

# The Significance of 1919

*by Sophia*



## WHAT'S COVERED

As President Wilson, other world leaders, and U.S. politicians debated the terms of the Treaty of Versailles, Americans faced different challenges at the end of World War I. Several unrelated factors combined to make 1919 one of the most significant years in American history.

When American troops returned home, they found the nation beset by a terrifying flu epidemic, racial violence, labor strife, and anticommunist hysteria. The uncertainty caused by these events marked the end of Progressivism.

This tutorial examines the challenges of 1919 in four parts:

## 1. The Flu Epidemic

Shortly after the armistice between the Allied and Central Powers was signed on November 11, 1918, American troops were demobilized and sent home. As the poster on the right indicates, many of the soldiers, along with citizens who supported the war effort, envisioned a celebratory transition from wartime to an era of peace, liberty, and prosperity.

However, one unanticipated (and unwanted) result of the soldiers' return was the emergence of a new strain of influenza. Within months of the war's end, over 20 million Americans contracted the disease. Further, 675,000 of them died before the epidemic mysteriously subsided in the spring of 1919.



### DID YOU KNOW

Recent estimates indicate that 500 million people worldwide were infected by this flu strain. As many as 50 million of them died.

Between the fall of 1918 and the spring of 1919, the fear of infection was prevalent throughout the United States. Americans avoided public gatherings, children wore surgical masks to school, and undertakers ran out of coffins and burial plots. Instead of welcoming soldiers with postwar celebrations, many Americans sought to avoid contact with the virus.





The flu pandemic that came home with the returning troops swept through the United States, as evidenced by this overcrowded flu ward at Camp Funston, Kansas.

---

## 2. Red Summer

As Americans recovered from the flu epidemic, race riots in Northern cities and other episodes of racial violence erupted. The violence was so great during the summer of 1919 that it came to be known as the “**Red Summer**.”



### TERM TO KNOW

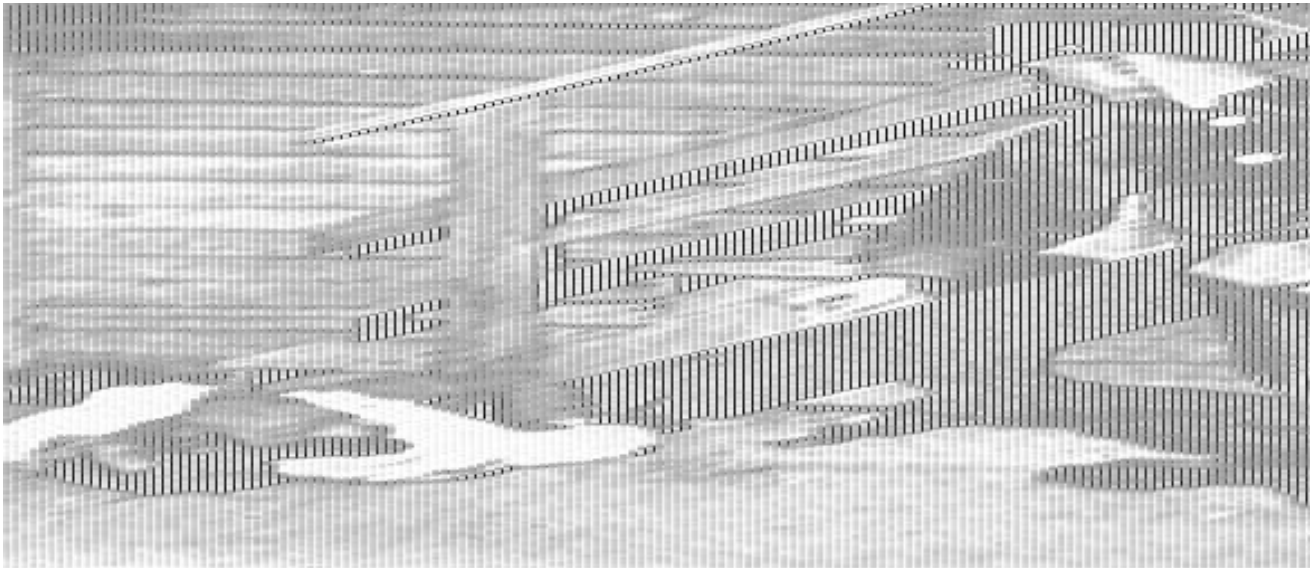
#### Red Summer

The summer of 1919, when numerous Northern cities experienced bloody race riots that killed over 250 people.

Racial violence was widespread in the United States, but it became concentrated in several Northern cities during World War I when thousands of African Americans traveled North in search of jobs in wartime industries.

During the “Red Summer,” 25 race riots that killed over 250 people occurred in Northern cities. In Chicago, on July 27, a White mob stoned a Black teenager to death because he swam too close to the “White beach” on Lake Michigan. The police at the scene did not arrest the perpetrators. The killing prompted a weeklong riot. By the time the National Guard restored order, 38 people—23 black and 15 white—were dead, and

millions of dollars' worth of property had been damaged.



Riots broke out in Chicago following the killing of a Black teenager. After a week of violence, 38 people (including 23 African Americans) were dead. Some of the Black victims were stoned (a); many of those who survived had to abandon their homes, which were vandalized by White mobs (b).

Like the Haymarket affair over 30 years earlier, news reports of the Chicago race riots shaped local and national opinion regarding racism, mob violence, and police brutality. As you read the newspaper accounts provided below, use the 5 Ws to guide your analysis. Here are some 5 Ws to consider:

- Who wrote this report? Whom is it about? Who is the audience?
- What's going on in this account?
- What's the purpose?
- Where was this report created or presented?
- When was it created?
- Why does this report exist?
- How is this account constructed?
- What does the ordering of the ideas tell you about its project and its argument?

The *Chicago Daily Tribune*, which catered to White readers and often expressed a distaste for the city's Black population, described the cause of the riots as follows:

***Chicago Daily Tribune*, Article on the Chicago Race Riots, Summer 1919**

"Racial feeling, which had been on a par with the weather during the day took fire shortly after 5 o'clock when white bathers at the Twenty-ninth Street improvised beach saw a colored boy on a raft paddling into what they termed 'white' territory.

A snarl of protest went up from the whites and soon a volley of rocks and stones were sent in his

direction. One rock said to have been thrown by George Stauber of 2904 Cottage Grove Avenue, struck the lad and he toppled into the water.

#### **Cop Refuses to Interfere.**

Colored men who were present attempted to go to his rescue, but they were kept back by the whites, it is said. Colored men and women, it is alleged, asked Policeman Dan Callahan of the Cottage Grove station to arrest Stauber, but he is said to have refused.

Then, indignant at the conduct of the policeman, the Negroes set upon Stauber and commenced to pummel him. The whites came to his rescue and then the battle royal was on. Fists flew and rocks were hurled. Bathers from the colored Twenty-fifth Street beach were attracted to the scene of the battling and aided their comrades in driving the whites into the water.

#### **Negroes Chase Policeman.**

Then they turned on Policeman Callahan and drove him down Twenty-ninth Street. He ran into a drug store at Twenty-ninth Street and Cottage Grove Avenue and phoned the Cottage Grove Avenue police station.

Two wagon loads of cops rolled to the scene, and in a scuffle that ensued here Policeman John O'Brien and three blacks were shot."



#### **THINK ABOUT IT**

According to the report above, how did the Chicago race riots begin? In what ways is this report different from, and similar to, the previous discussion of the riots' origins?

The *Chicago Defender*, the city's leading African American newspaper, provided a more graphic and gruesome account of the riots:

#### ***Chicago Defender*, Article on the Chicago Race Riots, Summer 1919**

"Following the Sunday [July 27] affray, the red tongues had blabbed their fill, and Monday [July 28] morning found the thoroughfares in the white neighborhoods throated with a sea of humans—everywhere—some armed with guns, bricks, clubs, and an oath. The presence of a black face in their vicinity was a signal for a carnival of death, and before any aid could reach the poor, unfortunate one his body reposed in some kindly gutter, his brains spilled over a dirty pavement. Some of the victims were chased, caught, and dragged into alleys and lots, where they were left for dead. In all parts of the city, white mobs dragged from surface cars, black passengers wholly ignorant of any trouble, and set upon them. An unidentified man, young woman and a three-month-old baby were found dead on the street at the intersection of 47th street and Wentworth Avenue. She had attempted to board a car there when the mob seized her, beat her, slashed her body into ribbons, and beat the baby's brains out against a telegraph pole. Not satisfied with this, one rioter severed her breasts and a white youngster bore it aloft on pole, triumphantly, while the crowd hooted gleefully. All the time this was happening, several policemen were in the crowd, but did not make any attempt to make rescue until too late."



#### THINK ABOUT IT

Why do you think this report used graphic language to describe the cause of the Chicago race riots?



#### BRAINSTORM

1. What differences do you notice in how the newspapers report the role of police officers during the riots? What might explain these differences?
2. Did these newspapers succeed in providing objective facts related to the violence, or did they only increase racial tensions?



#### BRAINSTORM

Think about contemporary debates about media control of information and whether the information they provide is valid. In light of the examples above, did such a debate take place during the Chicago race riots of 1919? To what extent can bias and news sources distort understanding of the Chicago race riots and other violent outbreaks in the “Red Summer”?



#### DID YOU KNOW

Southern lynchings also occurred during the Red Summer. Seventy-six people were lynched in the South in 1919, including several Black veterans wearing their uniforms.

The violence of the Red Summer revealed that many Whites, including returning soldiers, were committed to maintaining positions of supremacy in their neighborhoods and workplaces. Many Black soldiers returned home determined to assert their rights as citizens. At the same time, African Americans continued to move northward as the 1920s began, to find work and social mobility during a time of discrimination and violence.

---

## 3. The Red Scare

The year 1919 saw significant labor unrest. Over 4 million workers participated in nearly 3,000 strikes.

An important cause of the unrest was the transition of the economy from wartime to postwar production. When World War I ended, businesses shifted production from guns, ships, and other wartime products to domestic goods. However, demand quickly outpaced production, leading to shortages of these goods. Prices skyrocketed.



#### DID YOU KNOW

In 1919, the cost of living in the United States was nearly double what it had been in 1916.

During the war, many workers made a no-strike pledge, in which they agreed not to strike in support of the war effort. However, with the war over and because wages had not kept pace with rising prices, workers began to strike for better hours and increased pay.

Labor unrest was associated in the minds of many Americans with the Russian Revolution. In 1917, communist revolutionaries known as Bolsheviks, under the leadership of Vladimir Lenin, toppled the regime of Tsar Nicholas II. President Wilson and the other Allied leaders viewed Russian communists with suspicion.



#### DID YOU KNOW

In 1918, while the Bolsheviks fought a civil war against other Russian factions, Wilson sent American troops to Russia to undermine their government. However, this intervention had the opposite effect: It galvanized Russian support for the Bolsheviks, who won the civil war and established the Soviet Union in 1922. The United States did not formally recognize the Soviet Union until 1933.

As revolutionary rhetoric from Bolshevik Russia increased in 1919, a number of Americans feared that domestic labor unrest was the result of communist infiltrators who sought to overthrow the government.



#### DID YOU KNOW

An American branch of the Communist Party was founded in 1919.

Americans also remained suspicious of non-English speaking immigrants, particularly those from Southern and Eastern Europe, who subscribed to radical ideas like **anarchism**. The widespread intolerance toward foreigners and radical ideas in 1919 became known as the **Red Scare**.



#### TERMS TO KNOW

##### Anarchism

A radical political philosophy that rejects centralized government and advocates the creation of societies based on voluntary association.

##### Red Scare

The period following World War I in which Americans restricted and discriminated against radical dissent.



#### THINK ABOUT IT

How does the political cartoon on the right portray the American labor movement?

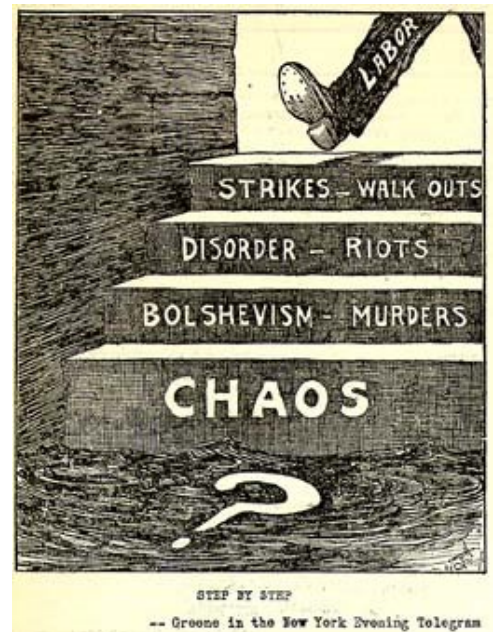
When investigators discovered 36 letter bombs addressed to federal, state, and local officials, as well as to industrial leaders (e.g., John D. Rockefeller), at a New York City post office, fear of radicalism grew significantly. When eight bombs exploded simultaneously on June 2, 1919, including one that destroyed the entrance to U.S. Attorney General **A. Mitchell Palmer**'s house in Washington, DC, the country was convinced that all radicals were to blame.



#### PEOPLE TO KNOW

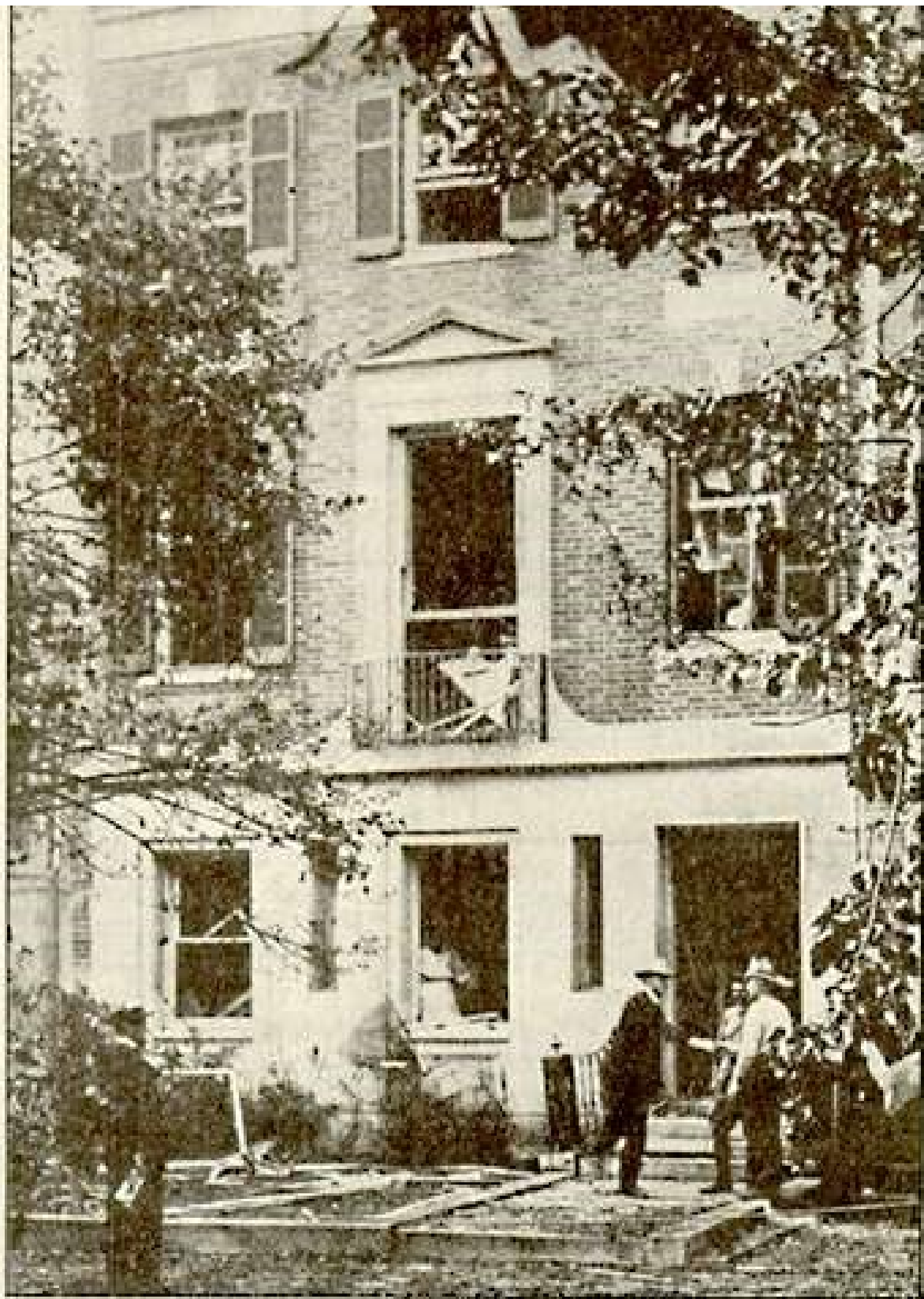
##### A. Mitchell Palmer

U.S. Attorney General who supported the rounding up of radical labor organizers and dissenters during the Palmer Raids, which dispatched federal agents to the offices of radical organizations and labor unions between November 1919 and January 1920.



This political cartoon, published in the *New York Evening Telegram* in November of 1919, portrayed the labor strikes of 1919 as the first step toward revolution and chaos in the United States.





**"THESE ATTACKS WILL ONLY INCREASE THE  
ACTIVITIES OF OUR CRIME-DETECTING FORCES."**

**Declares Attorney-General Palmer, whose Washington home, shown  
above, was damaged by a bomb-explosion on June 2.**

Newspaper photograph showing the damage done to Attorney General Palmer's house during the bombings of June 2, 1919. Federal investigators suspected that a group of Italian anarchists were behind the bombings.

Private citizens who considered themselves loyal and patriotic Americans, along with military veterans, raided the meetings of radical labor organizations in several cities.

In November 1919, Attorney General Palmer ordered the arrest of radical labor organizers and dissenters in what came to be known as the “**Palmer Raids**.”



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### Palmer Raids

The dispatching of federal agents to the offices of radical organizations and labor unions—to collect evidence, make arrests, and shut down operations—between November 1919 and January 1920.

Overseen by 24-year-old **J. Edgar Hoover**, the Palmer Raids targeted the headquarters of radical groups and labor unions in 12 cities. At least 4,000 alleged radicals were arrested—most of them without warrants—and detained for weeks in overcrowded cells.

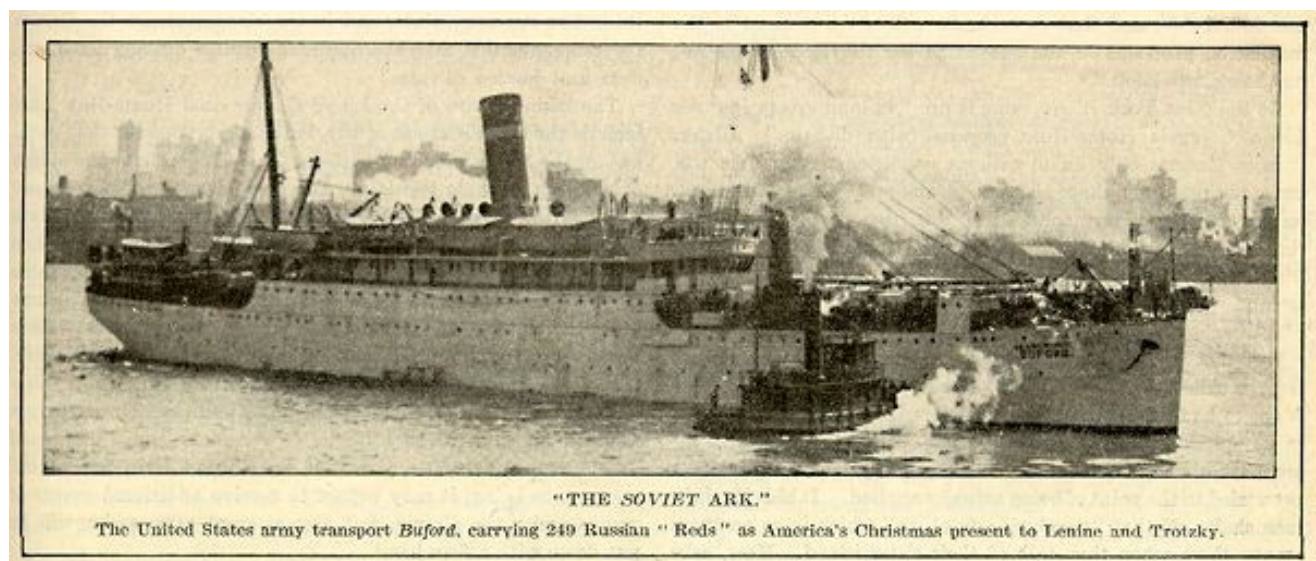


#### PEOPLE TO KNOW

##### J. Edgar Hoover

The first director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), who served from 1924 to 1972; oversaw the Palmer Raids of 1919–1920.

Almost 250 of those arrested, the majority of whom were members of the Union of Russian Workers, were deported to the Soviet Union on a ship dubbed the “Soviet Ark” (pictured below):



The “Soviet Ark” left New York City on December 21, 1919. As the photograph and caption above suggest, most Americans responded positively to the Palmer Raids, despite the disregard for civil liberties with which they were carried out.

## 4. The End of Progressivism

The tribulations of World War I and 1919 created an atmosphere of uncertainty that led many Americans to

view interventionist government and international involvement skeptically. These two principles formed part of the foundation of Progressivism, but by 1920, Americans wanted to focus on domestic progress and personal success.

Eager to regain the White House, Republicans capitalized on popular sentiment by nominating Senator Warren G. Harding of Ohio for president in 1920. Before his nomination, Harding summed up the view of many Americans by stating, “America’s present need is not heroics but healing; not nostrums but normalcy; not revolution but restoration.” Harding’s words indicated that he would provide what Americans wanted: a president who would look and act “presidential” while letting them live their lives as they wished.

Harding won the 1920 election in a landslide over his Democratic challenger, James Cox of Ohio. He received over 400 electoral votes and 60% of the popular vote. His election indicated a shift in public opinion and marked the beginning of a politically conservative decade dominated by Republican administrations.



## SUMMARY

The end of World War I did not bring the celebrations that many Americans anticipated. The flu epidemic, one of the deadliest in history, sickened and killed millions of Americans. The events of Red Summer violently demonstrated that America’s racial problems had not been solved: News reports of the Chicago race riots revealed that the United States was more divided by race than ever before. Labor unrest, radical activism, and bombings led to the Red Scare and the Palmer Raids. The events of 1919 made it seem as if the end of World War I brought turmoil and unrest, not peace.

Source: This tutorial curated and/or authored by Matthew Pearce, Ph.D with content adapted from Openstax “U.S. History”. access for free at [openstax.org/details/books/us-history](https://openstax.org/details/books/us-history) LICENSE: **CREATIVE COMMONS ATTRIBUTION 4.0 INTERNATIONAL**

## REFERENCES

“World peace with liberty and prosperity--1919--Happy new year,” OER Commons [bit.ly/2nMKKtN](https://bit.ly/2nMKKtN)

The Chicago Daily Tribune Reports Chicago Race Riot, OER Commons, [bit.ly/2nMv21R](https://bit.ly/2nMv21R)

The Chicago Defender Reports Chicago Race Riot, OER Commons, [bit.ly/2nk83YO](https://bit.ly/2nk83YO)



## ATTRIBUTIONS

- [Image of Soviet Ark](#) | License: Public Domain
- [Image of Attorney General Palmer’s house](#) | License: Public Domain
- [“Step by Step” cartoon](#) | License: Public Domain
- [Image of Kansas flu ward \(1918\)](#) | Author: U.S. Army Photographer | License: Public Domain



## TERMS TO KNOW

**Anarchism**

A radical political philosophy that rejects centralized government and advocates the creation of societies based on voluntary association

**Red Scare**

period following World War I in which Americans restricted and discriminated against any form of radical dissent.

**“Palmer raids”**

the dispatching of federal agents to raid the offices of radical organizations and labor unions between November 1919 and January 1920.

**“Red Summer”**

the summer of 1919, when numerous northern cities experienced bloody race riots that killed over 250 people.

**PEOPLE TO KNOW****A. Mitchell Palmer**

U.S. Attorney General who supported the rounding up of radical labor organizers and dissenters during the “Palmer raids,” which dispatched federal agents to the offices of radical organizations and labor unions between November 1919 and January 1920.

**J. Edgar Hoover**

first Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI), who served from 1924-1972; oversaw the “Palmer raids” of 1919-1920.