

The Revolution Will Not Be Mailed: The U.S. Post Office's Role in Antiradicalism during and after World War I

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ABSTRACT. During World War I, the United States government sought to suppress the activities of union members, socialists, anarchists, and other radicals viewed as disloyal and disruptive to the war effort. In the aftermath of the war, the U.S. government's efforts to quell radicalism reached new heights, including mass raids and deportations headed by the Bureau of Investigation and Bureau of Immigration. The U.S. Post Office Department also played a vital, yet understudied, role in wartime and postwar antiradicalism. Using records from the National Archives concerning the Espionage Act, this paper examines the Post Office's antiradical activities during and after World War I. The Post Office curtailed the ability of individuals, labor unions, and political organizations to communicate a range of dissident ideas through the mail. It also provided evidence for the prosecution and deportation of radicals for unlawful speech. The Post Office played a pivotal role in a period of ideological censorship and persecution that became a turning point for American discourses on loyalty, free speech, and civil liberties.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the early twentieth century, the American labor movement included anti-capitalist activists who advocated for a range of radical ideologies such as anarchism, syndicalism, and communism. The federal government was particularly interested in suppressing anarchists, who opposed both capitalism and government, and anyone the government considered to be "Bolshevik socialists," a broad term that government officials used to describe any socialist who seemed to believe in revolution or sympathize with the Bolsheviks in Russia (the Bolsheviks advocated for withdrawing from World War I, and did so once they were in power). Once the war began, their revolutionary ideologies made radicals natural suspects for sedition, and some radicals openly protested the war. While some radicals (especially in Europe) supported the Allies, viewing the war as an unfortunate but necessary battle against German imperialism, many radicals in the United States considered war to be at odds with their anti-capitalist, anti-nationalist, and, in some cases, pacifist philosophies.¹ These activists communicated their radical philosophies and anti-war messages in lecture halls, on soap boxes, and on factory floors. But mostly, they communicated through the mail.

Mail was central to the organization and culture of radical social movements in the United States. Historians have described the radical press as both "the movement's public face" and its "institutional base."² The press served as the primary means of communicating radicals' ideas, networking to build their communities, and fundraising to support labor and community organizing. In his study of the *Cronaca Sovversiva*, one of the largest Italian-language periodicals to have its second-class mailing privileges revoked by the Post Office Department, historian Andrew Hoyt noted that "publications, and not political

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parties or trade unions, connected thousands of Italian-speaking militants across the Atlantic world. [Publications] facilitated the movement of people and information, the creation of identity, the exchange of money, and the spread of tactics, thereby making possible mass-mobilization for collective action.”³ Historian Kenyon Zimmer described how the radical press created identity and community with the language of Benedict Anderson’s “imagined communities,” writing that anarchist print culture “created an imagined, text-based transnational community of anarchists, and transmitted the movement’s ideology across space while sustaining collective identities across time.”⁴

Hundreds of radical periodicals formed these text-based communities throughout the United States; many had circulations of tens of thousands, with subscribers in thousands of locations who shared the papers in workplaces, bookstores, and labor halls.⁵ In the late 1910s, the federal government declared the majority of the most popular radical periodicals to be non-mailable, revoked their second-class mailing privileges, and, in many cases, imprisoned or deported their publishers. This history of mail restriction is understudied, with most literature on the “First Red Scare” focusing on raids and mass arrests by the nascent Bureau of Investigation. This paper examines the central role that the Post Office Department played in this period of antiradical mobilization, arguing that its programs of mail control and surveillance helped suppress radical organizations and reshape America’s ideological landscape.

LEGAL PRETEXTS FOR RESTRICTING TEXTS

The federal response to dissidents during and after World War I built on earlier efforts to thwart radicals. On 6 September 1901, President William McKinley was shot by a self-proclaimed anarchist, dying from his wounds on 14 September. On 3 December 1901, his successor, Theodore Roosevelt, delivered his First Annual Message to Congress (what would now be called the State of the Union address). Roosevelt’s message was a fiery polemic against anarchism, describing it as “no more an expression of ‘social discontent’ than picking pockets or wife-beating.”⁶ Roosevelt called anarchists “more dangerous than any other” criminals, their ideology “a crime against the whole human race” and “of far blacker infamy” than even the slave trade.⁷

Roosevelt called for criminalizing anarchist speech, as he proclaimed, “No man or body of men preaching anarchistic doctrines should be allowed at large any more than if preaching the murder of some specified private individual. Anarchistic speeches, writings, and meetings are essentially seditious and treasonable.”⁸ However, most of Roosevelt’s policy proposals focused on anarchist immigration rather than speech. Soon after Roosevelt’s address, Congress passed the Immigration Act of 1903. Also called the Anarchist Exclusion Act, this new law empowered the federal government to exclude (deny entry to) or deport immigrants who believed in anarchism. It was the first law to restrict immigration based on political beliefs since the

controversial and short-lived Alien and Sedition Act of 1798. No federal laws were passed in 1903 to restrict “anarchistic speeches, writings, or meetings,” as Roosevelt also had desired, but his association of anarchist speech with sedition and treason would later become entrenched in policy.

On 28 May 1908, during a renewed scare surrounding anarchist connections to recent labor unrest and assassinations,⁹ Congress finally acted against anarchist speech. Congress amended existing obscenity laws that barred indecent or obscene literature (ranging from erotica to information on contraception) from the mail, expanding the definition of obscene or indecent to include “matter of a character tending to incite arson, murder, or assassination.”¹⁰ Anarchism was a philosophy that advocated for a stateless, cooperative form of socialism, and most anarchist publications in the United States advocated for tactics like labor strikes and public protest, not assassinations. In practice, few (if any) anarchist publications demanded readers murder or assassinate anyone, but the Post Office barred general discussions of revolutionary politics and discussions of McKinley’s assassination from the mail. Anarchists had already been punished under earlier obscenity laws: for example, three editors of the anarchist weekly *Firebrand* were arrested in 1897 for including a Walt Whitman poem about lovemaking, “A Woman Waits for Me,” in one issue.¹¹ The expanded obscenity law allowed political speech to be targeted even if it did not involve sexuality or birth control.

Anarchist publications barred from the mail under obscenity laws in 1908 included *La Questione Sociale* (which Roosevelt called “immoral” for opposing government), *Freiheit*, *Volne Listy*, *Sorgiamo*, and *Nihil*.¹² The anarchist press told readers that the Post Office was informally interrupting the distribution of other anarchist publications such as *Mother Earth*, citing reports that many subscribers did not receive mailed issues.¹³ Clearly, there were many newspapers with radical political leanings, but the federal government lacked the resources to take action against most of them. That changed during World War I, when lawmakers connected the control of radical speech (and radical immigration) to a much more urgent problem than indecency: sedition.

After World War I began in Europe on 28 July 1914, the United States government became increasingly concerned about sedition: speech that incited resistance against the government. In December 1915, President Woodrow Wilson urged Congress to pass laws to purge the country of citizens who sought to “bring the authority and good name of our Government into contempt, [and] to destroy our industries,” as “[s]uch creatures of passion, disloyalty, and anarchy must be crushed out.”¹⁴ A year and a half later, in April 1917, the United States entered World War I. The “disloyalty and anarchy” with which Wilson was concerned before became perceived as an immediate threat to national security.

To respond to this threat, the Espionage Act was signed into law on 15 June 1917. The Espionage Act is best known for making conveying information that would aid military enemies a crime. It also made attempting to cause disloyalty a crime, punishable by a fine and/or up to twenty years in prison.¹⁵ Wilson

wanted the act to allow the president to censor the press, but the Senate removed this provision by a one-vote margin.¹⁶ Rather than giving the president authority over what could appear in print, the Senate bill provided the Post Office with control over what could be sent through the mail. Material that could be declared nonmailable included anything that urged “treason, insurrection, or forcible resistance to any law of the United States.”¹⁷

The Espionage Act empowered the Post Office to use a few different methods to restrict such material. First, a publication (or multiple issues of a periodical) could be held pending an investigation. Second, if it was found to be problematic, the publication could be declared nonmailable by the Post Office’s solicitor (the highest legal authority in the agency; in this period, it was William H. Lamar). The Post Office would not accept nonmailable publications from senders and would inform local postmasters not to deliver them. If the publication was a periodical, future issues would be held for review.

After receiving notice that a publication was declared nonmailable, the postmaster general could revoke the sender’s second-class mailing privileges. Second-class mail included newspapers and other unsealed periodicals, which were delivered in bulk at just 1 cent per pound in 1917, and 1.25 cents per pound starting in 1918.¹⁸ Without second-class privileges, publishers would have to pay the first-class mail rate, 48 cents per pound in 1917–1918, and 32 cents per pound starting July 1919.¹⁹ The vast price difference meant having second-class privileges revoked was cost prohibitive for radical publications that relied on working-class subscribers for revenue.

Since first-class mail was sealed in envelopes, it was more difficult for the Post Office to effectively determine whether its contents violated the Espionage Act. The Post Office could obtain a search warrant, typically by focusing on addresses or names associated with a radical organization. After some radicals received tampered mail or never received expected mail, however, they accused postal inspectors of opening sealed mail without a warrant.²⁰

The Post Office’s powers were expanded further on 6 October 1917, when the Trading with the Enemy Act was passed. Although primarily concerned with wartime trade, the act required that translations of foreign language publications discussing the United States or any country involved in the war, or their policies or international relations, be submitted to the Post Office before they could be mailed.²¹ Any publication that did not file such a translation could be declared nonmailable. The Trading with the Enemy Act also made it unlawful to carry or transport any publications that were nonmailable according to either these provisions or those of the Espionage Act. This extended the Post Office’s legal authority beyond the services it provided, by making it unlawful for civilians and private mail companies to carry material that the Post Office declared nonmailable. This act also provided the Post Office with \$35,000 to hire newspaper readers and translators.²²

Finally, on 16 May 1918, Congress passed a set of amendments to the Espionage Act. (These amendments are often separately referred to as the Sedition Act, although postal officials

tended to prefer “Espionage Act” to encompass the original act and the amendments.) The amended Espionage Act made radical publishers more susceptible to mail restrictions and criminal prosecution. First, it allowed for the prosecution of anyone who would “willfully utter, print, write or publish any disloyal, profane, scurrilous, or abusive language about the form of government of the United States.”²³ This further criminalized dissent and limited people’s ability to be critical of the Espionage Act itself or write about their experiences being prosecuted under it. The expanded Espionage Act also made it unlawful to “encourage resistance to the United States, or to promote the cause of its enemies.”²⁴ Restrictions on encouraging resistance provided further general recourse against dissent, and language concerning the cause of the United States’s enemies provided more specific recourse against publications sympathetic to the Bolsheviks in Russia.

Crucially, this expanded Espionage Act also made it illegal to incite the interruption of production related to the war. This provided the government with additional license to target unions, such as the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). The IWW was an explicitly anti-capitalist union that the U.S. government considered both radical in ideology and a threat to wartime industries. The IWW’s 1916 convention passed a resolution declaring the union members to be “determined opponents of all nationalistic sectionalism, or patriotism, and the militarism preached and supported by our one enemy, the capitalist class. We condemn all wars.”²⁵ The union led copper and lumber strikes soon after the United States entered the war and continued to organize strikes throughout the war. This spurred governors and state legislators to call on the federal government to suppress the union for interrupting wartime production.²⁶

The Post Office started suppressing radical publications, such as the IWW’s, immediately with the 15 June 1917 passing of the original Espionage Act, declaring some issues from that very date nonmailable.²⁷ By 25 May 1918, a Post Office memo listed fifty-nine publications as having had their second-class mailing privileges revoked (while many more had individual issues declared nonmailable). Most of these nonmailable publications were attached to a union or radical political party, and the memo labeled most of them “anarchistic” or “Bolshevistic.”²⁸

In addition to restricting the use of the mail, the Post Office provided evidence for Espionage Act investigations headed by other agencies. In the years during and immediately following World War I, 1,500 people were charged under the Espionage Act, and over 1,000 were convicted.²⁹ Of the over 6,300 radicals for whom deportation warrants were executed between 1918 and 1925, 949 were eventually deported under the Anarchist Exclusion Act.³⁰ Due to conceptual overlap between unlawful uses of the mail, criminal offenses under the Espionage Act, and deportable offenses under immigration statutes, the Post Office was pivotal to many criminal and immigration cases involving political radicals. Through its nonmailable verdicts and revocation of second-class mailing privileges, the Post Office also disrupted the primary medium of communication for hundreds of organizations.

NONMAILABLE MATERIALS

The Post Office did not always provide explanations for why it ruled publications nonmailable or revoked second-class mailing privileges. However, correspondence involving the Post Office solicitor, postmaster general, and other government officials occasionally indicated either why a publication was flagged as potentially nonmailable or ultimately ruled to be mailable or nonmailable. These records provide valuable insight into which publications the federal government was targeting and why.

Naturally, some radical publications were declared nonmailable for their perspectives on the war. Problematic publications often discussed America's reasons for going to war and its foreign policy in Russia. For example, an issue of *Freie Arbeiter Stimme*, a Yiddish anarchist newspaper, was declared nonmailable because it argued that in Russia the Allies were at war not with Germans, but with the Bolsheviks, quoting the "infamous" Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky on the matter.³¹ An especially common (and legally problematic) criticism of the war was that the working class was fighting a war declared by the ruling class. For example, the Bureau of Investigation suggested that *El Rebelde*, a Spanish-language newspaper associated with the IWW, might be nonmailable due to a passage that was translated as, "Workmen before going to war consider if you have anything to defend in it. If you have nothing let them go who have something to loose [*sic*]."³²

The Post Office often declared publications nonmailable for criticisms of wartime curtailments of civil liberties. Another issue of *Freie Arbeiter Stimme* was nonmailable because of an editorial that criticized the "Alien Anarchist Deportation Bill" (Immigration Act of 1918). The editorial characterized the deportation of anarchists as a violation of the freedoms for which soldiers were fighting, writing that the bill, "in the guise of liberty, actually aims at the opposite, and that slowly, slowly as the war goes on, everything for which millions are fighting will slip from out [of] our hands."³³ Although this editorial framed the war as a fight for freedom, its criticism of U.S. immigration law was still deemed disloyal and therefore unlawful.

The Post Office also regularly targeted writings about Espionage Act legal cases. For example, on 21 March 1918, a federal marshal arrested Ricardo Flores Magón and Librado Rivera for violating the Espionage Act by using the mail to send *Regeneración*, the newspaper of the Mexican Liberal Party (PLM).³⁴ Magón and Rivera were organizers within the PLM, an anarchist-influenced organization that was involved in strikes and uprisings before and during the Mexican Revolution. Documents that the Post Office considered when revoking *Regeneración's* second-class mailing privileges included an English-language flyer from the periodical that called for funds for fourteen arrested PLM and IWW members. Postal inspectors circled objectionable passages throughout the flyer that described the case, characterized it as racist, and criticized the penal and judicial systems of Texas.³⁵ Restricting speech critical of laws and criminal cases diminished radicals' capacity to defend themselves, raise

awareness and funds for their cases, and speak freely about perceived injustices.

Even when the Post Office did not indicate specifically objectionable language, it often seemed to focus on specific organizations or ideologies. When questioned by a socialist about the newspaper *American Socialist* being nonmailable, Solicitor Lamar remarked, "You people advocate international socialism, and international socialism is opposed to national governments, and therefore opposed to the government of the United States."³⁶ However, when pressed further, Lamar refused to say what in particular within the pages of *American Socialist* was nonmailable. The editors had hoped that they could simply remove specific objectionable content, but, instead, the Post Office simply revoked the newspaper's second-class mailing privileges.

In another case in April 1918, Solicitor Lamar ruled that a "blank application form for [IWW] membership" was nonmailable.³⁷ The form in question included blank spaces for personal information and the preamble to the IWW constitution.³⁸ This version of the preamble, written in 1908, openly advocated against capitalism and spoke in favor of unionizing and striking by industry (rather than by trade), but it did not mention anything about the war. This suggests the IWW itself and its ideology may have been targeted, rather than specific disruptive or antiwar speech. This is further evidenced by search warrants for first-class mail sent by or to addresses associated with the IWW. In one case, the Post Office received a search warrant to seize and open 40,000 envelopes of such first-class mail; postal inspectors opened 19,810 envelopes as a result of this warrant.³⁹

These envelopes contained 19,534 copies of the *Daily Bulletin* (also known as the *Trial Bulletin* and *IWW Trial Bulletin*), which raised awareness and funds for IWW members' legal cases.⁴⁰ An internal Post Office Department memo stated that most of these bulletins were ruled to be "nonmailable because they contain a cut of 'The Man Behind the Bars.'"⁴¹ This illustration was used by multiple organizations of a man pointing to the viewer from behind prison bars, with the caption, "Remember! We Are In HERE For YOU; You Are Out THERE For US!" (Figure 1). The same internal memo specified that only the illustration, not the "reading matter," violated the Espionage Act.⁴² Besides its portrayal of a prisoner (which the reading matter also discussed) and its evocation of Uncle Sam, this image does not seem to have any direct relevance to the war. Perhaps identifying an image as nonmailable allowed the Post Office to expedite its search through this massive amount of mail. Or perhaps focusing on an image rather than text provided intentional ambiguity to the ruling.

Solicitor Lamar's reasons for nonmailable status were often vague, but he did not always rule against radical publications. For example, the Chicago postmaster, the third assistant postmaster general, Congressman William Mason, and a civilian contacted Solicitor Lamar with concerns about the May 1918 issue of *Young Socialists' Magazine*.⁴³ However, Lamar found that the issue contained only one, unspecific reference to war and therefore declared it mailable.⁴⁴ Although he did not feel he had the

No. 10 **DAILY BULLETIN** No. 10
 Issued by the Defense News Service, 1001 W. Madison St., Chicago, Ill.
 Chicago, Ill., April 12th, 1918.

THE I. W. W. TRIAL AT CHICAGO

JAIL CONDITIONS WHITEWASHED BY "COMMITTEE"

Prosecutor Nebeker Discovers Another "Conspiracy"

The complaint about unsanitary conditions and unhealthful and insufficient food in the Cook County Jail has been investigated. A committee of fourteen federal grand jurors headed by L. A. Smith of Joliet, Ills; looked into the charges made by the I. W. W. boys, and now everything is all right. This committee, after spending some short time in the grim grey corridors of the jail, and gingerly sampling the food, have reported that the inmates have no reason for complaint whatever. Mr. Smith made a statement to the press "Conditions are as good as



Remember!
 We Are In HERE For YOU;
 You Are Out THERE for US!

that come in through the bars when the windows are opened. When it is known that men are locked up three

igation, and report everything to be in fine shape. No doubt Jailor Davies earnestly desired a report of this kind to keep the real horrors of his jail from reaching the public. But the facts in the case have been unaltered by the statement of this so-called 'committee.' The truth is that conditions in the Cook County Jail are worse than almost any other institution in the country.

The I. W. W. prisoners, it will be remembered, were brought to Chicago from jails in all parts of the United States—from coast to coast. It is utter folly to try to tell these men that conditions in the bastille of Cook County compare favorably with other jails. They know better and can prove it. And a real investigation would bear out their contention.

Nebeker Springs Another Good One.
 Mr. Nebeker, the well known Corporation Trust corporation lawyer in

FIGURE 1. "The Man Behind the Bars" illustration, with green highlight by a postal inspector, *Daily Bulletin*, 12 April 1918. From the National Archives, File #51328, Post Office Records Relating to the Espionage Act, Record Group 28, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.

legal authority to declare the magazine nonmailable, a frustrated Lamar bemoaned to New York's assistant U.S. district attorney that it "is not very good material for the youths to read, and [the author] Mr. Pinchet means even more than he says. I do not like the paragraph referring to the IWW and the Bolsheviks."⁴⁵ In another case, the Post Office received multiple complaints about *The Ladies' Garment Cutter*, the newspaper of the Amalgamated Ladies' Garment Cutters' Union. Letters to the Post Office from the War Department claimed the paper "provokes class feeling and a veiled threat of disloyalty"⁴⁶ and said that, although the paper "refrains from saying what it apparently wants to say . . . it means more than mere words say."⁴⁷ However, Lamar found the paper did not violate the Espionage or Trading with the Enemy acts.

In addition to its efforts to control the use of the mail, the Post Office aided other agencies in criminal cases against radicals. For example, the previously mentioned case against Ricardo Flores Magón and Librado Rivera of the PLM grew to a multi-agency project of evidence collection involving any mail related to *Regeneración* and its publishers. The Office of Naval Intelligence

informed the Post Office of a letter intercepted from Magón's wife that indicated that the publishers of *Regeneración* were still mailing the periodical across national borders. Recognizing that "these people are attempting to reach all parts of the world with their propaganda," Naval Intelligence offered to assist "in any way in running them to earth."⁴⁸ The Office of the U.S. Attorney had the Post Office send any materials intercepted from "the Magons [*sic*] or their friends" to their office to help prosecute the Magóns.⁴⁹ Post Office Inspector Cookson was enthusiastic about assisting, sending additional exhibits to aid in Magón and Rivera's prosecution, which he felt would "tend greatly to eliminate such propaganda" in the Southwest.⁵⁰

Magón and Rivera were found guilty on 19 July 1918 and sentenced to twenty and fifteen years in prison, respectively. Magón died in prison from complications related to diabetes in 1922. Rivera was imprisoned until 1923 and then deported to Mexico. Their case was one of many in which the Post Office was instrumental in both prosecuting radicals and restricting mail concerning their cases. Arrests of radical newspaper publishers included Franz Widmer of *L'Era Nova*, Emma Goldman

of *Mother Earth*, Alexander Berkman of *The Blast*, and Luigi Galleani and Giovanni Eramo of the *Cronaca Sovversiva*.⁵¹

REACTIONS TO POSTAL CENSORSHIP

Radicals protested and attempted to subvert the Post Office's suppression. *Il Proletario*, a paper associated with both the Italian Socialist Federation and the IWW, tried to circumvent the Post Office through several means. First, in late 1917, the publishers attempted to mail the periodical without first filing a "true translation" with the Post Office, as the Trading with the Enemy Act required. The Post Office noticed this and rejected the publication from the mail. *Il Proletario*'s editor, Angelo Faggi, then sent the publication through the American Express Company, but this attempt was foiled as well.⁵² In February 1918, Boston's postmaster seized two securely tied bundles of the periodical, wrapped in "American newspapers," containing a total of 300 copies of *Il Proletario*.⁵³ Next, Faggi mailed the periodical through the Post Office, including a "True Translation Filed with the Post Office" disclaimer before any translations were actually submitted. Faggi was arrested by the Bureau of Investigation for mailing these issues, and deported in 1919.

While some tried to circumvent censorship, many also protested it. The Post Office received letters with complaints that it was violating the First Amendment, the definition of nonmailable material was too broad, and/or the solicitor was acting as the editor of all publications in the United States. For example, voters in a mass meeting in Two Rivers, Wisconsin, decided the city should write to the president and postmaster general to demand an end to the "despotic and unconstitutional suppression."⁵⁴

Much of this protest was not even sympathetic to radicals. One pastor, Thomas Woodrow, wrote to the postmaster general saying if socialists "are held back in words and not allowed freedom of expression, they are apt to become more revolutionary in action, which is worse."⁵⁵ This was a prescient point; historians have identified wartime suppression as a spark for more desperate, militant, and violent actions in the late 1910s and early 1920s. For example, anarchists involved in the nonmailable *Cronaca Sovversiva* addressed mail bombs to government officials including Solicitor Lamar.⁵⁶ Even organizations that did not respond with violence still used their suppression as a rallying cry. Figure 2 shows an IWW flyer that lists ways in which the "organization has been foully dealt with," including murder, deportation, being denied the right of free press, and being denied the use of the mails (this flyer was declared nonmailable).⁵⁷

Other members of the public wrote in support of the Post Office. For example, a librarian at Crozer Theological Seminary wrote to Solicitor Lamar, "What the government does is of course right, and we shall be guided accordingly."⁵⁸ Additionally, some concerned citizens, including newspaper publishers, alerted the Post Office to disloyal publications. In September 1917, the *Hartford Times* published an exposé that accused local German-language newspaper *Connecticut Staats-Zeitung* of paying lip service through advertisements for Liberty bonds only to mask

its true anti-American views, including claims such as that the "Allied Nations are only out for Booty [and] the 'war against Autocracy' [is] only an excuse."⁵⁹ William H. Worrell, a philologist at a seminary in Hartford, Connecticut, believed that the *Connecticut Staats-Zeitung* provided "aid and comfort to the enemy," so he sent a copy of the exposé to Solicitor Lamar.⁶⁰

In response to letters of protest across the political spectrum, Solicitor Lamar insisted that his actions were constitutional and that radical publications did, in fact, "handicap the Government in its military interventions."⁶¹ Government actions to suppress radical publications were upheld in the 1919 Supreme Court case *Schenck v. United States* and the 1925 Supreme Court case *Gitlow v. New York*, which both ruled that radical and anti-government speech posed a "clear and present danger" to bring about "substantive evils" and was therefore not constitutionally protected.

THE 1920S AND BEYOND

These Supreme Court rulings against radical speech would not be overturned until 1969's *Brandenburg v. Ohio*, which required a more imminent (rather than abstract) call for violence, revolution, or crime for speech to be unlawful. In the short term, rather than being repealed or overturned, antiradical legislation, such as the Anarchist Exclusion Act, various states' laws against syndicalism or anarchism, and portions of the Espionage Act, gradually fell into disuse.

Records indicate that the Post Office's antiradical activities slowed but continued at least into the early 1920s. For example, letters between the Post Office and the Bureau of Investigation state that copies of dozens of radical publications were pulled from the mail and sent to the Bureau of Investigation throughout 1920,⁶² and the New York-based Swedish socialist newspaper *Folket* was scrutinized by postal officials throughout 1921 (but Lamar's successor, John H. Edwards, ultimately ruled it mailable).⁶³ The National Archives' 1917–1921 collection of Post Office Records Relating to the Espionage Act does not provide a detailed account of the 1920s. Further research in other collections might shed light on shifting dynamics within the Post Office under a new postmaster general and new solicitor in 1921. In lieu of additional primary sources, the secondary literature documents well the general impact of the federal government's campaign against radicalism.

Even though radicals continued to publish their writings, their ideas became increasingly marginal throughout the 1920s. Historian Beverly Gage remarked that, "By the mid-1920s, opposition to radicalism had become a litmus test for entry into American politics . . . the new antiradicalism . . . was more assumed than explained," as activists tried to not sound "communitistic."⁶⁴ This broad shift in American political culture cannot be attributed to the Post Office alone, but the surveillance and censorship of dissident publications during and after World War I seem pivotal.

While antiradicalism may have had a chilling effect on the spectrum of acceptable political opinion, it also spurred free

WITH DROPS OF BLOOD

THE HISTORY OF

THE INDUSTRIAL WORKERS OF THE WORLD HAS BEEN WRITTEN

Ever since the I. W. W. was organized in June, 1905, there has been an inquisitorial campaign against its life and growth, inaugurated by the Chambers of Commerce, Profiteers, large and small, and authorities of State and Nation in temporary power.

The Industrial Workers of the World is a Labor organization composed of sober, honest, industrious men and women. Its chief purposes are to abolish the system of wage slavery and to improve the conditions of those who toil.

This organization has been foully dealt with; drops of blood, bitter tears of anguish, frightful heart pains have marked its every step in its onward march of progress.

- I. W. W. MEMBERS have been murdered.
- I. W. W. MEMBERS have been imprisoned.
- I. W. W. MEMBERS have been tarred and feathered.
- I. W. W. MEMBERS have been deported.
- I. W. W. MEMBERS have been starved.
- I. W. W. MEMBERS have been beaten.
- I. W. W. MEMBERS have been denied the right of citizenship.
- I. W. W. MEMBERS have been exiled.
- I. W. W. MEMBERS have had their homes invaded.
- I. W. W. MEMBERS have had their private property and papers seized.
- I. W. W. MEMBERS have been denied the privilege of defense.
- I. W. W. MEMBERS have been held in exorbitant bail.
- I. W. W. MEMBERS have been subjected to involuntary servitude.
- I. W. W. MEMBERS have been kidnapped.
- I. W. W. MEMBERS have been subjected to cruel and unusual punishment.
- I. W. W. MEMBERS have been "framed and unjustly accused.
- I. W. W. MEMBERS have been excessively fined.
- I. W. W. MEMBERS have died in jail waiting for trial.
- I. W. W. MEMBERS have been driven insane through persecution.
- I. W. W. MEMBERS have been denied the use of the mails.
- I. W. W. MEMBERS have been denied the right to organize.
- I. W. W. MEMBERS have been denied the right of free speech.
- I. W. W. MEMBERS have been denied the right of free press.
- I. W. W. MEMBERS have been denied the right of free assembly.
- I. W. W. MEMBERS have been denied every privilege guaranteed by the Bill of Rights.
- I. W. W. MEMBERS have been denied the inherent rights proclaimed by the Declaration of Independence—Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.
- I. W. W. Halls, Offices and Headquarters have been raided.
- I. W. W. property, books, pamphlets, stamps, literature, office fixtures have been unlawfully seized.
- I. W. W. as an organization and its membership have been viciously maligned, vilified and persecuted.

FIGURE 2. A flyer published by the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) on how their history has been written "with drops of blood." Over a printed background of blood spatter, the flyer includes examples of repression that IWW members faced, such as being denied the use of the mails, being deported, and being subjected to raids, incarceration, and murder. William Haywood, "With Drops of Blood the History of the Industrial Workers of the World Has Been Written" (Chicago: Industrial Workers of the World, 1919), Library of Congress, Printed Ephemera Collection, portfolio 18, folder 55.

speech advocates to action. Notably, the repression of the late 1910s prompted the founding of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). Still the largest civil liberties advocacy organization in the United States, the ACLU had early victories in the 1920s, including a scathing report on the Department of Justice's postwar antiradicalism that helped spark Senate hearings and prevent a peacetime sedition bill.⁶⁵ Throughout the 1920s, the ACLU was part of a patchwork alliance of civil liberties activists, including radicals, that saw some success in reframing antiradicalism and censorship as excessive. For example, in December 1923, Carlo Tresca, the publisher of the frequently nonmailable Italian-language radical newspaper *Il Martello*, was convicted of obscenity for publishing a two-line advertisement for a book on birth control (though his initial arrest followed complaints from Mussolini's government for an article criticizing the Italian monarchy). Tresca received a 366-day prison sentence, the longest in U.S. history for disseminating information on birth control.⁶⁶ Among Tresca's allies were civil liberties organizations founded in the aftermath of World War I, including the ACLU, the American Birth Control League, and the Workers Defense Union, as well as journalists in established publications such as the *New York Times*, the *New Yorker*, and the *Nation*. A campaign comprising criticism in the press and letter-writing to the federal government succeeded; President Coolidge commuted Tresca's sentence to four months.⁶⁷ Stronger legal protections for radical and "obscene" speech were still decades away, and radicals were still persecuted, but Tresca's case indicates a gradual shift in public opinion toward favoring a free press and free use of the mail.

CONCLUSION

World War I was a major turning point for American policing, protest, and civil liberties. Historians have long studied the roles of activists, courts, and the federal government in the history of dissent, suppression, and fights for free speech during and after World War I.⁶⁸ The Post Office has tended to play a peripheral and passive role in these narratives of suppressing dissent during World War I. Most works on World War I dissent and policing provide in-depth analyses of social movements and institutions, such as the Department of Justice, while mentioning the Post Office only in passing.⁶⁹ Only a few of these works have consulted Post Office sources. As historian Peter Conolly-Smith remarked in his 2009 study of the Bureau of Investigation, the Post Office, and domestic surveillance during World War I, the Post Office's Espionage Act records are a "massive collection often referred to in FBI historiography, but rarely used" themselves.⁷⁰ While Conolly-Smith's work put the Post Office records in conversation with the historiography of FBI surveillance, this essay utilized these rarely-researched records to study the Post Office itself.

This essay contributes to a small but growing body of literature on World War I Post Office censorship, including Donald Johnson's 1962 work on President Wilson and Postmaster Burleson's roles in wartime censorship, Jon Bekken's 1991 overview

of postal censorship in the United States, and Philip M. Glende's 2008 article on the Post Office's actions against socialist *Milwaukee Leader* publisher Victor Berger.⁷¹ Utilizing Post Office records and centering the mail in this narrative makes clear that the Post Office systematically targeted radical publications, leading to struggles over radicalism and free speech being actively fought by, through, and against the Post Office. Considering the earlier history of Post Office antiradicalism alongside Solicitor Lamar's sometimes ideologically driven statements, it also becomes clear that the Post Office was concerned not just with preventing the use of the mail for antiwar speech, but with suppressing a broad range of anti-capitalist ideas and organizations.

By arresting and deporting people for disloyal speech, the U.S. government delimited new boundaries of citizenship, belonging, and obligation that set limits on radical speech. As this essay has shown, the Post Office was an integral part of this antiradical project, as many Espionage Act cases were sparked by, or focused on, evidence collected from the mail. Moreover, the Post Office's own mail surveillance and restriction disrupted radical networks and placed explicit and implicit restrictions on the ideas people could communicate. While the Department of Justice's arrests punished those who communicated radical ideas, the Post Office often prevented these ideas from being communicated in the first place. Together, the Department of Justice and the Post Office Department transformed the American political landscape, demarcating limits to what speech was allowed and precipitating an influential civil liberties movement.

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NOTES

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4. Zimmer, *The Whole World Is Our Country*, 12.
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