

# Radical Dissent Squashed During War

Fran Shor

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a review of

*Free Speech & the Suppression of Dissent During World War I* by Eric T. Chester. Monthly Review Press 2021

The focus of Eric Chester's incisive study is the clash between the state and its dissenting citizens during the time of war. While based on a fundamental belief in the absolute right of free speech, Chester's book navigates the ways that the government of President Woodrow Wilson imperiled and suppressed free speech during World War I.

Divided into four sections, the main thread, however, underscores not only how state authorities during WWI criminalized free speech, but also to insist on popular struggle to combat those repressive efforts by state authorities in order to sustain movements for social change.

Among the government's targets were the Socialist Party and the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). The IWW, also known as the Wobblies, was a radical labor movement which took strong anti-war positions. Especially in the lumber and mining industries of the Northwest and Southwest, they faced arrests, legal harassment, and extra-legal violence.

Chester digs deep into how state and federal authorities used every repressive mechanism, including the military, to attempt to destroy the IWW. Even as the national organization drew back from fully endorsing draft resistance (while many locals embraced it), both at the point of production and in its political activities, the Wobblies spread the antiwar struggle. For this they paid a horrendous price of imprisonment and organizational destruction.

A major oversight in the book is the absence of any discussion of the suppression of anarchists and their journals. For example, Emma Goldman's *Mother Earth* was closed by the government in 1917. Some anarchists, like Sacco and Vanzetti, fled to Mexico or Canada to escape the draft. After WWI, during the so-called Red Scare of 1919, Goldman, Berkman, and hundreds of other anarchists were deported to Soviet Russia.

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