

Civil Liberties

Anti-German Hysteria

At the time of American entry into World War I, Americans with at least one German born parent totaled over eight million and represented roughly eight percent of the United States population. The vast majority of these people were loyal Americans. However, rumors of spying and sabotage as well as government propaganda whipped the public into a frenzy of anti-German sentiment. Hatred of Germans and all things German swept the country. Orchestras no longer performed the music of Beethoven or Wagner. Libraries removed German books from their shelves. High schools and colleges cancelled German language classes. During World War I, hamburger became “liberty steak” and sauerkraut became “liberty cabbage.” A handful of German Americans were tarred, feathered, and beaten and at least one German was lynched.

The Espionage and Sedition Acts

Congress passed the **Espionage Act** in June 1917 and the **Sedition Act** in May 1918. Under these laws, if a person was convicted of saying anything disloyal, criticizing the government, or interfering with the war effort in any way, they could be sentenced to up to twenty years in jail and fined up to \$10,000. Under these acts some 2,000 people were prosecuted with roughly half resulting in convictions. Most famously, Eugene V. Debs, a socialist leader received a ten-year prison sentence for giving a speech in which he criticized the war effort and the draft. The prosecution of Debs and others represent an unfortunate era in the history of American civil liberty. When the war ended presidential pardons were granted freely including one for Debs in 1921.

Committee on Public Information

To help sell the war effort, the United States government set up the **Committee on Public Information** (CPI). The organization was headed by George Creel, a journalist whose job it was to convince Americans of the **righteousness** of the war cause. The CPI hired 150,000 workers, half of whom served as “four-minute men.” Their job was to give brief patriotic speeches in support of all aspects of the American war effort. The CPI also had a hand in creating **propaganda** posters, leaflets, booklets, and even influenced movies such as *The Kaiser*, *the Beast of Berlin* and *To Hell with the Kaiser*. The CPI certainly inspired patriotism, but also helped to inflame the passions of Americans against German Americans and helped to stifle dissent.

Espionage Act

Espionage Act, United States Congress, 1917

SECTION 3

Whoever, when the United States is at war, shall willfully make or convey false reports or false statements with intent to interfere with the operation or success of the military or naval forces of the United States or to promote the success of its enemies and whoever when the United States is at war, shall willfully cause insubordination, disloyalty, mutiny, refusal of duty, in the military or naval forces of the United States, or shall willfully obstruct the recruiting or enlistment service of the United States, to the injury of the service or of the United States, shall be punished by a fine of not more than \$10,000 or imprisonment for not more than twenty years, or both.

Guiding Questions:

1. What three actions would be considered acts of espionage?
2. In order to be accused of espionage, what conditions must exist in the United States?
3. What was the purpose of the Espionage Act?

C.P.I. "Four Minute Man" Speech

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I have just received the information that there is a German spy among us—a German spy watching us. He is around, here somewhere, reporting upon you and me—sending reports about us to Berlin and Germans just what we are doing with the Liberty Loan [Liberty Bond]. From every section of the country these spies have been getting reports over to Potsdam—not general reports but details—where the loan is going well and where its success seems weak, and what people are saying in each community. For the German Government is worried about our great loan. Those Junkers (land owner in Eastern Germany) fear its effect upon the German morale. They're raising a loan this month, too. If the American people lend their billions now, one and all with a hip-hip-hurrah, it means that America is united and strong. While, if we lend our money half-heartedly, America seems weak and autocracy (government run by a self-appointed ruler) remains strong. Money means everything now; it means quicker victory and therefore less bloodshed. We are in the war, and now Americans can have but one opinion, only one wish in the Liberty Loan.

Well, I hope these spies are getting their messages straight, letting Potsdam know that America is hurling back to the autocrats these answers: For treachery (violation of trust) here, attempted treachery in Mexico, treachery everywhere—one billion. For murder of American women and children—one billion more. For broken faith and promise to murder more Americans—billions and billions more. And then we will add: In the world fight for Liberty, our share—billions and billions and billions and endless billions. Do not let the German spy hear and report that you are a slacker.

*Committee on Public Information,
Four Minute Man Bulletin, No. 17 (Oct. 9, 1917)*

Guiding Questions:

1. What point of view is presented in the Four Minute Man Speech? Provide evidence from the text to support your answer.

German Children in School



1. What point of view is presented in this political cartoon? Provide evidence from the text to support your answer.