

COLD WAR

A period in international history (beginning soon after the end of the Second World War and ending in the early 1990s), as well as a description of the overall relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union during that period. Although the cold war is fast fading into history, divergent interpretations of its character continue to shape expectations about some central features of contemporary international relations. For example, those who expect a world without extreme ideological conflict to be essentially harmonious tend to see the period of the cold war as inherently antagonistic.

There are three main views about the cold war. Each of them generates a set of discrete claims about the causes of the cold war, the nature of the cold war, the end of the cold war, and its legacy in contemporary international relations.

Perhaps the most popular view is that the cold war was an intense struggle for **power** between the **superpowers**. The word ‘**war**’ implies tension, armed conflict, and a zero-sum relationship between the superpowers. The word ‘cold’ refers to the presence of factors that allegedly restrained the confrontation and prevented a ‘hot’ war. Conventional historiography is based on a definition of the cold war that assumes a high level of East–West tension with the threat of escalation to nuclear conflict. Of course, there is a great deal of debate among those who share this overall view about who was to blame for the cold war. A common distinction is between *orthodox* and *revisionist* historians.

According to the orthodox argument, the cold war was a struggle between conflicting universal values. In the West, the concepts of a market economy and a multi-party democracy were cherished. In the East, single party statism and a command administrative economy were highly valued. The obvious conflict of ideas and obstinate nature of those who defended them were the driving forces behind the conflict.

Within this broad school of thought, the behaviour of the Soviet Union during and after the Second World War was a crucial impetus to the cold war. The policies of **containment** followed by the United States were defensive reactions to an inherently aggressive and expansionist enemy. In the absence of nuclear weapons and the condition of **mutually assured destruction** (MAD), the cold war might well have turned ‘hot’ on a number of occasions. Fortunately, the Soviet Union was unable to sustain its competition with the United States, and this inability was the main reason for the collapse of the cold war system. None the less, the timing

of that collapse was due in no small measure to the preparedness of the United States and its allies to match or exceed Soviet escalations of the **arms race**. Now that the cold war is over, the United States dominates the international system. In light of the benign nature of American **hegemony**, such dominance is not a matter of great concern.

Revisionists agree with orthodox scholars about the nature of the cold war, but reverse the focus of blame. Revisionism became popular in the 1960s during the Vietnam War, but it remains a marginal school of thought within the United States. Revisionists emphasise the power of the United States during and after 1945. For example, although the United States lost 400,000 lives during the Second World War, the USSR lost 27 million lives. The American economy benefited from the war whilst the Soviet economy was almost destroyed. According to some revisionists, Soviet behaviour was merely a defensive attempt to build a legitimate **security** zone in Eastern Europe, whilst the United States was trying to reconstruct the international economic system for its own **national interests**. In short, the cold war was a period of American dominance whose legitimacy was based on a mythical Soviet 'threat'. True, the Soviet Union's inherent economic weaknesses were crucial in explaining its collapse in 1991, but the end of the cold war could have occurred much earlier and without the horrendous expense of the arms race. The post-cold war era is a very dangerous time, since the United States now has no challenge to its military might, nor any political challenge to its own views about the most desirable international **order**.

In contrast to the view that the cold war was inherently antagonistic, regardless of who was the main instigator, an opposing school of thought suggests that the cold war was (in retrospect) very useful to both sides. For the United States, it solved the problem of what to do about Germany and Japan, both of whom were key states in bringing about the Second World War. For the Soviet Union and the United States, the cold war permitted a de facto solution of the German problem by freezing the social/political contours of Europe, both East and West. The perpetuation of the cold war was also useful for maintaining a strict nuclear hierarchy between the superpowers and their allies, as well as between nuclear states and non-nuclear states. The theoretical possibility of nuclear conflict subordinated actual conflicts within the respective blocs to the interests of 'global stability' ensured by the superpowers. Finally, powerful domestic interests on each side sustained the cold war. For example, within the United States, the arms race strengthened sectors of the military-industrial complex, justified intervention

abroad, facilitated the establishment of the national security state, and elevated the Presidency over other institutions of the US federal government. On the other side of the Iron Curtain, the cold war justified domestic repression, subordinated the civilian to the military sectors of society, and maintained an authoritarian system of government predicated on the demands of **geopolitical** 'catch-up'.

Although there is some truth in the main claims of all these schools of thought, they share a tendency to exaggerate the degree of coherence and foresight in the planning and implementation of foreign policy. The cold war was a period of genuine conflict *and* cooperation between the superpowers. It arose out of a long period of geopolitical turmoil in Europe, whose internal conflicts eventually subordinated that continent to two extra-European superpowers with very different social systems and little diplomatic familiarity with each other. Some conflict between them was inevitable, and was exacerbated by the tendency of each to suspect the worst of the other.

Also, it should be remembered that as a period of history, the cold war coincided with the onset of the nuclear era as well as **decolonisation**, both of which raised the stakes in the competition. None the less, despite all the factors that kept the superpowers apart, they did share some important common interests that moderated their competition, particularly after the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, when many feared that a nuclear war would break out. The division of Europe, **arms control**, the shared interests in ensuring that real wars in the **Third World** would not lead to direct conflict between them; all these factors ensured a degree of moderation in the cold war. However, as was demonstrated during the era of *détente* (relaxation of tensions) in the late 1960s, it was very difficult for the superpowers explicitly to acknowledge their shared interests in such a way as to end the confrontation once and for all. In so far as the cold war was a war, clearly the former Soviet Union as well as **communism** were the losers. On the other hand, in an era when the problems of world order are greater than the capacity of any state to respond to them effectively, and in light of the evidence suggesting that the cold war relationship could best be described as an adversarial partnership, it is important not to exaggerate the fruits of victory for the United States and its allies.

See also: **alliance; appeasement; arms control; arms race; balance of power; communism; containment; decolonisation; deterrence; embedded liberalism;**

end of History; great powers; misperception; North Atlantic Treaty Organisation; peace studies; superpower; Third World

Further reading: Booth, 1998; Crockatt, 1995; Gaddis, 1997; Isaacs and Downing, 1998; Lundestad, 1997; Walker, 1993; Westad, 2000