

# McCarthyism: Why was there an anti-communist witch hunt?

## Tasks

1. Analyse the different reasons for McCarthyism (the anti-communist hysteria in post-war America). Use the information below and the sources sheet to complete the grid on p.7.
2. In pairs or small groups, rank the different reasons in order of importance for understanding why McCarthyism gripped the USA so strongly.

### Cold War context

The Grand Alliance that existed between the communist USSR and the capitalist democracies of Britain and the USA did not last long past the end of the Second World War. The USA and Soviet Russia had very different political and economic systems, and victory in the war had helped transform the USSR into a superpower. The two countries became bitter rivals and the Cold War began.



Events soon increased Americans' mistrust of the Soviets' intentions. The Soviet Red Army troops who had invaded Eastern Europe to free people from Nazi occupation were slow to leave, and gradually communist, pro-Soviet governments were established in East Germany, Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria and Romania. When Czechoslovakia also became communist in 1948, an 'Iron Curtain' divided Europe between capitalist West and communist East.



China became communist in 1949, so now two of the world's biggest countries were communist.

The Korean War broke out in 1950 when the communist North, supported by China and the USSR, invaded the capitalist South. Communism had already spread in Eastern Europe, now it seemed Asia would also be affected.

### The FBI

The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) is the USA's domestic intelligence and security service. Its director, J. Edgar Hoover, was staunchly anti-communist and had a long history of drumming up fear and suspicion of communist activities in America.

President Truman allowed him to set up the Federal Employee Loyalty Program in 1947, which gave the FBI permission to investigate government employees to find out if they were or had ever been members of the American Communist Party.

Three million employees were investigated in just three years. Although no-one was charged with spying, 212 were declared to be communist sympathisers and therefore a security risk; they were forced from their jobs.



The House of Un-American Activities (HUAC) was set up in the 1930s, mostly to investigate people and behaviour associated with communism. In 1947, the FBI announced it had evidence that a large number of Hollywood directors, writers and producers were Communist Party members. HUAC called them before committee hearings which were open to the press.



HUAC

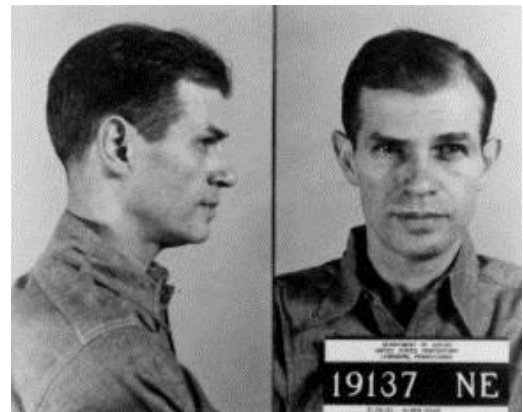
A number of those accused refused to answer the committee's questions, based on the facts that belonging to the Communist Party was not illegal in a democratic country, and that as they weren't employed by the government, they shouldn't be subjects of the FBI's investigations. These people became known as the 'Hollywood Ten'.

Each of the Ten was jailed for a year for contempt of court as they'd refused to answer the committee's questions directly, instead citing the First Amendment which protects the rights of Americans to believe whatever they wanted. Hollywood studios imposed a 'blacklist' on the Ten, many of whom never worked in the American film industry again. The high-profile nature of the case brought HUAC's work huge publicity.

Alger Hiss was an important employee of the US State Department (the branch of government responsible for America's foreign relations). In 1948, a man named Whittaker Chambers accused Hiss of being a communist during his own appearance in front of HUAC. Hiss dismissed Chambers' accusation as a lie and Truman decided not to pursue it.

Alger Hiss

Richard Nixon, then a junior politician, decided however to investigate further, and found strong evidence that Hiss had known Chambers. He also came across rumours that Hiss had even supplied the USSR with intelligence during the Second World War.



Historians still can't be sure whether these rumours were true, but Hiss was convicted of perjury (rather than spying) and was imprisoned for nearly five years.

## Joseph McCarthy

Joseph McCarthy was a junior senator for the state of Wisconsin. In February 1950 he made a speech claiming that the State Department was full of spies. Many people believed him, although his claims were based on out-of-date FBI reports: of the 57 employees he accused of being Communist Party members 35 had already been cleared and the rest were still under investigation.



With popular and government support, McCarthy began a witch-hunt to root out communist spies and sympathisers. He investigated people in public office, including the army, and influential people like university lecturers and Hollywood actors, directors and screenwriters.

McCarthy courted the publicity his work attracted and created a climate of fear; if people attacked his methods he accused them of being unpatriotic with communist sympathies themselves.

McCarthy's popular anti-communist stance was used to the Republican Party's advantage; he ran as a Republican candidate for the Senate in the 1952 elections and won. Many other seats were won by Republicans. The new president, Eisenhower, was so impressed with McCarthy that he appointed him to lead a White House committee investigating communist activity within the government.

Between 1952 and 1954, McCarthy extended his investigations, partly to boost his own power and bully those who disagreed with him. He even accused General Marshall (responsible for the Marshall Plan) of conspiring against the US government. Eisenhower seemed too anxious to stop him.

The public anti-communist hysteria McCarthy helped create also saw the blacklisting of influential people expand to include over 100 university lecturers and over 300 Hollywood workers. However, when he accused military personnel in 1954, McCarthy began to sound ridiculous. He became an alcoholic and was verbally attacked on television. He died in 1957.

## The Rosenberg case

When the USSR successfully tested its own atomic bomb in 1949, far earlier than the USA expected they could, it increased paranoia that there were US agents passing intelligence to the Soviets. Klaus Fuchs, a German-born British physicist, was accused and convicted of providing the USSR with American and British nuclear secrets.



Fuchs' investigation also implicated husband and wife Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, who were both Communist Party members. They both denied the charges of espionage (spying) at their trial, but they were found guilty nonetheless.

The evidence against them at the time didn't appear strong, but further investigations by historians suggest the Rosenbergs were in fact guilty; coded telegrams were passed between them and Soviet agents towards the end of the war. They were executed by electric chair in 1953.

### The McCarran Act

The official name for this act is the 1950 Internal Security Act, but it is more commonly known by the name of the senator who pushed it through, Pat McCarran. Congress voted in favour of the Act despite opposition from President Truman. The McCarran Act stated that:

- Communists could not carry US passports or work in defence industries.
- All communist organisations had to be registered with the government - this included taking fingerprints of their members.
- Detention camps could be set up in 'emergency' situations.



## Sources to match with reasons

### Source A

'The FBI asked me a million questions. They said they had information that I had been a member of the Young Communist League when I was sixteen in New York. They wanted to know about John Garfield and Bromberg. I had two sessions when they asked me about names and I answered quite honestly. Then MGM called me in and said: "We can't protect you any longer and this time you're going to have to testify."'

*Isobel Lennart, an employee of MGM studios in Hollywood*

### Source B

'The trial will be haunted at every turn by the great political issue that bedevils the conscience and well-being of every responsible citizen of a democratic country. Has a democrat the right to be a communist and to keep his job and a good opinion of society? Across the square in which Mr Hiss will be tried, the trial of 11 communist leaders goes on to try to establish for the first time a court test of whether a communist is ipso facto a man dedicated to overthrow by force the government of this country.'

*Alastair Cooke writing in the Manchester Guardian in 1949*

### Source C

'The seeds of totalitarian regimes are nurtured by misery and want. They spread and grow in the evil soil of poverty and strife. They reach their full growth when the hope of a people for a better life has died. We must keep that hope alive. The free peoples of the world look to us for support in maintaining their freedoms. If we falter in our leadership, we may endanger the peace of the world - and we shall surely endanger the welfare of our own nation. Great responsibilities have been placed upon us by the swift movement of events.'

*Extract from a speech made by President Truman in 1947, responding to the danger of Greece and Turkey 'falling' to Communism*

### Source D

'The recent successes of communist methods in other countries, and the nature and control of the world Communist movement itself, present a clear and present danger to the security of the United States and to the existence of free American institutions, and make it necessary that Congress, in order to provide for the common defence, to preserve the sovereignty of the United States as an independent nation, and to guarantee to each State a republican form of government, enact appropriate legislation recognizing the existence of such worldwide conspiracy and designed to prevent it from accomplishing its purpose in the United States.'

*Extract from the McCarran Act passed in 1950*

### Source E

‘Indeed the gravest, the most decisive point was the nature of the sentence itself. Even if the couple actually performed the acts with which they were charged, we were shocked at a death sentence pronounced in time of peace, for actions committed, it is true, in time of war, but a war in which Russia was an ally, not an enemy, of the United States.’

*Jacques Monod, a biochemist writing in 1953*

### Source F

‘I would prefer, if you would allow me, not to mention other people’s names. Don’t present me with the choice of either being in contempt of this Committee and going to jail or forcing me to really crawl through the mud to be an informer. I have two boys, one thirteen months, and one two weeks. Is this the kind of heritage that you would like to hand down to your children?’

*Larry Parks, a Hollywood actor, in 1947*

### Source G

‘The reason why we find ourselves in a position of impotency is not because the enemy has sent men to invade our shores, but rather because of the traitorous actions of those who have had all the benefits that the wealthiest nation on earth has had to offer - the finest homes, the finest college educations, and the finest jobs in Government we can give. While I cannot take the time to name all the men in the State Department who have been named as members of a spy ring, I have here in my hand a list of 205 that were known to the Secretary of State as being members of the Communist Party and who nevertheless are still working and shaping the policy of the State Department.’

*From a famous speech made by McCarthy in 1950*

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## McCarthyism: Why was there an anti-communist witch hunt?

Analysis grid: Why did McCarthyism take hold in the USA?

Reason	Key facts	Why did this make Americans fear communists?	Matching source	Explanation of source
The Cold War context				
The FBI				
HUAC				
Alger Hiss				
Joseph McCarthy				
The Rosenberg case				
The McCarran Act				