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Guided Reading : Howard Zinn's, *A People's History of the United States* – "A People's War?"

1. What were some of the world events that made it easier to support "the anti-communistic crusade at home"?
2. According to Howard Zinn, what motivated many of the communist movements in Asia?
3. What were some of Joseph McCarthy's targets when he served as chairman of the Permanent Investigations Sub-Committee?
4. How did McCarthy "antagonize both Republicans and Democrats"? How did the Senate respond?
5. Howard Zinn was very critical of the response by liberals to anti-communist hysteria. What are some examples Zinn cites to prove that liberals did not stand up against the "Red Scare"?

The United States' response to "the rule of force" was to reduce Korea, North and South, to a shambles, in three years of bombing and shelling. Napalm was dropped, and a BBC journalist described the result:

In front of us a curious figure was standing, a little crouched, legs straddled, arms held out from his sides. He had no eyes, and the whole of his body, nearly all of which was visible through tatters of burnt rags, was covered with a hard black crust speckled with yellow pus. . . . He had to stand because he was no longer covered with a skin, but with a crust-like crackling which broke easily. . . . I thought of the hundreds of villages reduced to ash which I personally had seen and realized the sort of casualty list which must be mounting up along the Korean front.

Perhaps 2 million Koreans, North and South, were killed in the Korean war, all in the name of opposing "the rule of force."

As for the rule of law Truman spoke about, the American military moves seemed to go beyond that. The U.N. resolution had called for action "to repel the armed attack and to restore peace and security in the area." But the American armies, after pushing the North Koreans back across the 38th parallel, advanced all the way up through North Korea to the Yalu River, on the border of China—which provoked the Chinese into entering the war. The Chinese then swept southward and the war was stalemated at the 38th parallel until peace negotiations restored, in 1953, the old boundary between North and South.

The Korean war mobilized liberal opinion behind the war and the President. It created the kind of coalition that was needed to sustain a policy of intervention abroad, militarization of the economy at home. This meant trouble for those who stayed outside the coalition as radical critics. Alonzo Hamby noted (*Beyond the New Deal*) that the Korean war was supported by *The New Republic*, by *The Nation*, and by Henry Wallace (who in 1948 had run against Truman on a left coalition Progressive party ticket). The liberals didn't like Senator Joseph McCarthy (who hunted for Communists everywhere, even among liberals), but the Korean war, as Hamby says, "had given McCarthyism a new lease on life."

The left had become very influential in the hard times of the thirties, and during the war against Fascism. The actual membership of the Communist party was not large—fewer than 100,000 probably—but it was a potent force in trade unions numbering millions of members, in the arts, and among countless Americans who may have been led by the failure of the capitalist system in the thirties to look favorably on

Communism and Socialism. Thus, if the Establishment, after World War II, was to make capitalism more secure in the country, and to build a consensus of support for the American Empire, it had to weaken and isolate the left.

Two weeks after presenting to the country the Truman Doctrine for Greece and Turkey, Truman issued, on March 22, 1947, Executive Order 9835, initiating a program to search out any "infiltration of disloyal persons" in the U.S. government. In their book *The Fifties*, Douglas Miller and Marion Nowack comment:

Though Truman would later complain of the "great wave of hysteria" sweeping the nation, his commitment to victory over communism, to completely safeguarding the United States from external and internal threats, was in large measure responsible for creating that very hysteria. Between the launching of his security program in March 1947 and December 1952, some 6.6 million persons were investigated. 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. Despite the failure to find subversion, the broad scope of the official Red hunt gave popular credence to the notion that the government was riddled with spies. 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 right after the war made it easier to build up public support for the anti-Communist crusade at home. In 1948, the Communist party in Czechoslovakia ousted non-Communists from the government and established their own rule. The Soviet Union that year blockaded Berlin, which was a jointly occupied city isolated inside the Soviet sphere of East Germany, forcing the United States to airlift supplies into Berlin. In 1949, there was the Communist victory in China, and in that year also, the Soviet Union exploded its first atomic bomb. In 1950 the Korean war began. These were all portrayed to the public as signs of a world Communist conspiracy.

Not as publicized as the Communist victories, but just as disturbing to the American government, was the upsurge all over the world of colonial peoples demanding independence. Revolutionary movements were growing—in Indochina against the French; in Indonesia against the Dutch; in the Philippines, armed rebellion against the United States.

In Africa there were rumblings of discontent in the form of strikes. Basil Davidson (*Let Freedom Come*) tells of the longest recorded strike

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(160 days) in African history, of 19,000 railwaymen in French West Africa in 1947, whose message to the governor general showed the new mood of militancy: "Open your prisons, make ready your machine guns and cannon. Nevertheless, at midnight on 10 October, if our demands are not met, we declare the general strike." The year before in South Africa, 100,000 gold mine workers stopped work, demanding ten shillings (about \$2.50) a day in wages, the greatest strike in the history of South Africa, and it took a military attack to get them back to work. In 1950, in Kenya, there was a general strike against starvation wages.

So it was not just Soviet expansion that was threatening to the United States government and to American business interests. In fact, China, Korea, Indochina, the Philippines, represented local Communist movements, not Russian fomentation. It was a general wave of anti-imperialist insurrection in the world, which would require gigantic American effort to defeat: national unity for militarization of the budget, for the suppression of domestic opposition to such a foreign policy. Truman and the liberals in Congress proceeded to try to create a new national unity for the postwar years—with the executive order on loyalty oaths, Justice Department prosecutions, and anti-Communist legislation.

In this atmosphere, Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin could go even further than Truman. Speaking to a Women's Republican Club in Wheeling, West Virginia, in early 1950, he held up some papers and shouted: "I have here in my hand a list of 205—a list of names that were made known to the Secretary of State as being members of the Communist Party and who nevertheless are still working and shaping policy in the State Department." The next day, speaking in Salt Lake City, McCarthy claimed he had a list of fifty-seven (the number kept changing) such Communists in the State Department. Shortly afterward, he appeared on the floor of the Senate with photostatic copies of about a hundred dossiers from State Department loyalty files. The dossiers were three years old, and most of the people were no longer with the State Department, but McCarthy read from them anyway, inventing, adding, and changing as he read. In one case, he changed the dossier's description of "liberal" to "communistically inclined," in another form "active fellow traveler" to "active Communist," and so on.

McCarthy kept on like this for the next few years. As chairman of the Permanent Investigations Sub-Committee of a Senate Committee on Government Operations, he investigated the State Department's information program, its Voice of America, and its overseas libraries, which included books by people McCarthy considered Communists. The State Department reacted in panic, issuing a stream of directives to its library

centers across the world. Forty books were removed, including *The Selected Works of Thomas Jefferson*, edited by Philip Foner, and *The Children's Hour* by Lillian Hellman. Some books were burned.

McCarthy became bolder. In the spring of 1954 he began hearings to investigate supposed subversives in the military. When he began attacking generals for not being hard enough on suspected Communists, he antagonized Republicans as well as Democrats, and in December 1954, the Senate voted overwhelmingly to censure him for "conduct . . . unbecoming a Member of the United States Senate." The censure resolution avoided criticizing McCarthy's anti-Communist lies and exaggerations; it concentrated on minor matters—on his refusal to appear before a Senate Subcommittee on Privileges and Elections, and his abuse of an army general at his hearings.

At the very time the Senate was censuring McCarthy, Congress was putting through a whole series of anti-Communist bills. Liberal Hubert Humphrey introduced an amendment to one of them to make the Communist party illegal, saying: "I do not intend to be a half patriot. . . . Either Senators are for recognizing the Communist Party for what it is, or they will continue to trip over the niceties of legal technicalities and details."

The liberals in the government were themselves acting to exclude, persecute, fire, and even imprison Communists. It was just that McCarthy had gone too far, attacking not only Communists but liberals, endangering that broad liberal-conservative coalition which was considered essential. For instance, Lyndon Johnson, as Senate minority leader, worked not only to pass the censure resolution on McCarthy but also to keep it within the narrow bounds of "conduct . . . unbecoming a Member of the United States Senate" rather than questioning McCarthy's anti-Communism.

John F. Kennedy was cautious on the issue, didn't speak out against McCarthy (he was absent when the censure vote was taken and never said how he would have voted). McCarthy's insistence that Communism had won in China because of softness on Communism in the American government was close to Kennedy's own view, expressed in the House of Representatives, January 1949, when the Chinese Communists took over Peking. Kennedy said:

Mr. Speaker, over this weekend we have learned the extent of the disaster that has befallen China and the United States. The responsibility for the failure of our foreign policy in the Far East rests squarely with the White House and the Department of State.

The continued insistence that aid would not be forthcoming unless a coalition government with the Communists was formed, was a crippling blow to the National Government.

So concerned were our diplomats and their advisers, the Lattimores and the Fairbanks [both scholars in the field of Chinese history, Owen Lattimore a favorite target of McCarthy, John Fairbank, a Harvard professor], with the imperfection of the democratic system in China after 20 years of war and the tales of corruption in high places that they lost sight of our tremendous stake in a non-Communist China. . . .

This House must now assume the responsibility of preventing the onrushing tide of Communism from engulfing all of Asia.

When, in 1950, Republicans sponsored an Internal Security Act for the registration of organizations found to be "Communist-action" or "Communist-front," liberal Senators did not fight that head-on. Instead, some of them, including Hubert Humphrey and Herbert Lehman, proposed a substitute measure, the setting up of detention centers (really, concentration camps) for suspected subversives, who, when the President declared an "internal security emergency," would be held without trial. The detention-camp bill became not a substitute for, but an addition to, the Internal Security Act, and the proposed camps were set up, ready for use. (In 1968, a time of general disillusionment with anti-Communism, this law was repealed.)

Truman's executive order on loyalty in 1947 required the Department of Justice to draw up a list of organizations it decided were "totalitarian, fascist, communist or subversive . . . or as seeking to alter the form of government of the United States by unconstitutional means." Not only membership in, but also "sympathetic association" with, any organization on the Attorney General's list would be considered in determining disloyalty. By 1954, there were hundreds of groups on this list, including, besides the Communist party and the Ku Klux Klan, the Chopin Cultural Center, the Cervantes Fraternal Society, the Committee for the Negro in the Arts, the Committee for the Protection of the Bill of Rights, the League of American Writers, the Nature Friends of America, People's Drama, the Washington Bookshop Association, and the Yugoslav Seaman's Club.

It was not McCarthy and the Republicans, but the liberal Democratic Truman administration, whose Justice Department initiated a series of prosecutions that intensified the nation's anti-Communist mood. The most important of these was the prosecution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg in the summer of 1950.

The Rosenbergs were charged with espionage. The major evidence was supplied by a few people who had already confessed to being spies, and were either in prison or under indictment. David Greenglass, the brother of Ethel Rosenberg, was the key witness. He had been a machinist at the Manhattan Project laboratory at Los Alamos, New Mexico, in 1944-1945 when the atomic bomb was being made there and testified that Julius Rosenberg had asked him to get information for the Russians. Greenglass said he had made sketches from memory for his brother-in-law of experiments with lenses to be used to detonate atomic bombs. He said Rosenberg had given him half of the cardboard top to a box of Jell-O, and told him a man would show up in New Mexico with the other half, and that, in June 1945, Harry Gold appeared with the other half of the box top, and Greenglass gave him information he had memorized.

Gold, already serving a thirty-year sentence in another espionage case, came out of jail to corroborate Greenglass's testimony. He had never met the Rosenbergs, but said a Soviet embassy official gave him half of a Jell-O box top and told him to contact Greenglass, saying, "I come from Julius." Gold said he took the sketches Greenglass had drawn from memory and gave them to the Russian official.

There were troubling aspects to all this. Did Gold cooperate in return for early release from prison? After serving fifteen years of his thirty-year sentence, he was paroled. Did Greenglass—under indictment at the time he testified—also know that his life depended on his cooperation? He was given fifteen years, served half of it, and was released. How reliable a memorizer of atomic information was David Greenglass, an ordinary-level machinist, not a scientist, who had taken six courses at Brooklyn Polytechnical Institute and flunked five of them? Gold's and Greenglass's stories had first not been in accord. But they were both placed on the same floor of the Tombs prison in New York before the trial, giving them a chance to coordinate their testimony.

How reliable was Gold's testimony? It turned out that he had been prepared for the Rosenberg case by four hundred hours of interviews with the FBI. It also turned out that Gold was a frequent and highly imaginative liar. He was a witness in a later trial where defense counsel asked Gold about his invention of a fictional wife and fictional children. The attorney asked: "... you lied for a period of six years?" Gold responded: "I lied for a period of sixteen years, not alone six years." Gold was the only witness at the trial to connect Julius Rosenberg and David Greenglass to the Russians. The FBI agent who had questioned

Gold was interviewed twenty years after the case by a journalist. He was asked about the password Gold was supposed to have used—"Julius sent me." The FBI man said:

Gold couldn't remember the name he had given. He thought he had said: I come from—or something like that. I suggested, "Might it have been Julius?" That refreshed his memory.

When the Rosenbergs were found guilty, and Judge Irving Kaufman pronounced sentence, he said:

I believe your conduct in putting into the hands of the Russians the A-bomb years before our best scientists predicted Russia would perfect the bomb has already caused the Communist aggression in Korea with the resultant casualties exceeding 50,000 Americans and who knows but that millions more of innocent people may pay the price of your treason. . . .

He sentenced them both to die in the electric chair.

Morton Sobell was also on trial as a co-conspirator with the Rosenbergs. The chief witness against him was an old friend, the best man at his wedding, a man who was facing possible perjury charges by the federal government for lying about his political past. This was Max Elitcher, who testified that he had once driven Sobell to a Manhattan housing project where the Rosenbergs lived, and that Sobell got out of the car, took from the glove compartment what appeared to be a film can, went off, and then returned without the can. There was no evidence about what was in the film can. The case against Sobell seemed so weak that Sobell's lawyer decided there was no need to present a defense. But the jury found Sobell guilty, and Kaufman sentenced him to thirty years in prison. He was sent to Alcatraz, parole was repeatedly denied, and he spent nineteen years in various prisons before he was released.

FBI documents subpoenaed in the 1970s showed that Judge Kaufman had conferred with the prosecutors secretly about the sentences he would give in the case. Another document shows that after three years of appeal a meeting took place between Attorney General Herbert Brownell and Chief Justice Fred Vinson of the Supreme Court, and the chief justice assured the Attorney General that if any Supreme Court justice gave a stay of execution, he would immediately call a full court session and override it.

There had been a worldwide campaign of protest. Albert Einstein, whose letter to Roosevelt early in the war had initiated work on the

atomic bomb, appealed for the Rosenbergs, as did Jean-Paul Sartre, Pablo Picasso, and the sister of Bartolomeo Vanzetti. There was an appeal to President Truman, just before he left office in the spring of 1953. It was turned down. Then, another appeal to the new President, Dwight Eisenhower, was also turned down.

At the last moment, Justice William O. Douglas granted a stay of execution. Chief Justice Vinson sent out special jets to bring the vacationing justices back to Washington from various parts of the country. They canceled Douglas's stay in time for the Rosenbergs to be executed June 19, 1953. It was a demonstration to the people of the country, though very few could identify with the Rosenbergs, of what lay at the end of the line for those the government decided were traitors.

In that same period of the early fifties, the House Un-American Activities Committee was at its heyday, interrogating Americans about their Communist connections, holding them in contempt if they refused to answer, distributing millions of pamphlets to the American public: "One Hundred Things You Should Know About Communism" ("Where can Communists be found? Everywhere"). Liberals often criticized the Committee, but in Congress, liberals and conservatives alike voted to fund it year after year. By 1958, only one member of the House of Representatives (James Roosevelt) voted against giving it money. Although Truman criticized the Committee, his own Attorney General had expressed, in 1950, the same idea that motivated its investigations: "There are today many Communists in America. They are everywhere—in factories, offices, butcher shops, on street corners, in private business—and each carries in himself the germs of death for society."

Liberal intellectuals rode the anti-Communist bandwagon. *Commentary* magazine denounced the Rosenbergs and their supporters. One of *Commentary's* writers, Irving Kristol, asked in March 1952: "Do we defend our rights by protecting Communists?" His answer: "No."

It was Truman's Justice Department that prosecuted the leaders of the Communist party under the Smith Act, charging them with conspiring to teach and advocate the overthrow of the government by force and violence. The evidence consisted mostly of the fact that the Communists were distributing Marxist-Leninist literature, which the prosecution contended called for violent revolution. There was certainly not evidence of any immediate danger of violent revolution by the Communist party. The Supreme Court decision was given by Truman's appointee, Chief Justice Vinson. He stretched the old doctrine of the "clear and present danger" by saying there was a clear and present conspiracy to make a revolution at some convenient time. And so, the top

leadership of the Communist party was put in prison, and soon after, most of its organizers went underground.

Undoubtedly, there was success in the attempt to make the general public fearful of Communists and ready to take drastic actions against them—imprisonment at home, military action abroad. The whole culture was permeated with anti-Communism. The large-circulation magazines had articles like "How Communists Get That Way" and "Communists Are After Your Child." The *New York Times* in 1956 ran an editorial: "We would not knowingly employ a Communist party member in the news or editorial departments . . . because we would not trust his ability to report the news objectively or to comment on it honestly. . . ." An FBI informer's story about his exploits as a Communist who became an FBI agent—"I Led Three Lives"—was serialized in five hundred newspapers and put on television. Hollywood movies had titles like *I Married a Communist* and *I Was a Communist for the FBI*. Between 1948 and 1954, more than forty anti-Communist films came out of Hollywood.

Even the American Civil Liberties Union, set up specifically to defend the liberties of Communists and all other political groups, began to wilt in the cold war atmosphere. It had already started in this direction back in 1940 when it expelled one of its charter members, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, because she was a member of the Communist party. In the fifties, the ACLU was hesitant to defend Corliss Lamont, its own board member, and Owen Lattimore, when both were under attack. It was reluctant to defend publicly the Communist leaders during the first Smith Act trial, and kept completely out of the Rosenberg case, saying no civil liberties issues were involved.

Young and old were taught that anti-Communism was heroic. Three million copies were sold of the book by Mickey Spillane published in 1951, *One Lonely Night*, in which the hero, Mike Hammer, says: "I killed more people tonight than I have fingers on my hands. I shot them in cold blood and enjoyed every minute of it. . . . They were Commies . . . red sons-of-bitches who should have died long ago. . . ." A comic strip hero, Captain America, said: "Beware, commies, spies, traitors, and foreign agents! Captain America, with all loyal, free men behind him, is looking for you. . . ." And in the fifties, schoolchildren all over the country participated in air raid drills in which a Soviet attack on America was signaled by sirens: the children had to crouch under their desks until it was "all clear."

It was an atmosphere in which the government could get mass support for a policy of rearmament. The system, so shaken in the thirties,

had learned that war production could bring stability and high profits. Truman's anti-Communism was attractive. The business publication *Steel* had said in November 1946—even before the Truman Doctrine—that Truman's policies gave "the firm assurance that maintaining and building our preparations for war will be big business in the United States for at least a considerable period ahead."

That prediction turned out to be accurate. At the start of 1950, the total U.S. budget was about \$40 billion, and the military part of it was about \$12 billion. But by 1955, the military part alone was \$40 billion out of a total of \$62 billion. A small but courageous movement against the military buildup, led by the War Resister's League and other groups, failed to stop it.

In 1960, the military budget was \$45.8 billion—49.7 percent of the budget. That year John F. Kennedy was elected President, and he immediately moved to increase military spending. In fourteen months, the Kennedy administration added \$9 billion to defense funds, according to Edgar Bottome (*The Balance of Terror*).

By 1962, based on a series of invented scares about Soviet military build-ups, a false "bomber gap" and a false "missile gap," the United States had overwhelming nuclear superiority. It had the equivalent, in nuclear weapons, of 1,500 Hiroshima-size atomic bombs, far more than enough to destroy every major city in the world—the equivalent, in fact, of 10 tons of TNT for every man, woman, and child on earth. To deliver these bombs, the United States had more than 50 intercontinental ballistic missiles, 80 missiles on nuclear submarines, 90 missiles on stations overseas, 1,700 bombers capable of reaching the Soviet Union, 300 fighter-bombers on aircraft carriers, able to carry atomic weapons, and 1,000 land-based supersonic fighters able to carry atomic bombs.

The Soviet Union was obviously behind—it had between fifty and a hundred intercontinental ballistic missiles and fewer than two hundred long-range bombers. But the U.S. budget kept mounting, the hysteria kept growing, the profits of corporations getting defense contracts multiplied, and employment and wages moved ahead just enough to keep a substantial number of Americans dependent on war industries for their living.

By 1970, the U.S. military budget was \$80 billion and the corporations involved in military production were making fortunes. Two-thirds of the 40 billion spent on weapons systems was going to twelve or fifteen giant industrial corporations, whose main reason for existence was to fulfill government military contracts. Senator Paul Douglass, an economist and chairman of the Joint Economic Committee of the

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