

Breakdown of the Grand Alliance between 1943 and 1949 - factors

Origins of the Cold War

Role of ideology

Economic interests

Fear

Aggression

Role of US

Role of USSR

To what extent did economic interests rather than ideology lead to the breakdown of the grand alliance between 1943 and 1949? (M17)

‘Ideology was the main factor that led to the emergence of superpower rivalry between 1943 and 1949.’ Discuss. (M18)

‘Superpower rivalry in Europe and Asia between 1943 and 1949 led to the breakdown of the grand alliance.’ To what extent do you agree with this statement? (N18)

“Fear, rather than aggression, was the main cause of superpower rivalry between 1943 and 1949.” To what extent do you agree with this statement? (M22)

Key events to remember:

April 4, 1949. NATO is founded as a formal American military commitment to protect Europe, and was founded with the nations of Brussels Treaty from earlier, but without USSR. Marked the change in tide for alliances. This and the Warsaw Pact clearly separated Europe into two mutually exclusive blocs under the US or USSR, therefore marking the collapse of the grand alliance and the beginning of proper superpower rivalry and tensions.

‘Superpower rivalry in Europe and Asia between 1943 and 1949 led to the breakdown of the grand alliance.’ To what extent do you agree with this statement? (N18)

The period of 1943 to 1949 would be marked by rising tensions between the USSR and the Western powers, with disagreements over the USSR's management of Eastern Europe, potential Soviet imperialism, and the division of Germany. On the Soviet's part, they were driven by security concerns over the future of Europe, particularly Germany, and felt threatened by US attempts at global hegemony. These tensions would ultimately lead to the breakdown of the Grand Alliance and the beginning of the Cold War. For the purpose of this essay, superpower rivalry will refer to the ideological and hegemonic competition between the US and USSR. Perhaps the mark of total breakdown of relations would be the Berlin Blockade of June 1948, which went on until May 1949. This essay will argue that while superpower rivalry for ideological superiority and hegemony was a significant factor, it was rather the national interests of each country, driven by fear and aggression, that resulted in the alliance's breakdown.

Firstly, superpower rivalry played a significant role, as seen by the ideological conflict between the two superpowers. Both superpowers possessed fundamentally opposing political, economic and social ideological differences. US liberal democracy was incompatible with Soviet-style communist dictatorship, while capitalism was incompatible with the Marxist-Leninist ideological principles. Both claimed to be based on modernity and claimed that their government represented the ideal and final form of human government, claiming ideological universality. In particular, contrasting economic systems were a source of tensions, as the US needed to spread their politico-economic system of capitalism to produce strong networks of free trade, while the Soviets needed to spread communism to have a centralised economy. However, Gaddis argues that both superpowers often pursued their own national interests over ideological conflict, at least in the period from 1943-1949. Stalin was primarily concerned with the security of the USSR, particularly after the damages inflicted during Operation Barbarossa. While Stalin insisted on securing key states like Poland, Romania and Bulgaria under Soviet influence, he was willing to be flexible in Hungary, Finland and Czechoslovakia. For example, in Finland, a democratic government was maintained, and free elections were held in Hungary and Czechoslovakia. Stalin's allowance of democratic institutions in Europe indicates that he may have been more concerned with supporting Soviet security and economic recovery than pursuing ideological dominance. Furthermore, on the part of the US, they did not treat the Communist world as a monolith, and rather were concerned with expanding their influence, seeing the USSR as a competitor for European influence. This can be seen by how they were willing to give economic and military assistance to Yugoslavia in 1951, despite Yugoslavia being a Communist state. This was because Yugoslavia was in conflict with the USSR. Thus, the US was more interested in consolidating power in Europe than contesting the USSR ideologically.

Therefore, it was arguably the national interests of both nations, rather than this ideological conflict that precipitated the collapse of the grand alliance. An orthodox interpretation of the Cold War suggests that Stalin's aggressive actions threatened the security of Western powers, who feared this apparent Soviet imperialism. Stalin annexed the Baltic States in 1945 and refused to withdraw from Eastern Europe until pro-soviet governments were elected, actions which were identified as imperialist in the Riga Axiom. These fears of Soviet imperialism were heightened by the Soviet rejection of the Baruch plan to control nuclear weapons development. This fear of Soviet imperialism would result in an aggressive US response to the Soviets, as prompted by Kennan's long telegram.

Additionally, a revisionist interpretation identifies Soviet security concerns about seemingly aggressive US actions as a main cause for the breakdown of the grand alliance as well. The Atlantic Charter was presented as an attempt to undermine the principles of communism as a way to support the growth of the US economy. The fact that Great Britain and the USSR both ended the war virtually bankrupt, while US GNP had more than doubled, gave rise to the suspicion that US commitment to open-door economics was an attempt to open the whole of Europe to American economic penetration. These suspicions were supported by the liberal conditions attached to the Lend-Lease payments and the establishment of the World Bank and the IMF at Bretton Woods in 1944, all of which favoured US trade. Furthermore, the US suspension of Lend-Lease payments to the USSR and reluctance to endorse reparations were interpreted as economic blackmail to a comparatively vulnerable USSR. The US nuclear monopoly brought up at the Potsdam conference further deepened Soviet fears. Ultimately, it could be argued that the Berlin Blockade was simply an extension of these economic fears, with the USSR trying to protect themselves from the devalued Reichsmark, which they saw as an economic attack from the Western powers.

In conclusion, while the incompatible ideologies and contest for hegemony between the superpowers was a large contributor to the breakdown of the Grand Alliance, it was ultimately conflicting national interests that resulted in the breakdown of the grand alliance. The US remained suspicious of what they perceived as Soviet imperialism, while the Soviets remained suspicious of what they perceived as US economic penetration. Ultimately, both countries held vested interests in protecting their security and shaping their image of the new world, and it was these conflicting goals, rather than an inherent bilateral rivalry, that caused the breakdown of the grand alliance.

Role of ideology

The ideological differences between the USSR and the US and its repercussions are the root cause for the breakdown of the Cold War and for superpower rivalry to emerge.

- Both US and USSR possessed **fundamentally opposing POLITICAL, ECONOMIC and SOCIAL ideologies** of **American democratic capitalism** and **Soviet authoritarian communism**.
 - US advocated for a **limited government** with only a **limited amount of influence in affairs** such as **elections and religion**.
 - Advocated for a **separation of power between party and state** to prevent dictatorships, and wanted multiparty politics and free elections.
 - Economically, US wanted a **free market system with free trade** all around the world, with private individuals and companies competing against each other for production and allocation under **capitalism**.
 - Socially, wanted an **open society** with **minimal government interference** in affairs
 - USSR on the other hand, wanted a **strong central government** where only the communist party was allowed and possessed control of all powers. **No freedom of press, religion, etc** as there was a high level of interference from the government.
 - Wanted a **communist command economy** where the **state makes all the decisions about production and allocation of goods and services**. Masses would thus enjoy **equal distribution of wealth and higher average standards of living**, thus gradually gaining it widespread appeal
- Systems were as such **fundamentally opposed**, and both sides believed their ideologies had claims to universality, meaning their ideologies should be promoted across the rest of the world for the greater good
- These fundamental ideological tensions bred mutual suspicions between the superpowers
 - **USSR refusal to grant Poland free elections** as originally agreed in the wartime conferences bred suspicion among the Americans as to whether Stalin could be trusted
 - **US' attempt to launch the Marshall Plan**, a scheme of economic aid lent to European countries that would also help to boost and **intertwine their economies with the US own economy**, was also viewed as “dollar imperialism” and an attempt to **detach Eastern Europe** as a communist bloc from USSR
- The USSR launched programs such as COMECON to compete with the economic aid offered by the Marshall Plan,
- By **forcing countries to pick sides**, ideological differences made the two superpowers and their allies and territories incompatible with each other, sparking superpower rivalry by drawing a clear East-West divide through Eastern Europe.

Evaluation:

- Ideology sometimes goes against realpolitik, showing that ideology might not be taken as seriously in extreme circumstances and putting some extent of limitation on ideology. The very **establishment of the Grand Alliance** in 1941 to face off against Germany happened **in spite of the already existing ideological differences**, hence proving that the breakdown in relations cannot completely be pinned on ideology

- However, ideology **still tends to be a more encompassing factor for the breakdown** in relations, as it still **set the basis for the fundamental divide** that existed between both superpowers
- Furthermore, without a unifying threat such as Germany, the ideological divide became more prominent.

Economic interest

Economic interests of the US and USSR, while significant, were not the main factors for the breakdown of the Grand Alliance.

- US and USSR had fundamentally opposed economic interests and alignments
 - US came from a position of **economic strength** from the end of WWII, having had its GDP rise from **\$90 billion in 1939 to \$211 billion in 1945**, which was mainly due to its late entry into WWII
 - Vouched for a free market, capitalist economy, believing free trade would usher worldwide prosperity and world peace. Would require economic partners to collaborate to provide a large marketplace for US goods in order to make such a system work. US therefore sought this in Europe and particularly, in Germany and Berlin that it saw as a potentially strong economic ally
 - USSR and Soviet industries significantly impacted after WWII, having been heavily involved in the war. There was an **ongoing famine situation, 70000 villages were destroyed**, and its overall economy was in tatters and **only ¼ the size of the US economy**.
 - Wanted a communist command economy and feared being encircled by the US that he deemed “imperialist” for trying to practice dollar diplomacy
- In order to play off their economic dominance to **establish global hegemony**, the US engaged in ‘dollar diplomacy’
 - In order to **establish dependency on the US dollar** in Europe, they established **Bretton Woods System in 1944**, adopting a monetary system that tied one’s currency to the value of the US dollar, thus boosting the many war-torn economies throughout Europe.
 - Also launched **International Monetary Fund and World Bank**, helping to bridge temporary imbalances through payment. With the US dollar as the only freely convertible currency,
- Launched the **Marshall Plan** to **provide assistance provide markets for American goods, create reliable trading partners**, and supported the development of stable democratic governments in Western Europe.
 - Based on the principle that an economically stable and improved country would reduce the spread of communism
 - Proposed **large dollar grants to European countries** who accepted the plan to **purchase food, industrial machinery and raw materials** to pull themselves out of economic recession.
 - Allowed US to practice dollar diplomacy by **having its economic power translate into political influence**

- Such schemes were amid rejection of economic aid that the US had previously promised to the USSR, thus fostering distrust. Stalin in particular took this as a sign that US was trying to **gain world dominance** and detach the communist bloc from Eastern Europe by tempting these countries with economic aid, **thus stirring further tensions**
 - USSR created COMECON as a counter to similarly **bring Eastern European economies into closer collaboration with USSR**, and created **Cominform in September 1947 to ensure tighter Soviet control over communist parties**

Evaluation:

- The fundamental driving force of the economic conflict was largely due to ideological differences
 - Economic aid was offered to USSR, but their refusal to be included in the marshall plan despite their clear need for economic aid (needed reparations from Germany)
 - May not have wanted to be beholden to US, who they considered a superpower rival?
 - However,
- Their use of dollar diplomacy was ultimately a tool to mitigate the communist influence in europe by reducing their reliance on the USSR, as acknowledged by the USSR where they created COMECON as a direct response, to re-establish their communist system in their communist bloc

Fear

- Definition
 - A mutual distrust and suspicion; a fear of the opposite side
- Breakdown of trust
 - Initial willingness to collaborate
 - In 1945, there was a genuine desire of Americans to keep Grand Alliance, but it deteriorated within a year
 - 1945: 55% of Americans felt Russians could be trusted
 - 1946: 35% of Americans
 - Truman's foreign policy was more threatening and intimidating towards USSR
 - Schwarz suggests that the compromises of the Potsdam conference were largely stopgaps and this were never really willing to cooperate
 - Ideological differences too large
 - Kennan - "sharing Germany with Russia is like a Chimera"
- Soviet fear of American atomic monopoly
 - Manhattan project + Hiroshima & Nagasaki
 - Existing weapons were rendered obsolete, the appraisal of national security changed rapidly
 - Zubok suggests nuclear monopoly fuelled a paranoia of a surprise attack
 - Aircraft units in Moscow on 24h alert
 - Gaddis argues that the effectiveness of atomic threat was undermined by unwillingness to use the bomb
 - Only become more significant with Eisenhower's New Look
- Soviet fear of American financial dominance
 - US established the Bretton Woods System
 - Established the IMF and World Bank to monitor exchange rates and lend reserve currencies
 - USD adopted as global currency
 - USSR was devastated after WW2, needed funds
 - Embarked on a series of 5 year plans for economic reform
 - Extracted 13 billions in reparations from Eastern European
- West fear of Soviet Expansionism
 - Churchill and Truman rejected any agreement that involved separate spheres of influence
 - Soviet interests in oil and security in Iran
 - West put pressure by demanding the withdrawal of the Red Army
 - Black Sea Straits for trade
 - Had been a long standing policy
 - US deployed a permanent fleet to the Mediterranean
 - West's actions caused Stalin to view them as increasingly hostile to Soviet economic recovery

Fear

Note: There's not actually much of a point trying to demo topic sentences as they have to be highly specific to the demands of the question. A "to what extent" question will likely only need you to compare two factors with each other if those are the only 2 factors mentioned. Subsequent evaluations should be purely based on the merits of the argument itself.

- Fear of ideology and goals of the opposing side
 - US received the Long Telegram in Feb 1946 that would dictate its foreign policy and necessitate urgency in its planning. Long telegram argued that perceived Soviet aggression had roots in Russian history and identified the west as its enemy, seeking to conquer the world for communism. It claimed ideology was a tool to justify this aggression that followed soviet domestic policy instead of US actions. This and Churchill's Iron Curtain speech that claimed the descent of the iron curtain across Europe generated paranoia and hardened US public opinion
 - Coupled with the repercussions of the appeasement policy, led to general fears that the security of Europe translated into the security of US as well. Therefore, this general sense of fear strongly encouraged the use of an aggressive containment policy to control the spread of communism (i.e. fear breeds aggression ?)
 - Similarly, USSR feared US ideology intended to encircle his communist bloc, and that US dollar diplomacy would endanger the economic strength and cohesion of the USSR
- Stalin's paranoia also informed most of his actions and intentions throughout the Cold War
 - During WWII, bore most of the brunt of the fighting on behalf of the Grand Alliance, and was left suspicious of most delays in opening the second front up in France
 - Became increasingly suspicious of US and UK aims, and was thus incredibly protective and concerned about his hold over the Eastern bloc: he wanted these as buffer states to ensure the USSR's own security. He rejected the notion of collective security through the UN and equated security with territory, making it difficult to engage in cooperation
 - Thus US dollar diplomacy scheme was seen as an expansionist threat by Stalin.
 - Stalin also incredibly apprehensive of Germany's economic success, having suffered majorly at the hands of Germany. Therefore, he wanted a weak Germany and Berlin that could eventually fall under the influence of the Soviets and never amass up the strength to put up a resistance against the Soviets, something UK and US failed to understand
- Arms race also propelled forward by fear
 - US knowledge that the USSR had already found out about the atomic bomb and their eventual ability to build one caused mass panic in the US and urged on public sentiment against the USSR, despite USSR having only 5 compared to US 369
 - Stalin believed West was out to destroy USSR and communism, thus putting his forces on high alert and sustaining high defense spending, thus adding to the superpower rivalry in building up their militaries and taking away from rebuilding the economy
 - Atomic bomb engendered reappraisal of national security on both sides

Evaluation:

- Fear was the fundamental motion for aggression, having been the main motivator for most of Stalin's actions to take actions that appeared increasingly hostile
- Fear on both sides was also the main motivator behind the foreign policy directions that both sides took. US through the Long Telegram, developed fear of potential USSR goals of expansionism and thus directed themselves towards a more containment-based policy, whereas USSR developed a wariness for anything that appeared to threaten its buffer states, causing it to resort to aggression through the Berlin Blockade and the formation of COMECON purely to rival the US Marshall Plan
- Adapting a post-revisionist lens, fear meant that both parties had misconceptions and overestimated the abilities of the other side, such as how the US overestimated USSR's military capabilities causing an arms race, or the USSR overestimated the potential military threat Germany and the West as a whole could pose against the stability of the buffer states themselves, causing them to closely guard the buffer states and take action based on it
- By nature, the Berlin blockade imposed could have been read as an act of aggression, but this crisis was particularly reactionary to the formation of West Berlin and Bizonia, along with the issue of the new currency, having occurred on just the day after. Thus, it was intended as a way Stalin could assert USSR's presence in the region

Aggression

- Refers to acting without provocation
- Military acts of aggression
 - Events such as the Greek Civil War broke out as communist uprising and revolts of bloody nature taking place. Interpreted as acts of communist and Soviet aggression, West believing it was instigated by Stalin. Eventual victory to the US and UK-backed royalist government was viewed as a victory against the Communist and USSR
 - Development and usage of nuclear bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 also viewed as a more subtle act of aggression to instill fear into the USSR. Its detonation and reveal was arguably not completely necessary and construed as a demonstration of hostility and military capability to USSR as well, with revisionist historians believing it to be an aggressive play to induce a more conciliatory attitude in USSR
 - Responded to with USSR already building its own atomic bomb to be successfully demonstrated in 1949, contributing to superpower rivalry in the form of the arms race and also adding to the mutual suspicions within the Grand Alliance as to how Stalin found out about such a top-secret project
- Economic acts of aggression
 - Marshall Plan construed as a form of dollar diplomacy, and USSR viewed it as an unprovoked attack to gain influence over the Eastern bloc by offering them economic aid
- Political acts of aggression
 - USSR practised salami tactics to gradually impose communist governments and regimes throughout Eastern Europe, unsettling their systems and also being construed as a form of expansionist aggression on the part of the USSR
 - Salami tactics used in Hungary, involving planned undermining of the postwar coalition government, marginalising political opponents and rigging elections to allow communist parties to gain control → directly violates principles agreed on

in wartime conferences to organise free and fair elections, increasing distrust between superpowers

Evaluation:

- What might have been construed as acts of aggression can be argued as an act of reactionary defence misconstrued by the other side
- Often acts that could be perceived as aggressive expansionism share a cause-and-effect relationship, such as how the Marshall Plan was conjectured as a reaction out of fear of the Greek Civil War situation repeating itself. Greek Civil War situation could have easily been worsened as Britain did not have the funds to continue putting up the Western resistance movement against the communists
- Conversion of Eastern Europe territories was not completely unexpected and was therefore not an explicit act of aggression either - Stalin had made it clear during the Tehran Conference that he felt entitled to the Eastern Europe territories for the sacrifices USSR had to make on behalf of the Grand Alliance during WWII

Role of USSR

- Subscribes to the orthodox perspective of the origins of the Cold War - that USSR is primarily responsible
- Russian expansionism
 - USSR and Russia in particular had a history of expansionism ingrained into it and would be used by Stalin to inform foreign policy
 - Claimed ideological universality - that its communist ideology would be applicable around the world and would therefore need to be spread by inciting communist revolution globally under the doctrine of Marxist-Leninism
 - Soviets were convinced that war was inevitable so would take expansionist steps as much as possible to give themselves the edge
 - Constantly conducted acts of aggression, such as the Berlin Blockade to block out supplies from reaching West Berlin in order to drive Western powers out of Berlin and Germany
- Stalin also personally paranoid, greatly affected the course of USSR action through the Cold War
 - Placed an unnaturally high emphasis on its own security, evidenced by 1939 Nazi-Soviet Pact, and unreasonably rejected the idea of collective security provided by the UN in favour of the security provided by buffer states
 - Constantly developed technologies and spent resources on military, propelling the arms race and superpower rivalry with the US through the building of the atomic bomb, with forces always on high alert and high defence spending occurring
- Engaged in salami tactics to retake Eastern Europe under communist influence, thus being the aggressor to exude its influence over Europe and necessitate US intervention in Europe
 - Gradually engaged in takeover by whittling down the opposition to the communist parties in the different countries until they were the last one standing, allowing Stalin to set up communist regimes across Eastern Europe that were friendly to USSR, thus posing a potential risk to the rest of Europe if West failed to apply containment policy to stem the spread
 - Salami tactics used in Hungary, involving planned undermining of the postwar coalition government, marginalising political opponents and rigging elections to

allow communist parties to gain control → directly violates principles agreed on in wartime conferences to organise free and fair elections, increasing distrust between superpowers

- Violation of terms agreed in wartime conferences
 - Stalin failed to carry out the terms the members of the Grand Alliance had collectively agreed upon during the wartime conferences in Potsdam, Tehran and Yalta
 - Did not carry out the free and fair elections previously promised to US and UK
 - Fostered general distrust within the Grand Alliance leading to its demise
- Such expansionist policies and dangerous tendencies meant it was necessary for US to respond using a hardline containment policy to counter the danger communism and Stalin posed as soon as possible

Evaluation:

- This particular school of thought and perspective was formulated by historians around the 1950s when information about Stalin's perspective of things was not yet made available
 - Most historians championing the orthodox idea were also people who held official positions within the US State Department or a government agency, leading to some extent of bias in this particular perspective (Herbert Fries, Thomas A. Bailey)
- Perspective fails to understand and take into account the motivations behind USSR actions and the historical contexts of war that informed its actions
 - USSR desire to revitalise its economy and industry which was damaged by Germans

Role of US

- Subscribes to the revisionist school of thought with regards to historiography of Cold War's origins - that US is primarily responsible
- US foreign policy was not informed with the objectives of peace-making and being reactive, instead, US was proactive in taking aggressive action to counter the USSR and benefit its own economic gain
 - US foreign policy as a capitalist democracy that believes in the values of free trade has always prioritised securing foreign markets for selling its goods and products → informed Bretton Woods System and Marshall Plan that aggravated USSR significantly
 - US failed to keep in line with its stated guidelines in the Atlantic Charter to oppose imperialism and the formation of spheres of influence by trying to secure economic relations with Eastern Europe under the Marshall Plan
 - Dollar diplomacy was therefore an act of aggression as USA tried to gain world dominance and diminish USSR's overall influence by forming its own international ties, especially with regions USSR made clear during the wartime conferences felt they were entitled to
- Further complicated situation and aggravated USSR by refusing them the loans they had requested for and fully expected to receive. US termination of Lend Lease to its allies in 1945 when it was already in a much stronger economic position than the rest of the world post-war further jeopardised relations within the Grand Alliance and showed that US was willing to betray the originally agreed-upon terms to benefit itself as well

- Also had a principle of ideological universalism to maintain - that engaging the world in one globalised, integrated economy would help to make every country economically prosperous and successful
- It was these attempts at US economic expansionism that necessitated USSR responses in order to safeguard its authority and hold over Eastern Europe, further jeopardising relations and as such drawing a clear divide across Europe

Evaluation:

- Revisionist perspective gained traction and popularity in the 1960s when national sentiment in US became increasingly unhappy and doubtful of American foreign policy due to their military failures in Vietnam, standing to reason that there is an extent of bias in adhering to this school of thought
- Attributing US most of the blame for starting the Cold War does not explain the radical responses the USSR took in having to secure additional territories such as Berlin and Germany as buffer states