

Start of the Cold War: The Yalta Conference and Containment

Overview

- The Cold War was a struggle for world dominance between the capitalist United States and the communist Soviet Union.
- At the Yalta Conference, the United States, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, and France agreed to split Germany into four zones of occupation after the war.
- The US ambassador in Moscow warned that the Soviet Union desired to expand throughout the world and prescribed the "containment" of communism as the chief US foreign policy strategy.

What was the Cold War?

The Cold War was a global conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union, lasting from 1947 to 1991, over which of the two superpowers would hold economic and ideological sway over the world. It's called the Cold War because no actual military engagement took place between the United States and the USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics). Instead, fighting took place in proxy wars conducted in "third-world" countries.

In this case, "proxy war" means a war fought with the support of a nation but not by that nation itself. For example, in the proxy war of Vietnam, the USSR supported the communist North Vietnamese with money, weapons and training and the US similarly supported the South Vietnamese. In the context of the Cold War, the United States classified countries in one of three categories:

- The "first world" consisted of the United States and its developed, capitalist allies, such as the United Kingdom and France
- The "second world" referred to communist nations, including China, Russia, and the satellite countries Russia controlled, such as Poland and Ukraine
- The "third world" referred to everywhere else, usually developing countries in Asia and Latin America over which the United States and Soviet Union vied for influence

The United States and USSR clashed over their economic and political philosophies. As a capitalist, democratic nation, the US sought to promote free elections and free markets. As a communist, totalitarian state, the USSR sought to ensure the security of its borders and the political dominance of the Communist party.

The Yalta Conference and the End of World War II

The United States, the United Kingdom, and the Soviet Union worked together to win World War II, but their relationship was tense and fraught from the beginning. The Soviet Union originally had signed a Non-Aggression Pact with Nazi Germany in 1939; the USSR only entered the war on the side of the Allies when Hitler double-crossed Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin and invaded Russia in 1941. This proved to be a fatal mistake for Hitler: the Russians eventually stalled his invasion and overtook all of the territory the Nazis had conquered in Eastern Europe.

Before the war's end, the leaders of the Allied powers met at the Russian resort town of Yalta to plan for the future after Hitler's defeat. At this Yalta Conference, they could not agree on much, but they did agree that any remnant of Nazi power had to be stamped out of Germany. To this end, they agreed to divide Germany, as well as the city of Berlin, into four zones, each of which would be occupied by one of the major Allied powers (the "Big Four"): France, the United Kingdom, the United States, and the Soviet Union.

As the war moved into its final stages in mid-1945, suspicion flared between the United States and the Soviet Union. The terrifying new power of the atomic bomb, which the United States dropped on Japan in August, made the Soviets justifiably nervous. The United States also didn't endear itself to Russia when it abruptly cut off all military and financial aid to the Soviet Union upon the war's conclusion, at a time when Russian citizens dearly



Figure 1: The leaders of the United Kingdom, the United States, and the Soviet Union met at the Yalta Conference to plan for the postwar era. From left to right: Winston Churchill, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Joseph Stalin.

needed the help. For its part, the Soviet Union was sending clear signals that it did not intend to give up the territory it had gained from the Nazis, including stalling on its promises to remove troops from oil-rich regions in the Middle East and to allow free elections in conquered Poland.

The "Long Telegram" and Containment

Amid this tense atmosphere, the US government received dire intelligence from its ambassador in Moscow, George F. Kennan. In a Long Telegram sent to the US Secretary of State in 1946, Kennan warned that the Soviets believed that "there could be no peaceful coexistence" between communists and capitalists, and that the Soviets desired the relentless expansion not only of their own borders but of communism writ large.

Kennan advised the US government that the only way to handle relations with the Soviet Union was to pursue a vigorous policy of containment: blocking the advance of both Soviet power and communism everywhere in the world.

The US government adopted Kennan's ideas for containment, which became the cornerstone of American foreign policy in the twentieth century.

What do you think?

1. Is "Cold War" really an appropriate name for the conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union? In what ways was the Cold War actually a hot war?
2. Do you think it would have been possible for the United States and the Soviet Union to coexist peacefully in the postwar era, or was conflict destined to arise between them?
3. Do you think that George F. Kennan was right in his assessment of the Soviet Union, or was he exaggerating the risk posed by communism? Do you think "containment" will be an effective foreign policy for the United States?