

# Setting the Stage for the Cold War and Decolonization

*We would consider it our moral duty to lend all support to the ending of colonialism and imperialism so that people everywhere are free to mould their own destiny.*

—Lal Bahadur Shastri, Indian independence movement leader in the 1920s

**Essential Question:** What was the historical context for the Cold War after World War II?

**A**fter the global conflict of World War II, the largely unfulfilled hopes for greater colonial self-government after World War I were revived. Shastri's anti-imperialist sentiments helped explain how global affairs changed after the war ended in 1945. Colonies' desire for independence became intertwined with a global ideological conflict between capitalist countries (led by the United States) and communist countries (led by the Soviet Union).

## Bringing the War to an End

During World War II, the leaders of Great Britain, the United States, and the Soviet Union, known as the **Big Three**, held several meetings to plan for the post-war world. Three of these were particularly important.

**The Tehran Conference** During the **Tehran Conference** in Iran in November 1943, the Allies agreed that the Soviet Union would focus on freeing Eastern Europe, while Britain and the United States would concentrate on Western Europe. In addition, Britain and the United States agreed to a Soviet demand to shift some Polish territory to the Soviet Union, which would be offset by Poland gaining territory elsewhere, mostly from Germany.

**The Yalta Conference** By February 1945, the Allies knew that Germany was near defeat, but they disagreed about what should happen after Germany's surrender. At the **Yalta Conference**, at a resort on the Black Sea, the leaders focused on plans for reconstructing Eastern Europe and for defeating Japan.

- Franklin Roosevelt wanted free, democratic elections in Eastern Europe. He also wanted the Soviets to join the war against Japan.

- Stalin demanded influence over Eastern Europe. Fearful that another Napoleon or Hitler would invade Russia from the West, he wanted Eastern Europe as a buffer zone. In return for Soviet help against Japan, he wanted control of islands claimed by Japan, ports ruled by China, and part ownership of a Manchurian railroad.

Roosevelt thought that after years of overseas war, the American public was unlikely to support a war against the Soviets over the fate of democracy in Eastern Europe. The conference ended with a Soviet pledge to fight Japan, but the Soviets offered only vague assurances on free elections in Eastern Europe.

**The Potsdam Conference** The final meeting among leaders of the Big Three, the **Potsdam Conference**, began in July 1945 in Germany. **Harry Truman**, who had become president after Roosevelt died on April 12, represented the United States. Churchill started the conference but lost his position as prime minister in mid-July and was replaced by Clement Atlee.

Truman insisted on free elections in Eastern Europe. However, by then Soviet troops had occupied the region. Stalin refused Truman's demand. With the backing of Soviet power, communists eventually gained control of East Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, and Romania.

By 1945, the United States and the Soviet Union lacked trust in one another and had begun the aggressive rhetoric that would become standard for four decades following World War II. Potsdam and the earlier conferences failed to settle important issues between the world's major powers. As a result, the stage was set for a cold war between countries still devastated by a hot war.

## Shifting Balance of Power

When the war ended in 1945, parts of Europe and Asia had been devastated. The war resulted in 40 million to 60 million deaths. It destroyed factories, roads, bridges, and other structures needed for industrial production. It forced millions of people to move. Many were fleeing communism or searching for safety and opportunity.

**Massive Destruction in Europe** Wartime losses were not evenly distributed throughout Europe. In general, East and Central Europe suffered greater losses than did Western Europe. Worst hit were the Soviet Union, Poland, and Germany. Each lost between 10 and 20 percent of its population.

Countries such as Great Britain and France, despite their losses, maintained strong traditions of democracy and the rule of law. They still had strong educational systems, including outstanding universities. They remained home to large, innovative corporations. These advantages provided the foundation for Western Europe to become a global leader after the war. However, because of the massive physical destruction and population loss in victorious and defeated nations, Europe became less influential and powerful in the rest of the world, while the United States and the Soviet Union became more powerful. (Connect: Write a paragraph comparing the destruction caused by World War I and World War II. See Topic 7.8.)

**The U.S.-Soviet Rivalry** In 1945, then, the United States was poised to become the most powerful country in the world. Of all the major countries involved in the war, the United States suffered the least. Heavy fighting occurred on U.S. soil, in the Philippines, but the U.S. mainland was untouched by attacks. Its industrial base and infrastructure not only remained intact but also grew stronger through government-funded military contracts. Further, the loss of life in the United States was far lower than in Europe. The relative prosperity of the United States allowed it to provide financial aid to European countries after the war. This aid program, called the Marshall Plan, is described in Topic 8.2.

The United States also had developed atomic weapons and used them during the war, making the country even more formidable. The Soviets successfully tested an atomic bomb of their own in 1949. By the end of the 1940s, only the Soviet Union could challenge the United States in military might and political influence.

**Advances During the War** Military research at universities and in private companies, often funded by government, resulted in tremendous technological developments during World War II. Among the items that were developed for, improved, or used more widely by the military were air pressure systems for airplane cabins, refrigeration for food, stronger plywood for construction, and a variety of plastics for many uses. One of the most important advances was the spread of the use of penicillin, which saved the lives of thousands of wounded soldiers. Each of these advances would be adapted for civilian use, thereby improving the lives of millions of people.

## The Start of the Cold War

The U.S.-Soviet tensions evident at Tehran, Yalta, and Potsdam made conflict likely. However, the high costs of the war meant that neither superpower wanted a full-scale war with the other. Rather, they settled into a **cold war**, a conflict does not involve direct military confrontation between two or more rival states. The Cold War between the superpowers played out in propaganda campaigns, secret operations, and an arms race.

The deadliest results of the Cold War occurred outside the lands of the two superpowers. The U.S.-Soviet rivalry led both countries to arm opposing sides in conflicts around the world, thereby transforming small civil wars and regional conflicts into much larger events. This increased the death tolls and level of destruction in these wars.

In the early 1950s, the United States and Soviet Union each developed a **hydrogen bomb** that was much more powerful than the atomic bombs dropped on Japan at the end of World War II. The arms race fostered close ties between the military and the industries that developed weapons. Before he left office in 1961, President **Dwight Eisenhower** expressed his concerns about the U.S.-Soviet competition for supremacy in nuclear armaments. He warned against allowing the **military-industrial complex**, the informal alliance between the



government and the large defense contractors, to gain too much power. In later decades, citizens in many countries expressed similar worries. They began to protest the stockpiling of nuclear weapons.

## Breakdown of Empires

After World War II, efforts resumed to undermine colonialism. The start of World War I had marked the high point of colonial empires. The British, the French, and other Europeans had colonized almost all of Africa, India, and Southeast Asia, and they dominated China. Empires based in Austria, Turkey, and Russia were multiethnic states, but each was dominated by one group, leaving others feeling discriminated against. After World War I, the demand for **self-determination**, the idea that each country should choose its own form of government and leaders, was spreading. The Austro-Hungary Empire and the Ottoman Empire crumbled, restructured into multiple new countries. However, in China, India, and throughout Africa, Europeans generally maintained their power, even expanding it over territories that had been part of the Ottoman Empire.

During World War II, the leading colonial powers focused on stopping Hitler. As a result, the anti-colonial movements probably grew stronger, but actual independence made little progress. However, after World War II, the foundation was set for the dismantling of colonial empires:

- In the colonized world, movements for self-determination grew. Often, they included both advocates of greater self-rule and proponents of full independence.
- World War II had so weakened Great Britain, France, and the other colonial powers that they had fewer resources to resist independence.
- The Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union gave anti-colonial activists two superpowers to recruit as supporters.

The successful efforts of people to undermine colonial empires are described in Topics 8.5 and 8.6.

KEY TERMS BY THEME		
<p><b>GOVERNMENT:</b> Europe Big Three Tehran Conference Yalta Conference Potsdam Conference</p>	<p><b>GOVERNMENT:</b> United States Harry Truman Cold War Dwight Eisenhower</p> <p><b>SOCIETY:</b> Anti-Colonial Movements self-determination</p>	<p><b>TECHNOLOGY:</b> Armaments hydrogen bomb military-industrial complex</p>