Origins of the Cold War

The Cold War was a conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union which lasted from 1945-1992. The conflict was characterized by competition between communism and capitalism for world domination, and by hostility between those who embraced totalitarianism and those who favored democracy. During the Cold War, competition between the United States and the Soviet Union was manifested in the arms race, the space race, and wars in which each superpower sided with a third party as to fight each other indirectly. The Cold War was a deadly but necessary response to communism in which the free world was morally obligated to protect vulnerable nations against totalitarianism and ruin. (Halle, 1967)

The Cold War began as a response to Soviet aggression following World War II. Though the United States and the Soviet Union were allies in the war, Joseph Stalin, the General Secretary and dictator of the Soviet Union, rejected the principles of the Atlantic Charter, that defined the terms and purposes of Anglo-American war against the Axis powers, and which asserted that neither the United States nor Great Britain would use the war to expand their territories. The Soviet army, however, had driven Germany from Easter Europe and Stalin took advantage of this by establishing communism in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, and East Germany. Between 1945 and 1948, as the Soviets sealed the Eastern Bloc nations off from the rest of the world, it was clear to western allies that the prediction Stalin had made in 1927 was indeed coming true, and that communists were initiating a new phase of conquest in the final struggle between communism and democracy. (Starobin, 1969)

The events of 1947-49 demonstrate that the Cold War originated from the desire of the United States to “demonstrate that freedom produces not merely guns, but the spiritual, intellectual and material richness that all men want.” (Dulles, 1954) In February, 1947, Britain informed the United States that it was unable to finance global resistance against communist threats, which were already manifest in Italy, Greece, and Turkey. Stalin’s Two Camp Speech of February, 1946 made plain the Soviet intention to crush capitalism, and so the United States had no alternative but to adopt the Truman Doctrine. In June, 1947, the United States announced the Marshall Plan, which would give billions of dollars to countries recovering from the war. The program helped European nations restore their urban and rural industries alike, and engendered good will to the United States.

In 1948, the Cold War intensified as the Soviet Union tried to prevent western allies from uniting and re-industrializing West Germany. The soviets attempted to drive western allies from West Berlin by a blockade, to which the allies responded by air-lifting thousands of tons of food, supplies and fuel to Western Berliners. The Soviets lifted the block after a year, and to ensure its defense, the allies created the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in 1949. By that time, the Soviet Union had secured its despotic grip on Eastern Europe and developed its own nuclear weapons. It was clear they had no intention of cooperating with their former war allies. (Nitze, 1990)

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The Cold War was a conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union which lasted from 1945-1992. The rivalry between these nations was largely an ideological one that set free market democracy against communism. The conflict led to an arms race and several wars in which the Americans and Soviets fought each other through third party armies. The Cold War has its roots in the early 20the century, as the United States sent soldiers to aid the Czar’s army against the Bolsheviks in 1918 and refused to recognize the Soviet Union until 1933. The Cold War grew out of mutual suspicions about the intentions of the superpowers to gain hegemony over the world.

Though the United States and Soviet Union were allies in World War II, they did not share a common vision for its outcome. Having been invaded several times in their history by western nations, the Russians desired to create a buffer between themselves and war offered the occasion to acquire the Baltic States and other Eastern European nations that stood between Moscow and Berlin. The western allies sought to defeat the Nazis, restore European borders, promote democracy, and renew business and trade on western terms. Western allies typically read the Soviet desire for national security as an excuse of the exportation of communism, and the Soviets typically interpreted Western promotion of free-market democracy as a smoke screen for the exploitation of the working class by the rich; they held that since the United States had imposed hegemony over Latin America under the auspices of national interests, it too was justified in pursuing nationals interests in Eastern Europe. (Williams, 1959)

The Cold War took shape in the final months of the war and was firmly fixed in international relations by 1949. The United States made clear their desire to influence the shape of Europe following the war by accepting Italy’s surrender in 1945 without Soviet input, and underscored the zeal for control by send the CIA to Italy in 1948 where it circulated anti-communist propaganda and paid people to vote for Christian Democratic candidates. (Del Pero, 2001) Further, there was great anxiety about the pending German surrender and the terms of peace. The Soviet Union had lost approximately 27 million in the war, endured the occupation of over 100 million square miles of its country for nearly three years, and lost over 700 cities. By contrast, the United States had not been occupied and had lost about 350,000 in ccombat. The Soviets believed it was only fair to establish the Eastern Bloc as a protection against future invasions. To complicate matters, following the Nazi’s surrender to the Soviets, the Soviets anticipated they would join the United States in defeating Japan. This assistance was unnecessary however, as the United States used atomic bombs to force Japan’s surrender. The fact that the United States had kept the atomic bomb a secret strengthened Soviet beliefs that the United States did not consider the Soviets as equals but as adversaries. (Alperhovitz, 1965) Moreover, the fact that some Americans were openly calling for the Western Allies to turn against the Soviet Union and drive them out of eastern Europe back to Moscow engendered little Russian good will. (Hastings, 2010)

To a large extent, the Cold War was unavoidable as the United States could not reconcile Soviet claims with its own agenda. The United States pursued a course of international diplomacy that espoused self-governance and liberty while supporting dictatorships in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. As the United States poured money into the re-building of Germany’s industries as part of the Marshall Plan, and pursued its proliferation of nuclear weapons, the Soviet Union concluded that the West did not respect its vulnerability nor was it sincere about compensating Russia for the great sacrifices it made to free the world of Nazi fascism.

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