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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Europeans in the Cold War: Between Moscow and Washington

The expression “cold war” has a long history. Used by the ancient Greeks, Spanish crusaders and popular into the twentieth century where it was employed by the likes of George Orwell and Winston Churchill, a cold war is when there is a state of conflict that stops just ever so short of direct military combat. Instead, the fighting mainly takes the form of economic competition, political maneuvers, propaganda and, at times, proxy wars between nations allied to one of the more powerful nations. It is a widely held belief that the post-World War II cold war started in 1946 or 1947 and was largely a result of Soviet aggression. As is so often the case, pinpointing the actual date and catalyst of conflict is not that simple. Some have argued that the Cold War started with Churchill’s welcome, but not acceptance, of the USSR as part of the anti-Hitler coalition in 1941.¹ Others have persuasively argued that the Cold War between Russia and the West actually started with the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917. What followed was the inevitable ebb and flow of relations between nations and rival social systems that were in fundamental contradiction.

No matter the date, it is clear that relations between the Soviet Union and the Western powers were not the best for a number of years after the defeat of fascism in 1945. One theory put forward is that the division of Germany was not so much a result of the Cold War as a cause. Having been invaded twice by Germany in the first half of the twentieth century, the Russian government wanted a key voice in any post-war settlement. Failure of the USSR to reach agreement with the West, and vice versa, was a key source of tension.² This was part and parcel of the general move to cut the Soviets out of the post-war world. The US may have shared the atomic bomb with the United Kingdom but not with Russia. Of course, that the United States chose not to share military secrets with the USSR, or any other ally for that matter, was hardly a surprise to anyone. More of a surprise, and a major source of animosity for the Russians, was the US reneging on their previous promise of financial assistance for reconstruction. After all, not only had

the Soviets endured the largest number of casualties, the European part of their country had been relentlessly destroyed in fighting and they were dead broke.

Before the final defeat of Nazism, the US ambassador to Moscow cabled the State Department that the USSR placed "high importance on a large postwar credit as a basis for the development of 'Soviet-American relations' ... [the implication was] that the development of our friendly relations would depend upon a generous credit."³ The Russians reasoned that they had suffered disproportionate casualties in the war and had further pledged to sacrifice even more of their people in the finale to the war against Japan, something that was not needed because of the development of the atomic bomb. Therefore, the Soviet Union thought the promises of economic assistance were just. After the war, Britain was granted a handsome loan at below 2 percent interest. But when it came to the Soviet Union, Washington insisted on a political and economic open door in Russian-occupied Europe, in addition to Moscow accepting US multilateral trade regulations. When the Soviets balked at what they thought was a capitulation of national interest and security, the Americans deployed the prospect of a loan as a weapon to make the Russians submit to their will.⁴ When they refused to give in to the dictates of the United States, the Western press had a field day painting the Soviet Union as closed, unreasonable and dangerously aggressive.

There are other plausible reasons and theories to explain the Cold War. Maybe the military-industrial complexes of West or East were simply looking for excuses to prevent peace from breaking out and ruining their business. No matter, by the late 1940s, there was a very real Cold War between the USSR and the capitalist West. Now, it is clear that this Cold War was not necessary for the "survival of the west," as bourgeois propaganda claimed. In fact, as the leader of the capitalist world, the United States was in a uniquely dominant position in 1945: it controlled half of the world's GNP and most food surpluses, along with nearly all global financial reserves. As well as economic superiority, the Americans had the nuclear bomb, a planet-wide network of military bases, and an air force and navy, both of which were unchallengeable. Having expanded their industrial and economic base during the war (while others' were destroyed), the US seemed to control the fate of enemies and allies alike.⁵ The US concluded that it should go from being *a* world power to being *the* world power.

The Soviet Union, by contrast, had seen much of its industrialized areas destroyed in fighting, had lost tens of millions of lives, and was worried

about its ability to feed and house the common people. In addition, the Soviet Union was now occupying territories with millions of inhabitants, who hated the USSR because it was Russian, Communist, or both. Moscow was not in the best shape beyond the prestige they gained from having defeated Hitler. The problem was that prestige didn't feed hungry people in the largely destroyed Soviet cities. Still, the Cold War served Stalin well in that it provided a better excuse to continue the repression of political opponents, whether real, potential, or imagined. Soviet officers who had been concerned for their careers as the military was scaled back could now breathe a sigh of relief as rearmament was ordered, despite the poverty of the average comrade. The West created the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) as their military alliance; Russia responded with the Warsaw Pact. While the US and Russia did not engage directly in battle with each other, their proxy wars killed millions in Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan and many other places. Both sides continued to build bigger and more lethal atomic bombs and ever more effective ways of getting them to the "enemy" heartland. In the middle (literally and figuratively) was Europe. More importantly, it was the commoners of Europe who daily lived in fear that one side or the other could start an all-out nuclear war that would destroy the planet. In the West, it was common to hear people say that the Americans would fight the USSR to the last European.

The reality that the Cold War was an imperialist fight between the rulers of two class-based societies is often forgotten. From the East came a flood of claims about how peace-loving the Soviet Union was and so on and so forth. From the West, particularly from the Anglo-Saxons, came a new political Christianity that was part of the "struggle to save civilization." With this new religious rhetoric, the Russians became not just economic or political competitors to the capitalist world, they became the godless seeking to destroy all that was good in the world.⁶ This politicized religious fervor that took hold in the capitalist West grew beyond their response to Russia and influenced the social and political scenes much more broadly. For some Englishmen, that meant saving the Empire, while for some white Americans it meant retaining racial segregation.

The view from the Kremlin's windows saw the Cold War and Tito's split as evidence that there were traitors everywhere. If not, it was still useful to pretend there were. Throughout Eastern Europe, the local Communist Party leadership found themselves victims of witch-hunts that often resulted in a show trial, followed by execution. One infamous example was the purge of Rudolf Slánský, general secretary of the Czechoslovakian party. Slánský was among fourteen leaders arrested in 1951 and charged

with high treason. The following year, in a mass show trial, eleven of the fourteen were sentenced to death and Slánský was executed on December 3, 1952. Meanwhile across the Atlantic, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were in New York's Sing Sing Prison awaiting the president's response to their appeal against their conviction for high treason and their accompanying death sentences. Despite such recourse to the American justice system, after two years spent filing appeals they were executed.

In June 1953, the workers in East Germany (aka the German Democratic Republic or DDR) showed that they would not be passive subjects of their government nor their Russian overlords. Resentment grew as workers tired of hearing so much about socialism without ever seeing it put into practice. The straw that broke the camel's back was an increase in work norms that would have cut the average workers' standard of living. The first response came from building workers along Stalinallee who stopped work. They were soon followed by a substantial number of metal workers. Even the CIA seemed surprised, that "spontaneity large-scale uprising unquestionable ... [DDR government] harping on themes such as 1917 Soviet uprisings and analyzing the reasons defeat German Workers' Movement 1933 and prior thereto backfired."⁷ In other words, the DDR talked about the glorious history of workers resisting oppression which actually encouraged workers to resist oppression. Nor was this the aimless rioting so often depicted in standard capitalist and Stalinist narratives. In a secret US briefing, it was conceded, "that shop stewards and the revolutionary tradition played a vital role in providing leadership and unity ... East German developments have demonstrated that an uprising from below is possible."⁸ These are surely not the sort of comments that the upholders of property and privilege would make in public, at least not about workers under their control. Following 1953, the DDR security apparatus was on alert for organized or politically motivated strikes. Therefore, DDR workers "quickly adapted to this danger, and it became a widely adopted practice to stress that one had decided to down tools spontaneously just this morning and could not remember who had thought of the idea first."⁹

The 1953 revolt was an unplanned, spontaneous revolt directed not against socialism, but against the lack of *real* socialism, which depends upon worker control and democracy. It is interesting that many participants belonged to the Socialist Unity Party (SED), East Germany's ruling party. Even the official SED party paper, *Neues Deutschland*, admitted the justice of the workers' demands. For a few days, the workers felt that power was in their hands.¹⁰ In the end, the tens of thousands of workers flowing into Berlin simply had insufficient planning or organization, and were repressed

with the help of Soviet occupation troops. The fact is that the June days had been unforeseen in the West, but agents provocateurs were dispatched to spread rumors, commit sabotage and give the workers revolt a pro-Western facade.¹¹ Despite the deep pockets of the CIA, they had limited success. The Soviets and their SED allies attempted to rewrite the history of these events into a Western-orchestrated provocation without mass appeal. No one believed them. Bertolt Brecht, living in the DDR, wrote a biting poem about this called “The Solution”:

After the uprising of the 17th June
 The Secretary of the Writer’s Union
 Had leaflets distributed in the Stalinallee
 Stating that the people
 Had forfeited the confidence of the government
 And could win it back only
 By redoubled efforts. Would it
 Not be easier
 In that case for the government
 To dissolve the people
 And elect another?¹²

This was not to be the only popular uprising in the Soviet Bloc. Before then, however, the biggest blow would come from within the orders of the Kremlin itself. On February 14, 1956, the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) opened in Moscow, with 1,500 leaders from 56 nations in attendance. Nikita Khrushchev, by then clearly the top leader in the USSR, made a “secret speech” attacking Stalin and his purges. He condemned the dead dictator’s paranoid determination to maintain power for causing the distortion of Marxism-Leninism and the deaths of innocent, loyal, party members. Khrushchev advocated reform and a peaceful coexistence with the capitalist West. Although the speech was meant to be private, it leaked out almost immediately. It hit like a bomb within the ranks of world Communists and their sympathizers. The speech helped encourage protest in Poland in the summer and fall of 1956. These protests escalated when Poland’s ruling party overreacted by sending in the military to suppress the protesters.

In October 1956, student protests in Hungary gained widespread support. Before long, there was a revolt against the Soviet-allied government, military units mutinied and the border with Austria was opened. Reform-minded Communists in Hungary hoped to use this movement to recast

their country in a more popular mold. Responding to the protests, Prime Minister Imre Nagy declared that his country would leave the Warsaw Pact and pursue an independent path to socialism. On November 7, 1956, Khrushchev told the Swedish ambassador that the USSR had "originally agreed to support Nagy and had decided to use troops in Hungary only when it became apparent that Nagy had lost control."¹³ Regardless of the truth of this statement, the fact is Russian tanks crushed the uprising and Nagy was executed by the Soviets. These events significantly impacted the morale of supporters around the world. One Italian Communist remembers that "things were never the same in the party after that. Trust in the USSR was broken or wasn't the same."¹⁴

A new, more reliable government was installed in Budapest at the point of Soviet steel. Western agents and propaganda from without Hungary's borders, such as the CIA's Radio Free Europe (RFE), called for a revolt and implied that Western military aid would back it. Naturally, once people rose up, nothing was done except to excite further violence with the view to embarrass the Soviet Union.¹⁵ This reckless incitement to cause needless bloodshed was so controversial that the CIA felt compelled to conduct a secret investigation of Radio Free Europe's actions. RFE denied the charges while admitting that some of the broadcasts "sounded emotional." Their defense was "a) Hungarians are basically emotional, and b) this was an emotional occasion [and] ... sentences or phrases could possibly be taken out of these broadcasts [to support the idea] ... that RFE 'incited.'"¹⁶ In any case, it is fair to say that the common people in the Warsaw Pact nations did not live altogether wonderful lives. It was clear to all but the most myopic eye that Eastern Europe was under the heel of the Russian government.

Yet, was it so wonderful in the West? Of course, compared with Stalin's Russia, almost anything looks good. Obviously after the war, Greece was far from the ideal of freedom and democracy.¹⁷ The best to be said about Portugal was that it was an ageing dictatorship: as the US State Department concluded in 1959, after thirty years, Portugal's "carefully managed dictatorial machine is showing signs of breaking down." There was rising dissent as the government failed "to raise the standard of living for the vast majority of the population." The same report concluded that the armed forces, backbone of the regime, "resent the generally low pay levels and the inequitable promotion policy." Accurately, the Americans predicted not an immediate "major national revolt," but warned of increasing boldness on the part of the opposition and the high likelihood of a military coup.¹⁸ Meanwhile, the ruling circles in the West were far more concerned about Spain.

Spain was still run by the butcher Franco, buddy of the dead mass murderers Hitler and Mussolini. Although the Spanish regime found the rest of Western Europe far too left wing for their taste, their hatred of Russia drove them to back an accommodation with London and Washington. Franco's government was backed by the UK and the US as reliably anti-communist despite the continuing stench of fascism that clung to the regime; Franco sided with the West since there was no longer a fascist alternative alliance. There is a mountain of testimony by Spanish exiles, political opponents and victims of this vicious dictatorship that condemns it as no better than its late fascist allies. Anti-fascists universally condemned Spain's government, but they would, wouldn't they? It is perhaps more interesting to see what Franco's *de facto* allies in the US thought about this government. According to a secret report, US intelligence saw a regime "unable to capture the genuine mass support of the people." Franco's government "has utilized corrupt means to consolidate its power and is now unable to overcome the corruption in the government ... The regime which took power by force has suppressed all civil and political liberties." It wasn't even a successful dictatorship in that "undernourishment has slowed down labor's output," while almost half the budget was consumed by the military and security forces upon whom Franco's "own tenure so much depend[ed]." ¹⁹ This situation worried Washington, not because of any professed ideological conflict between Spain and the US, but because the latter was nervous about what would replace Franco. When strikes and demonstrations broke out in 1955–56, the Americans were clearly concerned ²⁰ and this concern continued for decades as Franco hung on to power (and life).

For those capitalist countries herded into NATO, the United States, in a kinder and gentler way perhaps, became the overlord of Western Europe, just as Russia had seized the eastern part of the continent. American forms of control were subtle; the wealth of the American Empire allowed them to purchase consent, as well as punish resistance. In the 1948 Italian elections, it was \$10 million that helped the US's allies in the Vatican defeat the left in the vote. Yet, when there was a dockworkers' strike in the key French port of Marseilles, the US hired Corsican gangsters to break it. ²¹ If it was in some way inconvenient for Washington or Wall Street, European democracy was refashioned to suit American interests. For example, in 1951, Allen W. Dulles of the CIA noted that "electoral mechanisms had been manipulated so as greatly to reduce Communist representation in the French Chamber and in Italian municipalities ... [US economic aid] may well have saved these countries from Communist control." ²²

Not surprisingly, any and all US measures had to “be presented to the people as independent French and Italian moves. It should not appear to come under U.S.A. pressure and our support should be covert not overt.”²³ Washington also pressured European governments to repress those Europeans it considered subversive, even at the cost of violating basic freedoms. The 1951 Dulles report noted with satisfaction the actions of the French government in: 1) removing four elected PCF mayor and 29 Communist deputy mayors in Paris, 2) firing all public employees who stopped work to demonstrate against the visit of General Eisenhower, 3) outlawing international and foreign Communist fronts headquartered in Paris, 4) prohibiting the sale and distribution in France of five French-language Soviet periodicals, 5) banning three Communist-organized public demonstrations and 6) “discreetly” encouraging splits in the PCF and the CGT trade union. But even this was not sufficient for Dulles who recommended that Paris be pressured to institute a host of other measures such as limiting the PCF press’s access to newsprint and lifting the parliamentary immunity of elected members of the Chamber of Deputies. Even so, the CIA admitted that low real wages were a fundamental cause of the PCF’s appeal, and thus trade unions had to be tolerated as the most effective “method of bringing relief to that third of the French working class which is underpaid even by low prewar standards.”²⁴ Needless to say, there is a certain contradiction in attacking militant trade unions, like the CGT, and then conceding that poor living standards are one of the keys to Communist strength.

More effective at controlling Western Europe than the cloak-and-dagger schemes of the CIA was the Marshall Plan. This massive economic aid program, begun in 1948, pumped \$12 billion dollars into Europe to reconstruct and update its economy. By 1951, Europeans began to see the start of what many have called the “golden age of capitalism.”²⁵ Real wages soared, as did industrial productivity. Of course, relative wages were mainly stagnant as productivity rose as fast as wage levels. Still, using the 1890–99 average as a basis of 100, the index of real wages jumped from 1950—United Kingdom (169), France (168), West Germany (174)—till 1959, United Kingdom (207), France (274), West Germany (262).²⁶ Combined with low unemployment, the common people of Europe enjoyed a real upturn in their standard of living. Despite the lack of capital and a history of economic backwardness, this could also be said, in a lesser sense, for people living in the Soviet Bloc. By the mid-1950s, Eastern Europe had “devised its own variant of the Marshall Plan social contract—citizen enfranchisement through consumer rewards.”²⁷ But all this came at a price.

In Eastern Europe, full employment and other social security measures were purchased with political freedoms.

In Western Europe, the same trade-off occurred, albeit with more subtlety. Along with all those US dollars came the Marshall Plan, with its own ideology: consumerism. It has been argued that the American ideology of a “Consumers’ Republic” was a fundamental assault on long-standing European ideas of social citizenship. Without the context of the Cold War, this would make little sense, but the Americans were putting forth a rival ideology to left-wing ideas like equality or solidarity.²⁸ The old Enlightenment notion that “I think therefore I am” was replaced by “I consume therefore I am.” Most Marshall Plan historians agree that “a distinctly political transformation was attempted in Europe in the post-war period: the citizen was reconfigured as a consumer, whose individual prosperity and satisfaction spelled the triumph of democracy.”²⁹ One study of Austria has argued that this was all part of a deliberate “Coca-Colonization.” As with the armaments industry, the endless resources of America “from Coca-Cola to Wrigley’s chewing gum—were all centrally directed by government agencies.”³⁰

In fact, Coca-Cola itself was the subject of a curious debate in post-war France. In early 1950, the French National Assembly witnessed the following rather odd exchange that took place between a PCF deputy and the minister of public health:

Deputy: “Monsieur le ministre, they are selling a drink on the boulevards of Paris called Coca-Cola.”

Health Minister: “I know it.”

Deputy: “What’s serious, is that you know it and you are doing nothing about it.”

Health Minister: “I have, at the moment, no reason to act”

Deputy: “This is not simply an economic question, nor is it even simply a question of public health—it’s also a political question. We want to know if, for political reasons, you’re going to permit them to poison Frenchmen and Frenchwomen.”³¹

In the twenty-first century, this dialogue may seem odd. But at the time, Coca-Cola was understood to symbolize complete Americanization—that is, a threat. On the same day this strange exchange took place, the French Parliament, in a nod to anti-American sentiment, authorized the government to ban Coca-Cola if it was found to be harmful. This incident was not simply a Gallic quirk.

For their part, much of the American response was just as extreme. The *New York Enquirer* accused the French of being ingrates for criticizing the country who saved her in two world wars. Another periodical claimed that it was impossible to spread

... the doctrines of Marx among people who drink Coca-Cola ... The dark Principles of revolution and a rising proletariat may be expounded over a bottle of vodka ... but it is utterly fantastic to imagine two men stepping up to a soda fountain and ordering a couple of Cokes in which to toast the downfall of their capitalist oppressors.³²

This is rather silly and would come as a complete shock to anyone who witnessed the Cuban Revolution sweep into Havana in 1959. (A large number of Cuban revolutionaries drank *Cuba Libre*, a drink made up of rum and “Coke.”) Obviously, both sides in this debate resorted to rather exaggerated verbiage. Behind all the rhetoric hid a real dispute. That is, should French, or more broadly European, society be remolded into a mirror image of the United States? If a person’s view of Coca-Cola was the key measure, Americanization lost in France (at least in the short run), as a 1953 poll reported that 61 percent liked Coke “not at all” versus a mere 17 percent liking the colored sugar-water “well enough” or “a lot.”³³

Behind these seemingly trivial debates lurked far more weighty issues. The entire push for increased consumerism was, from the start, targeted at women. Male leaders on both sides of the Cold War considered female citizens susceptible to being easily bought off. To an extent usually not noticed, the Cold War was fought in the kitchen.³⁴ Thoughts of shopping, it was hoped, would displace more dangerous thoughts of progress, democracy, or gender equality. To the West, corporations promoted the positive value of an idealized housewife marching into her household task of negotiating mass consumption.³⁵ In Eastern Europe, women’s rights and female involvement in society was maintained, but consumerism was pushed in hopes of avoiding awkward questions about equality or democracy from the common people whom the governments claimed to represent. As the example of Hungary proves, a woman would have a position in Eastern European society, but it would be a second place to the privileged “breadwinner” male.³⁶ In the capitalist West, men were shown fictional cinematic portraits of powerful Communist women commanding subordinate men.³⁷ A struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union was being enacted on the big screen, as each side produced films showing their way of life as superior.³⁸

Post-war Europe was far more than a mere battleground between the USSR and the United States or even rival classes. Women began to question again their subordinate position in society and the economy.³⁹ A major theoretical bombshell was lobbed into the comfortable male-dominated world with the publication of *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir in 1949.⁴⁰ Appearing first in French, it sold more than 20,000 copies in its first week; the English edition has since topped a million in sales. This publication's importance was demonstrated by the ever-vigilant Vatican censors quickly placing it on its *List of Prohibited Books*. Whether this ban hurt or helped sales is hard to determine. Widely read and debated, it reopened and expanded discussion of women's oppression. In this volume and in her later work, de Beauvoir disputes the idea that women's struggle should be subordinated to the class struggle. She argues, in her words, that women's struggle appeared "primordial and not at all secondary." Of course, it is necessary to "link the two struggles. But the example of the countries called socialist proves that an economic change in no way entails the decolonization of women."⁴¹ Other scholars have contended that feminist consciousness can survive and grow, even under the most repressive conditions.⁴² Throughout the immediate post-war period, legal restrictions against women fell away (for example, equal voting rights were established in France and Italy), while theorists like de Beauvoir helped lay the foundation for modern feminism.⁴³ Moreover, the increased employment of female workers outside the household appears to have led to the growth of women's consciousness.⁴⁴

Women in many countries became involved in political movements or parties that created a space for female self-activity.⁴⁵ In Eastern Europe, women fought to force regimes to live up to their rhetoric. Facing a double burden of working outside the home and trapped in the role of housewife, women demanded the ruling parties at least police the most outrageous acts of male sexism. In the USSR, for example, women demanded that male party members be brought to account for wrongdoing. In one case, a man was expelled from the CPSU on the charge of "unworthy conduct in family life" for, among other things, "the systematic mockery of his wife."⁴⁶ This was far from an isolated case, as mainly woman-initiated charges led to a rise in expulsions for "unworthy conduct." In 1954, only 12.41 percent of CPSU expulsions were a result of these personal failings. By 1964, almost a quarter of those party members kicked out had been charged with failings in family or personal life.⁴⁷

After 1945, there was substantial immigration of workers from both economically underdeveloped parts of the continent and beyond. This

mass immigration transformed Western Europe. The bulk of these immigrants were, if judged by their position in the productive process, members of the working class. Immigration not only filled the void left by the millions who died in World War II, it also provided a reserve army of workers in nations that otherwise would have faced labor shortages. A number of factors contributed to a schism between indigenous Europeans and the newer immigrant workers. First, immigrants typically worked in less skilled, lower paying jobs and had only infrequent interaction with indigenous workers. There were also differences in language, culture and, often, religion. Despite labor shortages, many resident Europeans feared competition for jobs and reacted to the immigrants with irrational, racist hatred.⁴⁸ The irony was, of course, that whenever there were labor shortages, there was less than ever to fear from migrants.

Various surveys conducted in the 1950s clearly show that a great number of workers in the United Kingdom, France and Germany were prejudiced against immigrants. Interestingly, according to one study, French workers were less racially than culturally biased. It found that 62 percent thought there were too many North Africans (mainly Islamic in religious tradition) in France while only 18 percent said there were too many black immigrants (many of whom were Roman Catholic).⁴⁹ There have been powerful arguments made that immigration weakened the working class, increased the power of the ruling class and introduced a false consciousness (racism) into the labor movement.⁵⁰ Over time, millions of "guest workers," as immigrants were sometimes called, would be transformed into more or less permanent ethnic or cultural minorities in what had once been far more homogenous societies. Like issues of economic and social equality or women's rights, the issue of immigration and the changes it produced would not simply go away. Generations later, these issues still remain.