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ESSAY 22: The Cold War

In the first half of the twentieth century, World War I and World War II transformed the political, economic, and social dynamic of Europe and the rest of the world. However, left over tension and the emergence of two powerful nations with opposing ideologies created a third war that would last decades. These two main powers of the Cold War were the United States, and the Soviet Union, and both were equipped with nuclear weapons, making the war especially threatening. The War was a long struggle to install either democracy (U.S.) or communism (Soviet Union) into other governments all over the world. These two political and economic ideologies are total opposites and thus conflict ensues between these two states and their allies. These conflicting systems created a European schism as countries felt obligated to join either the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (U.S.) or the Warsaw Pact (Soviet Union). Once again, the west was divided and war persisted.

The causes of the Cold War are difficult to directly identity as complex political and social relations between western countries were present following World war II. “Some scholars attribute the hardening of the atmosphere between the two countries to Harry Truman’s assumption of presidency in April 1945, after the death of the more sympathetic Franklin Roosevelt, and to the American possession of an effective atomic bomb” (937). Other historians feel that the Soviet Union’s meddling in eastern European politics and economy after the establishment of peace following the previous wars increased tension with NATO nations. Nonetheless, the power and race for world dominance between the U.S and Soviet Union made conflict inevitable.

The Americans employed a policy of “containment” against the Soviets, which sought to contain the spread of communism instead of abolishing it through direct war. The hope was that containment would persist until the pressure of foreign opposition caused the Soviet Union to collapse in on itself. The Truman Doctrine, was issued in order to promote democracy among the Greeks and Turks, and this also conflicted with the Soviet Union’s attempts at spreading communism in eastern Europe. In another push for a democratic Europe, the U.S. offered economic aid following the destruction of World War II, known as the Marshall Plan. “The Soviet Union and its satellites were invited to participate … The Soviets, however, forbade them to take part” (939). This division between western and eastern Europe was a major turning point that further promoted the tensions between a democratic United States and a communistic Soviet Union. “The Cold War had taken firm shape in Europe” (941). Furthermore, the creation of NATO and the implementation of the Warsaw Pact solidified this European, which later would become a world division as well.

There were several major events/turning points that occurred during the Cold War that had a huge impact on the war itself and a lasting influence on the world. The creation of the state of Israel via the Balfour Declaration and U.N. intervention help ease conflict in the middle east. The Korean War was also a major satellite war established a North (communism) and South (democratic) Korea and was one of the first biggest “battles” of opposing western and eastern forces. The construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961 was as strong symbol of the schism between the east and west and remained so until its destruction in 1989. Another major turning point in the war was the Cuban Missile Crisis, the closest threat the U.S had experienced during the Cold War. Cuba, a communist country, allowing Soviets to use their territory to place nuclear weapons against the U.S. Later in the war, the United States became heavily involved in the Middle East for mostly economic reasons, who were mostly allies of the Soviets, and were major forces in the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars. In the 1980s, the Soviets were at war with Afghanistan which was “a strategic decision of enormous long-range consequences for the future of the Soviet Union as well as the United States.” (951). The Soviets and Americans never met directly in a military battle, but instead fought each other through a series of costly satellite wars and constant threat of nuclear annihilation. The Cold War consisted of decades of this tension and indirect war.

Both sides were equally at fault for the war. The beginning of the war saw leaders of these two countries who were overly confident from success in the second world war and ready for world dominance. They did little to diplomatically ease tensions and instead engaged in a mutual arms and power race that resulted in the Cold War. I think the crisis could have been diminished if most diplomatic measure were taken from the beginning. Nevertheless, the Cold War had a huge influence on world politics and the global economy and its influence still persists today.