

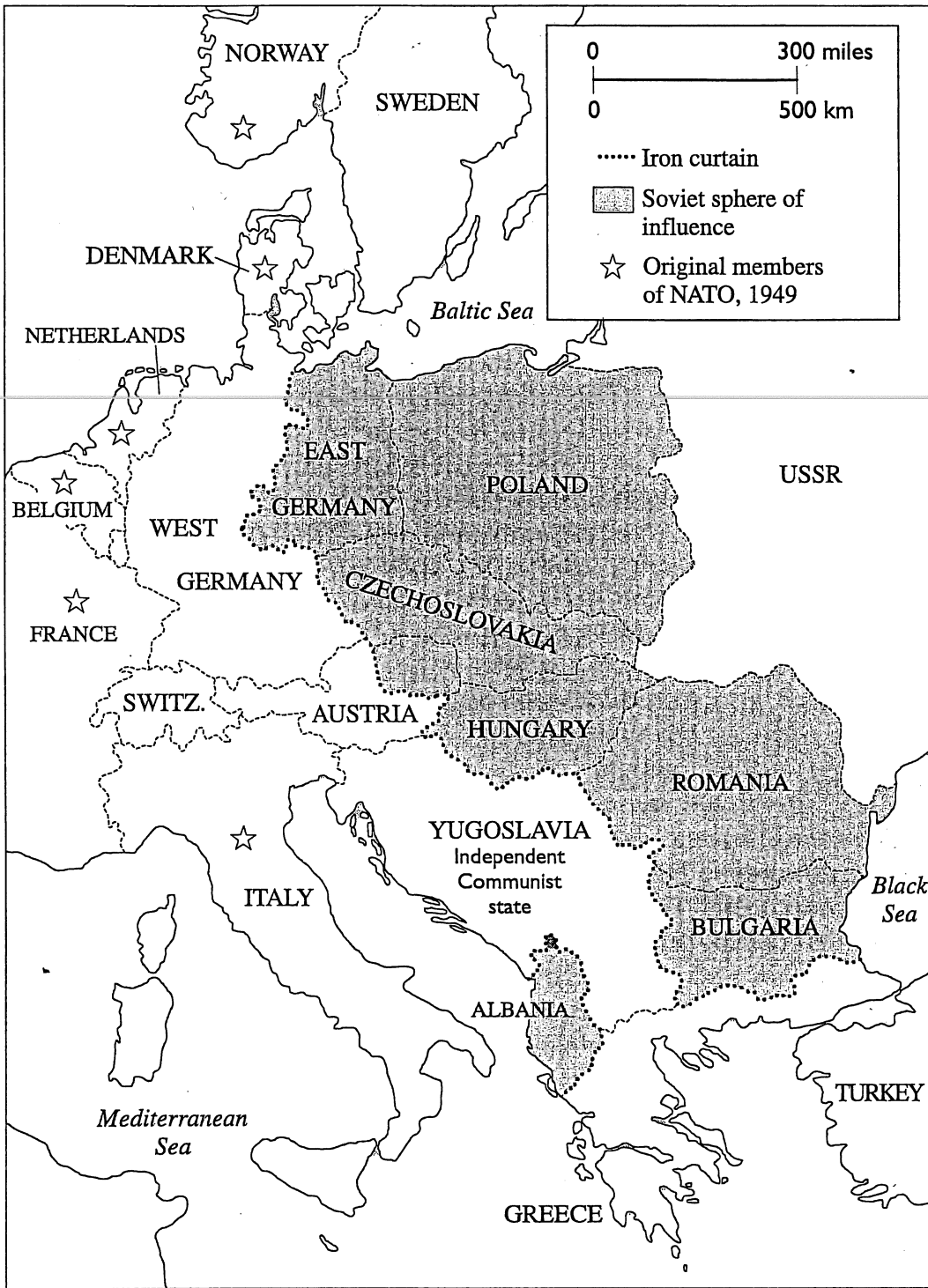
North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (1949)

KEY ISSUE Why did the United States join NATO?

In April 1949 the evolving American sphere of influence in western Europe was further consolidated when the United States signed the treaty which established the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). This was a historic moment in the foreign policy of the American republic. It was the first treaty signed with a European state since the Americans had concluded an alliance with France in 1778 to drive the British out of the 13 colonies. NATO was a military alliance of 12 states (United States, Canada, Britain, France, Belgium, Netherlands, Luxembourg, Italy, Portugal, Denmark, Norway and Iceland), which adopted the principle of collective security whereby an attack on one or more member states would be considered an attack on them all and could be met with armed force (Article 5).

It has been said that NATO was created 'to keep the Russians out, the Germans down and the Americans in'. There is some truth in this. Both Britain and France realised that the defence of western Europe was only viable with American participation. They wanted a permanent US military presence on the continent as a guarantee against Soviet attack. In the case of France NATO would also be a useful shield against a resurgent Germany. Even as late as 1949 French fear of Germany was acute and the priority of French policy was not so much the containment of the Soviet Union as the taming of Germany. Prior to 1949 the United States had shown no great interest in garrisoning US troops permanently on the continent. The focus of American policy in western Europe had been economic and political reconstruction. The Americans had encouraged their European allies to form their own defence organisation in 1948, the Western European Union (WEU), but saw no need for their own participation. A Soviet invasion of western Europe was never regarded as a real possibility in this period.

The United States joined NATO firstly for political and secondly for military reasons. It became clear to Washington that American membership of a security pact was a precondition of French and, to a lesser extent, British consent to west German statehood. In addition, the creation of NATO tied a relatively strong Britain more closely to a still recovering western Europe, calmed French security fears and offered anxious Germans protection against the Soviet Union. NATO membership brought several military advantages to the United States too: evasion of sole responsibility for the defence of Europe in the unlikely event of Soviet invasion, valuable bases from which air attacks against the Soviet Union could be launched and a framework for an eventual west German contribution to European defence.



Divided Europe in 1949