

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 158

“So Thoroughly Policed”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

“Your Honor, years ago I recognized my kinship with all living beings, and I made up my mind that I was not one bit better than the meanest on Earth. I said then, and I say now, that while there is a lower class, I am in it, and while there is a criminal element, I am of it, and while there is a soul in prison, I am not free.”

Eugene Debs, statement at his sentencing hearing following his conviction under the Espionage Act.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 158. So Thoroughly Policed.

We’re back in the United States today. I have a few topics I’d like to raise related to the US entering the Great War, some of which I include for their own sakes, others because they relate to the larger question of how the war is affecting modern liberal democracy. I call that the Liberal Crisis, which will be the focus of next week’s episode; for today, we’ll stick to the United States.

We’ve already discussed on this podcast the British shell shortage, episode 110, and the British conscription crisis, episode 116. When the United States entered the Great War, it found itself facing circumstances not so different from what the United Kingdom faced in 1914. The US had only a small standing army, and it would take time to build it up to the size required to make a meaningful contribution on the Western Front. And like the British government, the US government has traditionally eschewed government controlled arms and munitions manufacturing, in favor of purchases on the open market.

The US had one big advantage, though. It could learn from the experience of its alliance partners. As we saw in episode 142, the US government leapt right into conscription with a minimum of debate, having learned from the British experience. The British experience with shortages of munitions was also an object lesson for Americans. The Wilson administration learned from that experience and, infused with Woodrow Wilson's new determination to win the war and win it as quickly as possible, set about the task of creating government agencies to manage America's wartime economic needs, with an eye on avoiding the kinds of shortages and supply bottlenecks that had bedeviled the other belligerents in 1914 and 1915. In July 1917, the US government set up the War Industries Board to coordinate procurement between the War Department and the Navy Department. The Board would soon be led by the 47-year old Bernard Baruch, a Jewish American born in South Carolina, who had become one of the biggest financiers on Wall Street and an adviser to Woodrow Wilson. In this capacity, Baruch soon became a key figure in American war planning, scheduling US military purchases of agricultural products and manufactured goods, and unknotting the difficulties in shipping these supplies to Europe.

I mentioned airplane patents before, in episode 48, but let me remind you that the Wright Brothers invented the first airplane, more or less, and for the past decade have been fighting patent battles with other airplane manufacturers, especially Glenn Curtiss, to the detriment of the domestic airplane industry in the US. Once America was in the war, a war in which airplanes were becoming a critical military technology, the US government twisted arms to establish the Manufacturers Aircraft Association. Now Wright and Curtiss would pool their airplane patents in the association, which would license them to manufacturers, finally resolving patent disputes that had bedeviled the Federal courts in the US for years now.

And speaking of agricultural production, the United States has a fertile and productive agricultural sector, but we've already seen how the bad weather and poor harvests in Europe in 1916—which led to the "Turnip Winter" in Germany—have created food shortages everywhere. Even the US, a nation accustomed to food surpluses, faces shortages because the Allies are snapping up the fruits of America's farms. Meat, wheat, and sugar are in particularly short supply. This led to the passage of the Food and Fuel Control Act in August 1917, sometimes known as the Lever Act after its principal sponsor, Asbury Lever, a Democratic Member of Congress from South Carolina. The Lever Act was controversial, since it granted the Federal government sweeping new powers to control virtually every aspect of the production and distribution of food and fuel in the United States.

One consequence of the Act was the creation of the Federal Fuel Administration, which was run by the 54-year old Harry Garfield, son of the former President, who at the age of 17 had been an eyewitness to the assassination of his father. Garfield had broad powers to set coal prices and determine who did and didn't get coal. The FFA encouraged "heatless Mondays," shorter work weeks, and could and did deny coal supplies altogether to civilian factories when the agency deemed it necessary to keep shipping and war-related industry supplied.

The Lever Act also gave the nation the United States Food Administration, and to lead this agency, Woodrow Wilson tapped the 43-year old mining engineer and businessman, Herbert Hoover. We last met Hoover in episode 15 when he was working in China and found himself in the middle of the Boxer Uprising in Tianjin. He subsequently became a successful businessman, yet retained his skill at turning up in the middle of conflicts. He was working out of London in 1914, when the Great War began. Hoover joined a committee of other American businessmen in London that organized to help stranded American civilians make their way out of the war zones and back home.

But no sooner had that crisis been sorted out than Hoover turned his attentions to a new one: the plight of civilians in German-occupied Belgium. This is a story I've been meaning to tell you sooner, but it never quite made the cut in previous episodes, so we'll take care of it now. The densely populated nation of Belgium was never self-sufficient in foodstuffs, and after the war began, the British blockaded Germany and Germany refused responsibility for providing food to Belgium, and a humanitarian crisis was in the making.

Hoover organized the Commission for Relief in Belgium, a mostly American organization that raised donations to supply millions of tons of food relief to Belgium and later to occupied France during the period of American neutrality. Hoover traveled between London and Berlin dozens of times to arrange blockade exemptions from the British to deliver the shipments to Belgium and permission from German authorities to distribute it.

In accomplishing all this, Herbert Hoover became something of a national hero in the United States, so when the Lever Act was passed, he was the obvious choice to administer food distribution at home. Hoover threw himself into the job with energy and creativity. As a firm believer in the virtues of voluntarism, Hoover and his agency pushed Americans to reduce their consumption of critical foodstuffs voluntarily, calling for Meatless Mondays and Wheatless Wednesdays and publicizing slogans like "Save beans by all means," and "Wheatless days in America make sleepless nights in Germany." Parents told their children they couldn't put sugar on their breakfast cereal because "Mr. Hoover wouldn't like it." Hoover's agency was successful enough that, even though Congress had granted the administration authority to impose rationing on the American public, it proved unnecessary and was never implemented.

It's telling that the appointment of prominent people like these to these newly created emergency government positions spawned the creation of a new bit of American political slang: the czar. The newspapers took to calling Bernard Baruch the "industry czar" and Harry Garfield the "fuel czar" and Herbert Hoover the "food czar." Appearing as it does just weeks after Nikolai II was deposed in Russia, this usage smacks of some pointed irony, an example of good old American skepticism regarding government agencies and the presumed authorities and experts who administer them. But I am sorry to have to tell you that this tongue-in-cheek usage quickly went mainstream in the American press, and they will continue to use the thoroughly inappropriate, undemocratic, and downright ridiculous word "czar" for the rest of the century, unironically, to

describe high-ranking US government officials, typically ones appointed by the President to address specific policy problems. It is still in widespread use today. Why the press can't let go of this absurd bit of slang that wore out its welcome a hundred years ago is a question no one seems to have an answer for.

War exacerbated social divisions in America and created new ones. The industrial boom that America enjoyed from Allied arms purchases created a labor shortage which in turn drew African-American workers out of the South and into the industrial cities of the northern United States to work in the factories, creating new racial tensions. The number of lynchings in the US rose significantly in 1917 and 1918. In July 1917, a white mob rampaged through East St. Louis for a day, burning homes and killing 39 African-Americans. When the draft began, African-Americans were required to register along with every other American, but the draft cards used at this time had a designated corner on the bottom of the card that was to be torn off if the registrant was African-American, in order to make it easier for the file clerks to segregate them out later.

The NAACP magazine, *The Crisis*, edited by W.E.B. DuBois, declared, "If this is our country, then this is our war." Yet white American military officers regarded African-Americans as unfit to be combat soldiers, useful only as laborers, if that. This was in spite of the honorable service of the American Buffalo Soldiers in the West and in the Spanish-American War, and of African soldiers commanded by the British and the Germans in East Africa, and of African soldiers deployed by the French on the Western Front. In fact, only a small fraction of the African-Americans drafted in the Great War were sent to Europe, where they usually served under sullen white officers who regarded being assigned to those units as an insult.

African-American soldiers who did serve in France experienced a degree of racial equality they'd never experienced back home. French civilians welcomed African-American soldiers into their cafés and their shops and even into their homes. French women fraternized freely with African-American men, provoking anger from white American soldiers. Some US Army officers assigned black and white soldiers R-and-R time in different French villages, in order to protect white soldiers from the sight of such disturbing behavior.

This is not to say that France was some kind of racial utopia. As I already said, the French had African colonial soldiers fighting on the Western Front, but those soldiers were far less welcome among French civilians. The French regarded African-Americans as more "civilized" than native Africans, though that might just be a euphemism for "the Americans have US dollars in their pockets."

African-American soldiers brought more than US dollars to France. They brought African-American culture and introduced the French to ragtime and jazz, and the war would mark the beginning of an era of French interest in African-American art and culture and make Paris a haven for expatriate African-Americans for the rest of the twentieth century.

And I think that just gave me an excuse for one more round of Scott Joplin.

[music: Joplin, "Kismet Rag."]

The entry of America into the Great War also saw an uptick in hostility toward Germans and German-Americans in the United States, including occasional outbreaks of violence against German-Americans deemed insufficiently loyal. Others were pressured to buy Liberty Bonds to prove their patriotism. Many German-Americans took to anglicizing their surnames during this period to deflect attention from their heritage. Schools stopped teaching the German language. Words of German origin fell out of favor. "Sauerkraut" became "liberty cabbage" and "dachshunds" became "liberty pups." You couldn't even say "German measles," while the state of Nebraska one-upped the rest of the country by outlawing the teaching of any foreign language at all, anywhere in the state, publicly or privately, to any child before they entered eighth grade. That'll show the Kaiser. The US Supreme Court would find this Nebraska law unconstitutional in 1923.

Another area of American life where anti-German sentiment manifested itself was in the realm of classical music. Many US symphony orchestras of this time included German conductors and musicians and played heavily German programs, and when the US entered the war, these became matters of controversy. The most extreme case is that of Karl Muck, the music director of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, a German-born Swiss citizen. In October 1917, the Boston Symphony played in Providence, Rhode Island, where the newspaper, the *Providence Journal*, ginned up a controversy by accusing Muck of being pro-German and daring him to prove them wrong by playing "The Star-Spangled Banner" at the beginning of the Providence concert. The orchestra did not. This wasn't Muck's decision; it was made in the front office by symphony officials who dismissed the paper's challenge as a cheap publicity stunt and Muck himself never even heard about it until afterward.

A national outcry arose against the Boston Symphony, which found its concerts cancelled and its patriotism impugned by newspapers, patriotic organizations, clergy, other symphony orchestras, and Theodore Roosevelt. The orchestra apologized and began playing "The Star-Spangled Banner" at every concert, with Muck's approval, but the critics did not relent. In March 1918, Muck was arrested and interned as a dangerous enemy national along with 29 other musicians from the Boston Symphony, where they joined fellow internee Ernst Kunwald, conductor of the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra. The Boston Symphony lost so many musicians that the future of the organization was in doubt, though obviously it survived and is still performing in our time.

Karl Muck was deported to Germany after the war, where he continued to conduct for the next fourteen years until his retirement. Unsurprisingly, he declined all invitations to return to the United States.

Of course, many German-Americans served with distinction in the United States military during the Great War, up to and including the commander of the American Expeditionary Force, John Pershing, who was himself descended from Pennsylvania Germans, and Eddie Rickenbacker, the

son of German-speaking Swiss immigrants who became America's most accomplished fighter pilot of the era, shooting down 26 enemy aircraft. He will be the most decorated American of the Great War.

The previous forty years of US history had seen unprecedented numbers of immigrants come to the United States. By the time of the Great War, immigrants constituted about 15% of the population. Perhaps inevitably, the early twentieth century saw rising tensions between immigrants and native-born Americans. I've alluded to this a few times before on the podcast. These tensions arose for a variety of reasons. Religion was one. The more recent immigrants were likely to be Catholics or Orthodox or Jewish, while many Protestant Americans felt the US was by history and tradition inherently a Protestant nation and that admitting immigrants of other faith traditions would undermine American values.

Typically, immigrants were poor and immigrant workers could only find work in poorly paid and dangerous occupations, like mining and the worst of the manufacturing jobs. This predictably led to immigrant workers embracing labor unions, socialism, and anarchism, ideas they either brought along from their native lands or were exposed to by fellow Americans. Elite native-born Americans, especially in business or government, tended to be hostile to labor unions, socialism, and anarchism, if not downright revolted by them, and also tended to see these movements as alien to American culture, and associated them with immigrants, an association expressed as strange foreigners bearing strange ideas that were dangerous, subversive, and led to violence.

Recall the anarchists, for instance, episode 16. It was an immigrant anarchist, Leon Czolgosz, who assassinated President McKinley after being inspired by another immigrant troublemaker, Emma Goldman.

During the days of US neutrality in the Great War, there was fear and suspicion that immigrant Americans bore dual loyalties. Recall Theodore Roosevelt's speech against what he called "hyphenated Americans." Or that immigrants were a danger to US munitions shipments to the Allies, and as we've seen, that fears was not without a basis in fact.

We've also seen labor violence in the US during this period, notably the Ludlow Massacre. When the Great War began, corporations found it useful to play up the image of labor unions as organizations created and led by shadowy foreigners with hidden agendas of violence and sabotage.

In this context, it's time for me to introduce you to the Industrial Workers of the World, a labor union founded in Chicago in 1905. Which I probably should have mentioned it sooner, but you know, sometimes it's a question of finding the right entry point to bring up a new topic, and I haven't felt like I had one until now. The IWW was organized by socialists and anarchists dissatisfied by the American Federation of Labor, which they viewed as too cautious and too apolitical, while the AFL regarded the IWW as a bunch of crazy radicals.

The IWW, whose members were colloquially known as the “Wobblies,” had an explicitly socialist philosophy that aimed to replace capitalism with a sort of workplace democracy. For example, the Wobblies criticized the AFL for entering into labor contracts with factory owners. The Wobblies didn’t believe in labor contracts; they thought contracts limited workers’ rights. The AFL organized primarily skilled workers by craft. The IWW rejected this model as dividing the working class. Their own model was one big union for everyone. They organized factory workers, miners, and also among woodcutters and agricultural workers. They were strongest in the Northwest of the United States. Notably, and unlike any other labor union, they not only recruited among diverse trades but workers of all races and nationalities and even women.

The IWW’s strength and influence in America peaked at the time of the Great War. The organization would decline afterward, although it still exists even in our time. The Wobbly leadership often used incendiary rhetoric, calling for novel tactics (novel in America, anyway) such as general strikes, sit-down strikes, boycotts, and sometimes even sabotage and violence. Their bark was frequently worse than their bite; there’s virtually no record of IWW violence. Or sabotage as we understand the term. When the IWW spoke of “sabotage,” they usually meant labor actions we today might call “slowdowns.”

But the IWW and their radical talk certainly inspired fear in business and government in the United States, which in turn led to organized violence against the Wobblies. Tensions peaked in 1917 after the US entered the war. One example is the so-called Bisbee Deportation, which occurred in July 1917 in the town of Bisbee, Arizona, where the IWW had organized a strike against Phelps-Dodge, a mining company with extensive operations in the region, on both sides of the US-Mexico border, mining primarily copper, which was in great demand for war production. Phelps-Dodge accused the Wobblies of pro-German sympathies and claimed the strike was actually an attempt to sabotage the American war effort. These claims were picked up and repeated by newspapers across the United States.

At about 4:00 AM on July 12, 1917, a group of about 2,000 armed men, recruited by a private local organization calling itself “The Citizen’s Protective League” and controlled by Phelps-Dodge, fanned out across Bisbee and vicinity. They had a list of union supporters in hand. They rounded up those on the list as well as many other men in the town who voiced sympathy for the strikers or appeared to be Mexican or Eastern European. Not all the men rounded up that day were even employees of Phelps-Dodge. Some were even shopkeepers in the town who supported the strike because the mine workers were their customers, and the so-called “Citizen’s Protective League” was not above looting the shops. They also occupied the local telegraph office so that no one in Bisbee could notify the outside world of what was happening.

About 2,000 men were rounded up and marched to a local baseball field, where they were held in the summer desert sun without access to water. Those who had no known connection to the IWW and were willing to denounce the strike were released. That was about 700. The other 1,300 were loaded into cattle cars still filthy with manure and shipped east, across the state line

and on to the town of Columbus, New Mexico. Yes, this *is* the same Columbus, New Mexico that Pancho Villa attacked sixteen short months ago, episode 119. Columbus would not accept the deportees, so the train continued east to the town of Hermanas, New Mexico, arriving after midnight.

The New Mexico state government and the US Army took charge of the displaced men, and provided them food and shelter for the next four months. When the story got out, the national reaction was surprisingly mild. Many agreed with Theodore Roosevelt, who declared that “no human being in his senses doubts that the men deported from Bisbee were bent on destruction and murder,” a claim which has no factual basis whatsoever.

The US Department of Labor investigated the situation and concluded, “The deportation was wholly illegal and without authority in law, either State or Federal.” Still, the US Supreme Court ruled that no Federal law had been violated, and since so state prosecution was ever conducted, the perpetrators of the Bisbee Deportation paid no price for their actions.

Meanwhile, just a month before the Bisbee Deportation, on June 8, 1917, a fire in a copper mine outside Butte, Montana, killed 168 miners, becoming one of the deadliest mining accidents in US history. The disaster triggered a strike against the Anaconda Mining Company, which at that time controlled 10% of the world copper production and 90% of the state government in Montana, although it must be acknowledged that Anaconda did not own the mine where the fire took place.

An IWW labor organizer named Frank Little came to Butte in July 1917, in the aftermath of the mine fire to attempt to organize the copper miners. The local copper industry had once been heavily unionized; Anaconda had broken the unions once and fully intended to do it again. Frank Little, by the way, had just come from organizing workers in Bisbee, Arizona, of all places. He was not involved in the deportation. He arrived in Butte on July 18, just a few days after the Bisbee Deportations.

Little arrived in Butte on crutches. He’d sprained his ankle back in Bisbee. By some accounts he also had back and neck injuries from earlier beatings at the hands of various corporate thugs. Again, in Butte as in Bisbee, the company accused the strikers of being pro-German saboteurs, out to undermine the US war effort. On August 1, just before dawn, six masked men kicked open the door to the boardinghouse room where Little was staying, beat him, and hauled him out into the street. Still in his underwear, he was tied to the bumper of a car, dragged through the streets of Butte, and then hanged from a railroad trestle.

It was a lynching, and again I will take a moment to point out that although African-Americans were the most frequent victims of lynchings, there were also lynchings of people of other racial and ethnic minorities and of union supporters in the US at this time, and although most lynchings took place in the states of the former Confederacy, again, the phenomenon was not unique to those states, as we just saw.

It was in these fraught times that the Wilson Administration asked Congress to pass the Espionage Act, one of the darkest moments in American history, from a civil liberties perspective. It is a low point of Wilson's political career and it is still on the books in the US to this day.

Woodrow Wilson had actually been pushing for something like the Espionage Act since 1915, when the US was still neutral, but had been unable to persuade Congress. Now, with a war on, Wilson tried once again, and was more successful this time. The Espionage Act made it a crime to convey information on national defense to a person not "entitled to have it," an American version of the British Official Secrets Act. The Act also made it a crime to interfere with US military action, support US enemies, incite disloyalty in the armed forces, or interfere with recruitment.

Woodrow Wilson also wanted a provision in the Espionage Act that would allow the US government censorship powers over the nation's publications, but the US Senate stripped the censorship provision out of the bill by a vote of 39-38. Wilson had to be content with a provision that allowed the Post Office to refuse to provide mail services to publications deemed subversive.

Of course, no magazine in 1917 can reach an audience beyond its local community without access to the US Post Office, and Wilson's Postmaster General, Albert Burleson, wielded his new powers with a heavy hand. He banned *Watson's Magazine*, which was a vicious racist and anti-Catholic publication produced by Georgia Democrat Tom Watson. Watson had once had more moderate views and was even William Jennings Bryan's vice-presidential candidate in the 1896 Presidential election, but like many white southerners, his views on race had retrograded since then. He was now an explicit white supremacist and, more to the point, a vocal opponent of US involvement in the war and of Woodrow Wilson.

Watson's Magazine aside, though, most of the publications banned by Burleson were socialist, socialists being anti-war, including *The Milwaukee Leader*, *The New York Call*, and Leon Trotsky's old hangout *The Jewish Daily Forward*. Even publications that generally supported the administration took Wilson to task for these actions, including, notably, the magazine *The New Republic*, recently founded by journalist Walter Lippmann and generally pro-war, pro-Progressive, and pro-Wilson.

If this is hard to understand, bear in mind that this was at the same time as the Selective Service Act was going into effect, and as you'll recall the Act relied on young men voluntarily registering. There was a fear in Washington that anti-war and anti-draft political activism could interfere in the process and slow the already slow process of building up the US Army into a force capable of fighting on the Western Front. You and I know that these fears were in vain, that the draft will not be materially affected by anti-war writings or speeches, but the fear was a real one.

The US Justice Department, under Wilson's Attorney General, Thomas Gregory, was responsible for criminal prosecutions under the Espionage Act, and there were hundreds of these prosecutions, again mostly aimed at socialists because of their anti-war views. Many socialists tried to speak against the war while guarding their language to avoid running afoul of the Act, and mostly failed, including over a hundred leaders of the IWW, and Eugene Debs, the socialist who had run for President three times, most recently against Woodrow Wilson in 1912, when he received 6% of the popular vote.

Also prosecuted was Joseph Franklin Rutherford, of the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania. This is the group from which would later emerge the Christian denomination we know today as the Jehovah's Witnesses. At this time, the group believed that the Great War was a sign of the End Times and that the Second Coming was due in 1918. In early 1918, Rutherford and other leaders of the Society were prosecuted for publishing *The Finished Mystery*, a book that denounced worldly governments and other religions and declared that the end of the world was imminent. Rutherford and the others were convicted, but their convictions were overturned on appeal.

The US government seized copies of a motion picture titled *The Spirit of '76*, a fictionalized account of the American Revolution and prosecuted its producer, a Jewish American named Robert Goldstein, because the film depicted real and fictional crimes committed by British soldiers against American revolutionaries. The government argued that the film put Britain, now a US ally in the war, in a negative light and therefore amounted to aiding the German cause. Goldstein, a California native who had supplied the costumes for D.W. Griffith's film *The Birth of a Nation* two years ago, and then decided to go into the motion picture business himself, was convicted and sentenced to ten years in prison.

As a result of the Espionage Act, Attorney General Gregory would declare, "It is safe to say that never in its history has this country been so thoroughly policed." He meant this was a good thing.

You might think that some of this prosecutorial zeal could be excused, or at least explained, by the fact that America was involved in a war. But the use of the Espionage Act to crack down on political dissent would not decrease after the Armistice. In fact, it would grow even more severe.

But that is a story for another episode. Thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Jonathan for being a patron of the podcast. If you'd like to become a patron like Jonathan, or just make a one-time contribution, we can open up a slot for you. Just visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

And I hope you'll join me next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century* as we turn our attention to the Liberal Crisis. The war is supposed to be about defending freedom and democracy against authoritarianism and imperialism, so why is it that the Allied nations are becoming less democratic and less free? The Liberal Crisis, next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. I should mention that the Espionage Act is still on the books today, and Espionage Act prosecutions are very much still a thing in the United States of our time, usually for the crime of passing classified information to a foreign power, but one concern that modern civil liberties advocates voice about the Act is a recent trend toward prosecutions based not upon the passing of classified information to enemies of the United States but to the press for release to the public. Individuals who might well be viewed by some as “whistleblowers” have recently been charged under the Act. You might recognize some of their names: Chelsea Manning, Edward Snowden, Reality Winner, Julian Assange. Even in the twenty-first century, the Espionage Act remains controversial.

[music: Closing War Theme]