

World War I's Aftermath: Attack on Civil Liberties and Betrayal at Versailles



Wilson hailed as hero in Dover, England, 1919

I. Attack on Civil Liberties

A. Committee on Public Information propaganda effectively cast Germans as evil force in World War I.

B. Espionage and Sedition Acts

1. Loosely worded laws which gave the government wide authority to prosecute war critics'.
2. Numerous arrests and convictions with long prison sentences for those seen as "disloyal".
3. Supreme Court upheld acts, using "clear and present danger" doctrine to limit free speech in time of war.

C. Persecution of radicals: Wilson administration focused on IWW and Socialist Party as targets of suppression.

II. The Red Scare

A. Following Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, American hatred for Germany was transferred to Communist Russia.

B. Wilson sent American troops to Russia in 1918 in attempt to undercut Bolshevik government.

C. Following the war, a number of strikes, particularly in the steel industry, alarmed Americans.

D. Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer exaggerated radical threat and created the Federal Bureau of Investigation to fight it.

1. Series of mail bombs set off panic among government officials.
2. Palmer Raids, January 1920. With blatant disregard for civil liberties, federal officers raided suspected anarchists and aliens without search warrants.
3. Palmer eventually lost credibility with his tactics, though the FBI survived and became the federal crime-fighting unit

IV. The Versailles Peace Conference

A. Hailed as a hero by the French, Wilson faced some major obstacles in implementing his 14 Points (League of Nations, freedom of the seas, etc.)

1. Republicans had won control of Congress in 1918 and many were opposed to his plans.
2. Allies were determined to impose a harsh peace on Germany.

B. Wilson forced to accept compromises at Versailles

1. Germany accepts sole responsibility for war
2. Germany ordered to pay massive reparations despite economic deprivation
3. League of Nations is established with collective security concept to stop aggression.

C. American debate over treaty

1. Treaty was criticized in Congress for Article X, which called for American troops to be placed under the command of League of Nations officers
2. In an attempt to win support from the country, Wilson embarked on a nationwide speaking tour. Suffered collapse and stroke.
3. Senate rejected the Treaty. Unwilling to give up tradition of nonalignment and to commit the U.S. to collective international action.

V. The Experience of War

A. Exposed the heterogeneity of the American people and the divisions among them.

B. Government intervened in the economic and influenced people's lives to an extent never done previously.

C. U.S. is now the world's leading economic power and largest trading nation.

D. International system that came into being was unstable, fragmented, and lacked American cooperation

E. Civil liberties restricted in attempt to achieve unity

F. Ended Progressivism and brought mood of cynicism and discouragement to American intellectuals