

WEEK 2 LECTURE NOTES

Origins of the Cold War, 1945-1953 - HIST 214

Central question

Why did the wartime alliance between the United States and the Soviet Union become a global rivalry so quickly after 1945?

1. The Wartime Alliance Had a Narrow Purpose

The United States, Britain, and the Soviet Union cooperated during World War II because they shared an immediate enemy. Their alliance did not erase deep disagreements about political systems, security, economics, and the future of Europe.

- The Soviet Union suffered catastrophic wartime losses and wanted friendly governments along its western border.
- The United States emphasized political self-determination, open trade, and institutions such as the United Nations.
- Britain wanted to preserve influence while managing the economic costs of war.

2. Three Main Sources of Conflict

Issue	United States concern	Soviet concern
Ideology	Communist governments would restrict political freedom and markets.	Capitalist states would encircle or weaken the Soviet system.
Security	Soviet-backed governments might dominate Europe.	Another invasion through Eastern Europe had to be prevented.
Power	A balance of power required independent states and shared institutions.	Military victory justified a strong Soviet sphere of influence.

3. Turning Points, 1945-1949

1945	Yalta and Potsdam Conferences	Allies negotiated occupation zones and the postwar settlement while distrust increased.
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1946	“Iron Curtain” speech	Public language increasingly described Europe as divided into rival political systems.
1947	Truman Doctrine	The United States promised support for governments resisting outside pressure or armed takeover.
1947	Marshall Plan announced	Large-scale economic aid aimed to rebuild Europe and reduce political instability.
1948	Berlin Blockade begins	The Soviet Union blocked land access to western sectors of Berlin; Western powers organized an airlift.
1949	NATO formed	A formal military alliance linked the United States, Canada, and Western European states.
1949	Soviet atomic test	The U.S. atomic monopoly ended, intensifying the arms race.

4. The Cold War Becomes Global

By 1950, the rivalry was no longer limited to Europe. The Chinese Communist Revolution, the division of Korea, and the Korean War connected local conflicts to the larger competition between the superpowers. Both sides increasingly interpreted regional events through a global ideological lens.

5. Competing Historical Interpretations

Interpretation	Main claim	Question it emphasizes
Traditional	Soviet expansion and control of Eastern Europe drove the conflict.	How did Soviet policy threaten political independence?
Revisionist	U.S. economic and strategic power increased Soviet insecurity.	How did American power and open-market goals shape policy?

Interpretation	Main claim	Question it emphasizes
Post-revisionist	Mutual fear, incompatible goals, and misperception created an escalating cycle.	How did both security concerns interact?

Key Terms

- Containment - a policy aimed at limiting the expansion of Soviet influence.
- Sphere of influence - a region where one state has dominant political or strategic power.
- Marshall Plan - U.S. economic aid for European recovery beginning in 1948.
- Berlin Airlift - the Western supply operation during the Soviet blockade of West Berlin.
- NATO - the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, created in 1949.
- Security dilemma - a situation in which one side's defensive action appears threatening to another side.

End-of-Lecture Check

1. Name one security concern held by each superpower.
2. Why did economic recovery become part of U.S. Cold War strategy?
3. How did the Berlin Blockade turn political disagreement into a visible crisis?
4. Which interpretation places the most emphasis on mutual fear and misperception?
5. Write a one-sentence answer to the central question using two pieces of evidence.