

The Red Scare

AS WE SAW on [redacted] attitudes to new immigrants to the USA were changing well before the First World War. Established Americans thought that letting more people in was only adding to America's problems and was diluting America's 'true' Anglo-Saxon (white, European) nature. The idea that the USA should welcome all who wanted to come was losing popularity.

The war increased these feelings, particularly after the BOLSHEVIK REVOLUTION in Russia which brought into being the world's first communist state. Some Americans were worried about being swamped by people from southern and eastern Europe who brought communist and anarchist beliefs with them. They classed people who held these 'un-American' ideas under the general heading 'Reds'.

Strikes

Fears about Reds grew after the war. A wave of strikes in 1919 - 3600 strikes involving 400,000 workers - convinced Americans that communists were trying to destroy their way of life. This was the beginning of the 'Red Scare' which was at its height between 1919 and 1921.

In Seattle in 1919, a general strike seemed to the American public to be evidence of a Red communist plot led by an organisation called the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), and nicknamed the 'Wobblies'. Later, coal-miners, steel-workers and even the police force of the city of Boston went on strike. As workers in industry after industry went on strike they were locked out, sacked or starved into defeat. Many disputes turned to violence as employers, with government approval, used heavy-handed tactics.

The strikes were largely the result of terrible working conditions and low pay. Workers in heavy industries often worked twelve or more hours a day, and wages between 1914 and 1919 had fallen way behind the cost of living. But neither the public nor the government were interested in the plight of the workers. The authorities reacted to the strikes as though they were the start of a communist revolution to take over America.

Bombs

The fear of radicalism was greatly increased by a series of bombing incidents during 1919, including one which destroyed part of the home of the Attorney-General, Mitchell Palmer. The press whipped up hysteria, and mobs and police attacked socialist parades on May Day. Socialist organisations were raided and their books and pamphlets seized.

SOURCE 1 Newspaper headlines at the time of the bombings in 1919

“ 36 WERE MARKED AS VICTIMS OF BOMB CONSPIRATORS

REDS PLANNED MAY DAY MURDERS

BEWARE BOX IF IT COMES THROUGH MAIL - DO NOT OPEN IT - CALL THE POLICE BOMB SQUAD

RED PERIL HERE ”

The Palmer Raids

After the attack on his home, Mitchell Palmer devoted himself to rounding up anyone he believed was a 'Red'. During the 'Palmer Raids', between 4000 and 6000 suspected communists were arrested in 36 cities across the USA. In the end, 556 'aliens' were deported, but it was shown that most of those arrested were not communist supporters.

Despite the fiasco of the Palmer Raids, the alarms and hysteria of the 'Red Scare' continued throughout the 1920s. Some people used it as an excuse to attack any groups that they disliked or distrusted - Catholics, Jews, blacks, or new immigrants. Trade unionists were regarded as 'un-American' and unions were considerably weakened in the 1920s by raids and persecution.



SOURCE 2 A cartoon entitled 'Come On!', which appeared in the San Francisco *Examiner* in September 1919. The American Legion was formed in 1919 to uphold traditional American values and the Constitution, and maintain law and order. It was a patriotic organisation with men full of 'pep, punch and democracy'

SOURCE 4 Socialist newspapers claimed that the bombings were the work of right-wing extremists to encourage the government and others to attack the socialists. The *Liberator* (socialist newspaper) said

“ We believe that the reason that the perpetrators of these extensive and elaborate dynamitings have not been discovered is that some important person does not want to discover them. ”

SOURCE 5 Next door to Palmer's house was found an anarchist pamphlet, the *Plain Truth*

“ There will have to be bloodshed; we will not dodge; there will have to be murder; we will kill ... there will have to be destruction; we will destroy ... We are ready to do anything to suppress the capitalist system. ”

SOURCE 3 Billy Sunday, an evangelist and popular hero, quoted in the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 3 May 1919. He is describing a Bolshevik

“ ... a guy with a face like a porcupine and breath that would scare a pole cat. If I had my way, I'd fill the jails so full with them that their feet would stick out the windows ... Let them rule - we'll swim our horses in blood up to the bridles first. ”

Why was there a Red Scare?

The Red Scare blew up for several reasons.

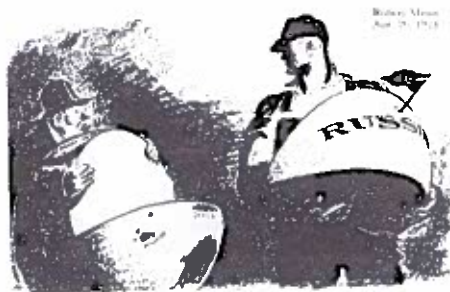
- **Patriotism:** During the First World War the government worked hard to build up patriotism. The USA was fighting Germany in Europe. Many people became suspicious of people of German origin in the USA. They were also suspicious of people who didn't wholeheartedly support the war, including groups like the IWW and the Socialist Party. When the war ended a variety of 'patriotic' groups were formed by returning soldiers. The largest of these was the American Legion, set up in May 1919. They urged the government to pass laws against immigrants, communists and the IWW.
- **Economic problems:** By the end of the war, about 4 million people were in the armed forces and about 9 million people worked in war industries. When the war ended, they became unemployed. Even though the USA suffered less than Europe at the end of the war, this was a huge number of people to get back to work. Some employers began to exploit the situation, lowering wages and putting up working hours.
- **Worker unrest:** Workers began to go on strike in response to their poor working conditions. The first big strike was in the Seattle shipyards. It began on 21 January 1919. On 6 February there was a general strike involving 60,000 workers. Despite the strike being peaceful, it got a lot of publicity, and people, including the government, reacted as if it had been violent. More strikes followed across the country and the press reacted as if they were the start of a communist rising.
- **Violence:** In April 1919 over 30 letter bombs were posted to important people all over the USA, to arrive for 1 May. About half of these exploded. In early June, much larger bombs were set off in eight US cities. These bombings, by anarchist groups, fuelled media hysteria.

SOURCE 40

The blaze of revolution is eating its way into the homes of the American workman, licking at the altars of the churches, leaping into the belfry of the school house, crawling into the sacred corners of American homes, seeking to replace the marriage vows with libertine laws, burning up the foundations of society.

Mitchell Palmer, US Attorney General, speaking in 1920.

SOURCE 41



A 1924 cartoon showing attitudes to Communism in the USA.

The Red Scare

In the 1920s these racist attitudes towards immigrants were made worse by an increased fear of Bolshevism or Communism. The USA watched with alarm as Russia became Communist after the Russian Revolution of 1917 (██████████). It feared that many of the more recent immigrants from eastern Europe and Russia were bringing similar radical ideas with them to the USA. This reaction was called the Red Scare.

In 1919 Americans saw evidence all around them to confirm their fears. There was a wave of disturbances. Some 400,000 American workers went on strike. Even the police in Boston went on strike and looters and thieves roamed the city. There were race riots in 25 towns.

Today, most historians argue that the strikes were caused by economic hardship. High levels of wartime production were being scaled down – so fewer workers were needed. Most strikers were poorly paid labourers in heavy industry who had been taken on for wartime contracts and then laid off. Many were immigrant workers, since they were usually the first to lose their jobs. Other workers were simply striking for improvements in low pay and appalling working conditions.

However, many prominent Americans in the 1920s saw the strikes as the dangerous signs of Communist interference. Communism meant state control of agriculture and industry, taking it away from its owners, which alarmed Americans. Fear of Communism combined with prejudice against immigrants was a powerful mix.

SOURCE 42

The steamship companies haul them over to America and as soon as they step off the ships the problem of the steamship companies is settled, but our problem has only begun – Bolshevism, red anarchy, black-handers and kidnapers, challenging the authority and integrity of our flag . . . Thousands come here who will never take the oath to support our constitution and become citizens of the USA. They pay allegiance to some other country while they live upon the substance of our own. They fill places that belong to the wage earning citizens of America . . . They are of no service whatever to our people . . . They constitute a menace and a danger to us every day.

Republican Senator Heflin speaking in 1921 in a debate over whether to limit immigration.

ACTIVITY

Work in pairs.

- 1 One of you collect evidence to show that the Red Scare was the result of fear of Communism.
- 2 The other collect evidence to show that the Red Scare was the result of prejudice and intolerance.
- 3 Now try to come up with a definition of the Red Scare that combines both of your views.

The fears were not totally unjustified. Many immigrants in the USA did hold radical political beliefs. Anarchists published pamphlets and distributed them widely in American cities, calling for the overthrow of the government. In April 1919 a bomb planted in a church in Milwaukee killed ten people. In May, bombs were posted to 36 prominent Americans. In June more bombs went off in seven US cities, and one almost succeeded in killing Mitchell Palmer, the US Attorney General. All those known to have radical political beliefs were rounded up. They were generally immigrants and the evidence against them was often flimsy. The person responsible for this purge was J Edgar Hoover, a young clerk appointed by Palmer. Hoover was to become an immensely important and deeply sinister figure in US history (see page 216). He built up files on 60,000 suspects and in 1919–20 around 10,000 individuals were informed that they were to be deported from the USA.

As Palmer discovered that these purges were popular, he tried to use the fear of revolution to build up his own political support and run for president. Trade unionists, black people, Jews, Catholics and almost all minority groups found themselves accused of being Communists. In the end, however, Palmer caused his own downfall. He predicted that a Red Revolution would begin in May 1920. When nothing happened, the papers began to make fun of him and officials in the Justice Department who were sickened by Palmer's actions undermined him. Secretary of Labor Louis Post examined all of the case files prepared by Hoover and found that only 556 out of the thousands of cases brought had any basis in fact.

- 1 Look at Sources 40–42. Do they tell historians more about Communists or the enemies of Communism? Explain your answer.

'The main cause of the Red Scare was a distrust of immigrants.' Use the sources and your own knowledge to explain whether you agree with this view. (15 marks)

■ **A basic answer (level 1)** will make a generalised statement. For example, *No, it was more to do with unions and the economy.*

● **A good answer (level 2)** will use detail from the sources and/or own knowledge to evaluate the statement. Considering arguments for **and** against the view will gain higher marks in the level. For example, *People were against immigrants, but also organisations like the IWW because of its strikes. Source B talks about 100% Americanism and C talks about vigilante justice against Reds – that's communists, not immigrants.*

▲ **An excellent answer (level 4)** will use detail from the sources and own knowledge to produce a balanced evaluation of the evidence for and against the view. For example, *It was a scare about communism, but people saw immigrants as more likely to be communists. People also turned against organisations (like the IWW) that they saw as 'unpatriotic' and 'communist'. The American Legion talks about 100% Americanism (Source B), but people saw it as anti-immigrant too (Source A). Source B talks about its vigilante justice against 'Reds'. It was complicated. It came out of the lack of jobs and strikes and even the patriotism left over from the war as well as anti-immigrant feeling.*

To uphold and defend the Constitution of the United States of America; to maintain law and order; to foster and perpetuate a 100 Percent Americanism; to preserve the memories and incidents of our association in the Great War; to inculcate a sense of individual obligation to the community, state, and nation; to combat the autocracy of both the classes and the masses; to make right the master of might; to promote peace and good will on earth; to safeguard and transmit to prosperity the principles of justice, freedom, and democracy; to consecrate and sanctify our comradeship by devotion to mutual helpfulness.

Source B: From the Constitution of the American Legion, passed in St. Louis in 1919.



By the fall, the Legion had 650,000 members, and over a million by year's end. While most of the Legion engaged in such relatively innocuous activities as distributing pamphlets, the patriotic and anti-communist fervour of the Legion led many to engage in vigilante justice meted out against Reds both real and suspected. The Legion's prevalence in the country and reputation for anti-communism was so great that the phrase "Leave the Reds to the Legion" became a common catchphrase.

Source C: From a US university website.

Source A: An American cartoon published during the Red Scare. Attached to the man's hat is a label that says 'Alien slacker', one of the papers another man is carrying says 'Bolsheviki propaganda' and the dog says 'They're going away for their health'.