How did the Australian government respond to the threat of communism after WW2?

Year 10 History

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The end of World War 2 saw the advances of Communism. Could Australia have been under imminent risk or was communism used as a political device? With the end of the Second World War, Australia and many emerging nations were tied or bound to either capitalism of the West or the ideologies of communism in the East. Wanting to draw the line (Appendix, Picture 1) against so called communist aggression, the Australian government made the containment of communism a key foreign policy.(Online, John Wiley & Sons, 2010)

As soon as the Cold War began in 1945, it was apparent that Australia would not be immune from the supposed fears of communism (Appendix, Picture 2). Every Australian at the time was affected by this new style of society, resulting in confusion and misunderstandings. During the course of the Cold War, over 5,000 military personnel were involved in defending our shorelines from the grasp of the communist web (Appendix, Picture 3).

As an overreaction to the paranoia caused by the Soviet Union in the late 1940s, many media newsreels frequently demonised communism. Public opinion at the time showed that although it was rumoured that communist activists and the Communist Party of Australia had taken a firm hold of trade union positions, the general public did not find the outlawing of the Communist party necessary. Prime Minister Robert Menzies’ calls for an uplifting response fell on deaf ears and the referendum to ban the Communist party in 1951 was voted down mainly in the Eastern States (Appendix, Picture 4). The ‘no’ vote totalled 2,370,009 whilst those supportive of the Communist Party Dissolution Bill numbered 2,317,927. (Anderson, RetroActive2, P. 163) Many trade unions and the Labor Party campaigned against the referendum as they believed that by removing certain political parties, it would be no different than the attitudes of Soviet communism.

Even though some had personal reasons of whether communism was really an imminent threat to Australian freedoms, society’s newly formed opinions were imposed on them. Newsreels were frequently churning anti-communist propaganda and with the Menzies government standing for re-election in 1954, the prime minister needed any excuse to recover the deficits in the opinion polls. With federal parliament drawing to a close, the prime minister stunned the nation by declaring that the third secretary from the Soviet embassy, Vladimir Petrov’s application for political asylum had been approved. (Anderson, p. 164).

Australia was now in the hands of an espionage epic, with the Menzies government ordering a royal commission to investigate Soviet spy activity within Australia stemming from trade unions and communist sympathisers within the opposition Labor party. This move proved highly effective not against communism in Australia but rather against the Labor party under the leadership of Dr Herbert Evatt. The findings of the royal commission reported that the Soviet spying had occurred from its embassy without Labor involvement. In the process of such politics, Mrs Petrov was abducted and forcibly escorted onto an aeroplane by two Soviet officials in the midst of 3000 bystanders at Sydney airport. A distressed Mrs Petrov managed to inform a stewardess which alerted Australian police whom secured the release of Mrs Petrov from the gun yielding Soviet guards.

The Petrovs were seen as Cold War allies and provided strong propaganda against communism. Since the Petrov affair did not quell the fears of communism and prolonged its hallmark on Australian politics, the Australian government continued to see communism as a major and formed
the ANZUS agreement with the United States and New Zealand in order to protect each other in the event of communist attack. (Anderson, RetroActive2, P. 166)

The SEATO Treaty of 1954 was also drawn up as a measure to contain communism in the Asia-Pacific region. The nations of Britain, France, Thailand, South Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Australia, New Zealand and the United States were involved in the bipartisan security arrangements to support the battle against communism. Conscription was re-introduced as shortly before the United Nations force lead by the United States, involving Australia demonstrated our relationship with the Americans sent troops to Korea. Mothers did not want to send their sons to die and formed the Save Our Sons organisation (Appendix, Picture 5), but the families of the servicemen already at war wanted to introduce conscription to support their loved ones already serving overseas. Over 300 Australian soldiers sacrificed their lives to halt the communist advancement on the Korean peninsular. (Korean War, AWM, 2010) The Korean War of 1950 saw Australia’s involvement in the struggle to confront communism take a decisive turn.

The Australian government was heavily criticised for its role in the politics behind the Vietnam War, with no official invitation or request for assistance from the South Vietnamese, the Menzies government took it upon themselves and the United States to invade Vietnam in order to protect it from the northern communists. Australia as part of SEATO first sent 30 military advisers to South Vietnam followed by thousands of troops.

The Australian government like many other western nations saw the split of Vietnam as a threat to global stability. There was a large western military presence in the former Indochina. However, Saigon and the South Vietnam were succumbing to the determined North Vietnamese communists led by Ho Chin Minh. According to Anderson (2005, p.173), in 1975, the South Vietnamese government surrendered and the longest war of the twentieth century ended. (Anderson, RetroActive2, P.173) The protesters wanted an immediate, total and unconditional withdraw from Indochina and the abolishing of conscription. (Anderson, RetroActive2, P.172) Deep resentment within the Australian population saw massive demonstrations against conscription and the war.

Australian politics within the Vietnam War era was long, fraudulent and lively as both ideologies fought for the hearts and minds of the people of which they claimed would benefit most. Debates are often heated encounters with only one victor. The Soviet Union and the United States, two of the world’s most powerful powers representing two powerful ideologies came head to head in the Cold War. Even though hostilities were at boiling point, neither side was involved in direct confrontation. The threats of one being dominant over the other caused much debate which lead to two Asian ground wars, the space race and the near destruction of a superpower. Today many people are uneasy about this delicate subject of whether attitudes from the east of the Iron curtain or western style freedoms should control the world.

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APPENDIX

- Pictures
  1. Source 6.1.2, RetroActive2, P. 160
  2. Source 6.1.3, RetroActive2, P. 161
  3. Source 6.1.1, RetroActive2, P. 160
  4. Source 6.2.2, RetroActive2, P. 162
  5. Source 6.6.2, RetroActive2, P. 171
  6. Source 6.3.2, RetroActive2, P. 165
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