

The Origins of the Cold War

Source A

The first explanation of the origins of the Cold War was not developed by historians but by a policy-maker. Seldom has a single individual done so much to shape American foreign policy as George Kennan in his characterization of the Soviet Union as a paranoid and insecure power that exaggerated the external threats to justify internal repression and cautious expansion. His article, "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," profoundly affected how policy-makers, the American people, and scholars viewed the Soviet Union. Kennan almost single-handedly transformed a former wartime ally into a nervous enemy that needed to be contained. Government officials quickly adopted Kennan's analysis in formulating U.S. foreign policy, and his ideological argument struck a familiar chord with many Americans.

Kennan's intent was not to blame the Soviets for the Cold War but to awaken American policy-makers to the nature of the Soviet threat in the postwar world. The Soviets' proclivity to expand was the result of a paranoid insecurity arising from the Bolsheviks' difficulty in consolidating their revolution of 1917. Kennan emphasized the need to be firm in containing the Soviet tendency to expand. Although Kennan's conception of containment was vague, political support to states near the Soviet border seemed to be the minimum requirement for a successful policy.

Timothy J. White, "Cold War Historiography: New Evidence Behind Traditional Typographies", *International Social Science Review*, Vol. 75, No. 3/4 (Fall-Winter 2000), p. 36.

Source B

Once something has happened, the historian is tempted to assume that it had to happen; but this may often be a highly unphilosophical assumption. The Cold War could have been avoided only if the Soviet Union had not been possessed by convictions both of the infallibility of the communist word and of the inevitability of a communist world. These convictions transformed an impasse between national states into a religious war, a tragedy of possibility into one of necessity. One might wish that America had preserved the poise and proportion of the first years of the Cold War and had not in time succumbed to its own forms of self-righteousness. But the most rational of American policies could hardly have averted the Cold War. Only today, as Russia begins to recede from its messianic mission and to accept, in practice if not yet in principle, the permanence of the world of diversity, only now can the hope flicker that this long, dreary, costly contest may at last be taking on forms less dramatic, less obsessive and less dangerous to the future of mankind.

Arthur Schlesinger Jr., "Origins of the Cold War", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 46, No.1 (Oct. 1967), p. 52.

Source C

With the expansion of the Cold War to the Third World in the 1960s – and especially with the American defeat in Vietnam – radical historians in the West gained a wider audience for their critique of the US role in the conflict. Still staying within the original political agendas of interpretation, these critics argued that the United States, with its increasingly global anticollectivist agenda, had caused and perpetuated the Cold War to at least as high a degree

HIS 354 Research Assignment: Roberts and Westad (2013), Book VII, Ch. 6, Q.4; and Book VIII, Ch. 2, Qs 2, 3, and 4

This is also a HIS 202 and POL 401 topic

as the Soviet Union had. To some of them, the American government's motives were driven by the economic needs of the United States as the global capitalist superpower. To others, Vietnam proved that the United States was simply not suited to pursue change abroad, and that it should rather concentrate on a progressive political agenda at home, rectifying injustices based on race, gender, education, and income levels.

Odd A. Westad, "The Cold War and the international history of the twentieth century", in Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd A. Westad (eds) *The Cambridge History of the Cold War Volume 1: Origins* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 4.

Source D

Something of the future implicit in the great power polarization could dimly be seen before the fighting stopped in Europe. It was made clear, for example, that the Soviets would not be allowed to participate in the occupation of Italy or the dismantling of its colonial empire, and that the British and Americans could not hope for a Polish settlement other than one wanted by Stalin. Yet (in spite of their record in their own hemisphere) the Americans were not happy about explicit spheres of influence; the Soviets were readier to take them as a working basis. There is no need to read back into such divergences assumptions which became current a few years after the war, when conflict between the two powers was presumed to have been sought from the start by one or other of them.

John M. Roberts and Odd A. Westad, *The History of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 6th ed. 2013), p. 971.

Source E

Russia's Great October Socialist Revolution of 1917 triggered a confrontation between the Soviet Union and the United States that would last much of the twentieth century. In its early years, each side aimed to transform the other. American-Soviet conflict became global only in the 1940s, at which point it shaped the international system and every nation in it. In addition to competition over markets or territories, this new form of struggle – the Cold War – was at its root a battle of ideas: American liberalism vs. Soviet Communism.

The ideologies animating the Cold War had centuries-long pedigrees, emerging by the early twentieth century as powerful and compelling visions for social change. These ideologies – explicit ideas and implicit assumptions that provided frameworks for understanding the world and defining action in it – were not antithetical to material interests, but often shaped the way foreign-policy officials understood such interests. Ideologies were lenses that focused, and just as often distorted, understandings of external events and thus the actions taken in response.

David C. Engerman, "Ideology and the Origins of the Cold War, 1917-1962", in Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd A. Westad (eds) *The Cambridge History of the Cold War Volume 1: Origins* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 20.

Essay Question

With reference to these sources and your own knowledge, evaluate the view that the Cold War was inevitable.