

Origins of the Cold War

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.

Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin at the Yalta Conference, February 1945



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.

1945

1946

1947

1948

1949

1950

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.
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.

1949

4 April The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is founded.
23 May The formation of the Federal Republic of Germany — capital city, Bonn.
29 August The USSR tests its first atomic bomb.
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.



Explosion of atomic bomb over Hiroshima, 6 August 1945



American aircraft drops food and supplies during the 1948–49 blockade of Berlin

Chris Read is professor of modern European history at the University of Warwick and chief editor of MODERN HISTORY REVIEW.