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Spring 4-23-2019

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# THE MISUNDERSTOOD ORIGINS OF THE COLD WAR

BY: JENNIFER MELTON

## RESEARCH QUESTION

**IN THE POST-WORLD WAR II ERA, WHAT FACTOR PLAYED THE MOST PROMINENT ROLE IN THE INCEPTION OF THE COLD WAR CONFLICT BETWEEN THE UNITED STATES AND THE SOVIET UNION?**

## ABSTRACT

The origins of the Cold War stemmed from the position of competition the United States and the Soviet Union were forced into after World War II ended which created the void of communication between the two superpowers. Without the excuse of alliance that World War II provided, the two countries moved into a period of a more pronounced ideological conflict. The reason for this was because ideologically they were at direct odds with one another. The difference in ideology and politics of both countries forced further separation and unwillingness to work together to resolve any issues. This difference in ideology imposed itself through the effort of both countries attempting to gain more control than the other over weak European countries. Together economic disparities, cultural differences, and the fear of communism in the United States caused competition where both governments felt the need to stand up to each other because neither side could be viewed as the weaker side. Overall, miscommunication played a role in all of these separate ideas in that they were all rooted in the misunderstandings between the United States and Soviet Union.

## THESIS

The peace treaty negotiations between the countries who were involved in World War II resulted in a magnification of miscommunication and awareness of present societal differences thus causing the beginning of the Cold War.

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## SET-UP TO FAIL

### CULTURE

The cultural divide between the United States and the Soviet Union arose from the bipolar nature of their competing ideologies. The United States followed capitalism and the Soviet Union was a communist country which meant that the goals of both countries differed greatly. The glaring bipolarity of the two ideologies of the western powers, most prominently comprised of the United States and Great Britain, and the Soviet Union contributed to miscommunication between the two sides because both refused to listen or to negotiate with a country driven by a different political system. To the Soviets communism equated to stability just as capitalism meant stability in the eyes of the United States. This means that part of the Soviet motivation to spread communism had to do with protecting its borders and part had to do with the effort to create economic stability. Another factor that influenced the miscommunication between the two superpowers was the misconceptions spread about the Soviets in America. Certainly, the two societies were polar opposites by nature, but American politicians or others in high government positions molded the American public opinion of the tense relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union into a negative view that shaped how Americans saw the Soviets.

### ECONOMICS



With political tensions high and relations between countries fraying, European countries were forced to rebuild their countries, cities, and economies. It is known that both the United States and the Soviet Union emerged from the war as superpowers, however, the United States was one of the few countries that emerged from the war with a healthy economy. They hoped that with U.S. assistance the European economy and the world economy by extension would regain the foothold it had before the war.

The economic issues in Europe created another issue for the United States and that was a rise in the fear of the spread of communism. There was worry that the economic weakness in European countries caused by World War II left them susceptible to the influence of communism. The United States government did not want Soviet involvement in the European countries because they believed that the Soviet Union was inherently aggressive and had negative intentions to take advantage of the weak economic systems.

### FEAR

In the post-World War II years, a fear of the spread of communist influence and ideology permeated Western European powers and the United States. The fear of communism added to the American want to protect weak countries from exposure to communist powers and ideologies. However, the effort of the Soviets to spread communism was not merely an effort to implant their influence, but also an attempt to revitalize the economy just as the Americans were trying to revitalize the economy. Because the Soviets were attempting to fix the economies of European countries, which would bring those nations closer to the Soviets instead of the Americans, the United States government spread anti-Soviet propaganda among their own citizens. However, the Soviets also spread anti-capitalist propaganda to discourage friendly ties with the Americans so as to distance the two societies.

<sup>1</sup>Vladislav M. Zubok, *Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev* (University of North Carolina Press: North Carolina, 2007), 1. <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/longwood/detail.action?docId=475215>.

<sup>2</sup>Ron Theodore Robin, *The Making of the Cold War Enemy: Culture and Politics in the Military-Intellectual Complex*, (Princeton University Press: Princeton, NJ, 2003), 29. <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/longwood/detail.action?docId=457893>.

<sup>3</sup>Robin, 29.

<sup>4</sup>Carroll Quigley, *The World Since 1939* (New York, NY: The Macmillan Company, 1966), 227.

## A BITTER FEUD

### SOVIET-AMERICAN AGGRESSION



The economic imbalance, the fear of communism, and the opposing cultural divide between the United States and the Soviet Union all led to the most obvious symptom of miscommunication which was Soviet-American aggression. Ron Robin's book, *The Making of the Cold War Enemy: Culture and Politics in the Military-Intellectual Complex*, discusses the evolution of the deterioration of the relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union and the impact that had on the military interactions. Robin argues that the rumors the American government spread to the public was from "a much older set of mutually reinforcing ideas and widespread popular notions about the essential nature of American society and its ability to transform a world perceived as both materially and culturally deficient".<sup>2</sup> This quote refers to the "modernization theory" which is a theory that encouraged countries to incorporate western ideals such as democracy, self-determination, and general adherence to American societal standards.<sup>3</sup> The significance of the American influence and incorporation of their own ideals into other countries' political systems is that it demonstrated their desperation to act in those countries before the Soviets had an opportunity to infiltrate those countries with their own political ideology.

Contributing to communication struggles between the United States and Soviet Union was the inability of world leaders to understand the intentions and motives of their contemporaries. For instance, Stalin expected and misinterpreted future actions and events in the United States which contributed to miscommunication between two countries. Carroll Quigley, author of *The World Since 1939*, argues that "Stalin assumed that the United States would soon relapse into isolationism, as it had done after World War I".<sup>4</sup> This is an example of Stalin's failure to interpret the future actions of the United States and represents the fact that Stalin did not plan accordingly for the United States to be more active in European affairs after the end of World War II which brought the two superpowers of the world into conflict with each other. However, Robert Higgs, author of *Depression, War, and Cold War Studies in Political Economy*, argues that America had a different point of view of their future involvement in Europe after the war. He explains that in the United States "'isolationism' and 'appeasement' were completely discredited".<sup>5</sup> In other words, the United States had been forced into a position of power and control after World War II ended. Therefore, they were the only country available to influence other countries. In addition, the United States realized that their previous policy of isolation from foreign politics was no longer feasible in terms of the world order. This further supports the Soviet misunderstanding of the intentions of the United States and the aggression between the two countries in the post-war years.

<sup>5</sup>Robert Higgs, *Depression, War, and Cold War Studies in Political Economy*, (Oxford University Press: New York, 2006), 126. <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/longwood/detail.action?docId=271296>.

<sup>6</sup>Zubok, 2.

## SYMPTOMS OF AGGRESSION

### INTERNAL STRIFE

Amid the external issues between the United States and the Soviet Union, arose different opinions and reactions within the societies of both countries. It seems as though there was a preference of peace among Soviet and American citizens. After having been at war for the few years before 1945, people were ready to support peace. In the words of Vladisov Zubok, "the vast majority of Soviet functionaries and people did not want conflict with the West and preferred to focus on peaceful reconstruction".<sup>6</sup> This quote demonstrates the fact that the Cold War was primarily an effort led by the Soviet and the United States governments even against the wishes of their own citizens.

A similar sentiment of seeking peace was shared by some American citizens. A newspaper article from 1950 from the *Philadelphia Inquirer* demonstrates that public figures in America wished to halt the Cold War in its tracks. This article describes letters sent to Stalin by Harold E. Stassen, the president of the University of Pennsylvania. In his letters Stassen requests to meet with Stalin so that he may make a plea to stop the Cold War. This case is also an example of criticism of the United States government for not attempting to meet with the Soviet Union and make amends so as to remedy the conflicts between the two countries before they got any worse.

### PROPAGANDA

As a result of the aggression between the Soviets and the Americans, which was driven by ideological differences and political misunderstandings, each country resorted to using propaganda to vilify the enemy. An example of this was during Roosevelt's presidency after he returned from the Yalta Conference which was held in February 1945 to plan for Germany's surrender. When Roosevelt returned to America he related that agreement had been reached on the issues addressed at the Yalta Conference which was untrue.



Therefore, the American public had difficulty understanding some of the conflicts between the United States and the Soviet Union in later years of the Cold War. In addition to the fact that the American government was untruthful to the American public, there was also an attempt to create an intimidating portrait of the Soviet Union in order to amass support for the effort against them.

### CONCLUSION

Miscommunication played the most prominent role in the inception of the Cold War conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union. The already widening divergence of the wartime alliances was worsened by the peace treaty negotiations and conferences that attempted to tie up the loose ends of World War II. Fear of communism throughout the globe subsisted in the United States which pressured the American and Soviet governments to be at odds with one another. As a result, citizens sought peace between the feuding countries, causing internal strife, while the governments requested citizen support of the conflict through propaganda. In conclusion, miscommunication influenced each of the issues discussed because, ultimately, the Cold War was a product of the inability of both the American government and the Soviet government to fully communicate.