

Red Scare! The Palmer Raids and Civil Liberties

Essential Question:
How did a war fought to 'save the world for democracy' end up threatening civil rights in America?

VOCABULARY EXERCISE AND PREPARATION

- 1) Working in small groups, do your best to define the key terms below without using a reference aid such as a dictionary.
- 2) Sort the terms into categories and be prepared to explain how the terms within these categories are related.
- 3) Share your group's definitions and categorizations with the class. Your teacher will record each group's main ideas about each term on the board.
- 4) As a class, use the best ideas from each group to create a final definition for each of the terms. You may use a dictionary now to double-check the accuracy of your definitions or if you are stuck and need help.
- 5) Lastly, write a sentence correctly using each of these words.

Agitator	Radical
Alien	Sediton
Anarchist	Subversive
Communism	
Deport	
Paranoia	

Timeline

April 6, 1917: The U.S.A. enters World War I by declaring war on Germany.

October 1917: The Bolshevik Revolution brings a Communist government to power in Russia.

May 1918: The U.S. Congress passes the Sedition Act (an amendment to the Espionage Act of 1917)

November 1918: Germany signs the Armistice ending World War I.

Summer 1919: A series of bombs is mailed to prominent Americans.

1919-1920: A massive wave of strikes agitates the nation.

November 1919-January 1920: Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer and his special assistant J. Edgar Hoover direct the largest mass arrests in U.S. history. The "Palmer Raids" result in the incarceration of thousands of suspected "subversives."

May 1 (May Day), 1920: The communist uprising predicted by Attorney General Palmer fails to occur. Later, he is accused of helping to create a climate of fear for political advantage.

INTRODUCTION: A RED REVOLUTION

In April 1917, American President Woodrow Wilson proclaimed that the United States had to join Great Britain, France, and Russia in their war against the Central Powers (Germany, Austro-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire) in order to “make the world safe for democracy.” Wilson wanted to use the power of the United States to change the world into a place that looked and acted more like America. Change is complicated, however, and the same year that the United States entered World War I (which had been going on in Europe since 1914), the people of Russia rose up and revolted against their king (or Czar), Nicolas II.

The Russian people had suffered terrible hardships during the war, and many of them were increasingly attracted to a small group of revolutionaries called the *Bolsheviks*, led by Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky. The Bolsheviks, better known as the communists or “reds” (after the color of the communist flag), promised to give up the war against Germany. The Bolsheviks kept their promise, and this helped them gain the support of many Russians who were sick of the war. The Bolsheviks eventually gained complete control of Russia and began to transform it into a communist state called the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (the Soviet Union, or U.S.S.R.). Despite the wishes of leaders like President Wilson, Russia (the U.S.S.R.) was now becoming even less like America than it had been before.



IMAGE 1: Woodrow Wilson, U.S. President (1913-1921)



IMAGE 2: Vladimir Il'ich Lenin, Communist revolutionary, leader of the Bolshevik party and first Premier of the Soviet Union

A popular high-school history textbook (*America: Pathways to the Present*) argues that the communist system of government in the Soviet Union meant that:

- The government owned all the land and property.
- A single political party controlled the government.
- Individuals had no rights that the government was bound to respect.
- The Soviet government promised to stir up revolution in other countries and spread Communism throughout the world.

1. Fill in the chart below to highlight **three important ways** the Soviet Communist system of government was *different* than the system of government found here in the United States.

	USA	USSR
1)		
2)		
3)		

2. Some historians would argue that the textbook definition of communism given above is not entirely accurate. It might, however, accurately reflect what many Americans *believed* about Communism in 1917. Why might many of these Americans have been afraid of the Soviet Communist government? You can use the chart above to help you answer this question.

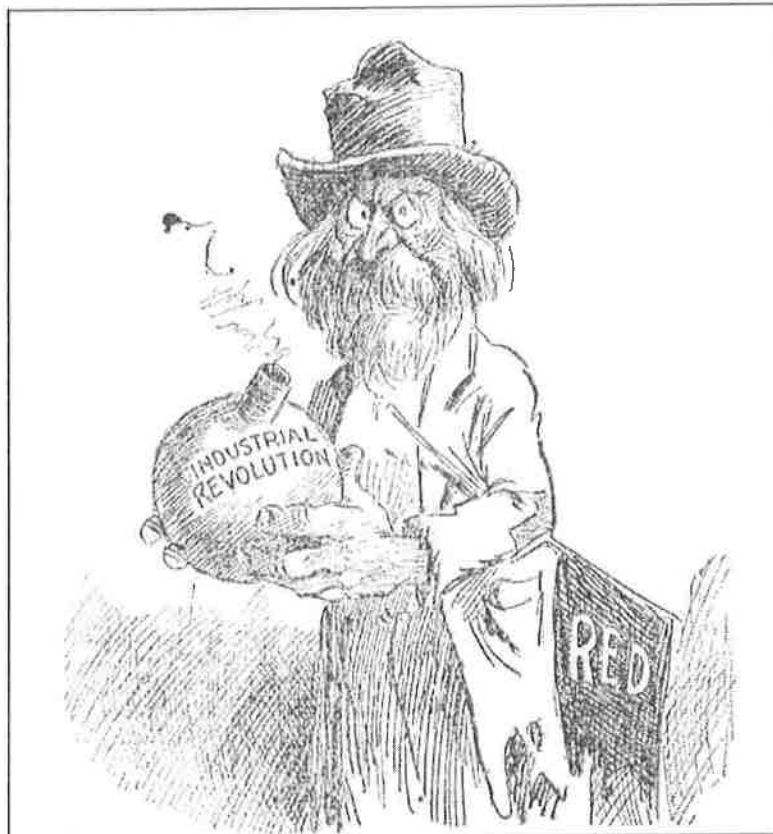
Take a look at the three political cartoons to the right, and on the following page, which were created in response to the **turmoil** affecting the United States after World War I. The three cartoons have similar messages.

Then, choose one of the cartoons and analyze it carefully by filling out the Primary Source Analysis Worksheet that follows. If you are working in a group, each member of the group should analyze a different cartoon. You can compare your findings after you have finished the analysis.



IMAGE 6, top: Kirby, "Coming Out Of the Smoke" (October 10, 1919)

IMAGE 7, right: Morris, "Curses, It Won't Explode In America" (October 18, 1919)



Glossary

turmoil: a state of extreme confusion or agitation; commotion or tumult.

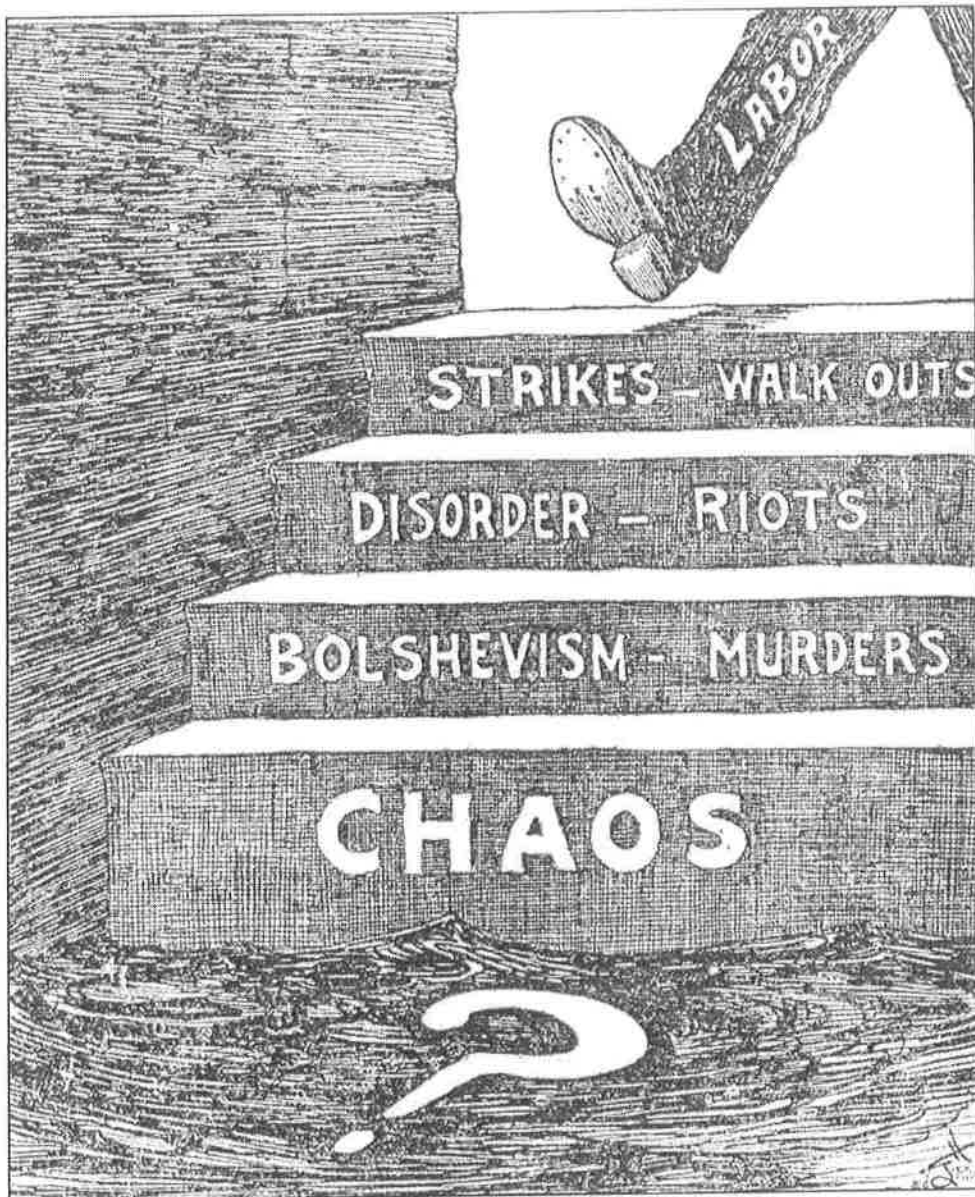


IMAGE 8: Greene, "Step by Step" (November 1, 1919)

PRIMARY SOURCE ANALYSIS WORKSHEET – POLITICAL CARTOONS

Content:

1. Who is the author of this cartoon?
2. When was it created?
3. What is the author describing; in other words, what is the author's subject?
4. How might the title of the cartoon help you to understand its meaning?

Perspective:

1. How does the author portray, or picture, the subject of this cartoon? In other words, what is the author's perspective?
2. Does the author seem to have positive or negative feelings about the subject of this cartoon? How can you tell?
3. How might the author have been trying to influence the way that you, the reader, feel about the subject of this cartoon?

Context:

1. What was happening around the time when this cartoon was created that might have affected its content?

Corroboration and Significance:

1. Does this cartoon support or challenge what you already know or have learned about its subject? If so, how?
2. What can this cartoon teach us about the past?

Conclusions:

1. From whose perspective, or point of view, was this cartoon created?
2. What is the message, or thesis, that the author is attempting to communicate to the reader?

The Seditlon Act

After a bomb blew up in front of U.S. **Attorney General** A. Mitchell Palmer's home in Washington D.C., he used laws that had been passed during the war to launch a campaign against those he suspected of being **subversives**. One of these laws, The **Sedition Act** (1918), made it a federal crime to criticize the government or Constitution of the United States.

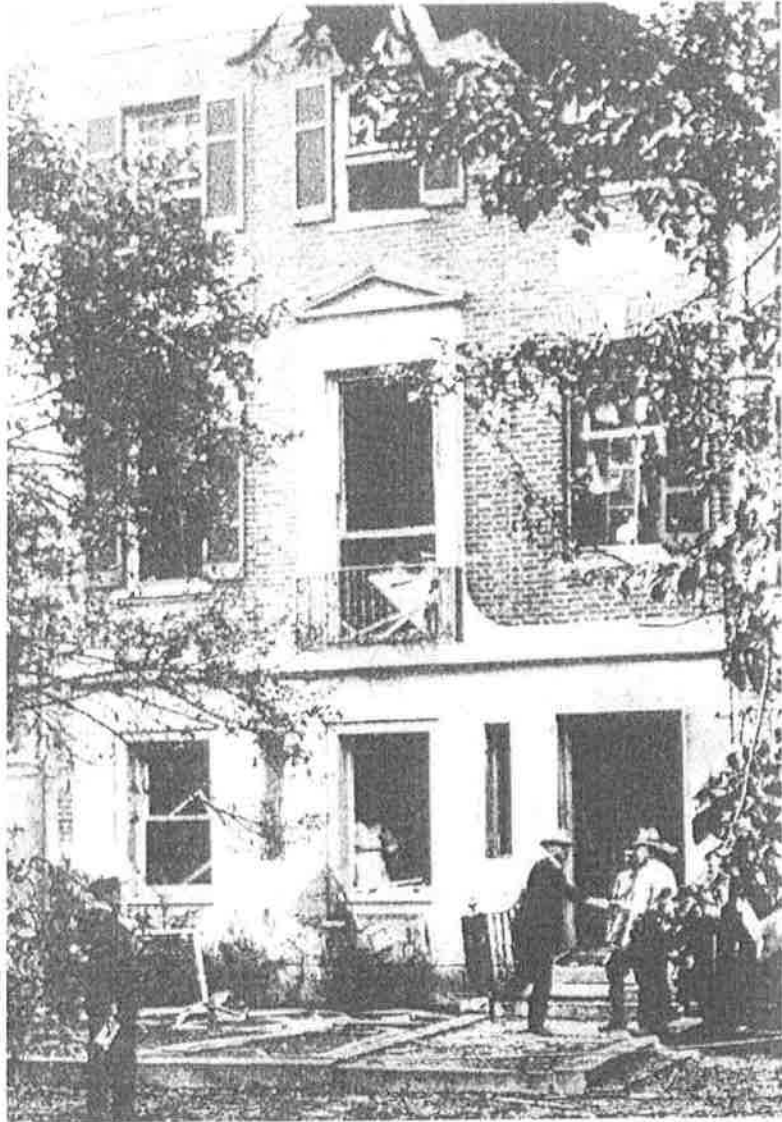


IMAGE 9: Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer's house after a bomb blew up in front of it on June 14, 1919

1. How might Americans have connected the attempted bombing of the government's top lawyer in 1919 (Image 9) to ideas expressed in the three political cartoons that you analyzed above? You can refer to one or more of the cartoons in answering.

Glossary

Attorney General: the head of the U.S. Department of Justice and a member of the President's cabinet.

The Palmer (and Hoover) Raids

Although it certainly seems to have been unconstitutional, many people supported Attorney General Palmer's use of the Sedition Act in his campaign to arrest suspected subversives. Palmer targeted labor leaders and outspoken radical intellectuals. His officials, under the direction of Palmer's special assistant, J. Edgar Hoover (who would later lead the FBI for many years), conducted raids on **anarchist** organizations, schools, and other gathering places in over thirty cities nationwide. Thousands of people were arrested and jailed. Most were recent immigrants to the United States. Almost 250 were deported back to the Soviet Union, including the outspoken anarchist and feminist activist, Emma Goldman.



IMAGE 12: Anarchist Emma Goldman

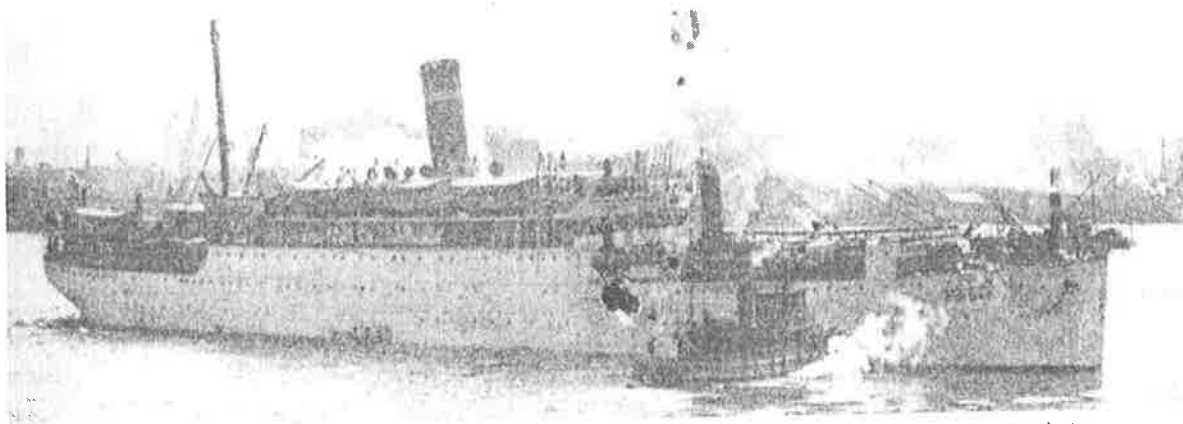


IMAGE 13: "The Soviet Ark"—a United States army transport carrying 249 Russian Reds as America's Christmas present to Lenin and Trotsky

1. Look at the picture in Image 13, above. Why were these people arrested and deported?

The Sedition Act empowered Attorney General Palmer to round up people, not for things they had done, but for expressing their thoughts and beliefs. They were arrested because they spoke or wrote words

that the government claimed were dangerous. But doesn't this conflict with the right to free speech protected by the First Amendment?

Justifying Detentions and Deportations

Many Americans' feelings about the Palmer Raids and suspected "subversives" were probably influenced

by statements made by government officials like Attorney General Palmer. Here is how Palmer himself ex-

plained his actions in 1920, in an essay called "The Case Against the 'Reds.'"

Read the passage and answer the questions that follow.

*My information showed that communism in this country was an organization of thousands of **aliens** who were direct allies of Trotzky [a leader of the Russian Communist Revolution and the Soviet Union] . . . it showed that they were making the same glittering promises of lawlessness, of criminal **autocracy** to Americans that they had made to the Russian **peasants**. How the Department of Justice discovered upwards of 60,000 of these organized **agitators** of the Trotzky doctrine [Communism] in the United States is the **confidential** information upon which the Government is now sweeping the nation clean of such alien filth.*

1. According to Palmer, who was working together with the communists in America against the United States?
2. How many communists does Palmer say were working to overthrow the United States government?
3. Does Palmer explain how the United States government got the information it used to pursue suspected "subversives"?
4. Who is Palmer referring to when he says the government will sweep America clean of "alien filth"?
5. Why do you think he describes the aliens as "filth"? How is Palmer trying to influence his readers' opinions by using such terms?

Glossary

autocracy: a government in which one person possesses unlimited power.

peasant: a country person; a rustic.

confidential: secret.

By the summer of 1920, the public gradually lost interest in Palmer and his campaign against subversives, in part because he predicted a series of terrorist attacks that failed to occur. The **paranoia** that had gripped America for over a year passed and Palmer was increasingly criticized for conducting searches without warrants and for denying detainees legal representation (he didn't let them have lawyers, even though the Constitution promises a lawyer to anyone accused

of a crime). When a bomb went off on Wall Street in New York City in September 1920, most Americans probably considered it the act of a crazy person rather than part of a communist plot against America. Palmer, once considered a possible presidential candidate, was largely forgotten.

The Palmer Raids and the Red Scare paranoia did, however, frustrate the labor movement's attempt to increase its influence in the United States. The Red Scare also helped convince

many Americans to support a dramatic change in the nation's immigration policy. Until the early 1920s, the United States had very few laws that stopped immigrants from coming here (racist regulations that restricted the entry of Asians, especially Chinese, were the great exception). In 1924, however, America became a "gatekeeping" nation for the first time, closing its doors to most Central and Eastern European immigration.

Closing the Gate

Study the political cartoon below and then fill in the Primary Source Analysis Worksheet that follows. After you have finished working with the chart, be prepared to explain how this cartoon—created during the Red Scare of 1919-1920—might have influenced the decision to drastically decrease immigration to the United States in 1924.

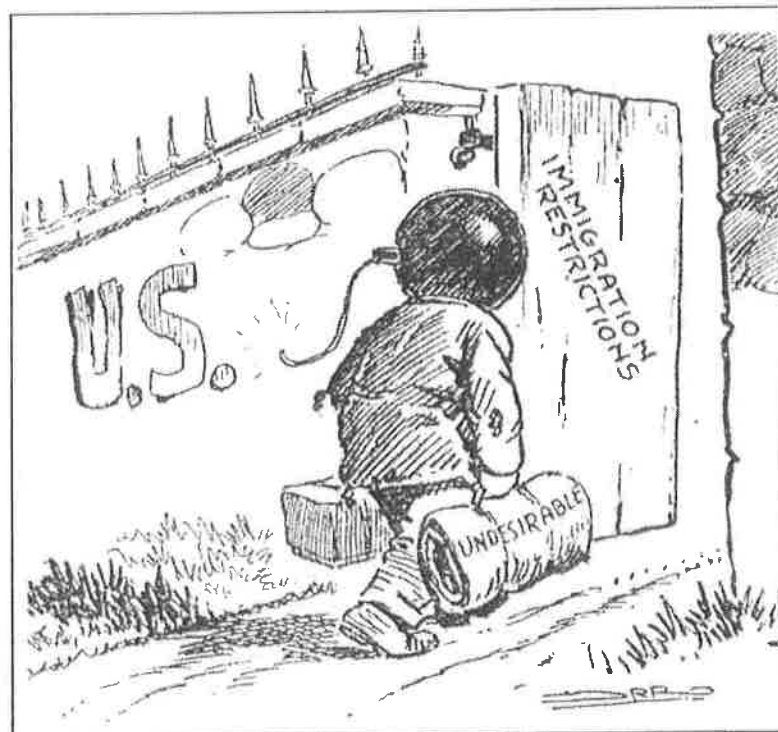


IMAGE 15: Orr, "Close the Gate"

PRIMARY SOURCE ANALYSIS WORKSHEET — CLOSE THE GATE

Content:

1. Who is the author of this cartoon?
2. When was it created?
3. What is the author describing; in other words, what is the author's subject?
4. How might the title of the cartoon help you to understand its meaning?

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2. What is the message, or thesis, that the author is attempting to communicate to the reader?
3. How do you think this cartoon might have influenced the decision to drastically decrease immigration to the United States in 1924?