

The Cold War as social mechanism



What was the Cold War? The simple definition would likely be a 20th century international confrontation between the Soviet Union and the United States, which involved first Europe, and then Asia, Africa, and Latin America, eventually dividing the world into two camps. The key players of this global conflict are generally noted as a number of high-ranking policymakers, including Harry S. Truman, Winston Churchill, Joseph Stalin, and Mao Zedong. We know this story. However, the full story is not so simple. It is time to change our ways of thinking about the Cold War.

Masuda Hajimu

THE PROBLEM WITH EXISTING LITERATURE is that there is a general tendency toward a particular division of labor among scholars. Diplomatic historians attempting to elucidate the shaping of the Cold War normally focus on policymakers' calculations, while social and cultural historians focus on the effects of the Cold War on society, culture, and the daily lives of ordinary people. Likewise, Asian specialists look for elements of the Cold War in Asia, exploring how the global conflict impacted that continent without contemplating what the Cold War really was. Looking at these trends, therefore, one might end up with the following impressions: policymakers' conduct shaped the Cold War, which, in turn, had enormous aftereffects on ordinary people's daily lives, and Asia was an end recipient of the global confrontation.

Yet, more needs to be examined, because such impressions are largely myths. I would like to discuss why we should think about an analysis of 'Cold War Asia' (Asia during the Cold War), instead of the conventional approach of examining the *Cold War in Asia*. In doing so, I will discuss how such an analysis will be useful for the reexamination and reinterpretation of the global Cold War, itself. This article may also suggest one possible direction for rethinking Asian Studies, as a whole, within a global context.¹ Before discussing the Cold War, however, let us look at what was going on in postwar-Asia.

Reconsidering the Red Purge in Japan

At 3pm on 28 July 1950, thirty-one employees at *Mainichi Shinbun* in Tokyo were called into their bosses' offices, most of them individually, and told that they were fired, on the spot. The only reason provided was that the news media had an important responsibility to drive out communists and communist sympathizers from the company. Similar notifications were conveyed to a total of 704 employees at fifty newspaper companies nationwide, ranging from major newspapers like *Asahi Shinbun* (104 dismissed out of 5,200) and *Yomiuri Shinbun* (34 of 2,200), to small local newspapers such as *Nihonkai Shinbun* (9 of 90) in Tottori, as well as *Shinyo Shinbun* (1 of 50) in Matsumoto. This was the beginning of the waves of mass dismissals, commonly known as the 'Red Purge', in which roughly 13,000 people were fired from various industries, including not only media, but also coal, steel, shipbuilding, chemistry, railways, and mining.²

As the name 'Red Purge' suggests, the mass dismissals have been viewed through a Cold War lens. The traditional understanding is that this was a purge of communists

conducted by the United States, in order to create an anti-communist country in East Asia. However, once we remove the Cold War lens, the mass firings of 1950 appear to be something else. To be sure, the very first wave of mass dismissals in the newspaper industry was initiated through General Douglas MacArthur's directive. Yet, there was no single order issued by the US Occupation General Headquarters (GHQ), let alone from Washington, to conduct further mass firings in other industries, which accounted for the large majority of dismissals that made up the phenomenon we now call the Red Purge.

In most cases, actually, dismissals were planned and conducted by individual companies, and each had its own criteria for who should be fired. The Mitsui Miike Coal Mine, the largest mining company in Japan, for instance, compiled a long list of criteria composed of twenty-two itemized categories, targeting communists – including not only current communist party members but also those who had left or been removed from the party – as well as various 'sympathizers' who had tried to help those who were fired. The list targeted even those who *might* have behaved like sympathizers or who *might* have hindered the company's operations.³ With criteria so broad and vague, how exactly was the Red Purge being executed? When we look more closely at who was fired and why, we can see that communists and communist sympathizers were not the only targets, and that the GHQ was not necessarily controlling the development of the Red Purge.

Local dynamics under the Cold War narrative

Take one case as an example: that of *Nippon Kokan* (Nippon Steel Tube Company), which fired 190 workers in the fall of 1950. The dispute began with an announcement on 23 October by the company president, Kawata Shige, that he was compelled to discharge workers "who hindered the smooth operation of the company's business or refused to cooperate with the company."⁴ Even GHQ officials, often considered operators of the Red Purge, were alarmed by this announcement; one staff member, for example, described it as an "abuse of the Red Purge." Robert Amis, a chief of the Labor Division, warned the *Nippon Kokan* management accordingly: "What I have said before is not being followed by the management. It seems to me that the management is taking advantage. Concrete reasons for dismissal should be given. If reasons for dismissal cannot be cited correctly, defer the discharge."⁵

Fig. 1 (Above left): The fear of World War III that spread particularly during the Korean War consolidated the belief in the imagined reality of the Cold War, and created a wartime atmosphere, which, in turn, made it easy to silence a multitude of social and cultural disagreements in the name of national security. "Hiroshima U.S.A." (Illustration by Chesley Bonestell. Reprinted with permission. New-York Historical Society. No. 1956.7).

Fig. 2 (Above right): The sudden revival and development of labor activism was one of the representative issues that shook social order in many parts of the world, not just in Japan and the United States but also in other European and Asian countries. "May Day Demonstration in Tokyo, May 1952." (Reprinted with permission. MacArthur Memorial Archives, Photographic Collection of Georges Dimitria Boria, No. PHB0167).

The company simply ignored this warning. Meanwhile, a 27-year-old worker, Ishijima Seiichi, wrote a lengthy petition to Amis to ask for help, explaining that, although he was an active union member, he had never been a communist nor communist sympathizer. The letter, which included a detailed counterargument against the company's charges, was translated and taken seriously. Amis examined the genuineness of Ishijima's letter with the help of Japan's Labor Ministry, which had one of its officials interview Ishijima. The official concluded that he was not a communist. Based on this information, Amis met with company officers and urged them to re-employ Ishijima. The company reacted by inviting Ishijima to a dinner and admitting that he was not a communist. Yet it still refused to re-employ him, instead offering him a deal, involving a sum of 250,000 yen – more than the average yearly income at that time – on the condition that he not challenge the management again before the GHQ or the public. Ishijima was in a tough spot. Having a wife and children, and no possibility of returning to the company, he apparently accepted this offer. We do not have any further records involving him. GHQ officials were confused and disturbed by the company's refusal to rehire Ishijima, in spite of their repeated warnings. One Japanese official at the Labor Ministry explained that, even though Ishijima was not a communist, he might be considered a 'troublemaker' because, as one of the founding organizers of a union at his factory in Tsurumi in the postwar years, he had actively criticized the management.⁶

Silencing troublemakers and creating domestic tranquility

Such cases, in which companies took advantage of this vague definition of 'troublemakers', are numerous. One is that of *Niigata Tekkoshu*, a small ironworks in Niigata Prefecture, where three dozen workers, mostly active union members, were fired for being "uncooperative, disturbing, and undesirable" elements at the company. One worker noticed that dismissals of workers were especially numerous where labor-management negotiations had been contentious.⁷ Another case was that of *Nittsu*, a major transport company, where 800 'reds' were fired. Many, actually, were guilty only of participating in wildcat strikes earlier in the summer of 1950. In the case of *Dai Nippon Boseki* [Dai Nippon Spinning Company], their actions were so conspicuous that a GHQ official described the company as "one of the worst offenders in the field of textiles in taking advantage of [the] 'red purge' to dismiss anti-communists who were, in fact, aggressive union officers."⁸

Toward an analysis of Cold War Asia, not of the Cold War in Asia

As this comment shows, the implementation of the Red Purge went far beyond the control of the GHQ and, in practice, covered up what were, in reality, labor and social disputes. Moreover, in most cases the mass firings actually involved a filtering out of troublemakers, nonconformists, dissenters, and malcontents. It is reasonable to suggest that the Red Purge developed less through the conduct of the GHQ and Washington than through local dynamics on the ground.

This re-examination of agency in the Red Purge leads us to reconsider the nature of events. That is to say, was it really a 'red' purge at all? In some cases, events fit well with the conventional Red Purge model, but a large majority of other cases are better conceived broadly as social repression conducted by nameless and numberless local people in attempts to restrain social disagreements. Viewed in this way, the Red Purge no longer appears to be a mere result of the Cold War; rather it can be seen as part of a conservative backlash that silenced disagreements and created domestic tranquility, for which the 'reality' of the Cold War was necessitated.

Here we can develop our thinking by asking whether this situation was unique to postwar Japan or not. The answer is, of course, not. Similar suppressions and purges, indeed, simultaneously swept over many parts of the world: the suppression of counterrevolutionaries in China, the White Terror in Taiwan, the crackdown on 'un-Filipino' activities in the Philippines, and anti-communist campaigns in Western societies, such as McCarthyism in the United States. Conventionally, these events have been viewed through a Cold War lens, and thus treated as end results of the global Cold War confrontation on the ground. Yet, removing the lens allows us to identify a different pattern of commonalities: a global phenomenon of purification and ordering in a chaotic postwar world.

Reconsidering the White Terror in Taiwan

While we cannot examine all of these cases here, let us briefly look at some examples that we usually think of as typical cases of Cold War suppression. Taiwan, for example, similarly underwent waves of 'anti-communist' suppression in the early 1950s, commonly known as the White Terror; an estimated 3,000 to 5,000 people were executed, and 8,000 were imprisoned for decades. Studies of the White Terror have increased in Taiwan since the 1990s, but it has received relatively little attention compared to the large volume of research on the "2.28 Incident", a series of mass uprisings against the Nationalist Party (GMD) government and subsequent repression in the weeks following 28 February 1947. Furthermore, as the name suggests, the White Terror has been commonly considered a case of state violence, the GMD government's political campaign to eliminate communists and communist sympathizers in Taiwan. Ordinary people have been described merely as victims under the storm of political repression.

Yet, the White Terror deserves more attention and fundamental reconsideration. To begin with, a large proportion of those repressed were neither communists nor communist sympathizers, but diverse groups of people, including members of local social elites, such as intellectuals, doctors, lawyers, journalists, teachers, college students, and the literati. What these groups represented was not simply a particular ideology, but a desire to make social and political changes in postwar Taiwan following the end of Japanese colonialism. The crux of the matter, in short, was not so much a Cold War struggle, as it was a struggle concerning the kind of society Taiwan would have.

As a matter of fact, even the Nationalist Party's own actions showed that this series of violent suppressions was not merely a part of an anti-communist movement, but rather a campaign to create a new social and political order, with the purpose of building a nation-state in Taiwan. For instance, commonplace GMD slogans, "Counterattack the Mainland" and "Eliminate Communists", appeared frequently, but were usually accompanied by others such as "Build Taiwan", "Stop Luxury and Extravagance", "Be Punctual", "Keep Order", and so on. Similar examples are numerous in the GMD's mass campaigns during this period, including the Wartime Life Movement, the Opposing Communists and Resisting Russians Movement, and the Campaign to Promote Public Order.⁹ This tendency implies that the real issues of contention had less to do with global and ideological conflicts, than with the process of silencing disagreements and creating tranquility at home. In such processes, ordinary people were not merely victims, but they in fact participated in various ways.

Reconsidering the suppression of counterrevolutionaries in China

In the People's Republic of China, we see a similar pattern of domestic purges, commonly known as the Campaign to Suppress Counterrevolutionaries, in which more than 700,000 people were executed and more than 1 million imprisoned. Conventionally, the movement has been

described as the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) top-down, coercive, political-cleansing campaign, aimed at eliminating former Nationalist Party members and sympathizers. Yet, this needs to be further examined, as the CCP was not always the only actor, and the nature of the phenomenon was not necessarily a mere political cleansing campaign. After all, if it had been purely a matter of political repression carried out by the CCP and aimed at the elimination of adversaries, those who were suppressed should have been mostly *political* and *ideological* 'enemies', such as landlords and businessmen, as well as former Nationalist Party members and sympathizers. Yet, a large number of people in those categories, particularly those who had worked under the GMD government, including bureaucrats, policemen, teachers, and lower-ranking officials, were in fact allowed to retain their positions, and continued to work. Actually, those suppressed and eliminated included much broader and more diverse groups of people, which better fit the category of 'social' enemies than that of 'political' enemies: local gang members and bandits, brothel keepers, and common criminals, such as persons convicted of murder, rape, robbery, as well as wartime collaborators and members of religious cults and secret societies. These people did not, apparently, share a single ideology. To the contrary, their heterogeneity suggests that we reconsider the nature of this entire phenomenon.

Let us look at how the Campaign to Suppress Counterrevolutionaries functioned in a local context. The Association of Street Vendors in Beijing, for example, implemented the campaign in its markets in the spring of 1951. In doing so, however, they used it to their own purposes of enforcing morality and creating order among their members. The slogans for their version of the Suppression of Counterrevolutionaries included: "No delay of tax payments", "Do not cheat customers", "Always issue a receipt", "Use standardized measuring instruments", "Do not set artificially raised prices", and "Keep street stalls clean". Another slogan adopted in this counterrevolutionary campaign was: "No pee and no shit on roadside and inside stalls". Clearly, these issues had nothing to do with the CCP's struggles against counterrevolutionaries, and yet, interestingly and importantly, these street vendors' campaigns were framed, conducted, and carried out as if they were. It was claimed that street vendors were fighting a different kind of war on the home front, that cooperation among vendors could stabilize the Chinese economy and maintain public order, and that their tax payments would support the fight against *Meidi* [American Imperialism] on the frontlines in Korea. This example shows how local people adapted and developed the CCP's campaign to meet their own needs: as a mechanism of 'social cleansing', to restore and maintain order in their communities.

Reconsidering McCarthyism in the United States

How can we understand the similarities and simultaneity of these suppressions in postwar Asia? In order to further consider this point, let us briefly look at one more case, the phenomenon commonly known as McCarthyism in the United States. McCarthyism has generally been considered as an anti-communist movement, an example of the 'Cold War at Home'. By calling this phenomenon McCarthyism, however, our attentions are focused on Senator Joseph McCarthy and congressional hearings, such as the HUAC hearings. By labeling and perceiving the phenomenon as such we miss other diverse social suppressions that silenced various local struggles, involving, for instance, racial, labor, and gender tensions.

As a matter of fact, victims during this so-called McCarthy period included not only communists and communist sympathizers, but African Americans, civil rights activists, labor movement activists, feminist activists, gays and lesbians, as well as advocates of various New Deal programs, such as public housing and universal health care. What these groups represented was not communist ideology, but elements of social change, which emerged from the experiences of the Great Depression and World War II. The rhetoric of anti-communism functioned very well in containing these elements of postwar change, and the 'reality' of the Cold War

Fig. 3 (Below left): Anti-Red Purge agitation spread among high school and college students in the fall of 1950. "Students' Demonstration Opposing the Red Purge at the University of Tokyo." *Mainichi Shinbun*, 5 October 1950. (Reprinted with permission, *Mainichi Shinbun*).

Fig. 4 (Below right): The general reaction toward anti-Red Purge movements was one of disinterest and disdain. The *Mainichi Shinbun* reported the news of anti-Red Purge demonstration at Waseda University on 17 October 1950 as an "unprecedented scandal." (Author's photograph. *Mainichi Shinbun*, 18 October 1950).

was not just useful but necessary to continue silencing such disagreements at home. Many suppressions were in fact carried out not by official committees, but by ordinary people on local and community levels.¹⁰

Ordinary people's wars at home

These examples reveal certain commonalities. First, all of these suppressions escalated simultaneously against the background of the Korean War that sparked a fear of a World War III. Second, the Cold War narrative was efficiently utilized in each case to suppress what were actually social and cultural disagreements, under the banner of national security. Third, the crux of the matter in each case was how to deal with social and cultural changes that had emerged from the chaotic experiences of World War II. Fourth, in these suppressions, the participants were not only powerful policymakers, but also ordinary people who engaged in the creation and maintenance of social order. Taken together, the wave of domestic purges in many parts of the world can be seen as a global phenomenon of nativist backlashes – a sort of social conservatism – that operated to contain and silence disagreements in a chaotic post-WWII world.

What becomes clear is the actuality of local conflicts, and the constructed nature of the global Cold War, as well as the social needs of such a reality to overcome 'war' at home. In this sense, the Cold War divide that emerged during the Korean War existed less between East and West than it did within each society; and each society required the continuation of the Cold War to maintain 'harmonious' order at home. So perhaps the Cold War was more than rivalry among superpowers at the international level. Conceivably, it could be better understood as an imagined reality that took on a role of social tranquilizer, pacifying various disagreements in the aftermath of World War II. And with ordinary people participating in the maintenance of social order, justified by this imagined reality, the Cold War was perhaps not only about East-West confrontations or a balance of global power, but also about local struggles in many parts of the world. It was, in essence, ordinary people's wars at home.

Conclusion

What I have tried to do here is to relativize the importance of the Cold War and reinterpret its meanings through an analysis of what we usually think of as the Cold War in Asia. Our analysis of various 'Cold War' suppressions shows that the issues that mattered most had less to do with the global struggle than with local and social conflicts at home. In other words, this analysis of Cold War Asia (Asia during the Cold War) gives us a chance to reconsider its very adjective, providing an opportunity to raise questions about the Cold War lens, and, thus, forcing us to see much more locally the specific realities in respective regions in the chaotic postwar period.

In presenting this analysis, I have also suggested a possible direction for thinking about the meanings of Asian Studies as a whole in global and comparative contexts. While only a few cases can be discussed in this article, a similar pattern might be observable in other places, particularly in the regions and countries that have often been viewed through the Cold War lens, including, for instance, France and Italy, Greece and Iran, Kenya and South Africa, Thailand and Vietnam, and Guatemala and Mexico, as well as the Soviet Union. An examination of Cold War Asia, in short, might be able to shed new light on the post-1945 histories of many parts of the world. While we have seen quite a few new approaches and findings in studies of the Cold War in the past two decades, more is yet to come. Thus, let us continue to ask these questions: What was the essence of Cold War Asia? And what, really, was the Cold War?

Masuda Hajimu is Assistant Professor of History at the National University of Singapore (hishm@nus.edu.sg).

References

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