

READING: Red Scare

Some people in America were scared by Russia's ideas. They were afraid of *communism*. Others were attracted to those ideas. Under communism, most property and goods belong to the state. People are expected to share. That sounds noble; it just never seems to work unless forced upon people. Communist nations have not been free nations.

After the world war, some people were scared that communists wanted to take over the United States. There were a few communists in this country- but the communists were not successful. Most Americans were not attracted to communism.



In September 1920, a bomb exploded on Wall Street, killing 38 people and injuring more.

In 1789, Congress passed an Alien law. It kept certain people from emigrating to the United States. A sedition law made it a crime to speak against the government. People were jailed for their ideas. The people who supported those laws said they wanted to keep "dangerous foreigners" out of the country. At the time, the foreigners they feared were French.

In that same postwar time, there were also some *anarchists* in America. Anarchists don't believe in government at all. You don't have to be very smart to realize that anarchy doesn't work. But, when the anarchist looked around and saw poverty, war, and evil, they thought this was the fault of governments. Some may have really believed that the answer was to do away with all governments. A few tried to do that by setting off bombs intended to kill government leaders. That, of course was criminal behavior. Newspapers made big headlines of the bombs. Many Americans were frightened. But what A. Mitchell Palmer, President Wilson's attorney general, did was irresponsible and criminal. Palmer went on a witch hunt. The witches he went after were communists and anarchists. He took the law in his hands, and, in two days of raids in major cities (in 1920), agents invaded homes, clubs, union halls, pool halls, and coffee shops, rounding up nearly 5,000 people, who were held in jail, not allowed to call anyone, and treated terribly. Those without citizenship papers were sent out of the country- to Russia. Most weren't guilty of anything.

Communists are sometimes called reds. Mitchell Palmer took advantage of America's fear of communism. He helped create a "red scare." He hoped it would make him president. During the red scare, Americans were not free to speak out about communism. They weren't free to criticize the government. Some people's lives were ruined. Witch-hunting turns up every once in a while in American history. (It happened at Salem, Massachusetts, during the colonial period; it happened after World War II with a senator named Joe McCarthy.) The good thing is that it

never seems to last very long. Persecution for ideas is not usually the American way.

The **First Amendment** says: *Congress shall make no law...abridging the freedom of speech*. Does that mean that communists and anarchists are free to speak out here- as long as they do not engage in criminal activity or plot to overthrow the government?

Thomas Jefferson wrote: *Truth is great and will prevail if left to herself, and errors cease to be dangerous when it is permitted freely to contradict them.*

He believed that when everyone's ideas are heard, people will make wise choices. Do you agree?



Behind the red scare was a fear of foreigners. The Ku Klux Klan grew hugely in the 1920s, getting a fresh start in Stone Mountain, Georgia. The Klan no longer limited its hatred and bigotry to blacks; it was anti-foreign, anti-communist, anti-Catholic, anti-Jewish.