Was the “Red Scare” after World War I a reaction to a genuine communist or anarchist threat, or was it a government attempt to silence domestic critics?

**Viewpoint:** The postwar Red Scare was an overreaction to the Socialist Party, which was already in serious decline, and the threat of communism was exaggerated.

**Viewpoint:** The Palmer raids were a legitimate response to a real threat posed by the American Communist Party, and its controllers in Moscow.

In these two essays, Margaret Mary Barrett and Robert J. Allison take different positions on the Red Scare that swept the United States after World War I. Barrett argues that the Wilson administration, under the leadership of Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer, carried out raids on the Communist Party and prosecuted a variety of radicals, including Socialist Party leader Eugene V. Debs, in a cynical attempt to stifle dissenting opinions. The Palmer raids are rightly seen as an overreaction to a spurious threat, she argues, and the Wilson administration used the pretext of an international communist menace to round up union leaders and other Americans with legitimate grievances.

Allison, on the other hand, argues that the Communist Party posed a real danger to American society in 1919. Though Palmer’s raids may have been heavy-handed, and may actually have resulted in the expansion of the communist movement by driving it underground, they served to warn communists that the United States government would not permit a violent revolution.

Which interpretation is correct? It is possible to think that both are right—that the Communist Party posed a threat, but that the Wilson administration overreacted and in arresting anarchists and socialists such as Debs, it was not limiting its scope to communists. In addition, constitutional rights were trampled. It is impossible, however, to know what would have happened without the Palmer raids or to credit the failure of communists to stage a revolution in the United States solely to the actions of the Wilson administration. Certainly, if Allison is right in his interpretation, it is clear that Party leaders in Moscow did not have a clear enough sense of American politics to have successfully orchestrated a revolution in the United States.
The postwar Red Scare was an overreaction to the Socialist Party, which was already in serious decline, and the threat of communism was exaggerated.

To U.S. Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer and many Washington legislators, it may have appeared that socialism was a serious threat to the American public in the period immediately following World War I. The Socialist Party, however, was not and had never been a serious contender to overtake democracy. Plagued by internal factions and a diversity that hampered any real political progress, the party was never in a position to threaten the existing economic and political structure. Moreover, antiradical legislation and the party's opposition to World War I made it unpopular, without leadership, and with little of its membership remaining in 1919. The Red Scare was therefore an overreaction and an attempt to defeat an entity that was never a credible threat to American democracy, because the movement could not mobilize voters. Socialist strength reached a pinnacle in 1912 when 6 percent of the popular vote, approximately 897,000 ballots, supported Eugene V. Debs in the presidential election. This showing—the movement's best effort—was hardly a force to be reckoned with. Additionally, at the time there were only 117,984 members in the Socialist Party.

Socialism was not a widespread national movement. Socialist candidates had succeeded in many local elections, but victory was confined to cities with large industrial-labor sectors. In 1911 there were thirty-three industrial towns with socialist administrations, including Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Berkeley, California; Butte, Montana; and Flint, Michigan. Outside of several select industrial towns, socialism was not a popular national movement. In many regions throughout the South, the socialist movement failed to find any followers at all.

Even less popular in the United States was the doctrine of socialism, the ultimate goal of which was to replace democracy with a classless, worker-based economic system. The main benefit to the workers would be security in quality of life, wages, and standards of living. Yet, socialism was unpopular as a long-term choice in the United States for several reasons. Material prosperity as a result of economic expansion in the early twentieth century garnered a great deal of faith in American capitalism, which also offered workers better opportunities for individual social mobility. On the whole, both prosperity and positive experiences with the American economic and political system led workers to reject the doctrines of socialism. Thus, socialist ideas, particularly those that advocated better working conditions, appealed primarily to the working classes. The idea of a new form of government was never popular among voters in the period up until World War I.

Even if Americans had been willing to accept and vote for socialism, the party was never capable of mobilizing voters. First of all it was plagued by a myriad of internal factions. The right wing believed they could use the existing state apparatus to bring about the gradual growth of socialized production. Left-wing socialists believed they could immobilize the state apparatus by electing socialists to public office and then use the revolutionary union, and the general strike, to lock out employers, seize industry on the shop level, and set up a trade-union state. Many other smaller factions fought within the party, each attempting to pursue its own course of action. The chaos of conflicting opinions and goals resulted in a weak movement with undefined objectives.

The Socialist Party did not even have a clearly articulated plan for organizing workers. They refused to deal with the American Federation of Labor (AFL), an organization of skilled laborers. It was also at odds with many members of organized labor who did not support socialism. Dogmatic socialists refused to cooperate with other labor-reform movements that did not reflect socialist interests. The party officially refused to participate in labor's day-to-day struggles; only occasionally did it support major strikes and labor-defense cases. On the whole, their support of labor was half-hearted and unreliable.

It is no surprise that such an erratic and disorganized party was never truly successful at mobilizing a significant number of voters. The Socialist Party never committed itself to being a political organization. It was a worker-supported revolutionary sect, but never a committed political party. Socialists therefore not only failed to establish political machines at the local level, they didn't even attempt to build them. Outside of Milwaukee and several other small industrial cities, the Socialists did not have systems in place to distribute literature, get voters registered and to the polls, watch the count, and perform the basic tasks of an emerging political party. They were too disorganized to be a serious contender in most elections.
Between 1912 and 1917 socialism declined as a result of the unpopularity of its ideology and the party's ineptitude. In addition, a series of events further crippled the party and its reputation. First, a segment of the membership departed from the party after a series of battles at the 1913 Socialist convention in Indianapolis, dropping membership from 118,000 in 1912 to about 96,000. After a slight rise in 1914, it then declined to 79,000 in 1915. Membership declined further when World War I broke out in Europe and the party opposed both the war and later U.S. involvement in the hostilities. Their opposition effectively crippled what remained of an already shaky movement. The Socialist Party cut itself off from the labor movement and created widespread distrust of itself among the American people. Additional members, including many intellectuals, left the party. Almost its entire intellectual contingent, including the writer Upton Sinclair and the painter Charles Russell, resigned from the party to support President Woodrow Wilson's declaration of war. What remained of the party was impotent to effect change and unpopular among the workers, as well as among the general populace.

Despite their utter lack of power, the socialists were defiant and belligerent in their opposition to the war. Nearly all its top leadership were strongly and vocally opposed to the conflict. Party leader Eugene V. Debs, and many other socialists, wrote antiwar editorials and gave antiwar lectures. At this time, any clear examination of the party leadership, membership, resources, and ability to arouse public interest, would have shown how ridiculous and ineffective their critiques were at recruiting additional party members. The socialists were never—particularly at this point—a threat to the United States.

The U.S. government, however, was worried about the existence of internal-security issues during World War I. Several pieces of legislation were enacted that punished those considered “disloyal.” These laws successfully decimated what little remained of the Socialist Party. The Espionage Act, which became law on 15 June 1917, gave the federal government the power to censor newspapers and ban them from the mails, and made the obstruction of the draft or enlistment service punishable by fine of up to $1,000 and twenty-years imprisonment. The Trading with the Enemy Act of 6 October 1917 was another attempt at ending socialist communication. It authorized censorship of all communications moving in or out of the United States. A specific section in the Espionage Act that allowed the postmaster general to censor all letters, circulars, newspapers, pamphlets, books, and other materials violating provisions of the act nearly destroyed all socialist publications.

The Espionage Acts immobilized the Socialist Party leadership as well. Many leaders were brought to trial under the act for writing and speaking against the war. Several party members, including Victor L. Berger, Adolph F. Germer, the party's national executive secretary, and many others were convicted in a Chicago federal court for obstructing the draft and enlistment services. The editors of The Masses, a Marxist literary magazine, were twice brought to trial under the Espionage Act. More than one hundred members of the International Workers of the World (IWW) were found guilty in a mass trial at Chicago, and there were numerous other cases involving little-known members of the Socialist Party. Debs was tried because he told a Socialist Party convention in June 1918 that the Allies were “out for plunder” and he later defended the Bolsheviks in Russia. As a result he was convicted for violating the Espionage and Sedition Acts.

By 1919, when Palmer embarked on his nationwide anti-Red crusade, the Socialist Party was in disarray, without publications and leadership. Palmer, who took office in 1912, had seen its decline and had overseen wartime legislation bring dissent to a halt. In spite of the fact that the Socialist Party was nearly extinct, Palmer embarked on a fierce campaign to round up socialists and to defeat an enemy that had already been defeated by their own ineffectiveness, unpopularity, and domestic wartime legislation. To call Palmer's raids an overreaction would be an understatement. He inflated the communist issue beyond all rationality. It was an overreaction and gross misrepresentation of a threat that no longer existed.

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**Viewpoint:**

The Palmer raids were a legitimate response to a real threat posed by the American Communist Party, and its controllers in Moscow.

The postwar Red Scare was not an overreaction. American society was threatened by two distinct and powerful movements—by anarchists, who sought to destroy all government in the interest of creating an international brotherhood...
The Bolshevik Revolution of November 1917 completely under the control of Moscow after 1919 and who sought to spread communist revolution around the world. The Palmer raids, as well as the arrest of communist and anarchist leaders, was not an overreaction, but a necessary action taken to protect the liberty of all Americans by arresting the revolutionaries who hoped to install a proletarian dictatorship.

The Bolshevik Revolution of November 1917 was the worst thing ever to happen to the American radical movement. No longer would the humanistic ideas of socialists, anarchists, and populists challenge the economic power of American capital. The success of the Bolsheviks, of Lenin’s theory of revolution, meant not only that communists had a successful formula for revolution, but that a Leninist communist movement had a nation from which to operate. By 1919 the Communist Party of the Soviet Union controlled the branches in every part of the world, which all followed the Leninist idea of the Party as a disciplined vanguard of the revolution, which must not deviate from the correct line. Thus radical activities in the United States were directed from Moscow, and though American radicals may have believed that the Soviet Union had only the best interests of the world’s workers at heart, in truth the interests of the Soviet Union had the primary place.

On 2 September 1919, the Communist Party of the United States was born at a Chicago convention. With 75,000 dues-paying members, the Communists also had more than one million sympathizers and noncommunist supporters. With offices throughout the country, communists printed newspapers and magazines in English and twenty-two other languages, distributing propaganda throughout the United States. Emissaries went to the Soviet Union to affiliate the Communist Party of the United States with the Communist International (Comintern), which was directing revolutionary activity in Europe and Asia.

Lenin’s Party had been a small but disciplined group. In order to maintain its solidarity of purpose, each member totally committed himself or herself to the revolution. The Party had operated in secret, outlawed by the tsarist police and military. When the tsar’s regime collapsed in the spring of 1917, a liberal republican government took its place. The Bolsheviks, small but well-organized and disciplined, took advantage of the turmoil in Russia and the inability of the Kerensky government to restore order to prepare for their coup d’etat. Strikes and domestic unrest in Russia opened the way for the tightly organized Bolsheviks to seize power in November, in the interests, said, of Russia’s proletariat. Having seized power using secrecy and ruthless force, the Bolsheviks maintained it in the same way.

The American Communist Party, and every other communist party in the world, had to operate in the same way. It was the successful way to revolution, Lenin believed, and the Soviets would supply desperately needed funds to carry out revolutionary activities. When asked, “What makes a good Communist?” Comintern president Grigory Yev-
seyevich Zinovyev replied, “A good communist is a comrade who loyally carries out a decision of his party, regardless of what the decision asks him to do, and even though at the time he does not see the logic for the decision and disagrees with it.” In Santiago, Chile, before its Communist Party was crushed by the military in 1973, it was said that you could tell when it snowed in Moscow because Santiago’s Communists put on their overcoats. The Party knew best, and the Party in Moscow knew best of all.

In 1919 Moscow prepared for international revolution, supporting or sponsoring strikes and revolutionary activity throughout Europe. When the American communists formed their own party, they joined this disciplined and committed international movement planning to liberate the working class of the world. The world did seem to be on the verge of revolution—in London, Liverpool, and other English cities the police and other municipal employees went on strike. With the police striking, no one was prepared to keep order, and lawless people rioted, raped, looted, and burned property. In every industrial country workers went on strike, demanding higher wages. The strikes were either supported by or sponsored by the communists, who hoped to use this labor unrest to create the same kind of revolutionary conditions as had allowed the Bolshevik coup d’état. A wave of strikes and race riots in the United States seemed to offer the communists their opportunity.

A strike in Brooklyn by the conductors and motormen on the rapid transit system was the occasion for communists to call for the creation of soviets, committees of workers which would form the basic unit of government in a soviet system. In the coal and steel industries, workers prepared to strike: William Z. Foster, a communist, led the steel workers, and other communists prepared to take control of the coal miners union. Throughout the country police and municipal workers organized unions.

The Communist Party took a leading role in organizing unions. In 1921, Lenin declared that communists must devote their attention to unions, either organizing new ones or taking over existing ones. Benjamin Gitlow, an officer of the Communist Party, later recalled in The Whole of their Lives: Communism in America, A Personal History and Intimate Portrayal of Its Leaders (1948) how the party sought to take control of unions. Members of the party who were members of the union would call for higher wages or make other demands—often reasonable ones. Communist workers would gradually escalate their demands to the point of being unreasonable. Noncommunist union leaders, knowing the demands were unreasonable—that they could not be obtained without a bitter and divisive strike—would resist calling for a walkout. The communists would charge their opponents of selling out to management, of opposing what was in the best interest of union members, or of incompetence. They then would call for new leaders to replace the lackeys of the bourgeoisie and use all kinds of tactics to win support within the union. These campaigns would be closely supervised by Moscow. “Not even the Executive Council of the American Federation of Labor,” Gitlow wrote, “gathers such a voluminous amount of information concerning the unions” as the Soviet Union’s Communist Party Political Committee.

One week after the Communist Party of the United States was formed in 1919, the Boston police went on strike. The absence of a police force led to a sickening wave of violence in Boston, as stores were looted, women were raped, and people were robbed in the streets. This upheaval was exactly the kind of civil unrest the Bolsheviks had exploited in Russia to convince the Russian people that they could restore order, that the chaos was the result of capitalism’s death throes, that a worker’s government could eliminate the disorders and violence. In Boston, the communists hoped to use the police strike to the same
end. Rioting and lawlessness would demonstrate the ineffectiveness of the civil government, while the reasonable demands of the police must either be accepted or their union crushed. Communists imagined that the civil government would be forced to negotiate with the police, a victory for the union; or it would be forced to use military power against its own police, a sign of heavy-handedness.

Calvin Coolidge, governor of Massachusetts, announced that no one had a right to strike against the public interest, so he called out the militia and restored order. He ended the police strike before it could turn into a revolution. Leninist doctrine, though, teaches that the communists will never lose a strike. The workers may lose—as the Boston police had lost—but the fundamental purpose of a strike is to destabilize capitalist society and give the Communist Party an opportunity to make propaganda gains. In the disastrous wake of the Boston police strike, the communists pointed to the heavy-handed tactics of the state in rejecting the legitimate demands of the police, winning sympathy for the strikers among liberals and other workers.

Two months after the strike in Boston, on the second anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution, communists around the country prepared for another series of confrontations with established authorities. A wave of strikes in October, in the coal and steel industries, had demonstrated the restlessness of American workers. In New York, communists prepared for a massive rally at Rutgers Square, launching a series of public rallies in support of strikers. The police began raiding communist headquarters on 5 November. New York’s mayor banned the proposed Rutgers Square demonstration. Communist leaders announced they would rally without his permission. The mayor sealed off the square, preventing the rally. In an alternative meeting, one speaker shouted “The day is coming soon when the proletariat will be able to meet the capitalist class bayonet for bayonet and machine gun for machine gun. The government that will send armed men to the coal regions to deal with strikers is on its last legs.”

Also present at the rally was Ludwig C. K. A. Martens, sent by the Soviets as their ambassador to the United States. The United States had not recognized the Soviet regime, but that was of little concern to Martens—he had come to the United States to promote the international revolution, and every year received $360,000 from Europe for the purpose of sponsoring revolution in America.

Before this revolution could be brought about, the U.S. government responded. The Department of Justice arrested foreign-born communists throughout the country in a well-timed and coordinated series of raids. On 8 November 1918 New York police and federal agents arrested two thousand communist leaders and confiscated twenty-five tons of papers. These November raids actually benefited the communists, who were quickly able to regroup and reopen their headquarters, while also blasting the U.S. government for trying to suppress their right to free speech.

In January the United States struck again. Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer coordinated an even larger sweep against the communists. Five hundred communists were arrested in Boston, and three thousand in New York, in a simultaneous, synchronized, national wave of raids of homes and headquarters. These Palmer raids, which resulted in the deportation to Russia of foreign-born communists, or the indictment of native-born communists for violating state sedition laws, effectively ended the Communist Party’s career as a public entity. Though Moscow tried to revive the party, the fear of arrest kept membership low.

Low membership, though, was not necessarily a sign of weakness. Those who remained, facing the threat of prison or deportation, were loyal and committed. Summer soldiers and sunshine patriots would stay away, while only the true believers—Zinovyev’s “good Communists”—would answer the call. Sixteen thousand communists remained in the Party, while nearly sixty thousand members left. Though most never again joined the Party, they continued to sympathize with it and to support its mission as they became active in other organizations. Thus the Palmer raids had the curious result of driving the Communist Party underground, making it into almost as tightly disciplined a movement as the Russian Communist Party had been, while at the same time sending sixty thousand former communists out to infiltrate or organize other groups.

The Communist Party of the United States, though small, formed a potent threat to American society. The Communist Party of Russia in 1905 had been even smaller than its American counterpart, and yet, through its iron discipline and manipulation of trade unions and related groups, had managed to install itself in power by 1917. The Communist International, which directed communist parties around the world, was committed to international revolution. Had the United States government not acted to crush the party, the party may have destroyed the government.

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