To What Extent is The Cold War a Result of Two Conflicting Ideologies?

The Cold War was an unceasing state of political and military tensions between the Communist and Capitalist countries, mainly the Americans and the Soviets, after World War II. These tensions were partially driven by the clashing of ideologies Marxism imposed on Capitalist societies and vice versa; the Communist and Capitalist agendas could not both survive in the same areas together due to their unrelenting differences. However, it is also evident that the rivaling ideologies were secondary to each nation’s desire of being the dominant power in a bipolar world; in other words, these conflicting ideologies were a façade for gaining supreme influence in the post-World War II world.

The diverging ideologies between the Soviet Marxists and the American Capitalists drove the Cold War based on their conflicting views of economics, politics, religion, and civil rights. The economic ideology began splitting with Karl Marx and his Communist Manifesto. The Communist Manifesto outlined the ideas and goals of Communism, this being that a government would hold all control and distribute the wealth evenly among its people until government would no longer be necessary. Marx proclaimed that a Capitalist form of economy, which sought to bring free trade and free enterprise with little interference from the government, would never work because the working class would always take revolutionary action against the exploiter. His followers, like Vladimir Lenin, the inaugural leader of the USSR, believed that the only way to avoid this was to create a Marxist economy in the USSR.
Unlike the economy Marxism sought to establish, Capitalism believed in a market economy where the supply and demand in the “market” would determine prices of production, and then products would subsequently be sold by private enterprises. With policies such as the Open Door Policy, which granted equal trade opportunities to all countries, the Capitalist economic ideology directly infringed on Communist ideals. However, this led the Communists to believe that the greediness of the Capitalists would cause them to perpetually fight amongst themselves and eventually, the Capitalist system would collapse. Stalin showed his belief in the demise of Capitalism at the Yalta Conference where he showed no intentions of confronting the US. In Stalin’s opinion, directly challenging the Capitalists would be unnecessary since the Capitalists would destroy each other in the end. Politically, the Soviets and the Americans differed in their beliefs as well. After World War II, The United States was ready to intervene in global affairs in order to spread political ideas of individual freedoms and self determination. The United States used the Marshall Plan, a plan which would give money to European nations to help them develop, in order to keep them democratic. The USSR on the other hand also competed for new spheres of influence in Eastern Europe in order to advance their political agenda and create satellite nations that would help them maintain a buffer zone from the rest of Europe. These nations were also offered funds from the Marshall Plan, but they rejected them in opposition to the spread of Capitalism and US political idealism. Another important disagreement from the Communists and the Capitalists was the view on religion. The Communists argued that religion, as Karl Marx said, was “the opiate of the masses” and was unnecessary to the promotion of their ideals. This Atheist view was far from being aligned with the Capitalist standard of importance of religion. While Capitalism promoted by the United States encouraged freedom of religion in all ways, Communism did not and discouraged anyone
from having a religion. Lastly, the differing aspects of civil rights in Communism and Capitalism played a large role in the Cold War. The United States promoted, along with Capitalism’s ideology, the idea of self determination and civil rights for all people. A main goal for the United States after the tragedies of World War II was to protect the individual liberties of humans world-wide. The Soviets, however, with their actions in Eastern Europe, such as the Berlin Blockade, and in Korea with the invasion of South Korea, they had little aim to protect or consider the rights of self determination or individual liberties among the areas the aimed to expand Communist influence on. Overall, the ideological differences between the United States and the USSR, or more importantly between Capitalism and Communism; politically, economically, religiously, and civilly would steer the Cold War from the end of World War II until the end of the 1980s.

Contrarily, another school of thought is that the ideologies of the US and the USSR were not the main cause of the Cold War. A main supporter of this was the creation of the “Realpolitik” School during the Bismarck Era in Germany. This proposed the idea that politicians use ideologies to gain support from their voters and will conveniently betray these values when a beneficial opportunity present itself. This can be seen by the United States involvement with Stalin before the Cold War, and the US support of dictators such as Syngman Rhee, Batista, and even Communist Tito whom was anti-Moscow. On another note, these ideologies did not manifest at the end of World War II, however only contributed to the outbreak of them. While the US experienced economic growth, the USSR underwent economic hardship. This made the US a large threat to Soviet security, the top issue for Stalin. With the growth of Soviet and American spheres of influence, it quickly became less about each ideology and more about the hunt for control and dominance. Stalin’s advance into Eastern Europe worried the US,
as they did not fully understand his need for security. Fear quickly increased with the introduction of the Arms Race and from there the war arguably exploded between the two nations. Taken as a whole, the Cold War can be seen as both nations fighting for power and security in the fear-ridden post-World War II world.

Many historians disagree on whether the ideologies of the Communists and the Capitalists were the driving force behind the Cold War. In the Orthodox view, historians such as John Gaddis believe that Stalin was responsible for the Cold War and that his ideology which sought to spread Communism was aggressive, making the Cold War inevitable. This view is supported by the lack of tolerance shown by Stalin in international agreements such as the Declaration of Liberated Europe where he agreed to hold free elections in Eastern Europe. His aggression in Eastern Europe made this view hard to ignore. However, the Revisionist view emerged in the late 1960s, claiming that the United States had not taken into account how weak the Soviets had become after World War II. The economic boom in the United States gave them an economic dominance and the Truman Doctrine provided them with the right to intervene anywhere on the globe. Revisionist Historian William Appelman Williams believed that the enforcement of the Open Door Policy sealed the fate of the Cold War due to the Soviets need for protection in Eastern Europe. Lastly, the post-Revisionist view surfaced in the late 1970s. This view took the blame off both sides, claiming that both nations had miscalculated the effect their policies had had on the other. The Soviets did not know how their movement in Eastern Europe enraged the Western opinion just as the Americans did not recognize the Soviet need for peace and security. This dangerous cycle of expanding weapons for security would eventually come to be called by post-revisionists, “miscalculations.” Post-Revisionist Melvyn Leffler argued that the US deciding to rebuild Western Europe would incite this fear and essentially, and unknowingly,
cause the Cold War despite it’s positive outcomes. There are many sides to each argument, inciting the idea that there were many reasons for the origins of the Cold War.

The importance of dominance and ideology would both ultimately be leading factors of the Cold War and are both important to understanding the history between Russia and the United States. The tensions between both nations during the Cold War were strongly fueled by different idealism; however, the search for power after World War II was also a strong contributing factor. The conflicting idealism between Communism and Capitalism suggested that coexistence between the two could never occur, and the Cold War then proved this.