
“Break Back of Radicalism” Was Palmer’s Order: 800 Aliens Arrested in Cossack Raid Held Foodless in “Black Hole” for 20 Hours, Reporter Testifies: 12 Found Deserving of Deportation. [aftermath of Jan. 2/3, 1920 raids]

by Laurence Todd

Published in the *Milwaukee Leader*, v. 10, no. 75 (March 5, 1921), pp. 1, 5.

WASHINGTON (Federated Press). — “Break the back of radicalism in Detroit,” was the message wired by Attorney General Palmer to Arthur L. Barker, his chief agent there, on the even of the “red raids,” Jan. 2, 1920. “Raid and keep on raiding until it is broken.”

That was the reason, according to Frederick R. Barkley, a reporter who testified before the Senate Judiciary Committee here, why there were seized and herded into the dark, unsanitary, foul-smelling, and overheated upper corridor of the federal building in Detroit some 800 victims of Barker’s raids.

“We are not furnishing settees for criminals,” was the answer of Palmer’s Detroit spokesman to complaints that the alien and citizen prisoners were being confined in a space which gave just 2 by 3 feet for each man and boy, and that there were neither beds nor washing nor shaving facilities, and that half a hundred men constantly stood in line to approach the one toilet afforded them. High wind and bitter cold met the few prisoners who desperately made their way to the roof for air and relief.

U.S. Citizens Included.

The presence of American citizens among the prisoners caused Barker to try to induce the reporters to conceal the fact that citizens had been subjected to the indignities and tortures of this imprisonment. Warrants were issued, before arrest, for less than 60 of the 800 confined and of the 200 more who were released on bail. Half of the 800 were freed after preliminary examination in from 1 to 6 days after their seizure. The remainder were scattered among 9 police stations, and 128 were crowded into the stone-floored basement “bull-pen” of the municipal court, which had but one window and a few benches. There they stayed for a week, until the city health officer, the mayor, and the city council had joined in protest to Washington against the menace to public health which their condition created.

Most Found Innocent.

Barkley told the Senate committee how the appeal to the federal government resulted in the sending of 130 of the aliens to an old army barrack at Fort Wayne, where they were left at the

mercy of guards, and with gradual examination of their cases, until the middle of April [1920]. At that time the sufferings of their families and the brutalities practiced upon the prisoners led to the formation of a citizens' committee to deal with the situation.

Frederick Butzel, vice president of the Detroit Board of Commerce and chairman of the Michigan Red Cross, a member of this committee, told of its having employed counsel to go over the files of the cases of the men confined at Fort Wayne. They found some 12 evidently deserving of deportation under the law, and about 15 or 20 whose belief in the overthrow of government by force and violence was doubtful. The rest were shown by the record to be clearly innocent; they were for the most part skilled workers and "good citizens." The lawyers who made these findings for the businessmen's committee were war veterans.

As the result of this report, the men held at the fort who were clearly innocent were released.

The witness gave no testimony which indicated that the Bureau of Immigration would have released these victims but for the intervention of influential private persons in this way.

Foodless for 20 Hours.

One curious item in the story of the "black hole" in the federal building was that no food was furnished the 800 boys and men driven into that fetid place of confinement until 20 hours after their seizure. Then some coffee and doughnuts were brought up. But as soon as the families of the prisoners began bringing real food, the Department of Justice quit feeding them.

Butzel testified to the indignation of the people of Detroit at Palmer's intrusion with his Cossack raids, since Detroit had had a clean record of no arrests of "dangerous aliens," no disturbances, and neither industrial sabotage nor denial of free speech and free assemblage. Detroit will long remember Palmer's back-breaking.

Edited by Tim Davenport.

Published by 1000 Flowers Publishing, Corvallis, OR, 2007. • Non-commercial reproduction permitted.