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## Chapter 17: Socialism/Political Radicalism

### Red Scare Deportations (1919-1920)

The Red Scare Deportations of 1919-1920 were a series of expulsions of foreign nationals from the United States on the basis of their suspected ties to radical anarchist or socialist organizations. Following a nation-wide panic triggered by anarchist bombings in the spring and summer of 1919, Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer ordered a series of raids in cities across the United States, taking over 10,000 people into custody between November 1919 and January 1920. Around 800 prisoners would eventually be deported as a result of the Palmer raids, before Assistant Secretary of Labor Louis F. Post canceled the deportation orders for over 1,500 aliens and calmed fears of a Bolshevik menace, in the wake of the successful Bolshevik Revolution in Russia in October 1917.

The impetus for the deportations came from a coordinated mail bomb campaign targeting many prominent Americans including John D. Rockefeller, J.P. Morgan, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and others. Although most of the bombs were intercepted, Americans saw it as a sign that a “Bolshevik menace” threatened the stability of the United States itself. Their conclusions were supported by other events throughout 1919; race riots all over the United States that summer were blamed on the “Reds” as was the Boston police strike in September.

A. Mitchell Palmer, President Woodrow Wilson’s newly appointed attorney general, was himself a target of an anarchist bomb. His Washington, D.C. townhouse was severely damaged by a bomb on June 2, 1919, and it was only saved because the bomb exploded prematurely, killing the bomber. Palmer quickly organized the Justice

Department's General Investigation Division (GID) and appointed a young lawyer named J. Edgar Hoover as its head. The GID soon identified over 60,000 radicals across the United States, many of them immigrants and aliens. Palmer then approached William B. Wilson, the secretary of labor, who had sole responsibility for the administration of laws affecting the alien population. Palmer had no legal basis for prosecuting the radicals, and he needed the Department of Labor's support to take action against the aliens on the list. Wilson was a friend of organized labor and feared the perceived growing influence of radicalism on the labor movement, so he readily agreed.

On November 7, the GID took its first large-scale action, raiding offices belonging to the Union of Russian Workers and arresting 450 men and women in twelve separate cities. Not a radical organization, the Union of Russian Workers acted primarily as an employment service for recent Russian immigrants. Those arrested during the raid were held without bail for five months.

Palmer followed the November 7 raid with another daring and widely celebrated move against the radicals arrested.. On December 21, 1919, the *Buford*, nicknamed the "Soviet Ark" by the press, set sail from New York Harbor. Aboard were 249 resident aliens seized during the November 7 raids, including the feminist and anarchist Emma Goldman and fellow anarchist Alexander Berkman. Palmer utilized the Immigration Act of 1918, which allowed the deportation of any alien found to be an anarchist without trial. The ultimate destination of the *Buford* was Hango, Finland, from which point the 249 aliens would be transported to Soviet Russia.

Hoping to streamline the deportation process further, Palmer pushed Secretary Wilson to reinterpret the existing deportation laws to deny the aliens the right to seek

counsel and allow Palmer to execute deportation warrants to cover every alien detained in the raids. This time, however, Wilson refused, noting that even aliens were still protected by the Bill of Rights.

Fortunately for Palmer, Wilson went on sick leave at the end of December and his duties were divided between his two deputies, Louis F. Post, who handled labor disputes, and John W. Abercrombie, who took charge of immigration matters. Abercrombie, a supporter of Palmer, accepted both of Palmer's requests.

On January 2-3, 1920, the GID and local law enforcement in 33 cities in 23 states arrested 5,000 suspects. Foreign members of the INDUSTRIAL WORKERS OF THE WORLD and ethnic workers' associations, seen by Palmer to be "a hotbed of radicalism" were particularly targeted in this raid. The raids were widely hailed as a success and Palmer's stature grew even more; the *Washington Post* called for immediate deportation of all those who were arrested, arguing that "there is no time to waste on hairsplitting over infringement of liberty." Palmer's name was frequently mentioned as a possible presidential candidate.

As accounts began to trickle in about the raids, however, the initial excitement faded. American citizens had been detained, many aliens had been arrested without a warrant and there were dozens of cases of mistaken identity. The treatment the detainees endured was particularly harsh and included beatings, inadequate space, sanitation, and rations for the prisoners. Bail for detained aliens was set at no less than \$10,000. "At no time in living memory had there been such a ruthless invasion of civil rights," historian Paul Avrich wrote about the January 2-3 raids in *Sacco and Vanzetti: The Anarchist Background* (1991).

Following Abercrombie's resignation in March 1920, Louis Post began an

investigation into the Palmer Raids. Post immediately cancelled 2,000 deportation warrants authorized after arrests were made, then swiftly decided an additional 1,600 cases. He allowed deportation to proceed in 460 cases, but canceled 1,140 other warrants. Further, he reinstated detainees' right to counsel and ordered that reasonable bail of no more than \$1,000 be set.

Palmer angrily demanded Post's impeachment, but the tide was turning against the Attorney General. Post defended himself before Congress, and an independent investigation by a committee of 12 of the nation's most prominent lawyers (including future Supreme Court justice Felix Frankfurter) found that the Department of Justice was guilty of "illegal acts" and constitutional violations during the raids.

The final straw for Palmer would come following an ill-fated prediction that May Day 1920 would see a renewal of radical violence. The day came and went without incident and soon Palmer himself was called to testify before Congress. His political career was effectively over, but the Red Scare he had helped introduce would overshadow the rest of the decade, influencing restrictive immigration laws, attitudes towards labor unions, and reaction towards SACCO AND VANZETTI.

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*See also* ANARCHISM/INDUSTRIAL WORKERS OF THE WORLD; POLITICAL SOCIALISM IN THE UNITED STATES; THE SACCO-VANZETTI TRIAL; SOCIALISM/POLITICAL RADICALISM AND THE LABOR MOVEMENT.

### **Further Reading**

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