



## The Origins of the Cold War

This is a transcript of the [Origins of the Cold War](https://www.mrallsophistory.com) podcast from [www.mrallsophistory.com](https://www.mrallsophistory.com)

This podcast aims to look at three key areas – why the alliance between the USA and the USSR broke down in 1945, how Stalin take control of eastern Europe in 1945 and America’s reaction to it, and the consequences of the Berlin Blockade.

By the end of World War 2 in 1945, two clear superpowers had emerged: the USA and the USSR. They had fought alongside each other during the war, but due to their ongoing political disagreements were to become enemies in its immediate aftermath. This relationship, and the events that occurred as a result of it, are referred to as the Cold War.

The central reason for the suspicion and mistrust that led to the Cold War was that of differing political beliefs. The USSR, which included Russia and various other countries that are now independent states such as the Ukraine and Georgia, had become Communist following the Bolshevik revolution in 1917. Examiners aren’t usually too fussed over whether you refer to the USSR, the Soviet Union, or Russia as a term for this country – but it’s worth me defining it at this point in order to avoid confusion.

The communist ideas that lay at the heart of Soviet politics were simply unacceptable to the USA, whose society was based on democracy and capitalism. Although the two countries fought on the same side in the Second World War, it was only because they shared a common enemy in Hitler. They detested each other, but they both opposed Hitler’s Germany more.

The final years of the war, however, saw the relationship deteriorate. The Allies refused to help Stalin’s fight against the Nazis by starting a second front in 1943. Stalin believed the Allies were purposefully making the USSR fight a difficult war in order to weaken the Communists for when the war was over.

In February 1945, when it is was clear that the Nazis were well on their way to defeat, the three war leaders – Churchill of Britain, Roosevelt of the USA, and Stalin from the USSR – met at Yalta where They were able to agree a number of points, which you may be asked to describe in your exam. Firstly, they agreed that Germany would be divided into four zones – American, French, British and Soviet. Berlin was in the Soviet zone so it would also be divided into four. Secondly, as the Allies were liberating countries from German occupation, they agreed that countries could hold free elections to choose the government they wanted. Other agreements involved the USSR sending its troops to help in Japan after the defeat of the Nazis, and the establishment of a United Nations to promote world peace. Finally, because the Soviet Union had suffered enormous losses during the war, they agreed that Eastern Europe should be a Soviet ‘sphere of influence’ in order to ease Stalin’s concerns that the USSR could not be invaded again.



This all sounds very nice and fluffy, but one major issue went unsettled. Although the leaders agreed to holding free elections in Nazi-occupied countries, it was clear that the Allies' and Stalin's idea of free and democratic governments differed. Stalin was keen that these countries should have pro-Soviet people in power so that they could be influenced by the USSR. The problem for the allies was that the huge Red Army was already dominating the countries to the East of Germany. By the time Germany surrendered in May 1945, the Soviet Red Army, effectively controlled the bulk of eastern Europe and the people of these countries – Romania, Bulgaria and Hungary – viewed the Red Army as their liberators.

The leaders met again at Potsdam, a suburb of Berlin, in July to August 1945. By this time, Harry Truman was the President of the USA as Roosevelt had recently died. Truman was much more anti-Communist than Roosevelt had been, which led to increased tension between the USA and the USSR. Truman had further raised the tension with the use of the atomic bomb at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Some historians believe the bomb was used just as much as a threat to the Soviets as it was an attempt to bring the War in the Pacific to a close.

At Potsdam the Allied leaders discussed the future of the newly liberated Germany, but with the war over the one unifying factor between the three countries had disappeared. Stalin wanted Germany to pay huge compensation to the USSR, but based on lessons learned from the Treaty of Versailles Truman was not keen. Stalin viewed Truman's opposition as an attempt to rebuild a strong Germany to threaten the Soviet Union. Furthermore, the leaders, with Churchill later being replaced by Clement Atlee, failed to re-confirm the promise made at Yalta - of free and independent elections in eastern Europe. Stalin continued to insist on the countries of eastern Europe being subject to Soviet rule, while Truman continued to argue for democratic elections. Stalin's growing influence in eastern Europe threatened Truman, who began to think that Stalin intended to take over the rest of Europe as well.

Therefore, by the end of 1945, the tensions that led to the Cold War had begun to emerge. The war was over so there was no longer a reason to cooperate with each other. Stalin didn't get along as well with Truman as he had with Roosevelt. The unknown quantity of America's atomic bombs worried Stalin, but at the same time Truman was concerned over Stalin's strength within eastern Europe. Over the next few years these concerns became more and more firmly embedded in the policies and actions of the USA and the USSR.

The five years following the end of the war saw relations between the USA and the USSR deteriorate even further. The Cold War was developing in Europe, as the Soviet Union built a barrier round itself – a kind-of buffer-zone against the West. The states surrounding the USSR, rather than holding the democratic elections agreed in the earlier meetings, had Communist governments imposed upon them. Stalin firmly believed that his actions were justified in order to ensure any possible future war did not cause further devastation to the Soviet Union like it had experienced against the Nazis.



In Poland, a rigged election in 1947 saw the communists won 400 out of 450 seats. These communists were hand-picked people loyal to Moscow. Hungary saw the communists win just 17% of the vote, but under threat from Moscow the majority politicians handed over control the Communists out of fear of what the USSR might do to them. Romanian elections brought the communists to power, and in Bulgaria – following the killing of non-communist leaders in October 1946 – the communists won a massive victory.

Yugoslavia and Greece, however, presented problems for Stalin. The Yugoslavian leader, Tito, was communist but was not easily controlled. When Tito's political party won 96% of the vote, even Stalin didn't feel confident enough to overthrow him. In Greece, meanwhile, the Greek communists fought hard from 1946-9 to overthrow the monarchy. It was here that America finally got involved to stop communism spreading – in March 1947 Truman made a speech that became known as the Truman Doctrine. While not naming Greece specifically, he said that America would help any country oppose a communist take-over: he wanted to stop communism from spreading. He wanted to contain it. His first move in the policy of containment was to support the anti-Communist forces in Greece by sending money and equipment. It worked: the communist uprising was defeated and communism was stopped in its tracks.

To ensure communism couldn't spread to other European countries, Truman decided to use America's economic power. George Marshall, a US general, was ordered to develop an economic plan that in the end provided \$17 billion to European countries to rebuild themselves after the devastation of the Second World War. Truman hoped that by doing this, the people suffering in these countries would not be easily persuaded to become communist as a result of promises made by Stalin. Truman believed that the Marshall Plan would help the people in Europe to get back to work, make money and feel good about democracy.

The Marshall Plan has been interpreted in a number of different ways. Some people argue that it was generous of America and its people to provide such aid, and while others acknowledge the generosity they claim it was done in order for the countries to recover enough to start buying American goods. Other people argue that the aid was an anti-Communist weapon, since only countries without communist governments were eligible to receive funding. Stalin, though, saw Marshall Aid as the USA making Europe economically dependent on America. Worried that America might dominate European politics, he banned the countries of eastern Europe from accepting the money.

Despite the challenges of Yugoslavia, Greece, and Marshall Aid, Stalin held a firm grip on eastern Europe. It was because of this division between West and East that Churchill made his famous Iron Curtain speech. He didn't mean there was a real iron barrier between East West, but was talking figuratively about the line that had split Europe in two. On Stalin's side of the line, his control was absolute – but while the USA had the atomic bomb and the USSR didn't, Stalin couldn't afford to provoke America. All this changed when the Soviet detonated



their first A-bomb in 1949. Suddenly America's advantage had narrowed. The Arms Race was on.

Following the defeat of Nazi Germany, the four winning nations – France, Britain, America and the USSR – divided Germany between them into four zones. They also divided Berlin into four zones and controlled one zone each.

The USA, Britain and France worked together to strengthen their zones. They wanted a strong, democratic Germany, which would be able to recover from years of Nazi dictatorship. The problem for Stalin, who insisted on keeping his zones weak in case a strong Germany decided to attack the USSR in the future, was that in Berlin the population could see the difference between the communist and non-communist styles of zones, which suggested to those people living in Soviet-controlled Berlin that it was better to live elsewhere! Stalin needed to remove the Allies from Berlin.

Stalin tried to force the Allies out of Berlin. He closed off all rail lines, canals and roads that entered West Berlin through the Soviet-controlled sector of Germany. For as long as the blockage went on, the people of West Berlin would suffer from a lack of supplies and in the end Britain, France and the USA would have to leave. But the Allies responded by flying supplies – coal, food, medicine, sweets and candies – into West Berlin. If Stalin tried to shoot down the Allied planes he risked starting a war! The flights continued for almost a year before Stalin gave up and lifted the blockade in May 1949.

The Berlin Blockade demonstrated the stubbornness of the two sides that persisted for the rest of the Cold War. Following the blockade, Germany was firmly divided into two nations – East and West Germany – and the countries that opposed Stalin formed NATO (the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation). Many more stand-offs were to come.

A popular question in examinations is about who was more to blame for the Cold War – the USA or the USSR. This question requires balance: you need to give examples of actions by the USA that show it was responsible for starting the Cold War, as well as giving examples of things the Soviet Union did that caused it. Remember that in essay answers you should PEE – use the Point, Evidence, Explanation system to score maximum marks. Begin by making your point (you might say, 'it could be argued that the USSR was more to blame for the Cold War). Follow this with evidence and examples of things the USSR did to cause tensions – you might, for example, point out Soviet intervention in eastern European elections to ensure that communism flourished. Conclude your paragraph by explaining why these actions led to tensions that caused the Cold War and remember the magic word – BECAUSE! Once you've looked at one side of the argument it's time to consider the opposing view – use the same structure of Point, Evidence, Explanation to consider America's blame for the Cold War. Round off your answer with a third paragraph in which you reach an overall conclusion. Remember there is no wrong answer here – as long as you explain why you think the USSR or



MR ALLSOP HISTORY . COM



the USA was more to blame for starting the war then the examiner will award you marks accordingly.