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An Analysis on The Cold War and Its Psychological Impact on the Society

The United States and the USSR competed for superiority in weaponry, technology, and economy that lasted for half a century in the 1900s, also known as the Cold War. The Cold War started for a number of political reasons, involved the whole world, and had, arguably, two-sided effects on the whole world. After WWII, the U.S. felt the need to stop the spread of communism in order to build a market-free Europe and retain the power of capitalism over the world.[[1]](#footnote-0) While the Cold War mainly involved the space race, armed race, and races in other aspects that were rather “cold”, it certainly developed into real-fought wars such as the Korean War and the Vietnam War. The Cold War ended with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the following collapse of the Soviet Union. While it benefited the United States in the long-term, such as the improvement in education, science, technology, and the construction of the massive transportation infrastructure, it also had negative effects: it kept the world in turmoil for another half-century where the world would have been in peace since the end of WWII; it cost millions of dollars and took away soldiers’ lives from all participating countries at real-fought wars; it distorted American democracy into militarism and the extreme left-wing; it caused panic and public insecurity such as the Red Scare and the fear of nuclear weapons.[[2]](#footnote-1)

The term “Cold War” was first introduced by English writer George Orwell in his 1945 essay “You and the Atomic Bomb.” “So we have before us the prospect of two or three monstrous super-states, each possessed of a weapon by which millions of people can be wiped out in a few seconds, dividing the world between them.”(Orwell, 1945). Worried about the global impact of such an expensive, powerful weapon owned by only a few nations, George Orwell predicted in his essay: “it is likelier to put an end to large-scale wars at the cost of prolonging indefinitely a ‘peace that is no peace.’”[[3]](#footnote-2) Just within several years, the world developed into exactly what Orwell had anticipated and depicted - a “Cold War” between the United States and the Soviet Union, the two most powerful and dominant countries in the world after WWII.

During WWII, the United States, the Soviet Union, and Europe fought together against the Nazi Germans. The Allied powers won the war at a heavy cost. The Soviet Union alone had suffered a casualty of approximately 27 million. Europe suffered even worse. The Soviet Union and the United States were the only two giant world powers left. Since the United States entered the war relatively late, the United States had suffered only a minimal amount of casualties. As a result, people from the USSR blamed the United States for not entering the war sooner, which caused the Soviet Union a much greater casualty.

The United States blamed the USSR too. After WWII, in fear of another World War, the USSR encouraged communism in Bulgaria, Romania, and Poland governments, deploying Soviet troops and acting as a buffer between the USSR and Europe. The United States thus blamed the Soviets’ attempt to build up a communist empire, which would crowd out capitalism and counteract their effort to recover a post-war market-free economy in Europe. So what really caused the Cold War?

The cause of the Cold War has been in decades of argument. Scholars generally split themselves into three categories. The traditional view blamed the USSR for their attempt to build up a Soviet empire while the revisionists blamed the United States for how much they made the USSR suffer in WWII. The Post-Revisionists believed both sides were to blame - there were hatreds on both sides. In fact, most historians agree with this theory that the Cold War was a clash of ideologies between communism and capitalism. Such an ideological conflict was what really ignited the breakout of the Cold War.

Tired of seeing people blaming each other on the causes of the Cold War, I began to wonder what people at the time of the Cold War thought or felt about it. I found some interesting results from my research. Regardless of who caused the Cold War or why it started, the psychological pain that the Cold War inflicted on citizens was not negligible. The fear of nuclear warfare had a huge psychological impact on citizens of both the US and the USSR. Harmful psychological effects included anxiety, fear of devastating war, and paranoia. Kiraly, who studied the psychological effects that nuclear warfares have, posted his research on *Pyschological Effects of the Threat of Nuclear War* in 1986. He described the arms race and its effects on humanity as dangerously inhuman, immoral, and ignorant and as psychologically pathological and pathogenic.[[4]](#footnote-3) He found that adults adapt to this threat in life by avoidance. They call on denial and depersonalization to deal with the fear and often become anxious, demoralized, and depressed. There was an especially heavy impact on children during these times. Children understood the threat of nuclear war just like adults but were more deeply disturbed and hit by it. They often felt powerless and hopeless in the face of this threat and questioned the future of their life and their chance of survival. Such kind of emotional distress caused the younger generation lasting problems. These harmful psychological effects of the threat of nuclear war had lasting impacts on the community as well. The distress and psychological adaptations led to emotional disorders, family breakdown, drug abuse, alcoholism, and a higher crime rate, which negatively impacted communities and families.

Furthermore, according to *The Cold War Experience*, a relatively modern website developed and published by Andrew Martin, Brandon Lauer, David Heller, Derek Marshall, and John Heym III, some people in the US were paranoid and feared Soviet invasion or nuclear war. Nuclear preparedness became a way of life, and many schools and businesses practiced duck-and-cover drills in case of an event.[[5]](#footnote-4) Communities installed air raid sirens, and homeowners built nuclear fallout shelters as precautions. The idea of McCarthyism - the act of accusing someone without clear evidence of a crime, developed because many innocent people were being accused of being communists. Those accused, even if innocent, were often shamed by their communities and, in some cases, fired from their jobs or imprisoned. The accusations led to mass paranoia within the public and great feelings of distrust between citizens and the government. Hollywood reacted to the overall mood of the nation through new Sci-Fi films that portrayed alien invaders and giant man-eating bugs that mutated from nuclear radiation. The alien invaders represented the fear of an actual Soviet invasion, and the mutated insects were an exaggeration of the public's vision of a post-nuclear world.

Nevertheless, there also existed positive sides to such psychological impacts of the Cold War. The increased focus on nuclear threats caused nuclear preparedness, an increased focus on preventing nuclear warfare. Ralph K. White was a scholar in political psychology who investigated this focus on how these psychological effects are related to the prevention of a nuclear war. He posted in his work *Psychology and the Prevention of Nuclear War* that the fear of nuclear warfare allowed society to become more educated and realize its destructive nature.[[6]](#footnote-5) The negative psychological impacts of the Cold War actually caused people to want to prevent the initiation of it. The more negative the impact, the stronger the will to prevent it as a human instinct to survive.

Meanwhile, life in the Soviet Union during the Cold War was similar and different from life in the US. Also according to *The Cold War Experience*, communism took away freedoms from people. The government had absolute control over everything, including media. Therefore, any reading, watching, or listening not permitted by the government was all banned. Paintings, drawings, poems, and novels must be produced to glorify Stalin's image. Education was also strictly controlled and exams were intentionally written for political propoganda purposes. Healthcare was expanded, but housing and famine remained major issues for citizens across the Soviet Union.

Overall, the Cold War created a fear in people from both the US and the Soviet Union that led to emotional and mental disorders, which had lasting negative impacts on both the community and the world. According to Xi Xie from Stanford University, this shared fear also significantly impacted the feelings and increased anxiety among the population at large.[[7]](#footnote-6) Among them, the younger generation was hit the hardest. These negative feelings might further lead to pessimism towards the future and sometimes even to criminal behaviors. However, such fear and anxiety educated people to realize how devastating it would be if the Cold War escalated into a real nuclear war. As a result, it motivated different means of law and other legislative methods to reduce the scale of war.

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