

McCarthyism: Witch Hunting and Blacklisting in 1950s America

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Senator Joseph McCarthy (center), a Republican from Wisconsin, questions Army Secretary Robert Stevens on April 26, 1954, during a Senate investigations subcommittee hearing in Washington, D.C. AP Photo/William J. Smith

Historians call it the "Red Scare." In the 1950s, anyone in America who was considered a communist could be questioned and thrown in jail.

The political system of communism, symbolized by its red flag, was embraced by an enemy country, the Soviet Union, or USSR. (In the 1990s, the USSR separated into Russia and several other countries.)

Senator Joseph McCarthy rose to national fame by promising to find communist spies in the United States.

Government workers and movie stars suspected of being communists were brought before a panel of lawmakers. The suspects were asked questions about their loyalty.

Many people compared the questioning to a witch hunt.

Why did so many people follow McCarthy? Why was this questioning allowed?

A tense relationship with the USSR

In communist countries, the government owns most things. Few people have the right to own private property, like land, or the right to own businesses. The government owns and runs businesses in the name of the people. The citizens of those countries often have fewer freedoms as a result.

The United States opposed communism, which was spreading because of the Soviet Union. The United States had a tense relationship with the USSR's government. The United States' government preferred capitalism, where the government and business remain separate. The U.S. also embraced a democratic government.

After World War II, America was very afraid of the Soviet Union and communists. The Soviet Union tested a deadly atomic bomb in 1949 (the U.S. had already used atomic weapons in World War II), and there were fears that it could be used against the United States. That same year, China, the world's most populated nation, became communist. Much of Europe was influenced by Joseph Stalin, the communist leader of the USSR.

In the late 1940s, Alger Hiss, a high-ranking government official, was convicted of spying. Fear of communists living in the United States grew stronger.

McCarthy used this fear in his rise to power. He proclaimed that communist spies were everywhere and that with his help America could be saved.

"Have you no sense of decency left?"

On February 9, 1950, McCarthy proclaimed in a speech that he knew of 205 communists working for the United States Department of State, which is in charge of America's foreign relations. He repeated the charges in other speeches and soon began to attract news headlines.

On February 20, 1950, McCarthy addressed the Senate and made a list of questionable claims. His proof was flimsy and he proved nothing, but the Senate called for a full investigation of these "communists."

After accusing some less powerful officials, McCarthy went bigger, even questioning the loyalty of two people who had been Secretary of State.

McCarthy's claims continued into 1954, this time targeting the Army. For eight weeks, in front of millions of television viewers, McCarthy questioned Army officials, including many war heroes.

But this was his major mistake. On television, McCarthy and his questioning appeared mean-spirited. The Army fought back, with one Army official simply asking McCarthy, "At long last, have you no sense of decency left?"

Many polls showed the American people thought McCarthy was unfair in his attack of the Army.

Fed up, McCarthy's fellow lawmakers criticized him, and the hearings came to a close. In poor health and an alcoholic, McCarthy himself died three years later.

Banned from Hollywood

McCarthy was not the only person on the hunt for communists.

The U.S. Congress created a committee that sought to find "Un-American Activities" in the Hollywood film industry. Actors, writers, and producers were ordered to appear before the committee and provide names of people they knew who may have been members of the Communist Party. Even future president Ronald Reagan — himself an actor at the time — was called to appear before the committee.

People who named names of suspected communists were allowed to return to their Hollywood jobs. Those who refused to address the committee were cited as disobedient, and many were fired from jobs in the entertainment industry. Some were "blacklisted" and never allowed to work in Hollywood again.

Were there, in fact, communists in America?

The answer is yes, but many of the people accused had attended rallies for communism 15 or more years before the hearings. Communism was seen more favorably and as less of a threat in the 1930s, before World War II, and before the Soviet Union began to spread.

Many of the accused were innocent

The vast majority of the accused were innocent victims. Many local governments followed in McCarthy's footsteps, questioning employees and firing people suspected of being communists.

Many books were pulled from library shelves, including "Robin Hood." It was said to be communist-like for suggesting the idea of stealing from the rich to give to the poor.

Nearly every politician that discussed trading with China was branded a communist.

Although McCarthyism was dead by the mid-1950s, its effects lasted for decades.

Above all, several messages became clear to the average American: Don't criticize the United States. Don't be different. Just follow.

Quiz

- 1 Which piece of evidence BEST explains the cause of Americans' alarm toward the Soviet Union?
- (A) The Soviet Union tested a deadly atomic bomb in 1949 (the U.S. had already used atomic weapons in World War II), and there were fears that it could be used against the United States.
 - (B) That same year, China, the world's most populated nation, became communist.
 - (C) Much of Europe was influenced by Joseph Stalin, the communist leader of the USSR.
 - (D) On February 9, 1950, McCarthy proclaimed in a speech that he knew of 205 communists working for the United States Department of State, which is in charge of America's foreign relations.
- 2 Which section of the article BEST explains how McCarthy conducted his operations to discover communists in the United States?
- (A) "A tense relationship with the USSR"
 - (B) "Have you no sense of decency left?"
 - (C) "Banned from Hollywood"
 - (D) "Many of the accused were innocent"
- 3 Read the introduction [paragraphs 1-6].
- What purpose does the introduction serve in the article?
- (A) It gives information about the relationship between the United States and USSR.
 - (B) It gives examples of types of governments used in the United States and USSR.
 - (C) It provides context for the struggle between McCarthy and the U.S. Congress.
 - (D) It provides background for how McCarthyism came to be.
- 4 Why does the author include the section "Have you no sense of decency left?"
- (A) to show that McCarthy and all citizens wanted to get rid of communism
 - (B) to show how McCarthy's popularity rose after promising to find communist spies
 - (C) to explain the rise and fall of McCarthy's search for communists
 - (D) to explain the way that McCarthy worked with government agencies to prosecute communists