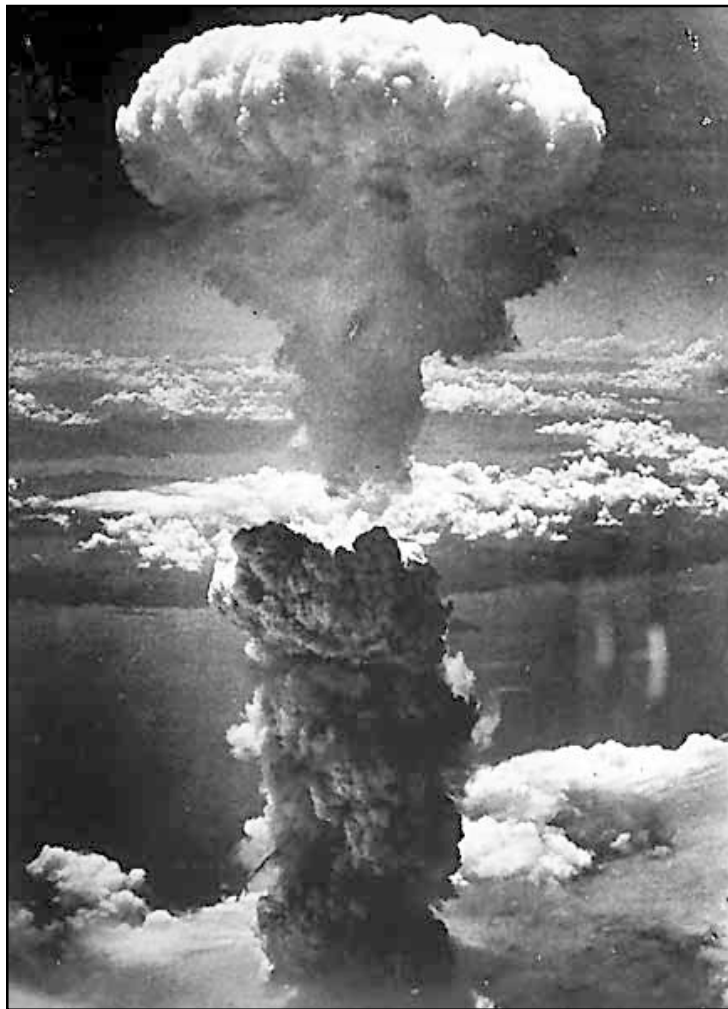


THE ORIGINS OF THE COLD WAR

A Unit of Study for Grades 9–12

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Teacher Background

I. Unit Overview

On August 6, 1945, the United States dropped one atomic bomb on Hiroshima that destroyed the city and half of its population. Two days later the Russians declared war on Japan. At the Teheran Conference in 1943, the Soviet Union reaffirmed its pledge to enter the war against Japan after the defeat of Germany. Russian entry into the war in Asia was again confirmed at both the Yalta and Potsdam conferences. The following day, August 9, a second atomic bomb was dropped on Nagasaki. Japanese capitulation on August 15 made the Russian invasion unnecessary. Stalin was convinced that the United States and Britain had contrived a plan to use the atomic bomb to force Japan out of the war before the Russians were able to comply with their promise to join the war against Japan and avoid agreements turning over territory held by the Japanese since their victory over Imperial Russia in the Russo-Japanese War of 1905. The Soviets likewise believed that the bombs were also meant to intimidate the Russians, who had, like the Germans, experimented with atomic energy but were well behind perfecting an atomic weapon. When the Americans offered a plan for sharing nuclear capability among the great powers after the war, the Russians rejected what they regarded as unfair or suspicious conditions. Thus, the bomb that ended one war marked the beginning of another—The Cold War.

The events of 1945 are widely regarded as a turning-point in twentieth-century history, a point when the United States unequivocally took its place as a world power, at a time when Americans had a strong but war-oriented economy and a long-standing suspicion of Europeans in general. This unit explores the decisions of key policy-makers at this crucial moment in modern history.

II. Unit Context

These lessons deal with American foreign policy from 1945 to 1950, on the eve of the outbreak of the Korean War. The material should be introduced after a study of World War II. This unit would also serve as part of a thematic approach to United States foreign policy. After studying the ideological differences between Americans and Russians and the use of “atomic diplomacy,” students should have some basic background for the study of the Korean War, the “brinkmanship” policy of President Dwight Eisenhower and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, the Cuban Missile Crisis during the Kennedy administration, and other events that brought the United States and the Soviet Union to the brink of war.

III. Correlation to National History Standards

The Origins of the Cold War provides teaching materials to support the *National Standards for History, Basic Edition* (National Center for History in the Schools, 1996). Lessons within this unit assist students in attaining **Standard 3B** of **Era 8** through an investigation of wartime aims and strategies hammered out at conferences among the Allied powers and by evaluating the controversies over surrounding the use of nuclear weapons. Analyze the different motives of the United States and the Soviet Union at the close of World War II. The central focus of the lesson supports **Standard 2A** of **Era 9**, “How the Cold War influenced international politics.”

The unit likewise integrates a number of **Historical Thinking Standards** by challenging students to differentiate between historical facts and historical interpretations; analyze cause-and-effect relationships; and, consider multiple perspectives.

IV. Unit Objectives

1. To analyze the different motives of the United States and the Soviet Union at the close of World War II.
2. To analyze the cultural, historical, economic and political factors that propelled the United States and the Soviet Union into the Cold War.
3. To examine “atomic diplomacy” in the early Cold War years and to determine the extent to which acquisition of atomic weaponry caused or affected the Cold War.
4. To examine a variety of primary sources and distinguish between unsupported expression of opinion and informed hypotheses grounded in historical evidence.

V. Introduction to the Origins of the Cold War

On September 1, 1939, Nazi troops invaded Poland beginning World War II. On August 23 the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany signed a non-aggression pact. The public text simply indicated that Germany and the Soviet Union would abide by the neutrality pact they had signed in 1926. The secret protocol however divided Eastern Europe into Nazi and Soviet spheres.

Britain and France declared war on Germany shortly after the invasion of Poland. By mid-September Soviet armies had crossed into eastern Poland. After capitulation, Poland was divided between the Nazis and Soviets. In June, 1940, Nazi troops swept into France and within six weeks France petitioned for an armistice. The battle for Britain began in earnest after the fall of France. On June 22, 1941, German troops invaded the Soviet Union and were at the outskirts of Leningrad by early September. The United States, professing neutrality, sent massive quantities of supplies to Britain and later to Russia through a Lend-Lease program pushed through by the Roosevelt administration. The United States entered the war against Germany and Italy a few days after the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor in December 1941. The Big Three powers, the United States, Britain, and the Soviet Union formed an alliance against the Axis Powers in Europe while Britain and the U.S. joined forces against the Japanese in the Pacific theater of the war.

The anti-fascist alliance in Europe was strained throughout the war because the United States and Britain delayed attacking the Germans in an all-out assault in Europe while the Russians carried the brunt of the fighting in Eastern Europe. Stalin urged an invasion of “Fortress Europe” to force German armies to shift their strength from the Eastern front to the west. Although the invasion was promised for some time it finally occurred in June 1944 at Normandy.

Matters of postwar policy were discussed at diplomatic meetings during the course of the war, specific policies were not thoroughly discussed in order to avoid a rupture in the alliance. Prime Minister Winston Churchill and Premier Josef Stalin had made an informal agreement at the Second Moscow Conference, October 1944, that would divide the Balkans into British and Russian spheres of influence after the war. Roosevelt was not a party to this agreement and soon let it be known that he would not be bound by the decision reached at the Moscow Conference. The issue of Poland appeared to be the breaking point of the grand alliance. Roosevelt and Churchill acquiesced to most of Stalin’s demands at Yalta in exchange for a Russian pledge to enter the war against Japan shortly after the war in Europe was brought to a close. Churchill and Roosevelt did get Stalin to agree to “free and unfettered elections” in Poland and Eastern Europe based on universal suffrage and secret ballot. A few months later at Potsdam, the Polish issue and Soviet interest in Eastern Europe were to again be the focal points of discussion. Truman had become President in April

Teacher Background Materials

following Roosevelt's death and Churchill, who attended the first sessions of the conference, was defeated in the British election and was succeeded by Clement Attlee.

Roosevelt's death in April 1945 was cause for alarm in the Soviet Union. Roosevelt's vice president was virtually unknown to the Russians; however, they were aware that when German armies invaded Russia in June 1941, then Senator Truman was quoted in the press as having said, "If we see Germany is winning we ought to help Russia and if Russia is winning we ought to help Germany and that way let them kill as many as possible. . . ." In April, Soviet Foreign Minister V. M. Molotov met with Truman at the White House before traveling to San Francisco for the United Nations Conference. Truman was reported to have given Molotov a tongue-lashing and Molotov stormed out of the meeting. Hostility between the U.S. and Soviet Union intensified during the San Francisco conference. It appeared to the Russians that the U.S. was determined to form a bloc of anti-Soviet nations. U.S. insistence of the admission of Argentina, a nation that had strong German ties during the war, confirmed Soviet suspicions. In May, Truman and his cabinet adopted a policy of abruptly ending the lend-lease program to Russia, criticized the Soviets for taking over the Eastern European countries, and condemned them for removing German factories to Russia to replace some destroyed in the war.

The Soviets were suspicious of Truman's request to postpone the Potsdam meeting that had been originally scheduled for June. Stalin and Molotov were convinced that Truman wanted a delay in order to test the atomic bomb before attending the Big Three conference. Soviet spies operating in the United States had passed on information regarding the Manhattan Project and were aware of work on the atom bomb. It therefore, came as no big surprise, when Truman informed Stalin that the U.S. had a secret weapon of great destructive power. Molotov expressed the Soviet view after the war when he remarked that, "The bombs dropped on Japan were not aimed at Japan but rather at the Soviet Union."

Secretary of State Byrnes was among Truman's advisors who wanted Truman to adopt a "get tough" policy. Two members of the American delegation at Potsdam, Secretary of War Henry Stimson and former ambassador to Moscow Joe Davies, expressed concern that Byrnes was brandishing the bomb in order to get the Soviets to fall in line. Truman's altercation with Molotov, the San Francisco Conference, and confrontations at Potsdam over Poland, peace treaties with Axis powers, and German reparations all seemed to confirm that the U.S. had embarked on a new policy in dealing with the Russians.

Given the evident enthusiasm of Americans for a war of ideology, Stalin enthusiastically declared one openly on February 9, 1946, by asserting in a speech that the contradictions of capitalism would tear the capitalists countries apart and communism would become the reigning system in the world. In the speech Stalin

implied that future wars were inevitable until communism was triumphant over capitalism.

The major response by Americans to Stalin's posture was to "contain" what was regarded as a worldwide conspiracy to spread communism. On February 22, 1946, George Kennan, the American chargé d'affaires in Moscow, sent a confidential cable to the State Department. In this so-called "Long Telegram" Kennan outlined Soviet policy and concluded that the USSR was on a fanatical crusade to obliterate the West. Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal had the Long Telegram reproduced and made it required reading for higher officers in the armed services. In his *Memoirs* published in 1967, Kennan remarked that the telegram read "like one of those primers put out by alarmed congressional committees or by the Daughters of the American Revolution, designed to arouse the citizenry to the dangers of the Communist conspiracy."¹ In March, Churchill's "Iron Curtain" speech solidified opposition to Soviet encroachments in Europe. In 1947, Greece was convulsed by a civil war supported by neighboring Communist states. At the same time the Soviet Union, to secure its position in the Eastern Mediterranean, was putting pressure on Turkey. Faced with what was perceived as a Soviet takeover of both Greece and Turkey, President Truman announced his "Truman Doctrine" that the United States was pledged to preventing such takeovers, and the first of several similar interventions was launched there at a cost of several hundred million dollars. In April 1948, the Marshall Plan to reconstruct Europe was also conceived as primarily an "anti-communist" measure to insure the rapid recovery of European economies devastated by the war.

By 1949, the Russians had tested a nuclear bomb. The arms race was on and would continue for nearly half a century.

¹ George Kennan, *Memoirs, 1925–1950* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967), pp. 294–95

VI. Lesson Plans

1. The Atomic Bomb and the Effect on International Relations
2. The Policy of Containment
3. The Practice of Containment