



# 01

What was the Cold War?



**Key concepts:**

## Significance and causation

This book is concerned with the period 1945–1991: the years recognized as the ‘Cold War’ era. Cold War is the term used to describe periods of hostility and high tension between states, which stop just short of war. In the period 1945–1991, this was the situation that existed between the two great post-war **superpowers**: the United States and the USSR.

The USA and the USSR had emerged as the two competing superpowers following the defeat of **Nazi** Germany in 1945. Rather than being traditional enemies, expected at some time to enter into conflict, the rapid escalation of nuclear armament by both of these countries made the results of any possible direct conflict unthinkable. It was of paramount importance to find new strategies to avoid escalation to the level of nuclear warfare. This situation led to 45 years of **ideological** conflict, a **conventional** and **nuclear arms race**, and wars fought by **proxy** on the battlefields of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. It also involved economic rivalry and the development of huge espionage networks, as each side tried to infiltrate the other to discover military and strategic secrets.

It was American journalist Walter Lippmann, writing for the *New York Herald Tribune* in 1947, who popularized the term ‘Cold War’ to describe the relationship that was developing between the USA and the USSR, while the US president of the time, Harry S Truman, preferred the phrase ‘the war of nerves’.

## Communism versus Capitalism

To understand the fundamental differences that existed between the USA and the USSR in 1945, and why these two countries were perceived by many as inevitable enemies, it is important to understand the key differences between their economic and political philosophies: that is, the opposing ideologies of **Capitalism** and **Communism**.

The **Bolshevik Revolution** in Russia in 1917 saw Vladimir Lenin and the Bolshevik Party establish the world’s first Communist state, based on the ideas of the 19th-century economic philosopher Karl Marx. For the leaders of the United States and other countries in the West, these ideas seemed to threaten the very basis of their societies.

### TWO RIVAL IDEOLOGIES

The West	The USSR
<p><b>Economic differences:</b></p> <p>Individuals should be able to compete with each other with a minimum of state interference and make as much money as they wish. This is known as Capitalism.</p> <p>Individuals are thus encouraged to work hard with the promise of individual reward.</p>	<p><b>Economic differences:</b></p> <p>Capitalism creates divisions between rich and poor. Thus all businesses and farms should be owned by the state on behalf of the people. This is known as Communism.</p> <p>Goods will be distributed to individuals by the state. Everyone will thus get what is needed and everyone will be working for the collective good.</p>
<p><b>Political differences:</b></p> <p>Individuals choose the government through voting. There is a range of political parties to choose from.</p> <p>Individuals have certain rights, such as freedom of speech and freedom of the press. This is known as liberal democracy.</p>	<p><b>Political differences:</b></p> <p>There is no need for a range of political parties, as the Communist Party truly represents the views of all the workers and rules on behalf of the people.</p> <p>Individual freedoms valued by the West are not necessary.</p> <p>This is a one-party state.</p>

The red telephone at Strategic Air Command headquarters, near Omaha, Nebraska.

## Increasing hostility

The mutual suspicion between the West and the Soviet Union manifested itself in various ways between the Bolshevik Revolution (1917) and the start of World War Two (1939):

- the intervention of the West in the **Russian Civil War** (1918–1922), through its support of the conservative forces – the **Whites** – in their attempt to overthrow the new **Bolshevik** government
- the fact that the USSR did not receive diplomatic recognition or join the **League of Nations** until 1934
- the **appeasement** of Adolf Hitler and the Nazis in the 1930s by the West; this was partly motivated by a fear of Soviet Communism, which at the time was stronger than the fear of German **fascism**
- the **Non-Aggression Pact (Nazi–Soviet Pact)**, between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, signed in 1939, which allowed Hitler to concentrate on attacking the West.

## Idealism versus self-interest

The USA and the USSR each believed that its particular political philosophy was the ‘right’ one – that its respective system was the most fair and the best for creating a just society. How they translated these opposing ideologies in practice is outlined below. You can see that each side believed that it offered the only true path to ‘peace, freedom, justice, and plenty’ for all. However, behind the idealism, the USA and the USSR were also motivated by their own self-interests.

USA	USSR
<b>What ideals underpinned the view of each country?</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Idealism of Presidents Woodrow Wilson and Franklin D Roosevelt</li> <li>• Struggle for a better world based on collective security, political self-determination, and economic integration</li> <li>• Peace, freedom, justice, and plenty</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Marxist idealism and Stalinism</li> <li>• Struggle for a better world based on international socialism</li> <li>• Peace, freedom, justice, and plenty</li> </ul>
<b>How was this to be achieved by each country?</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Achieved by democracy/Capitalism and international co-operation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Achieved by spreading Soviet-style Communism</li> </ul>
<b>What elements of self-interest lay behind each country's ideals?</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The need to establish markets and open doors to <b>free trade</b></li> <li>• The desire to avoid another economic crisis of the magnitude of 1929</li> <li>• President Truman and most of the post-war US administration's belief that what was good for America was good for the world</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The need to secure borders</li> <li>• The need to recover from the effects of World War Two</li> <li>• The need to regain strength as the ‘nursery of Communism’</li> <li>• Stalin's belief that what was good for the USSR was good for workers of the world</li> </ul>

So, what really motivated the **foreign policies** of the USA and the USSR – idealism, or simply old-fashioned **imperialism**? It could be a matter of perception. As you will see from the events after 1945, it is sometimes very difficult to separate actions based on ideology from those based on self-interest.

## What was the significance of Stalinism?

At this juncture it is important to establish what the Soviet leader Josef Stalin's own particular 'brand' of Communism meant. It was a Soviet Union driven by '**Stalinism**' that faced the Capitalist powerhouse of the United States in 1945, and some historians believe that this was a key factor in the development of the Cold War. (For further discussion on the **historiography** of the Cold War, see chapter 4.)

Stalin had taken over the leadership of the Soviet Union after the death of Lenin, becoming sole leader by the late 1920s. His policies included the ruthless **collectivization** of all farms, which led to the deaths of millions of agricultural workers. He also started a series of '**five-year plans**' in industry, which dramatically increased industrial production and put the USSR into a position where it could greatly contribute to the defeat of Nazi Germany in 1945. In the 1930s, Stalin launched the **Great Terror**, which resulted in **purges** of all political opponents, as well as millions of ordinary people, who were executed or sent to the **gulags** (slave labour camps).

By 1945, Stalinism meant:

- the dominance of Stalin over the party, and the party over state institutions
- a powerful state security machine
- the ruthless maintenance of power by the elimination of opposing leaders, groups, or entire sections of the population
- the development of a regime associated with **paranoia** and violence.

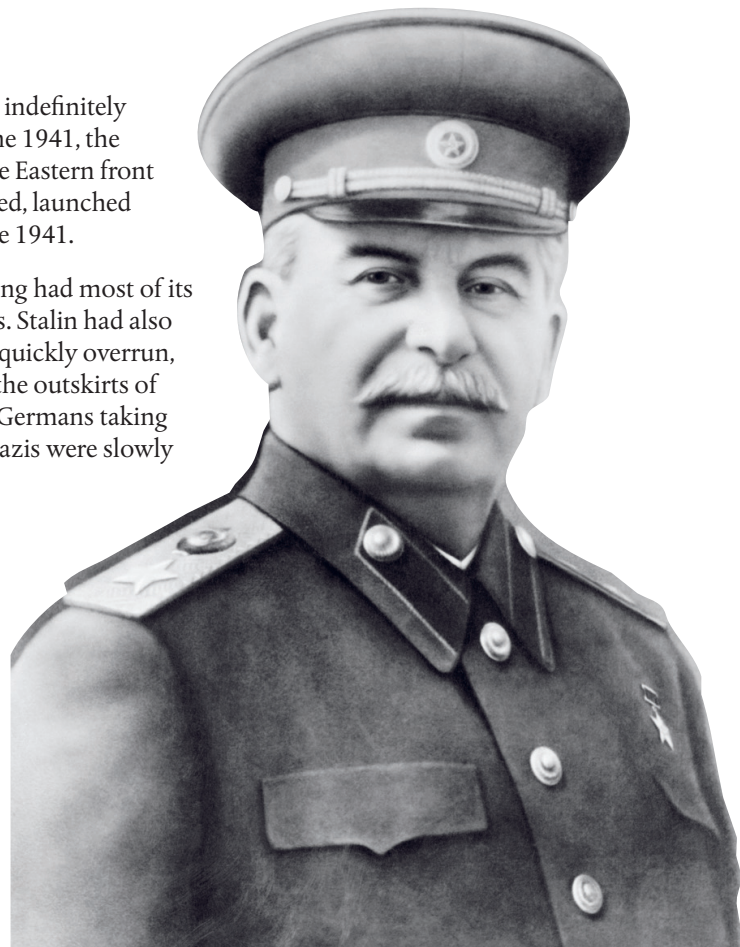
Joseph Stalin, leader of the Soviet Union, 1928–1953.

## Stalin's role in World War Two

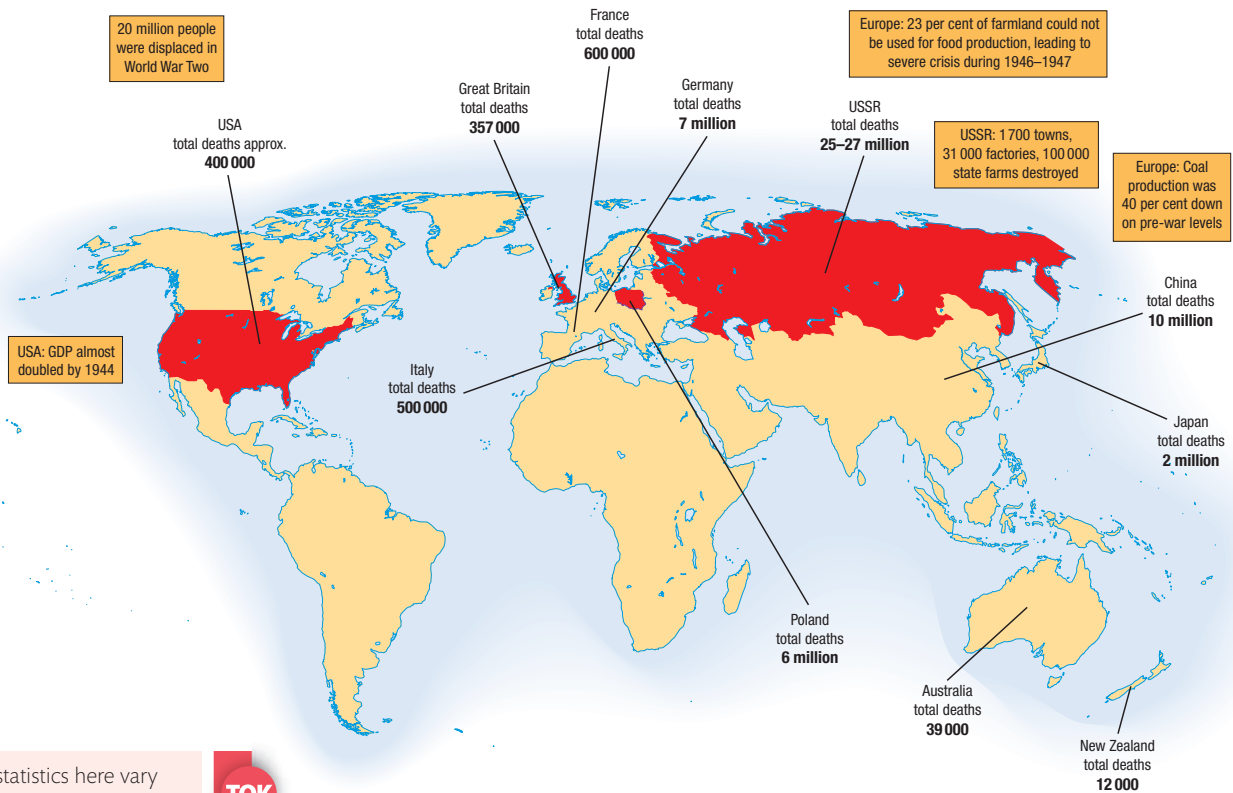
Stalin had hoped an attack from Hitler could be delayed indefinitely by signing the Nazi–Soviet Pact in 1939. However, in June 1941, the Germans felt they could no longer hold off action on the Eastern front and, despite the fact that Britain had not yet been defeated, launched **Operation Barbarossa** against the Soviet Union in June 1941.

The **Red Army** was ill-prepared to resist the Nazis, having had most of its experienced and talented officers killed in Stalin's purges. Stalin had also ignored repeated warnings from the West. Ukraine was quickly overrun, and the German army besieged Leningrad and reached the outskirts of Moscow. However, the Soviets were able to prevent the Germans taking Moscow, and after the Soviet victory at Stalingrad the Nazis were slowly pushed back towards Berlin.

Stalin's key role in the final victory over Nazi Germany in Europe not only made him more secure and more powerful in the Soviet Union, but it also put the Soviet Union in a strong position to emerge as one of the leading powers of the post-war world.



## The cost of World War Two



The statistics here vary in different historical sources. Why might this be the case?

What does this suggest for the historian, with regard to the use of statistics?

**TOK**

### Activity 1

**ATL** Thinking skills

1. What do the statistics on the map above indicate about the different positions of a) the Soviet Union and b) Europe as a whole compared to that of the USA in 1945?

## Why did the USA and the USSR emerge as superpowers after 1945?

American statesman and politician Dean Acheson wrote of the situation in the aftermath of World War Two: 'The whole world structure and order that we had inherited from the 19th century was gone.' In 1945, the 'Old Powers', that is Britain and France, had been shown to be no longer able to maintain peace on their own, while the USA and USSR emerged from World War Two as significantly more powerful than they had been before the war. Why was this?

### Military reasons

- To defeat Germany, the USA had become the number-one air-force power in the world.
- To defeat Germany, the USSR had become the number-one land-force power in the world.
- France's and Britain's inability to defeat Germany had changed the balance of power. They had become 'second-rank' powers.
- The USSR now lacked any strong military neighbours. This made it the regional power.

## Economic reasons

- The USA's economy was strengthened by the war. It was now able to out-produce all the other powers put together.
- The USA was committed to more 'open trade'. Its politicians and businesspeople wanted to ensure liberal trade, and market competition flourished. The United States was willing to play an active role in avoiding the re-emergence of the disastrous pre-war pattern of trade blocs and tariffs.
- The USA had the economic strength to prevent a return to instability in Europe.
- The small Eastern European countries that had been created after World War One were not economically viable on their own, so they needed the support of a stronger neighbour, and the USSR could replace Germany in this role.

## Political reasons

- For the West, the outcome of World War Two showed that the ideals of **democracy** and international collaboration had triumphed over fascism. Thus the political system of the USA was the right path for the future.
- For the Soviet Union, it was Communism that had triumphed over fascism. Indeed, Communism had gained widespread respect in Europe because of its part in resisting the Germans.
- The USSR's huge losses, and the role of the Red Army in defeating the Nazis, gave Stalin a claim to great influence in forming the post-war world.
- The USSR had the political (as well as military) strength to prevent a return to instability in Eastern Europe. Communism could fill the political vacuum there.

Given the new positions of the USA and the USSR in 1945, and their relative strength compared to the weakened European countries, it is not surprising that they were to become the key players in establishing the post-war settlement in Europe that created the new political map. It was during this process, however, that the alliance set up during the war collapsed, and by 1949 – only four years after the end of the war – the state of Cold War had come into existence. This international situation was to last 40 years, until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989–1991.

Key stages in the Cold War are outlined in this timeline, which is useful for quick reference when constructing essay plans.

