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**Title:** The 'Red Scare' Threatens Personal Liberties.

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**Abstract:** During 1919 and 1920, following World War I, many Americans feared that Communists were soon to take over the United States. The result of this 'Red Scare' was a flood of raids, arrests and attacks on suspected 'Reds.' Individuals involved included Alexander Mitchel Palmer, United States Attorney General, J. Edgar Hoover, Director of the General Intelligence Division, and United States President Woodrow Wilson. Details and consequences affecting American civil liberties are provided.

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**The "Red Scare" Threatens Personal Liberties**

**What:** National politics and civil rights

**When:** 1919-1920

**Where:** The United States

**Who:**

Alexander Mitchell Palmer (1872-1936), Attorney General of the United States from 1919 to 1921

J. Edgar Hoover (1895-1972), Director of the General Intelligence Division, Department of Justice from 1924 to 1972

Thomas Woodrow Wilson (1856-1924), President of the United States from 1913 to 1921

**A Growing Panic**

When Woodrow Wilson took the steps that led the United States into World War I in 1917, he said that fighting a war abroad would require cutting back freedoms at home; he feared the "spirit of ruthless brutality" that would enter American life as a result. Patriotic propaganda poured out of the government-funded Committee on Public Information, and those who were suspected of sympathizing with the German enemy or opposing the U.S. government in other ways were likely to be censored when they tried to make their opinions known.

After the Armistice in November, 1918, the wartime crusade against Germany did not slow down; instead, it simply changed its direction. It became a crusade against anything "un-

American"-which in 1919 meant "radical" or "red" (Communist). Postmaster General Albert Bursleson, who during the war had been given power to censor mail when he considered it to be hindering the war effort, now censored mail when it was used to communicate radical ideas. Conscientious objectors-people who refused to participate in the war because of their moral or religious beliefs-had been imprisoned during the war, and now they remained in jail, for the Wilson administration refused to grant them amnesty.

The American Civil Liberties Union, which had been formed during the war to defend the constitutional rights of Americans, now found even more to do. There were new patriotic societies that preached "one hundred percent Americanism" and tried to use schools and fraternal orders to spread their propaganda. In Congress, an investigation into German propaganda activities quickly turned into an anti-Bolshevik investigation.

Several events in 1919 led many Americans to believe that the "Reds" (Bolsheviks or Communists) had made a conspiracy to destroy the United States. First came a strike by police in Boston, which the newspapers promptly labeled "Bolshevik." Next there was a widespread strike in the steel industry, and the U.S. Steel Corporation accused the strike leaders of associating with Bolshevik groups. Then there was a strike in the coal industry. Meanwhile, crude homemade bombs had been sent in the mail to several public officials, or had been thrown at them. Throughout the year, there were street riots between whites and African Americans, and between war veterans and Socialists.

### The Crest of the Wave

By the fall of 1919, the American people were clamoring for some kind of government action in response to the "conspiracy." In August, Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer had established the General Intelligence Division in his department to investigate and take action against radicals. He appointed J. Edgar Hoover as its director, and Hoover began to make a huge index of radical organizations, publications, and leaders.

On November 7, Hoover's agents raided the headquarters and branch offices of a labor society known as the Union of Russian Workers. Throughout the country, state and local officials carried out smaller raids on suspected radicals. Meanwhile, Congress began considering several bills requiring that foreign radicals be deported from the United States. One senator even proposed that native-born Americans who were radical be expelled to a special prison colony on Guam.

Action was taken after the Labor Department proclaimed that membership in the Union of Russian Workers was a deportable offense. On December 21, 249 deportees set sail from New York aboard the old army transport ship Buford, nicknamed "the Soviet Ark." Most of the deportees were members of the Union of Russian Workers and the others were labeled as anarchists, public charges, criminals, and misfits. Two weeks later came the last and greatest raids, as the wave of the Red Scare crested and finally broke.

Late in the afternoon of Friday, January 2, 1920, Justice Department agents began arresting thousands of persons in major cities throughout the nation. They poured into private homes, clubs, pool halls, and coffee shops, seizing citizens and foreigners, Communists and non-Communists; they tore apart meeting halls and damaged and destroyed other property. Agents jailed their victims, prevented them from contacting family members or lawyers, and interrogated them.

Prisoners who could prove their American citizenship were released, though they were often placed under the custody of state officials who hoped to bring them to court. Aliens

were released a few days later, unless they were members of the Communist Party or the Communist Labor Party. The Department of Justice hoped to deport these individuals.

In two days, nearly five thousand people had been arrested, and possibly another thousand were seized in follow-up actions during the next two weeks. The arrests did not conform to the process of law, and many of those who were arrested were treated very badly. These raids, which became known as the Palmer Raids, were the climax of the Red Scare.

### Consequences

After January, 1920, conscientious objectors still found it hard to obtain amnesty, and restrictions on immigration grew tighter under the 1924 National Origins Act. Throughout the 1920's, the U.S. Army held antiradical training seminars. School textbooks were censored, and those who wished to take certain jobs were often required to sign oaths of their loyalty to the U.S. government.

On the other hand, raids and deportations decreased quickly after the winter of 1920. Many people were outraged at the violation of constitutional rights that had occurred. In June, 1920, Federal Judge George W. Anderson, in the case of *Colyer v. Skeffington*, declared that the Justice Department's methods were brutal and unjust and that its raids were "sordid and disgraceful." Attorney General Palmer tried to win the presidential nomination at the Democratic National Convention in 1920, but failed.

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