

Debating the origins of the Cold War

While no-one questions that the Soviets expanded their influence massively in the early post-war years, historians have debated for decades the motives behind Moscow's policies. Were the Soviets acting simply to guarantee their security in the future – that is, did East and Central Europe simply represent a first line of defence against the future rise of Germany or other Powers trying to invade the USSR? Or were the Soviets deliberately attempting to expand communism, initially to Eastern Europe, but later to Western Europe and beyond? Did Stalin have a master plan? Was he simply an opportunist, or do the take-overs in, and subsequent hegemony over, Eastern Europe provide evidence of the impact of communist ideology in Soviet foreign policy?

A closely linked debate concerns the motivations behind American involvement in Europe. Initially, most observers and a large number of historians stressed the essentially defensive nature of American policy: that the Truman administration merely responded to the aggressive policies of the Soviet Union. In the 1960s the so-called revisionist school – led by scholars like William A. Williams – challenged this interpretation by arguing that American foreign policy was driven by a need to secure overseas markets and incorporate Western Europe firmly into an American-dominated international system. Subsequent scholarship has often taken these opposing views as the starting point of analysis, although gradually the picture of the origins of the Cold War has become increasingly complex. In particular, numerous authors have explored the role of other players (notably, the various European countries) and taken advantage of new methodological approaches to explore the cultural and social aspects of the origins of the Cold War in Europe. In general, the scholarship of the onset of the Cold War is both rich in scope and large in volume, offering no easy path for generalization.