In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, the political map of the world was redrawn. How did this set in motion the rift which became the Cold War?

**The immediate postwar world**

Of the seven ‘Great Powers’, five had collapsed or were greatly enfeebled: Britain, France, Germany, Japan and China. This left two unequal and ‘asymmetric’ powers:

- **USSR**
  - The USSR had suffered massive war losses with 27 million dead (c.7.5–10 million military; c.15–20 million civilians) and another 25 million homeless. It was also suffering from the destruction of 65,000 km of railway track, 15,800 locomotives, 1,710 towns and 70,000 villages. Its postwar priorities were:
    - reconstruction, and reparations from Germany
    - security from any possible future attack by Germany
  - The extent of its ambition to spread communism is hotly debated.

- **USA**
  - The USA, in contrast, had a massively dominant economy, strengthened by the war. It enjoyed a totally dominant position in world trade. Western European, Latin American, Chinese and Japanese propertied elites were desperate for the USA to save them from communism.

**1945**

- **4 February** The Yalta Conference opens. The USA, UK, USSR and France agree to divide Germany into four occupation zones.
- **2 August** The Potsdam Agreement is signed by Attlee, Truman and Stalin. It agrees a plan to destroy Germany’s war machinery and to organise and reconstruct Europe as a whole.
- **6 August** US forces make the first military use of an atomic bomb, against the Japanese city of Hiroshima.
- **9 August** The USA deploys a second atomic bomb, against Nagasaki.

**1946**

- **22 February** US diplomat George F. Kennan’s ‘Long Telegram’ from Moscow calls for ‘containment’ of Soviet influence.
- **5 March** In a speech in the USA, former prime minister Winston Churchill warns of the descent of an ‘iron curtain’ across Europe.
- **27 September** The Soviet ambassador in Washington, N. V. Novikov, sends a telegram to Moscow arguing the goal of US foreign policy is ‘world supremacy’.

**1947**

- **12 March** US President Harry Truman announces the Truman Doctrine committing the USA to ‘contain’ communist expansion.

**1948**

- **3 April** Truman approves the Marshall Plan, a comprehensive programme of economic assistance for Western Europe.
- **23 May** The formation of the Federal Republic of Germany — capital city, Bonn.
- **29 August** The USSR tests its first atomic bomb.

**1949**

- **4 April** The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is founded.
- **23 May** The formation of the German Democratic Republic, i.e. the Soviet zone of Germany — capital city, East Berlin.
- **7 October** The formation of the German Democratic Republic, i.e. the Soviet zone of Germany — capital city, East Berlin.

**1950**

- **14 April** A top secret report called NSC-68 is completed by the US Department of State. It sets out the threat posed by the USSR and defines a policy of containment as the cornerstone of US foreign policy.

**1951**

- **24 June** In protest against the launch of the Deutsche Mark, Stalin blocks all land routes from West Germany (the three sectors occupied by the UK, USA and France) to Berlin. This remains in force until 11 May 1949.

**What next?**

This postwar situation had a wide variety of possible outcomes, including a new war between the USA and USSR, Sovietisation of Japan, revolution in eastern and/or western Europe and/or Latin America, and even a USA/USSR condominium (joint power) via the UN. In the event it led to the Cold War, a state of hostility and tension between the two superpowers that was to dominate global affairs for decades. The timeline below highlights key points in the early unfolding of this scenario.