



2

Winston Churchill Describes the “Iron Curtain”

When former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill visited the United States in 1946, World War II had been over for less than a year. Much of Europe still lay in ruins. The people of Britain and of many other European countries were struggling to rebuild shattered homes and industries. Hunger and want were widespread. Most people were tired of war and ready to forget about international problems—but not Churchill.

In a speech at Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri, in March 1946, Churchill warned Western democracies to remain on guard. He accused leaders of the Soviet Union of seeking “indefinite expansion of their power and doctrines.” And he introduced the term “iron curtain” to describe the boundary between zones of Western influence and Soviet influence in Europe. Churchill’s “iron curtain” speech was an early warning about what soon became known as the cold war.

. . . A shadow has fallen upon the scenes so lately lighted by the Allied victory. Nobody knows what Soviet Russia and its Communist international organization intend to do in the immediate future, or what are the limits, if any, to their expansive . . . tendencies. . . .

From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the continent. Behind that line lie all the capitals of the ancient states of Central and Eastern Europe. . . . [A]ll these famous cities and the populations around them lie in what I must call the Soviet sphere, and all are subject in one form or another, not only to Soviet influence but to a very high . . . measure of control from Moscow. . . . The Communist parties, which were very small in all these Eastern states [countries] of Europe, have been raised to . . . power far beyond their numbers and are seeking everywhere to obtain totalitarian control. Police governments are prevailing in nearly every case, and so far, except in Czechoslovakia, there is no true democracy.

An attempt is being made by the Russians in Berlin to build up a quasi-Communist party in their zone of occupied Germany by showing special favors to groups of left-wing German leaders. . . .

. . . Whatever conclusions may be drawn from these facts—and facts they are—this is certainly not the liberated Europe we fought to build up. Nor is it one which contains the essentials of permanent peace.

In front of the iron curtain which lies across Europe are other causes for anxiety. . . . [I]n a great number of countries, far from the Russian frontiers and throughout the world, Communist fifth columns¹ are established and work in complete unity and absolute obedience to the directions they receive from the Communist center. Except in the British Commonwealth and in the United States where communism is in its infancy, the Communist parties or fifth columns constitute a growing challenge and peril to . . . civilization. . . .

I do not believe that Soviet [leaders] desire war. What they desire is . . . the indefinite expansion of their power and doctrines. But what we have to consider here today while time remains, is the permanent prevention of war and the establishment of conditions of freedom and democracy as rapidly as possible in all countries. Our difficulties and dangers will not be removed . . . by mere waiting to see what happens; nor will they be removed by a policy of appeasement. . . .

From what I have seen of our Russian friends and Allies during the war, I am convinced that there is nothing . . . for which they have less respect than for weakness, especially military weakness. For that reason the old doctrine of a balance of power is unsound. We cannot afford, if we can help it, to work on narrow margins, offering temptations to a trial of strength. If the Western democracies stand together in strict adherence to the principles of the United Nations charter, their influence for furthering those principles will be immense and no one is likely to molest them. If, however, they become divided or falter in their duty, and if these all-important years are allowed to slip away, then indeed catastrophe may overwhelm us all. . . .

¹**fifth column**—a group within a country that works secretly on behalf of another country or cause

Review Questions

1. What did Winston Churchill mean when he stated “a shadow has fallen upon the scenes so lately lighted by the Allied victory”?
2. Why did Churchill declare that much of Eastern Europe was behind an “iron curtain”?
3. a. What did Churchill mean by “appeasement”?
b. Why was Churchill against appeasing the Soviet Union?
4. How did Churchill feel that Western democracies should behave toward the Soviet Union?