History: International Relations

The emergence of the Superpowers, 1945-62

The Grand Alliance and the position at the end of WW2:

By 30th April 1945, Hitler had committed suicide and a week later WW2 had come to an end. Soviet forces had systematically liberated most of Eastern Europe as they pushed in from the east towards Germany.

*The Grand Alliance was composed of Britain, USSR and USA.*

Orthodox = USA Good, USSR Bad

Many believe that the collapse of the Grand Alliance and the development of Cold War was inevitable. An early school of historical interpretation is known as the Orthodox group – this interpretation placed the blame for the Cold War squarely on the shoulders of the Soviet Union. American policy was interpreted as a legitimate response to Soviet provocation. The Soviet Union had no interest in preserving the Grand Alliance because its existence was contrary to Soviet expansionist aims.

Orthodox historians argue that the Soviet Union was ‘calculating’ in its determination to establish power in Eastern Europe and that the peoples of eastern Europe were merely a means to an end for Stalin.

‘America is presented as a sleeping giant that finally awakes to Soviet threat’

Revisionism = USSR Good, USA Bad

An alternative interpretation, known as Revisionism, later developed. This view says Soviet actions from 1945 as legitimate responses to American economic imperialism in Europe. This is simply the Orthodox interpretation in reverse.

Revisionist Historians argued that the main reason as to why Americans rejected communist regimes was because they saw it as being part of aggressive expansion by the Soviet Union, because they deprived American of economic opportunities there.

The Soviet Union had no choice but to expand its own influence to protect itself from aggressive American economic expansionism.

Both the above views are Unilateral – action by one side only (Either USA or USSR)

The Grand Alliance:

By the end of 1941 – the so-called ‘Grand Alliance’ was in place. The principal allies had little in common before the Second World War. The war untied them because they faced a common enemy in Germany. Ideologically, Communism was the polar opposite of Nazism and after a non-aggression pact between the Soviet Union and the Germans had been broken by Germany, the Soviets were opposed to German interests in WW2.
A limited number of central German offices dealing with finance, trade etc. were to be formed at some point in the future.

The Potsdam Conference did nothing to reinforce the apparent unity achieved in Yalta. It failed to define a consensus between East and West. It contributed to the growing suspicion and uncertainty surrounding USA and USSR.

Vyacheslav Mikhailovich Molotov was Stalin’s Foreign Minister. He was a loyal and committed supporter of Stalin. He was the leading Soviet representative at Yalta and Potsdam and many regarded his attitudes as making a major contribution to the collapse of East-West relations soon after the end of the war.

The Development of the Atomic Bomb

The atom bomb was tested in Alamogordo (New Mexico) the day before the Potsdam Conference opened. When this took place, successfully – he was told that the bomb had a much greater destructive potential than was accepted and was ready for immediate use against Japan.

The Americans saw the atomic bomb as being primarily a diplomatic tool in regards to East-West relations. The USA wanted to make USSR more compliant in Europe. America’s strategy was based on the idea of atomic diplomacy which was the idea that America’s monopoly of nuclear technology would be used to put additional diplomatic pressure on other states.

Arguable, the two atom bombs which were dropped in Hiroshima and Nagasaki in early August were primarily intended to impress the USSR.

If the bomb truly was a diplomatic tool, then its role was a failure. There is no tangible evidence to suggest that Soviet actions were driven towards more cooperation with the USA because of the existence of nuclear technology. On the contrary, the news about the bomb made him more suspicious of the USA. The Soviet response was to develop its own nuclear weapons by 1949.

USA and Europe in 1945

The presence of a divided Europe alarmed the USA. It was obvious to the Americans that the USSR was not going to enter into any meaningful international dialogue over the future of Eastern Europe. Roosevelt’s ambition of international security based on cooperation between states, had become increasingly untenable as the USSR strengthened its sphere of influence in Eastern Europe by establishing pro-communist regimes.

Truman’s initial focus was on European reconstruction – there was no suggestion that the USA envisaged any long-term military or political entanglement in Europe beyond the time it would take to establish political and economic reconstruction there. Nor was there any clear indication that the USA regarded Europe as a springboard for the development of a global power role for the USA.

The USA was interested in expanding its economic interests, not simply within war-torn Europe but also globally. At the end of WW2, the Americans wanted a world order in which their economic strengths could be enhanced. There would be international stability achieved through cooperation based on a collective desire to preserve peace.
Berlin Blockade (June 1948-May 1949)

After WW2 (at the Yalta conference), Germany was divided between East and West – Berlin (deep in Soviet Eastern territory) was also divided between East and West. Capitalist powers had control over both Western territories, and the Soviets controlled the Eastern areas.

On 20th June, the Western Allies introduced the new currency, the Deutschmark, into the Western zones and four days later the Soviets responded by introducing the new East German Mark (ostmark) into their own zone.

The Berlin Blockade was an attempt in 1948 by the Soviet Union to limit the ability of France, Great Britain and the United States to travel to their sectors of Berlin, which lay within Russian-occupied East Germany.

The Berlin blockade (24 June 1948 – 12 May 1949) was one of the first major international crises of the Cold War. The Soviet Union blocked the Western Allies’ railway, road, and canal access to the sectors of Berlin under allied control. Their aim was to force the western powers to allow the Soviet zone to start supplying Berlin with food, fuel, and aid, thereby giving the Soviets practical control over the entire city.

In response, the Western Allies organised the Berlin Airlift. This involved carrying supplies to the people in West Berlin. At first a military challenge was considered, but this was rejected as it would have provoked a clash with Soviet forces. Over the next 321 days, Western fliers made 272,000 flights into West Berlin, delivering thousands of tons of goods every day. Up to 4700 tons of necessities were provided daily including fuel and food. The Western powers had outsmarted the Soviets.

By the end of January 1949, it had become clear that Stalin’s gamble was failing. Transport of goods to West Berlin was increasing daily by day through the use of large transport planes such as C54s. In February, the Western powers declared the Deutschmark to be the sole legal currency in West Berlin and stopped all Western exports to the Soviet zone, which increased the pressure on the zone’s economy. Stalin, who was not prepared to go to war over Berlin, had little option but to cut his losses.

In early May they finally reached agreement that the blockade would be called off on 12th May.

Consequences:
- Strengthened Western allies’ determination to set up West Germany
- Failure of blockade leads to setting up of east Germany
- Western allies remain in West Berlin

The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) - (1949)

The Berlin Blockade finally persuaded the Americans that there was no alternative to a formal commitment to defend Western Europe.

The discussions between the Western nations concluded on April 4, 1949, when the foreign ministers of 12 countries in North America and Western Europe gathered in Washington, D.C., to