Origins of The Cold War

How much were Europeans players in The Cold War

Christian Bailey:

I'm here today to learn more from Anne Deighton, Professor of European International Politics at the University of Oxford, about the changing ways that historians have approached the topic of the Cold War.

Q: Prof. Deighton, though the Cold War was played out in Europe, it was not directed by Europeans. Yet your work has drawn attention to the role played by European countries such as Britain. How much were Europeans players, rather than just victims of the Cold War?

Professor Anne Deighton:

That's a really interesting question because we have a view about the Cold War - the traditional view that the Europeans didn't matter. That they were the victims of a great superpower conflict that was going on over their head and there certainly were victims in the Cold War in Europe, but let's remember that those victims tended to be those in the Eastern parts of Europe and the Baltic states within the Soviet Union since the end of the Second World War - but the West position was rather different. So I think you're absolutely right to try and sort out those who found themselves to be victims - victimised even by Soviet policy and those who were under the leverage, the control of the United States of America but felt that they had some capacity to make things different. I think we should say first of all, the major European countries in the Cold War - Britain or the United Kingdom, France and West Germany were all in a sense in competition for the eye, for the ear and certainly for the money of the United States. But they all brought their own history to the emerging Cold War and the developing Cold War over the 60s and 70s in particular, so that we can see individual countries taking a lead, sometimes steering the United States they hoped, towards certain outcomes. Always in competition with each other and particularly the British were in competition with the French over European integration and the British and the Germans were much more closely allied on questions of military security. And the French and the Germans, long-time historic enemies who made this effort to work together within the European community, but there is still a sense of competition between them for the attention of the United States.

Christian Bailey:

Could you give an example of how these Western countries jockeyed for a position with the US?

Professor Anne Deighton:
One thinks of the great changes of the Cold War as coming from the United States of America, but this really wasn't always the case. For example, In 1949 it was really the British and the French who were coaxing the United States into NATO - to create a NATO organisation and then give them money to re-arm themselves so that they could become active members of NATO. The American idea of NATO had been far more to act as a back-stop, a support for Western Europe but from the other side of the Atlantic, that was an early example. But then the following year, the creation of what sounds a very dry organisation but it's a very important one, the European Coal and Steel Community was an idea of the French and the Germans and they sold it to the Americans first. In fact the British were very upset that they tried to sell it to the Americans first and the British refused to join, and that was partly out of bad temper. In the 1954 / 1955 discussions about security, it was again the British and the French who competed with each other to show the Americans that they could set up some quasi-military organisation which was called Western European Union. It was a bit of a dead-letter organisation but there was the competition again. They wanted to show the Americans that they could stand on their own feet but they also wanted American money. But many of them did see themselves also to be victims of superpower conflict and we should remember that countries like Spain were excluded from integration processes, Portugal as well, until they got rid of their own dictatorships.