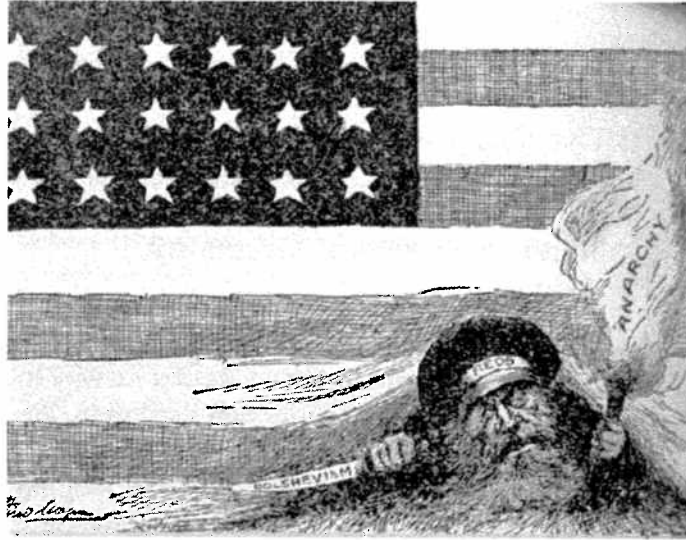


The Palmer Raids



The climate of repression established during World War One continued after the war ended: this time, government interest focused on communists, Bolsheviks and "reds" generally. The climactic phase of this anti communist crusade occurred during the "Palmer Raids" of 1918-1921. A. Mitchell Palmer, Wilson's Attorney General, believed communism was "eating its way into the homes of the American workman." In his essay "The Case Against the Reds," Palmer charged that "tongues of revolutionary heat were licking the alters of the churches, leaping into the belfry of the school bell, crawling into the sacred corners of American homes, seeking to replace marriage vows with libertine laws, burning up the foundations of society." With a broad base of popular support, in 1919 Palmer intensified the attacks on political dissent that had begun during the war.

The year 1919 saw a great deal of social conflict--a wave of strikes, the passage of both Prohibition and Woman Suffrage, and the Chicago race riot. A series of bombings by suspected anarchists began in Summer 1919; on June 2, bombs went off in eight cities, including Washington DC, where Palmer's home was partially destroyed. Just who set the bombs remained unclear. Although there were only about 70, 000 self professed Communists in the United States in 1919, Palmer viewed them as responsible for a wide range of social ills, including the

bombings. Encouraged by Congress, which had refused to seat the duly elected socialist from Wisconsin, Victor Berger, Mitchell began a series of showy and well publicized raids against radicals and leftists. Striking without warning and without warrants, Palmer's men smashed union offices and the headquarters' of Communist and Socialist organizations. They concentrated whenever possible on aliens rather than citizens, because aliens had fewer rights. In December of 1919, in their most famous act, Palmer's agents seized 249 resident aliens. Those seized were placed on board a ship, the *Buford*, bound for the Soviet Union. Deportees included Emma Goldman, the feminist, anarchist and writer who later recalled the deportation in her autobiography, excerpted here: "Russia of the past rose before me and I saw the revolutionary martyrs being driven into exile. But no, it was New York, it was America, the land of liberty!"

The "Red Scare" reflected the same anxiety about free speech and obsession with consensus that had characterized the war years. Two documents included here point to the absurdity of some of these fears. In the case of "The Most Brainiest Man," a Connecticut clothing salesman was sentenced to six months in jail simply for saying Lenin was smart. A story that same year in the *Washington Post* noted with approval how in Chicago, a sailor shot another man merely for failing to rise during the national anthem. Finally, a satirical essay by the humorist Robert Benchley mocks the public's "hunger" for enemies, invented enemies if necessary. The Red Scare suggests how quickly legal rights can succumb to hysterical rhetoric and public fear.

Relating History

Read the following article and answer the questions below:

1. What brought about the “Red Scare” in the United States and who was it geared towards?
2. Who was “Palmer” and what did he believe was the main problem in the United States? What did he do about it?
3. Describe the political cartoon on the first page – what is it implying?
4. What happened to the people who were suspected Communists? Do you feel this was fair treatment?
5. Relating History: Think about the events that have happened over the past 7 years (since the 9/11) terror attacks – think about the terms that have arisen: “unpatriotic” “support our troops” “patriot act” “freedom fries” “wire tapping”. What “similarities” can you draw from the Red Scare with what America has done since 9/11? (explain in paragraph form – use back as necessary)