The Widening of the Cold War (1949-1955)

US Containment in action in Asia

The reconstruction of Japan and US-Japanese relations

Japan had been a poor nation for hundreds of years and seen as a secondary nation to that of China. China, with a huge territory, trade and tributary states was where European nations had decided to build colonies to exploit. Japan was forgotten. In 1868, the Meiji Restoration in Japan had seen the country adopt Parliamentary Government, proper intuitions and Western style industrialisation. In 1905, it beat Russia (at the time, the world’s most feared military nation) decisively in the Russo-Japanese War. It began to build an empire, which included Korea, Malaysia, Taiwan and Burma, amongst others. In 1937, Japan had invaded China in hope to conquer the territory the European’s coveted and were only stopped in 1945 by two nuclear weapons falling in Nagasaki and Hiroshima. Japan brought the US into the war by launching an attack on Pearl Harbour in 1941. Japan was a nation that had begun poor and quickly affirmed itself as one of the most powerful nations in the world.

After 1945, the US, the led by General MacArthur, took a different approach to Japan as it did to Germany. The US took away Japan’s military and began holding War Crime Trials over the next two years, to which the Japanese cooperated if they exempted Emperor Hirohito from trial. The trials were not as thorough as the Nuremberg Trials in Germany.

The Japanese began to hold suspicions of the USSR when their 400,000 prisoners of war were not sent back to Japan. By 1949, only 94,000 had been returned. In 1989 the USSR published a list of 46,000 prisoners who were buried in Siberia.

In 1946, MacArthur’s officials drafted a new constitution for the Japanese and promised to protect the Japanese from nuclear war. They pledged that all political prisoners were to be released, all political parties could exist (including Communists), women could have equal rights, religious freedom, and the Emperor was no longer a political figure but a symbolic figure.

After this, the US aimed to consolidate South-East Asia and Japan into a ring of ‘anti-communist’ states to help with the US’ foreign policy of Containment. America became concerned that as defeated peoples, the Japanese would become desperate and succumb to Communism. By 1947, Japan was suffering little trade with the rest of the world and low industrial production with food costs soaring.

In 1947, the Chairman of Chrysler and some US businessmen helped set up a Japanese car industry. In 1949, US Congress authorised $500m per year in aid do Japan to allow Japan to buy essential materials and food. Japan bought 5.8m acres (38% Japanese cultivated land) and sold it to farmers cheaply so they could make food. By 1950, three million peasants had their own land, breaking landlord domination that had presided over centuries.