

The First Red Scare

A lesson plan developed by the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training and brought to you as part of an Una Chapman Cox Foundation project on American Diplomacy and the Foreign Service

High School Grades 9-12
Adaptable for Grades 7-8

Objectives:

Students will be able to:

- Define the first Red Scare
- Comprehend and critically analyze the historical context behind the event from a global perspective
- Develop objective awareness
- Understand various perspectives regarding the phenomena
- Comprehend and analyze primary sources

Standards:

This unit is aligned with the following 2015 [Virginia Department of Education History and Social Science Standards of Learning](#)

- **United States History 1865 to the Present**
USII.1
- **Civics and Economics**
CE.1, CE.3, CE.4, CE.10
- **World Geography**
WG.1
- **World History and Geography: 1500 A.D (C.E.) to the Present**
WHII.1, WHII.10
- **Virginia and United States Government**
GOVT. 1, GOVT. 3, GOVT. 11, GOVT.14

Time required:

- One 45-minute class period

Background information

The Red Scare refers to the widespread fear of communism in the democratic capitalist United States, especially fear that the Soviets were using communism as a tool for world domination. The “Reds”—referring to communist governments and movements—had become a perceived threat to the United States.

The first Red Scare occurred from approximately 1917 to 1920 following the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution in the Russian Empire, about the same time as the conclusion of World War I. The Bolshevik Revolution, otherwise known as Red October, was led by Vladimir Lenin as a means of seizing power from the provisional government put in place after the abdication of Tsar Nicholas II. By seizing control of the banks, taking over the telegraph lines to control communications, and seizing military equipment from the cities, Lenin and his Red Guards successfully marched on the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg, forcing the government in place to dissolve. But Lenin was not yet in complete control. From 1918 to 1921, Russia entered into a civil war in which the Bolsheviks emerged victorious, establishing the communist regime in what became known as the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (the USSR), or the Soviet Union.

The Red Scare reached its highest peak in America with the Palmer Raids in 1919 and 1920—a violent U.S. government reaction to the perceived communist threat.

Glossary

Alexander Mitchell Palmer: Former United States Attorney General (1919–1921), commander of the Palmer Raids.

Communism: A political and economic system that advocates for the public ownership of property and denies social classes.

- Karl Marx: *The Communist Manifesto*

Capitalism: A political and economic system in which a country's trade and industry are controlled by private owners for profit, rather than by the state.

- Adam Smith: *The Wealth of Nations*

Palmer Raids: A series of raids conducted by the U.S. in 1919-1920 to suppress communist followers and other leftist radicals.

Soviet Union: Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) included Russia and 14 soviet republics from 1922 to 1991.



[Flag of Union of Soviet Socialist Republics](#) | Britannica

Vladimir Lenin: Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, the founding head of the Soviet government, who ruled Soviet Russia and the Soviet Union from 1917 to 1924.

Lesson Preparation

Materials:

- [Video: The Revolution That Shaped Russia](#) | *National Geographic*
- [Primary Source: The Case Against the Reds](#) | *Digital History*
- [Primary Source: Kane Out; Protests Palmer's Red Raids](#) | *Chronicling America*
- [Academic Article: Communism and the Great Steel Strike of 1919](#) | *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*
- [Article: A Century Ago, May Day Brought Anarchist Bombs to Mailboxes—And Helped Transform American Politics](#) | *TIME*

Resources:

FBI. "Palmer Raids." *U.S. Department of Justice*. [Palmer Raids — FBI](#). Accessed 9 April, 2021.

Stone, Geoffrey R. "Civil Liberties in Wartime." *ShareAmerica*. [Civil liberties in wartime | ShareAmerica](#). Accessed 22 April, 2021.

Wade, Rex A. *The Russian Revolution, 1917*. Cambridge University Press. [41548pre \(loc.gov\)](#). Accessed 9 April, 2021.

Lesson Procedure

Provide background and context to establish an initial understanding.

Play [VIDEO FOR BOLSHEVIK REVOLUTION](#)

The rise of Lenin and the communists to power created a sense of fear in the United States that was only heightened by labor unrest and anarchist bombings, further triggered by the aftereffects of World War I.

Examples:

- [The Great Steel Strike of 1919](#)
- [May Day Bombs](#)

This incentivized Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer to act in the hopes of protecting the nation from communism in what became known as the Palmer Raids. With the help of J. Edgar Hoover and the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Palmer arrested over 5,000 suspected radicals. Following the raids, Palmer justified the operation in an article entitled "Case Against the Reds" in *The Forum*, a popular American magazine.

The Case Against the "Reds" A. Mitchell Palmer 1920:

In this brief review of the work which the Department of Justice has undertaken, to tear out the radical seeds that have entangled American ideas in their poisonous theories, I desire not merely to explain what the real menace of communism is, but also to tell how we have been compelled to clean up the country almost unaided by any virile legislation. Though I have not been embarrassed by political opposition, I have been materially delayed because the present sweeping processes of arrests and deportation of seditious aliens should have been vigorously pushed by Congress last spring. The failure of this is a matter of record in the Congressional files.

The anxiety of that period in our responsibility when Congress, ignoring the seriousness of these vast organizations that were plotting to overthrow the Government, failed to act, has passed. The time came when it was obviously hopeless to expect the hearty cooperation of Congress in the only way to stamp out these seditious societies in their open defiance of law by various forms of propaganda.

Like a prairie-fire, the blaze of revolution was sweeping over every American institution of law and order a year ago. It was eating its way into the homes of the American workmen, its sharp 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.

Robbery, not war, is the ideal of communism. This has been demonstrated in Russia, Germany, and in America. As a foe, the anarchist is fearless of his own life, for his creed is a fanaticism that admits no respect of any other creed. Obviously it is the creed of any criminal mind, which reasons always from motives impossible to clean thought. Crime is the degenerate factor in society.

Upon these two basic certainties, first that the "Reds" were criminal aliens and secondly that the American Government must prevent crime, it was decided that there could be no nice distinctions drawn between the theoretical ideals of the radicals and their actual violations of our national laws. An assassin may have brilliant intellectuality, he may be able to excuse his murder or robbery with fine oratory, but any theory which excuses crime is not wanted in America. This is no place for the criminal to flourish, nor will he do so so long as the rights of common citizenship can be exerted to prevent him.

Our Government in Jeopardy

It has always been plain to me that when American citizens unite upon any national issue they are generally right, but it is sometimes difficult to make the issue clear to them. If the Department of Justice could succeed in attracting the attention of our optimistic citizens to the issue of internal revolution in this country, we felt sure there would be no revolution. The Government was in jeopardy; our private information of

what was being done by the organization known as the Communist Party of America, with headquarters in Chicago, of what was being done by the Communist Internationale under their manifesto planned at Moscow last March by Trotzky, Lenin and others addressed "To the Proletariats of All Countries," of what strides the Communist Labor Party was making, removed all doubt. In this conclusion we did not ignore the definite standards of personal liberty, of free speech, which is the very temperament and heart of the people. The evidence was examined with the utmost care, with a personal leaning toward freedom of thought and word on all questions.

The whole mass of evidence, accumulated from all parts of the country, was scrupulously scanned, not merely for the written or spoken differences of viewpoint as to the Government of the United States, but, in spite of these things, to see if the hostile declarations might not be sincere in their announced motive to improve our social order. There was no hope of such a thing.

By stealing, murder and lies, Bolshevism has looted Russia not only of its material strength but of its moral force. A small clique of outcasts from the East Side of New York has attempted this, with what success we all know. Because a disreputable alien (Leon Bronstein, the man who now calls himself Trotzky) can inaugurate a reign of terror from his throne room in the Kremlin, because this lowest of all types known to New York can sleep in the Czar's bed, while hundreds of thousands in Russia are without food or shelter, should Americans be swayed by such doctrines?

Such a question, it would seem, should receive but one answer from America.

My information showed that communism in this country was an organization of thousands of aliens who were direct allies of Trotzky. Aliens of the same misshapen caste of mind and indecencies of character, and 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 in the United States is the confidential information upon which the Government is now sweeping the nation clean of such alien filth....

Will Deportation Check Bolshevism?

Behind, and underneath, my own determination to drive from our midst the agents of Bolshevism with increasing vigor and with greater speed, until there are no more of them left among us, so long as I have the responsible duty of that task, I have discovered the hysterical methods of these revolutionary humans with increasing amazement and suspicion. In the confused information that sometimes reaches the people they are compelled to ask questions which involve the reasons for my acts against the "Reds." I have been asked, for instance, to what extent deportation will

check radicalism in this country. Why not ask what will become of the United States Government if these alien radicals are permitted to carry out the principles of the Communist Party as embodied in its so-called laws, aims and regulations?

There wouldn't be any such thing left. In place of the United States Government we should have the horror and terrorism of Bolsheviki tyranny such as is destroying Russia now. Every scrap of radical literature demands the overthrow of our existing government. All of it demands obedience to the instincts of criminal minds, that is, to the lower appetites, material and moral. The whole purpose of communism appears to be a mass formation of the criminals of the world to overthrow the decencies of private life, to usurp property that they have not earned, to disrupt the present order of life regardless of health, sex or religious rights. By a literature that promises the wildest dreams of such low aspirations, that can occur to only the criminal minds, communism distorts our social law....

It has been inferred by the "Reds" that the United States Government, by arresting and deporting them, is returning to the autocracy of Czardom, adopting the system that created the severity of Siberian banishment. My reply to such charges is that in our determination to maintain our government we are treating our alien enemies with extreme consideration. To deny them the privilege of remaining in a country which they have openly deplored as an unenlightened community, unfit for those who prefer the privileges of Bolshevism, should be no hardship. It strikes me as an odd form of reasoning that these Russian Bolsheviks who extol the Bolshevik rule should be so unwilling to return to Russia. The nationality of most of the alien "Reds" is Russian and German. There is almost no other nationality represented among them.

It has been impossible in so short a space to review the entire menace of the internal revolution in this country as I know it, but this may serve to arouse the American citizen to its reality, its danger, and the great need of united effort to stamp it out, under our feet, if needs be. It is being done. The Department of Justice will pursue the attack of these "Reds" upon the Government of the United States with vigilance, and no alien, advocating the overthrow of existing law and order in this country, shall escape arrest and prompt deportation.

It is my belief that while they have stirred discontent in our midst, while they have caused irritating strikes, and while they have infected our social ideas with the disease of their own minds and their unclean morals we can get rid of them and not until we have done so shall we have removed the menace of Bolshevism for good.

Source: A Mitchell Palmer, "The Case Against the 'Reds,'" *The Forum* (1920), 63:173-185.

Introduce Primary Sources

- What is a primary source?
- Why are primary sources important?

Things to think about when looking at primary sources

- Context
- Point of view
- Purpose
- Audience
- Bias

QUESTIONS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION

1. What threats did Palmer think communism would bring to the United States?
2. What words does Palmer use to describe communism? How do you think he wished his audience to perceive this threat?
3. Who was Palmer addressing his concerns to? Who are *The Forum's* audience?
4. What is the purpose and goal of this publication? What bias does it display?

Other Optional Questions

- What rights are guaranteed and protected by the United States? What are the protections guaranteed in the First Amendment of the Bill of Rights?
 - Do Palmer's attacks and censorship violate these rights?
 - Even if a small minority of people identified themselves as communists, do their expressions and ideals still warrant protection?

LEARNING IN ACTION: Debate

- Individually, have students read *The Sun* article about Attorney Kane's Protest of the Palmer Raids (Entry can be found in the reading section), still keeping in mind the tools for analyzing primary sources.
- Have students prepare both sides of the argument as to whether or not the Palmer Raids were justified.
- Divide students into two groups. After brainstorming with one another, have them debate the use of the Palmer Raids. Were they justified? Does the standard of justice change in times of national crisis? Why or why not? Encourage the use of primary sources to defend their answer.

KANE OUT; PROTESTS PALMER'S RED RAIDS - U.S. Attorney in Philadelphia Unsympathetic with Anti-Communist Policy

PHILADELPHIA, Jan. 23 -- Francis Fisher Kane, United States Attorney for Eastern Pennsylvania, made public today his letters of resignation, in which he said he quit office because he did not approve the wholesale raiding of radicals recently carried out by the Department of Justice; was opposed to the enactment of a new espionage act "with teeth in it," and because he was opposed to the "general drift" of Attorney-General Palmer's policies.

Mr. Kane's letters to President Wilson and Mr. Palmer are dated January 12. Mr. Kane has been a supporter of the Palmer-McCormick wing of the Democratic party and was appointed by President Wilson soon after the latter took office and was reappointed when the President was reelected.

In his letter to the President Mr. Kane said: "I am obliged to take this step because I feel out of sympathy with the anti-radical policies of Mr. Palmer and his methods of carrying them out.

"I am strongly opposed to the wholesale raiding of aliens that is being carried on throughout the country with a view to putting through deportations under the act of October 16, 1918. To my mind this policy is both unwise and unjust. I am also utterly opposed to the enactment of a new espionage act 'with teeth in it' now that we are, to all intents and purposes, at peace."

Would Repress Free Speech.

"I believe that the enforcement of such a new act as Mr. Palmer has proposed would lead to an entirely unnecessary repression of free speech and interference with the liberty of the press. I could not conscientiously and wholeheartedly take part in the enforcement of such a law."

Mr. Kane in his letter to Attorney-General Palmer protested against the contemplated Communist party raids, but the Attorney-General wrote that he was too late.

Mr. Kane disagrees with Mr. Palmer's statement that there does not seem to be any question of policy involved in the recommendations.

"As I read the manifestoes of the Communist party," he wrote, "it does not expressly stand for the overthrow of this Government by force, and it is surely a question of policy, not one of law, whether the Department of Justice should take the initiative and cause raids against the alien members of the party.

"It is one thing to debar an alien coming into this country by administrative methods, but it is quite another to deprive a man who has been in the country a long time and who perhaps has a wife and children here of what we are accustomed to think of as constitutional rights.

Would Drive Reds Under Ground.

"In the present raids we appear to be attempting to repress a political party. It has a platform most of which is highly objectionable to you and me. So much I grant you. but it

calls itself a political party and holds open meetings and discussions. Consequently we ought not to raid it unless we are absolutely compelled to do so in order to enforce the law, for by such methods we will drive underground and make dangerous what was not dangerous before. Is it necessary to protect our American workingmen and the vast number of steady, law abiding foreign born workmen from the influence of a handful of Russians and Russian Jews in love with the Soviet form of Government? To my mind such protection is entirely unnecessary.

"Munition manufacturers and many other persons made rich by the war are seeking to dodge the payment of their taxes. The enforcement of the law against them is of prime importance. There are also fraudulent contractors who during the war have grown rich, and there are, as you know, corrupt Government agents using their offices for illicit gain. The punishment of these people is infinitely more important than the pursuit of the 'radicals.' "

Source: "Kane Out; Protests Palmer's Red Raids." *The Sun* [New York, NY], 24 January 1920, p. 3.

Wrap Up

In times of national crisis, especially war, the government can legally restrict civil liberties. Usually acting on fear, the suspension of such rights is justified as a necessary sacrifice as an initiative to help the war effort. We see this in the following examples

- The Alien and Sedition Act of 1798
- Suspension of the Writ of Habeas Corpus during the Civil War
- Japanese internment camps during World War II

While these may seem justifiable in the given circumstances, we often look back at these instances with horror due to the harsh nature and sometimes excessive action taken by the government in its effort to promote American interests. Although they were legal government-sanctioned raids, Palmer's attacks on immigrants and alleged communists are another example of the restriction of civil liberties in times of crisis, in this case World War I.

Again, even though they were legal, Palmer's raids appeared to be an extensive breach of civil liberties due to a lack of genuine probable cause and many spoke out against both him and J. Edgar Hoover. By the summer of 1920, the fear surrounding the "Reds" had subsided, constituting the end of the first Red Scare.

Lesson Evaluation

- When providing background and conclusion information, are students taking notes that help them comprehend the material?
- In class discussion, are students actively participating, and do they appear to be actively engaged in their peers' comments and responses?
- During the debate, are students actively planning with their group? Do they point to specific evidence to support their argument?

Credits

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