The Cold War

How did the USSR and USA create spheres of interest in the world by the 1960s?

What was the Cold War?

The Cold War is the name given to the struggle between the superpowers following World War Two. On one side were the USA and its allies, referred to as the ‘West’ and on the other, the USSR and its allies, called the ‘Soviet bloc’. It was not a proper war, as there was no open declaration of war between the superpowers (hence ‘Cold War’ – it never got hot), but was a clash between ideologies: the West’s capitalism and democracy and the Soviet bloc’s communism.

It lasted almost 50 years, coming to an end in 1990, having dominated the second half of the 20th century. The Cold War led to the formation of military and political alliances, as well as a massive arms race between the superpowers. It also caused many conflicts in different parts of the world.

How did the Cold War start?

Even before the Second World War, tensions existed between the West and the Soviet Union, but these were put aside in the fight against Nazi Germany. In 1945, however, their wartime alliance collapsed due to differing opinions over the future of Germany.

The West distrusted the USSR for several reasons:

- After World War Two, the USSR annexed Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Eastern Poland
- USSR established Soviet-controlled governments in Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania, Czechoslovakia and East Germany
- The West feared a communist takeover of western Europe

At the same time, the USSR distrusted the West:

- America had a policy of ‘containment’, intended to prevent the spread of communism
- US issued the Truman Doctrine in 1947, promising military aid to countries under ‘communist threat’
  - Sent immediate aid to Greece and Turkey to stop communist uprisings
- The Marshall Plan of 1948 promised American financial aid in rebuilding Europe
  - This increased divisions and tensions, as the USSR viewed it as ‘Dollar Diplomacy’ or the buying of allies, and prevented countries from accepting Marshall Aid

These tensions were realised in the divisions that occurred between the superpowers over Germany:
• After the Second World War, Germany was divided into 4 zones of occupation
  ○ American, French, British and Soviet
• Berlin was in the Soviet Zone, but was also split into 4 zones
• 1948 to 1949 saw the first real crisis of the Cold War:
  ○ Berlin Blockade: the USSR cut off western sectors of Berlin, preventing supplies from entering
  ○ Berlin Airlift: The West was forced to supply Berlin by air, flying in tonnes of food, fuel and other supplies almost daily
  ○ In May of 1949, Stalin lifted the blockade, reopening the land routes. His plan to make the West give up West Berlin had failed
• This resulted in further tensions between the superpowers, with the West remaining on guard but not stepping back. West Berlin remained under Western control, still capitalist and democratic, and the city became a symbol of Cold War tensions.
• Finally, Germany was divided into two zones:
  ○ East Germany: German Democratic Republic, capital: East Berlin
  ○ West Germany: German Federal Republic, capital: Bonn

Alliance blocs during the Cold War:

After the Berlin Blockade (1949) the West formed NATO, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, a military alliance between USA and Western Europe. Originally the headquarters were located in Paris, but later moved to Brussels. This alliance enabled the USA to maintain military bases in Britain, Spain, Italy, Greece and Turkey, but the USSR viewed it as an American attempt to increase its hold over Europe. The American domination was resented by France, who withdrew from NATO under the leadership of de Gaulle, who wanted to pursue an independent nuclear program and foreign policy.

Other anti-Communist alliances formed were the South East Asian Treaty Organisation (SEATO) in the Far East and the Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO) in the Middle East.

In 1955, after West Germany joined NATO and was permitted to have a standing army, the USSR formed its own military alliance, the Warsaw Pact, with Eastern Europe. This allowed the USSR to keep troops in member nations; much like NATO did for America. The West viewed the Warsaw Pact as Soviet domination of the satellite states. The USSR used the Pact troops to crush uprisings in Hungary (1956) and Czechoslovakia (1968). Similar to the Truman Doctrine in America, the Brezhnev Doctrine confirmed that the Warsaw Pact would intervene whenever Communism was threatened.

Other anti-Western alliances were Cominform, which coordinated the activities of Communist parties in other countries, and Comecon, which coordinated the economic side of Communist parties.
The Berlin Wall

There was a flow of refugees, most of whom were young and educated, from East to West Germany through Berlin. They were attracted by the better economy and greater freedom afforded by capitalism and democracy respectively. To combat this drain on the nation, the East German government built the Berlin Wall in 1961.

The city was divided in two almost overnight. The Wall stopped the flow of refugees, making it more difficult for people to leave. Many of those who attempted to scale the wall were shot by armed sentries. The Berlin Wall became a symbol of Cold War divisions, and was considered part of the Iron Curtain.

Competition between the superpowers:

- The nuclear arms race:
  - Initially, only the USA had the atom bomb but, in 1949, the USSR caught up
  - Both sides built up stockpiles of nuclear weapons and missiles in a deadly arms race
  - The great tensions between the superpowers led to fears of a possible nuclear war which, due to the large amount of nuclear arms, would have caused Mutually Assured Destruction (the war would destroy both sides)
  - In the late 1960s, talks between the superpowers aimed to defuse tensions
  - In 1972, the SALT (Strategic Arms Limitations Talks) agreement was reached, the first step in slowing down the arms race

- The Space Race:
  - In 1957, the satellite was launched into space. A Soviet probe named Sputnik won the USSR the first victory of the Space Race
  - In 1961, the USSR had another success, putting the first human (Yuri Gagarin) into space
  - Shocked by having been outdone by the Soviets, the American response was to put the first men on the moon. This was achieved in 1969, when Neil Armstrong became the first human to set foot on the moon

- Different lifestyles:
  - There was a marked contrast in the lifestyles in America and in the USSR
  - The Capitalist West was more prosperous, with cars, supermarkets, appliances and other consumer goods readily available
  - The Communist East suffered from a shortage of consumer goods

- Espionage:
  - The USA had the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)
  - The USSR had the KGB
  - America developed a special spy plane called the U2
  - Both sides used networks of spies to obtain secret information, used satellites to photograph military installations and were involved in coups and assassinations in other countries

- Propaganda and Government Control:
Both sides utilised various means of control to influence popular thought, such as propaganda in education and the media.

The USA used the threat of the ‘Red Scare’
- Anti-Communist movement under Senator McCarthy (who headed the government investigation of ‘Un-American Activities’)
- Between 1950 and 1954, public enquiries took place to find pro-Communists in government, the film industry, trade unions and universities
- Many lost their jobs, but no one was imprisoned

The USSR used strict control and punishments
- No criticism was allowed
- Thousands were either sent to labour camps or executed
- A powerful secret police force was used
- Uprisings against Soviet control were harshly suppressed, such as in Hungary in 1956
- Citizens were prevented from leaving

There was propaganda employed in other parts of the world as well:
- American Peace Corps workers spread a positive image of USA
- Patrice Lumumba University in Moscow gave a free, pro-Communist education to students from Asia and Africa
- Radio stations, such as the ‘Voice of America’ and ‘Radio Moscow’ spread official propaganda around the world

As well as in popular culture:
- Films, books, etc.
  - James Bond
- Some Russian writers were jailed for criticising the Soviet system