



# Was the Cold War inevitable?

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The Cold War occurred between 1947-1991 and was a state of political hostility that arose between Soviet-led communist states, the Eastern Bloc, and US-led capitalist states, the Western Bloc. For the purpose of this paper, the inevitability of the Cold War will be viewed from the years preceding the start of the Cold War, from the beginning of 1945 to the end of 1947. This was done not only for logistics with the length of the conflict and paper but to also focus on the preventability of this war by the ‘warring’ nations (Crihfield, 2019).

To investigate the preventability of the Cold War from both an international and American-based view, I separated my paper into two main sections: the State of the World and the State of the Nation. Using the two main sections, I further divided the material and researched my topic based on the type of historiographical argument needed. When assessing my researching methodology, although the highly structured format led to some difficulties with searching for relevant material, it ultimately worked quite well for me as I was able to find evidence and applicable material that helped shape my structure as well as support the arguments that I already had in mind. Using this structure, I was able to implement my two opposing perspectives of the paper. A reflection of the historiographical approaches, these debated viewpoints of the Cold War, traditionalism and revisionism, provided a base for the various arguments presented within my paper (*Case Study: Different perspectives on the Cold War*, 2019).

Beginning with my first perspective, I used the traditionalist approach including scholars such as Herbert Feis and Thomas A. Bailey who, in their books such as *America Faces Russia* and *From Trust to Terror*, respectively put their placement of responsibility of the Cold War onto the Soviet Union (SU) and its expansion into Eastern Europe (Feis, 1970). Contrastingly, revisionists, such as Alan Brinkley and William Appleton Williams, who express their beliefs that the United States (US) bore the responsibility for the Cold War with their expansionism policies and the SU’s weakened state (Costigliola, 2014). While traditionalists’ beliefs indicate the Cold War was inevitable due to the SU’s actions, revisionists counter with the notion that the US had major responsibility with its actions on both the home and international front, thus making the Cold War preventable. In addition to these two historiographical perspectives, I also used a newer approach, post-revisionism, as a source of inspiration for my analytical and evaluative statements. Post-revisionists, such as John Lewis Gaddis, demonstrate the argument that due to the collective actions of both the US and the SU, the Cold War was inevitable. I

utilized all three approaches to get a collective viewpoint of the various interpretations of the events of the Cold War.

I first became interested in the topic of historiography when I took US History and we were required to look at the various interpretations of the Holocaust. Alongside this introduction of different interpretations of history, the main course material included ramifications of the Cold War, thus sparking my curiosity to delve deeper into this subject. Not only is history personally interesting, but its portrayal is crucial. History is much like a story in that the way you tell it can change how you see its characters, what you believe occurred, and the lessons gained. With the wrong storyteller, events and people can be changed in its entirety. While I currently believe that the Cold War was inevitable, I am excited to do further research and continue with telling my own interpretation of this time period.

### **State of the World**

#### *Economics*

After the end of WWII, many of the Allied forces including the US and Britain believed that the SU had become a danger to what they considered to be the 'free world'. They believed that they had to be stopped against their "onward sweep" and that "A settlement must be reached on all major issues between West and East in Europe before the armies of democracy melt." (Churchill, 1945). This clearly highlights the pressures felt by the Eastern European countries by the SU continuously pushing towards the Atlantic. An assessment of the SU's actions indicates their onward sweep of communism which led the US, Britain, and their European allies to feel threatened by a takeover, thus creating more tensions towards the beginning of the Cold War. A Harvard graduate, Dr. Herbert Feis was an economist that worked as the Economic Advisor for International Affairs during the Hoover and Roosevelt administration, later becoming a respected American historian. Despite his lack of objectivity within the actions of the administration, Feis' experience demonstrates his expertise on the subject and his unique insight into the thoughts of the administration. When assessing Feis' contribution to historiographical Cold War debate, his experiences provided him with a unique insight into the implications of governmental actions, therefore making his opinions highly-valued (Llywellyn, 2018). Within his book *From Trust to Terror: The Onset of the Cold War*, Feis discusses the pressure felt from the SU. The US began to push back against their 'take-over' through their own foreign policy plans such as the Truman Doctrine, "It must be the policy of the US to support free peoples who are resisting attempted

subjugation by armed minorities or...outside pressures" (Truman, 1947). This quote demonstrates, although not overtly, that Truman's intent with this action was to not only help European countries in economic crisis, but to halt the spread of communism and instill the belief of capitalism. When gauging the intent of Truman and the US' actions, it is made clear that their belief in the domino theory creating pressure from the Soviet's actions alongside their own movements towards conflict made the tensions on both sides flare to the extent of the Cold War being unavoidable.

Despite the seeming threatening stance that the SU held on the world stage, they had suffered quite a devastating blow to their economy by the end of WWII. One in eight citizens were killed and it destroyed, "one third of their national wealth... followed by harvest failure and regional famine" (Harrison, 2010). These statistics highlight the SU's economic woes that were felt from an individual to a national level during this time period as this breakdown affected many people's daily lives. An assessment of the post-WWII economic status of the SU denotes the country as majorly weakened and thus their need to defend themselves on the front of Eastern Europe appears reasonable. A Cornell historian professor who graduated from Stanford University after studying under Thomas A. Bailey, Walter LaFaber argues within the piece *America, Russia, and the Cold War* that, "From a Soviet perspective, the German economy...was an object of booty, to be used to restore the war-damaged Russian economy" (LaFaber, 1970). This quote emphasizes the perspective that the SU's seeming attempts to gain traction within Eastern Europe were not because of a harmful intent but rather of a dire need for economic stability and opportunity. In previous years throughout the 1920s and 1930s, tensions between the US and the SU were able to be somewhat eased majorly due to economic cooperation. The shifting political system in the SU as well as the repercussions of WWI left their economy and population devastated. However, when US diplomats and businessmen began forming ties with various Soviet companies, it assisted in opening doors to peaceful diplomatic relations and open dialogue between the two nations. As LaFaber continues, this era of cooperation, although limited, displayed the potential for positive relations. However, LaFaber notes that, "In every decision they [US] were motivated not by concern for stability or democracy...they sought control and opportunity" especially given the fact that American, "policymakers were quite aware of the pitiful conditions in western Russia" (LaFaber, 1967) (Williams, 1959). When calculating the intent of the SU in their attempts to gain power within

various parts of Eastern and Western Europe, it is clear that their hopes for economic stability were outright ignored by the US, thus making the Cold War preventable through US action.

### *Politics*

In addition to the numerous economic issues that raised concerns for US and SU relations, these two countries faced off on the political stage at various international conferences. Right before the end of WWII, from February 4 to 11, 1945, the leaders of the US, SU, and Britain-also called the Big Three-convened to discuss the postwar reorganization of Europe at the Yalta Conference (Bailey, 1994). The reorganization of these various European countries often consisted of a complete reformulation of their governmental systems. However, this meeting, although originally intended to be a comprehensive peace settlement, ended up being merely a rough sketch of intentions that came with small pokes and prods from either side to determine each other's limits. A Stanford professor who paved the way for the traditionalist approach with his research and widely used textbook *The American Pageant*, Thomas A. Bailey demonstrates that, despite his lack of objective perspective, his world-shaping research and publications denote his work as essential. Within his popular textbook, he discusses how the SU agreed that, "Poland, with revised boundaries, should have a representative government based on free elections...Bulgaria and Romania likewise to have a free-elections" (Bailey, 1994). Despite this, their promises were soon flouted. He goes on to state that had the SU kept to their promise of allowing for free elections to take place within these European countries, particularly Poland, "the sorry sequel would have been different". This argument presented clearly highlights the SU's unwillingness and ultimate lack of trustworthiness with fulfilling their plan to rework the European countries' governments. An assessment of the SU's actions suggests that their lack of commitment lead to rising tensions within foreign affairs, thus making the subsequent Cold War inevitable.

A few months later from July 17 to August 2, 1945, the Big Three met in Potsdam, Germany to negotiate the terms for the end of WWII at what would come to be known as the Potsdam Conference (Williams, 1988). It must be noted that during the time between the two conferences, President Roosevelt of the US passed away on April 12 and Vice President Harry Truman assumed the presidency (Williams, 1988). The numerous effects of this event will be discussed in greater detail later in this paper. These leaders aimed to establish postwar order, resolve peace treaty issues between the settling countries, and counter the devastating effects of

the war. One of the major aspects of reformation discussed was reparations for the SU from Germany, as had been formerly confirmed by President Roosevelt. However, Truman took a different approach by denying these reparations in fear of a repetition of the Treaty of Versailles where Germany was forced to pay large amounts of reparations after WWI. This subsequently caused major inflation, fueling the rise of the Nazi empire. Due to Roosevelt's previous agreement, these new terms did not bode well with Stalin, especially due to the major destruction and death wrought by Hitler and his army throughout the SU. As William Appleman Williams argues in *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, there was the potential for the US to still supply a lesser form of reparations for the SU through a smaller sum from Germany so as to not completely deteriorate their economy. Although the SU eventually received a small sum of reparations from Germany, this demonstrates that there was a potential solution that Truman failed to reach in a timely manner, effectively further heightening tensions. An assessment denotes the Cold War as preventable due to Truman's lack of experience with dealing with high stakes foreign policy affairs. Additionally, during this time period, American policy-makers often drew the conclusion that the relations between Nazi Germany and the US in the 1930s were highly comparable to relations with the SU and US. Yet, as Williams discusses this was simply not accurate. Not only did the countries differ in foreign and domestic policies, but the US had gained great economic and military power. He goes on to state,

...the existence and the knowledge of that strength...encouraged Truman and other leaders...to think...they could force the Soviets to accept American proposals without recourse to war (Williams, 1988).

This idea highlights the Americans' unwillingness to compromise stemmed not from their misconception of Soviet behavior, but their confidence in their power and influence on the world stage to put in place whatever they believed fit with minimal repercussions. When calculating the events that lead to the SU's minimal reparations, it is clear that the US was at fault due to their lack of consciousness towards the SU's damage.

In conclusion, Bailey and Feis concur that the SU held major responsibility towards the heightening tensions that led to the Cold War as a result of their seemingly threatening advances. However, LaFaber argued that the US ignored the SU's state of economic distress that explained their need for security within and from Europe. Williams continues that the US's transition of power and ultimate cockiness on the world stage further drove these strains. When assessing the arguments presented, one can see that despite the SU's advancements and difficulty with

compromise, the US could have held significant more sympathy for the state of the SU as previously shown merely two decades prior, thus making the Cold War preventable.

### **State of the Nation**

#### *Ideological*

Relations between the US and the SU had always been driven by a complex interplay of ideological, political, and economic factors over the years that lead to shifts from bitter rivalry to hesitant cooperation. The 20<sup>th</sup> century began with the rising of these old flames with the SU pulling out of WWI with their main ideology being the starkly opposed, often unaccepted, communism. However, relations began to heal with the establishment of commercial ties as well as a famine relief program started up by the US for the SU, and by 1933 the two countries had reached diplomatic relations. With the start of WWII, both were brought together with the common cause of defeating Nazi Germany. Yet, once the war had concluded it was evident that Stalin's aggressive and antidemocratic policies and ultimate ideology of communism didn't bode well for friendly relations between the two countries (Davis & Trani, 2009). Notwithstanding connections with 1940's American diplomat George Kennan, John Lewis Gaddis has been a professor and historical author for over 40 years, publishing multiple Pulitzer Prize winning works focused on the Cold War post-revisionist perspective. Gaddis' research and experience highlight his importance within the field of historiographical historians, and his connections with George Kennan allow for a unique insight into one of the head individuals within the US government during this era. An assessment of Dr. Gaddis' credentials displays both his high-level qualifications and his insight into the tensions found during that time-period (Gaddis, 2020). Much of the rising tensions were rooted at this fundamental level as Gaddis (2007) describes

...United States and the Soviet Union...been born in revolution. Both embraced ideologies with global aspirations: what worked at home, their leaders assumed, would also do so for the rest of the world.

Within Gaddis's approach, his quote demonstrates that the ideological foundation established tensions between the US and the SU that resulted in both countries finding success within their own government while finding little common ground. When assessing the conflicting ideologies of the two nations, it is clear to see that with both countries upholding the belief that their

governmental system was the key to success for every country, the resulting rift set in stone that an eventual conflict between the two was inevitable.

Despite the clear ideological tensions that were found between the US and the SU, there were grassroots efforts found within the US that advocated for peace and believed in what was coined as 'ideological convergence'. The CIA began investigating those who were members of this group through a classified report. Although the CIA had only twenty years of experience at the point of this report's publication, their goal of gathering and analyzing national security information connects with the topic of local and international feelings towards the SU and the ideology of communism. In addition to the aligning of goals, this world-renowned agency had this document labeled as classified, which allowed for objectivity and honesty, thus highlighting both the capabilities of this organization and the trustworthiness of the material presented (*History of the CIA*, 2018). Within this report, an interviewed member of this movement stated,

...Russians are much like people everywhere... people everywhere want the same things, it will be easy to build 'one world' with a sobered and friendly Joseph Stalin after the war...He now knows the value of democracy, who his friends are, and how destructive war is...together we will build a world in which the peace-loving countries will become steadily more like each other and come ever closer together (*The Theory of "Convergence" and/or "Futurology"*, 1970).

This example demonstrates that, although somewhat of an underlying movement, the theory of ideological convergence persisted with the intention of bringing peace and harmony to the two growing nations. An assessment of the convergence theory can display that despite the glaring differences between SU and US beliefs and government systems, there were still people who actively believed in and worked towards a one-world union, thus making the Cold War potentially preventable. Despite this, the overall limited size and reaches of these movements as well as a lack of a clear course of action, lead to their lack of potential success in dampening the heated ideological-based flames.

### *Leaders*

In addition to the major ideological differences that lead to tensions, the leaders within the governments of each of these countries played vital roles in determining the fate of the coming Cold War. Two of the major leaders, Joseph Stalin of the SU and Winston Churchill of Britain, were essential in not only running their country internally, but handling affairs between nations. Despite the want for peace and friendly relations after the end of WWII, these two leaders did little to aid in that communion on the world stage. In one of Churchill's most famous



speeches, he discusses how an “iron curtain” was descending in the middle of Europe, overtly suggesting that the SU had violated their international right through their expansion towards Eastern Europe (Churchill, 1946). However, it must be noted that this speech was meant to be a call for peace not conflict as Pamela C. Harriman notes, “Churchill identified...The Soviets might want expansion, but they do not want war” (Harriman, 1986). This demonstrates Churchill’s ultimate wish to compromise upon the only common ground that he could find between the SU and rival nations. Yet, this was not how many interpreted Churchill’s speech, both at home and internationally. In response, Stalin described that WWII had been unavoidable due to “capitalist imperialism” and further implied that another war may occur (Stalin, 1946). Not only did these two speeches raise tensions between the US and Britain and the SU, but they set a tone between the countries in how they viewed each other on both an international and individual scale. These two points reveal the back and forth argument between two major leaders of the subsequent Cold War and highlight their stringently opposing views of each other as well as their lack of ability to come together in some form of an agreement. When calculating the implications of the argument between these two world leaders, it is clear that due to the unwillingness for compromise between the rivaling countries, the Cold War was inevitable.

Similar to the debacle between Stalin and Churchill, George Kennan and Paul Nitze played major roles in determining the fate of these warring nations within the foreign policies they proposed for the US. George Kennan put forth the policy of containment through his famous “X article” in which he was hoping to reduce the expansion of the SU on the world powers (US, Western Europe, and Japan) through the economic assistance and “psychological warfare” that put pressure on the SU. This was described as, “adroit and vigilant application of counter-force at a series of constantly shifting geographical and political points, corresponding to the shifts and maneuvers of Soviet policy” (*Kennan and Containment, 1947, 2001*). However, this policy faced quite a bit of backlash from internal forces including Paul Nitze, Kennan’s eventual successor in regards of being too defensive. Nitze believed that the best way to avoid a nuclear war was to prepare for one, spurring on the eventual arms race between the US and SU. In Nicholas Thompson’s book, *The Hawk and the Dove: Paul Nitze, George Kennan, and the History of the Cold War*, he discusses not only the unlikely friendship between these men but the clashing politics of the two. Thompson was a Stanford graduate political science-major who has worked as a journalist for over twenty years and is the current editor-in-chief at the

international WIRED. An assessment of Thompson's attributes denotes that his previous of education in politics and years of experience in authoring pieces give him the proper skills for his assessment of the Cold War (Thompson, 2019). Within one of his points he discusses how their close relationship often allowed them to discuss each other's opinions and stances on current political affairs in a nonchalant manner. During this time period, despite Kennan's overarching success with his policy of containment, Thompson argues Kennan had the ability to influence Nitze's personal policies. This, in addition to Nitze's harrowing visit to the site of the US atomic bombing, highlight the opportunities for his stance on foreign policy to be altered. When assessing the policies of Nitze, it is clear that his direction towards a build-up of arms lead to rising tensions between the two nations and, with the influence of Kennan, could have been transformed, therefore making the eventual Cold War preventable.

### *Technology*

During this time period, the field of technology was ever-changing. With the recent discovery and usage of the atomic bomb at the end of WWII, there rose an interest in the development of atomic weaponry within the SU, US, and other parts of the world. At the Potsdam conference, President Truman got word of success of an atomic denotation from the Manhattan Project, a US-based operation that worked to develop a functional atomic weapon throughout WWII. Towards the beginning of this conference, Truman mentioned to Stalin the success of a new weapon. Stalin replied by simply suggesting his approval and a hope for further success so as to make "good use of it against the Japanese" (Neiberg, 2015). Despite Stalin's seeming nonchalance, he quickly notified his own team to work faster on their own version of the Manhattan Project, the Soviet atomic bomb project (Neiberg, 2015). A professor of political science and history for over three decades at Stanford University, Dr. David Holloway discusses the ramifications of the Soviet's discovery of the groundbreaking American technology within the book *Nuclear weapons and the escalation of the Cold War, 1945-1962*. Holloway has multiple award-winning, Cold War publications, particular connected to atomic weaponry. Despite this chapter's limited scope of view, Holloway's career displays his consistent dedication to history. When assessing the credentials of Dr. Holloway, his years of narrowed experience within the topic at hand allows him a transcendent viewpoint of the Cold War as budding historians generated altered opinions soon after the release of significant information from the

SU's perspective in the 1990s, thus giving him a highly tailored and well-rounded perspective (Holloway, 2019). In his chapter he writes,

He [Stalin] adopted a policy of... 'tenacity and steadfastness'... Instead of proving more pliable and willing to compromise... adopted a policy of stubbornness... The bomb had a dual effect on Soviet policy... inspired caution and restraint... also made the Soviet Union less willing to compromise for fear of appearing vulnerable to intimidation (Holloway, 2010).

This quote exemplifies the SU's lack of cooperation with the US and other Allied forces in regard to the testing of the atomic bomb by the US, thus leading to psychological tensions between the countries and their citizens. When calculating the effect of Stalin's foreign policy decision towards the US, it is clear that his unwillingness to compromise resulted in rising hostility between the two nations that were only heightened after his decision to speed up production of the SU's own atomic bomb program, thus making the Cold War inevitable.

However, there were many intricacies within the US' politics that reflect otherwise on the Cold War's situation. Colonel Uwe F. Jansohn begins to address these issues within his thesis paper, and, although he is not a highly acclaimed historian, his viewpoint certainly provides insight and a worldly perspective. Despite originating from Germany, where coverage of deeper aspects of US history may not be addressed or may have been skewed due to nationalistic influences, Colonel Uwe F. Jansohn received his masters at the US Army Command and General Staff College and served in the US military for numerous decades. His paper, allows for the hindsight of past events and highlights Jansohn's in-depth experience in both military schooling and service, giving him an analytic and militaristic viewpoint of the Cold War. An assessment of Jansohn's credentials exhibit him as a valuable source of the technology within the Cold War era (Jansohn, 2000). As Jansohn discusses, when first taking office after Roosevelt's passing, "Truman's vision for the future included not only political cooperation between nations, but also economic collaboration among them...", thus highlighting not merely his willingness but desire to see peace between nations (Jansohn, 2013). However, soon after hearing news of the successful atomic bomb testing while at the Potsdam Conference Churchill and Truman decided to casually inform Stalin in hopes of making him more pliable towards cooperation. Yet, they failed to account for the other direction Stalin may take this 'subtle' threat. Jansohn (2013) states,

...should have alerted Truman to the relationship, or more accurately to the potential relationship, between the atomic bomb and the U.S. policy towards the Soviet

Union....Truman...focused more on the personal burden of...having to authorize the use of the extraordinary weapon and less on the geopolitical implications.

This quote demonstrates Truman's lack of focus on the repercussions of his actions towards Stalin and the SU. Due to his recent move into office, there was a rush of opinions and information that Truman had trouble grappling with, thus leading to poor choices in his interactions with Stalin. When assessing Truman's foreign policy maneuvers, it is clear that despite his best intentions the combination of a lack of specified focus, experience, and time to assess his foreign policies lead to poor decisions and rising tensions between the SU and the US. This suggests the Cold War was preventable had Roosevelt remained alive and in office.

It is clear that between the arguments presented, the Cold War was ultimately inevitable within the years leading up to its commencement. Despite the US's specific actions to prevent unrest against the SU that demonstrated their ability to prevent the Cold War discussed by Holloway and Thompson, Gaddis highlights the argument that the combination of ideological differences and the fear felt on both sides ultimately lead to the demise of the two countries' relationship. When assessing the arguments presented, while the innate differences and fear felt on both sides majorly contributed to the Cold War's inevitability, it is evident that Truman being thrown into office with a lack of experience -particularly in foreign policy- provided the tipping point by which US and SU relations could not come back from, thus making the Cold War inevitable.

### **Final Conclusion**

With all of this information in consideration, I have found that this question has numerous intricacies. Although a deeper dive may have been able to have been done using the subtopics of the US, the SU, and Other Countries, the subtopics of State of the World and State of the Nation allow for a comprehensive view of both the international politics and the feelings within each country. When looking at the large-scale international foreign policy, as seen in State of the World, it is clear to see the despite the strong stances taken by the SU after the conclusion of WWII as discussed by Feis and Bailey, the US's lack of empathy and understanding towards the SU's troublesome financial conditions argued by Williams suggested that the Cold War was preventable. Particularly given the US's personal booming economy as well as the previous hopeful economic relations between them and the SU before the onset of WWII, there was an evident possibility for reconciliation between the two superpower nations. However, after taking

a closer look at the countries as individuals within State of the Nation, the longstanding ideological differences noticed by Gaddis in addition to the fear felt by both nations with the looming threat of the atomic bomb significantly added to the strained relations between the two countries on a fundamental level. Furthermore, these central issues combined with the inexperienced Harry Truman being pushed into the presidency and tensions between the Britain and the SU, which Truman could hardly begin to solve, furthered international tensions to its utmost breaking point. These irreversible issues were summed well by then statesman, Harry Stimson,

...[Truman] was willing and anxious to learn and to do his best...laboring with the terrific handicap of coming into such an office where the threats of information were so multitudinous that only long previous familiarity could allow him to control them (Jansohn, 2013).

This combination of unprepared leaders with complex international and domestic disputes ultimately dictated the heated relations that would define the US and SU for the following decades. When assessing the relationship between the SU and the US in the years between 1945-1947 as well as decades prior, there appears sufficient evidence that the Cold War was simply inevitable. Looking at the bigger picture, this analysis of the Cold War's inevitability brings forth two main conclusions for modern politicians and historians: First, the experience, temperament, and personal relations of a country's leader is crucial when examining the actions that must be taken in a matter of foreign policy; secondly, to avoid matters of war, or in this case extreme hostile relations, diplomatic relationships must be established with an open-mindedness and willingness to compromise so as to foster a sense of community rather than aggression. Although these ideas are certainly at times unrealistic, they are nonetheless important to keep at the forefront of ones hopes for the world so that the hostility such as between the US and the SU during the Cold War will be less likely to repeat.

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