

SOURCE WORKSHOP PACKET

Competing Perspectives on the Early Cold War - Fictional classroom simulation

Important

The excerpts below are original fictional simulations written for this demo. They are not authentic historical documents and must not be cited as real primary sources.

Background Reading: Why Did the Alliance Break Down?

The early Cold War developed from a combination of ideological conflict, strategic uncertainty, wartime destruction, and disagreements about political control. The Soviet leadership viewed influence in Eastern Europe as essential protection after repeated invasions from the west. American officials viewed closed political systems and one-party governments as evidence that Soviet influence would continue to expand. Each side described many of its own actions as defensive while interpreting the other side's actions as aggressive.

Economic policy also mattered. U.S. leaders believed European recovery would reduce instability and support international trade. Soviet officials feared that Western aid programs could pull neighboring states into an American-led economic system. The result was a cycle in which aid, alliances, military planning, and political control reinforced the belief that Europe was dividing into two camps.

Fictional Source A: U.S. Diplomatic Memorandum, March 1946

Author: Eleanor Brooks, junior political officer at the fictional U.S. Mission in Prague

"Local officials increasingly speak as if every political disagreement is a security threat. Opposition newspapers face new restrictions, while government representatives insist these measures are temporary protections against sabotage. If the pattern continues, elections may remain formally present while meaningful political competition disappears."

Fictional Source B: Soviet Regional Briefing, July 1947

Author: Viktor Morozov, fictional economic planning official

"The proposed Western recovery program is described as neutral aid, but its conditions would give outside officials influence over production, trade, and currency policy. A state dependent on this support may soon be unable to make an independent economic decision. Security cannot be separated from control over reconstruction."

Fictional Source C: West Berlin Diary, December 1948

Author: Lena Hoffmann, fictional secondary-school teacher

“The aircraft arrive so often that their engines have become part of the city’s sound. People argue about which government caused the crisis, but the practical question is simpler: will coal and food arrive before the cold becomes worse? Politics feels both enormous and very close when a family’s heat depends on an airplane.”

Source Comparison Table

Source	Main concern	Evidence offered	Likely limitation
A	Political control and restricted opposition	Newspaper limits and reduced competition	A foreign diplomat may rely on limited contacts or interpret events through U.S. assumptions.
B	Economic dependence and outside influence	Conditions attached to recovery aid	An official briefing may justify Soviet policy and exaggerate Western control.
C	Civilian survival during crisis	Food, coal, and the airlift	A diary captures lived experience but cannot explain high-level decision-making by itself.

Workshop Questions

1. What does each fictional source identify as the main threat?
2. Which source focuses most on political freedom? Which focuses most on economic independence?
3. How might the author’s position shape what is included or left out?
4. Which two sources could be used together to support a “security dilemma” interpretation?
5. Write a two-sentence claim explaining why the early Cold War escalated. Use one detail from two different sources.

Vocabulary in Context

- Political competition - the ability of multiple groups or parties to organize and contest power.
- Economic dependence - reliance on another state or institution for essential resources or financing.
- Reconstruction - rebuilding political institutions, infrastructure, and economies after war.
- Civilian perspective - evidence focused on everyday life rather than official strategy.