



**"Until Victory is Achieved"**



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*The Cleveland May Day Riots of 1919*

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CLEVELAND, OHIO



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# Cover credit

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Newspaper clippings from the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, 2 May 1919, p. 1. NewsBank: America’s Historical Newspapers

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# Introduction

May 1, 1919 in Cleveland, Ohio, seemed like any other day. The weather was clear and the city, like much of the world, was getting accustomed to peace rather than war. However, the day would be anything but peaceful — as one reporter later put it, the day was characterized by “mounted police at the gallop wielding truncheons on the heads of Bolsheviks, citizens and soldiers tearing red flags and trampling them in the mud, [and] tanks from the western battle front charging crowds in the front of the statue of Tom Johnson.”<sup>1</sup> An American city from the “heartland” had become the scene of a large, politically-inflected street battle, an event commonly associated with post-war Germany in this era. This event, the Cleveland May Day riots of 1919, offers a historical scene which reveals cross-ethnic solidarity, the beginnings of modern veteran culture, the radicalization of a city, and an ignored tradition of civic-nationalism, all processes which defined one of America’s largest cities during a critical period in the “American Century.”

The days and months leading up to May Day, 1919 in Cleveland were anything but calm. American entry into World War I and the following mobilization introduced patriotic fervor and suppression of political and pacifist dissent, most notably through the Espionage and Sedition Acts. These new laws criminalized, among other activities, anti-war speech as a nationally-subversive action. While these restrictions would not be a problem for the ardent patriot who followed Woodrow Wilson’s claim that the United States made World War I into a war for democracy and against tyranny; such laws were utterly problematic for the confirmed isolationist, pacifist, or socialist. Just as America became involved in the war, Russia retreated from it, first after the February Revolution, then definitively after the October Revolution and the Bolshevik policy of an immediate end to Russian involvement. The Bolshevik Revolution, the first major seizure of political power by radical leftists since the Paris Commune of 1871, had electrified the international left. It was soon followed by leftist revolutions in Hungary and Bavaria, which took the Russian cue in naming their form of government “Soviets/ councils.”<sup>2</sup> By May of 1919, the Bolsheviks had established a firm grasp on many parts of Russia, though they were still engaged in a brutal war against Russian counter-revolutionaries. Constant news coverage on the expansion of the revolution appeared side by side with coverage of the ongoing Paris Peace Conference that would ultimately produce the Treaty of Versailles.

While President Woodrow Wilson was in Paris trying to forge an equitable peace settlement, the United States,

1. *The Cleveland Plain Dealer*, May 5, 1919.

2. Eliza Ablovatski, “The 1919 Central European revolutions and the Judeo-Bolshevik myth,” *European Review of History: Revue européenne d’histoire*, 17, 3 (2010): 474.

like many other nations, was in the midst of economic and social upheaval. Economic troubles, low wages, and shortages were quietly suffered during the war by “patriots” and protested by many anti-war liberals and leftists. With the war at an end, the conflicts endemic to industrial society erupted again. In April, a vast anarchist letter-bomb conspiracy revealed itself, which targeted, but failed to kill, a swath of anti-radical and anti-immigrant public figures, including federal officials like Attorney General A. M. Palmer, the governor of Mississippi, the mayors of Seattle and New York, and the businessmen J. D. Rockefeller and J.P. Morgan Jr.<sup>3</sup> The nation sank into a state of terror, and a similar bomb plot occurred in June that year. The Seattle general strike, which lasted from February 6 through 11, also entered the forefront of the national consciousness. Initiated by radical unions associated with the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) for a modest wage increase, even conservative American Federation of Labor (AFL) unions joined in a sympathy strike that effectively shut down the city for a quiet week, during which the conservative press and mayor Ole Hanson feared a Bolshevik revolution was underway in the Pacific Northwest.<sup>4</sup> As Hanson later recalled:

The so-called sympathetic Seattle strike was an attempted revolution. That there was no violence does not alter the fact...The intent, openly and covertly announced, was for the overthrow of the industrial system; here first, then everywhere...True, there were no flashing guns, no bombs, no killings. Revolution, I repeat, doesn't need violence. The general strike, as practiced in Seattle, is of itself the weapon of revolution, all the more dangerous because quiet. To succeed, it must suspend everything; stop the entire life stream of a community...That is to say, it puts the government out of operation. And that is all there is to revolt-no matter how achieved.<sup>5</sup>

The strike quickly fell apart, mostly on account of the AFL and Teamster unions capitulating to pressure from the national leadership and local fears that the state and federal troops called out to prevent a suspected revolution would inevitably turn violently against the striking workers.<sup>6</sup> Revolution or not, Ole Hanson became a self-proclaimed American hero, subsequently quitting his office as mayor to go on the speaking circuit to warn his fellow citizens of the dangers of the American “Bolsheviki.”<sup>7</sup> This counter-revolutionary fame would lead him to take part in the traveling Victory Bond campaign, which continued to raise funds to supply America's still partially-mobilized draft army. Thus, Ole Hanson became one of the main attractions (another was an army tank from the Western Front) of a Victory Bond campaign in Cleveland which was promoted in advertisements in all the city's major newspapers on May 1.<sup>8</sup>

For their celebration of the first of May, otherwise known as International Workers' Day, various left-wing groups from Cleveland planned to march through the city, led by frequent mayoral candidate and head of the Cleveland branch of the Socialist Party, Charles Ruthenberg.<sup>9</sup> The Socialists planned four parades, which would meet at

3. *Chicago Tribune*, May 1, 1919.

4. Jeremy Brecher, *Strike!* (San Francisco: Straight Arrow Books 1972), 111.

5. *Ibid.*, 111.

6. *Ibid.*, 113-4

7. Robert K. Murray, *Red Scare: A Study in National Hysteria, 1919-1920*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1955), 65-66.

8. *Cleveland Press*, May 6, 1919

9. Stephen Millett, “Charles E. Ruthenberg: The Development of an American Communist, 1909-1927,” *Ohio History Journal*, 81 (1972): 197

the socialist meeting hall, Acme Hall, then march together to Public Square for speeches, and then dissemble for more festivities later that evening<sup>10</sup>. Come the morning of May 1, everything had proceeded smoothly. An estimated 30,000 marchers had gathered at Acme Hall and begun the march to the city's center<sup>11</sup>. Bearing flags and bedazzled in red pennants and ribbons, workers from various Socialist, IWW,<sup>12</sup> and AFL<sup>13</sup> unions and Great War veterans who were there to announce their anti-capitalist politics, protest the ongoing American expedition into Civil War Siberia, and demand the release of Eugene V. Debs, Socialist icon and victim of government suppression of anti-war speech.<sup>14</sup>

While planned as a peaceful demonstration, there were concerns about possible trouble. As the *New York Times* would later recall, "two machine-gun companies, equipped with motor trucks" were stationed outside the city "in the event the police proved unable to cope with [May Day]."<sup>15</sup> Police were on hand to maintain the peace; regardless, conflict arose. Fights broke out before all of the parade column had reached Public Square. As one part of the column passed by, a uniformed soldier who had been watching the parade approached another uniformed soldier who was marching with a red flag and attempted to take the flag. Allies of each and the police came to break the small struggle, but it expanded into a larger brawl. A massive fight developed between the "Bolsheviki" marchers and the, as the *Cleveland Press* referred to them, "loyalist" citizens, veterans, and policemen.<sup>16</sup> Pitched battles then spread across the city. Fighting erupted at Public Square, where a public stand previously used by the Victory Bond campaign days earlier was commandeered by Ruthenberg and his followers. Almost immediately, soldiers and citizens assaulted them, demanding the destruction of red flags.<sup>17</sup> As part of its efforts to clear out the mobs of people, the police mobilized police trucks, cars, and even the Victory Bond tank.<sup>18</sup> The results of the violence were one-sided, with just over a hundred socialists, including Ruthenberg, arrested (no "loyalists" were arrested), two socialists killed, many people wounded, and the Socialist headquarters at Acme Hall ransacked.<sup>19</sup>

10. Charles Ruthenberg, "Cleveland May Day Demonstration," *Revolutionary Age*, May 10, 1919.

11. The most conservative estimate for the parade's size is 5,000 (see: Millet, 202) and the most liberal is Ruthenberg's rough 50,000 people (see: *Revolutionary Age*, May 10, 1919), with several newspapers estimating somewhere between these two numbers, from about 10,000 or 20,000. As is noted elsewhere in this paper, even the Russian language branch of the Socialist Party exceeded 5,000, so Millet's conservative estimate appears false. Given that Ruthenberg has every reason to inflate the number, this author has chosen to take the average at around 30,000. Also accounting for the fact, cited below, that police arrested many bystanders by accident once the riots started, it seems impossible to ever get a truly accurate estimate from the contemporary historical accounts, because they had trouble differentiating bystanders from socialists.

12. The IWW, or International Workers of the World, a union confederation, advocated a strain of radical socialism termed "anarcho-syndicalism," which envisions the tactical transition beyond capitalism to necessarily come from direct action by workers in the workplace. By organizing every type of worker in every industry, unions pave the way for a new type of society centered on the democratic control of factories and shops by workers, organized on the macro level by groups like the IWW as the "One Big Union." Their most powerful weapon was the general strike of its various workers, as seen in Seattle 1919. Also present at the May Day riots were Daniel DeLeon's WIIU, or Workers' International Industrial Union, a splinter of the IWW who supported some measure of political participation in the IWW platform

13. The AFL, or American Federation of Labor, another union confederation, was politically eclectic, though nationally conservative under its long term leader Samuel Gompers from 1886 to 1924. A much larger organization than the IWW or Socialist Party, many debates by Socialists centered on the issue as to whether to work with, within, or against a "pro-business" union that coordinated with the U.S. government during World War I. Due to its size, one could likely find the most "patriotic" and the most radical unions in a region to both participate in the AFL.

14. Charles Ruthenberg, "Cleveland May Day Demonstration," *Revolutionary Age*, May 10, 1919

15. *The New York Times*, May 3, 1919

16. *Cleveland Press*, May 2, 1919

17. *Revolutionary Age*, May 10, 1919

18. *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, May 2, 1919

19. *Revolutionary Age*, May 10, 1919

The Cleveland May Day riots, one of the more dramatic and violent events in the United States during the globally tumultuous year of 1919, opens many questions about the city and the nation during that period. Possible inquiries extend from broad questions of political symbolism to more detailed issues relating to individual identity and intent. While the narrative of the riot is fairly well documented, the socialists of Cleveland who participated in it, along with issues of personal motivation, remain historical cyphers.

Cleveland was one of the leading American cities in this era, yet conflicting reports from the time implied that Cleveland was either a thoroughly “American” city, or a home to a set of foreign-born revolutionaries eager and immediately able to install a Marxist-Leninist dictatorship of the proletariat. This paper probes this dichotomy of historical image by examining four different “contexts” relating to the city, the riots, and their participants. The first is the identity of the marchers, or “Red Rioters,” and how this identity fits into different conceptions of Cleveland, American or alien, in the early twentieth century. The second is the split image of the soldier or veteran during the immediate post-war era, an issue prompted by the fact that it was soldiers who acted as the vanguard in attacking a group of protestors that also included men in uniform. The third is the place of the riots in the overall political history of the Socialist Party in particular and the leftist movement in general in Cleveland, as well as Cleveland’s relation to the movement throughout Ohio and the Midwest. The final context is the nature of the ideology embodied in the march. Rather than an expression of Bolshevism, the May Day marchers and their leftist movement adhered to a sort of American-socialist civic-nationalism, in contradistinction to a competing concept of a “blood and soil” nationalism that developed in the course of the Great War and Red Scare. While the Cleveland May Day riots are admittedly only a single event in American history, it has links to larger national and international questions, particularly those that relate to words and labels such as radical, patriot, alien, and American. When Ole Hanson, Eugene Debs, the Socialist Party, the Victory Bond campaign, tanks, red flags, and the immigrant and radical heritages of Cleveland, the Midwest, and the United States came together on May 1, 1919, the mixture proved to be both volatile and of more than local historical consequence.

# The Leftist Context: The Identity of a People and their City

Until 1920 Cleveland had long been a community with a substantial foreign-born population. In 1870, 41.8 percent of the total city population was born in a foreign country. In 1910, the foreign-born and their offspring composed almost 75 percent of the population.<sup>1</sup> While the foreign-born population dipped to 30.1 percent by 1920, the overall number of immigrants residing in the city had increased.<sup>2</sup> There was simply no mistaking it: Cleveland was a true cosmopolitan city in the early-twentieth century, and any attempt to construe “the foreign-born” as an Other stood as little more than uninformed nativism. When the oft-repeated Red Scare stereotype of the “foreign-born radical,” invoked in this time to help justify new immigration restrictions,<sup>3</sup> was introduced to Cleveland, it meant that a substantial portion of the population might be suspect. Because of these demographic facts, it is difficult to justify claims that such identities were inimical to Cleveland, rather than actually being constitutive of the city. Nonetheless, foreign birth and the suspicion of radicalism played a key role in the construction of the May Day riots’ image. *The Cleveland Plain Dealer*’s report, that only four percent of the socialists arrested on May 1 were “native born” and that the rest should be deported, typified the mainstream reaction.<sup>4</sup> But what evidence did the paper have for this characterization? Just who were these radicals? Historians of American socialism traditionally find that the Socialist Party and its affiliated unions in the Midwest principally had their bases in the older immigrant communities of Anglo-Saxons and German, as well as skilled laborers.<sup>5</sup> Did Charles Ruthenberg, a securely middle-class, American-born, educated former-sales manager, have command of a particular ethnic group, neighborhood, or trade union? Additionally, what did the character of the Cleveland socialists say about Cleveland socialism?

Fortunately for historians, the *Cleveland Press* produced a comprehensive list of all those arrested (all reports agree loyalists were not arrested), noting their age, occupation, home address, country of birth, and even marital

1. Richard Judd, *Socialist Cities: Municipal Politics and the Grass Roots of American Socialism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 162
2. Federal Census Bureau, “Tech Paper 29: Table 22. Nativity of the Population for Urban Places Among the 50 Largest Urban Places Since 1870: 1850 to 1990.”
3. Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 99-100
4. *Plain Dealer*, May 3, 1919
5. For a collection of essays examining the practices and demographics of other Midwestern towns and cities, including Milwaukee, WI, Marion, IN, Minneapolis, MN, and others, see Donald Critchlow, ed., *Socialism in the Heartland* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 1986). One of the guiding theses that connect the essays, as Critchlow says in his introduction, is that “American socialism should be seen as a political and social experiment on the part of certain worker and ethnic groups to preserve their dignity and sense of freedom.” (15)

status.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, it later printed a list of bystanders who were accidentally arrested and were not affiliated with the socialists.<sup>7</sup> What these two lists provide is, essentially, a randomly selected sample of 111 leftists that provides the basis for an analysis of the city's radical milieu (Figure 1; see Appendix).

In line with the *Plain Dealer's* report, the *Cleveland Press* reports a very small percentage of American-born rioters, here found to be about five percent. However, the published list of individuals is somewhat problematic since it is based on national birthplace, rather than ethnicity. Thus it conceals a huge diversity, particularly among immigrants from the multi-ethnic empires of Austria-Hungary and Russia. When these immigrants arrived in Cleveland, they often settled into culturally- rather than nationally-defined neighborhoods; they were Czechs and Poles, not Austro-Hungarians and Russians.<sup>8</sup> Fortunately, the Federal census schedules for 1910, 1920, and 1930 provide a form of cultural identification by listing the language of the individuals. When the names listed in the newspaper are traced through the census, a fuller picture of ethnic identity appears (Figure 2; see Appendix).

When the vague categories of "Russia" and "Hungary" are dissolved, at least as the records allow, a much greater degree of ethnic diversity appears. Most important is the emergence of the Poles as the third largest ethnic category among the rioters, falling behind Magyar-speakers and the unclarified "Russian" category. The addition of language also reveals a large Yiddish-speaking grouping from several different national backgrounds. When these Yiddish-speakers of different nationalities are added together, they turn out to form a principal component of the marcher milieu. Overall, the preponderance of these groups is not at all surprising, given that they dominated the foreign-born demographic in Cleveland: the 1920 census recorded 800,000 Clevelanders, of which 240,000 were foreign-born, or about thirty percent<sup>9</sup>. Of that 240,000, 58,000 were "Austrian," 42,000 "Russian," and 42,000 "Hungarian." Again, the lack of specificity caused by the multi-ethnic empires complicates comparison, but the sample of leftist "rioters," as a selection of Cleveland foreigners, roughly correlates with the foreign-born population as a whole. And despite the predominance of these three groups, they still composed only about sixty percent of the Red Rioters sample, the rest of which was a cornucopia of national origins and linguistic variety. As a matter of demographic fact, it can be said that the leftists were statistically representative of Cleveland's ethnic variety. The leftists were not dominated by any one ethnic group to any extent greater than the relative weight of those local ethnic populations. Thus, the socialists participating in the march can be characterized as a genuine political movement, rather than a particularity of any one cultural grouping.

The heterogeneity of the leftists is also displayed in their geographic distribution throughout the city and its immediate suburbs. While one might expect a large concentration in a single or several ethnic neighborhoods or working-class districts, the actual distribution is visibly dispersed when mapped. Ignoring cases of untraceable addresses and several homeless workers, the home locations appear as shown in Figure 3 (see Appendix). While there were certain concentrations in the East Side neighborhoods between Carnegie Avenue and Kinsman Road (possibly favored by the selection because it is near the locations where the riots first broke out), a large and scattered collection of leftists is apparent: most notable are the Italian from as far as the hamlet of Euclid Village

6. *Cleveland Press*, May 2, 1919

7. *Ibid.*, May 3, 1919

8. Edward Miggins and Mary Morgenthauer, "The Ethnic Mosaic: The Settlement of Cleveland by the Immigrants and Migrants" in Thomas Campbell and Edward Miggins, eds. *The Birth of Modern Cleveland 1865-1930*, (Cleveland: Cleveland Historical Society, 1988), 106

9. Federal Census Bureau, "Tech Paper 29: Table 22. Nativity of the Population for Urban Places Among the 50 Largest Urban Places Since 1870: 1850 to 1990."

(1920 population: 3,300) and an ethnically-varied collection of participants from the far West Side neighborhoods.

The final observation to be made from the Cleveland Press data is the surprising variety of occupations among the Red Rioters. As will be established below, the Cleveland Socialists were one of the most radical branches regionally. It might be argued that those who were willing to march in the growing Red Scare atmosphere would have had to possess a level of political dedication only expected from unskilled laborers ("You have nothing to lose but your chains.") And yet, while the category of "Laborer" dominates, one also comes across many machinists, carpenters, tailors, bakers, a female social worker, chauffeurs, the unemployed, and others. This conforms with the Ohio Socialist's coverage of the riots, reporting that a baker's union, machinists union, "one local of the Carpenters" and "members of the Workmen's Sick and Death Benefit Fund" marched on May 1.

In the categories of ethnicity, geography, and occupation, the participants in the May Day march of 1919 were a truly variegated group of the radical left. Contrary to the traditional thesis of historians of Midwestern radicalism, who contend that socialism was largely dominated by older immigrant groups, grew on the basis of a single ethnic group, or was strongest among skilled workers, the "Red Rioters" were as Slavic as Cleveland, but also multi-ethnic, and employed in jobs of varying skill level.<sup>11</sup> And contrary to Lipset and Marks's sociological finding that socialist politics depended upon workers pre-existing communalism derived from "cultural homogeneity," the "Red Rioters" were culturally- and geographically-eclectic, but successfully united. Even factious leftist groups and labor unions came together for a march under the duress of growing Red Scare oppression.<sup>12</sup> The conservative conspiracies that these "Bolsheviki" constituted a group of foreign infiltrators sent by Moscow also becomes a more obvious farce. The fact that census records were available for most of these individuals shows that they lived in the country either decades before or after the riots.<sup>13</sup> This makes problematic the media assertion that they were foreign radicals. Certainly, they were not recently imported Bolsheviki.

### **Subsection: The First Among Equals—Charles Ruthenberg, a Cleveland Radical**

In many ways the biography of the movement's leader, Charles Ruthenberg, fits this multifaceted and diverse characterization of those who followed him on May 1. It also illuminates the character and history of Cleveland socialism. Coming from a middle-class background, Ruthenberg began his political life as a supporter of Democratic reform mayor Tom Johnson.<sup>14</sup> For the future American-born head of a largely foreign-born socialist movement, Ruthenberg's socialism had distinctly European origins. Around 1904, a friend had suggested he read the work of the British socialist and Fabian, Robert Blatchford. Impressed by Blatchford's arguments for socialism, Ruthenberg proceeded then directly to Karl Marx's *Das Kapital*.<sup>15</sup> In his journey from a Progressive political stance, then to a Fabian intellectual introduction to socialism, and finally to Marx, it becomes perhaps obvious that Ruthenberg derived his political views from a social-evolutionary, reformist socialist tendency. As Stephen Millett puts it, Ruthenberg initially saw capitalism's injustice coming from its inefficiency, which would

10. *The Ohio Socialist*, May 8, 1919

11. Critchlow, *Socialism in the Heartland*, 15

12. Seymour Lipset and Gary Marks, *It Didn't Happen Here: Why Socialism Failed in the United States*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000), 135

13. *Census Schedules* for 1910 & 1930, accessed through ancestry.com

14. Millett, "Charles E. Ruthenberg": 195

15. *Ibid.*, 194-5

be solved through centralized planning.<sup>16</sup> Nonetheless, Ruthenberg's ideological development constantly shifted him further to the left. In 1912, when the question of tactics arose, whether to restrict the Socialist Party to purely political action at the ballot box or to pursue direct action in the workplace, Ruthenberg adopted a middle ground by accepting all tactics: he both defended the tactics of the IWW and stressed party unity.<sup>17</sup> By the time of his pamphlet *Are We Growing Towards Socialism?* (1917), Ruthenberg distanced himself even further from his Progressive past. In the pamphlet, he distilled the insights of *Das Kapital* into common American parlance, focusing most notably on the theory of surplus value so as to convince the reader of his/her own exploitation and Marx's theory of history, which proposes a historical progression from primitive communism to feudalism to capitalism to socialism. Through his description of the transition from capitalism to socialism especially, Ruthenberg positions his own Progressive beginnings as the starting point for a larger political program. As he put it, "Capitalism has developed from individual production to collective, co-operative production."<sup>18</sup> The drive towards centralization, integration of industries, and mechanization leads to both greater production and greater exploitative capability; this was simply a repetition of Marx, but Ruthenberg added to these processes of "collectivism" the development of municipal ownership of water, gas, and electric utilities, as well as ownership of industries brought on by World War I. While this "collectivism" and planning might have sated the Progressive Ruthenberg of 1901, he rejected the social-democratic hubris of reform-towards-socialism and the inevitability of utopia:

This collectivism, which is developing in the shape of municipal and state ownership, is not, however, Socialism. With a powerful working class movement, strongly organized on the political and industrial field, developing with it, it may become the means of facilitating the establishment of Socialism. Without such a movement it may well become the basis for more extreme exploitation and oppression of the workers than that which existed in the days of capitalist competition.<sup>19</sup>

Ruthenberg's radical apogee occurred during the fire of the left-wing revolutions in Russia, Hungary, and Bavaria from 1917 to 1919 and the entrance of the United States into the war, a period during which Ruthenberg achieved national notice for his radical pacifism. During his 1917 Cleveland mayoral campaign, he directly invoked Karl Liebknecht, the only German Social Democrat to oppose Germany's entrance into the war in 1914, as a figure of emulation:

I am speaking to you as Karl Liebknecht spoke in the German nation . . . when he denounced the war as a war of the ruling class and stated his unalterable opposition to that war... If you are inspired with that which will bring a better world, then you must stand up and fight for that ideal. You must fight with those who are fighting against the war.<sup>20</sup>

Ruthenberg attained national celebrity status within the Socialist Party through this and other public speeches

16. Ibid., 196

17. Ibid., 197

18. Charles Ruthenberg, *Are We Growing Towards Socialism?* (Cleveland: Local Cleveland, Socialist Party, 1917), 18

19. Ibid., 32-3

20. Millett, "Charles Ruthenberg," 198



against the war, becoming one of the writers of its resolution condemning the war and thus earning national acrimony from those outside the party. In 1917, he was indicted under the Espionage Act for subversive activity for a speech he delivered on Cleveland's Public Square on May 27, 1917: "This is not a war for democracy. This is not a war for freedom...It is a war to secure the investment and profits of the ruling class of this country."<sup>21</sup> The U.S. Supreme Court's support of the indictment in *Ruthenberg et al. v. United States* set the precedent allowing the Espionage Act to imprison many more socialists in the years to come. Later that year, presaging the much more violent May Day of 1919, Cleveland's mayoral candidates assembled in Luna Park on Labor Day, 1917 to give speeches. When Ruthenberg took the podium, he was assaulted by "uniformed soldiers," escaping injury through the efforts of "vaudeville entertainers" who hid him backstage. Notwithstanding, Ruthenberg had his most successful campaign that year, polling 27,685 votes, about one fourth of those cast.<sup>22</sup>

Ruthenberg's Bolshevism assuredly emerged during the winter of 1918-19, the period when he served his prison sentence for the May 27 speech. One possible radicalizing event was a Socialist Party convention in Canton, Ohio, held in the park across from the prison in which he was detained.<sup>23</sup> Ruthenberg was visited by Eugene Debs, himself subsequently arrested for a speech that day extolling Ruthenberg and others for their imprisonment for exercising free speech.<sup>24</sup> Thus, a cycle emerges, linking Ruthenberg, Debs, and the Espionage Act: Ruthenberg as the first victim of the Act and the case under which it was constitutionally-confirmed; Debs as its most famous victim, in part caused by expressing sympathy with Ruthenberg; and Ruthenberg's marshalling of the May Day march to protest Debs own imprisonment, for which he would again be arrested.

Ruthenberg's path to Bolshevism mirrored that of the Cleveland branch of the Socialist Party (Local Cleveland). During the winter of 1918-19, American socialists debated how to respond to the emerging success of the Bolsheviks and their calls for similar "mass action" revolutions in the industrial West.<sup>25</sup> The Socialist Party left-wing vacillated, debating whether to splinter from the right-wing, à la Bolsheviks and Mensheviks, or to capture the whole party by changing the party platform to advocate revolution.<sup>26</sup> Ruthenberg would end up declaring Local Cleveland's support of Bolshevik tactics in April, 1919: "As set forth in the Left Wing program, political action, revolutionary and emphasizing the implacable character of class struggle, has now overthrown the old idea of attempting to carry out various local reforms such as better housing or municipal ownership of street car lines...It is the mass action that will count in the future warfare against the capitalist state."<sup>27</sup> These pronouncements were a far cry from his earlier passive consent to municipal ownership and centralization!

It might have been intellectual engagement, with rigorous texts like *Das Kapital*, that propelled Ruthenberg to a general socialist position, but he was radicalized through the push of state oppression of free speech and the pull of Bolshevik success in Russia. It is in this context that Ruthenberg, a former Progressive and sales manager, came to head a far-left party branch, leading a march of Socialists, IWW members, and left-leaning AFL unions, composed of Cleveland's ethnically-eclectic working-class, to call for Eugene Debs's freedom, an end to all imperialist wars, and revolutionary socialism.

21. Ibid., 198

22. Ibid., 200

23. Nick Salvatore, *Eugene Debs: Citizen and Socialist* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 291

24. Ibid., 294

25. Salvatore, *Debs*, 297

26. Ibid., 298

27. *Revolutionary Age*, April 26, 1919



# The Loyalist Context: Veteran Warfare

One of the principal contradictions that manifests itself in the Cleveland May Day riots is the politically-split identity of the American veteran. While some veterans marched with red flags in their hands, other veterans proclaimed that flag's unpatriotic character and violently tore it away. Of course, drafting a massive civilian army would accrue soldiers who might hold radical or conservative viewpoints. The fact that they, as veterans, chose to wear uniforms for the May Day event meant that their former role as a soldier was central to the identity they wished to express during the parade, either inside or outside the parade column. In the May Day riots, two principal narratives of the "veteran" on display came into conflict: the conservative vision of the veteran as a patriotic representative and the radical vision of the veteran as an exceptional category of the exploited proletariat.

The veterans of the United States' military had always been one of those deciding factors in political conflict. Most recently, the veterans of the Union and Confederate armies had organized into fraternal organizations. The Grand Army of the Republic, the main organization for Union veterans, became a politically-influential voting bloc of the Republican Party and every Republican president from Ulysses S. Grant to William McKinley was a member.<sup>1</sup> And like the G.A.R. before it, the American Legion, founded in Paris in February 1919 by, among others, Teddy Roosevelt, Jr., was ostensibly founded to provide a community for all servicemen active in the war, at home and abroad.<sup>2</sup> The composition of its founding delegates and leaders were upper-class and professionally-employed.<sup>3</sup> Preaching a doctrine of "Americanism," the political character of the American Legion was unmistakably anti-radical. During its St. Louis founding caucus on May 8, 1919, as part of the stateside response to the Paris Conference, the Legion asked "the United States Congress to pass a bill for immediately deporting every one of those Bolshevik or IWWs." By November of that year, it instructed local legionnaire posts to "organize immediately for the purpose of meeting the insidious propaganda of Bolshevism, IWWism, radicalism, and all other anti-Americanism." In a 1921 report by the American Civil Liberties Union, it noted that the Legion had engaged in "hundreds of mobbings, kidnappings, and intimidations as well as strikebreaking" and labeled it "the most active agency in intolerance and repression in the United States."<sup>4</sup> From its conception, the American Legion was an elite-driven project which, similar to the G.A.R. before it, directed veteran solidarity and veteran culture into a political orientation, which in the Legion's case was anti-radicalism.

1. Scott Ainsworth, "Electoral Strength and the Emergence of Group Influence in the Late 1800s," *American Politics Research* 23, 3, July 1995, 323

2. Alec Campbell, "The Sociopolitical Origins of the American Legion," *Theory and Society*, 39, 1 (2010): 10-11

3. *Ibid.*, 12

4. *Ibid.*, 17

It is not surprising that organizing American veterans into a patriotic, anti-radical force would be desirable for the particular class of officers who founded it. During the early months of 1919, they were many contemporary and recent examples of veterans being organized into socially-transformative and chaotic political projects which graced every newspaper. The Bolshevik Revolution had successfully organized veterans into the Red Army to eventually win the Civil War against the Whites,<sup>5</sup> while Germany was torn by conflicts between revolutionary Workers' and Soldiers' Councils and counter-revolutionary Freikorps, themselves an organization of demobilized German soldiers.<sup>6</sup> The Great War soldier possessed both a revolutionary and reactionary potential; to stop such developments from occurring, it made sense to quickly induct the military population into a thoroughly "patriotic" organization.

Distinct from the loyalist role of the soldier in the American Legion, the socialist marchers embodied what might be termed a Leninist-pacifist understanding of the "veteran." Recognizing the revolutionary potential on display in Russia and elsewhere, radical socialists like those in Cleveland construed veterans as a type of proletariat. Specifically, soldiers were seen as victims of imperialist wars waged for capitalist interests. As Lenin wrote, "the present-day imperialist bourgeoisie [are] deceiving the peoples by means of 'national ideology' and the term 'defense of the fatherland' in the present war between slave-owners for fortifying and strengthening slavery."<sup>7</sup> And as Ruthenberg said in the May 1917 speech: "This is not a war for democracy... This is not a war for freedom. ... It is a war to secure the investments."<sup>8</sup> According to this viewpoint, the soldier was a proletariat mobilized by national bourgeoisie to resolve international disputes of capital, with ideas like "patriotism" or Wilson's "war for democracy" as mere instrumental fictions for achieving that task. Socialists must have felt that the economic deprivations soldiers would experience on their return stateside would radicalize or reconfirm their socialist commitments; the left-wing satire journal *Good Morning* said as much on May 15, 1919 (see Figure 4).

The May Day riots, composed of fighting between veterans of opposing political ideologies, were also a struggle over what role the veteran should play in America's social and political transformation after the war. American veterans carrying American and red flags in the march were attacked and beaten by other veterans adhering to a patriotism opposed to the latter flag. The loyalists, quite notably, burnt those flags in Public Square before the Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument. The *Cleveland Press* later lionized those soldiers, printing their pictures in the newspaper. It also credited a legless Canadian veteran James Stevens, also in town for the Victory Loan campaign, for having "caused [the] May Day Riots."<sup>9</sup> After the tumult in Public Square, Sergeant Joseph Almacey, president of the Ohio Soldiers' and Sailors' League, invited "every loyal soldier and sailor, whether he served in the states or overseas, to join the league," which they planned to make "a national organization to combat Bolshevism."<sup>10</sup> A nearly stereotypical portrayal of the figure of the loyalist soldier, however, appeared in the *New York Times*: "It was in this fight [during the Cleveland Riots] that John Keller, an ex-marine who lost an arm at Chateau-Thierry, swung his remaining arm with such effect that five radicals required treatment by ambulance

5. Jan Palmowski, "Red Army." in the online *A Dictionary of Contemporary World History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008)

6. Mary Fulbrook, *A History of Germany 1918-2008: The Divided Nation* (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 24

7. Vladimir Lenin, *Socialism and War: The Attitude of the Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party Towards the War*. (1915), Chapter 1; can be found in the Volume 21 of the Lenin Collected Works, available online at marxists.org

8. Millett, "Charles Ruthenberg," 199

9. *Cleveland Press*, May 2, 1919

10. Ibid.

surgeons.”<sup>11</sup> The loyalist attempt to solidify this dichotomy between the military service and leftist politics was perhaps best exemplified by Lieutenant Herbert Bergen, who initiated the fight in Public Square by yelling to two socialist soldiers “Take off the uniform or throw away the flags!”<sup>12</sup>

The May Day riots confirmed that the revolutionary potential of a demobilized mass draft army was successfully channeled into patriotic societies and organizations explicitly or implicitly formed to counter leftist tendencies in the United States. While *Good Morning* and Ruthenberg may have believed unemployment and poverty would drive the veteran into following the “Down with Everything” line, preemptively-devised outlets like the American Legion with its welfare policies, as well as sheer patriotism and Red Scare fervor, likely explain the continued presence of most soldiers outside the picket-line. Ironically, it was this same generation of veterans who a decade later organized the “Bonus Army,” under General Smedley Butler, to march on Washington and demand compensation from the national government in the midst of the Great Depression.<sup>13</sup> As during the May Day riots, the U.S. army of the 1930’s and future fighters of World War II used tanks to disperse that band of veterans seeking economic rectification, albeit lacking the language of socialism. The immediate post-war era in the United States featured a violent struggle for the political identity of the Great War veteran and the May Day riots bear witness both to that conflict and signal the victory of an anti-socialist veteran culture in the form of organizations like the American Legion.

11. *The New York Times*, May 3, 1919.

12. *Cleveland Press*, May 2, 1919

13. *Plain Dealer*, July 29, 1932.

# The Local Context: The Crimson Midwest, Red Ohio, and Reddest Cleveland

In order to view the May Day riots properly, the riots need to be placed in the larger regional and historical context of the growth of Midwestern radicalism and the Socialist Party in Ohio, as well as Local Cleveland's place in the party. The Ohio Valley, with convenient access to river systems, its proximity to the East Coast and the Midwestern heartland and Chicago, as well as rail access to Appalachia, made it an industrial center<sup>1</sup> and earned the moniker "Ruhr of America."<sup>2</sup> And like the German Ruhr, the Midwest was a hotbed of the country's socialist movement.<sup>3</sup> The national railroad strike of 1877, settled only through violent militia mobilization, spread throughout the Midwest with flashpoints in Pittsburgh, Chicago, and St. Louis. Arguably, it was this strike, which shut down large parts of the national economy, that birthed modern unionism and socialist tendencies in the United States.<sup>4</sup> It was in Haymarket Square, Chicago, 1886, where the international worker's holiday itself was bombed into existence.<sup>5</sup> The Midwest also produced several notables of American socialism's national leadership (perhaps only matched per capita by the Pacific Northwest), most important Eugene Debs of Indiana. As Richard Judd recounts in great detail in *Socialist Cities*, the Socialist Party of America (founded in 1901), which became the most successful left-wing party in American history in the early twentieth century, attained great electoral success throughout the country. In the case of Ohio and its surrounding areas, Judd shows that the Socialist Party achieved its electoral victories mostly at the municipal level through a complex relationship with the Democratic, Republican, and Progressive political forces: "While Ohio contained neither the greatest number of socialist victories nor the largest 'socialized' cities, gains there were the most representative of Socialist successes in urban politics. Ohio socialists managed to elect city council minorities in major cities such as Columbus, Cleveland,

1. Ronald Weiner and Carol Beal, "The Sixth City: Cleveland in Three Stages of Urbanization," in Thomas Campbell and Edward Miggins, eds. *The Birth of Modern Cleveland 1865-1930* (Cleveland: Cleveland Historical Society, 1988), 27
2. The moniker "Ruhr of America" for the Ohio Valley has an as-of-yet unidentified origin. James Casto in *Towboat on the Ohio* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1995) claims that the term was invented by Kentucky federal Senator Thruston Morton in a 1957 speech on the Ohio River. However, as early as 1934 the Alabama newspaper *Florence Times* (Nov. 23, 1934) referred to the Tennessee Valley, after the development of the Tennessee Valley Authority, as a "possible 'Ruhr of America.'" Later, the *Milwaukee Journal* (Dec. 20, 1945), mentioning an economic development foundation in Youngstown, refers to the Ohio area as the "Ruhr of America" and Youngstown as its center. Clearly, the term was used rather loosely and served as a claim of economic prestige long before Morton.
3. Werner Angress, "Weimar Coalition and Ruhr Insurrection, March-April 1920: A Study of Government Policy," *The Journal of Modern History* 29, 1 (1957): 1. ; Critchlow, *Heartland*, 9-10
4. *The Encyclopedia of Strikes in American History* (2009): John Lloyd, "The Strike Wave of 1877," 190
5. Philip Foner, *May Day: A Short History of the International Workers' Holiday* (New York: International Publishers, 1986), 27

Dayton, and Akron, and to elect more mayors to office in small and medium-sized cities than any other state.”<sup>6</sup> Most of these victories occurred in small mining or farm communities, those typical areas of Populism that the Socialists captured for themselves.

The trend of Socialist triumphs in Ohio, and nationally, fit the following pattern: the Socialists had great success in electing municipal positions, like council and mayoral seats, between 1909 and 1913. After stagnating in the following years, they revived significantly in 1917 to monopolize the anti-war vote, but fell apart almost completely due to party splits and state oppression. Though Ohio and the Midwest generally followed this trend, it is not representative of individual cases or Cleveland in particular. In the 1911 elections, Ohio Socialists won office in “93 cities and towns” with 17 new mayors from “a wide spectrum of communities ranging from villages of a few hundred people to cities of forty thousand.”<sup>7</sup> The political character of these campaigns, rather than being radical, were actually quite reformist and similar to the programs proposed by the more ‘bourgeois’ Progressive party. A successful campaign platform in Martins Ferry, Ohio, included city “democratization,” cheaper utility rates, free textbooks, and “eventually municipal ownership.” Likewise, the Socialist mayor of Toronto, Ohio, Robert Murray, “campaign[ed] to wipe out the village debt and reduce the tax rate.”<sup>8</sup> Radical socialists, these were not. Nonetheless, these victories were building the party’s rapport and filling a political niche in small working-class towns that was normally occupied in the big cities by reform-minded Progressives, Republicans, and Democrats fighting corrupt political machines. The predominance of this “pre-existing bourgeois reformism” explains why Ohio Socialists in the major cities merely captured council seats in 1911 (4 in Columbus, 2 in Akron, 3 in Dayton, 1 in Toledo).<sup>9</sup> The significant middle-class vote, interested in improving city maintenance and breaking-up political machines, relied on traditional parties to voice its discontent. The Socialists could garner the workers and get partial victories, but they also needed the shopkeeper and salesman to take an entire city.

The Socialist success of 1911 was fleeting however: only two of the seventeen Socialist mayors elected in Ohio in 1911, Newton Wycoff of Martins Ferry and Robert Murray of Toronto, survived the 1913 elections, though these elections won eleven new mayors to soften the electoral losses.<sup>10</sup> In many cases, the deciding middle-class vote on the local-scale were swept by “fusion tickets,” single candidates appointed by a combination of Republicans, Democrats, or third-parties specifically meant to defeat the Socialist incumbent.<sup>11</sup> A Socialist in Ohio could win a plurality when Democrats and Republicans split their bases within economic classes, but they nearly universally lost two-way elections. However, while the state generally was having these successes, the Cleveland Socialists had none of their own. In Cleveland, a city dominated by local party machines run on ethnic lines, the Socialists had no easy way to enter the city council. Neither could they achieve success in the ballot for the mayor’s office, since reform politics had dominated the competition between Republicans and Democrats since the administration of Tom Johnson beginning in 1901. If a Cleveland Socialist wanted to achieve any meaningful progress, he must make it in the workplace, through a union; about half of the 1910 Socialist Party membership of one thousand Clevelanders were also union members.<sup>12</sup>

6. Judd, *Socialist Cities*, 24

7. *Ibid.*, 73

8. *Ibid.*, 73

9. *Ibid.*, 73-74.

10. *Ibid.*, 74, 88-89

11. *Ibid.*, 76

12. *Ibid.*, 162-3

While this analysis focuses on Ruthenberg's Socialists, these electoral failures also worked to create the radical IWW, whose tactics were to reject political action completely and focus on industrial activity in preparation for direct worker ownership of industry. The focus on industrial action seemed to be the logical conclusion of the ineffective politics the Socialists struggled with, at least until the Bolshevik inspiration. Notably, the Cleveland IWW was the home to the unknown, possibly Slovenian, illustrators "Nedeljkovich, Brashich, & Kuharich," who produced the famous American rendition of the "Pyramid of Capitalist System" propaganda poster in 1911 (Figure 5; see Appendix).<sup>13</sup> The same illustrators produced other political posters, which better evince an ideology that would fit Cleveland's suppression of effective Socialist political participation (Figures 6 and 7; see Appendix). It is important to note not only the critique of reformist policies, like Teddy Roosevelt-style trust-busting failing to go to the "root" of the problems of industrial woes, but also the utopic ideal of "Co-operative Commonwealth," a term Ruthenberg also used in *Growing*.<sup>14</sup> One can only speculate to the degree to which local and active IWW ideologues and union activity played in helping radicalize the Cleveland Socialists and AFL unions into left-wing, mass action, and industrial action contingents of their respective organizations.

Local Cleveland's tactics during the pre-war years readily contrasted with those of Dayton. While the institution of scientific management techniques by cash register magnate John Patterson and organization of an Employer's Association under John Kirby suppressed union action in the Dayton industries, the political establishment and industrialists tolerated Socialist political action. The Socialists built their own political machine, adopted a "moderate program centered around municipal ownership", and "came within a hair's breadth [of electoral success] several times in the prewar years."<sup>15</sup> Through a greater adherence to the strictures of liberal democracy, the Dayton Local came ever closer to victory, thereby softening the Socialist's radical end goals. For Cleveland, the reverse was true. Industrial action became the realm of meaningful improvement on worker's lives, while progressive figures like Tom L. Johnson and Newton D. Baker prevented Dayton-style socialist compromise a chance at municipal rule.<sup>16</sup> The radicalization of Local Cleveland, and Ruthenberg as well, would come through the stymieing of possibly-successful political action:

Rather than stress the narrow and confusing points of contention between Socialists and reformers, the Cleveland Socialist party issued bolder, more abstract ideological declarations. They adopted the left-wing rationale for politics, fighting political battles not to win office but to instill a working-class spirit that would carry the movement to its ultimate goal: abolition of the capitalist system and the creation of the Cooperative Commonwealth.<sup>17</sup>

A perhaps more significant comparison to the Cleveland Socialists than Dayton are the highly successful Milwaukee Socialists at the same time. The Milwaukee Socialists, unlike those of Cleveland, were able to grab

13. N, B, & K are listed as the publishers in the bottom left of the poster in Figure 5

14. The history of the term "Cooperative Commonwealth" in American radicalism is varied. The term accompanied the first introduction of Marx's ideas from *Kapital* through Laurence Gronlund's *Co-operative Commonwealth* (1884), ultimately wrapped up in conservative, reformist politics. Debs is known to have read Gronlund, but such politics would be antithetical to the IWW and Ruthenberg is not known to have read him. It very likely represented one of those terms, though analytically suggesting anarcho-syndicalism, which remained vague enough for a broad-left description of the socialist utopia pursued by all branches of American radicalism

15. Judd, *Socialist Cities*, 162

16. *Ibid.*, 162-3

17. *Ibid.*, 163



the middle-class Progressive milieu that was usually captured by the Progressives, Democrats, or Republicans, principally through watering down their radical socialist rhetoric and platform to pure municipalism. As the Wisconsin Historical Society puts it, the "Milwaukee Socialists played down social theory and, like the Progressives, emphasized the need for honest government, a popular appeal in a city long notorious for corruption and administrative inefficiency."<sup>18</sup> Thus, the Milwaukee Socialists attained offices — socialist Emil Seidel became a multi-term mayor and Victor Berger the first socialist Congressman — by becoming *the* municipal reformers: "Many professional people supported a Socialist mayor because he helped give Milwaukee a reputation as the best-governed city in the United States."<sup>19</sup> The Milwaukee Socialists would wind up on the right-wing of the Socialist Party's splits in mid-1919, rejecting a revolutionary platform in order to prevent being labeled un-American radicals and losing their domination of the ballot box. Whereas the left-wing(s) would fizzle out over lost enthusiasm after 1919 and sectarian strife, the right wing in Milwaukee would very slowly fade through guilt-by-association and a realignment of the reform-minded professional class with the traditional parties.

In Ohio, with the beginning of the war years and eventual U.S. entry into the war, Socialists began to come into direct conflict with their more nationalist political contenders. The national Socialist party had declared its strident anti-war position in April, 1917 in response to U.S. involvement, thus opening up all the local parties to charges of unpatriotic sentiment and pro-Germanism.<sup>20</sup> Moderate socialist centers like Dayton and Milwaukee restricted their anti-war stance to basic issues like war inflation and food shortages.<sup>21</sup> Local Cleveland, a party largely built on first- and second-generation immigrants with close familial ties to the (German/Austro-Hungarian) homeland, stuck to its anti-war rhetoric, which would eventually land Ruthenberg and others in jail. Regardless of Dayton and Milwaukee's reservations, the anti-war stance gave life to the Ohio and Cleveland left by increasing Ohio Socialist membership by fifty percent, doubling Local Cleveland's membership in the six months after the anti-war declaration, accruing to Ruthenberg's 1917 mayoral campaign one fourth of the total vote, and finally winning Cleveland city council seats. Those seats, however, were not to be held. Instructed to emulate the standard moderate role fulfilled by the Milwaukee Socialists, Socialist councilmen John Willert and Noah Mandelkorn were supposed to "attend strictly to their civic duties" to thwart the growing wartime oppression of radicals. Nevertheless, the rest of the council forced the socialists out by bring forward a measure supporting the war effort. When the Socialists voted against it as a measure outside the jurisdiction of a municipal government, the council ejected the Socialists from their seats citing an "unwritten law requiring support of patriotic measures."<sup>22</sup> Such anti-Socialist tactics predominated throughout Ohio and only served to further radicalize the Ohio Socialists in general and Local Cleveland in particular. As the *Miami Valley Socialist* later put it in 1920 after the Red Scare repressions and collapse of the Socialist Party apparatus and municipal presence: "[workingmen] scratch their heads and say 'what's the use?' As soon as the workers do manage to elect somebody to office the plutes kick him out."<sup>23</sup>

It was in this historical context of political action's constant failure — of failing to obtain enough votes or actually accomplishing anything in office — that Ohio and especially Cleveland was radicalized. Despite greater

18. Wisconsin Historical Society: *Turning Points in Wisconsin History*, "Milwaukee Sewer Socialism.

19. *Ibid.*

20. Judd, *Socialist Cities*, 165

21. *Ibid.*, 167

22. *Ibid.*, 165-6

23. *Miami Valley Socialist*, April 9, 1920; as quoted in *Ibid.*, 169

local setbacks, Local Cleveland grew rapidly during the war: after February 1917 Local Cleveland gained a new membership of 200-275 per month (more than the rest of the state combined), including a growth of the Russian-language branch from 2,300 to 7,800 between December 1918 and April 1919.<sup>24</sup> Revolutionary success in Russia, the Seattle general strike, and the New York Socialist Party's publication of the Left-Wing Manifesto "repudiating 'reformist' measures and advocating revolutionary mass action" pointed towards a tactical alternative to Local Cleveland's problems at the ballot box.<sup>25</sup> Local Cleveland announced its support of the manifesto in the April 26, 1919 issue of *Revolutionary Age*: "It is the mass action that will count in the future warfare against the capitalist state."<sup>26</sup> Later that year in June, the Ohio Socialists, in response to the moderate National Executive Committee of the Socialist Party expelling the radical Michigan Socialist Party, passed a motion reinstating them, thus earning the Ohio party its own expulsion from the national party.<sup>27</sup>

The May Day riots represent the apotheosis of a radicalization process in the rise and fall of the Ohio Socialist Party and Local Cleveland. Some parts of the state, like Dayton, resembled the "sewer socialism" of Milwaukee, focusing on the reformist nature of municipal ownership and thereby filling the role of progressive reformers where no "bourgeois" party had. But Local Cleveland, due to the forces of existing reformist mayors, powerful political machine control over council seats, and near instant expulsion from the few offices they did win, had no reason to temporize or refrain from engaging in industrial action. The reason why Cleveland developed a politics so radical was that it possessed a milieu that would convince an IWW, a Socialist, and even an AFL union man that direct revolutionary action was the most logical political position. The reason why Local Cleveland "aligned themselves with the Bolsheviks of Russia and the Spartacists of Germany" was not because there were many Germans and Russians in Cleveland.<sup>28</sup> From the view of any sort of leftist politics, a Clevelander had nothing to lose but their chains and a useless ballot. The May Day riots were a confirmation and statement of that radical program. They were also the reaction such a declared political position would receive from a city that had not and would not parley in the slightest with socialists.

The impressive size of the May Day march, its place in Cleveland's political history, and the violent response to growing socialist power, also represent an exception to the historiographical consensus on Midwestern radicalism. Histories dealing with American radical "success," particularly in the Midwest, tend to focus on and generalize the case of Milwaukee's electorally-successful "sewer socialism." Because of this focus on winning mayoral power or city councils, historians like Donald Critchlow paint most Midwestern socialists as moderates and depict individual radical leaders like Ruthenberg or Marguerite Prevey of Akron as outliers.<sup>29</sup> However, the case of Local Cleveland and the leftist movement that grew in membership and popularity as it became *more* radical, not less, completely contradicts this existing model. After the riots, i.e. after growing radicalism and conflict, Local Cleveland gained 335 new members, roughly 50% *more* than the normal monthly rate, in May, 1919.<sup>30</sup> This exception, coming from one of the key Midwestern cities, suggests that further research into the Midwestern radicalism of the early-twentieth century should operate on a case-by-case basis, taking into account

24. Ibid., 169

25. Ibid., 170

26. *The Revolutionary Age*, April 26, 1919

27. Judd, *Socialist Cities*, 171

28. *Cleveland Press*, May 2, 1919

29. Critchlow, *Heartland*, 7

30. Judd, *Socialist Cities*, 171

the differing types of conservative opposition the leftists faced, the demographic makeup of the locality, and the dynamic created by the response, radicalizing or moderating, of the individual local branches and organizations. A synthetic history of these differing cases, from Milwaukee to Cleveland, would have to focus on the processes which were capable of producing *variegated* experiences throughout the Midwest, rather than simply generalizing the Milwaukee paradigm.

The May Day riots, however, were also the beginning of the end of Local Cleveland. In August, the party splintered: Ruthenberg brought a majority of the foreign language leagues and the party's assets into the Communist Party, Alfred Wagenknecht led most of the English-speaking contingent into John Reed's Communist Labor Party, and the Finnish and Jewish language federations would constitute the remaining husk of the Socialist Party in Cleveland.<sup>31</sup> The Ohio Socialist Party as well would split into obscurity over the course of the period from 1919 to 1924.<sup>32</sup> As a summation of this period, one can do little better than Max Hayes of the *Cleveland Citizen* newspaper. A moderate at odds with the Socialist Party as a whole and the left-wing in particular by 1920, though he blamed the May Day riots on Ruthenberg and his radicalism, he admitted that aside from Cleveland as a radical epicenter, Ohio cities had "about as live a bunch of workers as you can find in any graveyard, politically speaking."<sup>33</sup> From the mass grassroots activity and success of the 1911 elections, red Ohio had faded except for Cleveland, sustained only by a radicalism built up from constant obstructions, persecution, and a modicum of ballot success. The declaration of Local Cleveland for the left-wing and the subsequent May Day riots represented the ultimate break between Ohio and socialism; Ohio socialism's most neglected section rejecting the political process and the city's continued rejection in kind.

31. *Ibid.*, 172

32. *Ibid.*, 181

33. *Cleveland Citizen*, July 31, 1920; as quoted in Judd, *Socialist Cities*, 173.

# The National Context: Socialism as Civic-Nationalism; Loyalism as Ethno-Nationalism

When reading politically opinionated papers, publications, and writings of individuals, conservative and radical, from the early twentieth century, one thing becomes readily apparent: a deep appreciation, perhaps even an obsession, with symbolism and iconography.<sup>1</sup> Importantly, notions of nationalism and radical socialism are communicated through how one presents or reacts to a political symbol. To conservatives and radicals, a red flag was much more than just a flag. It represented a certain set of ideas and associations: utopia or anarchy; industrial suffering or disrespect for traditional institutions; egalitarianism or the world turned upside down. But while some of these dichotomies were certainly accurate, it is easy to be drawn into a binary logic that may favor one over the other. The most pertinent binary for the May Day riots and the general case of socialism in America was internationalism and nationalism. Those who attacked the marchers were ‘loyalists’ and ‘100 percent American,’ while the socialists were foreigners or ‘internationalists.’ Looking back, we can easily discard loyalist epithets for socialists like “Bismarckians” or “pro-German,” but it is harder to dismiss the idea that socialism was something international, European, and if not un-American then at least non-American. After all, a common trope of American socialist commentary and historiography is “Why didn’t socialism happen here?”

Contrary to these simplistic binaries, taking the May Day riots as a starting point, the socialism of 1919 carried for American socialists themselves a distinctly American tradition of democratic values into the industrial era. Ultimately, the consternation over red flags by conservative Americans was the flip side to this interpretation. While socialists were developing a sort of socialist civic-nationalism, the conservatives contested it with an alternative militant ethno-nationalism. This argument is a revision on Gary Gerstle’s assertion in *American Crucible* that presents American history as a struggle between American civic- and ethno-nationalism. While this paper reads this same dichotomy into twentieth-century American history, Gerstle focuses exclusively on the civic-nationalism of liberals and mainstream politics. When he covers the period of World War I and the 1920s, Gerstle recognizes that [liberal] civic-nationalism was in decline, but misses the ways in which American socialism was a type of civic-nationalism.<sup>2</sup> And because Gerstle focuses on American liberals and an ethno-

1. For work on the importance of political symbolism, see the many works of Murray Edelman. As he says in one article: “It is language about political events and developments that people experience; even events that are close by take their meaning from the language used to depict them. So political language is political reality; there is no other so far as the meaning of events to actor and spectators is concerned.” Murray Edelman. “Political Language and Political Reality”. *American Political Science Association* 18, 1 (1985): 10
2. Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 83

nationalism focused on race, he misses how the concept of American ethno-nationalism was essentially defined by its anti-radicalism, in addition to the racial chauvinism which Gerstle focuses on. The May Day riots, and the subsequent squelching of the indigenous socialist movement by the forces of international Soviet Bolshevism and Red Scare nationalism, thus represent the death of a tradition of American civic-nationalism that did not survive the turmoil 1919.

So, what were the symbols which the socialists used to interpret for themselves a distinctly American socialism? Given that the riots began as a march, the socialist symbols used during their International Workers' Day should be examined first. The first important symbol is of course the red flag, which was the source of the brawls that ignited the riots. Soldiers and citizens assaulted marchers to take their flags and, once the riots subsided, those loyalists burned, ripped, and tore red flags throughout town, most notably in Public Square at the Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument. In almost every case, journalists, public commentators, and police cite the absolutely unbearable nature of the flag itself as the cause of the bedlam, rather than individuals who carried it. The *Cleveland Press* declared: "The red flag was their symbol of revolution, terrorism, disorder, anarchy, and chaos. It expressed a hate of all established institutions and a determination to overthrow the United States...The public against which the threat was made recognized the red flag for what it is."<sup>3</sup> And as the same paper delighted in concluding its coverage: "Bits of red flags which caused the riots littered the gutters of the downtown section all evening. Bolsheviks, who had started out to demonstrate their power had lost all stomach for that. They had preached disorder, but the taste they got of its practice was enough. So far was known there was not a red flag flying in all Cleveland one hour after the riots started."<sup>4</sup> After the event, Police Chief Frank Smith told the *Plain Dealer* that "the police will be ordered to forbid the display of red flags, ribbons or other emblems—that started the trouble Friday...Even the Socialists ought to know that the appearance of red would start a riot."<sup>5</sup> While it would be almost intuitively clear that a populace wrapped up in patriotic fervor after a war would react negatively to a flag construed as anti-American, the test case of the obsession with the red flag shows a strong psychic awareness of symbolism. The loyalists reacted so viciously to what was ostensibly a peaceful march because symbols such as the red flag were viscerally evocative of controversial political ideals.

Now, if one were to impute the same appreciation of symbolic connotation that launched some into a vicious rage onto the marchers themselves, what kind of message might be interpreted? Of course, there is the red flag, that symbol of internationalism and socialism. But at the head of the march were American soldiers carrying "three American flags and three Socialist red flags," one of which was a gift from the Ukrainian socialists.<sup>6</sup> It was reported that the band played "Maryland, My Maryland," "The Marseillaise," and "The Stars and Stripes Forever."<sup>7</sup> One would struggle to build a more patriotic, but yet socialist, playlist of pre-1919 tunes: "Maryland," a common battle hymn and the state song of Maryland sharing the same tune as the British Labour song "Red Flag," would invoke a martial mood, but remains distinctly-American and labor-centric; "The Marseillaise" is the classic song of French republicanism; and "Stars and Stripes" is an incredibly "American" song, yet it heralded the beginning of the riots.

3. *Cleveland Press*, May 2, 1919

4. Ibid

5. *Plain Dealer*, May 3, 1919

6. *Plain Dealer*, May 2, 1919

7. Ibid

Through this combination of symbols — both red and American flags — socialists were expressing a notion of civic-nationalism that connected their political ideals with the idea of American nationhood founded upon political ideals. In theories of nationalism, this conception of nationalism contrasts with the typical “blood and soil” nationalism of Europe and elsewhere, in which the historical continuity of a race in a geographic location bequeaths the power of “nationhood.” “Germany” is the combination of the German people as a biological concept and the physical land termed “Germany.”<sup>8</sup> The United States, lacking such a blood and soil myth, has the myth of the American Revolution embodied in sacred texts like the Declaration of Independence.<sup>9</sup> Quite certainly, the actual politics of the twentieth-century socialists differed from those of the Founding Fathers, but the political ideals were seen as compatible, if not interdependent in order to remain viable in modern industrial society. Tracing the genesis of socialist tendencies in 1870s industrial strife, Nick Salvatore finds that this dynamic happened through the political and religious ideals of harmony: “With the emergence of an industrialized society, one that threatened the republican and religious foundations of the older culture, many workers saw in this concept of justice [as harmony] a stringent critique of the new order.”<sup>10</sup> American civic-nationalism was the translation of the abstract ideals of the American foundation into an ideological background used to criticize the exploitative industrial conditions which ill-suited the United States as an idyllic Jeffersonian democracy.

The idea of American socialist civic-nationalism was present not only in the symbols of the May Day march and the vague ideals of nineteenth century American life, but also in the vocabulary of the riots’ central figures. Eugene Debs was the very embodiment of this “Americanism-as-socialism” ideal. In his defense speech in 1918, he invoked the figures of Washington, Adams, Patrick Henry, Thaddeus Stevens, and Christ, all heroes of post-Civil War Americana, and favorably compared them to the Bolsheviks, thereby accepting accusations that Debs was one as well.<sup>11</sup> Invoking Abraham Lincoln’s critique of President Polk’s war against Mexico in 1848 to defend his own “unpatriotic” war opposition,<sup>12</sup> Debs crystallized the civic-nationalist critique of his times: “I believe in patriotism. I have never uttered a word against the flag. I love the flag as a symbol of freedom. I object only when that flag is prostituted to base purposes, to sordid ends, by those who, in the name of patriotism, would keep the people in subjugation.”<sup>13</sup> Further stressing his loyalty to American ideals, he added: “I believe in the Constitution of the United States. Isn’t it strange that we socialists stand almost alone today in defending the Constitution of the United States? The revolutionary fathers who had been oppressed under king rule understood that free speech and free press and the right of free assemblage by the people were the fundamental principles of democratic government.”<sup>14</sup> Debs, as the moral center and fulcrum of the American socialist movement prior to its dissolution in the 1920’s, embodied the ideas that animated the immigrant citizens with a twin display of American and socialist flags.

Ruthenberg’s socialism, while certainly of a more intellectualized and Marx-derived variety than Debs’, also evinced this quintessentially American character. In his depiction of Marx’s stages of history, Ruthenberg openly

8. Fulbrook, *Germany*, 311

9. Gerstle, *Crucible*, 4.

10. Salvatore, *Eugene Debs*, 25

11. Eugene Debs’s Defense Speech, 27-31, in David Karsner, *Debs: His Authorized Life and Letters* (New York: Boni and Liveright Publishers, 1919), 14-58

12. *Ibid.*, 34

13. *Ibid.*, 32

14. *Ibid.*, 35

quoted Lincoln declaring that “no society...can remain in existence permanently, which is part slave and part free” to explain the necessary transition of historical stages.<sup>15</sup> In addition, his strong adherence to the socialist tactic of political action — the belief that socialism will be attained through the ballot box — up until the state threw him in jail and Lenin showed a successful alternative, places Ruthenberg and the socialist movement as Americans who were assured of the justice of their political institutions until it would be naïve to continue doing so. And more so than Debs, Ruthenberg was the rallying-point of a cosmopolitan city made of immigrants. Ruthenberg’s marshalling of Cleveland’s diverse radical communities into a single radical wing expressed what can be called the reverse side of the American nativism: American foreignism.<sup>16</sup> The creation of a party branch of America’s diverse foreigners in an American city mostly made of diverse foreigners is tautologically “American.” Whereas Debs and his conveyance of American-socialism grew out of the classic American ideals, Ruthenberg’s organization of an ethnically-heterogeneous city around such ideals is the political enactment of civic-nationalism.<sup>17</sup>

Standing opposite to the socialist civic-nationalism is a type of American nationalism closer to the ethno-linguistic, “blood and soil” nationalism of Europe. Of course, an actual “our ancestors, since time immemorial...” myth is impossible in the American context. Given shape by the wartime measures, the loyalists and anti-socialists that broke up the May Day marchers framed their ideas of “the nation” mostly in the language of “Americanism” and a negative stance toward socialists. Through this novel construction of an American identity, the conservatives engaged in a project of otherizing those foreigners who had always been a part of America. This negative and deconstructive stance, directed towards a socialism that grew naturally out of classic American republican values, produced the scenario wherein Debs could legitimately exclaim, “Isn’t it strange that we socialists stand almost alone today in defending the Constitution of the United States?”<sup>18</sup>

Other than the simple demonization of the foreign-born socialist marchers, the newspapers reporting on the events serve as excellent conduits to track the ideological constructions of Americanism, as well as its debated status. The May 4 edition of the *Plain Dealer* announced that in response to the May Day riots, a “Loyalty Parade” would be held in June by loyal laborers to show their patriotism. Combined with this axis of simple loyalty, however, is the declared imminent necessity of Americanization:

Cleveland’s May Day riots brought home to the city the menace of the Red flag — the flat

15. Ruthenberg, *Growing*, 10-11

16. “American foreignism,” my own term, is chosen for its oxymoronic meaning. Same as Bellamy, cited below, notes the classic American policy of “let alone,” American foreignism is a willing embrace of the foreign into collective identity recognized as particular. In other words, “America” conveyed as an ideal can accommodate the foreign, where the foreign is not foreign ideals but merely foreign cultural practices, languages, etc. This is in lieu of using the term “American internationalism” because internationalism is vague enough to allow for a particular American identity to stand separate of other cultures; an ethno-chauvinist can be internationalist enough to help his global neighbors so they do not intrude upon his national territory. An “American foreignist” would accept all foreign peoples into the national community, when that community is defined by adherence to a common democratic ideal.

17. Cleveland may even be more exceptional in this regard than other possible contemporary examples. In 1919, Cleveland was only just beginning to receive African-American migration from the South into the industrial north to form a sizeable minority in the city. Not yet a presence in industrial labor, African Americans were a source of possible and actual scabbing during the national steel strike in the summer of 1919; though not in Cleveland, where they “strongly supported the union,”—*Encyclopedia of Strikes*, 356. Ruthenberg’s diplomatic leadership of Local Cleveland may help explain this Cleveland exception

18. Debs’s Defense Speech; in Karsner, *Authorized Life*, 35

issue of whether this nation shall have one emblem or two — whether it shall be a nation of order or anarchy. Cleveland accepted the challenge splendidly. But the problem is not yet solved. One man out of every ten in Cleveland is an un-naturalized foreigner. He isn't a citizen. He can't vote. Often he is un-American in spirit...All these vitally important questions are discussed in an Americanization series, written by Paul Bellamy of The Plain Dealer staff.<sup>19</sup>

In the “Americanization” series, Paul Bellamy, son of the famous Edward Bellamy, utopian writer and early socialist of a self-declared “nationalist” variety,<sup>20</sup> laid out the problem:

Cleveland's May Day riots...woke the city with a jar to the critical Americanization problem confronting it. For after the shots and blows had subsided, when the police could take stock of results, one fact loomed ominously above all the rest — the disturbers were predominantly eastern European importations, just as their ideas were imported European ideas. ... Is Cleveland to remain a thoroughly patriotic, progressive American city?<sup>21</sup>

Bellamy's article is helpful not just in showing the well-known prejudice against the Eastern European, here dehumanized as an “importation,” but also for showing his confused handling of the American and Cleveland traditions. As noted above, Cleveland had been anything but “thoroughly American” in the sense of being composed of pure Anglo-Saxon conservatives. Bellamy was engaged in nationalist myth-construction which ignored social complexities — “the great war emphasized the absolute necessity of producing somehow, one people with one mind consecrated to the national task” — but even he admitted that the American traditions, which preserved an ethnic diversity he did not recognize, must also be abandoned: “The time honored American doctrine of ‘Let alone’ as applied to the immigrant has broken down.”<sup>22</sup> Bellamy is just one of many who, throughout the course of the war and Red Scare, produced an *ad hoc* “blood and soil” nationalism which, in its confrontation with the socialist civic-nationalism, disparaged certain American traditions and ideals, attesting to its comparative novelty.

A less nuanced version of Bellamy's project is seen in one of the letters to the editor in that day's issue. In “Down with the Red Flag,” the writer displays the binary nationalist logic and obsession with symbols combined with distaste for free speech and the police who (initially) protected it:

The Socialist demonstration in Cleveland yesterday was a direct challenge to loyal Americanism that should not have been permitted by the police. For the tragic consequences of the waving of the red flag the authorities of that city must bear responsibility...Free the Socialists are to meet and within proper limits discuss their theories of government. But their

19. *Plain Dealer*, May 4, 1919

20. Edward Bellamy, “THE “CO-OPERATIVE COMMONWEALTH” Mr. Gronlund's New Edition of this Important Work Reviewed,” *The New Nation* Volume 1, (1891): 224-5

21. *Plain Dealer*, May 5, 1919

22. *Ibid*



every meeting is of a revolutionary nature, and not to be regarded as of peaceful intent. Where they hoist any standard except the Stars and Stripes, save that the emblem of a friendly nation may be displayed together with Old Glory, they announce their enmity to this country, their purpose to destroy American institutions. They should be dispersed and their leaders punished...The police officers of Cleveland who permitted the Socialists to fare forth under the banner of anarchy should be made to suffer for their stupidity and worse. All honor to the loyal men who resented the insult to America!<sup>23</sup>

Combined with such rabble-rousing is the contemporary institution of the "Victory Loan," which absolutely pervaded the mainstream Cleveland papers. Both the *Press* and *Dealer*, as part of the Loan campaign, announced on the front page of every issue Cleveland's progress towards raising the loan goals by city district. In addition, almost every single article in the *Press* ended with signature-like ads for bonds: "V Bonds Pay \$4.75." Within the comics section, pro-bond messages invoked a non-violent message of "support the troops" in the *Press*, as in Figure 8 (see Appendix). Nonetheless, the anti-leftist ethno-nationalist project adorned the front page of the *Dealer* on May 3 (Figure 9; see Appendix). As the man in the cartoon suggests, the obverse of Bolshevism is nationalism, so pummel Bolsheviki to death and buy Victory Bonds!<sup>24</sup>

Another dimension of the Americanization project took the form of education initiatives stressing language and civics classes to Americanize the foreign masses. This dimension also served the goal of undermining the typical labor concerns animating socialist politics. Reporting on the initiatives, the *Cleveland Press* cited Fred C. Croxton of the Ohio Institute for Public Efficiency that "most of the industrial accidents, and especially those in the mining districts, are caused by the inability of workmen to read signs of warning and direction."<sup>25</sup> *Ipsa facto*, Bolsheviks can only appeal to those who cannot read so a bare minimum of English education makes a patriot and inoculates against Bolshevism.

The conservative national-myth project was not entirely one-sided. Good liberals of conscience could still voice their reservations in the public sphere. Gerstle's liberal civic-nationalists had disappeared with the beginning of the war and when they did communicate their discontents, it was in the terms of the novel and growing anti-radical ethno-nationalism. The *Dealer* reported on a meeting of social scientists and their reaction to the ongoing Americanization project:

Dr. H. A. Miller of Oberlin College said that immigrants should be allowed to speak their own tongues. Contentment will follow the opportunity to express their ideals, where a sense of oppression and discontent would follow any effort to compel them to speak only English, he said. ...How are you going to prevent them from speaking their own language except by using the methods of Bismarck?<sup>26</sup>

23. Ibid

24. *Plain Dealer*, May 3, 1919

25. *Cleveland Press*, May 2, 1919

26. *Plain Dealer*, May 4, 1919

The paper made sure to note all the academics at the meeting denounced Bolshevism, but here was a liberal academic embracing the cosmopolitan American ideal, while using the non-leftist language of popular anti-German sentiment. The ethno-chauvinism of those like Bellamy was something new, to which liberals had to react.

In their own press, the rank-and-file socialists likewise proved that they were aware of this ethno-nationalist ideological project and dealt with it in kind with their civic-nationalism. In the “Views” section of the *Ohio Socialist*’s May 8 edition, one letter in particular countered the “Get right or get out” phrase and sentiment:

The proclamation issued by the patriots to the Reds of Cleveland said a speaker at the Public Square since the May Day riots, is “Get right or get out,” “Get right or get out”—just what does it mean? The speaker meant this “If you don’t like the government we have, get out of the country.”... *We are here. Brought here by the same forces that brought the parasites here. We mean to stay...All the wealth and well-being of the world is the produce of our hands and brains.* The world’s heroes are those men and women who did not run. They stay. *They stayed at Valley Forge. They stayed at Gettysburg.* They stayed throughout history in the face of fulmination and oppression. They stayed and through them and the principles they stood for the world reaped a harvest of happiness and well-being.<sup>27</sup>

Whereas the ethno-nationalists struggled to draw upon their national heritage, merely noting the red flags threatened “our institutions,” the civic-nationalists readily recalled Revolutionary and Civil War ideals and language. Other examples of this conversation with the ethno-nationalist project and its amorphous binaries mid-construction were humorously confronted in the same paper’s “Riotisms” section:

And now we know what a “loyalist” is. An assaulter, a rock thrower, a breaker of law, an insulter of women, a frightener of children, a maniac, a beast. A thief, a button snatcher, a bully, a hoodlum. *They are welcome to the honors but to what or to whom they are loyal is a pertinent question.*

Deport the Reds. *Yes, but what to do with those American Reds who are being deported home?*

Cleveland daily press now says we should Americanize the foreigner. And we assent. *An Americanized Bolshevik could do wonders with a ballot.*<sup>28</sup>

The socialists may have lost the battle of fists, but examples such as these shows they had the upper-hand in the battle of wit and satire.

In the context of competing national projects of a socialist civic-nationalism with an organic connection to

27. *Ohio Socialist*, May 8, 1919

28. Ibid

American republicanism and a newly-constructed ethno-nationalism with ideals of “Americanism” as anti-radicalism, the May Day riots represented the clash in the streets of these ideas. Such a clash, however, was not to last. State oppression, widespread adoption of “Americanism,” and continuing setbacks in 1919, including many failed strikes, internal divisions, and loss of leadership to imprisonment, deportation, and murder, heralded the end of an authentic American socialism that could house the Socialist Party, IWW, and AFL under one roof. From then on, the international prestige of the Russian Bolsheviks, institutionalized through the Comintern and its policy-dictating influence on the American Communist Party, smothered any widespread adoption of leftist politics on any basis other than Leninism, let alone a Debsian American democratic culture.

# Coda: The Echoes of 1919 and The Dissolution of Cleveland's American Radicalism

But what exactly happened after 1919? Surely a movement based around the idea of a socialistic civic-nationalism, which could mobilize thousands of Clevelanders and thrive under increased government pressure, would not simply disintegrate in a matter of months. What became of Cleveland's radicals? Just as any event has historical precedence, so too does it have a legacy. What was the legacy of the May Day riots, and May Day in general, in Cleveland?

Splits among the American left in 1919-20 and government persecution of leftist leaders devastated the organizational and leadership capabilities of the American socialists. As noted above, this factionalism would result in the irony that Charles Ruthenberg and Alfred Wagenknecht, radical Ohio socialists who had suffered the Canton workhouse together in 1917, would come to be leaders of opposing American communist parties in 1920.<sup>1</sup> Combined with constantly shifting political strategies, as dictated from the Comintern office in Moscow, the eventually united Communist Party USA (CPUSA) endured the 1920s dismally. By March of 1929, the national membership of the CPUSA stood at 9,300, which was a fraction of what the communist movement could boast even during its semi-legal underground period from 1920-23 (15,000 by 1923).<sup>2</sup> Likewise, non-Bolshevik radical groups like the IWW were decimated by Red Scare operations like the Palmer Raids and the overall decline in union activity during the 1920s. In terms of nationwide activity, the IWW has been an empty husk ever since 1920.<sup>3</sup> But what about the Great Depression? Never before was the plight of the American worker so great, the unemployed so many, or capitalism's contradiction of poverty-within-overproduction so stark and lucid. If the remnants of 1919 were to revive themselves, this would have been their chance. In what ways, if any, did the specter of the Cleveland radical left which was on display in 1919 show itself during the Great Depression?

Given the factious nature of the American left during the 1930s, there are a multitude of groups one could use to draw out the legacy of the Cleveland radicals of 1919. Two vital organizations to follow are the CPUSA, the party led by Ruthenberg until his death in 1927, and the IWW. No other national leftist group held as much of the public attention as the CPUSA, given its direct ties to the USSR through the Comintern. The IWW remains notable in the Cleveland context because, in the period from 1934 to 1950, the Cleveland IWW's Metal and Machine Workers'

1. Millett, "Charles E. Ruthenberg": 205

2. Harvey Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism: The Depression Decade*, (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 5

3. Roy Wortman, *From Syndicalism To Trade Unionism: The IWW in Ohio 1905-1950*, (New York: Garland Publishing, 1985), 101

Industrial Union 440 (IU 440) was exceptional for being the only IWW local to dominate any major industry after the 1920 collapse of the organization. These two groups, in their failures and successes in the 1930s, indicate the two paths the legacy of Cleveland radicalism took: a slavish devotion to the prestige of Russian Bolshevism and a reformist recuperation under the labor-friendly politics of the New Deal coalition.

### Subsection: The CPUSA and The Decline of May Day in Cleveland

With the onset of the Great Depression with Black Tuesday in October, 1929, the United States and Cleveland were beset by massive unemployment. The prosperity and growth of the 1920s in Cleveland gave way to the Depression at an astounding rate, resulting in about 41,000 unemployed in April, 1930, and 100,000 in January, 1931, in a city of about 900,000 people.<sup>4</sup> While \$200 million in direct aid and work relief were provided from 1928 to 1937, this paled in comparison to Cuyahoga County's loss of \$1.2 billion in salaries and wages during that period.<sup>5</sup> At least initially, it seemed that the CPUSA was poised to exploit this disaster and grow its membership in the midst of disaster, just as Ruthenberg had grown the party during the economic and political stresses of World War I. The CPUSA sought to expand its membership, after Black Tuesday, by organizing the unemployed, appealing to those most vulgarized by capitalist crises. This took the form of putting together "Unemployed Councils" which would agitate and use protests to prod officials for relief.<sup>6</sup> Most importantly the CPUSA, in conjunction with its Comintern affiliates, organized an International Unemployment Day on March 6, 1930, in which thousands marched, demanding various forms of relief, as well as diplomatic recognition of the Soviet Union. It turned out to be a greater success than the CPUSA could have hoped. Between preparations with the Unemployed Councils and spontaneous support from bystanders, the marches in major cities defied expectations and the New York City demonstration was noted for devolving into a large riot and brawl with the police while other cities remained more passive in their confrontations.<sup>7</sup>

In Cleveland, March 6, 1930 was a similar "success." Dubbed "Red Thursday" by the press, the official Communist demonstrations in Ohio concluded without any violence. The Plain Dealer estimated there were a total of 10,000 people, about 2,500 Communists and 7,500 bystanders and interested onlookers.<sup>8</sup> The Communists assembled in Public Square, marched to City Hall, gave speeches, read demands, talked with the mayor, and dispersed peacefully. The demands communicated by John Adams, district organizer of the Communist Party for Ohio and West Virginia, included "appropriation of funds to be placed at the disposal of the unemployed workers for relief, unemployment insurance, establishment of the seven-hour day and five day week...abolition of the criminal syndicalist law and recognition of Soviet Russia."<sup>9</sup> As far as the *Plain Dealer* was concerned, there were two notable aspects to March 6 in Cleveland. The first was the personage of Lil Andrews, "Girl Communist" and leader of the district's Youth Communist League, who engaged in a witty dialogue with Cleveland Mayor John Marshall (brackets indicate paraphrasing by the *Plain Dealer*):

4. Carol Miller and Robert Wheeler, *Cleveland: A Concise History, 1796-1996*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 136

5. Ibid

6. Klehr, *Heyday*, 49-50

7. Ibid., 34

8. *Plain Dealer*, March 7, 1930

9. Ibid

Marshall: “There’s no use of my trying to fool you people. Suppose we put everybody in this crowd to work. Tomorrow we’d have twice as many unemployed here from other cities. So far as putting money at your disposal, there is no legal way in which that could be done, even if the [city] Council wanted to do it. The five-day week is a matter of agreement. The abolition of child labor is a matter of state or federal law. You surely must realize that the city government has nothing to do with the recognition of Russia.”

Andrews: [I don’t see why the city cannot levy a tax on the profits of Cleveland businesses from last year.]

Marshall: “Suppose for the sake of argument that we did that. It would take a year or a year and a half to collect the tax, and you want relief now. Maybe a year from now you won’t need it.”

Andrews: “Then, you admit the inability of the city to meet our demands?”

Marshall: [Yes]

Andrews: “Therefore you admit the government is no good for the workers.”

Marshall: “I wouldn’t say that.”

Andrews: “That’s what we think.”<sup>10</sup>

The second notable aspect of March 6 in Cleveland was that, after the official demonstration, there was “a crowd of about 500 hangers-on lingering in Public Square” whom the police violently dispersed with mounted police. As the *Dealer* put it: “There was no riot...But for about 3 minutes Public Square was the scene of greater confusion than at any time since the May Day riot of 1919.”<sup>11</sup> International Unemployment Day was the closest to a repeat of May Day 1919 the city would ever see, but the *Plain Dealer* displayed none of the wrath or fear of its earlier coverage. Even with the unexpected outpouring of support for March 6, the Communists elicited curiosity in bystanders, not political reaction. As one article concluded, “by 4:30 the pigeons reigned in the Square once more.”<sup>12</sup>

March 6 proved to be a flash in the pan and was not indicative of stupendous growth for the CPUSA in Cleveland or elsewhere. May Day, 1930 registered as a nonevent: “May Day in Cleveland broke no heads and made no history...The police were ready but found nothing to do. Everybody was satisfied, unless it be some unsung hotspur thirsting for martyrdom. From his standpoint the disappointing feature of the day was that no martyrs to Communism were made.”<sup>13</sup> March 6 proved itself an anomaly and the newspaper which once bristled with demands to restrict the rights of leftists, in response to a tepid May Day of about 600 Communists, now declared

10. Ibid

11. Ibid

12. Ibid

13. *Plain Dealer*, May 2, 1930

that "The right of petition and of free assemblage is so fundamental to liberty that any effort to suppress it is not only unfair but unsafe."<sup>14</sup> May Day 1933 was similarly languid. About 1,500 Communists assembled in Public Square, made demands for unemployment relief, denounced Nazi persecution of Jews, and sang songs like "Solidarity Forever" and "Wave, Scarlet Banner Triumphantly (Bandiera Rossa)"; seemingly gone were the days of leftists singing "Star-Spangled Banner."<sup>15</sup> Gone also, or for the most part, was the obsession with flags as symbols. When "some city employee had hauled down the [American or Cleveland] flag from the Public Square flag pole just before the meeting," only the local American Legion chairman seemed to care about the symbolism of such an act.<sup>16</sup> This trend of the Cleveland Communists making a poor show of their political acumen continued through the decade. While "campaigning" for Ohio Governor, Cleveland CPUSA leader Andrew Onda was stereotypically assaulted with vegetables while speaking in Bellefontaine, Ohio, in 1936<sup>17</sup> and the anti-fascist periodical FIGHT publicly shamed Cleveland for its poor sales, notably being out-ordered by much smaller cities at a rate of 20:1. As they put it:

Where are the trade unionists of Cleveland? Where are the students and professional groups? Where are the Socialists and Communists? Where are the militant workers? Is Cleveland with a population of one million satisfied with a sale of 25 copies of FIGHT? Is there no struggle against War and Fascism in Cleveland?<sup>18</sup>

The closest the CPUSA ever came to re-approaching the socialist civic-nationalism of old was while acting under the "Popular Front" policy of the Comintern, which dictated that Communist parties align with non-proletarian groups, up to and including liberal and conservative political parties, to counteract the expansion of fascism. Accepted hesitantly by the CPUSA leader during the 1930s and early 40s, Earl Browder, this resulted in the CPUSA becoming more "patriotic," at least in public. Thus, on January 22, 1939, Cleveland was the stage for the national leader of the CPUSA publicly singing "Star Spangled Banner" while welcoming back Cleveland veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigades from the Spanish Civil War.<sup>19</sup> Tellingly, the May Day in Cleveland for that year was restricted to the protest by several hundred Communists of the German consulate, itself closed for the holiday.<sup>20</sup> In other words, it was only under pressure from the Comintern to "be more American" that the CPUSA adopted the trappings of the civic-nationalism which defined the political tenor of the movement two decades prior, creating phrases like "Communism is 20th century Americanism". During this period Cleveland's May Day, with the exception of the one-off International Unemployment Day, had degraded from a city-trembling march to a petty-protest done mostly on the part of Moscow-signed directives. When assessing the legacy of Cleveland May Day, 1919, the CPUSA represents one direction toward which that radicalism developed: rigid Stalinist ideology, tepid tactics and demonstrations, and the marginalization of Cleveland as a center of American leftism.

14. Ibid

15. Ibid., May 2, 1933

16. Ibid

17. Ibid., Oct 4, 1936

18. *Fight – Against War and Fascism*, May, 1934

19. *Plain Dealer*, January 23, 1939

20. Ibid., May 2, 1939

### Subsection: The IWW and The Recuperation of Industrial Action

Of course, the CPUSA was not the only radical group to survive the leftist disasters of 1919-20. While the CPUSA had focused its efforts on organizing the unemployed during the Great Depression, its membership often being primarily unemployed,<sup>21</sup> the remnants of the Industrial Workers of the World, also often being unemployed, remained ideologically centered in the labor movement, particularly in Cleveland. In contrast to the unity of the 1910s, the Russian Bolshevik persecution of anarchists and IWW refugees sowed great animosity between the Wobblies and their Bolshevik-inspired neighbors, often criticizing the later for being unlike the civic-nationalists they once were: the likes of the CPUSA had taken up “traditional Russian icon worship” in their veneration of the great Bolshevik revolutionaries, had become dictatorial in party structure, dogmatic in ideology, and disconnected from the “essence of the American people.”<sup>22</sup> In the eyes of the Depression-era IWW, their own moribund group was the only sufficiently democratic radical leftist organization in the U.S.

Finally, by 1934, it seemed as if the IWW would make its return. Though it lost union control of Detroit to the UAW, the IWW’s IU 440 began to win strikes and shop-control in the metal working sector of Cleveland, gaining a membership that ranged from 1,600 to 10,000 in the period from 1934-1950.<sup>23</sup> This success came under the leadership of the Cedervall brothers, Frank and Tor, who built up 440 with an ideology of anti-Communist and anti-fascist unionism, but also dissociated from the IWW’s original anarchist and utopian ideology which had advocated vigorous struggles to build a syndicalist polity.<sup>24</sup> In his own words, Frank Cedervall described his ideology as “non-political, not anti-political...non-religious, not anti-religious...against nationalism and for the recognition of the universal brotherhood of all men...opposed to violence whether committed by government or individual men.”<sup>25</sup> The goals of the Cleveland IWW during the Great Depression were to be an effective union for its members and to not let the organization’s past utopian dreams hamper that. In practice, this resulted in IU 440 taking full advantage of the pro-labor political climate of the Roosevelt years, including participation in the National Labor Relations Board system. In a twist of historical irony, an IWW local won labor representation for the Draper Manufacturing Company over the AFL through the auspices the NLRB, in other words, the federal government.<sup>26</sup>

IU 440’s pragmatism also resulted in it breaking one of the sacred doctrines of the IWW, namely the signing of labor contracts. While contracts were originally conceived as a “capitulation to capitalism,” the IWW justified its signing of contracts with the American Stove Company with the claim that “Contract Protects Solidarity.”<sup>27</sup> Through a willingness to bend principles to present realities, IU 440 had achieved success no other IWW local in the country had had since 1920, becoming the largest source of membership and dues for the national organization.<sup>28</sup>

Nonetheless, this turn towards “pragmatism” was not merely the employment of labor legislation and legal

21. Klehr, *Heyday*, 161

22. Wortman, *IWW in Ohio*, 102-3

23. Ibid 108

24. Ibid 110

25. Ibid 111

26. Ibid. 129

27. *Industrial Worker*, May 29, 1937; as quoted in Ibid., 133

28. Ibid 180



structures to advance “radical trade unionism,” but represented a fundamental de-ideological shift in the Cleveland IWW. As Frank Cedervall reflected, “Idealism is a wonderful thing, but job control is a far more practical factor in holding a dues-paying membership in good standing.”<sup>29</sup> By the 1940s, IU 440 was seen as the IWW’s rightwing anomaly. The national organization noted that there was “a very slight absorption of IWW philosophy” by the membership.<sup>30</sup> Put differently, “to place a Wobbly union card in a man’s pocket was an easier task than to inculcate IWW ideals in his heart.”<sup>31</sup> This ideological-pragmatic difference of opinion ultimately came to a head in the late 1940s with arguments over the practice of signing labor contracts and the passage of the Taft-Hartley law which, among other labor-union restrictions, required union officials to sign non-Communist affidavits.<sup>32</sup> Despite being anti-Communist, the IWW national office had leftist principles and an organizational history of opposition to such state-driven witch hunts, as well as political issues with the other provisions of Taft-Hartley. Attached to a national office which refused to sign the affidavits, and thus gain union recognition for the NLRB, Cleveland’s pragmatic IU 440, which served their non-ideological workers as well as their ideologists, successfully voted to split from the national IWW in November 1950. By signing the affidavits, the Cleveland IWW fully integrated itself into the American labor mainstream, incorporating itself into larger unions until it became part of the AFL-CIO.<sup>33</sup> Through the Cleveland IWW, one segment of the Cleveland radical tradition of 1919 came in from the cold, but at the cost of anything that would have identified it with that IWW which marched along with Ruthenberg and the broader Cleveland radical left.

The CPUSA and IWW of Cleveland represent the two extremes of what ultimately became of that radical political tradition of Cleveland and the Midwest that was on display in the May Day riots of 1919. The CPUSA remained at the fringes, becoming the “foreign ideology” the left was always derided as, with the exception of the Comintern-dictated Popular Front period which prescribed patriotism as a USSR foreign policy. The success of the CPUSA among Cleveland’s unemployed were spectacular, but was ultimately measured in hours. The IWW kept its democratic character, and in that sense remained “American,” but the manner in which Cleveland’s “One Big Union” took advantage of the Great Depression and the New Deal sacrificed the political content of “radical trade unionism.” The *Plain Dealer* editors and letter writers’ original portrayal of America’s relation to radicalism, where it was a distinction between “Americanism” and “foreignism,” proved true in more ways than one; the left itself came to conform to this dichotomy. In time, this divide became a reality and the Cleveland left(s) took up positions on either side of the Cold War split. The sort of “radical-center” which united proto-Bolsheviks, Wobblies, and left-AFLs around leaders like Debs and Ruthenberg did not hold after 1919, and the subsequent history of American radicalism until at least the 1960s’ New Left was Soviet Bolshevism or left-liberal capitalism. With the decline of socialistic civic-nationalism in Cleveland, May Day dissolved as a notable event in the city; after 1919, it was all downhill.

29. Ibid 154

30. Ibid 125

31. Ibid 125

32. Ibid., 176

33. Ibid 180



# Conclusion

Writing on the May Day riots for the May 10, 1919 issue of *Revolutionary Age*, Ruthenberg expressed optimism in light of the violence perpetrated against his march. Terming the riots the Cleveland workers' "baptism in blood," he saw this violence as yet another event confirming his left-Socialist principles and a chance to more sharply draw the contrast between radicals and the opposing capitalist forces.<sup>1</sup> The worker's revolution, per Marxist theory, was inevitable and the riots confirmed the revolutionary stirrings in his society. The reason the socialists were met with violent opposition was not because they were insignificant. The loyalists confronted the Cleveland marchers, unlike the years previous and afterwards, because they feared the socialists; one fears the powerful and growing Cleveland Socialists of 1919, not the powerless Cleveland Socialists of 1911 or the fringe Communists of 1930. Social conflict augmented the socialists as Local Cleveland gained more members in May that year, not less.<sup>2</sup> In light of Local Cleveland's thriving under stress Ruthenberg concluded his coverage of the riots rallying, "The Socialist organization remains intact in spite of the destruction of party headquarters...The workers have had their lesson. They have learned how 'democracy' meets a peaceable protest. They know from the thousands who marched that their power is greater than ever. Another day is coming. They will go on until victory is achieved."<sup>3</sup> Despite the blood, bruises, prison time, and death, the May Day riots were a cause for celebration: a celebration that the Cleveland radicals had come so far as a political unit and organization that they warranted such treatment. Such counter-revolution could only herald revolution and a further reason to be on the left-wing of American socialism.

The perennial question of all historians of the Socialist Party and leftism in the United States, first asked by the German economist Werner Sombart in 1905, is some version of "Why did socialism not happen in America?"<sup>4</sup> Of course, the first clarification should be what the question means by "socialism?" Often, the implication is "American Exceptionalism," an American version of the *Sonderweg* thesis: large "socialist" parties grew in other industrialized nations, but not in the United States. However, this version of the question actually means "Other countries have social-democratic parties, but the U.S. does not," thereby ignoring the later New Deal Coalition and the development of a Fordist economy in the US, similar to Western Europe. The real question, for which the U.S. was actually an exception to the rest of the industrial world in the early twentieth century, is "Why did the U.S. never have a large *revolutionary-socialist* political party," like the Bolsheviks in Russia, the Spartacists

1. *Revolutionary Age*, May 10, 1919

2. Judd, *Socialist Cities*, 171

3. Ruthenberg, "Cleveland May Day Demonstration," *Revolutionary Age*, May 10, 1919

4. Werner Sombart, *Why Is There No Socialism In the United States*, White Plains: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 190

in Germany, the anarcho-syndicalists in France and Spain, or the left-wing of the Labour Party in Britain? The case of the Cleveland radicals shows that there was such a movement growing in the U.S., but it was met with the “May Day riots,” informal violence from counter-revolutionary veterans’ groups, and later the formally-directed Red Scare, most notably the Palmer raids in late 1919 and early 1920. The various answers offered to the question of why there is/was no “socialism” in the United States have included American workers being inherently non-ideological, the social mobility in the U.S. dissuaded radical opposition of capitalism, the U.S. being an essentially liberal society, the difficulty in building a new political movement in the first-past-the-post electoral system, and the repressive measures taken by the American state in responding to unionizing, strikes, and socialist organizing.<sup>5</sup> Though the truth is most certainly a combination of these, the case of May Day, 1919, in Cleveland adds further force to the “suppression” explanation in this historiographical debate. In response to the question “Why is there no socialism,” a Cleveland leftist would have responded: “Because it was killed.”

Aside from this central historiographical question, Ruthenberg, the Cleveland radicals, and the May Day riots bring many historical processes into clear focus. They reveal the cultural and intellectual character of the “Red Rioters,” which reflected the foreign-born identity of Cleveland as a city in 1919. They show the beginnings of a veteran culture contested between an anti-radical patriotism of the American Legion and the revolutionary character of the “Great War veteran” who the socialists hoped would carry the European revolutions stateside. The May Day riots were also the culmination of Midwestern radicalism, of which Ohio served as an epicenter, but Cleveland as its most electorally-impotent, and thus radical, exponent. The riots help to expose two conflicting nationalist projects pulsating through early-twentieth century America: a “civic-nationalism” of socialism informed by the founding principles of American political culture; and an “ethno-nationalism” of anti-immigrant, racialized “Americanism” that defined itself through anti-Bolshevism, thus making it a novel category in American thought. Finally, a comparison of May Day 1919 to the activities and marches of Cleveland’s radicals during the Great Depression show that the organizational success and socialistic-republicanism of the 1900s and 1910s did not continue: the city’s left could either become fringe Communists, devoted to the Russian example, or accede to the left-liberal trade-unionism of the New Deal society. May Day 1919 did not herald the birth or death of the “Cleveland Commune,” nor did it overthrow a bourgeois-republic or monarchy. It was a distinctly American event, riven by the same contradictions that would both end and give rise to the general movements of (inter)national history. All of America was in those streets, in Public Square, in Cleveland, observing and acting for both good and ill.

5. Critchlow, *Heartland*, 1

## Appendix

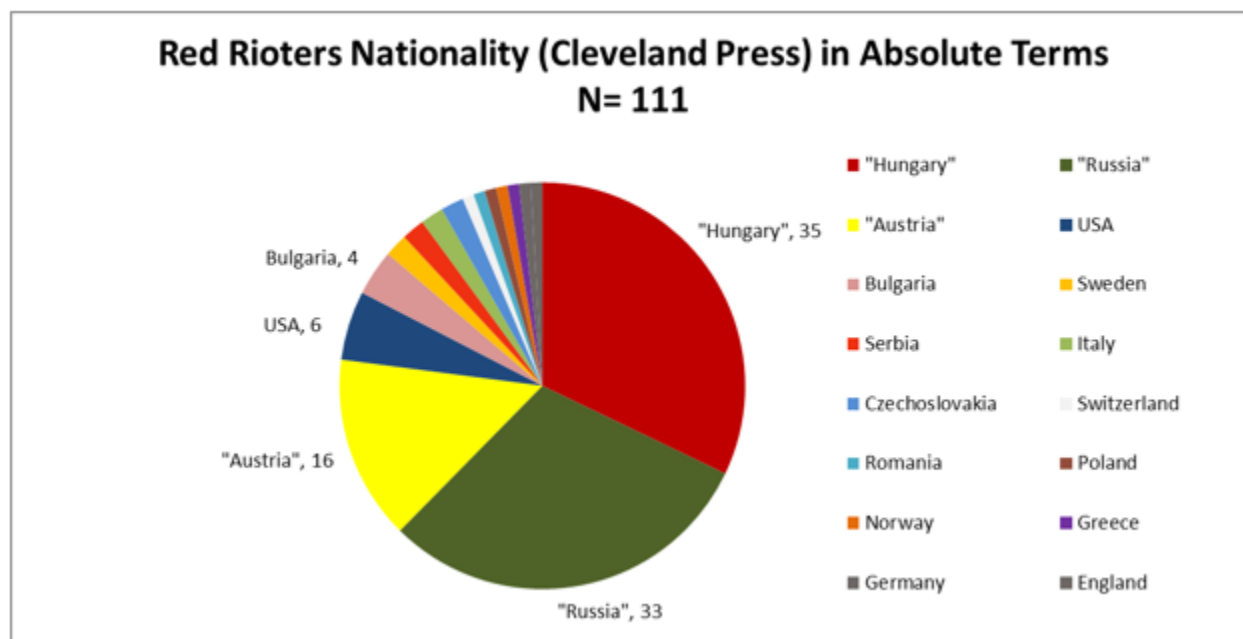


Figure 1 Leftist Rioters' Birthplace According to Cleveland Press in Absolute Terms

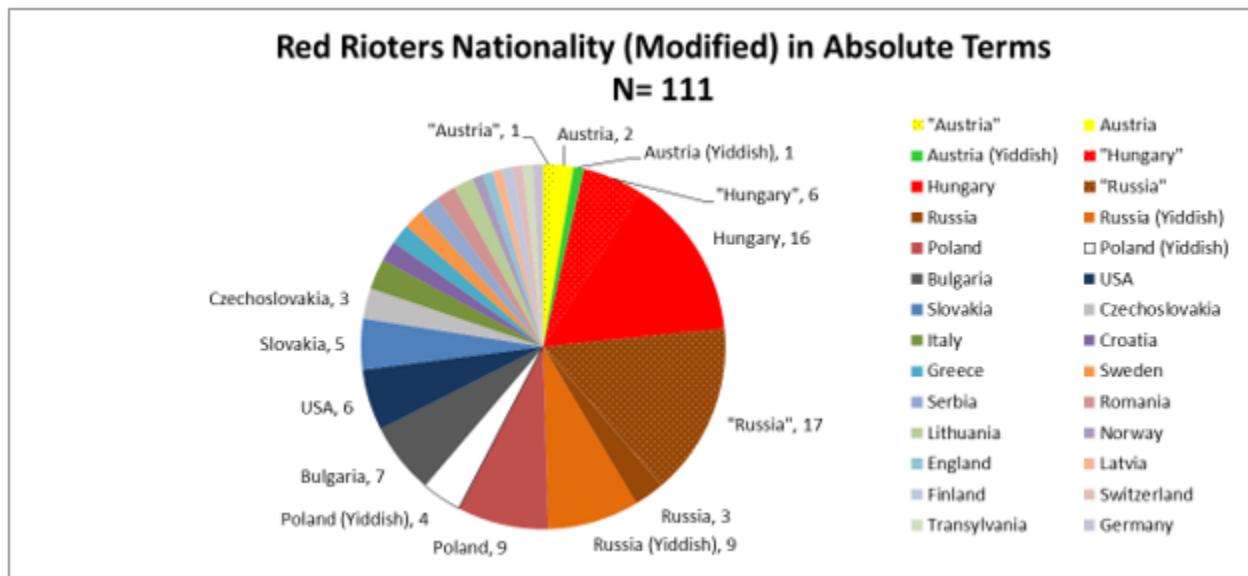


Figure 2 Leftist Rioters' Nationality Based on Census Reports of language. Dotted sections and quoted nations indicated individuals who could not be clarified.

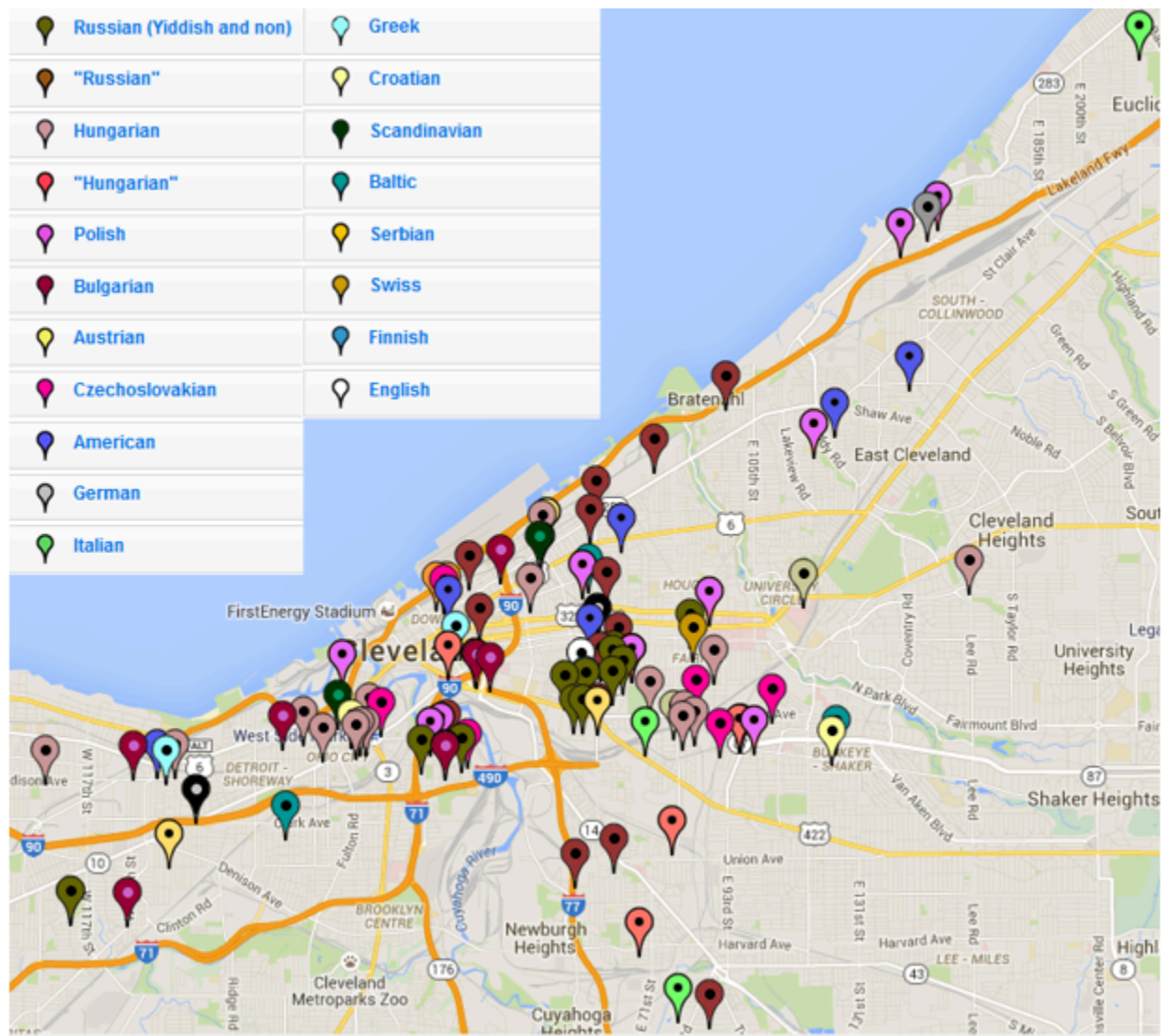


Figure 3 Distribution of Leftist Rioters' Home Addresses with Clarified Nationality

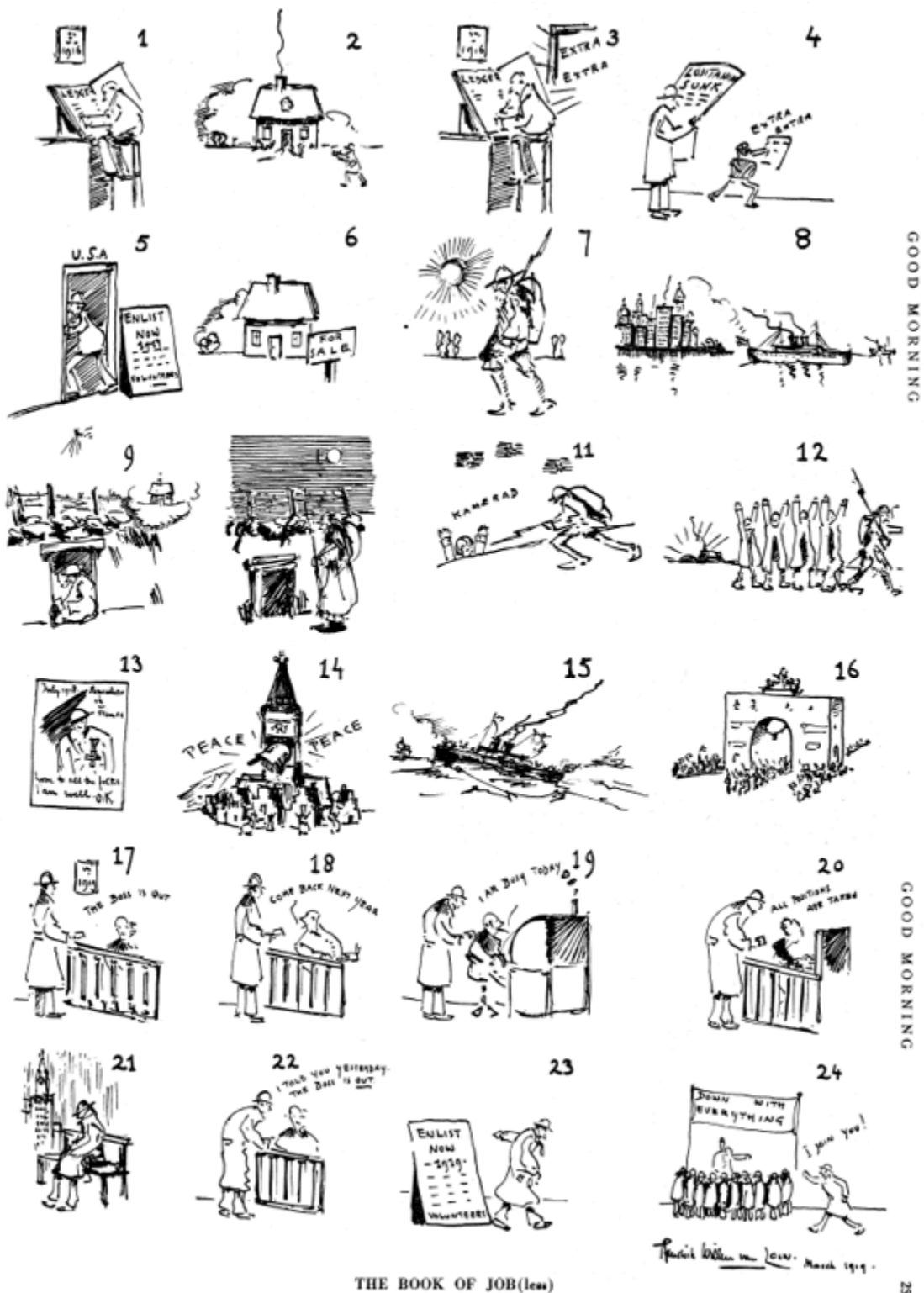


Figure 4 Good Morning presents the narrative of the American soldier, once returning to economic deprivation stateside, joining the proponents of "Down with Everything."



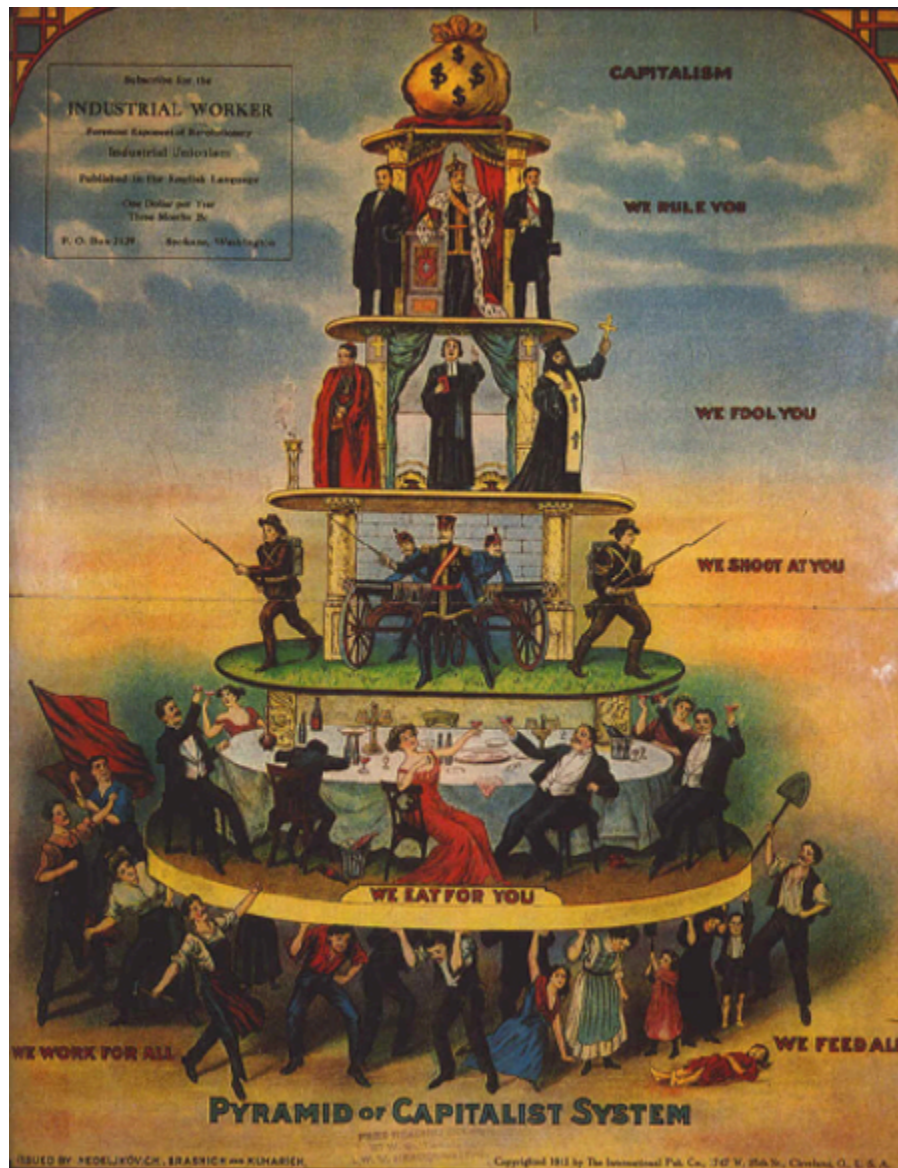


Figure 5 N,B,&K's Famous "Pyramid of Capitalist Systems," presenting a basic anti-capitalistic view of class warfare.



Figure 6 Another NBK's design IWW propaganda poster. Partially in Slovenian, note that Karl Marx as an educator, instructs the worker in taking out society's problem by the root of "ignorance." Also note the ineffective efforts of doctors, theologians, and trust-busters as only trimming at the edges of social ills. Courtesy of the digitization efforts of the Joseph A. Labadie Collection at University of Michigan.





Figure 7 Another NBK poster titled “The Last Strike,” it stretches the limits of political-cartoon leveling to explain in a single picture a complete anarcho-syndicalist view of how capitalism is maintained and how socialism is to be attained. Courtesy of the digitization efforts of the Joseph A. Labadie Collection at University of Michigan

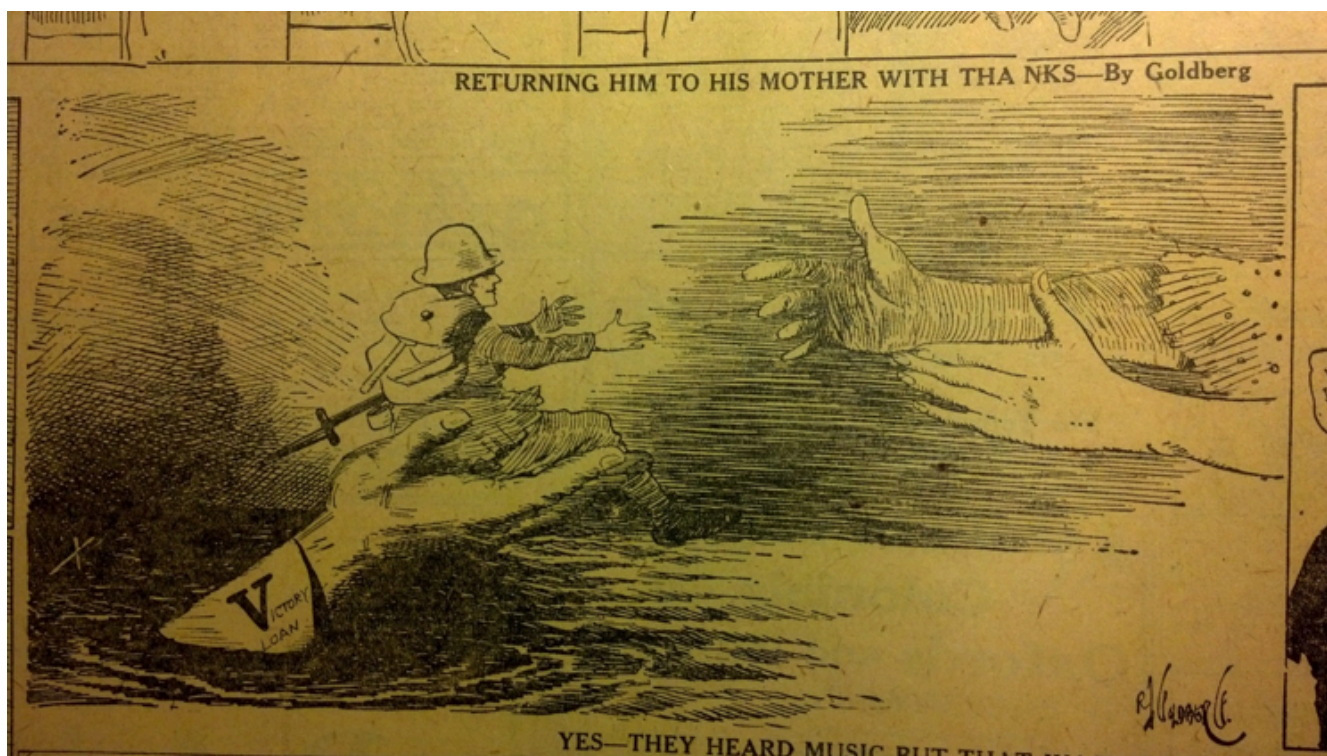


Figure 8 A nonviolent Victory Loan advertisement cartoon in the Cleveland Press.



Figure 9 The violence-insinuating front page picture on the Dealer's May 3, 1919 issue. Bolshevism and patriotism are directly contrasted, while violence towards leftists and Victory Bonds are equated.

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See Also:

—Interactive Version of "Home Locations of Red Rioters" Map at: <http://www.zeemaps.com/view?group=1492912&x=-81.631016&y=41.493998&z=7>

—Joseph A. Labadie Collection of Radical Political Posters at University of Michigan, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/l/lbc2ic?page=index>

—Roy Wortman Collection of the Industrial Workers of the World in Ohio Dissertation Research at Western Reserve Historical Society

—Census Schedules for 1910, 1920, and 1930 via [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com)



## About the Author

Emerson Bodde graduated from Case Western Reserve University with a BA in History and Philosophy, during which I performed the research which resulted in “Until Victory is Achieved”. He is currently pursuing a career in philosophy, including completing a PhD in philosophy at Vanderbilt University. His research interests include the philosophical development of key socio-political concepts like social class and democracy, especially the development of such concepts during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.