Introduction to the Early Origins of the Cold War

Read the selection below. On a separate sheet of paper make a list of key dates and events. Be prepared to share your list in class discussion.

With the defeat of Hitler’s Germany in 1945, the Big Three alliance of Great Britain, Russia, and the United States began to crumble with alarming speed and impact. The diplomatic impasse and frustrating anxiety that followed were soon labeled the “Cold War,” a phrase which Walter Lippmann popularized in 1947 with the publication of a book by that name. To those Americans who nurtured hopes of peaceful postwar international relations, the immediate collapse of the wartime coalition and the increase in Soviet-American tension were shocking and largely unexpected. For others, however, the antagonism was disturbing but anticipated, and for some people, perhaps desired. Indeed, the history of twentieth-century Russian-American relations was not comforting to the postwar optimists, for those relations were characterized by coldness and isolation, jilted [rejected] hopes, and even armed conflict before 1945. And there were two themes running through those relations which were to plague the postwar period as well: national security, and economic development and reconstruction.

The successful Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 precipitated [caused] Russia’s decision to withdraw its weary people from World War I. To France, Britain, and the United States, the decision to end the war on the eastern front appeared catastrophic. Some observers believed in fact that the Bolsheviks were simply German agents. American and European leaders, considering the Marxist ideology an anathema [a curse] and the Bolshevik seizure of foreign properties in Russia intolerable, were generally fearful of the success of the Revolution, its possible spread, and its ultimate questioning of and challenge to the capitalist world order. Desirous of keeping Russia in the war and of weakening the Bolsheviks, the United States contributed about 5,000 soldiers to a 1918 Allied interventionist expedition in Northern Russia. Another 10,000 Americans invaded Siberia, and were involved in anti-Bolshevik military ventures until their withdrawal in 1920. American participation in an economic blockade of Russia before 1920 put trade between the two nations on a troubled footing from the beginning. Russia was excluded from the peace conference at Versailles, and in America a Red Scare brought anti-communism to a high fever. Permanent scars were thus early imprinted on Soviet-American relations.

Although Great Britain opened diplomatic relations with Russia in 1924, American recognition was not offered until 1933. Yet, recognition did not smooth diplomatic ripples, for soon after, Americans claimed Russia was fomenting [causing] international revolution. The two nations failed to reach agreement on the issue of Russian debts owed to the United States government ($193 million), to American nationals ($107 million), and to the American corporations and nationals who lost property after the Bolshevik Revolution ($337 million). Nor did Soviet-American trade improve markedly as anticipated. The diplomacy leading to World War II further embittered relations. Not invited to the Munich conference of 1938, Russia was the only major nation to denounce the appeasement agreement. The Nazi-Soviet pact of 1939 saw two European dictators carve up helpless Poland, and Russia’s seizure of Finnish territory in the “winter war” of 1940-41, confirmed American beliefs that Hitler and Stalin were two of a kind, brutal and aggressive.

After 1941, communist Russia and capitalist America were both at war with Germany, and formed an alliance of convenience for national survival. But the alliance was constantly ridden with strife. The United States and Britain failed to fulfill their 1942 promise of a second front to relieve Russia from carrying the burden of the war. That front finally came at Normandy in June, 1944; the Russians were grateful but also seriously annoyed by the delay. They believed the worst in their desperation: that many in the West were realizing their publicly stated wish that Germany and Russia would annihilate one another while the West watched. Squabbles over Lend-Lease shipments, the surrender of Italy to the western front forces, and Soviet liberation of Eastern European countries also divided the Allies. The Big Three wartime conferences at Moscow (1943), Teheran (1943), Dumbarton Oaks (1944), Yalta (1945), and Potsdam (1945), although bringing agreement on the need for a second front, an international organization, the temporary division of Germany, and Russian entry into the war against Japan, left many divisive questions unanswered in statements and declarations that contained a great deal of imprecise language. The administration of Germany, and Russian entry into the war against Japan, left many divisive questions unanswered in statements and declarations that contained a great deal of imprecise language. The administration of Germany and Japan, German boundaries, the status of governments in Eastern Europe—especially Poland, reparations, and the voting procedures in the new United Nations Organization awaited more precise formulation in postwar settlements. In short, a long history of ill will, mutual suspicion, and indecisive conflict lay behind the break-up of the World War II alliance..."