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what was the Cold War?

This chapter will cover:

- the definition of Cold War
- the participating Great Powers
- the importance of conflicting political ideas in creating an atmosphere of mistrust.

Picture the scene. It is springtime in Eastern Europe and two groups of young men and women have met at midday on the banks of a river and are busy socializing, drinking and dancing to the wheezing of a concertina, hugging, kissing, shaking hands and vowing to be friends. A charming rural idyll? No. This was the meeting of the American and Soviet troops on the banks of the Elbe near Strehla on 25 April 1945. For the sake of the cameras this meeting was repeated two days later at Torgau but in spite of press intrusion the scene was one of happiness and unity between young comrades-in-arms. True, there were differences between the two groups as one American soldier, Private Jim Kane, recalled later:

> 'They (the Soviet Red Army) were still using horse-drawn wagons, cavalry pieces, horse-drawn artillery... The soldiers were on horseback. It was like the medieval times...'

Who could have imagined on that heady day of peace and goodwill that these two nations would soon become mortal enemies and spend the next 45 years engaged in a frosty stand-off which was to shape the latter twentieth century.

If you were to compare a series of maps of Europe during the twentieth century it would immediately be obvious that the frontiers of certain countries have been far from stable. During the second half of the century the changes in frontiers were largely due to developments known as the Cold War which developed between the Great Powers. This strangely named conflict, which began in 1945, was to last until the early 1990s – the dates of its beginning and of its ending are debatable. The causes of the conflict are equally a matter of contention between historians and, indeed, so complex are the various elements of this conflict that one is forced to make generalizations in order to make sense of the causes and events which developed following the end of the 1939–45 'hot' war.

During these years each side had its own interpretation of the other's actions – what one side considered self-defence, the other side interpreted as aggression. The very nature of the 'Cold War' with its climate of mistrust and suspicion makes it difficult to work out the motives and reasons for the actions of the Great Powers. Indeed, frequently what contemporaries thought had happened was often more important than what actually happened!

What was the Cold War?

Following the Second World War, an increasingly frosty atmosphere developed between the Great Powers and this grew into a tense rivalry which became known as the 'Cold War'. This was to last for over 40 years and spread from Europe, where it originated, to the rest of the world during the 1950s and 1960s.

This rivalry had all the features of a traditional 'hot' war with one exception – there was no open, armed conflict. It was a war because there were two opposing sides each equipped with armies, navies and air forces and each had Allies. It is called a 'cold' war because there was no open direct fighting between the Great Powers, although there were a few instances when the Cold War spilled over into open conflict. All other features of warfare were present – causes, weapons, tactics, events and results, and each side used spies and propaganda to further their aims or to persuade others to join them in their mission against their enemies, whom they believed were trying to destroy their way of life. There was fear, hostility, suspicion, competition, threats and quarrels between the two sides, yet the obvious feature of direct fighting was avoided.

Neither side wished to risk the prospect of a 'hot' war, perhaps because of the existence of nuclear weapons.

Who were the Great Powers?

A Great Power is a country which has a number of important features. It generally has a large land area rich in natural resources, a large population, its economy is prosperous, its industry strong, and foreign trade contributes to its economic wealth. Another aspect of a Great Power is political stability and these features, combined with strong armed forces, give the Great Power worldwide influence.

Great Powers tend to use their extensive resources to influence other powers and world events by persuasion or sometimes by force and this can lead to both direct and indirect conflict.

For centuries the Great Powers were European, but following the twentieth-century world wars, the map of Great Powers was re-drawn with the United States, the USSR and later China taking the place of the European Powers as the movers and shakers of world events.

There were many differences between the Great Powers, but it was in the field of politics and economics that the countries differed the most. The USSR's and China's ideologies were (and in the case of China still are) based on communism, whilst the American political system is based on democracy. In economics, the United States followed capitalism, based on private enterprise; the Communist states on the other hand had command economies, where the state owned the means of production.

The Cold War is generally regarded as a conflict between East and West or between communism and capitalism. These two ideologies were personified by the Soviet Union (USSR or Russia – communist) and the United States of America (capitalist), the two 'superpowers' that had emerged following the eclipse of the leading European Powers in the wake of the Second World War. However, the origins of the Cold War can be seen to date back to the Russian Revolution in 1917 after which Communist Russia seemed to threaten the liberal democracies in Western Europe. The establishment in 1919 of the Comintern, an organization dedicated to the expansion of communist ideals at the expense of capitalism, strengthened this fear and contributed to the decision on the part of many Western powers to aid the opponents of the Bolsheviks during the Russian Civil War of 1918–21. Indeed Churchill, the British Secretary of State for War, summarized his policy during this period as 'Kill the Bolshie. Kiss the Hun', as the Western nations built up a defeated Germany in order to prevent the spread of communism. Germany joined the League of Nations in 1924 but the Soviet Union received no such invitation.

Conflicting ideologies

The difference in political, social and economic ideas between Russia and the West became apparent during the 1920s. Communist countries were generally classless societies where individual profit-making was prohibited and where industry and agriculture were owned, not by private individuals, but by the state, which encouraged its citizens to work for the greater good of society rather than for personal gain. In these 'one-party states', the government maintained close control of the lives of the populations through political, social and financial mechanisms including censorship, propaganda and limitations on travel and religious worship.

In contrast, citizens in the capitalist West had a variety of political parties from which to choose their governments, via free elections. These governments had a limited control over their citizens' lives, and freedom of speech and movement were the norm. Most industry and agriculture was in the hands of private companies or individuals who employed others to work for them, and whose aim was to make as much profit as possible.

During the Second World War, out of necessity, these contrasting ideologies had formed an uneasy alliance against Hitler and Nazism, but in spite of their cooperation on the surface, tension had existed between the two sides, a tension which intensified following the defeat of Germany and her Allies, the Axis powers, in 1945. Their political ideologies and very different forms of government, economy and society were naturally a point of irritation and had resulted in an increasing atmosphere of mistrust.

From a Western point of view, communism threatened their democratic values and beliefs; Stalin's political purges and agricultural policies had killed many of his own people during the 1920s and 1930s. During the 1930s a young American, George F. Keenan, witnessed events in the Soviet Union and concluded that the country was 'unalterably opposed to our traditional system'. In spite of growing concern as Hitler reasserted German power, no serious attempt was made by Britain and France to cultivate an alliance with Russia, and the world was astonished to hear of the Nazi–Soviet non-aggression pact signed in August 1939. Those in the West would remember Stalin for this cynical signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact – the Nazi–Soviet agreement which had divided Poland in 1939.

Similarly, Communists regarded capitalism as evil – Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, the authors of the 'Communist Manifesto' in 1848, had emphasized how the rich prospered through their exploitation of the 'proletariat' – the working classes. Nor could Russian Communists forget how the West had helped the 'Whites' (an anti-Communist coalition) fight against the Bolshevik Red Army during the Russian Civil War. Churchill (Britain's wartime leader during the Second World War) had been Secretary of State for War at this time, and had sanctioned the sending of British troops to Russia to aid the 'White Army'. This had followed another humiliation when, in 1919, the Entente powers had distributed Russian territory to other countries including Poland. Small wonder, then, that in 1945

Stalin commented to Mjilan Djilas, a fellow Communist:

> 'Perhaps you think that, because we are allies of the English, we have forgotten who they are, and who Churchill is. They find nothing sweeter than to trick their allies.'

Further humiliation followed during the inter-war years when Russia was excluded from the League of Nations, and the attempts of the Russian diplomat Litvinov to organize a united front against Hitler's demands on Czechoslovakia in 1938 were ignored.

Still later, in 1942, Britain and the USA had refused to open up a second front against Hitler by invading Europe quickly and thus relieving Russia of some of the pressure upon her.

Conflicting aims in Europe

The two power blocs had conflicting aims for Central and Eastern Europe following the Second World War. The Western powers were anxious to support democratic movements in these areas and were eager to hold free elections. They believed that Poland's Western frontier should remain as it was and Germany should be aided and encouraged to produce her own goods and food in order that she could quickly rejoin world trade. This would avoid a repetition of the economic difficulties that she had faced following the end of the First World War when hyper-inflation bred discontent and contributed to the rise of the Nazis. The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, as Russia had become in 1923, wanted a 'buffer zone' – an area of friendly states between her and Germany to protect 'Mother Russia' from invasion by the West. These 'friendly' states would, of course, have Soviet-style governments, an unlikely event if free elections were held, as few inhabitants were eager to see Communist-style governments in their countries. To further strengthen Russia's Western borders, Stalin was anxious to redefine Poland's Western border and to keep Germany weak both economically and politically, since in this way would Russia be protected.

These differences in aims began to become apparent at the two peace conferences held in Yalta and Potsdam following the end of the war.

02

Europe at the end of the Second World War

This chapter will cover:

- the peace conferences following the end of the Second World War
- the points of post-war tension between the Big Three – Britain, the US and the USSR
- the coming of the Iron Curtain.

The end of the war in Europe

The 'Big Three' leaders of the Allied forces – Winston Churchill of Britain, Franklin D. Roosevelt of the USA and Joseph Stalin of the USSR, met at Tehran in 1943. Military issues dominated the meeting with Stalin pressing for the opening of a second front in order to relieve the pressure on Russia. He was assured that plans were afoot to do just that the next year, provided Russia launched a major offensive in the East at the same time. Stalin agreed.

The future of Germany and Poland was also discussed at this meeting and all three believed they had made progress. Unbeknown to the Western leaders, their suites at Tehran had been bugged and Stalin, not wishing to leave anything to chance, had studied transcripts of their conversations.

On 6 June 1944, D-day, Allied troops landed on the beaches of Normandy. The American, British and Canadian forces began to advance towards the Rhine. Meanwhile, the Red Army launched their offensive advancing westward relentlessly, pausing only near Warsaw. There, the free Polish Resistance rose up and took control of the capital in anticipation of declaring an independent Poland. The Nazis returned and crushed the uprising, while the Red Army waited, in spite of Churchill's pleas to Stalin. The Red Army needed time to re-group, Stalin claimed, and refused to permit Allied planes to use Soviet airfields to supply the Poles. Following 63 days of fighting, the Nazis overcame the Polish resistance; 200,000 Poles were killed – 90 per cent of them civilians – and the city was reduced to rubble. Stalin had deliberately allowed the Poles to be massacred in order to place his own men in control. The ruins of Warsaw became a monument to the extinguished hope for democracy in Eastern Europe.

In October 1944 Churchill flew to Moscow to meet Stalin and discuss dividing Europe into spheres of interest. The proposals were written on a scrap of paper and Stalin indicated his approval by a large tick.

These proposals gave the USSR 90 per cent influence in Rumania; Britain was to have 10 per cent; 75 per cent of influence in Bulgaria would go to the USSR and the remaining 25 per cent to others. In return, Britain would receive 90 per cent influence in Greece and, in Yugoslavia, influence would be shared equally between Britain and the USSR. Following these

suggestions there was a long pause. Churchill later remembered that he said, 'Might it not be thought rather cynical if it seemed we had disposed of these issues, so fateful to millions of people, in such an offhand manner? Let us burn the paper.'

'No' Stalin replied, 'you keep it.'

This cavalier attitude towards the fate of millions of people in several countries was hardly in accordance with the terms of the Atlantic Charter of 1941 or the Anglo–Soviet Treaty of 1942. The Atlantic Charter had agreed that there would not be any territorial adjustments without the 'freely expressed wishes of the peoples concerned' while the Anglo–Soviet Treaty read:

> The High Contracting Parties agree to act according to the principles of not seeking territorial aggrandisement for themselves, and of non-interference in the internal affairs of other States.

There was no mention of the USA in this document and Churchill told an adviser that there was nothing he could do for Poland.

Yalta

In February of 1945 the Big Three met in Yalta, the old summer palace of the Tsars, to discuss how Europe was to be structured after the war. Although this represented the 'high tide of Allied collaboration and understanding', tensions were already apparent. Stalin distrusted both Churchill and Roosevelt, while Churchill feared a lack of US support in post-war Europe and was constantly being blocked by Roosevelt who distrusted his 'imperialist adventurism'. In spite of these differences, the three leaders managed to decide that, once Germany had been defeated, she should be disarmed and split into four zones which the Big Three, together with France, would occupy. Eastern European countries including Poland were to be allowed to hold free elections in order to decide how they would be governed in the post-war world. The USSR agreed to join the war against Japan a month after Germany had been defeated and all agreed that a United Nations organization would be set up, in spite of Stalin's reservations that it might be controlled by the USA and Britain.

Poland

There were disagreements about how Poland would be governed. The British wanted to install the Polish government in exile in London, while the Soviets wanted the pro-Soviet government that had been set up in Lublin. While Churchill tried to explain that Poland's freedom and sovereignty had been the reason for Britain declaring war on Germany in 1939, Stalin emphasized the USSR's need for security since it was through the Polish Corridor that the Soviet Union had been invaded twice in the previous 30 years. The USSR was eager to move her frontier with Poland westwards, compensating Poland in turn by moving her Western frontier into German territory and removing the German population from that area. In addition, Stalin wanted massive reparations (money to repair the damage done during the war) from Germany, at a far higher level than the other two powers thought realistic. This was opposed because of the confusion the question of reparations had caused following the First World War and the fear that these payments would hinder Germany's recovery following the end of the Second World War. The Soviets saw high reparations as imperative as compensation for the destruction caused by the Nazis, as a way to punish the Nazis and as a symbol of the victory of Communism over Nazism. A figure of $20 billion to be paid in goods and equipment over a period of years was the final compromise.

Yalta was a controversial meeting and was immediately criticized. The Western leaders appeared to have ignored the fact that Eastern Europe would be liberated by the Red Army thus giving the Soviet government the decisive influence in what was to happen in those countries. Even if the Western leaders were aware of the implications of liberation by the Red Army, they certainly appeared to have been ignorant of the ideological differences between East and West.

Some believe that Stalin skilfully manipulated Roosevelt into agreeing to what amounted to a betrayal of Poland and its handing over to the USSR, in return for Stalin agreeing to 'free elections' in Poland. Stalin had no personal experience of 'free elections' in the Western sense and it is likely that his interpretation of this concept was completely different to that of the Western powers. He was acting pragmatically. Poland was an important part of Stalin's plans for the future and for the construction of a buffer zone between Russia and the West.

The meeting also exposed the cracks in the Grand Alliance. Once the unifying ambition to defeat Hitler had been removed, only the trust between the three leaders could hold it together.

The Potsdam Conference

By July 1945, the Allies met again at Potsdam near Berlin. However, this time things were different. There was a change amongst the leading players and with it came a change of attitude. President Roosevelt had died in April and he had been replaced by Harry S. Truman. Although Truman had played a leading role in the USA's war effort, his knowledge of foreign affairs, particularly the situation in Europe, was superficial. Unlike Roosevelt, he was unwilling to compromise with 'Uncle Jo' Stalin, whom he believed was little more than a bully.

Churchill was present in the early stages of the conference, but lost the British General Election and was replaced by Clement Atlee, leader of the new Labour government.

Stalin remained as secretive and as determined as ever. Some decisions were made but there was little agreement and it was clear that tensions and divisions between the East and West were increasing.

In Germany, the Powers finalized details regarding the zones of occupation. The Nazi party was to be banned and the Nazi leaders were to be put on trial as war criminals.

Each Power was to collect industrial equipment from their zone as reparations, but since the USSR's zone was predominantly agricultural, the other zones would contribute additional reparations.

Poland's Western border was to be along a line defined by the Oder and Neisse rivers, and Germans living in Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia were to be returned to Germany.

Although the Conference ended amicably enough, there had been areas of disagreement. The USSR's request for the Ruhr to be opened to international influence, for access to the Straits (Dardanelles) and for control of Libya were rejected. Similarly, Western requests for Europe's main waterways to be accessible to all and for a greater say in Eastern and South-east Europe were also refused.

The divisions between East and West were growing. The West was increasingly concerned about Stalin's intentions in Eastern Europe. In March, the non-Communist Polish leaders had been invited to Moscow, where they were promptly arrested. Communists were now in control of the key positions in the Polish government.

It became apparent that far more Germans were to be expelled from Eastern Europe than the Western Allies had anticipated.

Truman became convinced that Stalin was planning world conquest and that the only thing the Soviets would understand was force. The United States' 'trump card', the atomic bomb, became a vital factor.

On 16 July 1945, the eve of the Potsdam Conference, the first atomic bomb was tested at Alamogordo in the New Mexico desert. Truman was informed immediately of its success and, five days later, learned that it was far more destructive than previously thought and would be ready for combat use soon. Churchill noted that Truman was a changed man – he was delighted with the United States' new power. Stalin was informed of this new weapon on 24 July, but if Truman had been hoping for a reaction, he was disappointed. Stalin already knew of the bomb's existence thanks to his spies including Klaus Fuchs, a German physicist working on the bomb in England. Fuchs had passed detailed notes on the bomb to his contact Harry Gold in June 1945. When Truman informed Stalin of the United States' big new weapon Stalin merely replied, 'Good, I hope the United States will use it'. Privately Stalin ordered Molotov to speed up the Soviet bomb project.

Truman lost no time in putting the atomic bomb to work. On 6 August 1945 a B-29 Superfortress, Enola Gay, dropped an atom bomb on Hiroshima, a city in Japan. The explosion, which had a force of 13,000 tons of TNT, created heat and blast that destroyed the city in minutes. The exact figures are uncertain, but approximately 100,000 civilians were killed immediately and thousands more died of radiation poisoning over the next few years. On 9 August a different type of bomb, a plutonium implosion bomb, was dropped on Nagasaki. Again the city was destroyed and thousands killed. Truman hoped to avoid an invasion of Japan and prevent huge American casualties by dropping the atomic bombs on these cities. On 10 August the Emperor of Japan announced his decision to surrender and terms were agreed on 14 August. The Second World War was over. Truman must have been aware of the immense strength the

possession of such a bomb gave the United States, especially in dealings with the Soviets. He was becoming increasingly suspicious of Stalin's motives. The Red Army was the biggest in the world, there were no signs of it being disbanded and it seemed likely that Stalin was building a buffer zone along his country's Western borders. This was a natural response to being invaded from Europe three times in the last century and a half. As the Red Army liberated territories in Eastern Europe, Stalin's henchmen established friendly pro-Soviet regimes.

Stalin's tactics in Eastern Europe risked confrontation with the West and, less than six months after the end of the war, the United States increasingly viewed its wartime ally as a possible enemy. This U-turn was exacerbated by Stalin's speech to the Supreme Soviet in February 1946 where he insisted that the very existence of capitalism made war inevitable since that was how capitalism developed and increased its strength. Washington was alarmed and asked its Embassy in Moscow for details and explanations of Stalin's foreign policy. The reply came to be known as the Long Telegram – and no wonder, it was 8,000 words long! The author was George Kennan, who was all too aware of how Russia's past influenced present thinking. His telegram predicted nothing less than a fight to the death between Communism and democracy. This shocked Washington and Kennan's warning seemed to have come true when Stalin refused to withdraw Soviet troops from Northern Iran, thus threatening oil supplies to the West. These fears of Communist influence infiltrating Iran, Turkey, Greece and Italy and aiming at world domination echoed Winston Churchill's speech in Fulton, Missouri: 'From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the continent'. This speech declared that Europe was divided by Soviet policy into two separate halves; in the West were free democratic states, while in the East, behind an iron curtain, were countries under the control of Communist parties directly controlled by the Soviet Union. The American public was horrified and Truman, in public, denied all prior knowledge of the content of the speech. In private it was just what Truman and his advisors wanted to hear. It warned of the spreading influence of the Soviets and of the need to stop this expansion westwards. Stalin accused Churchill of being a warmonger; the Soviet press accused him of being a racist and even compared him to Hitler. Churchill may have been out of office with no control over British policy, but his speech in Fulton proved that even as a private citizen he could influence the United States' policy and push it in what he believed was the right direction.