

Theatre of war

Winston Churchill took credit for it in 1946, but the phrase 'iron curtain' was first adapted from the stage by a pacifist and feminist in 1914. Patrick Wright traces a divisive and enduring metaphor

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On March 5 1946, Winston Churchill and President Truman drove into the small Missouri town of Fulton. Having enjoyed a lunch of hickory-smoked country ham, they and their grateful hosts proceeded to the college gymnasium, where Churchill delivered a lecture entitled "The Sinews of Peace". Though he used the occasion to advocate a "special relationship" between Britain and America, his widely broadcast Fulton "oration" would be remembered for a different coinage. It was here that Churchill launched one of his century's most powerful political metaphors, declaiming: "From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the continent ..."

It quickly came to suit leaders on both sides of the new division to believe that the Fulton speech marked the beginning of the story of the iron curtain. This conviction enabled Stalin to blame Churchill for the declaration of the cold war, just as it allowed the western powers to attribute the new crisis to Stalin's activities in eastern Europe and elsewhere. As nuclear anxieties gripped the world, those who tried to insist that the "iron curtain" actually had a longer history came to seem like antiquarian pedants. Churchill himself was happy to be known as the originator of the phrase - although in 1951, when asked about earlier usages by the persistent editor of a new American college dictionary, he did concede that "everybody has heard of the iron curtain that descends in the theatre".

Such was the force of its descent in 1946 that the iron curtain's theatrical background would be largely forgotten over the decades to come. The original iron curtains were installed as anti-fire barriers in late-18th-century theatres such as Richard Sheridan's new Theatre Royal in London's Drury Lane. These novel contrivances were proudly displayed to reassure audiences for whom theatre fires were an all-too-common horror. Their prophylactic powers were extolled in inaugural odes recited by popular actresses.

In the event of an actual blaze, however, they appear to have been little more effective than the conspicuously helmeted actor who could sometimes be found standing about in the aisles as a "fire officer". Indeed by 1809, when Sheridan's vast Theatre Royal burned to the ground, its iron curtain had already been removed as practically useless. Nobody died in that particular fire, but it still confirmed the prejudices of Ann Alexander, an evangelical Englishwoman who, in a pamphlet published in 1812, ridiculed the iron curtain as an impious and futile contraption that would never prevent God from incinerating sinners who should be studying the Bible at home.

These unwieldy devices were greatly improved in the Victorian period, when new fire regulations insisted they be fitted into solid proscenium arches and securely framed at the sides rather than just suspended from above. By the late-19th century, the re-engineered iron curtain was considerably more than a theatrical prop designed to calm fearful audiences. Hydraulically powered in many cases and made of asbestos as well as iron, the new versions were so effective that actors and others who worked backstage began to worry that, while the audience might indeed now be saved in the event of a fire, they themselves risked being trapped and burned alive. Like a dissenting East European a century later, one such late Victorian objector wrote anonymously to the Times,

arguing against such one-sided thinking and urging consideration for those on the "other side".

By 1904, when HG Wells, in his novel *The Food of the Gods*, placed an iron curtain between an oblivious scientist and the "outer world", it was an eerily complete barrier through which no communication could pass. By this time, Europe was divided into rivalrous national empires, and the iron curtain was ready to find a new theatre in the world of international relations.

This relocation took place some five months into the first world war. It happened on Christmas Eve 1914, at the Temple Church in London's Inns of Court. The precipitating event was a performance of Bach's Christmas music: itself a somewhat resistant gesture, since the propaganda war was then at sufficient pitch to ensure that German music had, with the approval of the Times as well as the Daily Mail, been excluded from the Promenade Concerts earlier that year.

The congregation that day was joined by a woman writer in her late 50s, Violet Paget, who used the pseudonym Vernon Lee. A friend of Henry James, a proponent of the Aesthetic movement, a suffragist and a cosmopolitan, Lee is known today - if at all - for her ghost stories. She had grown up in continental Europe and normally lived in Florence, but had found herself stranded in England by the sudden outbreak of war in August 1914. Writing about her attendance at the Temple Church in *Jus Suffragii*, the journal of the International Woman Suffrage Alliance, she described the congregation, noting the apprehensive women, young and old, and also the sprinkling of anxiously accompanied "soldier-lads" about to march off to war.

Remembering the German Christmases of her own infancy, she went on to insist that, despite the rising tide of patriotic hatred on both sides, the war actually made the opposed peoples more rather than less alike in their threatened humanity: "Never have we and they been closer together, more alike and akin, than at this moment when war's cruelties and recriminations, war's monstrous iron curtain, cut us off so utterly from one another."

Lee's article "On Bach's Christmas Music in England and in Germany" is one of the more neglected texts of the first world war. And yet her "iron curtain" cannot be dismissed as a mere accident of language, a momentary phrase plucked from the air and just as quickly forgotten. Lee might not use the phrase again, but the division she here named would remain central to her analysis of the war, which would be elaborated over the next five years.

If the war was an "iron curtain" brought down between hostile nations and kept in position by the states on either side, it was also a guillotine falling on the hopes of all who had previously associated the prospect of peace with an increased internationalism. Lee pursued her unpopular analysis as a long-standing member of the anti-war movement. In the years before 1914 she had written articles aimed at reducing Anglo-German tension. She was affiliated with the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom and also the Union of Democratic Control, which quickly emerged as the leading anti-war campaign in Britain under the leadership of ED Morel. Her "iron curtain" was well remembered in these circles, and her article on "Bach's Christmas Music in England and in Germany" was reprinted at least twice by other anti-war campaigners. In 1920, the "iron curtain" that she had seen fall between Britain and Germany was found in a new location by Ethel Snowden and Charles Roden Buxton, who travelled to Red Russia as members of a British Labour Delegation despatched to assess the Bolsheviks and their policies. They used the phrase to condemn the blockade, or cordon sanitaire, with which Winston Churchill and other allied leaders were trying to isolate and extinguish the communist regime. Buxton, who had known Lee as a fellow member of the Union of Democratic Control, would quote her phrase again when relations between Britain and the Soviet Union took another turn for the worse in 1927.

By that time Britain's first ambassador in defeated Berlin, Lord D'Abernon, had also reimagined the "iron curtain" as a mutually agreed demilitarised zone, a calming device which might be placed between Germany and France, or even between Britain and France in the form of the English Channel. It would later be invoked by the Bolshevik leader Bukharin as he pressed home Stalin's 1927 victory over Trotsky and the left

opposition in the Russian Communist Party: by this time it resembled a "dry guillotine" falling on those about to be banished to the outer darkness.

If, as historians now suggest, there was a "first cold war" in those years when the west squared off against Bolshevism after the armistice of November 1918, there was, as these examples suggest, also a "first iron curtain". What did this mean to Winston Churchill, who emerged from the war as a champion of Britain's military intervention against Soviet Russia and a leading purveyor of anti-Bolshevik rhetoric? There can be little doubt that he was aware of this earlier usage, even if he did not consciously raise it from the back of his mind when he stood in that college gymnasium in Fulton in 1946.

This earlier history invites us to reconsider the cold war conviction that the iron curtain was launched into the world in 1946. It might also prompt us to wonder about the equally widespread idea that the barrier has recently vanished from the world, having been overthrown by triumphant displays of "people power" in 1989. If we think of the iron curtain only in terms of its story since 1946, we are likely also to identify it closely with the Berlin Wall and other stretches of the armed frontier that divided the blocs in central Europe. That division is indeed gone, yet to view the iron curtain in its longer history is to recognise that it was never just a frontier, a wall, or an armed line on a map.

This first iron curtain placed around Russia was a blockade and a line of bordering countries organised into a cordon sanitaire. But it also retained its theatrical characteristics. Deprived of information and unhealthily reliant on what they were told by their hosts, the visitors who stepped through the iron curtain found themselves in a confusing "wonderland". They were indulged, exhibited at mass rallies and driven around in limos that once belonged to the tsars. It was said from the beginning that they were deceived by a deliberate "camouflage" of realities and that the "New Russia" they saw actually consisted of "Potemkin villages" specially rigged up to confuse them. Deception of this sort would indeed become central to the Soviet "techniques of hospitality" and helped to make idiots of all too many credulous western visitors from the late 20s onward.

If the early iron curtain signified a pronounced theatricalisation of politics, it also polarised the world into enclosures declared entirely Good (us) or utterly Evil (them). These tendencies did not disappear with the Berlin wall. The point is not just that Vladimir Putin has shown plentiful signs of craving the old paranoia-inducing barrier against the west in order to strengthen his own domestic regime. Nor is it just that various states have been building new walls to separate themselves from others - from Israel's "separation" fence, or the closure proposed for the border between Mexico and Texas.

The iron curtain has also lived on in a state-driven manipulation of public perception. In this respect, its recent incarnation is to be found in such manipulations as Tony Blair's "dodgy dossier" and in the more spectacular rigging of American perceptions epitomised by the notorious Potemkinist manoeuvre carried out off the coast of California on May 1 2003. That was the day on which George W Bush landed a jet (chosen because it made him look altogether more virile than the customary helicopter) on the homecoming aircraft carrier the USS Abraham Lincoln and then stepped out to hail America's returning troops and give a speech announcing "one victory" and an "end to major combat operations". The White House's media rigger had ensured that a banner reading "Mission Accomplished" was displayed behind him, and it is said that the carrier itself had been carefully positioned to ensure that open sea, rather than San Diego, could be seen in the background.

• Patrick Wright's *Iron Curtain: From Stage to Cold War* is published by Oxford University Press (£18.99). To order a copy for £17.99 with free UK p&p call Guardian book service on 0870 836 0875 or go to guardian.co.uk/bookshop