

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

**WORLD WAR II
AND THE COLD WAR**

WORLD WAR I WAS ONLY ABOUT TWENTY YEARS in the past when another huge war began in Europe. Some call it the most popular war the United States ever fought. Eighteen million Americans served in the armed forces, and 25 million gave money from their paychecks to support the war.

It was a war against evil—the evil of Germany's Nazi Party, led by Adolf Hitler. After coming to power in Germany, the Nazis began attacking Jews and members of other minorities. Hitler's Germany became a war machine, determined to conquer other countries. For the United States to step forward to defend those helpless people and countries matched the image of the nation in American schoolbooks, but is that what really

happened? Are there other ways to look at World War II, questions that did not get asked in the patriotic excitement of the time?

America at War

THE WAR STARTED IN 1939 AFTER GERMANY attacked Poland. Germany had already taken over Austria and Czechoslovakia. Later the Germans would invade and occupy France. Italy had already invaded the African nation of Ethiopia. Together with some smaller powers, Germany and Italy formed one side in the conflict. They were known as the Axis. Against them stood the Allies. Britain was one of the main Allied powers. Another was Russia, which now had a Communist government and had been renamed the Soviet Union.

The other side of the world was at war, too. Japan had attacked China and was moving toward Southeast Asia, which had rich resources of tin, rubber, and oil.

What did the United States do while this was happening? Hitler's attacks on the Jews did not bring the United States into the war. Neither did Germany's invasions of other countries, although President Franklin D. Roosevelt sent American aid to Britain. Neither did Japan's attack on China.

The United States entered the war after the Japanese attacked an American naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, on December 7, 1941. This strike at a link in the American Pacific empire was the reason the United States joined the fight, in Europe as well as Asia.

Once the United States had joined with England and Russia in the war, what were its goals? Was America fighting for humanitarian reasons or for power and profit? Was it fighting to end the control of some nations by others—or to make sure that the controlling nations were friends of the United States?

Noble statements about the government's goals didn't always match the things that were said privately. In August of 1941, Roosevelt and the British prime minister, Winston Churchill, announced their goals for the world after the war. They said that they respected "the right of all peoples to

choose the form of government under which they will live.” But two weeks earlier, a top U.S. government official had quietly promised the French government that France would regain its empire of overseas territories after the war.

Italy had bombed cities when it invaded Ethiopia. German planes had dropped bombs on cities in the Netherlands and England. These were not attacks on military targets. They were attacks on the civilian population. Roosevelt had called them “inhuman barbarism that has profoundly shocked the conscience of humanity.”

But the German bombings were very small compared with British and American bombings of German cities. Raids of a thousand planes or more targeted cities. They did not even pretend to be seeking only military targets. The climax of the Allied terror bombing was an attack on the German city Dresden. More than a hundred thousand people died in a firestorm started by the bombs.

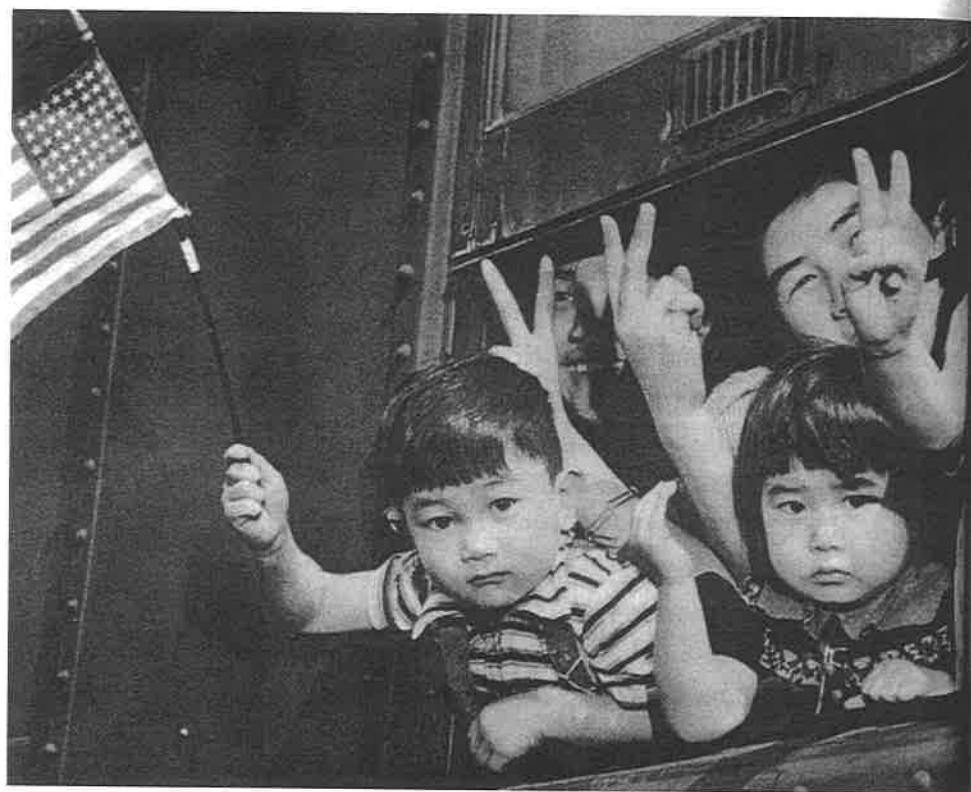
During the war, newspaper headlines were full of battles and troop movements. Behind the headlines, American diplomats and businessmen worked hard to make sure that when the war ended American economic power would be second

to none in the world. At the time, the poet Archibald MacLeish was an assistant secretary of state. He wrote:

As things are now going, the peace we will make, the peace we seem to be making, will be a peace of oil, a peace of gold, a peace of shipping, a peace, in brief . . . without moral purpose or human interest. . . .

Many people thought that the reason for the war against the Axis was to end the terrible situation of Jews in German-occupied Europe. But that wasn't a chief concern of Roosevelt. While Jews were being put in concentration camps, and Germany was getting ready to begin exterminating 6 million Jews (and millions of other minorities and dissidents) in what has come to be called the Holocaust, Roosevelt failed to take steps to save some of those doomed lives. He left it to the U.S. State Department, which did nothing.

Hitler claimed that the white German race—he called it Aryan or Nordic—was superior to others. Was the war being fought to show that his ideas of racial superiority were wrong? American blacks might not have thought so. The nation's armed forces were segregated by race. Even the blood



banks that saved thousands of lives kept blood from white people apart from blood donated by black people. A black doctor named Charles Drew had invented the blood-bank system, but when he tried to end blood segregation, he was fired.

Blacks in the United States knew the reality of racial prejudice, and sometimes racial violence, in everyday life. In 1943 an African American newspaper printed a poem about the thoughts of a black man drafted into the army:

Dear Lord, today
 I go to war:
 To fight, to die,
 Tell me what for?
 Dear Lord, I'll fight,
 I do not fear,
 Germans or Japs;
 My fears are here.
 America!

In the way it treated Japanese Americans during the war, the United States came close to the brutal, racist oppression that it was supposed to be fighting against. After the attack on Pearl Harbor, anti-Japanese feeling was strong in the government. One congressman said, "I'm for catching every

(left)
 Japanese American
 citizens on their
 way to an internment
 camp flash "victory"
 signs, 1942.

Japanese in America, Alaska and Hawaii now and putting them in concentration camps. . . . Let's get rid of them!"

In 1942 Roosevelt gave the army the power to arrest every Japanese American on the West Coast—eleven thousand men, women, and children. Three-fourths of them had been born in the United States and were U.S. citizens. The others, born in Japan, could not become U.S. citizens because American law made that impossible.

The Japanese were taken from their homes and carried to camps in remote regions of the interior. There they were kept in prison conditions. They remained in those camps for more than three years.

The war in Europe ended in May 1945 when a beaten Germany surrendered to the Allies. By August of that year, Japan also was in desperate shape and ready to surrender. But there was one problem. The Japanese emperor was a holy figure to many of his people, and Japan wanted to keep him in place after a surrender. If the United States had agreed, Japan would have stopped the war. But the United States refused, and the fighting continued. (After the war, the United States allowed the emperor to remain anyway.)

Japan did give up—after the United States dropped atomic bombs on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August of 1945. The bombs killed as many as 150,000 people and left countless others to die slowly of radiation poisoning. It was the first use of these deadly new weapons in war.

Why would the United States not take the small step of allowing Japan to keep its emperor if that would have ended the war without the use of atomic weapons? Was it because too much money and work had gone into the atomic bomb not to use it? Or was it because the United States wanted to end the war before the Soviet Union could enter the fight against Japan, as it planned to do? If Japan surrendered to the Soviet Union, then the Russians, not the Americans, would control post-war Japan.

Whatever the real reasons for dropping atomic bombs on Japan, at least the war was over. Or was it?



The War at Home

THE WAR YEARS WERE A PATRIOTIC TIME IN the United States. The country seemed totally dedicated to winning the war. There was no organized antiwar movement. Only one socialist group came out firmly against the war. It was the Socialist Workers Party. In 1943 eighteen of its members went to jail under a law that made it a crime to join any group that called for “the overthrow of government by force and violence.”

Still, many people thought the war was wrong. About 350,000 of them avoided the draft. More than forty thousand flatly refused to fight.

The nation’s two biggest groups of labor unions, the AFL and the CIO, had pledged not to go out on strike during the war. Yet there were more strikes during wartime than at any other time in American history. In 1944 alone, more than a million workers walked off their jobs in mines, steel mills, and manufacturing plants. Many were angry that their wages stayed the same while the companies that made weapons and other war materials were earning huge profits.

By the end of the war, things seemed better to a lot of people. The war had brought big corporate

(left)
Ethel and Julius
Rosenberg leaving
New York City
Federal Court after
arraignment, 1950.

profits, but it also had brought higher prices for farm crops, wage increases for some workers, and enough prosperity for enough people to keep them from becoming rebellious. It was an old lesson learned by governments—war solves the problem of controlling the citizens. The president of the General Electric Corporation suggested that business and the military should create “a permanent wartime economy.”

That’s just what happened. The public was tired of war, but its new president, Harry S. Truman, built a mood of crisis that came to be called the Cold War. In the Cold War, America’s enemy was the Communist country that had been its ally in World War II, the Soviet Union.

New Wars

THE RIVALRY WITH THE SOVIET UNION WAS real. The former Russia was making an amazing comeback from the war. It was rebuilding its economy and regaining military strength. But

the Truman administration presented the Soviet Union as something worse than a rival. The Soviet Union, and communism itself, were seen as immediate threats.

The U.S. government encouraged fear of communism. Any communism-related revolutionary movement in Europe or Asia was made to look as if the Soviets were taking over more of the world. When Communist-led revolutionaries gained control of the Chinese government in 1949, China became the world’s most populous Communist nation—and added fuel to Americans’ fear.

The growing fear of Soviet power and communism in general led to a big increase in U.S. military spending. It also led to new political partnerships between conservatives and liberals.

In politics, a conservative is someone who wants to preserve the existing order of society, government, and the economy. Conservatives tend to place a high value on security, stability, and established institutions. A liberal is someone who supports progress, often through change. If the changes are extreme, a liberal may be called a radical. Liberals tend to place a high value on individual rights, civil liberties, and direct partici-

pation in government. (The liberal position has come to be called the Left, while the conservative position is the Right.)

The United States wanted to unite conservatives and liberals, Republicans and Democrats, in support of the Cold War and the fight against communism. Events in the Asian nation of Korea helped President Truman get that support.

After World War II, Korea had been freed from Japanese control and divided into two countries. North Korea was a socialist dictatorship, part of the Soviet Union's sphere of influence. South Korea was a conservative dictatorship in the American sphere of influence. In 1950 North Korea invaded South Korea. The United Nations—which had been created during the war and was dominated by the United States—asked its member nations to help South Korea. Truman sent U.S. forces, and the United Nations army became the American army.

When American forces pushed all the way through North Korea to the Chinese border, China entered the fighting on the side of North Korea. In three years, the war killed as many as 2 million Koreans and reduced North and South Korea to

ruins. Yet when the fighting ended in 1953, the boundary between the two Koreas was where it had been before.

If the Korean War changed little in Korea, it had an effect in the United States. It caused many liberals to join with conservatives in supporting the president, the war, and the military economy. This meant trouble for radical critics who stayed outside the circle of agreement.

The Left had become a force during the Depression and the war. The Communist Party probably never had more than about a hundred thousand members, but it had influence in the labor unions, in the arts, and among Americans who had seen the failure of capitalism in the 1930s. To make capitalism more secure, to build support for an American victory over Communist foes, the nation's established powers of government and business had to weaken the Left. They did so by attacking communism. The hunt for Reds, as Communists were called, soon filled American life.

In 1947 Truman launched a program to search out "disloyal persons" in the U.S. government. In the next five years, more than 6.5 million government employees were investigated. In their book

The Fifties, historians Douglas Miller and Marion Nowack described the results:

Not a single case of espionage was uncovered, though about 500 persons were dismissed in dubious cases of "questionable loyalty." All of this was conducted with secret evidence, secret and often paid informers, and neither judge nor jury. . . . A conservative and fearful reaction coursed the country. Americans became convinced of the need for absolute security and the preservation of the established order.

World events built support for this anti-Communist crusade. Communist parties came to power in places like Czechoslovakia and China. Revolutionary movements flared up in Asia and Africa when colonial peoples demanded independence from European powers. These events were presented to the American public as signs of a worldwide Communist plot.

Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin began his own crusade to find Communist traitors in the country's State Department and the military. He found nothing and eventually became an embarrassment to the government. Other political leaders, however, had their own ideas for crushing dissent. Liberal senators Hubert Humphrey

and Herbert Lehman suggested that suspected Communists and traitors could be held without trial in concentration camps. The camps were set up, ready for use.

The government also made lists of hundreds of organizations it considered suspicious. Anyone who joined these groups, or even seemed sympathetic to them, could be investigated. Leaders of the Communist Party were jailed.

In 1950 the government charged Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, known to be connected with the Communist Party, with giving atomic secrets to the Soviets. Although the evidence against the Rosenbergs was weak, they were executed as spies. Later investigations proved that the case was deeply flawed. But at the time, everything from movies and comic strips to history lessons and newspapers urged Americans to fight communism.

By 1960, the Establishment seemed to have succeeded in weakening the Left. The Communist-radical upsurge of the New Deal and the wartime years had been broken up. The Cold War kept the country in a permanent war economy. There were big pockets of poverty, but enough people were

making enough money to keep things quiet. Everything seemed under control. And then, in the 1960s, rebellions exploded in every area of American life.

BLACK REVOLT AND CIVIL RIGHTS

THE BLACK REVOLT OF THE 1950S AND 1960S surprised white America, but it shouldn't have. When people are oppressed, memory is the one thing that can't be taken away from them. For people with memories of oppression, revolt is always just an inch below the surface.

Blacks in the United States had the memory of slavery. Beyond that, they lived with the daily realities of lynching, insults, and segregation. As the twentieth century went on, they found new ways to resist.