
Abstract: Struggle for world power carried on between Eastern and Western nations during the post-World War II years of ostensible peace. “Cold war” differs from “hot war” in the matter of violent conflict. In a hot war, actual military hostilities occur. No such hostilities occur in a cold war, but it is the nature of the concept that a cold war can erupt into a hot war at any time. In the historical struggle between the West, led by the United States, and the Soviet Union and its satellites in Eastern Europe, no hot war ever developed. However, a nuclear catastrophe nearly did occur during the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. Moreover, tensions over the status of West Berlin through the Cold War threatened to erupt militarily at various times. Nevertheless, the two dominant superpowers managed to avoid open hostilities largely because they came to realize what ruin they faced if they allowed their conflict to develop into nuclear warfare. Cold War; Cold War International relations; Cold War Government and politics; Cold War Military; Cold War Cold War Soviet Union; and Cold War

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**Cold War**

Struggle for world power carried on between Eastern and Western nations during the post-World War II years of ostensible peace

**Date** 1945 to 1991

The Cold War had profound and long-lasting effects on both Canadian and American society; those effects were mostly destructive and could still be felt at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

“Cold war” differs from “hot war” in the matter of violent conflict. In a hot war, actual military hostilities occur. No such hostilities occur in a cold war, but it is the nature of the concept that a cold war can erupt into a hot war at any time. In the historical struggle between the West, led by the United States, and the Soviet Union and its satellites in Eastern Europe, no hot war ever developed. However, a nuclear catastrophe nearly did occur during the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. Moreover, tensions over the status of West Berlin through the Cold War threatened to erupt militarily at various times. Nevertheless, the two dominant superpowers managed to avoid open hostilities largely because they came to realize what ruin they faced if they allowed their conflict to develop into nuclear warfare.
Although the Cold War never developed into a violent conflict, it had vast effects on both Canadian and American society. In assessing its effects, it must be remembered that the United States was engaged in a prolonged, titanic struggle for the dominance of democracy and freedom—first, against Soviet communist dictatorship, later against an Asian version of communism that threatened Southeast Asia. The vantage point of the Western victory over Soviet communism in 1991, with the virtual collapse of the worldwide communist movement, places the anxieties and social damage inflicted by the Cold War in a positive light to those who value liberty.

The 1950’s in the United States are often characterized as years of placid conformism presided over by a reassuring, fatherly president, Dwight D. Eisenhower, the heroic Allied commander in chief during World War II. This characterization is only partly true, however, since strong undercurrents of fear were generated by Cold War events, often breaking out into public expression.

Pervasive, at times nearly hysterical, fear of atomic weapons and the vast swath of death and destruction such weapons could inflict on North America became a marked feature of 1950's American life. Added to the fears of the influence of domestic communists, their “fellow travelers” (a favorite category of the period), and Soviet spies in their midst, the fear of Soviet nuclear weapons lay over the nation like an invisible blanket throughout the period.

Rise of the “Iron Curtain”

Immediately after World War II, U.S. leaders believed that the need for military might had passed, at least for the moment. The government rapidly demobilized most of its military forces, leaving occupation forces to maintain order and supervise transitions to constitutional government in Germany and Japan. Peace, most Americans thought, had come at last. Events in Eastern Europe spoke otherwise, however. Throughout the region, agents under the direction of Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin worked to subvert democratic regimes. Soon, free government had disappeared in Eastern Europe, and a pall of fear spread across Western Europe—fear that communist parties beholden to or controlled by Moscow might take power.

Less than a year after the collapse of German resistance to the Allies, British statesman Winston Churchill gave voice to these fears and provided a name for what was proceeding wherever the Soviet Union’s Red Army had been situated at the war’s end. In a memorable speech delivered at a small college in Missouri in March, 1946, he said that from the Baltic to the Adriatic, “an iron curtain has descended across Europe.” The “iron curtain” analogy at once stuck, and the American public now had a graphic image of what was occurring across the Atlantic, where, such a short time before, American soldiers had sailed for home secure in the belief that their victory would endure.

After Churchill’s call for the West to recognize Soviet policy for what it was—the ruthless extension of communist tyranny wherever opportunity presented itself—events establishing the Cold War as a fact of international life followed in rapid succession. In 1947, President Harry S. Truman called for military aid to Greece and Turkey to save them from communist takeovers. In 1948, the Marshall Plan, named after Secretary of State George C. Marshall, began pouring billions of dollars in economic aid into Western Europe to save its nations from the imminent communist menace.

During the same year, the Soviet Union initiated a blockade of Berlin. The city, divided into Soviet and Western-controlled sectors, was surrounded by the Soviet-controlled Germany, soon to become “East Germany.” The blockade was intended to starve it into submission to communism. However, against the advice of his advisers, Truman ordered an air lift in June, 1948, to provision Berlin. Fifteen months of harrowing and heroic flying eventually broke the Soviet will and ended the blockade.
If 1949 was a year of triumph in the former German capital, it also saw an event that in the context of the Cold War was to have a remarkable—and deeply malignant—effect on American domestic politics during the 1950’s and beyond. This event was the victory of the Chinese communists under Mao Zedong over the Nationalist forces of Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek. On October 1, 1949, Mao proclaimed the People’s Republic of China in Beijing.

At once a cry went up in the West: “Who lost China?” This meant, first, that some U.S. officials, perhaps disloyal and perfidious individuals, must have been responsible for the loss of the U.S. alliance and friendship with China. It was, and was perceived to be, a grievous loss to the nation. China, the world’s most populous nation and its oldest culture in continuous existence, had been an ally of the United States since the 1930’s. Madame Chiang Kai-shek, a graduate of Wellesley College in Massachusetts, had visited Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt in the White House during the 1940’s, drawing much publicity.

Throughout China’s ordeal after invasion by Japan during the 1930’s, the United States was attuned to China’s fate partly through the influence of publisher Henry R. Luce’s flagship Time magazine, which had carried extensive pronationalist government and anti-Chinese communist reporting from the 1930’s and throughout the 1940’s. The departure of China from the camp of American allies came as a shock to Americans. Answers to the question of “who lost China” were not long in coming.

A number of American foreign service officers who had served in China and written analyses of its political and military landscape for the State Department during the 1940’s, and who were in fact both loyal and highly competent public servants, were singled out for blame. During the 1950’s, these individuals, known as “Old China Hands” for their expert knowledge of the country, endured repeated, highly publicized investigations of their loyalty. Though exonerated, talented China professionals such as John Carter Vincent were nevertheless drummed out of government service, under a cloud of suspicion. Another, Owen Lattimore, a highly respected China scholar, was accused of being a communist. Though there was no truth to the charge, Lattimore left the country for England, where he remained in exile for many years.

Altogether, it would be difficult to exaggerate the toxic effect that the debacle in China created in American politics during the 1950’s, especially when Americans and Chinese met, face to face, in a hot Asian war in Korea that began in 1950. This poisonous atmosphere had both open and subtle influences on American public life. Chinese communists became viewed as well-nigh subhuman evil creatures; no criticism of their Nationalist opponents, corrupt and ineffective as well as infested with the influence of organized crime though they were, could be tolerated. For decades, China, to which no American could legally travel, became a closed subject.

As if the loss of China to communism was not trauma enough, the year 1950 saw further events in Asia that would add materially to the American public’s perception of the communist menace. On June 25, the communist government of North Korea made a surprise attack on South Korea. The United States, acting with some fifteen allies under the auspices of the United Nations, took up the task of defending the South against the communist onslaught. In November, China entered the war. By June, 1953, neither side had defeated the other, and a truce was signed. Some 54,000 Americans and more than 300 Canadians lost their lives in the process. Korea illustrated the stark reality that aggression might precipitate a hot war at any time. The shadow of war thus hung like a shroud over American society throughout the 1950’s.

Espionage
As the 1950’s opened, further events were unfolding that would roil the placid surface of American society throughout the decade and after. Public fear of spying, spurred by prolonged public accusations of widespread spying by Soviet agents, was among the principal influences of the Cold War on American society during the 1950’s. Soviet spies were found to have taken atomic secrets and handed them to the Soviet Union. The most notorious of these spies was Klaus Fuchs, who had gained access to the U.S. atomic bomb project during World War II and, with his fellow spies, was responsible for the Soviets’ explosion of their first atomic weapon in 1949, years before it otherwise would have been possible.

Another accused spy, Alger Hiss, a former high official in the U.S. State Department and a personal friend of U.S. secretary of state Dean Acheson, was accused by onetime communist courier Whittaker Chambers of transmitting secret U.S. government documents to the Soviet Union, was convicted of perjury in January, 1950, and was sentenced to five years in prison. The case generated enormous public controversy throughout the 1950’s and for decades afterward. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) was accused of evidence tampering, and Hiss, along with his many champions, aggressively maintained his innocence until the end of his life. By the mid-1990’s, however, evidence had appeared that convinced most scholars of Hiss’s guilt.

A further, enormously publicized, case at about the same time was that of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, who were arrested in January, 1950, and accused of spying for the Soviet Union, passing top-secret data on nuclear weapons in 1944 and 1945. Several others were accused along with them. Convicted in 1951, the Rosenbergs were executed in June, 1953, again to much publicity. However, the damage had been done, for much to the horror of the American public, in 1949 the Soviets had exploded their atomic bomb.

The existence of Soviet spies and the revelation that America’s atomic secrets had been compromised during the 1940’s increased the pervasive fear of domestic subversion that characterized the Cold War’s effect on American society throughout the 1950’s.

Canada and the Cold War

Canada became embroiled in the Cold War in part through its proximity to its southern neighbor and its huge expanse of northern territory close to the Soviet Union. In 1958 Canada became a target for Soviet missiles on account of its participation in the DEW Line defense system of the North American Air Defense Agreement, which placed a line of powerful radar facilities on Canadian territory. Canada, too, had been shaken by the Soviet takeover of Eastern Europe, by the Soviet atomic bomb, by the blockade of Berlin, and by similar events. By 1950, it had long been familiar with the problem of Soviet spies, since in 1945 a Soviet cipher clerk named Igor Gouzenko had defected from the Soviet embassy in Ottawa and revealed that Canada was host to a large number of spies.

Canada was drawn into the Korean War through its membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), of which it was a charter member, as well as through its membership in the United Nations. In the autumn of 1950, in an address in Toronto, Canadian prime minister Louis St. Laurent sounded a warning about the Soviet threat, in which he said that the number of those deceived by Soviet propaganda “diminishes week by week.” Protecting civilization, he said, requires “building up armed strength” to deter Soviet aggression. During the course of the Cold War, however, Canada tended to reduce its military in favor of welfare state spending. Nevertheless, the nation became caught up in a mentality of fear not unlike the preoccupations of its neighbor.

Rise and Fall of Joseph R. McCarthy

The high point of public fear of domestic communist subversion was the phenomenon that became known as McCarthyism, after the red-baiting Wisconsin senator Joseph R. McCarthy. In essence, McCarthyism meant
wild accusations of connections to communism, with little or no evidence, that ruined reputations and lives and created a general climate of fear.

When McCarthyism first appeared in early 1950, the soil had been well tilled: The Fuchs, Hiss, and Rosenberg cases had begun during the late 1940’s, and China had fallen under a communist regime in 1949—the same year that the Soviet Union exploded its first atomic bomb. By then, communism had taken over most of Eastern Europe and threatened to engulf Berlin, which had to be rescued by the airlift. All of this and more being fresh in the public memory, the stage was set for sensational charges mounted in February, 1950, by the hitherto obscure Senator McCarthy.

In a Lincoln’s birthday speech delivered in Wheeling, West Virginia, McCarthy waved to his audience a piece of paper, which, he said, listed some 205 “known communists” in the U.S. Department of State. Soon afterward in another speech, he made a similar claim, though the number of alleged communists had fallen to 57. Amid nationwide headlines, McCarthy soon afterward took the Senate floor for five hours repeating the charges, now charging that 81 communists infested the State Department.

McCarthy kept up his barrage of accusations for several years, embroiling the nation in fear of domestic spying and secret Communist Party influence in government. After Republican gains in the 1952 election, McCarthy gained new powers of investigation as chairman of a Senate subcommittee and set about making further reckless charges of communist infiltration of government. In 1954 he charged that the U.S. Army was suppressing evidence of espionage at an Army installation.

Lack of hard evidence for his charges eventually caught up with McCarthy. A Senate investigation under Millard Tydings exonerated the State Department and branded McCarthy’s claims fraudulent. At the end of 1954, the Senate passed a resolution censuring him, and his influence rapidly waned. A few years later he was dead of alcoholism at the age of forty-nine. Meanwhile, the lives of many who had been called before his investigating committee had been ruined through accusation of communist sympathies or actual Communist Party membership.

The passing of McCarthy’s power did not, however, mean the end of the influence of McCarthyism, as its effects lingered throughout the decade. Some of this lingering influence accounts for the perverse and shameful refusal of certain prominent New York intellectuals, such as writer Susan Sontag, to oppose communist tyranny. They were refusing, they thought, to succumb to McCarthy’s continuing malignant hold on the public imagination.

It must not be thought, however, that McCarthy and his tactics were unopposed by a universally cowering public. Pamphlets in his home state of Wisconsin denounced him; students at such institutions as City College of New York held robust rallies denouncing him. Even a suburban Philadelphia public grade school teacher was not intimidated by the atmosphere of fear and denounced McCarthy to his class each day for weeks. Nevertheless, many Americans were intimidated, and damage was done to the public weal.

**House Committee on Un-American Activities**

Another fixture of American society throughout the 1950’s was the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC), a congressional committee that investigated the influence of communism in American society. Those called before it were asked if they were members of the Communist Party, and if they declined to answer on grounds of the **Fifth Amendment** to the U.S. Constitution, which protects people from coerced self-incrimination, they became known as “Fifth-Amendment communists.”
HUAC operated throughout the 1950’s and well into the following decade. Its activities were usually given wide publicity, so those who refused to answer its queries often found themselves ostracized in one way or another. The most usual consequence for those who failed to acqit themselves before the committee was the loss of their jobs. One study found that perhaps ten thousand Americans lost their jobs. Major corporations, including General Electric and U.S. Steel, fired employees who invoked the Fifth Amendment before an investigating committee.

In a number of avenues of society individuals came under public scrutiny for their political beliefs and associations. Among the institutions seeking to purge communists or their sympathizers were universities, which set up systems of loyalty oaths. Those refusing to sign these oaths were dismissed.

Another section of society in which suspected subversives lost their jobs or were refused work was the entertainment industry. In 1947 HUAC made its first foray into Hollywood, accusing various writers, actors, and others of communist complicity. Soon a blacklist was created in the industry denying employment to those on it. HUAC returned to Hollywood in 1951 and continued its work. Prominent blacklisted members became known as the “Hollywood Ten.” A 213-page book, known as Red Channels and published in 1950, listed hundreds of suspects who thereafter found it difficult or impossible to find professional employment. Some were permanently disbarred from the business, though others were eventually rehabilitated.

Democracy thrives on openness—on information being freely available to the electorate to inform its judgments. The Cold War caused a great chill to descend upon the nation. A cult of secrecy gained force within the federal government, lest secrets find their way into the hands of spies or subversives. The Cold War, it is true, made much secrecy in defense and allied matters necessary and legitimate. However, secrecy often went beyond necessity, injuring democratic values and processes. The Cold War spread fear of nuclear war far and wide in American society.

Cries of “witch-hunt” objected to all of this—to secret accusations and lists, to congressional committees that seemed to their opponents more like medieval inquisitions than instruments of democratic rule. To protest the excesses of public efforts to search out and expose communists, famed playwright Arthur Miller wrote The Crucible (1953) about the literal “witch-hunting” in seventeenth century Salem, Massachusetts. The charge of “witch-hunt,” however, intended as pointed criticism of the search for communists in government and elsewhere in national life, while not without substance, was wide of the mark, for the term “witch-hunt” referred to the search for something that did not exist and was therefore futile to seek. However, there were real spies in the United States, some of whom had done irreparable damage to American security.

Sputnik

Besides all else, there was also objective evidence of the challenge Soviet communism posed to America’s self-confidence in its place as champion of the free world. This evidence came in the form of a startling announcement in 1957. The Soviet Union had, Americans awoke one morning early in October to discover, launched the world’s first artificial satellite, Sputnik I. Although the United States launched its own satellite less than four months later, Americans were shocked by the technological achievement of a rival it had considered its inferior.

Sputnik gave rise to far more than redoubled efforts of the American space program. It occasioned a period of national self-examination and soul searching. Was the nation really the light of the world that its famous statue in New York Harbor implied? Americans felt a need to prove that their nation was by launching new efforts in education for science. Suddenly, budgets for science education in schools and colleges became fully funded, as the nation geared up to meet the Soviet challenge. However, the reality of what appeared to be the strength of its Soviet rival, which suppressed every vestige of liberty in its society, had taken its toll in renewed anxiety.
Impact

The domestic consequences of the Cold War for the United States included deep and unbridgeable divisions between the Left and the Right over the issue of communism and how deeply it did or did not threaten the nation. Mutual contempt between the two sides became a hallmark of American politics that has never really been transcended. The American approach to Cold War issues did not necessarily coincide with Canada’s, and by about the end of the decade the two nations had moved apart on some foreign policy matters. For example, in future years, Canada recognized the communist government of Fidel Castro in Cuba, while the United States refused to do so and maintained an economic embargo against Havana throughout the Cold War period and beyond.

A second consequence was the pervasive fear of nuclear war and communist subversion that lay just beneath the placid surface of American society, home during the 1950’s of such comforting symbols of normality and everyday confidence and good humor as the television shows I Love Lucy, Leave It to Beaver, and The Honeymooners. Children who watched these reassuringly comic entertainments by night might be engaging in rehearsals for atomic attack in their schools by day. At the same time, their parents might be building a backyard bomb shelter for surviving the nuclear holocaust that might suddenly eclipse the Cold War. Canada, for its part, had its “Diefenbunker”—the sarcastic nickname for the bomb shelter that Prime Minister John Diefenbaker had built at the close of the decade for government leaders.

Other consequences were more far-reaching. Upon leaving office in January, 1961, President Dwight D. Eisenhower, military hero of World War II, who had presided reassuringly over most of the decade, gave a farewell address. In that speech he urged the nation in a memorable and endlessly repeated passage to “beware of the military-industrial complex.” In so doing, the president alluded to further consequences of the Cold War for American society.

The need for national defense against communism had given rise to a new set of industries that were allied with the armed forces and would seek to further their interests in Washington, not necessarily to the country’s benefit. Eisenhower’s warning of the rise of such a “military-industrial complex” reflected fears of the corrosive effects on the national budget, political life, and even social life of an economic alliance between military contractors and the government.

The Cold War also played a significant role in fostering a climate that promoted social conformism and political orthodoxy. It also gave rise to extremist political organizations such as the John Birch Society, whose hysterical anticommunism threatened to undermine legitimate concerns about the existence of subversives. President Eisenhower himself, the society proclaimed, was “a knowing and conscious member of the international communist conspiracy.”

Conformism reached deep into society, extending, for example, to strict controls on public display of eroticism. While the cultural revolution of the 1960’s would change all that, now even the word “pregnant” was banned from the airwaves, along with suspected communists.

In November, 1960, John F. Kennedy, a handsome and dashing U.S. senator from Massachusetts, was elected to the presidency by a slim margin. Even so, the coming to Washington of a new elegance and cultural energy (the White House was soon dubbed “Camelot”) in the form of a young chief executive, Kennedy, and his beautiful and cultivated wife, Jacqueline, signaled that one era had passed and another had begun.

Bibliography


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