Did the Soviet Union start the Cold War?

Viewpoint. *Yes*. The Cold War was the result of the belligerence of Joseph Stalin and the insecurity it caused in the United States and the West.

Viewpoint. *No*. The primary responsibility for the Cold War derives from the hardline policies of the United States.

The questions of who "started" the Cold War has been an issue of rancorous debate among historians and policymakers for more than four decades. Most of what was written in the 1950s and 1960s about the origins of the Cold War came to be defined as "orthodox" or "traditional." In the 1960s and 1970s a new interpretation of the sources of the Cold War emerged and was dubbed "revisionist" because of its challenge to the orthodox interpretation. Shortly after the first revisionist studies appeared, and at an accelerated pace during the late 1980s and early 1990s, as archives in the Soviet Union (later Russia) and Soviet-bloc countries opened to Western scholars, a "post-revisionist" reading of the origins of the Cold War appeared.

Traditionalists put the blame for the Cold War on the Soviet Union. They argue that the Soviets' denial of free elections in Poland and Czechoslovakia, their meddling in Greece, Turkey, and Iran, their assistance to communist forces in China, and their opposition to US-sponsored post-war plans for controlling weapons and promoting economic development—such as the Baruch Plan and the Marshall Plan-caused the Truman administration to reassess its initially more conciliatory approach to the Soviet Union and adopt a harder line toward it. There are differences among traditionalists regarding the driving motivation behind Soviet conduct. Some emphasize the messianic nature of communist ideology, while others offer a combination of traditional Russian imperial impulses, and also point out that Soviet conduct was in line with historical patterns of traditional power politics.

Revisionists argue that Soviet behavior was largely defensive in nature. After the devastation of the Second World War, the Soviet leadership was interested in rebuilding its country and addressing legitimate security concerns—especially making sure that the countries of east and central Europe would no longer be used as a corridor of invasion into Russia. According to this argument, it was the United States, driven by a capitalist need for markets and raw materials, that adopted a confrontational, bullying tone toward the Soviet Union, leading to the outbreak of the Cold War.

Post revisionists reject what they regard as the dogmatic Marxism that characterized much of the revisionist reading, but they also challenge what they consider an excessive emphasis by traditionalists on the role of communist ideology in guiding Soviet foreign policy. Post revisionist analyses emphasize geopolitical considerations and strategic realities to suggest a more balanced view of responsibility for the Cold War. In their writings, however, there is a return to traditionalist themes, as they point to provocative Soviet actions and to an exceedingly bellicose Soviet rhetoric as major contributing factors in the breakdown of cooperation between the two countries and the onset of the Cold War.

Yes, the Cold War was the result of the belligerence of Joseph Stalin and the insecurity it caused in the United States and the West.

The Cold War—the discrete, globalized confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union that began immediately after the Second World War and came to an end with the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991—occurred as a result of the belligerence of Joseph Stalin and the insecurity it caused in the United States. The "revisionist" interpretation of the Cold War, which stipulates that it

originated in the expansionist tendencies of American capitalism, accurately explains some kinds of US expansion after 1945, but it fails to account for the particular hostility of US-Soviet relations during this period.

There can be no doubt that after the Second World War the United States engaged in the most lucrative and widespread economic expansions in the history of modern empires. A powerful, confident, industrial powerhouse, the United States saw ever one of its major economic competitors go down to defeat or demoralization during the war. Japan and Germany were reduced to rubble, Great Britain, and, to a greater extent, France, were shorn of their colonial holdings and exposed as declining economic powers. Unscathed by the war and brimming with wartime industrial capability, the United States sought to fill the vacuum left by the reduction and retrenchment of its economic rivals, New York City replaced London as the center of world capitalism. American goods and American popular culture flooded every corner of the world. American corporations wielded immense power and leverage over dozens of foreign societies, squeezing profits from them and in so doing enriching the American population.

This imperial project had nothing essentially to do with the Soviet Union of 1946. The United States had been engaged in global economic expansion since the 1890s; its postwar policies were merely an accelerated continuation of its earlier agenda. If the Soviet Union had been taken over by the Walt Disney Company in 1946, the basic elements and direction of American economic expansion would have continued unchanged. Nations that emerge triumphant after world war, such as the Netherlands after the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) or Great Britain after the Napoleonic war (1803-1815), tend to exploit their hard-won success materially; the United States was no exception to this rule.

What pushed postwar international politics beyond simple imperial rivalry and into the volatile and militarized Cold War was the growing insecurity of the United States, particularly key officials of the United States, particularly key officials in President Harry S. Truman's administration, about the belligerence and aggressiveness of the Soviet Union under its tyrannical leader Joseph Stalin. This insecurity manifested itself in late 1945 and reached a critical level in February 1946. By that point, the Truman administration officials had become convinced that, left unchecked, the Soviet Union, would eventually threaten the security of the United States.

During the wartime Tehran Conference of late 1943, President Franklin D. Roosevelt declined to support a British proposal to revive French and German power after the war. By announcing this decision, he was making it clear to Great Britain and the Soviet Union that the United States would not oppose Soviet domination of the European continent. As Roosevelt, British prime minister, Winston Churchill, and Stalin all understood, with German and France Weakened, the Soviet Union would be the only remaining great power on the Eurasian continent. Nonetheless, Roosevelt believed in 1943 that the United States could tolerate Soviet hegemony. Certainly, Germany was not then regarded as a nation to be rejuvenated, and the dismal performance of France during the war had discouraged Roosevelt from viewing it as a legitimate European postwar power.

At the Yalta Conference in 1945, Roosevelt's acquiescence to the obvious signs of Soviet domination over Eastern Europe merely affirmed his earlier decision. By once again declining to bolster France and Germany and by tolerating Stalin's flagrant imposition of Soviet-style regimes in Poland and elsewhere, Roosevelt, a dying man at Yalta, gave no signal that the US position on the postwar balance of power in Europe had changed. These crucial questions faced Truman when he became president on the death of Roosevelt in April 1945; would he continue to regard the expansion of Soviet power in Europe as acceptable to the United States?

From the vantage point of basic American national security, this question did not have an obvious answer. Certainly, the Soviet Union was in many ways hostile regime. As Truman's more hardline advisers and

his Republican critics in Congress were quick to point out, the Soviets had violated wartime agreements in eastern Europe, having ruthlessly and often brutally imposed client regimes on the long-suffering populations in that part of the continent. Moreover, the Soviet Union adhered to an ideology of global communist revolution and the destruction of capitalist regimes such as the United States, an ideology that Stalin had already used to justify the liquidation of millions of "class enemies" and political opponents in the 1920s and 1930s. On the other hand, many American officials regarded the Soviet domination of Eastern Europe as an understandable, defensive act, considering that Germany had crossed the central European plain to invade Russia twice in the space of thirty years. Revelations about Stalinist atrocities and terror were widely discounted as American and British propaganda or at least regarded as internal matters. Finally, the physical devastation of the Soviet population and the devastation of the Soviet population and the Red Army, together with the American monopoly over the atomic bombs, led many to minimize the possibility of a Soviet threat to American security.

The answer to the question boiled down to a reading of Stalin's true objectives and an interpretation of those objectives in light of US national security. If the Soviet government were interested in moving beyond Eastern Europe and dominating the entire continent, and if the Soviet domination of Europe could be seen as a threat to American survival, then it would make sense to abandon Roosevelt's Tehran policy and adopt a more confrontational position toward the Soviet Union. During late 1945 and early 1946, Truman and his advisers debated this problem, and in February 1946, they decided that the Soviet Union indeed sought to expand its power and therefore posed a serious long-term threat to the security of the United States.

Three events pushed Truman and his aides to adopt this position. On 9 February 1946, Stalin delivered a public address in which he revived a form of volatile communist rhetoric that had been suppressed during the war. In his speech, Stalin blamed American criticism of his actions in Eastern Europe on the forces of international capitalism, asserting that the Second World War was the result of capitalist rivalries and predicting that the Soviet Union would prevail over its capitalist enemies. This ill-timed speech discredited those individuals who saw Stalin as a defensive-minded Russian nationalist, and it emboldened Americans who viewed him as a messianic communist revolutionary. On 16 February, the US announced the discovery of a spy ring in the United States; agents of the Soviet Union, acting as Canadian emissaries and scientists, had been caught infiltrating US atomic facilities. This revelation fueled American animosities toward its erstwhile ally, as well as sparking concern of an imminent Soviet atomic arsenal. A week later George Fa. Kennan, an American diplomat working in Moscow, sent a telegram to Washington explaining Stalin's recent actions. The Soviets, he argued, adhered to a different view of international politics than did the United States and other western nations. He contended that the Russians were much more cynical about international agreements, considering them as pieces of paper to be discarded when convenient, rather than as binding documents. They regarded the West as an eternal adversary of Russia, always arrogant in its dealings with "backward" Russia and never to be trusted. They thought of adversaries in international relations not as rival nations but as sworn enemies to be destroyed. These Russian traditions, Kennan argued, were strengthened by Soviet ideology, which lent a sense of historical inevitability to the looming conflict with the West. Kennan's "long telegram" capitated its many readers in the Truman administration, who were receptive to a clear, historically based assessment of the Soviet threat.

Could Soviet belligerence threaten the United States? In 1946, Americans faced a world far more dangerous than any they had seen before. The Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor in 1941 had shown that nations could launch surprise attacks on America from across oceans, something that had never before been technologically possible. The rapid Nazi conquest of Europe had demonstrated that the balance of power in Europe can change in an instant—that nations will often fold in the face of seemingly inexorable power. Its geographical isolation, together with the historically stable balance of European power, had long provided the United States with free national security. Recent history had proven beyond a doubt

that it had become possible for a regime to dominate the Eurasian continent quickly and attack the United States directly and devastatingly.

In 1946, the only nation even remotely capable of threatening the United States was the Soviet Union. The Soviets still had an immense army, which was certainly capable of marching through war-torn Europe and attaining inestimable geopolitical momentum and military resources. The Soviets formally adhered to an ideology that endorsed the violent overthrow of capitalist regimes such as the United States. The only question was whether the Soviet Union actually intended to embark on such a campaign. Stalin's brutal treatment of his own citizens, his cynical treaty with Nazi Germany, and his imposition of tyrannical regimes in Eastern Europe confirmed the suspicions of Truman and his advisors. The events of early 1946 convinced them it would be too great a risk to assume that the Soviet Union did not intend to dominate Europe or to believe that the United States would be safe in a world where the Soviet Union would embark on such a campaign; more important, it had become impossible for Truman and his aides to believe with certainty that the Soviets would not. Erring on the side of national security, Truman therefore decided to adopt a harder line toward the Soviet Union in the many postwar negotiations of 1946 and 1947. Despite the American atomic monopoly, the Soviet Union did not back down. The Cold War ensued.

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