



Patrick Wright. *Iron Curtain: From Stage to Cold War.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. xvii + 468 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-923150-8.



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Lifting the Iron Curtain

On March 5, 1946, Winston Churchill visited Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri and delivered the “Iron Curtain” speech. Actually titled “Sinews of Peace,” Churchill’s speech provided strong support for the newly created United Nations and the “joint inheritance of the English-speaking peoples.” The line that stole the show, however, was apparently added at the last minute. “From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the continent,” Churchill declared.[1] Ever since, the phrase “iron curtain” has been the durable and predictive metaphor for the Cold War.

Churchill may have provided the roar in his inimitable way, but it turns out that the phrase “iron curtain” has an extensive history dating back to the end of the eighteenth century. As Patrick Wright ably demonstrates, Churchill did not create it out of whole cloth. Originally, the term referred to a stage device designed to prevent fire on a stage from spreading to the audience. At the first sign of fire, commonly caused by lighting in pre-electrified theaters, an iron curtain would descend, ostensibly ensuring that the theater patrons could evacuate with relative equanimity. Perhaps the early failures

of the theatrical iron curtains foreshadowed the uneven consequences of Churchill’s iron curtain.

The phrase came from the stage, but the term developed a life of its own, especially during the twentieth century. Beginning in World War I, writers recognized that the metaphor of an impenetrable safety wall separating actors and audience was a powerful rhetorical device. The pivotal figure for Wright was a female writer and pacifist named Vernon Lee, who in 1915 bitterly lamented “[w]ar’s monstrous iron curtain, [which] cut us off so utterly from one another” (p. 80). Pacifists such as Lee used the term to condemn the various governments’ unwillingness to acknowledge the humanity of their opponents. The trenches in World War I did indeed become like an iron curtain, sealing off any contact between the Allies and the Axis powers, the famous Christmas truce of 1914 between British and German soldiers notwithstanding. The Germans actually built a wall in Belgium to try to separate the Belgians from the Dutch. Although not built of iron, it was electrified with guardhouses placed at intervals.

The emergence of communism because of the Russian

Revolution, however, accelerated the use of the term and it began to take on a new and more consistent meaning that reached full fruition in Churchill's speech in 1946. The stage term was meant to be somewhat reassuring, symbolizing not separation but safety. Increasingly, the phrase as applied to international politics came to be negative, implying an intentionally harmful division inflicted by the other side. The curtain always sealed us off from them, and its creation was attributed to them. The irony, of course, is that such usage virtually guaranteed separation, and, as in 1946, intensified the division.

Wright's history of the term follows a winding, oddly riveting path through the century. At first, the term applied to a cultural frustration at the impenetrability of the Russian propaganda machine and to Allied self-criticism of the economic iron curtain imposed on post-1918 Germany. Sympathetic early visitors to the Soviet Union sought to penetrate the propaganda iron curtain, and the western world attempted to freeze out the Soviet Union. British observers conceived of the iron curtain in the Soviet Union primarily as a Potemkin obstacle thrown up by the Soviets to prevent them from seeing the real conditions for Russians. Repeatedly, British and western observers characterized life, culture, and ideology in the Soviet Union as deceptive, divided, and alienated. By the time Churchill made the phrase famous, it had long been

levied against the Soviets. Even Joseph Goebbels used it, arguing on March 15, 1945, that "as soon as the Soviets have occupied a country, they let fall an iron curtain so that they can carry on their fearful bloody work behind it" (p. 351).

The cumulative effect of the examples in the book drives home the persistence and pervasiveness of the cultural divide between communism and capitalism. The book is a testament to the power of political language and its ability to shape not only popular opinion, but also the views of decision-makers. Once transformed from a technical term to a political metaphor, the notion of an iron curtain sustained the West's imaginative enmity towards the Soviet Union. Perhaps Churchill's speech in 1946 was too effective, and the notoriety of the "iron curtain" as the defining term of the post-war era will limit its future use in the end. The idea of a linguistic and cultural metaphor splitting the international world into opposing camps, however, is far from dead.

Note

[1]. Winston Churchill, *Sinews of Peace (Iron Curtain)* [speech online]; available from <http://www.winstonchurchill.org/i4a/pages/index.cfm?pageid=429> (Accessed November 23, 2007).

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