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The Cuban Missile Crisis

Learn more about this topic! Each section gives more detail on one of the lyrics from the song. Read each section, and then respond by answering the question or taking notes on key ideas.

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Throughout the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union were enemies. Prior to that, however, the two countries had actually been collaborators. Both were part of the Allied powers during the first and second world wars, though their leaders frequently frequent disagreements led to hostilities on either side. Still, the breaking point did not come until after the Axis had been defeated.

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The Soviet Union first emerged in 1917 after the communist Bolsheviks overthrew the tsarist Russian Empire. The Bolshevik government redistributed land and property, seized control of industry, and persecuted its political opponents. Meanwhile, the capitalist United States fostered anti-Soviet sentiment by cracking down on suspected communists during what is now known as the first Red Scare. Despite this, both countries recognized the threat posed by the Axis powers and teamed up to defeat them. But in 1945, following the surrender of Nazi Germany, their uneasy alliance began to disintegrate. Each had their own vision for postwar Europe: While the United States wanted the continent to be democratic and capitalist, the Soviets sought to spread communism, starting with the installation of left-wing governments in eastern Europe. Fearful of this trend, the United States worked to bring western Europe under its control by providing economic aid and promoting free markets. By 1947, tensions between the two nations had reached a historic high, and the Cold War was officially underway.

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Notes

In the late 1950s, discontent was brewing in Cuba. For years, the island nation had been ruled by Fulgencio Batista, a US-backed military dictator. Though first elected by popular vote in 1940, Batista soon became a tyrant. He canceled elections, suspended the constitution, revoked civil liberties, and aligned his administration with the powerful sugar industry, which was controlled by a handful of wealthy landowners. The Cuban economy crumbled under Batista's rule, and tens of thousands were tortured and killed by his secret police force.

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Cubans responded to the cruelty of the Batista regime with frequent riots and demonstrations. At the forefront of the opposition was Fidel Castro, a lawyer and communist. Though his early attempts at organizing were unsuccessful, they brought the young lawyer to prominence within the anti-Batista movement. In 1953, Castro launched a guerilla campaign against the regime. He and his fighters targeted government buildings, military facilities, and sugar plantations in small-scale attacks. In an effort to quell the unrest, Batista escalated his violent crackdown on suspected communists.

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By 1958, support for the Batista regime had declined precipitously. Meanwhile, Castro's revolutionaries had defeated the Cuban army in the countryside. Early the following year, as the rebels were poised to capture the capital city of Havana, Batista fled the island. Castro then appointed himself president for life, kicking off a nearly 50-year reign marked by further political violence and economic strife.

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As the Cold War intensified in the early 1950s, anti-communist sentiment in the United States increased markedly. Many feared the government and other institutions had been infiltrated by Soviet sympathizers. This paranoia culminated in a series of congressional hearings, during which suspected communists were persecuted and blacklisted from their respective industries. Led by Senator Joseph McCarthy, this movement came to be known as McCarthyism, or the second Red Scare.

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McCarthy helmed a series of highly publicized investigations into alleged communist activities in the highest ranks of government. He and his allies also targeted union leaders, academics, and members of the entertainment industry. Those named in McCarthy's probes often lost their jobs, families, and livelihood. Most had at best a tenuous connection to communism and posed no legitimate threat to national security. Moreover, the vast majority had done nothing illegal.

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During the second Red Scare, hundreds were imprisoned and thousands more were fired. McCarthy's power went unchecked until 1954, when he leveled accusations against President Dwight Eisenhower's administration. Without Eisenhower's tacit support, the Senate, as well as the general public, quickly turned on McCarthy. Though his crusade lasted only four years, McCarthy left behind a legacy of political repression that would define the Cold War era.

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