The Cold War Revision notes

**The beginning of the Cold War**

The term ‘Cold War’ refers to the period of struggle and conflict between the USA and USSR between 1945-1991. Each of the Superpowers saw the other as a threat to its continued survival and adopted strategies to preserve their positions. The two Superpowers never went to war directly with each other in this period, but became involved in conflicts such as the Korean War where each side stood behind the other nations involved. Therefore this conflict is termed as the Cold War rather than a conventional hot war. There were a number of occasions when it appeared that a hot war would break out between the Superpowers, but thankfully this was avoided.

Reasons for the breakdown of the wartime alliance by 1945

The USSR and the USA both joined the Second World War in 1941, the former on June 22nd following Hitler’s Operation Barbarossa and the latter on December 9th following Japan’s surprise attack on Pearl Harbour. In the long run both attacks proved fatal to the aggressor nations; sleeping giants were awoken, the Axis powers were defeated in 1945 and a new world order was created. The USSR and the USA emerged as by far the most powerful nations from the Second World War. The former Great Powers – Britain, France, Germany, Italy and Japan – were no longer capable of dominating the rest of the world, only the USA and the USSR, the Superpowers, remained unbroken.

The USA and the USSR were strange bedfellows during the Second World War. Their alliance was purely strategic. The underlying differences between the supreme capitalist nation (the USA) and the original communist state (the USSR) were bound to re-emerge once Germany and Japan had been defeated. It was clear that two states could no longer ignore each other in a new world of global finance and communication. Both were extremely nervous of the other nation’s aims; worry led to fear, fear caused the breakdown of the wartime alliance and turned eventually to hostility and mutual antipathy.

The emergence of rivalry between the Superpowers

The USSR was a one party state dominated by Stalin. Individuals did not have the choice to choose alternative politicians in free elections; industry and agriculture was owned by the state. In the 1930s, Stalin had transformed the USSR into a modern industrial state through the Five Year Plans, Collectivisation and the Purges. The transformation had come at a huge cost in human life, but a superpower had been born, capable of defeating Nazi Germany and emerging as a world power. The people of the USSR had experienced foreign invasion in the First World War, during the Civil War 1918-1921 and the Second World War. Stalin believed that the USA’s long-term ambition was to destroy communism, therefore he adopted policies, which he believed would prevent this from happening.

The USA was a democratic state, with free elections, freedom of speech and a capitalist economic system. In the 1930s the American people had experienced the Depression and a withdrawal from world politics (isolationism). The Second World War helped to regenerate the USA’s industries to such an extent that people’s standards of living actually went up during the Second World War. The USA emerged immeasurably more powerful from the war with Germany and Japan. It was clear that the USA could no longer sit on the sidelines in world politics. However, the USA was extremely concerned by the spread of communism in Eastern Europe and the Far East. The USA believed that Stalin wanted to convert the rest of the world to communism. The USA had fought the fascist ideologies of Germany, Italy and Japan, now it was prepared to fight the communist ideology of the USSR.

The beliefs and attitudes of Stalin and Truman

Stalin’s fear of the USA led him to believe that the USSR needed a barrier of territory between Soviet territory and the USA’s allies in Western Europe. Stalin feared another anti-communist invasion of Russia from Europe as had occurred in 1918 and 1941. Stalin wanted to create a barrier against the West, a barrier made up of communist run countries in Eastern Europe. The new president of the USA, Harry Truman, saw Soviet domination of Eastern Europe not as an act of defence on Stalin’s part, but as an act of aggression. Would this communist take-over spread to Western Europe too?

The Yalta and Potsdam Conferences

While the war with Germany continued, the wartime allies (USA, USSR and Britain) met to discuss the post-war future of Europe. The most significant meetings between the allied leaders were at Yalta in February 1945 and Potsdam in July 1945.

The Yalta Conference

Roosevelt, Stalin and Churchill agreed that Germany be divided into four zones to be occupied by USA, USSR, Britain and France. It was also recognised that Stalin was to have influence over Eastern Europe, but that free elections be held in them to decide who governed them. The biggest problem was Poland. Stalin had liberated Poland and a communist government had been established. Stalin insisted that a ‘friendly’ government be established there to protect the USSR from Germany. Stalin refused to allow democratic elections in Poland.

The ‘Big Three’ at Yalta were Winston Churchill, President Roosevelt and Joseph Stalin

The Potsdam Conference

By the time the allies met again, the situation had changed considerably. Germany had been defeated, Roosevelt had died and had been replaced by Truman and Clement Attlee had defeated Churchill. The allies agreed to divide Germany into zones and to claim reparations for war losses.

However, the USA began to realise that it did not want a weakened Germany in Central Europe, a perfect breeding ground for communism. Truman wanted to rebuild Germany, while Stalin wanted to weaken it further by taking equipment and materials as reparations. The pattern for future conflict between the USA and the USSR had begun.

**The deepening of the Cold War 1945-53**

Soviet expansion into Eastern Europe, the Iron Curtain and Western reactions

Advancing allied and Soviet forces from the West and East defeated Nazi Germany. While American and British forces liberated France, Italy and the Low Countries, Soviet forces replaced Nazi forces in a string of countries in Eastern Europe. The Americans and the British could do nothing about this while Nazi Germany remained undefeated; the USSR after all was an ally at this time. It was clear, however, that Stalin was very reluctant to relinquish control of Eastern Europe, a Soviet sphere of influence. President Roosevelt and Winston Churchill did not like the Soviet domination of Eastern Europe, but they needed the USSR as an ally and they could do very little to prevent Stalin’s military annexation of this region.

In 1946 Churchill referred to the division of Europe, East and West, communist and capitalist, as the descending of an iron curtain.

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|   | *A shadow has fallen across the scenes so lately lighted by Allied victory. From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the continent.* Churchill, Fulton, USA, 1946.  |

There was no real physical barrier, but there was a clear division between the democratic states of the West and the communist states of the East. Many in the West were concerned that Stalin would not stop in Eastern Europe, would he now turn to the West?

The Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan

The Truman Doctrine

Harry Truman replaced President Roosevelt when he died in April 1945. Truman was very concerned by the growth of Soviet power. Truman realised that the USA could no longer continue with its policy of isolationism. If the spread of communism was to be halted, Truman believed that the USA would have to be much more active in world affairs. To defend the USA from communism, Truman believed that he would have to support other countries militarily and financially in order to prevent them from potentially becoming communist states. This policy became known as the Truman Doctrine.

The Marshall Plan

In 1947 it appeared that Greece and Turkey might become communist states. In March 1947 Truman promised that the USA would help any country threatened by communism. The USA would ‘contain’ Soviet expansion. Truman believed that Stalin had forced the countries of Eastern Europe into accepting communist governments; he also believed that it was America’s duty to defend democracy. Communism was prevented in Greece and Turkey. Truman gave $400 million dollars to the two countries and in return established missile bases in Turkey.

Truman was concerned to help European countries recover from the war. He believed that economically strong countries would be unlikely to turn to communism and would become major trading partners with the USA. To help Europe rebuild after the war, the USA gave millions of dollars under the Marshall Plan. A fund of $15 billion was set aside for European countries to draw on. The idea was to allow countries from both East and West to receive Marshall Aid, but Stalin realised that this would make countries like Poland more dependent upon the USA than the USSR. Stalin denounced the Marshall Plan, claiming that it was economic imperialism. Stalin forced the Eastern European countries to withdraw their applications for assistance. Instead, these countries had to apply for help from the Comecon (Council for Mutual Economic Assistance). This was never very effective as the USSR had too little resources to offer.

In all, sixteen countries received Marshall Aid, Britain and France being the major recipients. West Germany also received just under $1.4 billion. Stalin was very angry with this, he did not want a strong Germany; in the East he deliberately weakened the Soviet zone of Germany. In the West, Truman wanted to create a powerful buffer against communism; he did not want Germany to be weak. By 1952 most Western European countries had recovered to their pre-war levels of production. The communist parties in France and Italy lost their support as standards of living rose. The Marshall Plan had been very effective in preventing the spread of communism in Western Europe and had created economically strong democratic allies for the USA.

The Cominform

In 1947 communist leaders from all over the world were invited to a conference in Warsaw, where the Communist Information Bureau (Cominform) was created. This was designed to spread communism and to protect states from US aggression. In 1948, Stalin ordered Cominform to expel Tito, the communist leader of Yugoslavia, because he would not give into Stalin’s wishes. This shows that Stalin wanted total control of the communist world and would allow no opposition. The USA saw Cominform as a serious challenge to the West. Relations between the superpowers deteriorated further.

The post-war division of Germany and the Berlin Crisis of 1948-49

The first major crisis of the Cold War was over Germany. With Nazism defeated and Germany occupied by the allies, the question of what to do next became an issue resulting in tension between the superpowers.

As they had agreed at Yalta and Potsdam, Germany was divided into four zones of occupation. At first relations between the forces were good as all were united in the belief that Nazism should be crushed. However, the USA, Britain and France saw quickly that Germany would have to be supported economically if communism was to be prevented. The allies wanted a strong, democratic ally acting as a buffer against the communist states of Eastern Europe. In contrast, Stalin wanted to weaken Germany as a punishment for the war, to help rebuild the USSR by stealing German industrial technology and to make communism seem more attractive to the Germans. These conflicting policies soon led to a crisis.

 Berlin was also divided into four zones, but the city as a whole was located in the Soviet zone of Germany. The West depended upon Soviet goodwill to keep open routes to the British, French and American zones of the city. By 1948 the Western zones of Germany were recovering and the allies decided to join their zones together. Stalin was very worried by a resurgent and prosperous Germany; his response in June 1948 was to close all roads, canals and railways leading from the West to West Berlin. Stalin believed that the West Berliners would be starved into submission. Truman’s choices were to give into Stalin and lose face, to go to war over the Berlin blockade or to keep the West Berliners supplied from the air.

The Berlin airlift was the result. To maintain Berlin over 4000 tons of supplies needed to come in each day; by the spring of 1949, 8000 tons were being supplied daily. Stalin realised that the allies would not give in. He could order allied supply planes to be shot down, but this would have been an act of war. In May 1949 Stalin ended the blockade of West Berlin. The allies were now determined to build up West Berlin as a showcase for capitalism. Many Germans from the Soviet zone crossed into West Berlin.

Any hopes for a united Germany had ended. In 1949 the three Western zones, including West Berlin, became the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany), with its own democratically elected government. The USSR responded by turning its zone into the German Democratic Republic (East Germany), which had a communist government.

 The Marshall Plan and the Truman Doctrine were very successful in creating a strong, democratic Western Europe. After the Berlin crisis of 1948-49, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) was formed as a military alliance of most of the Western European countries and the USA. All members agreed to go to war if any one of them was attacked.

Stalin tried to respond to the Marshall Plan with Comecon and to the Truman Doctrine with Cominform. When Stalin died in 1953 there was a ‘thaw’ in relations between the superpowers, but when West Germany joined NATO in 1955, Soviet fears were revived. The Warsaw Pact of 1955 was a military alliance controlled by the Soviet Union made up of all the communist Eastern European countries. This was the USSR’s response to NATO. Europe was now divided economically, politically and militarily into two armed gangs of hostile opponents. Would the Cold War turn into another hot war in Europe?

The Korean War 1950-1953

Japan had occupied Korea between 1910-1945. Soviet forces in the North and American forces in the south replaced Japanese soldiers. Korea became divided in two, in a similar manner to the division of Germany. Stalin promised free elections in Korea at the Yalta, but he broke his promise. Instead northern Korea became a communist satellite state under the control of Kim Il Sung; in the south a capitalist state was set up under Syngman Rhee.

It proved impossible to reunite the country. In 1949 China became a communist state. The South Koreans were very nervous, surrounded by communist states – the USSR, China and North Korea. Stalin and Mao (the Chinese communist leader) encouraged Kim Il Sung to attack South Korea. They saw a perfect opportunity to spread communism in the Far East, perhaps even to Japan. The USA was very worried by the so-called domino effect; if one country fell to communism, others would fall also. When Kim Il Sung attacked South Korea he had the financial support of Stalin, but not the direct military support of the USSR.

South Korea appealed to the United Nations for help. Sixteen nations, headed by the USA took part immediately, another sixteen followed later. Under General MacArthur UN forces quickly pushed back North Korean forces and approached China. The Chinese were very concerned especially as MacArthur made it clear he was prepared to invade China and use nuclear weapons. Truman dismissed MacArthur in 1951 and the North Koreans, with Chinese support, were able to push back UN forces to the 38-degree N parallel, the same division between North and South Korea that had existed in 1949. When Stalin died in 1953 both sides agreed to a cease-fire. The Korean War had been a stalemate between the superpowers. Although both had been involved, the USA and the USSR had not fought directly against each other.

In 1954 SEATO (South East Asian Treaty Organisation) was set up as a copy of NATO. Communism had been prevented in South Korea and the UN was seen as a success, it had stood up to major aggression, something the League of Nations had failed to achieve. However, the war also revealed that China was no longer weak and was prepared to stand up to the West. Was this the emergence of a third superpower?

**Changing attitudes and policies in the 1950s**

When Stalin died in 1953, it appeared that the relationship between the USA and the USSR would improve. With the emergence of Khrushchev as Stalin’s successor in 1956, this belief seemed to take effect. However, Khrushchev was an old-school communist, with no wish to diminish the USSR’s status as a rival superpower to the USA. By the late 1950s, relations between the two states had deteriorated as a result of a series of crises: the Hungarian Uprising, the Arms Race and the Space Race.

Khrushchev, the 1956 speech and co-existence

Stalin had been a brutal dictator of the USSR between the late 1920s and 1953, upon his death many Russians hoped for a less cruel and repressive leader. Stalin’s successor, Nikita Khrushchev, denounced the excesses of Stalin’s’ rule in 1956 in a secret speech made to the Communist Party. Statues of Stalin were pulled down, cities, towns and streets were renamed, the secret police became less active and more consumer goods were produced. This policy was known as destalinisation. This was very popular in the USSR and in the West as well. It seemed that Khrushchev held out the promise of greater freedom for the Soviet people. Khrushchev wanted also to reduce the Cold War tension between the superpowers – this process was known as the ‘thaw’.

The Hungarian Rising 1956

The communist satellite states of Eastern Europe expected that they too would benefit from destalinisation and the thaw. This was a mistake. Khrushchev could not allow the Eastern European states to go through a similar process of destalinisation, he believed that this would undermine communism in these countries, they might then break away from the USSR and it would lose its barrier against the capitalist West. Revolts against the USSR had broken out in East Germany in 1953 and in Poland in 1956; these had been put down mercilessly. In 1956 the people of Hungary also tried to break free from Soviet control.

Many Hungarians saw the thaw as an opportunity to break free from the Soviet Union. In 1956 demonstrations and protests in Budapest led to the election of Imre Nagy, a known moderniser, as Prime Minister. The Soviet Union was unprepared for this challenge to its authority and for a few weeks, withdrew its forces and did nothing. Khrushchev hoped that the situation would calm down in Hungary, but in fact Nagy began to implement a reform programme. Freedom of speech was allowed, non-communists were allowed into government, free elections were promised and Nagy demanded Hungarian withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact.

Khrushchev could not allow this to happen. If the USSR backed down over Hungary, similar protects might have spread to other communist states in Eastern Europe. (This is what happened in 1989 when communism in Eastern Europe came to an end). The USSR invaded Hungary in November 1956, 30,000 were killed and 200,000 fled to the West. Nagy was arrested and executed and was replaced by the hard-line communist Janos Kadar. The USA, NATO and the West could do nothing to aid the Hungarians. To attempt to stop the Soviet Union’s invasion of Hungary would have been seen as an act of war. Despite all the tension between the USA and USSR, each could not afford to risk all-out nuclear with each other. Therefore, the USA held back from going to Hungary’s aid. The result of the Hungarian Uprising was to cause a further deterioration in relations between the USSR and USA.

The beginnings of the Nuclear Arms and Space Races

Khrushchev wanted to prove that the USSR could hold its own with the USA. In sport, science, technology, military and diplomatic spheres, the USSR sought to show that it could compete and do better than the USA. This led to challenges, tension and conflict.

The two most important areas of tension were known as the Arms and Space Races. In 1945 the USA had detonated two nuclear bombs over Japan to help bring an end to the Second World War. Japan was very nearly at the point of defeat before the nuclear bombs were used, so some historians believe that the USA wanted to use their atomic weapons in order to warn the USSR that they had weapons of mass destruction and were prepared to use them. The attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki happened just as the Cold War began.

The USSR challenged the West’s lead in nuclear weapons. By 1949 the USSR also had nuclear weapons. The Cold War became very much more serious in the 1950s as each of the superpowers built more and more atomic weapons. The growth in the huge stockpile of weapons was known as the Nuclear Arms Race.

The Space Race was connected to the Arms Race. Until the late 1950s, long-range aircraft would have delivered nuclear weapons. But in the 1950s the USSR and the USA began to develop missile technology that would be able to put rockets into space. These rockets would be capable of delivering nuclear warheads across continents and at very high speeds. Both sides set about building Inter-Continental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMS) capable of travelling thousands of miles and killing tens of thousands of people.

The USSR took an early lead in the Space Race with the launch of the Sputnik 1 satellite in 1957. By 1960 the USA had developed a missile system launched from submarines called Polaris. Both sides tried to locate missiles in friendly countries that neighboured their enemy – the USA had missiles in Turkey, the USSR tried to put missiles on Cuba in response. By 1963 the Arms and Space Races had brought the Cold War to the brink of all-out nuclear war.

Both superpowers believed that possessing nuclear weapons would prevent the other power from going to war, this was known as nuclear deterrence. For years this brought stability to the world, however, both sides had nuclear weapons, so there was a chance they might be used. Between 1946-1962 there were over 800 disarmament meetings to try to reduce the Arms Race. In 1962 Khrushchev and President Kennedy pledged to consider disarmament seriously at the Geneva Disarmament Conference.

**Crisis in the 1960s and their causes and results**

The U2 Crisis

In May 1960 a summit between the ‘Big Four’ (Khrushchev, Eisenhower of the USA, De Gaulle of France and Macmillan of Britain) was due to be held in Paris. But, on 1st May a new crisis erupted to sow further tension between the superpowers.

In the late 1950s the USA had developed the very light U2 spy plane, which was capable of flying at 75,000 feet. It could be picked up on Soviet radar, but it was thought to be out of range of Soviet planes. Cameras on board the U2 planes were used to photograph Soviet military bases. On 1st May 1960, a U2 plane flown by Gary Powers was shot down with a SAM-2 missile over the town of Sverdlovsk in the Ural Mountains. Powers ejected and was captured by Soviet forces.

The USA had been caught spying on the USSR; Powers was alive and thousands of photographs were recovered from the plane. Khrushchev demanded a full apology, but Eisenhower refused saying that it was the USA’s responsibility to protect itself from surprise attacks. Relations between the superpowers worsened. Powers was put on trial in Moscow and received a ten-year sentence. He was eventually released 17 months later in a spy-swap with a Soviet spy released from a US jail.

The building of the Berlin Wall 1961

In the 1950s, West Berlin had gone from strength to strength under the economic aid of the Marshall Plan. Its success was a magnet for people dissatisfied with communist life in the East. West Berlin was a hue embarrassment to the USSR, an island of democratic capitalism in a sea of communism. While those in West Berlin enjoyed prosperity, there were few luxury goods in East Berlin as well as food shortages and bad working conditions. Many East Berliners defected to the West; by 1961 over 2 million East Germans had crossed into West Germany.

In 1961 Khrushchev demanded that the West should give up West Berlin. President Kennedy refused. In response, Khrushchev ordered a border of machine guns, barbed wire and concrete to be build along the demarcation line between the two halves of the city. The Soviets threatened to kill anyone who tried to cross the wall. Churchill had spoken of an iron curtain descending in 1946; in 1961 a real wall had been built dividing Berlin in half. Kennedy used the building of the Berlin wall as a propaganda opportunity: if communism was so great, why did the Soviets need to build a wall to keep people in? In 1963 Kennedy visited West Berlin and in his speech he said "Ich bin ein Berliner" (I am a Berliner), this symbolised his support for the city and his determination to prevent its fall to the communists.

The Cuban Missile Crisis 1962

The most serious event of the Cold War occurred in 1962. The Cuban Missile Crisis brought the USA and the USSR to the brink of nuclear war. The crisis was over the deployment of Soviet missiles on Cuba, a very near neighbour of the USA.

Background

From 1933-1959, a right-wing dictator called Batista ruled Cuba. The Americans bought sugar, Cuba’s main crop; they also controlled much of Cuba’s economy. Batista was overthrown by the Marxist Fidel Castro in 1959. The USA did not like Castro and refused to trade with Cuba, as a result Castro seized American assets in Cuba and made an alliance with the USSR.

The Bay of Pigs 1961

President Kennedy tried to overthrow Castro in April 1961. Cuban rebels, with the support of the CIA, launched an invasion of Cuba at the Bay of Pigs. The attack was a disaster and failed dismally. The fiasco convinced Castro that the USA was enemy; he now turned to the USSR for protection.

The Cuban Missile Crisis

In 1962 Khrushchev sent aircraft, boats and ground-to-air missiles to Cuba. Medium-range nuclear weapons were also sent. On 14th October 1962, U2 spy planes confirmed that nuclear missile sites had been built in Cuba for the Soviets. These missiles had a 2500-mile range and could now include most US cities as targets. The situation was dangerous; Kennedy had lost face over the Bay of Pigs and the building of the Berlin wall, he was not prepared to back down again.

On 22nd October Kennedy announced a 500-mile naval blockade of Cuba to prevent nuclear missiles being delivered. Khrushchev was not prepared to go to war, but he did not want to back down either. During the next few days a U2 plane was shot down over Cuba and a Soviet cargo ship was boarded. The world held its breath. On 28th October the USSR agreed to remove its missiles from Cuba; in return the USA ended its blockade on 20th November.

Results

Both the USA and the USSR realised that they had had a narrow escape. Relations between the two sides had to improve. In 1963 a Test Ban Treaty was signed, banning the testing of nuclear weapons in the air or under water. A hot-line was set up between Moscow and Washington. A much greater spirit of co-operation existed between the superpowers after the Cuban Missile Crisis, although there were a number of setbacks e.g. the Prague Spring of 1968. In the 1970s the thaw between the superpowers was known as ‘détente’. Relations worsened after the USSR’s invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, but in 1989 communism collapsed in Eastern Europe and in Russia in 1991. Since then relations between the USA and Russia have improved, although a clear pattern has yet to emerge.