

10.1 The Cold War Begins

Iron Curtain:

Following World War II, tensions were high between the western Allies and the Soviet Union. Neither side trusted the other since the western powers were democracies with capitalist market systems and the Soviet Union was a socialist state led by the Communist Party. After the war, the United States and Great Britain felt strongly that the Allies should not occupy the territories they conquered during WWII. The Soviets, on the other hand, had suffered greater losses in terms of life and property than either of them. They were determined not to be invaded again. Stalin decided that he must maintain control over Eastern Europe in order to keep a buffer between the Soviet Union and western nations. Not only did Stalin make it evident that he had no intention of giving up control of the conquered territories, he also stamped out any opposition to his Communist Party in the nations under his control. The European continent now stood divided between the western democracies and Soviet satellite nations (nations answering to and representing the views of the USSR). In a speech given by Winston Churchill at Westminster College in Missouri, the former prime minister said of Europe, "A shadow has fallen... an iron curtain has descended across the continent." As a result of his comments, "iron curtain" became the common term used to refer to the dividing line between Eastern and Western Europe.

U.S. Post-War Policies in Europe:

In 1946, a top U.S. diplomat named George Kennan was stationed in the Soviet Union. After observing Soviet behavior and becoming very familiar with the USSR's government, Kennan recommended that the U.S. and its allies focus on a containment policy. Kennan believed that Eastern Europe was firmly in Soviet hands and could not be saved. Therefore, the U.S. and the West should focus on containing communism to those countries in which it already existed and not let it spread any further. Reaffirming Kennan's philosophy, Truman introduced the Truman Doctrine. This doctrine stated that the United States would not hesitate to intervene and aid nations overseas to resist communism. It featured a financial plan to build up Europe worked out by former army chief of staff and then secretary of state George Marshall. Labeled the Marshall Plan, it provided nations in war-torn Europe with much needed financial support from the United States. This aid served to spark economic revival and prosperity in these countries, alleviating the suffering of many people. Since communist revolutions often started due to economic hardships, the Marshall Plan went a long way towards preventing Soviet advances into Western Europe and became the crowning achievement of the containment policy.

Division of Berlin

When World War II ended, the Allies divided Germany among themselves. Part of the country fell under U.S. control, part fell under British control, and part of the nation fell to the Soviets. Out of the portions allotted to the United States and Britain, France received a portion as well. In addition, the German capital of Berlin, although located within the Soviets' territory, was also divided. The western portions of the city went to the western Allies while the eastern portion went to the Soviets. Great Britain, the United States, and France all saw these divisions as temporary. They envisioned Germany eventually being a unified and independent democracy. Stalin, however, had no intention of giving up the Soviet controlled parts of Berlin or Germany. By 1948, it became obvious that Stalin would not relent. Realizing that a unified Germany would not be possible, the U.S., Great Britain, and France combined their sectors into one nation, the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany), and declared West Berlin to be part of this new nation. The USSR responded by establishing the German Democratic Republic (East Germany) under communist rule. Almost immediately, thousands of people wishing to escape communism fled to West Berlin hoping to make their way to freedom. In an effort to stop this, Stalin decided to force the West to surrender its portion of Berlin. He cut off the city, not allowing any needed supplies to reach the people of West Berlin. Wanting to avoid a war, yet deal firmly with Stalin, Truman authorized the Berlin Airlift. Over a fifteen-month period, U.S. and British planes delivered needed supplies to West Berlin. The Soviets finally gave up in May of 1949, but the bitterness of the conflict only served to fuel the fires of the "Cold War."

The term "cold war" was first used by presidential advisor, Bernard Baruch, in 1947. It referred to the tension between the United States and the Soviet Union that dominated both nations' foreign policies and which many feared would lead to actual war.

China's Communist Revolution

Prior to the Japanese invasion of the early 1930s, Nationalist leader, Chiang Kai-shek, ruled China. Although Communist rebels had waged a civil war against the government prior to WWII, when the Japanese attacked, the two sides stopped fighting one another to fight against the Japanese. After the war, however, hostilities between the Nationalists and the Communists started up again. After a U.S. attempt to mediate the conflict failed, the United States reasoned that it could not allow a communist takeover of such a key country. Therefore, it decided to send financial aid to Chiang Kai-shek. The Soviets responded by sending support to the Communist forces of Mao Tse-tung. By 1949, Mao's Communists won control of the mainland, forcing Chiang and his supporters to flee to the island of Formosa (known today as Taiwan). The United States refused to recognize the new government, insisting that Chiang's Nationalists on Formosa still represented the true government of China. It used its veto power to prevent the U.N. from formally recognizing Mao's government in the newly formed United Nations (organization founded in 1948 where nations meet to negotiate peaceful solutions to problems).

The Korean War

Korea was among the countries liberated from the Japanese during World War II. Since both the U.S. and the Soviets played a role in its liberation, the nation was divided along the 38th parallel (line of latitude that runs through Korea). The northern half of the country established a communist government while the southern half put in place a pro-US democracy. In June 1950, the Korean War began when North Korean forces crossed the 38th parallel. The United Nations elected to come to South Korea's aid and President Truman chose General Douglas MacArthur, the man who had liberated the Philippines and oversaw the establishment of a democracy in Japan after WWII, to lead the U.N. forces. Technically, the conflict was never a declared war, but rather a U.N. police action. MacArthur's forces pushed their enemy back across the 38th parallel. Continuing to advance north, the U.N. forces moved ever closer to the Chinese border. Concerned that U.S.-led forces were so close and wanting to maintain a communist regime in North Korea, the Chinese sent troops across the Yalu River to aid the North Koreans. A stalemate soon developed. To make matters more complicated, Truman fired MacArthur after the general criticized the president's handling of the war. After two more years of fighting, both sides signed a truce in 1953. The agreement left the country divided at almost the same point as when the conflict started.

Attitudes at Home

Citizens in the United States were very concerned due to the Cold War and the expansion of communism. Unlike before the war, people now lived with the threat of nuclear weapons. The U.S. and USSR were engaged in a nuclear arms race in which both sides continually built updated weapons aimed at one another and which provided the possibility of massive retaliation (responding to an attack with nuclear weapons). Private citizens began building fallout shelters which they hoped could provide protection if the Soviets launched a nuclear attack. Schools conducted nuclear attack drills and taught students how to "duck and cover" in the event of a missile strike.

In addition to fears of nuclear war, there was also a new wave of fear about communism. During the Great Depression, many citizens had joined the Communist Party, or at least voiced agreement with certain communist ideals. Most did this because they felt communism offered the economic relief that they needed. When economic times got better and people learned more about Stalin's brutality in the USSR, most no longer had an interest in being Communists. Still, the success of China's communist revolution and North Korea's attempt to invade South Korea convinced many in the U.S. that Communists would stop at nothing short of worldwide domination. The U.S. government inevitably responded to such concerns. In the late 1940s and into the '50s, the government investigated, arrested, and sometimes harassed many people due to their alleged connections to the Communist Party. This period became known as the second "Red Scare."

Government Policies Dealing with Communism

Concerned with the threat of communism, President Truman signed legislation which created what became the Department of Defense kept 'to preside' over military affairs. This act also created the president's National Security Council for the purpose of coordinating national security policies and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to be responsible for spying on the USSR and its allies. Meanwhile, Congress relied on the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) to root out Communists in the federal government. The committee became most famous for its investigation of State Department official, Alger Hiss, after he was accused of giving the Soviets secret US documents during the 1930s. Hiss denied the charges but was convicted of perjury (lying under oath) and sent to prison. HUAC also gained notoriety for its investigations of individuals in the movie-making industry who were suspected of being Communists. The committee called a number of Hollywood actors, producers, and writers to testify in 1947. Believing the committee's actions to be a violation of civil rights, 10 of the accused refused to appear before the HUAC. The "Hollywood Ten" then went to jail for contempt. Some were sentenced to terms as long as a year. Out of fear that they might be targeted next, a number of movie executives denounced the Hollywood Ten and developed a Hollywood blacklist. The list consisted of writers, actors, directors, and so forth, that producers refused to work with because of suspected ties to communism. Even today, many in Hollywood remain bitter about the list.

Joseph McCarthy

One of the most interesting characters to arise as a result of national concern about communism was Wisconsin Senator, Joseph McCarthy. McCarthy was convinced that Communists had infiltrated high levels of government and the U.S. military. He even accused former army chief of staff and secretary of state, George Marshall. At first, Communist aggression in Korea served to help McCarthy and his ideas gain popularity. Eventually, however, McCarthy had to defend his views in a series of televised hearings. By the time the hearings ended in June 1954, most US citizens viewed McCarthy as paranoid at best and downright crazy at worst. "McCarthyism" (the ideas and fears of communism voiced by McCarthy and his supporters) began to collapse, and the irrational fear that "Communists are everywhere" ultimately subsided.