

Division and Realignment in Europe, 1945 – 1992 | Sample answer

What were the causes of the Cold War and how did it develop in Europe, 1945-1992?

The Cold War was a period of tension, hostility, and propaganda rivalry between the USSR and the countries of western Europe allied with the USA. Following the allied victory in World War II, the tension between the world's superpowers reached boiling point. While the USA maintained the world's most powerful economy, equipped with a strong military, the USSR held the world's largest army. Marked by a series of crisis from across the globe, the Cold War was provoked by contrasting ideologies, Stalin's mistrust of the West approaches to the German revival and post-war European aid, as well as undisputable military alliances, all of which carried the world to the brink of a third World War.

The initial tensions dated back as far as 1917, when Vladimir Lenin and the Bolsheviks overthrew Tsar Nicholas in the October revolution in Russia. Inspired by the writings of Karl Marx, they aimed to introduce communism, ensuring the abolition of private property and the introduction of state ownership of farms and factories. While the communist system took hold in the Soviet Union, the West maintained its capitalist system allowing individual freedom to obtain as much profit as desired. Western European society identified communism as a threat to both their property and freedom. This fear sparked deep divisions. British prime minister Winston Churchill described how "an iron curtain has descended across the continent", firmly separating ideologies. It soon became apparent that two sides had formed, East vs West, communism vs capitalism.

The USSR leader Joseph Stalin firmly believed that confrontation between capitalism and communism was inevitable. He described that Western capitalism developed "not in a path of smooth and even progress, but through crisis and the catastrophe of war". Stalin heavily mistrusted the capitalist countries of Western Europe. This was heightened following the USA's 'Manhattan Project', developing nuclear weapons. Tensions also escalated after the slowness of the allies to open up a second front during World War II to relieve Russia. Stalin's mistrust slowly separated the East and the West, inevitably creating a deep divide.

To prevent an invasion of the USSR, Stalin began his policy of 'sovietisation' to create a defense against the West. He set up puppet governments in these satellite states including Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and East Germany. Utilising loyal Communist exiles who had spent the duration of the War in Moscow, Stalin appointed them roles in key ministries such as minister of interior in order to gain greater control. While Stalin viewed this progression as a form of protection and defense, countries such as the USA viewed this as defiance against capitalism and a threat of war. The great superpowers grew further away from each other, ensuring an all-out war was probable.

The West feared sovietisation as it proved as a treat to their capitalist systems. Britain aided Greece and Turkey, helping them to withhold against Stalin's communist regime. However, the outbreak of World War II ensured Britain's funds were limited. Attention quickly turned to the United States when the Truman Doctrine was published president by George Truman. The Truman Doctrine displayed the USA's willingness to prevent the implementation of communism in European countries through sovietisation. Their policy of containment quickly developed as their policy towards the East, aiming to halt the spread of Stalin's communist regime. They would maintain this policy for the duration of the Cold War.

Many European countries found themselves devastated by the Second World War. The USA ultimately decided to introduce their policy of Marshall Aid. This was intended to rebuild European economies from war-ravaged nations to booming countries with efficient economies. While the USA developed this plan as a means of boosting the American consumer industry, Stalin viewed it as a significant threat, understanding it as a method of preventing the spread of communism. In response, in 1955, the USSR created Comecon, an Eastern European response to Marshall aid. This would encourage economic development and prosperity in Stalin's satellite states. Churchill's iron curtain hypothesis now appeared to be a reality.

The Potsdam conference in 1946 proved to be an essential catalyst for the Cold War. Germany was divided into sections among the allies Britain, the USA, France, and Russia following World War II. The area of Berlin was divided similarly, resulting in the Berlin blockade and airlift. This was to prove essential for the entirety of the Cold War. The seeds of the war were truly sown with the differing approaches to the German revival, particularly in Berlin.

After World War II, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation was formed in the event of a possible attack by Germany or the Soviet Union. Its members included Western European countries and the United States. Each member state declared allegiance to one another, starting a war on one

country was a war on all members. In response, Stalin enlisted Eastern European countries, forming the Warsaw Pact. Much like the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, or NATO, the member states were obliged to protect each other from outside threats to security.

The rise of the superpowers, the USSR and the USA provided an ideal setting for the Cold War. While many reasons contributed to the separation of East and West, the fears of communism and sovietisation, Stalin's mistrust of capitalist societies, and powerful military alliances proved essential in creating an Iron curtain across Europe, initiating the Cold war.