What was the Cold War?
Summer Reading Task – Cherwell History

- This chapter comes from a book named ‘Understand the Cold War’ by C.B. Jones. It is a very short, easy-to-read guide to the Cold War and is well worth buying to go alongside your studies.
- Please answer these questions in full-sentence notes on A4 lined paper with the heading ‘What was the Cold War?’.
- This needs to be put inside your Cold War ring binder folder and brought to your first Cold War lesson.

Note-Taking Task

1. What characteristics did the Cold War have that mean it qualifies as a ‘war’?
2. Why is the Cold War known as a ‘cold’, rather than ‘hot’ war?
3. Why could this name be seen as misleading?
4. What were the main ideological and economic differences between the Great Powers (USSR, China and USA) in the 20th century? (You may wish to leave this question until you’ve read the full chapter.)
5. Why did the establishment of Comintern by the Russian Revolutionaries in 1919 frighten the Western Powers?
6. What made the USA and Britain very wary (nervous) of Stalin in the 1920s and 30s?
7. What reasons did Stalin and the USSR have for disliking the British and other Western European countries?
8. What were the three main aims of the Western powers (Britain, USA, France etc.) for Central and Eastern Europe after the Second World War?
9. What were Stalin’s main aims for Central and Eastern Europe after the Second World War?
10. What were the names of the two major peace conferences held in 1945 between the Great Powers?

Don’t forget your folder!
What was the Cold War?

In this chapter you will learn about:
- the definition of Cold War
- the participating Great Powers
- the importance of conflicting political ideas in creating an atmosphere of mistrust.

Picture the scene. It is springtime in Eastern Europe and two groups of young men and women have met at midday on the banks of a river and are busy socializing, drinking and dancing to the wheezing of a concertina, hugging, kissing, shaking hands and vowing to be friends. A charming rural idyll? No. This was the meeting of the American and Soviet troops on the banks of the Elbe near Strelka on 25 April 1945. For the sake of the cameras this meeting was repeated two days later at Torgau but in spite of press intrusion the scene was one of happiness and unity between young comrades-in-arms. True, there were differences between the two groups as one US soldier, Private Jim Kane, recalled later:

They (the Soviet Red Army) were still using horse-drawn wagons, cavalry pieces, horse-drawn artillery... The soldiers were on horseback. It was like the medieval times...

Who could have imagined on that heady day of peace and goodwill that these two nations would soon become mortal enemies and spend the next 45 years engaged in a frosty stand-off which was to shape the second half of the twentieth century.
If you were to compare a series of maps of Europe during the twentieth century, it would immediately be obvious that the frontiers of the European continent were far from stable. During the second half of the century, the changes in frontiers were largely due to developments known as the Cold War between the Great Powers. This strangely named conflict, which began in 1945, was to last until the early 1990s—the dates of its beginning and ending are debatable. The causes of the conflict are equally a matter of contention between historians, and, indeed, so complex are the various elements of this conflict that one is forced to make generalizations in order to make sense of the causes and events which developed following the end of the 1939-45 ‘hot’ war.

Insight

Historians disagree as to when the Cold War began. Was it after the Russian revolution in 1917; or in 1945, when the Allies disagreed over how to govern occupied Germany; or following Churchill’s speech in Fulton Missouri in 1946, when he used the term ‘the Iron Curtain’? Each case has its merits.

During these years, each side had its own interpretation of the other’s actions—what one side considered self-defence, the other side interpreted as aggression. The very nature of the ‘Cold War’, with its climate of mistrust and suspicion, makes it difficult to work out the motives and reasons for the actions of the Great Powers. Indeed, frequently what contemporaries thought had happened was often more important than what actually happened.

What was the Cold War?

Following the Second World War, an increasingly frosty atmosphere developed between the Great Powers, and this grew into a tense rivalry which became known as the ‘Cold War’.

This was to last for over 40 years and spread from Europe, where it originated, to the rest of the world during the 1950s and 1960s.

This rivalry had all the features of a traditional ‘hot’ war with one exception—there was no open, armed conflict. It was a war because there were two opposing sides each equipped with armies, navies and air forces and each had allies. It is called a ‘cold’ war because there was no direct fighting between the Great Powers, although there were a few instances when the Cold War spilled over into open conflict, often through ‘proxies’. All other features of warfare were present—causes, weapons, tactics, events and results, and each side used spies and propaganda to further their aims or to persuade others to join them in their mission against their enemies, whom they believed were trying to destroy their way of life. There was fear, hostility, suspicion, competition, threats and quarrels between the two sides, yet the obvious feature of direct fighting was avoided.

Neither side wished to risk the prospect of a ‘hot’ war, perhaps because of the existence of nuclear weapons.

Insight

The first nuclear device was exploded by the US Manhattan Project in 1945. Extremely powerful explosive devices, they were originally designed as strategic weapons to destroy entire cities and, during the Second World War, were used against the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Who were the Great Powers?

A Great Power is a country which has a number of important features. It generally has a large land area rich in natural resources and a large population, its economy is prosperous, its industry strong, and foreign trade contributes to its economic wealth. Another aspect of a Great Power is political stability and these
features, combined with strong armed forces, give the Great Power worldwide influence.

Great Powers tend to use their extensive resources to influence other powers and world events by persuasion, economic pressure or sometimes by force and this can lead to both direct and indirect conflict.

For centuries the Great Powers were European, but following the twentieth-century world wars, the map of Great Powers was redrawn with the United States, the USSR and later China taking the place of the European Powers as the movers and shakers of world events.

There were many differences between the Great Powers, but it was in the fields of politics and economics that the countries differed the most. In terms of ideology, the USSR and China were (and China still is) based on communism, while the American political system is based on democracy. In economics, the United States followed capitalism, based on private enterprise; the Communist states on the other hand had command economies, where the state owned the means of production.

Insight

Communism is a system of government based on the ideology of Karl Marx. The one-party state owns all property and the means of production, plans and controls the economy and aims to create a classless society.

Capitalism is a free market economic system whereby the means of production is owned mainly by private individuals who are motivated by the opportunity to make a profit. Investors in private companies are known as shareholders.

The Cold War is generally regarded as a conflict between East and West or between communism and capitalism. These two ideologies were personified by the Soviet Union (USSR or Russia - Communist) and the United States of America (capitalist), the two ‘superpowers’ that had emerged following the eclipse of the leading European Powers in the wake of the Second World War. However, the origins of the Cold War can be seen to date back to the Russian Revolution in 1917 after which Communist Russia seemed to threaten the liberal democracies in Western Europe. The establishment in 1919 of the Comintern, an organization dedicated to the expansion of communist ideals at the expense of capitalism, strengthened this fear and contributed to the decision on the part of many Western powers to aid the opponents of the Bolsheviks during the Russian Civil War of 1918–21. Indeed Churchill, the British Secretary of State for War, summarized his policy during this period as ‘Kill the Bolshie. Kiss the Hun’, as the Western nations built up a defeated Germany in order to prevent the spread of communism. Germany joined the League of Nations in 1924 but the Soviet Union received no such invitation.

Insight

The League of Nations was an international organization established in 1919, aiming to ensure that a world war was never repeated. It attempted to settle disputes between nations peacefully, taking economic sanctions against any country that resorted to war rather than submit to arbitration. Unfortunately all decisions had to be unanimous, which lessened the League’s effectiveness. The League was replaced by the United Nations in 1945 (see page 13).

Conflicting ideologies

The difference in political, social and economic ideas between Russia and the West became apparent during the 1920s. Communist countries were generally classless societies where individual profit-making was prohibited and where industry and agriculture were owned not by private individuals but by the state, which encouraged its citizens to work for the greater good of society rather than for personal gain. In these ‘one-party states’, the government maintained close control of the lives of the populations through
political, social and financial mechanisms including censorship, propaganda and limitations on travel and religious worship.

In contrast, citizens in the capitalist West had a variety of political parties from which to choose their governments, via free elections. These governments had a limited control over their citizens’ lives, and freedom of speech and movement were the norm. Most industry and agriculture was in the hands of private companies or individuals who employed others to work for them, and whose aim was to make as much profit as possible.

During the Second World War, out of necessity, these contrasting ideologies had formed an uneasy alliance against Hitler and Nazism, but in spite of their co-operation on the surface, tension had existed between the two sides, a tension which intensified following the defeat of Germany and her allies, the Axis powers, in 1945. Their political ideologies and very different forms of government, economy and society were naturally a point of irritation and had resulted in an increasing atmosphere of mistrust.

From a Western point of view, communism threatened their democratic values and beliefs; Stalin’s political purges and agricultural policies had killed many of his own people during the 1920s and 1930s. During the 1930s a young American, George F. Kennan, witnessed events in the Soviet Union and concluded that the country was ‘unalterably opposed to our traditional system’. In spite of growing concern as Hitler reasserted German power, no serious attempt was made by Britain and France to cultivate an alliance with Russia, and the world was astonished to hear of the Nazi-Soviet non-aggression pact signed in August 1939. Those in the West would remember Stalin for this cynical signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact – the Nazi-Soviet agreement which had divided Poland in 1939.

Similarly, communists regarded capitalism as evil – Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, the authors of *The Communist Manifesto* in 1848, had emphasized how the rich prospered through their exploitation of the ‘proletariat’ – the working classes. Nor could Russian Communists forget how the West had helped the ‘Whites’ (an anti-Communist coalition) fight against the Bolshevik Red Army during the Russian Civil War. Churchill (Britain’s wartime leader during the Second World War) had been Secretary of State for War at this time, and had sanctioned the sending of British troops to Russia to aid the ‘White Army’. This had followed another humiliation when, in 1919, the Entente powers had distributed Russian territory to other countries including Poland. Small wonder, then, that in 1945 Stalin commented to Milovan Djilas, a fellow Communist:

> Perhaps you think that, because we are allies of the English, we have forgotten who they are, and who Churchill is. They find nothing sweeter than to trick their allies.

Further humiliation followed during the inter-war years when Russia was excluded from the League of Nations, and the attempts of the Russian diplomat Litvinov to organize a united front against Hitler’s demands on Czechoslovakia in 1938 were ignored.

Still later, in 1942, Britain and the USA had refused to open up a second front against Hitler by invading Europe quickly and thus relieving Russia of some of the pressure upon her.

**Conflicting aims in Europe**

The two power blocs had conflicting aims for Central and Eastern Europe following the Second World War. The Western powers were anxious to support democratic movements in these areas and were eager to hold free elections. They believed that Poland’s Western frontier should remain as it was and Germany should be aided and encouraged to produce her own goods and food in order that she could quickly rejoin world trade. This would avoid a repetition of the economic difficulties that she had faced following the end of the First World War when hyperinflation bred discontent and contributed to the rise of the Nazis.
1. What was the Cold War?

The Cold War was a period of international tension between the United States, its allies, and the Soviet Union and its allies, which lasted from the late 1940s to the early 1990s. It was not a traditional military conflict, but rather a conflict of ideologies and interests. The Cold War began after World War II, with the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan, which were designed to contain the spread of communism in Europe. The conflict was characterized by a series of proxy wars, political alliances, and arms races. The Cold War ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the communist regime in Eastern Europe in 1991.