

Clampdown!

Repression of Dissent in America during World War I

Rob Blurton

The confluence of circumstances that creates openings for profound social transformation in America are few. Research reveals a pattern of repressive behavior by power structures in the United States when these rare historical opportunities for change occur. Extreme personalities such as J. Edgar Hoover become convenient scapegoats for the excesses of American political policing. In fact, the “reaction” of an organization like the FBI is more of an institutional knee-jerk dutifully carried out by a structure’s current billet-holders, combined with the more-or-less significant influences of historical personages.

The rise of America’s modern political police took off during the most repressive period in the state’s history, during and immediately after U.S. involvement in World War I. Coming as it did during a time of “progressive” changes, labor activism, and social turbulence, the war was seen by government men like young Hoover as an opportunity to smash domestic dissent under the pretense of thwarting fifth columnists sympathetic to the enemy.

In 1888, eighteen-year-old Alexander Berkman arrived in America when forced to flee imperial Russia after coming to the attention of tsarist authorities for his revolutionary activities. Three decades later, during the First World War, he was tried by the United States government for “conspiracy to induce persons not to register [for the draft].” During the most virulent attack on free expression in American history, it was a “foreigner” who passionately defended the right of dissent, during his closing arguments to a jury of U.S. citizens:

“We may be wrong. Maybe anarchism is all wrong. Maybe our ideas are all wrong. But I claim even the right of being wrong. I may express any opinion...I believe free discussion and free speech should not be limited under any consideration. It is a dangerous thing to do. It is the murder of liberty.”

Unswayed, the jury found Berkman guilty. He served two years in federal prison, and was then deported to Russia. (By 1921, his criticisms of the emerging Soviet regime necessitated a second exit from his native land. He would finish his life a stateless exile.)

What occurred during this era that caused the Bill of Rights—which spokespeople of all the dominant institutions in American life never tire of invoking as a core value of this society—to be trampled into the dirt?

Conscription

In March 1917, Woodrow Wilson mounted the Capitol building steps to be re-inaugurated U.S. President after successfully campaigning as the man who “kept us out of war” because Americans were “too proud to fight.” Less than one month later, he again climbed these steps, now to exhort a joint session of Congress for U.S. entry into history’s largest conflagration to date. After this April declaration of war, the American state implemented legal restrictions on anti-militarist and anti-government speech that were gradually codified by legislative acts,

presidential fiat, judicial decisions, and administratively by executive bureaus such as the U.S. Post Office and the Department of Justice.

Mobilization for war required conscription. President Wilson had asked for a million-man army, but six weeks later, only 73,000 enlistees had stepped forward. By May, realizing that volunteerism would not do the trick, Congress had ordered all men aged 21 to 30 to register with the government in preparation for a military draft. Only once before in the U.S., during years of civil war, had it been necessary to force Americans into military service. To many immigrants (and native-born Americans), this was a reminder of life in the European states to which the United States was intended to be an alternative.

Popular feeling in 1917 America against the war and conscription was significant. The Socialists—already a viable party and explicitly anti-war—actually increased in strength during 1917. In spite of federal government propagandizing on a scale unprecedented in U.S. history orchestrated by the Committee on Public Information (CPI), Socialists made considerable gains in that year's municipal elections. The Socialist Party (SP) candidate for mayor of New York polled 22 percent of the vote, five times what SP candidates normally received. Ten Socialists were elected to the New York state legislature. In Chicago, the party vote went from 3.6 percent in 1915 to 34.7 percent in 1917; in Buffalo, the percentage increased from 2.6 to 30.2. Socialists rang up 44 percent of the vote in Dayton, Ohio, and elected a mayor.

Anti-war meetings that summer in Minnesota drew tens of thousands of farmers. The Plymouth Review, from Wisconsin, exclaimed, "Thousands assemble to hear Socialist speakers in places where ordinarily a few hundred are considered large assemblies." The Akron Beacon-Journal, a conservative daily, reported that "scarcely a political observer...but what will admit that were an election to come now a mighty tide of socialism would inundate the Middle West." It added the country had "never embarked upon a more unpopular war."

Wobblies

The internationalist and vehemently anti-militarist Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) was a union movement in eclipse in the East by 1917, but on the rise among loggers and miners out West. The IWW was a significant social force in Washington, Oregon, Northern California, Idaho, Montana, Colorado, Utah, New Mexico, Arizona, Kansas, and Nebraska. Melvyn Dubofsky, a historian of the IWW, observed, "In the summer of 1917, from the Douglas fir forests of Puget Sound to the 'richest hill on earth' at Butte, from the isolated mining towns of Arizona to the golden wheat fields of the Midwest, the IWW threatened the nation's war-making capacity."

Opposition groundswells with wide social roots worried government officials, and they responded. The CPI, headed by veteran newspaperman George Creel, hired 75,000 "Four-Minute-Men" who from May through December 1917 delivered speeches nationwide of the self-described length, anywhere large gatherings could be found. The topics varied each day, and the contents were scripted in Washington. It has been calculated that over one million speeches were given to an aggregate audience of 400,000,000 people in this seven month blitz, reaching every American community.

Congress intended to destroy social and political resistance to national war policy. In May 1917, it amended the old Espionage Act to make a felony, punishable by twenty years in prison, "when the United States is at war, [to] willfully utter, print, write or publish any disloyal, profane, scurrilous, or abusive language about the form of government of the United States, or the Constitution of the United States, or the military or naval forces of the United States, or the flag of the United States, or the uniform of The army or navy of the United States, or any language intended to bring [the above] into contempt, scorn, contumely or disrepute."

Repression

For war opponents who could not be convinced by propaganda and continued speaking out against mobilization, a machinery of suppression was devised. As Senator Kenneth McKellar of Tennessee put it, "If we cannot reason with men to be loyal, it is high time we forced them to be loyal." In June 1917, a far more restrictive version of the Espionage Act was passed by Congress and signed into law by Wilson. Though its name makes this act sound like an anti-spying measure, its real target was dissenting speech among the domestic population. Expressing anti-war

opinions became a crime. Some 2,000 people, usually key activists from effective social movements in various parts of the country, were prosecuted for Espionage Act violations, and 45 percent of these cases ended in conviction.

The act was sold to the public as protection from espionage, but not one person was convicted of spying during this period. At least 30 political dissidents, however, received twenty-year sentences, and 70 were sent up for ten years. In contrast, the hated sedition prosecutions by British authorities in Colonial America yielded no sentence longer than four years; the maximum term handed out under the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1797 was eighteen months. Some, nevertheless, found the punishment too lenient. New Mexico Congressman W.B. Walton complained, "Twenty years! Twenty years in the penitentiary for men who should be shot within twenty-four hours after their crime is discovered."

Further addenda to the Espionage Act were required in 1918 as intolerance of dissent accelerated, and this amended version was commonly known as the Sedition Act. In addition to existing restrictions, the Sedition Act added penalties for "disloyal advice" regarding the purchase of U.S. bonds, saying or printing anything "disloyal...scurrilous, or abusive" about the government, or advocating "any curtailment of production" of goods necessary to the "prosecution of the war." This last provision was directed at militant labor organizations, especially IWW members. Outlawing even discussion of strikes, it revealed class war motives behind the free speech abridgment. The Sedition Act was not repealed until three years after the armistice, and the original Espionage Act stayed on the books to be used again during World War II. It has never been overturned or repealed, so it remains law today.

Bureaus of Investigation

Administrative measures enhanced legislative statutes. In August 1917, the Postmaster General used his new authority under the Espionage Act to ban a leftist magazine, *The Masses*, from having second class mailing privileges, making distribution impossible. *The Masses* appealed, but a local judicial injunction blocking the Post Office action was overturned by the regional federal court. After that, the Postmaster had a free hand in refusing to mail any publication he deemed unpatriotic. Over 100 dissident newspapers were thus censored. [This did not end with the European armistice. In 1919, the Attorney General's office raided the Seattle Record during a general strike in that city, and suppressed it. Thirteen months after the guns went silent in France, the New York *Call* was still barred from the U.S. mail. —FE Editor]

Muscle necessary to enforce expanding restrictions on free expression came from an obscure Justice Department desk, the Bureau of Investigation (BoI), which prior to the war had primarily handled violations of federal morality laws, such as the Mann Act. Staffed by 300 agents in April 1917, the BoI saw an opportunity to use the conflict as a cover for systematic suppression of "reds." This big-tent epithet included union militants, pacifists, socialists, communists, anarchists, and especially the anarcho-syndicalist IWW. The SP and the wobblies were significant social movements in entire regions of the country, and the small federal bureau would need help. They took on as auxiliaries the era's most prominent right-wing vigilante organization, the American Protective League (APL). Under government sanction, APL membership grew to 250,000, in chapters spread across the country. For a dollar, members received a badge that read, "Auxiliary to the U.S. Department of Justice."

The nerve center in Washington of this growing political police apparatus was the bureau's General Intelligence Division (GID), headed by the BoI's assistant director, an ambitious 24-year-old Justice Department lawyer, who was none other than J. Edgar Hoover. He established centralized federal direction of national "counterintelligence," as practitioners called political suppression, and set up field offices in major cities where his agents could exchange information and coordinate their activities with regional police and APL chapters. Intelligence provided on local dissidents was indexed, which facilitated federal government and police-vigilante suppression of political "undesirables."

Prominent Socialist leaders were jailed, and legally-elected party representatives were denied their legislative seats. The IWW was ruthlessly destroyed with a blend of overt physical attacks on individuals, offices, and meeting places, and widespread judicial railroading of effective activists into the nearest penitentiary. [Hoover would employ similar methodology against the Black Panther movement in the 1960s.]

Copper

Private business interests, while they stridently called for federal suppression of the IWW, did not idly await federal response to their entreaties. The ground underneath Arizona produced a full 28 percent of the nation's total copper supply, critical for manufacture of munitions and communication wire. Mine conditions were abysmal, and militant wobblies found wide support among miners in 1917 for immediate walkouts. The area around Bisbee, Arizona, in particular, was a IWW stronghold, and copper production there virtually ceased.

Furious mine owners and local law enforcement agencies used wartime hysteria as a tool to deputize 2,000 local men to function as official strikebreakers.

They unleashed their striker-cleansing ambush one July dawn, as armed posses roused IWWs and their supporters out of their homes at gunpoint, and marched over 1,200 "subversives" out of town, where an engine pulling boxcars had been conveniently provided by the El Paso and Southwestern Railroad. (A wobbly named James Brew, who had been forced to leave Colorado for his union activities, shot dead the first armed vigilante to enter his bedroom that morning; he in turn was immediately gunned down by others in the mob.)

The men were then loaded aboard the train, hauled into the scorching desert, and left stranded near Columbus, New Mexico, unable to return to their families and livelihood in Bisbee for fear of assassination by the armed deputies that now ruled approaches to the town. The U.S. Army then "rescued" the stranded miners by detaining the men indefinitely in a makeshift desert camp for two months. (The net had been wide: a meticulous Army count revealed over 400 Wobblies, 350 members of the reformist American Federation of Labor (AFL), and 360 non-union men. In addition, there were several sympathetic small business owners, and even a Bisbee lawyer.)

The IWW wanted nothing less than to revolve power from one social class to another, and had made progress—particularly among recent immigrants—in organizing laborers of various skills into "one big union." Their working class perspective opposed capitalist class hegemony over the wealth of the world. Once enough workers joined the Big Union, their theory went, a general strike would shift power from the ruling capitalists to workers' committees on the shop floors of all industrial production. Such views made Wobblies enemies of the state, despised with equal fury by "conservatives," "liberals," and reformist unions, like the conscientious objectors (C.O.s), these incorrigibles had to go.

Espionage Act prisoners were sent to federal penitentiaries, especially Leavenworth in Kansas, where conditions were appalling. Due to overcrowding, wormy food, and poor sanitation, the cell blocks were incubators for disease. Beatings were routine; men sent to solitary slept on bare concrete floors in damp, pitch-black cells; medical care was denied the sick. Fourteen "politicals" died while incarcerated, several due to deliberate neglect by prison authorities of their health problems, including prominent Mexican anarchist Ricardo Flores Magon. [See sidebar.]

The press and Western business elites, by denying accusations of atrocious workplace conditions and labeling anything that hampered mobilization as treasonous and pro-German, were able to whip up public frenzy to support their suppression of the Wobblies. Dubofsky notes:

"This mass wartime hysteria primed the employers' counterattack against the IWW...Western employers used the rhetoric of patriotism to thwart the IWW menace to their wartime profits. Whichever the Western state involved, employers used similar tactics in stymieing the IWW's labor offensive. Pledging their wholehearted cooperation in the nation's moment of need, businessmen offered to do anything feasible to serve their country—except bargaining with or making concessions to traitors. In return for their loyalty, businessmen expected local, state, and federal authorities to repress the IWW."

Strikes against unsafe and exploitative conditions in mining, lumber, and agriculture affected the war effort, though this was not the motivation for the striking workers or IWW organizers, despite the rhetoric of the bosses.

Knowing they did not have the nationwide economic clout to seriously challenge mobilization, wobbly leadership decided to tone down soapboxing and instead to intensely organize industrial workers, as labor shortages forced employers to hire men who carried the IWW's red membership card. Western industrial reality made strike militancy among organizers effective, but this was not matched in other locales. Hence, on the waterfronts of Philadelphia, aboard the freighters of the Great Lakes, and in the sprawling munitions works of Du Pont—all which had active IWW locals, and would have been prime targets for any deliberate countermobilization campaign—no walkouts took place because pay and conditions were better than those of migratory workers in the West.

Torture

War fever also condemned many pacifists to imprisonment, abuse, and in some cases, death. About 65,000 men claimed C.O. status, both for religious and political reasons; of these, 20,000, despite legitimate claims recognized by their draft boards were inducted into the military and sent to various army installations. Refusing to train for war, they were not court-martialed, but instead were kept on military posts where they were harassed on the orders of base officers, jeered at, and occasionally attacked by troops preparing for battle. This army effort intended to “break” them was largely successful; 16,000 C.O.s undergoing such treatment changed their minds and accepted combat duty, deciding their consciences could take war after all.

Conditions of detainment for thousands of remaining political prisoners was atrocious. Severe mistreatment was routine: C.O.s were beaten, firehosed in their cells and left to sleep on wet straw bedding, and subjected to mock executions. They were also thrown into solitary confinement “holes” that were dark and germ-infested. Some were driven insane, and at least seventeen died while in government custody. Like the politicals, these men were basically executed by being thrown into dungeons, tortured, and left to die when they got sick.

In early 1918, Wilson decreed that suitable non-combatant duty for C.O.s be made available, and about 2,600 men accepted such work. The remainder held out, including over 400 who were dubbed “absolutists” because they refused all military discipline, and would not even answer a roll call. They were handled brutally; many spent months on bread and water diets, shackled to their cell doors nine hours each day for refusing to fall out for duty when other soldiers were put to work.

The same month of Wilson’s C.O. policy reform, his Secretary of War issued an order to post commanders that, “any man classed as conscientious objector on account of religious belief or personal scruples, (a) whose attitude in camp is sullen and defiant, (b) whose sincerity is questioned, (c) who is active in propaganda, should be promptly brought to trial by court-martial.” Thus, the presidential carrot was quietly backed up by the administrative stick.

In addition to helping the BoI break up radical organizations, the APL assisted in draft enforcement. Though without legal authority to make arrests, APL chapters used conscription laws to harass and detain anyone they felt disloyal, ostensibly to check their draft status. With the Attorney General’s approval, APL possses throughout the country conducted what were called “slacker raids,” intended to round up young men who had evaded conscription. Often directed by government agents, APL volunteers invaded movie theaters, workplaces, union halls and private homes, looking for draft-dodgers. The APL “arrested” over 40,000 people during 1917–18. After a 1918 raid, the U.S. marshal for New York, Thomas McCarthy, impounded an APL man’s badge and released his 85 detainees on the grounds that a private citizen could not arrest draft evaders. In response, BoI Director George Wickersham denounced McCarthy and spoke out in support of APL activities.

1919

The November 1918 cease-fire in France did not result in the easing of America’s political repression. Rather, the worldwide social turbulence of 1919—which, like 1968, was a year of international social and political upheaval—frightened ruling elites. In Russia, revolution had been followed by civil war, and American doughboys were fighting Bolsheviks as part of a British-led foreign intervention in the conflict. Revolution threatened in Germany. Britain was rocked by a wave of walkouts culminating in a general strike.

At home, reformist labor unions, often sponsored by the U.S. government during wartime as a preferred alternative to the IWW, had gained millions of members and now flexed this strength. One out of every five employees walked off the job at some point in 1919, making it the most work-interrupted year in American history. 3,600 strikes involving four million workers swept the country, and repressive-minded state managers in the U.S. turned up the heat. The Red Scare of 1919 to 1920 was a direct response to not only radical organizations, but also to the foothold gained by reformist unions.

Also that year, a small affinity group of immigrant Italian anarchists in Massachusetts sent mail-bombs to judges and government officials involved in political repression. In June their campaign reached right into the presidential cabinet. An explosion destroyed part of Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer’s fashionable Washington, D.C. town-

house. He was left unhurt in his study, but the young anarchist who lit the fuse blew himself to pieces. Though Palmer knew from his informants that the bombs were the work of an isolated sect, rooted in the East Coast Italian anarchist milieu, he promoted a wave of hysteria in the press about an imminent Bolshevik-style coup d'état. The thoroughly frightened public docilely accepted Palmer's winter anti-immigrant raids of 1919 to 1920, whose purported rationale was to thwart this great conspiracy. Continued suppression of radicals by APL mobs and the newly formed American Legion also kept up the pressure on political dissent. Not until the summer of 1920 would the surge of repression slowly begin to ebb.

Security States

The stick is merely the carrot by other means. Recalcitrant subjects who could not be persuaded to accept the government line simply required sterner measures to silence their opposition. The CPI-published War Encyclopedia had under its "Freedom of the Press" entry: "Congress may establish a censorship of the press in war time if circumstances render such a measure 'necessary and proper'...Also, of course, Congress may penalize publications which are calculated to stir up sedition, to obstruct the carrying out of the laws, or to 'give aid and comfort to the enemy' (which is treason)." The loyal citizenry were thus instructed to reinterpret the First Amendment according to the Espionage Act and the state propaganda agency; those who disagreed were seditious and treasonous, grave crimes which necessarily required suppression.

In a society as politicized as America was in 1917, with strong socially-rooted counter-movements to the dominant capitalist class, mass resistance to the draft during an unpopular war was a potential problem. The most intrusive action by a country into the daily lives of its citizenry is conscription, the physical removal of men from their homes and families into direct indentured servitude. Genuine anti-war social movements in the Midwestern grain belt, the Southwest, and the Northwest made national circulation of anti-conscription literature much more significant than would have been the case without organic grassroots resistance. This is the difference between a political grouplet of isolated individuals, which is no real threat to the status quo, and a social movement with broad, deep roots in local communities. The latter is a much greater challenge to business as usual, and will cause a "necessary" institutional response if it grows too oppositional in character to the dominant paradigm.

Lawmakers revealed their class interests. Senator Lee Overman of North Carolina feared that without the Espionage Act, "papers" would be "circulated all through the South urging Negroes to rise up against white people." Congressman Albert Johnson, from the state of Washington, complained on the House floor about the effectiveness of prewar IWW organizing in his state's timber industry. He noted that "all of the lumber manufacturers" were sending telegrams requesting federal suppression of the wobbly movement. Johnson supported the Espionage Act as away to eliminate "non-loyal agitators" and "outlaw leaders" of the IWW. Another congressman, William Green of Iowa, agreed, stating, "for the extermination of these pernicious vermin [i.e., IWW members] no measures can be too severe." The BoI clampdown on dissident organizations, rather than getting out of control or being Hoover's private war, was exactly what elites desired.

A fundamental change in American political policing took place during the war years. Hoover's General Intelligence Division was the embryo of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. By the mid-1920s, the BoI had been redesignated the FBI, and Hoover was its director. The GID had by then compiled an index of 450,000 names, the beginnings of the Bureau's diligently updated database of today. Thus the FBI's secret wars against dissent, especially the infamous Counterintelligence Program (COINTELPRO) of the 1950s through the 1970s, trace their tactics and lineage back to the establishment of regional field offices in 1918. Coordinating intelligence with local law enforcement, using right-wing vigilante proxies, and infiltrating agent-provocateurs to carry out dirty tricks were standard Bureau procedure in African-American ghettos during the 1960s, and on South Dakota Indian reservations the following decade, with similar success. The FBI cut its repressive teeth on the IWW.

When civil liberties pose a threat to plans of the United States government, it continues efforts to limit them. A short list of such abuses would include FBI COINTELPROs in the 1950s directed against the Puerto Rican independence movement and the Communist Party, infiltration and destruction by federal agents and local police "red squads" in the 1960s and 1970s of radical and liberal groups resisting the Vietnam War, FBI-directed counter-

insurgency on the Pine Ridge Indian reservation in the mid-1970s, burglaries and assorted “dirty tricks” directed at Christian and political organizations working against U.S. policy in Central America in the 1980s, and the introduction of agent-provocateurs into the growing Earth First! radical environmental movement rooted in the Northwest and Southwest in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

The FBI continues COINTELPRO operations up to the current day, sans the discredited code name. President Clinton’s “best and brightest” appointee, Director Louis Freeh, acted as FBI directors always do when he seized the moment after the Oklahoma City bombing to pitch for expanded Bureau counterintelligence capabilities. The early part of this century was an era of less subtle forms of control that are not politically feasible now, yet these synapses for today’s diffuse and weblike net of counterintelligence capabilities were first triggered in 1917.—

Sidebar: Execution Of an Anarchist

Ricardo and Enrique Flores Magon were Mexican anarchists who participated in several insurrections in Northwestern Mexico’s Baja California region between 1906 and 1911, including a major 1910–1911 uprising that lasted for months. (American military aid to the Mexican government greatly assisted suppression of “Magonist” rebels.) The brothers fled to the U.S., where they were constantly harassed by the Yanqui government. Ricardo did an eighteen-month stretch in Arizona in 1908 to 1910 for alleged violation of neutrality laws, and he was imprisoned for the same offense from 1912 to 1914.

When war hysteria gripped the U.S. in 1917–1918, the brothers were rounded up yet again. Both were convicted under the Espionage Act and given twenty year sentences. Ricardo eventually landed in Leavenworth, Kansas, where his health quickly collapsed in this disease-ridden federal penitentiary. From his cold, damp cell, Flores Magon requested medical attention and wrote his lawyer and friends, detailing his physical distress, but prison officials deliberately refused the anarchist admittance to the infirmary.

Ricardo died in Kansas in late November, 1922, at the age of 48. Leavenworth’s physician—who had repeatedly denied the visibly deteriorating Flores Magon’s request for hospitalization and once referred to Ricardo as a “cunning Mexican” in an official medical report—blamed heart failure for the death.



Photo captions (left to right)

Peter Green, an extremely effective IWW organizer in the Pacific Northwest lumber strikes of 1917, was sentenced to ten years in Leavenworth at the big Chicago wobbly trial of 1918.

Edward Johnson, a Wisconsin farmer and religious C.O., began a one-year stretch in Leavenworth but went insane and was committed to an asylum. It is unknown if he was ever released.

South Dakota farmer and socialist Orville Anderson received a four-year sentence for calling the president a “murderer in the first degree.” Anderson was again detained by the U.S. government during WWII.

Frank Little was an uncompromising foe of conscription and a tireless organizer among Montana’s copper miners. In 1917, he was murdered in Butte by an anti-union lynch mob.

fifth Estate

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