

Chapter 6 - Building the Image

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Another aspect of extremism emerged from a letter Hoover had written to the Immigration Bureau of the Labor Department, urging that it refuse to free any prisoner in bail until he had agreed to answer questions put to him by detectives. Hoover argued that this was "of vital importance," stressed that it was necessary to get prisoners to talk, conceded that it would virtually defeat the ends of justice if prisoners couldn't be induced to give the information necessary for their own deportation. He opposed letting prisoners talk to lawyers or communicate with anyone until they had submitted to questioning. This rule was, indeed, adopted. The Bureau's orders to the branch offices stated that "persons taken into custody are not to be permitted to communicate with any outside person until after examination by this office and until permission is given by this office."

Attorney General Palmer was asked for an explanation of this order, which flouted the basic and vital American principle that a man must not be threatened and coerced into testifying against himself, that he has a right at all times to the advice of counsel. Palmer protested: "At the time, I knew nothing about it. I never heard of it until long afterwards." Hoover was then asked to explain. He did. He said the stringent incommunicado rule had been adopted because subordinates in the Labor Department wanted it that way.

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An example of his deep commitment to the cause of bureaucratic defense developed during the Senate inquiry into the conduct of the Detroit raids. Some 800 persons had been arrested in Detroit and flung for from three to six days into a veritable Black Hole of Calcutta, a dark, windowless, narrow corridor in the city's antiquated Federal Building. For some twenty-four hours, the prisoners had no food. They were packed so closely together that they could not lie down, and there was just one toilet for the lot of them. Such inhumane treatment provoked expressions of outrage from the press, leading citizens, and from the mayor and other officials. A letter from a Detroit lawyer, read before the Senate committee, charged: "The space allotted to those arrested was not sufficient to even comfortably stand up. . . . The agents of the Department of Justice did not permit either an attorney or the wife of any relative to see the prisoners held. . . . At the Post Office Building the aliens had to sleep on stone floors, there being no bedding or covers, nor any other of their natural needs."

Hoover promptly telegraphed Arthur L. Barkey, Detroit branch chief of the Bureau of Investigation, for an explanation of the charges. The answer, addressed "Attention Mr. Hoover," was submitted to the Senate committee. It insisted that the prisoners had been well treated. The floor on which they had slept wasn't stone but wood, and the corridor in which they had been confined wasn't cramped, but really spacious, measuring "4,512 ~~sq~~ square feet, which allowed approximately eight square feet for the occupancy of every alien held."

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This prettied-up picture of conditions in Detroit received a rude jolt when the Senate committee, still skeptical, summoned before it W. O. Garred, assistant custodian of the building. Under Garred's

testimony, the Bureau's spacious 4,512-square-foot corridor shrank to a minuscule 448 square feet. For the 800 prisoners this represented something like half a square foot apiece. There was, said Garred, just one dim skylight opening onto the roof. There was only the one toilet, and men had to stand in line, forty to fifty at a time, waiting for its use. Some couldn't wait. "Before many days . . . the stench was quite unbearable in some parts of this corridor and room," Garred testified.

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The Red Raids had been conducted to the accompaniment of much patriotic drum-beating and to the applause of an overwhelmingly conservative and generally imperceptive journalistic claque. For a time, in many quarters, the harassment of the Reds, however brutal, at whatever cost to civil liberties, was considered a highly laudable achievement. And Palmer, until sober second thoughts began to set in, seemed to be running a strong race for election by acclamation as every man's hero. But in this flush of achievement, there was one disturbing nettle of failure. The Bureau of Investigation, despite that steady, day-by-day progress it had reported six months earlier, seemed no closer to solving the mystery of the great bomb plots than it had been the night when the front of Palmer's residence was demolished. This was a blot that ~~must~~ could hardly be allowed to stand on the federal escutcheon, and detectives now embarked on a desperate effort to remove it.

In trying to ~~lx~~ track down the origin of the "Plain Words" flier found at the bombing sites, they had ~~received~~ a tip that the type might have been set in a Brooklyn ~~paint~~ shop. The printer, Robert Elia, was picked up by Bureau agents on February 25, 1920, and on March 7 Andrea Salsedo, a typesetter in the same shop, was taken into custody. The Bureau later maintained that pink paper - similar to that on which "Plain Words" had been printed - had been found in the Brooklyn shop and that peculiarities of type faces found there matched the printing of the anarchistic tract. Even so, the Bureau had no evidence on which it could hold the two men on a criminal charge; it had, indeed, no authority under the current laws to arrest them. This, to the Bureau, was a technicality that did not matter. Elia and Salsedo were taken to the New York offices of the Bureau, a suite of rented rooms on the fourteenth floor of the building at 15-21 Park Row. There they were held prisoners without writ, warrant, or charge of any kind preferred against them - and they were held for nearly two months.

Note: There follow several pages of the brutalities of this "confinement", ending with the mysterious "suicide" of Salsedo.