CHILLING TIMES

The Cold War lasted nearly 50 fearful, uncertain years. It changed Canada.

1945

THE GOUZENKO AFFAIR

As soon as the Soviet Union opened an embassy — an office to represent its country — in Ottawa in 1942, it started spying on Canada. Igor Gouzenko (EE-gor goo-ZENK-oe) worked at the embassy coding and decoding secret messages. He and his wife Svetlana found that life here was much nicer than in the U.S.S.R. When he learned he was to be sent back there, he decided to switch sides, known as defecting. On Sept. 5, 1945, Gouzenko left work, taking all the secret papers he'd copied. He tried to give the information to different government offices and even a newspaper before anyone took him seriously. The papers showed the Soviets had been spying on us in all kinds of ways. Gouzenko wore a bag or a mask over his face in public for decades so he couldn't be recognized. He and Svetlana had eight children and eventually became Canadian citizens.

Igor Gouzenko at a television interview, 1966.

1949

NATO

Several free, democratic countries in Europe and North America got together in April 1949 to form the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). If any country was attacked, the others would help protect it. (Countries allied with the Soviet Union formed their own group, the Warsaw Pact, in 1955.) Canadians were — and still are — posted with NATO in different countries.

Canadian soldiers on a NATO posting, Germany, 1958.

Library and Archives Canada

1950

KOREAN WAR

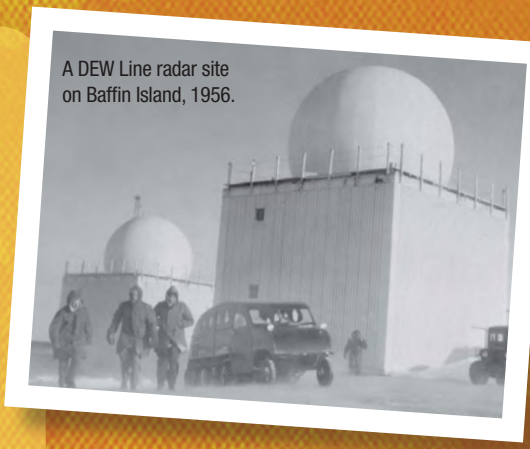
After the Second World War, Korea was split in two. The Soviet Union and China supported communist North Korea, while the West backed South Korea. The United Nations called on its members to help the South when the North invaded in 1950. The first Canadian troops arrived that December. More than 500 Canadians died in the Korean War, which ended in 1953.

The South Korean capital, Seoul, in September 1950.

The Korean War made the Cold War even more real and frightening. It seemed certain that World War III would involve terrible weapons like nuclear bombs that destroyed all life and poisoned the environment.

DISTANT EARLY WARNING (DEW) LINE

If the Soviet Union wanted to attack the U.S., the shortest route for bombers was over the Arctic. The American military planned a line of 63 radar stations across the Far North to watch for enemy planes. The DEW Line roughly followed the northern coast of North America into Greenland and Iceland. Construction started in 1954 and took three years. But within a decade or so, both sides had new missiles the DEW Line couldn't detect. The government of Canada still operates the much smaller North Warning System.



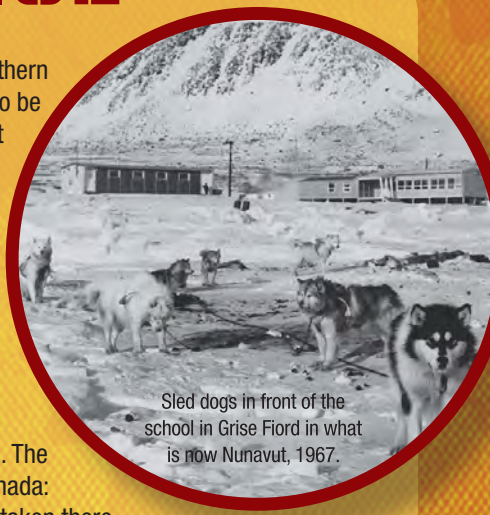
A DEW Line radar site on Baffin Island, 1956.

CP Images

The DEW Line left behind enormous amounts of garbage: metal, equipment, fuel and a lot of harmful chemicals. Cleaning up unused sites took until 2014.

Canada and the U.S. set up two other, less well known chains of radar stations. The 39 Pinetree Line locations were much farther south, not far from places like Sydney, N.S., Montreal, Beausejour, Man. and Kamloops, B.C. They had a lot of technical problems and would only have been able to give last-minute warnings anyway. Finished in 1958, the Mid-Canada Line was also quickly outdated. It had eight stations with staff and 90 others without. It ran from Dawson Creek, B.C., to Hopedale, N.L.

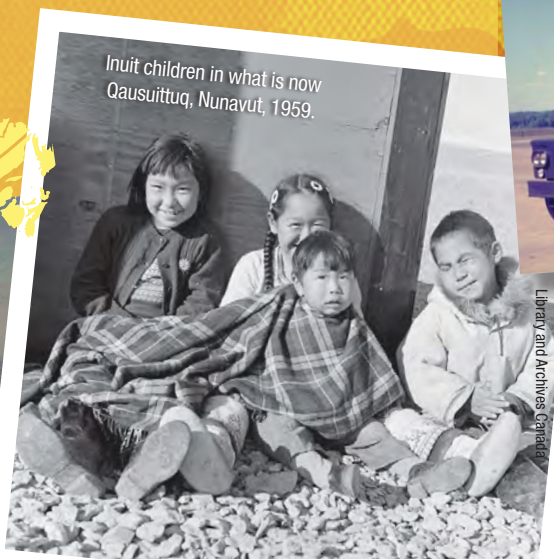
INUIT PAY A HIGH PRICE



Sled dogs in front of the school in Grise Fiord in what is now Nunavut, 1967.

To prove that Canada controlled the Arctic's northern islands, the government decided to move Inuit to be what some have called "human flagpoles." That is, by forcing Inuit much farther north, Canada could prevent other countries from claiming those territories. (Some government officials, church leaders and others also felt Inuit had lost their traditional ways and depended too much on being near villages.) Two of the biggest relocations happened in 1953 and 1956. RCMP officers took about 92 people from Nunavik, Que., to live in new places, in some cases nearly 2,000 kilometres away from home. The new communities were the farthest north in Canada: Qausuittuq (Resolute Bay) and Grise Fiord. Inuit taken there were told others would be joining them and that they could come back after two years if they wanted. In reality, the RCMP separated families, and people were not allowed to return. Hunting and fishing for food was much harder in the new locations and the dark winter months lasted longer. Relocated Inuit were promised places to live but received only tents to sleep in for the first several years. Still, they built new lives. In 1988, the Canadian government offered to pay costs for those who wanted to go back. In 2010, it finally apologized.

Canadian military base in what is now Qausuittuq, Nunavut, 1956.



Inuit children in what is now Qausuittuq, Nunavut, 1959.

Library and Archives Canada

1958

NORAD

Canada and the U.S. are partners in the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD). Since 1958, it has been responsible for keeping an eye on North America's skies and defending against enemy attacks.

American soldiers move a tank in Cuba, 1962.

1962

CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS

By October 1962, it was clear the Soviet Union had put missiles in communist Cuba (an island near Florida). These weapons could destroy cities throughout the U.S. and Canada. The Americans sent ships to block Cuba and demanded the Soviet Union remove the missiles. When the Americans asked Prime Minister John Diefenbaker for support, he was furious Canada hadn't been involved in decisions that could anger the Soviets. After days of debate, he put our military on alert. During the 13 days of the Cuban Missile Crisis, nuclear war seemed possible at any moment until the Soviets eventually backed down.

A Bomarc missile being transported by truck, 1963.

1963

BOMARC MISSILE CRISIS

As part of our responsibilities to NATO and NORAD, Diefenbaker announced in the fall of 1958 that Canada would buy 56 Bomarc missiles. (These weapons could be sent long distances from the ground — they didn't have to be launched by a plane.) When Canadians learned the missiles needed to be armed with nuclear tips, called warheads, some supported them while others were angry. NATO criticized Diefenbaker's decision not to arm the missiles. Our defence minister resigned. The crisis was a big issue in the 1963 election. The Liberals under Lester B. Pearson, who supported using the nuclear warheads, won. The missiles in Ontario and Quebec were armed late that year. They were never used, and our government returned them to the U.S. by 1972.

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WORKING FOR PEACE

A Voice of Women peace protest, 1961.

Anti-cruise missile protesters near Cold Lake, Alta., 1984.

Many Canadians were less worried about political differences between communism and democracy than about the horrors a nuclear war would bring. In 1957, Pugwash, N.S., hosted a conference of scientists to discuss the threat of nuclear weapons. An organization named after the town grew out of that meeting and still brings experts together for the same purpose. The Voice of Women started in 1960 with the goal of promoting peace and encouraging countries to get rid of their nuclear weapons. Many other groups held marches and pushed for international peace. A few of these groups, such as the Canadian Peace Congress, had communist links. But most were made up of ordinary people worried about the possibility of war.

1983

CRUISE MISSILE TESTS

The U.S. wanted to test these missiles over areas that were a lot like the northern Soviet Union. Canada agreed. Although the missiles were unarmed, many Canadians spoke out against the plans. Testing started over northern Alberta in early 1984.

Library and Archives Canada, Edmonton Journal

In July 1983, a Toronto art student poured red paint on one of the original copies of the Canadian constitution. He was protesting the plan to test cruise missiles here.

1989

When the Berlin Wall fell, people could move more freely between East and West after decades of separation.

People from East Berlin flood west through the broken Berlin Wall, 1989.

People in Moscow in what is now Russia celebrate the toppling of a Soviet statue, 1991.

CP Images

1991

The Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact collapsed. The Cold War was over.

Although there were no tanks, bullets or bombs here, the Cold War felt very real to generations of Canadians. Daily life went on pretty much as usual, but the fear of nuclear destruction was always there. Imagine what it would be like living with that constant worry. Better yet, ask older members of your family how they felt during that time.