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Was the escalation of the Cold War attributable to one side?

HIST 072
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Differences between the United States and the Soviet Union (or Russia, before the revolution) may provide a basis for the development of bad relations, but it was the intents and actions during the Second World War and following which really illustrate the beginnings of the Cold War best. In order to gauge whether the United States or the Soviet Union should be blamed for the inception of the Cold War, one must analyze the original intentions and actions by both countries during this period of time.

However, a brief background on American-Russian relations may be required to understand the historical tensions between these two countries and why they would necessarily come out of the Second World War as enemies. Characteristic of the suspicious prewar actions by the United States include sending troops to fight the communist revolutionaries in Russia during their civil war, and with the Versailles Peace Settlement, creating an Eastern Europe full of capitalist nation-states to isolate the USSR (LaFeber 3). Twice during the war, whether for ulterior motives or not, the United States and Great Britain both ruled out a second front in France until 1944. They vied instead to start up through Africa and on to Italy, which invariably led to the deaths of many Russian soldiers as they were forced to fight off the NAZI Heer (LaFeber 9). Stalin did not react amiably to such treatment, and he used these examples to promote what he named "capitalist encirclement" to expedite his five-year plans. By 1941 the Soviet Union was exhibiting similar traits of earlier expansion by tsarist Russia. They overran their neighbors in Finland, Poland, and the Baltic states as per the Hitler-Stalin pact of 1939. The other allied forces frowned on the USSR, and the United States State Department even issued a statement decrying Soviet dictatorship and secularism (LaFeber 6).

While it is clear that the United States and Britain distrusted Stalin, they could not

be one-hundred percent certain of his intentions until he broke his promises made at Yalta concerning the inclusion of pro-Western Poles in the new Polish government (LaFeber 16). This signaled Stalin's intent to rule over the Eastern European countries in a form of totalitarian rule. Indeed, Stalin could have made the claim that the countries overrun by the Soviet Union in 1941 rightfully belonged to its territorial integrity, as they were once part of tsarist Russia. However, the event of setting up a puppet government in Poland made it quite clear that the Soviet Union intended to extend its boundaries past that of tsarist Russia, albeit not as a part of the USSR itself, but rather as a guaranteed friendly political entity.

The United States, however, was certainly a much larger force in provoking the Soviet Union into the Cold War. When Truman entered office upon the death of Roosevelt in 1945, the administration became geared toward fighting the new enemy, the Soviet Union. Truman was foremost determined to get tough with the Russians, and he heard out advisors who thought like he did (LaFeber 17). Harriman, an advisor to Truman, suggested extending economic ties to Eastern Europe to pull them away from the Soviets (LaFeber 18). In 1946 Niebuhr, a liberal anti-communist, set the tone among Truman and his advisors in Washington (LaFeber 50). Walter LaFeber, author of "America, Russia, and the Cold War, 1945-2002", suggests that "Truman's toughness had only stiffened Russian determination to control Poland" (LaFeber 19). This implies that Truman was a major cause for the Cold War, as he was unable to accept the Soviet's claim to Eastern Europe as part of its sphere of influence. Though just as well, LaFeber cites other scholars as viewing the Cold War inevitable due to Stalin's paranoid and mentally ill behavior (LaFeber 20).

The Truman Doctrine served as a basis for the Cold War, but in all likelihood, its

inception and ramifications were completely out of line with its main contributor, George Kennan. The doctrine was drafted to grant aid to Greece (and additionally to Turkey), once protected by British forces, in order to secure them from falling to communist revolutionaries (LaFeber 58). Were it presented as such, American officials think this might not have been enough to convince congress to hand over four-hundred million dollars. For this reason, Truman and Acheson, believing the Soviets were behind all revolution, presented the civil war occurring in Greece as part of a much larger plan for communism to overtake Europe and much of the world (LeFeber 59). These scare tactics ultimately oversimplified the situation. George Kennan's view, exemplified in the "Mr. X article", was that the Soviet Union would only expand out on its periphery due to its historical insecurity. He believed that only when met with force would the USSR stop its expansion (LaFeber 68). He did not think that such an open-ended and ideological doctrine should be set forth, however. It should not have been a global battle against communism. In the same logic, Turkey had little to do with the Greek revolution or communism, so Kennan naturally rejected sending military equipment to a country bordering the USSR, fearing provocation and justification of Stalin's fears of capitalist encirclement (LaFeber 59). By creating an ideological, as opposed to realist, approach to the encroachment in Eastern Europe by the USSR, the United States completely missed the point. The revolution in Greece should have exemplified this, as the communist forces there were supported by Tito of Yugoslavia, not Stalin (LaFeber 57). There was no such thing as solidarity among communist states, and the failure of Truman to grasp this or present this as such, lead the United States down a path committed to ideological struggle instead of one directed solely at the Soviet Union.

While the 1947 Marshall Plan did much to improve the economic situation in Europe, it very much divided up that part of the world into two economic zones, tantamount to the political division between communism and capitalism, the West and the Soviets. As LaFeber suggests, it was an attempt to tie together the West using economic tactics (LaFeber 68). Even though the Russians were invited to join the plan, Marshall made the demands on the Soviet Union so strenuous that had it wanted to join, it would be forced to open up its economic records to the United States, and it would have had to export Soviet products in a time when its own people were starving (LaFeber 65). LaFeber puts it bluntly, "Apparently no one in the State Department wanted the Soviets included" (LaFeber 65). The plan was unfriendly to the Soviet Union, and it not only grouped together a definitive West to battle the Soviet Union, but it also made clear that the peoples under the USSR would be forced to deal with their problems internally. The United States Congress would have been reluctant to approve the Marshall Plan due to the amount of money it required, but the coup in Czechoslovakia provided Truman with additional fuel to scare congress into approving it. LeFeber states, "Forrestal and his Pentagon advisers, concocted the scare [...] to scare Congress into passing bills for a major military buildup" (LaFeber 78). In 1949 COMECON became the reaction to the Marshall Plan. It can be inferred that the United States, or more precisely Truman and his administration, was the aggressor here, because it set out the battle field for the Cold War, albeit in economic terms (LaFeber 75).

It is not wrong to point fingers at the Soviet Union for being aggressive, however, The United States defined the Cold War in the NSC-68 document as one of global conflict. It assumed a bipolar world, and it assumed that the ideologies of the Soviet Union were

simply not compatible with those of the United States. These assumptions are wrong. It would be easy to mistake Stalin for being a vehement proponent of communism when he denounced Tito for choosing nationalism over communism (LaFeber 83). However, Stalin's record speaks for itself. He asked his people during the Second World War to fight for Mother Russia as opposed to communism (LaFeber 19). The implications of NSC-68 go much further. It basically set the militaristic tone to the Cold War, and the Korean War allowed for its implementation (LaFeber 103). NSC-68 may not have been adopted unless the Korean War broke out, but the drafting of the document precedes the war, thus making the United States the ultimate constructor of the definition for "Cold War."

The United States consistently put forward doctrines and bills that ultimately defined what the Cold War was. Although the Soviet Union took an active role in its assimilation of Eastern Europe, they did little more to actually provoke the United States. In most cases, the Soviet Union was the one which always reacted to U.S. policies. The Truman administration was most definitely responsible for the hard line, ideological doctrine directed at a *united* communist front dependent on the Soviet Union. The fact that no such solidarity existed among all communist states only further proves that the Truman Doctrine was grossly misguided, especially as an instrument for creating U.S. policy toward the Soviet Union. Truman himself can largely be blamed for bad relations after the development of the atomic bomb (LaFeber 28). His cocky attitude and decision to get tough with the Russians placed any hope of cooperation with the Soviet Union in the trash. Although multiple other events occurred within the time span from 1945-1950 such as the creation of NATO and the Sino-Russian agreement, the events that best show why the United States is to blame always come back to the Truman administration. Aggressive

behavior by the USSR alone does not lead directly to cold war, but U.S. policy defining the Cold War did.

Works Cited:

LaFeber, Walter. America, Russia, and the Cold War, 1945-2002. New York:
McGraw-Hill, 2002.