

# The Espionage and Sediton Acts of World War I

It was called “The Great War” in its time. It was a global war, but its origins were in Europe. It lasted for four years, from 1914 to 1918. After the experience of World War II many years later, we have come to know The Great War as World War I. President Woodrow Wilson had pledged neutrality in the war at the beginning.

Americans largely supported Wilson’s neutrality. Few wanted war. After the sinking of the British cruise ship *Lusitania* in 1915 by a German U-boat (submarine), killing 128 Americans, and a later sinking of an Italian passenger ship killing 27 more Americans, public opinion began to change. Many Americans felt hostile toward Germany. And as many German-born immigrants spoke out against war, public opinion began to turn hostile toward the immigrants, too.

In April 1917, the U.S. finally declared war against Germany and entered into the Great War. U.S. allies were France, Britain, Russia, and others. In that same month, the U.S. government created the Committee on Public Information to help to shape public opinion in favor of the war effort. The committee asked newspapers to practice voluntary censorship of information that could sway the public against the war effort.

In June of 1917, Congress passed the Espionage Act, which restricted free speech and freedom of the press. Among other things, the law made it a crime punishable by death to promote the success of Germany or its allies in the war. President Wilson wanted press censorship in the law. Instead, Congress gave the Post Office the power to evaluate and block the mailing of materials it considered offensive to the law. Blocked materials were dubbed “unmailable.”

Less than a year later, in May 1918, Congress passed the Sediton Act. This law amended the Espionage Act, prohibiting even the expression of negative opinions about the United States or its flag:

Whoever, when the United States is at war, shall willfully utter, print, write, or publish any disloyal, profane, scurrilous, or abusive language about the form of government of the United States, or the Constitution of the United States, or the military or naval forces of the United States, or the flag . . . shall be punished by a fine of not more than \$10,000 or imprisonment for not more than twenty years, or both . . . .

This led to the suppression not just of those who criticized the war effort, but also dissenting political groups and their newspapers, especially left-wing groups like the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and other anarchists, socialists, and communists. Socialist Party presidential candidate Eugene V. Debs was convicted under this act and was sentenced to 10 years prison. He ran for president from prison in 1920 and won over 900,000 votes. The following month, the Sediton Act expired. The Great War had long since been over. (President Warren G. Harding commuted Debs’s sentence in 1921.)

The Espionage Act has never been repealed, though it has been amended many times over the decades. Most recently, Chelsea Manning was convicted under the Espionage Act for passing military secrets to WikiLeaks, and Edward Snowden was charged under the act for exposing sensitive government programs. But Snowden lives as a fugitive in Russia.