

Stalin Versus Truman

During the first six months of 1945, the stage for the Cold War was set by the actions of the Soviet Union and the responses of the Western powers—especially the United States. The Yalta Conference (February 1945) was the last wartime conference attended by Stalin, Churchill, and Roosevelt, who died the following April. That spring, the Soviets consolidated their control over Eastern Europe.

With the death of FDR, Vice President Harry Truman assumed the mantle of leadership. While Roosevelt and Stalin had shared a relative friendship during the war, Truman quickly developed a strong dislike for the Soviet premier.

In May, the German High Command surrendered following the suicide of their leader, Adolf Hitler. As Allied nations around the world celebrated their joint victory, they began to watch with dismay as the Soviet army took further steps to tighten control in Eastern Europe.

Although the war in Europe was complete, the conflict in Asia against the Japanese was not. Both the British and the Americans still faced a formidable enemy in the Pacific. In July, another wartime conference was held, this one attended by President Truman, Premier Stalin, and a new British prime minister, Clement Attlee (Churchill's Conservative Party had been voted out during a mid-summer election).

The conference was held in the German city of Potsdam, near Berlin. At this conference, Truman demanded free elections for all of Eastern Europe. Stalin would make no such promise. Both Britain and the U.S. accused the Soviets of communizing the occupied nations of the East. By that time, Stalin had extended military and political control over the Baltic states of Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania, portions of Finland, Romania, and Poland, as well as Czechoslovakia.

During the conference, President Truman received word of the detonation of the world's first atomic bomb, the result of a secret, joint British-American research project. In August, two such bombs were

dropped on Japanese cities, bringing an abrupt end to the war in the Pacific with the surrender of Japan. But such success did not sway the Soviets from their pursuit of communist control in Eastern Europe.



Roosevelt, Stalin, and Churchill

Throughout the second half of the 1940s, the Soviets further consolidated their power. Two immensely powerful political blocs were formed—the Free World nations led by the United States, and the Communist bloc, dominated by the Soviet Union. The Free World nations included Great Britain, France, Canada, the Philippines, Japan, and West Germany (a combination of the three Allied sectors, with the Soviet-controlled sector becoming East Germany). The

Communist bloc included the Soviet-dominated countries of Eastern Europe, and, by 1949, communist China.

During the late 1940s and early 1950s, the Cold War became highly confrontational. Both the Communist bloc and the Free World distrusted the other, each accusing the other of pursuing a destructive foreign policy at the other's expense. Both the West and the East felt justified in their positions and their politics. They saw the other side as threatening, even evil. The Cold War set the course for much of the history of the second half of the twentieth century. And ever present in the endless tension was the threat of the use of nuclear weapons.

Review and Write

1. How was Truman's relationship with Stalin different from FDR's relationship with the Soviet leader?
2. What nations and regions were members of the Free World and the Communist bloc after World War II? What did these two armed camps represent for the future of the world?