

LESSON 6: NATIONAL SECURITY, 1919–1920

Student Handout 6

OUTCOMES

Attorney General Palmer established a special anti-radicalism division within the Justice Department under the leadership of J. Edgar Hoover. In November 1919, on the second anniversary of the Russian Revolution, Palmer ordered raids on radical organizations without obtaining search warrants or arrest warrants. The raids turned up very little evidence. One set of blueprints seized by officers turned out to be drawings for a phonograph. Palmer had thousands arrested, but had to release most of them. Two hundred ninety-four people were deported without trial to Finland, on a ship named the “Soviet Ark.” In January 1920, Palmer ordered larger raids on communist meetings. Law enforcement jailed over 4,000 people and had many of them deported. Again, these raids turned up no evidence of bomb making.

Palmer appealed to American public’s widespread fear of communism, a fear he may have shared due to the attack on his home. Some historians, however, believe he staged the raids to increase his public profile and thereby improve his chances for a successful presidential run. But he overstepped his bounds when he predicted that radicals would try to overthrow the government on May 1, 1920. He put police on high alert all over the country to stop the impending revolution. When nothing happened, most Americans, who were already uncomfortable with Palmer’s apparent willingness to violate civil liberties, lost interest in his tactics. When a bomb killed 38 people on Wall Street and injured many more in September 1920, the public did not place the blame on a radical communist conspiracy. By the spring of 1920, most Americans wanted to put the chaos and turmoil of the war behind them. Newspaper headlines paid more attention to baseball and fashion than to threats from abroad. Communism had failed to run rampant throughout Europe and the rest of the world, and the fact that communists in the United States numbered only in the thousands comforted Americans; the threat no longer seemed so great. In the 1920 election, Americans elected President Warren G. Harding on the platform of “normalcy,” confirming that their priority was prosperity, not anti-communism.

It is important to look at the Palmer Raids in the context of post-World War I America. The war had caused Americans to unite and wage war against a powerful, hated enemy—the Germans. The policies of the Committee on Public Information during the war encouraged Americans to be suspicious of foreigners and foreign ideas, such as communism and anarchism. Radical leftists tended to promote deeply unpopular anti-war views, and the resentment that Americans felt towards these “unpatriotic” groups continued after the war. After the Russian Revolution, communism seemed to pose the next great threat to American peace and security. The bombings heightened American fears that a revolution within the United States was imminent. Palmer encouraged this view, warning Congress that communists planned “to rise up and destroy the government

at one fell swoop.” He contributed to the paranoia that communists were lurking in all segments of society, declaring that “tongues of revolutionary heat were licking the altars of the churches, leaping into the belfry of the school bell, crawling into the sacred corners of American homes, seeking to replace marriage vows with libertine laws, burning up the foundations of society.”

Interestingly, as Handout 4 points out, the strength of radical groups was on the decline in 1919. The Communist Party had only about 70,000 members (it had had more members before the war) and internal disputes and government repression during the war had weakened radical groups. Given the declining strength of these groups, the raids hardly seemed necessary and only served to increase American paranoia.

Attorney General Palmer’s actions significantly increased fear in the United States in the early 1920s and had **unintended consequences**:

- Palmer’s targeting of foreigners established a precedent for restrictions on immigration. People feared foreign ideas, and these fears spilled over to foreigners in general. One of the groups pushing for 100% Americanism and immigration restriction was the Ku Klux Klan, with 4.5 million members. The increased strength of the KKK proved detrimental not only to immigrants but also to African Americans.
- This atmosphere of resentment towards foreigners affected the Sacco and Vanzetti case. Sacco and Vanzetti were two Italian immigrants charged with the 1920 murder of two men during a robbery. They were found guilty and sentenced to death. Many people thought the evidence against them was inconclusive and that they should not have been convicted. But the judge in the case had a clear bias against the men, having stated, “Wait until you see what I do to those anarchist (expletive)!”
- Support for labor unions waned. Business owners took advantage of the public’s fears of communism and labeled strikes “Bolshevist.” They called unionism a “subversive foreign concept,” and when they wanted to promote their own “open shop” policy, in which workers would decide whether to join unions instead of joining them automatically, they called the policy the “American plan.”
- Schools required teachers in many parts of the U.S. to take a loyalty oath. Textbooks were examined and taken out of schools if their content was thought to be “un-American.” Pressure groups pushed for “patriotic instruction,” in which teachers would emphasize the greatness of the U.S. and not provide any information that might criticize its leaders.
- The fear of foreign ideas made the U.S. more isolationist in the 1920s, and the hatred of Bolshevism led the U.S. to a policy of non-recognition of the Soviet Union. The necessity for trade relations eventually overcame the fear, and the United States recognized the Soviet Union in 1933.
- By appointing J. Edgar Hoover head of his anti-radicalism division, Palmer raised Hoover’s profile. Hoover helped found the FBI in 1924 and served as its director until his death in 1972. Critics have accused Hoover of disregarding the civil rights of American citizens throughout his tenure. In one notable example,

- Hoover encouraged the FBI's practice of monitoring and keeping records on civil rights leaders and Vietnam War protestors.
- The Red Scare of 1919–1920 was a precursor to a second Red Scare of the late 1940s and early 1950s. Senator Joseph McCarthy utilized many of the same scare tactics as Attorney General Palmer before him.