Different perspectives on the Cold War  
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Whereas during the Second World War the United States and the Soviet Union had been Allies in the fight against Nazi Germany, after the war the relation between the two countries quickly degenerated into mutual distrust, military and nuclear build-up, and Cold War. The Cold War was a continuing state of political and military tension between the powers of the Western world, led by the USA and the Communist world, led by the USSR. It lasted from approximately 1945 till 1991.

Why did the conflict emerge?
Three different explanations for the emergence of the Cold War
It is part of the nature of history as a discipline that interpretations of the past are always being reassessed (or revised) not just because new facts emerge, but also because historians looking at the same events at different times and in different places view those events through different lenses. This has certainly been the case with historical interpretations of the causes of the Cold War.

Historians have sharply disagreed as to who was responsible for the Cold War, and whether the conflict was inevitable or could have been avoided. Generally speaking, three schools of thought can be identified: the traditionalists, the revisionists, and the post-revisionists.

How did the conflict evolve?
The Greek civil war and the Truman Doctrine
After the evacuation of German forces from Greece in 1944, there were two groups in that country that wanted to take power: the monarchists and the Communists. A civil war soon developed. The Communists were supported by the Soviet Union, and, after the end of the Second World War, also by Yugoslavia, Albania and Bulgaria. Britain and the United States supported the monarchists.

The involvement of the United States in the Greek civil war marked a new era in their attitude towards world politics. The new approach became known as the “Truman Doctrine” and it would guide U.S. diplomacy for the next forty years. The doctrine was established on 12 March 1947, when President Harry S. Truman delivered a speech before Congress in which he called for the allocation of $400 million in military and economic assistance for Greece and Turkey. In his speech, Truman declared:

It must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures.

How is/was this conflict perceived at the time and since?
A letter from President Truman
On 5 January 1946, President Truman sent a handwritten letter to Secretary of State James Byrnes, in which he stated that the Russians “have been a headache to us ever since” the war in Japan ended. On the last page Truman instructs Byrnes to stop “babying the Soviets.”

What impact did the conflict have on people's lives?
Willy Brandt on the Berlin Blockade
Willy Brandt, future West German Social Democratic chancellor, was an assistant to the mayor of West Berlin during the Berlin Blockade of 1948-1949. He described what life was like in Berlin throughout this crisis:

At the beginning of the blockade the supplies in the west sectors were enough to guarantee the barely sufficient rations for approximately four weeks at maximum. In the first months just enough food was brought in by air to secure the further issue of the rations and to save the Berliners from starving to death – but hunger they could not be spared.

The stock of coal was supposed to last for thirty days but it was impossible to replenish it to the same extent as the urgently needed food. Apartments and the greater part of offices – even the administration buildings – could no longer be heated. Every family got for the whole winter an allotment of twenty-five pounds of coal and three boxes of wood. Some fuel was smuggled in by black-marketeers. Most of the families were glad when they could keep one room of their apartment moderately warm for a few hours of the day. Fortunately, the winter was not particularly severe. (…)
Electric current was only available for four hours daily, usually in two periods of two hours each. These periods came at different times of day in different sections of the city, and people had to rise at odd hours in order to take advantage of the available current. (...) The Berliners did not waver, though in addition to hunger and cold – particularly in the first months of the blockade – they were subjected to a vicious fear propaganda. The Soviets declared that all of Berlin was theirs, and their newspapers in German language didn’t cease to foretell the realization of that claim. They spread rumors of different kinds, they didn’t spare threats and intimidations. Thus, here and there, doubts arose as to whether one would be able to resist the Russian pressure in the long run. The retaliation and vengeance in case of a defeat would be terrible. Source: J.M. Hanhimäki & O.A. Westad (eds.), The Cold War: a history in documents and eyewitness accounts (Oxford 2004).

What were the consequences?

Mutually Assured Destruction

Both the U.S. and the USSR had the nuclear weapons to destroy the other side. This led to a situation in which neither side would dare to attack first, since the other would retaliate with equal or greater force. Nuclear weapons thus deterred both superpowers from attacking first. This policy was known as Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD). Khrushchev remembers:

I remember President Kennedy once stated (...) that the United States had the nuclear missile capacity to wipe out the Soviet Union two times over, while the Soviet Union had enough atomic weapons to wipe out the United States only once. (...) When journalists asked me to comment (...) I said jokingly, ‘Yes I know what Kennedy claims, and he’s quite right. But I’m not complaining, (...) We’re satisfied to be able to finish off the United States first time round. Once is quite enough. What good does it do to annihilate a country twice? We’re not a bloodthirsty people’.


What is the legacy?

Unipolarity

The aftermath of the Cold War continues to influence world affairs. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, some considered the post-Cold War world to be “unipolar,” with the United States as the sole remaining superpower and the key engine of globalization. Besides, the U.S. was the only nation capable of projecting its military influence around the world.

Many observers also agreed that capitalism had finally triumphed. Even in the few countries where Communism remained the official ideology, the appeal of the free market could not be held in check. China in particular was determined to bring back an entire capitalist sector.

How does this fit into the bigger picture?

The changing nature of international relations from 1850 onwards

How do you describe the bigger picture of a conflict that was global in scope and that covered much of the second half of the twentieth century? This key question attempts to illustrate the bigger picture of the Cold War by analyzing the changing nature of international relations and the shifting international position of Russia and the United States from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards.

The nineteenth century saw the decline of the Spanish, Portuguese, French, Chinese, Holy Roman, and Mughal Empires. This paved the way for the rise of the British, German, and Japanese Empires, but at the end of this century the influence of the United States and Russian on the world stage also grew.