordered Western communist parties to go on a political offensive. In Greece, a civil war, which had begun during the Second World War, threatened a communist takeover. In 1946 the United States embarked in a strategy of "containment" aimed at restricting the further expansion of communism worldwide.

The American president announced the Truman Doctrine, promising aid to any peoples resisting internal and external threats to democratic freedom. The first beneficiary was Greece, where US aid in 1947 helped to turn the tide against the communist guerillas - a pattern that would be repeated many times during the Cold War era.