

History 118 US Since 1877

Discussion Transcript for March 25, 2021

Main Reading: Oral histories by Forry, Meier, Valentini plus Goodman website

These student projects describe events and topics from the early Cold War era covered in chapter 25 of the American Yawp. Here are selections from student comments:

OVERVIEW

STUDENT COMMENT: The American Yawp textbook gives an objective and detailed recounting of the events of the Cold War. Within the Yawp chapter lies a series of themes and historical events as they occurred in the Cold War. However, unlike other chapters, this chapter of Yawp did not contain many personal anecdotes. On the other hand, student authors Forry, Meier, and Valentini utilize oral histories and stories to add to their historical recounting. Forry supplemented their report on the Berlin airlift with a personal account. The Berlin airlift was a supply effort to West Berlin after the Soviets blockaded the region; the operation eventually ended the blockade in May of 1949. The Yawp simply detailed the event while Forry included a note about Americans living at the time recollection of the airlifts. Additionally, the Yawp chapter's rendition of the Turkish front in the Cold War was merely a footnote. Valentini's paper provides a far more personal and textured depiction of Turkey at the time through the eyes of an American soldier stationed there. Army corporal Tony Bucci recounted "a small town on the Black Sea coast called Samsun" in which he bathed in the ocean and lived in huts (Valentini). The Turkish front was not a major part of the Cold War on the scale of the fighting in Vietnam, however, the deployment of U.S. troops does garner more reportage than included in the Yawp. Valentini on the other hand provides historical content intermixed with a firsthand account of life in Turkey as a U.S. soldier.

BERLIN AIRLIFT (1948)

STUDENT COMMENT: Tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union were initiated by Woodrow Wilson in 1920 when he refused to recognize the Bolshevik government as legitimate. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt eased this relation by recognizing the communist state and beginning negotiations in 1933, resulting in fruitful communication with respect to the second world war as the allies united against Nazi Germany. Once there was no common enemy for the two super powers, increasing tensions resumed in 1945 as Germany's future looked uncertain. Joseph Stalin began to steal agricultural resources from eastern Germany soon after the war, betraying promises of food supply to the west solidified in the Potsdam Conference that year and causing a famine that raised tensions between the Kremlin and the western powers. After Great Britain and the United States united their occupation zones and established a currency in 1947, thereby also violating agreements in the Potsdam Conference, Stalin also felt betrayed. The Berlin Blockade in 1948 was meant to punish the western powers for this economic change in addition to other disagreements, effectively beginning the Cold War. The US had no plans to stop the Berlin airlift so long as there was Soviet oppression, evidenced by the Air Force's determination to keep sending a plane to Berlin up to even at times every minute with the condition that US citizens demand it. Although the results of the airlift were inconsistent, Americans Lois Schaffer were proud of their nation for

such action against the USSR and were reassured that the Truman Doctrine was by no means a false promise (Forry).

STUDENT COMMENT: In the YAWP chapter, the Berlin airlift is described as "one of the first major crises of the Cold War." (YAWP, 25) Based on that quote, one would probably see the Berlin airlift as just a negative event in history without much room for interpretation, but there was more to it than that. Until the Soviets lifted the blockade on May 12, 1949, the United States continued to fly supplies in and out of the city. In Forry's interview, Shaffer remembers that she and her husband were "impressed" by what the U.S. military could accomplish. (Forry) Shaffer also said that it instilled a sense of national pride for people on the home front because of what the U.S. military was doing to help those in Berlin. Moreover, more than what was happening with the Soviets, it was in some ways a positive for the United States and helped bring people together for a common cause. Of course, there were also many downsides to the Cold War in the U.S., one of them being how younger people had to grow up and live through more difficult times. In the YAWP chapter, one of the primary sources is "Duck and Cover," which was quite literally a civil defense film shown to school children living through the Cold War. It was funded by the U.S. Federal Civil Defense Administration and showed "a physical position designed to mitigate the effects of a nuclear blast." (YAWP, 25) Similarly, in Forry's interview, Shaffer recalls doing bomb drills and that the threat of an "atomic attack was always on the back of her mind." (Forry) Moreover, growing up during this time, there was always a sense of unrest, and the YAWP chapter and Forry's interview both show that.

NUCLEAR WEAPONS

STUDENT COMMENT: In "The Hydrogen Bomb: Keeping Us Safe" by Patrick Meier, Meier speaks of his grandfather, Stephen Patrick Meier, in creating the hydrogen bomb. He mentions the raging debate at the time over weapons of mass destruction, as men such as his grandfather felt it was "a necessary evil, one that "kept us safe" despite its danger, while others saw it as a dangerous method of escalation" (Meier). According to Meier himself, he served as a physicist on the Aberdeen Bombing Mission Special Weapons Liaison Group in New Mexico. He served an important role, as "depending on the way the bomb acted when it was released [he] would put numbers into the bombing system to make the sure the bombs went toward the target" (Meier). Disregarding the project's politics, Meier's views on the project were based upon questions of his own morality, as although he does support that its development was right for the time, Meier had his "qualms." Beneath the surface, he felt "it was such a dramatic increase in destructive capability. And you know you had to be thinking long and hard, I don't care what kind of madman you were, to even unleash such a thing. It was terrible" (Meier). Therefore, Meier's own questioning of himself overlaps with the thoughts and hysteria of many Americans on the home front at the time, as many pondered and reacted to the possibility of nuclear annihilation.

STUDENT COMMENT: The Cold War was, for many Americans, more about a fight for emotional stability and less about political control. Lois Shaffer's story is one of strong conviction, emotion, and meaning. Most notably, how she explains how the ongoing fear of

nuclear attacks on home soil was more of a conversation topic and not a life-absorbing concern.... The textbook explores the fear, often referred to as “hysteria,” whereas Shaffer experienced it as more of a conversation. Similarly, the experiences of Stephen Patrick Meir ironically explained how the bombs were created for more so in the line of defense, than in the line of attack, explaining how the hydrogen bomb “kept us safe.” The contrasting ideas between the textbook and these first-hand accounts hold much significance, for it alludes to the way in which the Cold War acted as a fight for emotional stability for many, disregarding the political dominance

HENRY WALLACE, PROGRESSIVES AND THE COLD WAR

STUDENT COMMENT: Someone that really stood out to me was Henry Wallace, due to his progressive speeches and his third-party campaign. During the Cold War and Red Scare era you almost hear about everyone in politics in favor of stopping the spread of communism and the Soviet Union’s power in general. The main opinion in this time was a realist opinion, one that supported isolation from communism and countries in its favor. Although Henry Wallace expressed his liberal opinions loudly, promoting globalization and free trade with every country despite political choices and ideologies. Wallace also stated that the US needed to end US Western imperialism, which puts the question out there that maybe the US was really just concerned about being a world hegemon. The US had already gained regional hegemony through imperialism, and after the World Wars they were on their way to a global one. Once the Soviet Union had tested an atomic bomb successfully, invaded Berlin, and turned China to communism, this really put the US on edge. The creation and use of the atomic bomb changed the world forever, creating a prolonging chance of nuclear war. One of Wallace’s comments that really struck me was “he who trusts in the atom bomb will sooner or later perish by the atom bomb- or something worse.”