

Essay and Discussion Questions

Contemporary History Post-1945 Higher Education Questions

Help students understand how events since 1945 have shaped today's world through these essay and discussion questions.

Question 1

What was the fundamental conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War? What are the major factors that contributed to why the Cold War stayed cold? To what extent were decisions by American and Soviet leaders key in explaining why the Cold War stayed cold? Were leadership decisions more or less important than structural factors such as balance of power and nuclear weapons?

- How did deterrence work during the Cold War?
- What role did alliances such as NATO and the Warsaw Pact play in preventing direct conflict?
- What role did proxy conflicts play during this period? Give specific examples.
- How did the United States and Soviet Union build military credibility during the Cold War?
- Would you describe the Cold War as an era of global stability or instability? Use evidence to support your claim.

Question 2

What factors led to the decline of colonialism? How did former colonies build their nations post-independence and what challenges did they face? How did they meet those challenges? To what extent did the Cold War complicate decolonization?

- What are the lasting impacts of colonialism, with reference to at least two different geographical regions of the world? How are they similar or different depending on the type of colonial rule?
- To what extent does decolonization remain an ongoing process?
- Are there additional legacies of colonialism that you believe merit reckoning? How should civil societies reckon with the lasting impacts of colonialism?

Question 3

Which post-World War II historical events led to the rise of mass production and mass consumption? To what extent has the rise in mass production and mass consumption been a beneficial development in global history? To what extent has it been detrimental?

- Who has benefited most from the rise of mass production and mass consumption? Who has been hurt by this trend?
- How have mass production and mass consumption changed everyday life for Americans?
- Has mass production and mass consumption impacted American culture for the better or worse?

Question 4

What was so humiliating about China's century of humiliation? How does the century of humiliation inform the current policy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)? To what extent does history inform the CCP's domestic and foreign policy goals?

- How did Mao Zedong's rule and the Cultural Revolution transform China?
- What moves did Deng Xiaoping implement to promote growth and modernization in China?
- How does the modern CCP maintain such tight control over its people?
- How does China seek to increase its power on the international stage today?