

History Major Scares Up Consequences of Red Scare

Summer research isn't just for science

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Associate professor Lucy Salyer and Joseph Juknievich
Joseph Juknievich '16 was assisting a UNH history professor with research for her upcoming book when he came upon the subject that would be the focus of his own project a year later.

Here's what intrigued him: In 1919 and 1920, a series of raids had been carried out against Russians and eastern European immigrants who were suspected of being communists. Named for then-U.S. Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer, the Palmer Raids were a reaction to the Red Scare that swept America after World War I.

Palmer, described by one colleague as "seeing red behind every bush," was convinced radicals were out to overthrow the U.S. government. Sweeps took place in more than 30 cities and towns in 23 states. With the support of a 2014 Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship (SURF), Juknievich spent the summer learning more about the history of those raids that took place in New England.

His research led him to the U.S. Citizen and Immigration Services archives in Washington, D.C., where, reading through files from the period, Juknievich learned that under President Woodrow Wilson, Palmer authorized the Bureau of Investigation, headed by newly-hired J. Edgar Hoover, to conduct round-ups of suspicious non-U.S. citizens. More than 4,000 people were arrested.

"There was a fear of anything that resembled communism and anarchy. If you were a member of the Communist Party, you were suspect. Homes were swept; meeting places were raided. People were taken to local police stations. Some were let go, some were sent to jails," says Juknievich, a history major who plans to one day teach the subject.

One of those imprisoned was Massachusetts resident Peter Frank, a member of a labor union. Frank was born in the U.S and worked in a shoe factory. When officials knocked on his door and asked him to fill out a form, he signed it without knowing it stated he wasn't an American citizen. Frank was taken to Deer Island House of Correction in Boston Harbor.

"My own interpretation is that he was nervous and didn't realize what he was signing," Juknievich says, adding, "The response of the people sent there is that it was hell on earth. There were many complaints about the hygiene."

Frank was eventually freed. Others—nearly 500 nationwide—were deported. According to archive records, Juknievich says, that number would have been much higher if Palmer had had his way. But many government officials didn't agree with his tactics.

"Basically, the raids were stepping all over due process," Juknievich says. "Anyone who was a member of the Communist Party or appeared to be an anarchist was deemed suspicious."

Juknievich saw the research project as a chance to put to work skills he had learned in the classroom. At the same time, studying the Palmer Raids allowed him to localize a historical event and look at it on a smaller scale, an approach to studying history that appeals to him.

"Successful research requires discipline, persistence, and imagination—all qualities that Joe displays," says Lucy Salyer, associate professor of history. "Perhaps most importantly, I saw Joe learning that research was a process. We start off with certain questions in mind but the sources sometimes lead us in a different direction."

Says Juknievich, “Analytical skills are important in any field. If you can analyze and gain significant meaning from research, that’s huge. The ability to pull meaning out of something puts you way ahead.”

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