Ideology and the origins of the Cold War, 1917–1962

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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.

Ideologies in conflict and in common

Though American leaders typically proclaimed their immunity from ideological temptations, this self-perception ignored a rich tradition of American thought and policy that developed, defined, and acted upon a clear set of ideological premises. The foreign policy of the United States, like so much else in that country, drew on a long tradition of liberalism originating in the ideas of John Locke. As the etymology suggests, Lockean liberalism was, at its core, a theory of liberty, one that viewed liberty as defined for the individual, based in law, and rooted in property. The Declaration of Independence paraphrased Locke in proclaiming human beings “endowed by their Creator” with rights to “life, liberty and [where Locke had emphasized property] the pursuit of happiness.” Liberty could be protected only by a system of laws in a polity guaranteeing popular sovereignty. A government, furthermore, should provide only formal freedoms (protecting the rights of property and participation), not substantive ones (equality of condition).

American liberalism evolved beyond Locke’s ideas. It was progressive, implying that liberty was on a forward march and equating the spread of American influence with the spread of liberty. American liberalism saw this march as steady and gradual; too-rapid change was likely to result in tyranny or mob rule. It had an important economic basis; the spread of liberty could be measured by the spread of market economies allowing the free exchange of goods. American liberalism’s focus on formal equality meant, in the international realm, an emphasis on structures of statehood rather than on power differentials that might restrict nominal sovereignty.

Racial hierarchy touched all aspects of American liberalism in both its domestic and foreign-policy aspects. The notion that rising American influence was tantamount to the rise of liberty, for instance, led directly to the claims that westward expansion was both providential and inevitable—as the term “Manifest Destiny” suggests. American liberty was destined to grow; the fate of Native Americans, therefore, was to yield to the greater civilization, even if that meant extinction: “the United States ‘check the course of human happiness,’” one Congressman asked in 1830, “merely to save the ‘wigwam of the red hunter?’” Many peoples were seen as unworthy of the blessings of liberty. The liberal defense of black slavery rested on claims that the slaves were unfit to rule themselves. And racial hierarchies applied globally. Repulsed by the wave of South American independence movements in the early nineteenth century, John Quincy Adams declared that “You cannot make liberty out of Spanish material.”

Political scientist-turned-president Woodrow Wilson, writing at the dawn of the American rise to world power, incorporated these strands of liberalism into his notion of politics. Wilson saw American history as a guide to the world’s future. His national history was a story of ordered liberty gradually attained; he celebrated the founding generation as “statesmen,” not “revolutionists,” noting George Washington’s “passion for order.”

Writing in 1902, in the aftermath of the Spanish–American War, Wilson described the United States' ultimate aim as the liberation of Cuba from Spanish tyranny, setting it on the path to "self-government." But self-government, he warned, was a thing of "infinite difficulty" and best not come too soon. Wilson saw liberal democracy as the endpoint of history, but appropriate only at advanced stages of development; democracy, he had noted earlier, "is poison to the infant but tonic to the man." On this scale, Russians, like Cubans, were immature — "a people dumb and without knowledge of speech" in matters political. These views found full expression in Wilson's expansive global vision in the aftermath of World War I. Wilson sought a liberal world order much like his vision of the American Revolution, ordered liberty gradually attained — with self-determination for those ready to assume such obligations.

Soviet ideology is much easier to describe and analyze than its American counterpart. Soviet leaders proclaimed their ideology obsessively, trumpeting slogans on stationery and street corners alike. Even as domestic and foreign policies shifted, Soviet ideological claims remained constant; each shift had an explanation rooted in what came to be called Marxism-Leninism (or, from the 1930s through the 1950s, Marxism-Leninism-Stalinism). Especially before the mid-1960s, Marxist ideology was a key part of the framework in which Soviet foreign and domestic policy were made. The trove of once-secret documents declassified in the 1990s make clear that Lenin and his successors did not use ideology as mere cover for those ready to assume such obligations.

The starting point for Soviet ideology is Karl Marx's theory of capitalism. What made this conflict an ideological one — and why — has been the subject of much discussion among historians. What set these antithetical visions of social organization had in the past maintained agreement between the two countries. But other nations with antithetical visions of social organization had in the past maintained diplomatic relations. What made this conflict an ideological one — and ultimately into the Cold War — inhered in the nature of the ideologies themselves. Soviet and American ideologies were both universalistic; they both held that their conceptions of society applied to all nations and peoples. Both nations prided themselves on their modernity, seeking to supplant what they saw as the moribund traditions of Europe — and ultimately to transform Europe itself. Both nations, furthermore, subscribed to progressive ideologies; they portrayed history as an irreversible march to improvement, which they defined as the spread of their own influence. Each side feared the advance of the other as a step backward. Americans understood Soviet expansion as a direct blow to the gradual spread of freedom, while Soviet observers saw American expansion as proof that the final crisis of capitalism was near. Both ideologies, finally, exhibited a tension between determinism and messianism. Leaders on each side believed that history itself was on their side, but at the same time exhibited a certain impatience with the workings of history; neither side was willing to stand aside and let history take its course. Thus, both countries equated the growth of their own power with historical progress. For this reason, the USA and the USSR represented new

its collapse. Capitalism would ultimately fall before a proletarian revolution that ushered in the age of Communism. Marx viewed history as a predetermined process ending in human liberation — in the form of Communist society.

What did these theories of history and freedom mean for Soviet ideology? First, Soviet ideology was deterministic: bourgeois and proletarian alike had little choice but to obey history's iron laws. Second, Communism dismissed liberalism's emphasis on gradual change; "revolutions," Marx had it, "are the locomotives of history." Third, Soviet ideology rejected capitalist institutions as creatures of the ruling class; the state was, in Marx's words, the "executive committee of the bourgeoisie." The political rights that stood at the center of American liberalism were, to Marxists, charades that helped maintain capitalist rule. Bourgeois democracy, sneered Lenin, offered democracy only to the bourgeoisie. The dismissal of bourgeois institutions shaped Soviet notions of foreign relations, too. Relations between governments served only the class interests of the respective national bourgeoisies. Soviet leaders would deal instead with other nations' revolutionary forces.

That American and Soviet ideologies were set in direct opposition to each other ensured disagreement between the two countries. But other nations with antithetical visions of social organization had in the past maintained diplomatic relations. What made this conflict an ideological one — and ultimately into the Cold War — inhered in the nature of the ideologies themselves. Soviet and American ideologies were both universalistic; they both held that their conceptions of society applied to all nations and peoples. Both nations prided themselves on their modernity, seeking to supplant what they saw as the moribund traditions of Europe — and ultimately to transform Europe itself. Both nations, furthermore, subscribed to progressive ideologies; they portrayed history as an irreversible march to improvement, which they defined as the spread of their own influence. Each side feared the advance of the other as a step backward. Americans understood Soviet expansion as a direct blow to the gradual spread of freedom, while Soviet observers saw American expansion as proof that the final crisis of capitalism was near. Both ideologies, finally, exhibited a tension between determinism and messianism. Leaders on each side believed that history itself was on their side, but at the same time exhibited a certain impatience with the workings of history; neither side was willing to stand aside and let history take its course. Thus, both countries equated the growth of their own power with historical progress. For this reason, the USA and the USSR represented new

forms of international politics. Proclaiming their universalism and messianism, they each sought to transform the whole world as a means to social progress. With such broad aspirations, permanent coexistence was impossible.
Until they did so, he wrote, Russian revolutionaries were in a "besieged fortress, waiting for other detachments of the world socialist revolution to come to our relief." The Soviets hoped these detachments would arrive in 1919, as revolutionary insurrections sprang up in Bavaria, Vienna, and Budapest. The wait, however, would be long indeed; by year's end, the revolutionary tide in the West had subsided, leaving Russia's Bolshevik regime global in principle but isolated in practice.

In 1921, the Comintern belatedly acknowledged that the 1917 revolution had not led to the overthrow of world capitalism, and concluded that different tactics were in order. Revolutionaries, it declared, must turn their energies to supporting Soviet Russia, which alone was carrying the socialist banner. The imminence of the revolution was a particular problem for American Communists; as the most advanced capitalist economy, the United States should theoretically have been closest to revolution. Lenin acknowledged the complexity, though, in his letters to American workers: a socialist revolution in the United States was not imminent, and thus socialism and capitalism would coexist for a time. The many defeats for American labor and radicalism in the 1920s made the a priori logic of an imminent revolution seem even less suitable. American Communists debated the "American exception" from Marx's laws of revolution. The Comintern's American Commission adjudicated the dispute; its head, Stalin, criticized those Americans who ignored the fact that the principal features of capitalism were identical in all countries. Marx's laws of revolution allowed no "American exception."

In the decade after the Bolshevik Revolution, then, the implications of Soviet ideology became clear: aspiring to world revolution, it sought to unite progressive forces in the developed world under its control. Since the USSR was the beacon of revolution, the long-term goal of world revolution came with a short-term goal of building up the USSR. Anything that strengthened the bastion of world revolution, therefore, would advance world revolution.

American leaders, meanwhile, saw the Russian Revolution as a threat to liberty. The strands of American liberalism—formal liberty, gradually attained; popular sovereignty; racial hierarchy; and market-based individualism—shaped American responses to Russian events. Understanding Bolshevik power as mob rule, American leaders decried Bolshevism alternately as a catalyst of murder and repression and as an inevitable descent into anarchy. President Wilson saw Russians as guided by irrational impulses rather than detached rationality; as with his encomiums to the founding fathers, popular sovereignty was orderly. Thus, Wilson's praise of Russia was tinged with condescension; his famous war address in April 1917 praised Russians' "natural instinct" for democracy—not their rational hopes for it. Wilson and his administration spent more time, however, describing baser Russian instincts, ones that revealed Russia's political immaturity and danger to the advance of liberal democratic civilization. From the point of view of American policymakers, then, the Russian Revolution had two problems: it was Russian and it was a revolution.

Wilson also saw the Russian problem in a broader ideological context, in which the Bolsheviks were interfering with human progress. "Bolshevism is a mistake," he told one interlocutor, "and it must be resisted as all mistakes are resisted. If let alone it will destroy itself. It cannot survive because it is wrong." He also opposed Allied intervention in Soviet Russia—though only months later he reluctantly approved American actions against Bolshevik rule. Wilson convinced himself that only American military aid and troop deployments in Russia would keep history on the proper path. The United States, then, fought Soviet Russia in the name of ordered liberty, national sovereignty, and gradual progress.

Wilson's messianic liberalism appeared not only in the White House but also among some of its sharpest critics in the 1910s. A circle of writers and diplomat led by Progressives were such firm believers in historical progress that they could imagine only a bright future for Russia, in spite of all the available evidence. Bolshevism, in this analysis, was a necessary phase before the inevitable normalization of the country. No evidence to the contrary could shake American liberals' conviction that Russia would soon conform to the American model.

Interwar to World War II: searching for convergence

Barring any changes in the USSR, though, the United States adopted an official policy of nonrecognition. The announcement came in 1920, only months after the troops had departed. Secretary of State Bainbridge Colby declared that the US government could not recognize Soviet Russia because of the Comintern's aim of world revolution. A lack of diplomatic relations, however,

9 PWW, XL, 524.
10 PWW, LX, 154.
did not impede an increasing range of American-Soviet interactions in the 1920s, interactions which revealed Americans' hopes that the Soviet Union could become a liberal state like the United States. American observers optimistically greeted Lenin's announcement of the "New Economic Policy" (NEP) in March 1921. NEP reduced state control of the economy to the "commanding heights," allowed market forces freer play, and encouraged the use of economic concessions with foreign firms.

Soviet agreements with American firms during NEP revealed both ideologies in action. American governmental officials saw no contradiction between diplomatic nonintercourse and unofficial economic relations; what made free markets free, after all, was their distance from governmental authority. At the same time, many observers saw NEP as proof that the Soviet Union was quickly evolving toward capitalism. One business periodical celebrated NEP-era Soviet Russia as "a great capitalist experiment - perhaps the greatest of modern times." Henry Ford expressed this aspect of American market ideology most succinctly: Communist theory, he declared upon opening a Ford plant in the USSR in 1929, "makes little difference ... for in the long run facts" - economic facts - "will control." By recognizing the need for markets, the Soviet Union was heading the American way. At the same time, Soviets celebrated the economic agreements as proof of the iron laws of capitalism; Lenin boasted to a comrade that they showed how capitalists contributed to "the preparation of their own suicide." American relief during the Soviet famine of 1921-23 revealed similar ideological dispositions. Many American officials hoped that their efforts would reconstruct Russia right out of Bolshevism; aid would be a crucial step in the transformation of Soviet Russia into a normal capitalist system. The Soviets, meanwhile, saw the relief program as an opportunity to learn American economic and industrial techniques - even from committed anti-Bolsheviks like Herbert Hoover.

By the late 1920s, as the Soviet Union abandoned NEP for its first Five-Year Plan, Americans remained captivated by the Soviet experiment but for different reasons. They celebrated the application of American technology, even if used to catch up with and surpass the United States in industrial production. American enthusiasts embraced the plans because they represented an effective if brutal means of transforming a backward agricultural economy into a modern industrial nation. The stock-market crash of 1929 only spurred further interest in Soviet planning, sending hundreds of fact-finders and thousands of American engineers and workers to the USSR in the early plan era (the 1930s). Most enthusiasts celebrated Soviet practices, not Communist doctrine. New Deal Stuart Chase, for instance, lauded Soviet economic planning but dismissed the relevance of Marxist theory; John Dewey did the same for Soviet education.

The Depression that wracked the capitalist world in the 1930s gave further hope to those looking for signs of American-Soviet convergence. The New Deal in the United States represented a step away from the individualist and free-market orientation that had defined American liberalism. As New Deal agencies moved toward "organized capitalism," with a stronger government role in the economy, their operatives looked with envy at the Soviet central-planning apparatus. At the same time, the Soviet turn toward "socialism in one country" suggested to many observers that the USSR was abandoning its global aspirations in favor of "normal" economic development within its own borders. Nor was the convergence solely economic; Americans saw Stalin's social policies in the mid-1930s as a rejection of revolution and a return to normality what one sociologist termed the "Great Retreat" from ideology. Ambassador Joseph Davies led the charge in claiming that Communism had given way to human nature and common sense under Stalin; he was not the only American searching desperately for normality in the increasingly repressive Stalinist system.

The Soviet vision of the interwar United States was a perfect inverse. Irrespective of the 1920s boom, the Comintern announced the arrival of Communism's "Third Period," which took as its central premise that the revolution was nigh. Under such circumstances, Communists needed to be especially vigilant against other leftist parties that might mislead the proletariat. The practical effects of this policy were minimal: outside the precincts of the far Left, which were roiled by Communist obstreperousness. The 1929 crash bolstered Comintern claims, as the Soviets interpreted the growing economic crisis in the West to mean that the capitalist system was on its last legs. Stalin gleefully contrasted the economic fortunes of the USA and USSR.

In 1928, there had been a "halo around the United States" amidst "triumphant hymns of prosperity." Two years later, economic crisis reigned in the capitalist world. "Things," Stalin gloated, "have turned out exactly as the Bolshevics said they would." Given capitalism's crisis, Soviet leaders reasoned,
companies would be looking to new markets, including the USSR, to sell their goods. Stalin was right. Many American business leaders promoted diplomatic recognition as the first step toward increasing commerce with the Soviet Union; liberal ideas, they argued, would follow free trade.

Not just economic but also geopolitical concerns led to US-Soviet diplomatic recognition in 1933. Adolf Hitler's ascension in Germany that year initiated a sequence of events that would have a profound effect on the American–Soviet relationship. Hitler's rise demonstrated the vigor of supposedly archaic forces of racial nationalism; the old order continued in spite of liberal (Wilsonian) and radical (Leninist) challenges. The Soviet Union used a variety of diplomatic tools against Nazism, seeking a collective security agreement that would isolate Germany by uniting Western powers against it. The Comintern promoted a "Popular Front" against Fascism, with the aim of uniting once-reviled leftists (including even some New Dealers) against the Nazi threat. Germany responded in kind, signing the Anti-Comintern Pact with Japan and Italy (1936). The United States and the Soviet Union also shared concerns over Japanese expansion into Manchuria. The United States, meanwhile, remained neutral in European conflicts through the 1930s. The threat on the Right brought together — temporarily at least — liberal (American) and radical (Soviet) challenges to the old order, deferring direct confrontation.

Before the war against Nazi Germany began, however, another Soviet reversal created international upheavals. The August 1939 Nazi–Soviet Pact quickly replaced the Popular Front against Fascism with a new strategy, a nonaggression pact (along with a secret division of Poland). Soviet leaders defended the agreement on ideological grounds; since capitalism led inevitably to Fascism, the argument went, there was no reason to single out Fascism. Soviet leaders claimed instead that the cause of world revolution was best served by treating all capitalist countries with equal disdain and by seeking advantage (in this case, buying time for a military buildup) in whatever alliances it could establish. The next two years were difficult ones for Western Communists: the post-pact party line that all forms of capitalism — Fascist or not — were a threat did not play well with the many radicals attracted to the Popular Front against Fascism. The Soviet foreign minister defended the pact by reminding the world's radicals that the interests of the USSR were identical to the interests of world revolution, but few Western radicals were convinced. As a result, the pact amounted to an earthquake: the structures of the Popular Front were flattened and radical intellectuals fled the scene in droves; few such refugees ever returned. The pact also increased Western doubts about Soviet ideology, even among those once sympathetic to the Soviet cause; how could an ideology be capacious enough to promote a broad alliance against Fascism (the Popular Front) at one moment and a nonaggression pact with the most dangerous Fascist power the next? Many such doubts were rendered moot by Nazi Germany in 1941.

The German attack on the Soviet Union in June 1941, followed by the German declaration of war on the United States in the aftermath of Pearl Harbor that December, brought the USA and USSR together. The Grand Alliance, as Stalin noted, did not deny ideological differences, but sought to work together on common aims. By 1943, the Comintern, the Soviet organ of world revolution, closed its doors, a sign that world revolution was not imminent. The CPUSA (Communist Party of the United States of America) followed Moscow's cue, changing its name to the Communist Political Association and softening its rhetoric. Indeed, Soviet authorities played up national and even nationalistic themes over internationalist ones during the war, suggesting perhaps that the alliance, however grand, was primarily tactical. American optimism about the USSR — and its ostensible similarities to the United States — also ran high. Pitirim Sorokin, a Russian émigré sociologist at Harvard, wrote Russia and the United States (1944), which pointed toward a future convergence between his birthplace and his current residence. While Sorokin's book did not represent official opinion, President Roosevelt cited approvingly the notion of American–Soviet convergence. This illusion would not survive long past the war itself.

From bipolar to global conflict

The defeat of Nazi Germany in 1945 cleared the stage for the expansion of American–Soviet ideological conflict into a global cold war. Each side concluded, according to its own ideological dispositions, that the specter of Nazism outlasted Hitler. Americans saw the Soviet Union as totalitarian — just like Nazi Germany. And the Soviets, who saw Fascism as the logical outcome of capitalism, saw the United States as moving on the path toward Fascism most recently trodden by Germany. The resounding defeat of Nazi Germany represented, furthermore, a broader defeat for the old order of nationalism and imperialism that Wilson and Lenin had so powerfully (but unsuccessfully) attacked in the aftermath of World War I. With the final defeat of a conservative alternative, the radical and liberal visions of world order faced off against one another.

The factors making the Cold War a war related to longstanding ideological differences combined with common features of the two ideologies (universalism,
messianism, and determinism). Believing itself the end of history, and believing that historical progress was itself inexorable, each side expected to conquer the other and the rest of the world. But what made the Cold War cold? The Cold War did not center on direct conflict between the two superpowers because the two were not focused on the immediate transformation or conquest of the other. Of course, other chilling factors went beyond the ideological: a desire to avoid total war after the devastating experience of World War II and the development of atomic weapons. But even in the earliest years of the Cold War, when the United States had a nuclear monopoly, it did not seriously contemplate an attack. And, even at their most reckless, Soviet leaders never came close to contemplating a nuclear first strike.

The emergence of two distinct worlds—the "Free World" and the "Socialist Bloc"—represented not a rejection of messianism, only the temporary reduction of its sphere of operation. While each side maintained its belief that history would eventually create the ideal global society, each side also acknowledged that such a society might be a long time in coming. Soviet authorities continued fulminating against capitalism but held few serious thoughts that the United States would soon go Communist. Recognizing the short-term viability of the capitalist world economy did not mean that Marx’s "locomotive of history" had been derailed or was running on the wrong track; it would just make an extended station stop so far as the United States was concerned. For its part, the American foreign-policy apparatus had given up, for the time being, on converting the USSR to capitalism.

World War II loomed large in American and Soviet views of each other. First, the defeat of Nazism contributed to the decline of racial nationalism and imperialist expansion as international forces. Second, the military victory of the Soviet Union over Germany demonstrated that it had become sufficiently modern and powerful to repel the Nazi war machine. The dream that the USSR was evolving toward liberal capitalism seemed all the more unrealistic after the hard-won victory in World War II. "Totalitarian" societies such as the Soviet Union, scholars argued, had reached the end of internal historical development; they were no longer susceptible to internal transformation according to the laws of history. Totalitarianism could be dislodged only through military defeat. Soviets, too, rethought the future of the capitalist world, as Eugen Varga, the influential Soviet economist, suggested that capitalism had won a temporary reprieve from imminent crisis as a result of the New Deal and the war. These modifications did not affect the ultimate ideological goals, only the timeframe for their fulfillment. Each of the two

universalist ideologies still maintained the assumption that the other would end up in the dustbin of history— but also the expectation that victory would be only in the distant future.

With no hopes of transforming the antagonists themselves, the American-Soviet conflict became a bipolar one in which the poles themselves were off-limits. Cold War conflict took place over membership in the "Free World" and the "Socialist Bloc," but not over who would lead each side. Thus the story of the Cold War was the story of boundaries, establishing the outer limits of each sphere of influence and competing for those who had not yet pitched their tents in one camp or the other. This situation did not make the Cold War less ideological, but more so. The conflict was ideological precisely because the two sides measured their own positions in terms of their ability to replicate their social systems around the world. Yet, at the same time, the superpowers pursued ideological aims in the broadest possible terms. They tended to see every conflict as black and white—or perhaps as red vs. red-white-and-blue—and thus to give a great deal of leeway to allies who did not fit their ideological precepts. Soviet leaders worked with "bourgeois" or military regimes in the name of furthering Communism and world peace, while American leaders supported dictators and cartels in the name of democracy and free trade. The world became a sort of oversized scoreboard measuring the relative success of each social system. The Cold War was fought on neutral ground or, more precisely, to make neutral ground less so.

As an ideological conflict, the Cold War would be defined by four features. First, it would be marked by competition to win new adherents to one or the other economic and social system. Both sides maintained empires, as John Lewis Gaddis noted, but of a very different sort. In Europe, the United States led an "empire by invitation" while the USSR ruled an "empire by imposition." Second, the principal locus of American-Soviet conflict would undergo geographic shifts from one region to another, as nations committed themselves to one camp or the other. The Cold War first divided Europe and then moved on to Asia, Latin America, and eventually Africa. As it did so, the distinction between empires of invitation and imposition blurred; the Soviets were often more "invited," and the Americans more "imposing," in the Third World. Third, economic production and technological advance would be key instruments in American-Soviet competition. Direct economic competition between the superpowers underwrote the expansion of influence around the world, but also demonstrated the superiority of an economic system. Finally,

the Cold War revolved around understandings of the enemy (and the world) that were deeply rooted in each ideology. Soviet leaders, believing imperialism to be the highest stage of capitalism, saw American globalism as a desperate effort to stave off collapse. For their part, most American officials explained Soviet expansion as a single-minded ambition for world revolution. And with this mutual projection came the conviction, strongly held on both sides, that the antagonist was denying present realities and interfering with a future that would inevitably lead to its own demise.

From war to Cold War

These features of ideological conflict took shape in the crucial years of 1946 and 1947. The winter of 1946 was a long and cold one—not just in terms of European weather, which made the reconstruction of that war-ruined continent all the more pressing, but in the climate of international relations as well. In February 1946, Stalin struck a confident tone during a speech in the "Stalin Electoral District" in Moscow during the sham election campaign of 1946. In this unconventional campaign speech—how could he lose in a district named after him?—Stalin drew lessons from World War II. Like incumbents everywhere, Stalin recited accomplishments under his rule, extolling the USSR's new status as a modern economic and military power; the war demonstrated that "the Soviet social order" is "superior to any non-Soviet social order." Yet, Stalin continued, the USSR could not rest on its laurels; it must prepare for future conflict. The recent war had been the "inevitable result" of the capitalist system, proving once again Marxism-Leninism-Stalinism's iron law: capitalism meant war.16 The speech attracted wide attention in the United States; Justice William O. Douglas called it a "declaration of World War Three."17 This sharp reaction revealed as much about American predispositions as it did about Soviet dispositions. Stalin waved neither an olive branch nor an unsheathed sword at the United States; he wanted the USSR to prepare for war by increasing production—not just of military materiel, but also of consumer goods. Economic strength would mean not just military power but also an improved standard of living. Both would be essential tools in the upcoming ideological struggle.

Stalin's speech marked a new phase of American-Soviet relations. The mood of this new era was best articulated by US diplomat George F. Kennan, then working in the Moscow embassy. His famous "Long..." simplified Soviet postwar politics to a version of two camps. He quoted Stalin's statement that there were only "two centers of significance," adding that the Soviet leader was "committed fanatically, with..." that there could be no "permanent modus vivendi" between them. The greatest danger, the American warned, came in the ideological nature of power; it seems "inaccessible to considerations of reality," instead of being "arbitrarily and tendentiously" a few facts "to bolster an already preconceived."18 Yet the gloomy Kennan sounded a few notes of optimism. He described Soviet leaders as opportunistic, ready to exploit but not to overpower strong resistance. American strength and resolve would prevent the expansion of Soviet power; this view provided the premise for Kennan's notion of containment of the Soviet Union. The flipside of containment was integration—bringing the Free World together—and here Kennan called for American leadership.

Next month Winston Churchill coined a new term for the dividing line between the two worlds: the Iron Curtain. Churchill sounded an alarm bell based on Britain's errors in the 1930s. Nazi Germany had been the greater and stronger while Western powers stood idly by; they must not make the same mistake with the USSR. In the past, statesmen could balance the power to maintain world peace; that outmoded notion, he argued, could not counteract the Soviet threat to Anglo-Saxon civilization. The enthusiastic American response to this speech, in both the official and public arenas, showed how it resonated with American ideology. Kennan rebutted the "Iron Curtain" speech the following week, opening his statement that Churchill and his allies in the United States were different from Hitler. Each side claimed to find the Nazi specter in the other.

Yet assessments of the postwar world similarly emphasized conflict; "within" the capitalist world. In September 1946, the Soviet ambassador in Washington, N. V. Novikov, sent an alarmist telegram to Moscow; it attributed foreign policy to "the imperialistic tendencies of American capitalism." The Americans would seek global domination through an expanding network of military bases and the spread of American economies all over the world. Yet Novikov's dispatch, representing Foreign Ministry's views, foresaw intercapitalist rivalry—USA vs. UK—as...
the main threat. The postwar world would be divided, but the sides were not yet entirely clear.  

That same September, presidential advisers Clark Clifford and George Elsey took Kennan’s alarms about the USSR and linked them more specifically to Soviet ideology. Soviet leaders keenly believed Marx’s theory that capitalism would ultimately destroy itself. Given the Soviet propensity to expand its influence and control wherever and whenever possible, Clifford and Elsey argued, the United States should come to the aid of any nation threatened by Soviet expansion. The United States should orient its diplomacy and military toward the prevention of Soviet expansion, not toward the elimination of the Soviet Union itself. Even dissenting voices envisioned two worlds. Secretary of Commerce Henry Wallace, for instance, lost his job for condemning American bellicosity toward the Soviet Union – but he, too, imagined spheres of influence.

The year 1946 saw both the United States and the USSR move toward acceptance of a bifurcated world. Each side believed that it would ultimately prevail – the laws of history dictated its victory – but the time horizon for this victory receded into an ever-more-distant future. In the meantime, there would be little direct effort to create an American SSR, or to destroy the Soviet regime. The remaining task, in 1947, was to define the two worlds as ideological, not national, opponents, and to give the American-Soviet conflict its final shape as a conflict between different social systems each intent on expansion. The American case was made, most prominently, by President Harry Truman in March 1947. Responding to Britain’s retreat from the eastern Mediterranean, Truman announced his doctrine that the United States would intervene in the name of freedom in Greece, and wherever else freedom was threatened. In defining the Cold War as a battle of freedom against totalitarianism, Truman invested the two worlds with ideological content while striking what would be a common refrain about the Cold War as a battle between different ways of life. Like Churchill, he drew an explicit parallel between the rising conflict with the USSR and the conflicts that gave rise to World War II.

39 Ibid., 3.
Communism. Though Varga faced stringent criticisms for these views, within a few years his vision of capitalist stabilization would take hold. And even as Varga wrote, Soviet economists placed less emphasis on intercapitalist rivalry and envisioned a capitalist world united against the USSR. Senior Communist Party official Andrei Zhdanov, in September 1947, offered a similar message to foreign Communists. He compared postwar American expansion to Germany in the 1930s; the rising tide of anti-Communism was only a cover for its expansionist designs. Soviet foreign policy, in contrast, accepted that capitalism and socialism would coexist for the foreseeable future. Zhdanov's speech neatly encapsulated the postwar Soviet posture: he compared American capitalism to German Fascism and expressed a Soviet acceptance of a world divided in two.

Back in Washington, Kennan authored the single most important article of the 1940s. "The Sources of Soviet Conduct" (by a certain "X") revised his Long Telegram, placing ideology at the center of Soviet behavior. Soviet foreign policy, Kennan concluded, was shaped by two tenets of Marxism-Leninism: the "innate antagonism between capitalism and Socialism" and "the infallibility of the Kremlin." His famous article described the American-Soviet conflict as an ideological one; the Soviet Union was not a nation in the traditional sense, but the terrestrial incarnation of an ideology. The task of the United States, then, was to limit the range of Soviet action: "no mystical, Messianic movement – and particularly not ... the Kremlin – can face frustration indefinitely without eventually adjusting itself ... to the logic of that state of affairs." To change Soviet policy, the United States needed not to eliminate the Soviet Union – only, famously, to contain it. A contained Soviet Union, the logic went, would be less aggressive internationally and less stable domestically; it would ultimately collapse of its own internal contradictions.

Kennan offered an elegant exposition of the United States' task for the postwar world. It merited a fourteen-part response from the country's most influential commentator on foreign affairs, Walter Lippmann, who challenged Kennan's basic premise; the sources of Soviet conduct, the columnist wrote, were Russian, not Marxist. Lippmann argued that Stalin was the heir not of Marx but of Peter the Great, continuing the tsar's efforts to expand Russia's influence. Though the American chattering classes favored X's ideological explanation over Lippmann's national one, the columnist had at least one lasting impact. When his columns appeared in book form in early November 1947, they bore a title that outlasted its author: "The Cold War. Three decades to the week after the Bolsheviks took power, American-Soviet conflict now had a new form and a new name.

The remainder of the late 1940s focused primarily on the division of Europe. The American Marshall Plan (announced in 1947) sought to reconstruct Europe and integrate Western Europe while containing Soviet influence to the eastern and southeastern portions of that continent. The establishment of the Cominform (1947) amounted to a belated and impoverished Soviet effort to integrate its own European sphere – by imposing tighter Soviet control backed up with military force. At the center of the early Cold War was Germany, under four-power military occupation (by Britain, France, the USSR, and the United States) in the late 1940s; the occupation of Berlin, deep in the Soviet zone, was similarly divided. The Soviet Union challenged this division, in 1948 blockading ground transportation between the western zones of Germany and Berlin. Rendering West Berlin a "Free World" island in the middle of a Red Sea, the blockade prompted a strong Western response – but not a military one. The airlift of supplies to West Berlin indicated Western resolve to contain the Soviet Union; the United States was not in a position to roll back Soviet power, but would act assertively to limit its expansion. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO, 1949) provided a military component to earlier forms of economic integration of Western Europe under American leadership and the American nuclear umbrella. When the Soviets ended the blockade a year later, the map of Cold War Europe had been drawn. Both sides repeated their ideological claims that the continent would eventually turn to their own way of life; in practice, though, the Iron Curtain separated the two realms.

The most influential American policy document of the early 1950s expressed the two-world concept in language bristling with ideological confidence. NSC 68, an official doctrine approved in April 1950, opened with the messianic claim that "the idea of freedom is the most contagious idea in history." The contrast with the Soviet system was total: "No other value system is so irreconcilable with ours." The American response must be firm, though it would not entail, for the foreseeable future, direct military engagement. Instead, the United States must "place the maximum strain on the Soviet structure of power." The immediate goal was not the elimination of the USSR but instead the "emergence of satellite countries as entities independent of the USSR." Following NSC 68, American foreign policy directed significant resources to psychological warfare but avoided direct military confrontation.

Soviet pronouncements expressed similar confidence. In his last statements on foreign policy, Stalin insisted that intercapitalist rivalry was inevitable; it

would eventually destroy capitalism from within and leave Communism victorious. "Eventually" was a key qualifier here; in other writings, Stalin counseled patience to those economists who wanted to move too quickly toward Communism. The transition to Communism, he scolded, was a "difficult trick." Communism's victory was inevitable, but not imminent. When the architects of the Cold War, Truman and Stalin, both left the scene in 1953, the ideological orientations were firmly in place for their successors.

In its next phase, American–Soviet ideological conflict expanded into Asia. While neither Lenin nor Stalin had evinced serious hopes for a colonial revolution, the facts on the ground — most notably Mao Zedong's establishment of the People's Republic of China in late 1949 — showed the power of Communist appeals outside Europe. Asia became all the more important to the Cold War as decolonization, starting with British India in 1947, replaced European empires with a welter of new states. While the Clifford–Elsey and Novikov memoranda worried about a third world war, the 1950s gave rise instead to a Third World war.

The rapidly expanding Third World would remain contested terrain for the remainder of the Cold War. The United States and the Soviet Union competed for influence in the newly independent nations, measuring their progress on a global scorecard. The Soviet Union had two distinct advantages in the so-called battle for the hearts and minds of this Third World. American support for its European allies — up to and including Marshall Plan aid — put that nation, in the eyes of most anticolonial leaders, on the side of empire. They had a point; American policymakers saw the transition from colonies to independent nations as a gradual process under the tutelage of Western powers. The USSR's economic system gave it a second advantage. Having recently transformed itself from a backward nation into a modern industrial society, the Soviet Union was an inspiration for former colonies too impatient for the gradualist approach promoted by American development agencies.

The American effort to bring Third World nations into the Free World had its own advantages. First, the American economic record was far stronger than the Soviet Union's. True, the Soviet economy grew much faster than the American one — but mainly because it was at such a low relative level to begin with. Even as the two superpowers squared off as supposed equals, the United States economy dwarfed the Soviet Union's — two to three times the GNP in 1966, even more by other measures. The sheer size of the American economy.

erected the superpowers themselves. Changes in personnel and ideas also changed the nature of American-Soviet relations. The ouster of Khrushchev – in large part for his failings in Cuba – marked the changing of the guard in the USSR. His successor, L. L. Brezhnev, moved away from the ideological paradigm that had motivated his predecessors. At home, he favored actually existing socialism over the bright future. Historian Vladislav Zubok argues that Soviet elites, generally, had traded in some of their ideological fire for improvements in standards of living and employment opportunities, and for a more stable existence than was possible in the quarter-century of Stalin’s rule.26 Internationally, the Soviet Union chose its allies on the basis of strategic interests, focusing less on bringing about socialist revolutions. The death of Kennedy, who had viewed the Cold War as a battle between different ways of life, similarly left American leadership without an energetic proponent of ideological struggle. As President Lyndon B. Johnson dealt with one product of American ideology – the deepening US involvement in Vietnam – he wrestled with the notion that Americans should “pay any price” to spread liberalism around the world. But it would take Richard Nixon to bring American-Soviet relations to focus on interests rather than ideas, an underlying principle of détente.

American-Soviet relations had begun in 1917 with each nation’s efforts to transform the other. By 1964, though, each side had accepted the existence of the other and its sphere of influence. They would still compete, but in ever-more-marginal areas – and what, after all, could be more marginal to superpower interests than Vietnam and Angola? At the same time, the superpowers sought more measures of coexistence and, to a surprising extent, normalized the Cold War. American-Soviet conflict would continue for another quarter-century, but it would never be the same.

The ideological battles that dominated the middle decades of the twentieth century left many important and disturbing legacies. The universalism of both the American and Soviet ideologies turned a bipolar conflict into a global transfiguration, with devastating results. The Third World suffered from superpower embrace, which turned areas of domestic dispute into geopolitical despots. The brief but intense focus on Third World countries – Iran, Guatemala, Egypt, Taiwan, Indonesia, Lebanon, and Cuba in short succession – left nations with despotic rulers who served the needs of their superpower sponsors or themselves rather than their own nations’ interests. Civil wars became superpower proxy wars, multiplying the length, complexity, and destructive fallout of heretofore-local conflicts. In the name of appealing to a prosperous future, the world of the present suffered mightily.

The ideological nature of American-Soviet conflict marked its protagonists well. Citizens on both sides, whether voluntarily or otherwise, would (in Kennedy’s famous words) “pay any price and bear any burden” in the name of victory. President Dwight D. Eisenhower enumerated some of the American acts as early as 1961. His farewell address bemoaned the rise of a “military-industrial complex” that had come into being under his watch and had distorted the politics, culture, and economy of the United States. The price came in the USSR was much greater, but its public recognition much later; until Mikhail Gorbachev took the reins in 1985 there were serious efforts to reduce the defense burden, restructure the economy, and open up a new public sphere. Gorbachev’s reforms failed, leading to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991; a country that for seventy-some years had declared itself a forerunner of the future was itself relegated to the dustbin of history. Within the United States came signs of triumphalism; it was not just neoconservative Francis Fukuyama who declared the “end of history,” but a wide swath of the American policy elite that declared ideological victory.27 That confidence, bolstered by the universalism at the root of American liberalism and the military might acquired during the conflict with the Soviet Union, might be the Cold War’s most durable legacy.


27 Francis Fukuyama, America at the Crossroads (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 53-57.
The bibliographical essays in the three volumes of the Cambridge History of the Cold War aim at being selective and critical overviews of the literature available in each subfield of historical investigation. The entries are written by the authors of the chapters in the main text, with additions, deletions, and cross-references suggested by the editors. Readers may want to look at the bibliographical entries in more than one volume to get an overview of the literature on a particular issue or region.

1. The Cold War and the international history of the twentieth century


2. Ideology and the origins of the Cold War, 1917–1962


3. The world economy and the Cold War in the middle of the twentieth century


