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Origins of the Communist Fear in the United States and the Extension of the First Red Scare

*Leitfrage: When and why did the fear and distrust of the word 'Communism' come into being in American Culture?
And furthermore, how did this affect the United States' relations with Europe?*

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Introduction

Communism: A word that has struck fear, anger, and distrust into the hearts and minds of many American people. Throughout the 20th century communism spread across the world, gaining the support of many powerful nations and growing as a viable economic and political ideology over time. The United States opposed this ideology strongly and would fight several proxy wars during the 20th century in a period of time known as the Cold War to prevent the spread of this political system in the world. This time period would encompass several proxy wars the Vietnam War and the Korean War. Many Americans recall these decades with great pain, and do not wish to remember the great rivalry between the capitalist United States and the communist Soviet Union between the years of 1947 and 1991.

The relationship between the United States and this political credo is very important to the history of the 20th century. With mass immigration to America occurring during the turn of the 20th century, the United States was introduced to new cultural and political notions from all across Europe. These ideas, whether popular or not, would influence the relationship the United States maintained with Europe over the next century, in both its economic and foreign policy.

Many historical essays and dissertations have been written about the fear of communism during the Cold War era, however many forget that the ideology had been around for almost a century before this conflict began. This essay attempts to analyze the rationales behind the American fear of communism by looking at books, documents, and articles written in the early 20th century (1918-1930) within the United States on the topic of communism.

In analyzing the relationship between the United States and the political and economic principles of communism, much can be discovered about early 20th century American culture, and its influence on foreign policy, immigration laws, and American values. It can also help explain the rationale behind anti-communist views within the United States in the 1950s and beyond such as McCarthyism and the Second Red Scare. It is always important to find the start of historical events and cultural changes, as they give us so much insight on exactly what was happening within a time period, and how that changed the history of the world.

This paper seeks to pinpoint the time at which the fear of communism took root in the United States, and asserts that it took place in the 1920's during a period known as the First Red Scare (1919-20 by some historical accounts), rather than the longer, more widely-known Second Red Scare of the 1950's. This paper goes further and stipulates that the First Red Scare did not end in 1920, instead creating the long lasting animosity towards communism within the country, which would later transform into the goal of preventing the spread of communism throughout the world during the Cold War and Second Red Scare.

In order to answer the question of whether the First Red Scare was truly a lasting turning point in the relationship between the United States and communism, one must analyze documents and historical accounts from the time period. This essay analyzes a series of documents in different chapters in order to support the thesis that the First Red Scare was not only the turning point in the American relationship to communism, but also lasted much longer than just one year.

The first chapter of this paper provides definition for communism as an ideology. It looks at two main documents; Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' *Communist Manifesto* and Russian-American Boris Brasol's book *Socialism vs. Civilization*, a book which criticizes Marx' definitions of Socialism and their practice in both the United States and Russia in the early 20th Century. This section attempts to shed a light on how the 'new Socialism' (communism) was perceived by the 1920's United States, and what parts of the ideology did not fit with the culture of the American people. This chapter also analyzes and critiques the quality of the source document to establish if Brasol's writing can be effectively used to help explain the negative connotations of communism within 1920's America.

To add on to the analysis of the first chapter, the second chapter explores communism in America through the lens of historical events between the years of 1918-1930. It cites newspaper articles and reports to gain a historical understanding of what events may have led towards the intensification of America's distrust and fear of communism. These articles and events are examined critically in order to determine their effects on the American people. In addition, this

chapter seeks to extend the dates of the First Red Scare beyond their original limits and introduces the idea that the First Red Scare lasted well past 1920.

The third chapter focuses on defending the thesis that the First Red Scare lasted much longer than the traditionally ascribed dates, going beyond the research in the second chapter and examining government policy between 1918 and 1930 including: immigration, foreign policy, and unions. This chapter helps explain the long-lasting effects of the First Red Scare visible from the time of the Cold War up to the present day.

Chapter 1:

The Communist Ideology: Ideal Socialism? Or Radical Dream?

In order to understand the deep-rooted distrust and hatred towards communism in America, one must first inspect the definitions and history behind the term. The word ‘communism’ became twisted from its original principles described by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in the *Communist Manifesto*. In Marx and Engels’ writing ten goals of communism are listed as well as the results of an existing nation switching its political system to communism

1. Abolition of property in land and application of all rents of land to public purposes.
2. A heavy progressive or graduated income tax.
3. Abolition of all rights of inheritance.
4. Confiscation of the property of all emigrants and rebels.
5. Centralisation of credit in the hands of the state, by means of a national bank with State capital and an exclusive monopoly.
6. Centralisation of the means of communication and transport in the hands of the State.
7. Extension of factories and instruments of production owned by the State; the bringing into cultivation of waste-lands, and the improvement of the soil generally in accordance with a common plan.
8. Equal liability of all to work. Establishment of industrial armies, especially for agriculture.

9. Combination of agriculture with manufacturing industries; gradual abolition of all the distinction between town and country by a more equable distribution of the populace over the country.
10. Free education for all children in public schools. Abolition of children's factory labour in its present form. Combination of education with industrial production, &c, &c.¹

The principles that Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels described focused on a centralized state with an emphasis on creating an equal playing field for all people within the nation; thereby forming a nation without classes. The principles of communism, viewed in this light, seem at best harmonious and at worst utopian or idealist. So why have the people of the United States been afraid of communist governments and Stateside communist sympathizers for over 100 years? As previously mentioned, the principles of Engels and Marx were perverted in practice throughout the history of this political system. Within the centralized Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR or Soviet Union) after the Russian Revolution, too much power was allotted to members of government, leading to mass executions of people deemed untrustworthy by the Secretary-General of the Union.

In 1920 Russian immigrant Boris Brasol published a book entitled *Socialism vs. Civilization*, a work that focused on analyzing the doctrine written by Marx and Engels and comparing Marxism to prior forms of socialism. Mr. Brasol refers to communism in his writing by the name of "modern socialism" as it was the leading form of the socialist idea throughout the world during the early 1900s.²

In the first chapter of his writing, Mr. Brasol defines modern Socialism as "aim[ing] [for] the abolition of public property, the abolition of the 'bourgeois family,' the abolition of nationalism and religion."³ Furthermore, Brasol asserts, "socialism advocates for the *forcible* and *violent* overthrow of the existing social order⁴." He deems that this type of modern Socialism is quite

¹ Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels: Manifesto of the Communist Party (2004) [1848] online unter URL<<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Manifesto.pdf>> (08.10.2015).

² Brasol, Boris: S. 3.

³ ebenda.

⁴ ebenda.

radical compared to prior forms of socialism, which not only allowed capitalism to coexist within a socialist order, but also allowed for religious and other freedoms.

If we examine Brasol's definition as it appears in the beginning in his book, we notice a stringent pattern of violence in the communist (modern socialist) system. The communist system encourages violent overthrow, and therefore poses a threat to any sovereign nation containing a large communist movement within its borders. In addition to a violent overthrow of the existing system, opposition to nationalism was seen during this time as part of the radical nature of the communist system. In the 20th century United States and Europe, there was a thriving tradition of nationalism and it is often named as a key cause of the First World War. In the case of wartime America, an opposition to nationalism would mean an opposition to the war effort, and thereby the possibility of espionage. In the 2013 publication of *Diplomatic History* by Phillip Payson O'Brien, it has been established that "[despite] regular expressions of horror and tragedy on the war ... many Americans were much more excited than shocked and followed the war eagerly."⁵ O'Brien also states "[t]here was a strong consensus ... that the war was primarily an economic opportunity for the United States."⁶ Because of the war's public support and importance to the capitalist system contemporaneously in place in the United States, it can be clearly established at this time that capitalism and communism would not be able to coexist peacefully.

To further his claim that the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* was indeed a radical form of socialism, Brasol delves into another of the largest principles in the Communist Manifesto: the class struggle. In one of the first sentences of the Manifesto, Marx and Engels state, "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles."⁷ In this quote, the two communist advocates state that all problems in the world today can be explained by the constant battle between classes. Brasol too references and acknowledges this quote by Marx and Engels and offers his own definition of what this class struggle entails:

By the word "class" is meant a social group the members of which are united because they are living under common economic conditions and also because they occupy a

⁵ O'Brien, Phillip Payson: *Diplomatic History* (2013) S. 446-475 online unter URL <<http://dh.oxfordjournals.org/content/37/3/446.full.pdf+html>> (08.10.2015).

⁶ ebenda.

⁷ Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels: *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (2004) [1848] S. 15 online unter URL <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Manifesto.pdf>> (08.10.2015).

distinct place in the process of economic production. Thus, with reference to modern times, according to Marx, existing society is divided into two classes, namely, the bourgeois class, which comprises the owners of the means of production, who are also the employers of wage labor, and the proletarian class, consisting of modern wage laborers, who, having been deprived of the means of production, are thus compelled to sell their labor on the open market.⁸

Brasol's summary of the class struggle described in the opening paragraphs of the *Communist Manifesto* is quite concise and simple to understand. He simplifies the struggles between the proletariat and bourgeoisie as simply workers struggling against their employers. These two groups are indeed the two basic groups within a capitalist system and both add to the value of the production of capital, (a good or service which leads to profit). Brasol discusses this value and critiques Marx's theories on profit, citing that Marx believes profit is entirely due to labor and is represented entirely by the quantity of the labor put into the production of the good or service.⁹ While this simplification of labor being the sole form of capital and profit makes it easier to understand Marx's negative stance on the capitalist system, it is perhaps oversimplified. Brasol points out that Marx's theories assume that capital is merely consisted by the quantity of labor.¹⁰ This oversimplification fails to look at the quality of such labor, a social, but important characteristic to look at when analyzing any type of economic system. In fact, if one looks through the *Communist Manifesto*, one will not find a single reference to "quality of labor" throughout the entire document. Brasol takes note of this and points out that quality is indeed just as important as quantity when dealing with work done on a project.¹¹

Brasol's analysis gives insight on where the communist ideology did not mesh with the American people on a philosophical level. Brasol had studied the ideologies of Communism in various parts of the world and was therefore well versed in the nature of the ideology.¹² His writing is therefore an excellent piece to understand how the both the American and European

⁸ Brasol, Boris: S. 3.

⁹ Brasol, Boris: S. 12.

¹⁰ Brasol, Boris: S. 12.

¹¹ Brasol, Boris: S. 74.

¹² Brasol, Boris: S. xi.

people felt about communism in 1920. These feelings will be explored in more depth in the following chapters through historical examples and images.

Chapter 2:

Effects of the Communist Movement in America During the Early 1900s

The early 1900s were a time of great change in the United States. Mass immigration to the country was diversifying the nation and introducing new ideas. America was entering a global economy and began to look at world events with a more attentive eye. World War I and the Russian Revolution were major topics of discussion during this early part of the 20th Century. This was a time of great nationalism in the country and non-patriotic individuals were often labeled as traitors.¹³ Paul Burnett writes, “It was out of this Patriotism that the Red Scare took hold”.¹⁴

Alongside the mass patriotism and support of the War during the turn of the 20th Century, labor unions became another relevant topic of discussion within the country. Unions formed to help protect workers rights and to avoid exploitation by business owners in aspects such as working conditions and pay rate. Unions allowed for workers to strike in industries, to make their plea known, and to try invoking change.

Unions were often associated with socialist or communist ideas as two groups; the “International Workers of the World” (I.W.W.) and “the Socialist Party” formed during the early 20th Century.¹⁵ These Unions helped discontent workers in striking against their employers when the working conditions under which they worked were deemed unsustainable. Whether it was manufacturing or law enforcement, under US law all industries were allowed to strike and be protected from their employers by these Unions. This was deemed problematic when critical

¹³ Burnett, Paul: The Red Scare (o.J), online unter URL <<http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/SaccoV/redscare.html>> (08.10.2015).

¹⁴ ebenda

¹⁵ ebenda

industries would go on strike. In September of 1919 for example, the police force in Boston went on strike causing the city of Boston to be ravaged by vandalism and looting¹⁶.

To the communist movement, unions were a breeding ground for the spread of the ideology. Armed with the mentality mentioned in chapter one of violently overthrowing the current capitalist system, communists looked toward labor unions for their soldiers in their battle of change. Discontent workers could act as excellent spokespeople for overthrowing a capitalist economic system.

There were, however, several major issues with this mentality set by the communists in the United States. Violent demonstrations and overthrows were not taken kindly by both the government of the country and by ordinary working citizens who were just as affected by any striking organization. When protests became violent, there was a strong sense of outrage within the country; thus depleting public sympathy for the movement to continue.

One of the biggest problems that the communist movements faced in addition to a lack of support in their union battles was the lack of a clear image of what the Party stood for. In 1919 a referendum was called by the Socialist Party to attempt to determine which elements of communism would be combined to create a stronger platform to spread communism and socialism in America. The goal of this referendum was to unite the Socialist Party under one common ideology to strengthen its political power, as factions had weakened it.¹⁷

Because of the factions, the Communist Party began losing its influence. Some members of government during the early 1920s supported the party and ran under a communist campaign, however, their ideas were shot down within Congress. Without significant representation, these politicians were unable to grow in numbers or invoke much change within the system.

¹⁶ Burnett, Paul: The Red Scare (o.J), online unter URL
<<http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/SaccoV/redscare.html>> (08.10.2015).

¹⁷ Allison, Elmer T: "Present Party Officialdom Overwhelmingly Repudiated by National Referendum." *The Ohio Socialist* 73 (1919): S. 3.

In addition to the political members within the Communist Party, there were many radicals that also took part in the movements. These individuals often took the words of Marx and Engels quite literally and planned violent demonstrations to try and spread the communist ideology. The reaction to these actions, however, did not gain a positive response or lead to much change within the political system.

Rather, the response to these actions was one of fear. Anarchist groups that were allegedly linked to striking workers perpetrated several bomb plots. Newspapers reported on the bombings, however, the groups responsible were never officially discovered. The bombings were intended to disrupt the current capitalist system by targeting areas such as Wall Street, perhaps one of the strongest symbols of capitalism in the country.

Because several groups were proposed as possible perpetrators of this attack, communism became linked with other radical groups [as the century progressed,]. Despite a strong distinction ideologically, communists and fascists were often linked together in having the goal of replacing the current political and economic system within the United States. This lack of identity sapped the strength of the communist movement in America. Without an identity, the ideology was merely seen as another radical idea and the movement thus slowed to a halt.

Chapter 3:

Forgotten Effects of the First Red Scare

The Red Scare is defined as the time period between 1919 and 1920 in which a series of strikes, riots, and chaos ensued around the American Labor industry. In Chapter 2 we saw several examples of how the labor industry was affected by the growing influence of collective bargaining via labor unions and how this affected the opinions of the American public during this time. Some researchers argue that this First Red Scare would end at the conclusion of 1920.¹⁸

¹⁸ Burnett, Paul: The Red Scare (o.J), online unter URL <<http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/SaccoV/redscare.html>> (08.10.2015).

While it is true that the First Red Scare would conclude in intensity at the end of 1920, the effects would continue over the next 30 years and would therefore eventually merge with the so-called Second Red Scare and the onset of the Cold War. The resulting policy against the spread of communism or communist-influenced ideas such as stronger unions would affect the relationship that the United States had with Europe over the next century and gradually led towards the events that would become the building blocks of the Cold War.

After the mass labor strikes of 1919 and 1920, the United States government sought to intervene. The initial model for their intervention against the spread of Communism can first be seen in 1919 by the creation of the Overman Committee: a committee focused on discerning possible threats to the country from communists and anarchists. The committee sought to understand if these groups threatened the country's existence and its cultural values. The conclusions reached by this committee were that these ideologies were united under the principles of Bolshevism (Russian-influenced communism) and therefore presented dangers to the values within the United States.

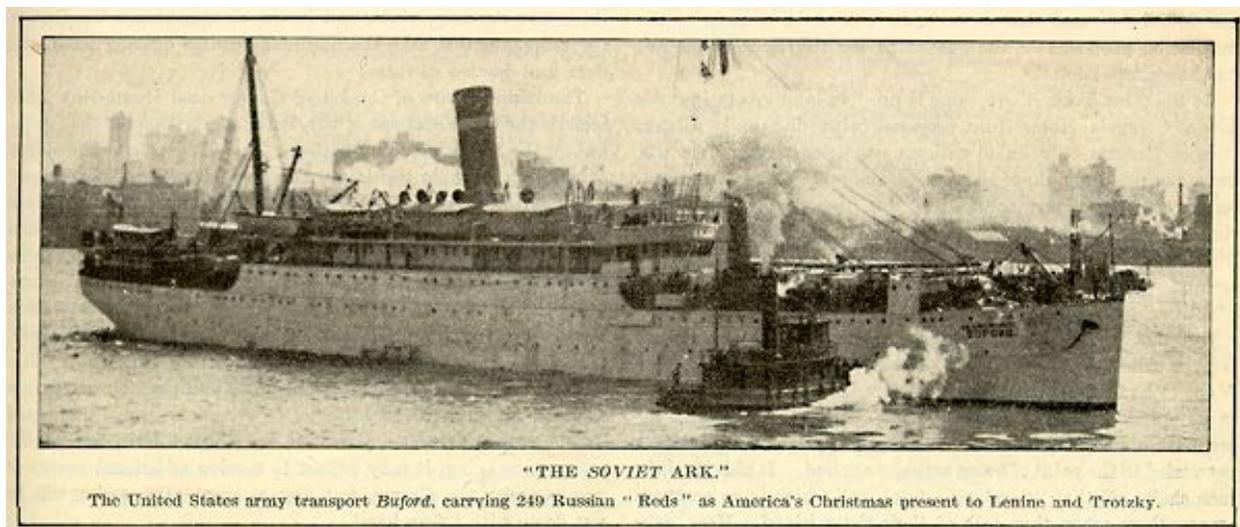


Figure 1: The *Buford* nicknamed „The Soviet Ark“ used in the deportation of Red Communist supporters¹⁹

¹⁹ Literary Digest: “The Soviet Ark” (1920), online unter URL http://www.baruch.cuny.edu/library/alumni/online_exhibits/digital/redscare/IMAGES_LG/Soviet_Ark.jpg (08.10.2015).

Over the next year, the Bureau of Investigation (today's FBI) would head campaigns in finding members of these Bolshevism sympathizers and supporters and attempt to deport these radicals.²⁰ A series of political cartoons mocking the desire ineffectiveness of these deportations were released in 1919. One of the most famous depicts communists, socialists, Reds, anarchists, and other groups deemed radical being kicked out of the country via a slide and then getting back into line to be kicked out again (See figure 2).²¹



Figure 2: Political Cartoon Mocking Deportation of Communists in 1919²²

These mass deportations stopped in the 1920s and the policy against a Red Communist uprising began to lose its momentum, however, immigration policy against Eastern and Southern European Immigrants and a strong distrust of the Soviet Union began to gain influence in the United State directly after the Red Scare crises of 1919 and 1920.

²⁰ Burnett, Paul: The Red Scare (o.J), online unter URL <<http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/SaccoV/redscare.html>> (08.10.2015).

²¹ Darling: Deporting the Reds, (1919) online unter URL http://www.baruch.cuny.edu/library/alumni/online_exhibits/digital/redscare/IMAGES_LG/Deporting.jpg (08.10.2015).

²² ebende

Immigration policy continued to tighten. Diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union were not very stable in the years following the Russian Revolution, as the United States did not recognize the Soviet government of Russia to be legitimate as it did not operate democratically in choosing its leaders.²³ The US Department of State reports that it was not until 1933 that the United States opened up full diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union and the relationship between the two countries would be built under necessity against standing up to a National Socialist German Regime.²⁴

Although there was not a constant slew of bomb plots and massive strikes after 1920, the effects of the First Red Scare and fear towards communist ideologies are quite noticeable. It is clear that the effects reshaped America's foreign policy in Europe, especially in its diplomatic stance with Soviet Russia and tightening its borders after two long years of radical-influenced destruction within the nation. Therefore the First Red Scare in the United States did last longer than 1919 to 1920. The Scare continued not in extremity, but rather furthered the long lasting effect towards the negative cultural associations of communism by the American people.

Conclusions

Communism has become one of the most feared and distrusted ideologies within the United States over the past 100 years. It spread to the country during the beginning of the 1900s via its European origins due to mass immigration to the United States. Looking at why this ideology did not mesh with the American culture is a very important part of understanding the relationship between the United States and Europe within the 20th Century.

In examining Boris Brasol's book *Socialism vs. Civilization*, we see an analysis of the communist ideology in the year 1920 from the perspective of a Russian-American immigrant. Brasol's immigrant status can be argued to illegitimize his book as a reliable source of popular opinion of the communist ideology during the time period; however, his immigrant status

²³ Office of the Historian Bureau of Public Affairs U.S. Department of State: The United States, the Soviet Union, and the End of World War II, (2005) online unter URL <<http://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/ho/pubs/fs/46345.htm>> (08.14.2015).

²⁴ ebende

captures the time period quite perfectly as there was a mass influx of immigrants to America during this time. Simply put, this asserts that Brasol's perspectives represent a new culturally growing America and therefore his work is an excellent source for the American viewpoint on communism.

Brasol's exposure to a collapsing Russian society also gives him a unique perspective in his analysis of communism. His writing not only analyzed the effects of communism in the United States, but also in several nations around the world. He also provides a unique analysis of how communism did not meet the goals of the ideology within Russia after the revolution.

When using Brasol as a source to analyze the communist ideology itself to attempt to understand why it was seen as a radical system within the United States, one can find three main answers. The first answer lies in that communism, unlike other forms of socialism, will not accept a system where both communism and capitalism can thrive in the same society. Communism calls for a violent overthrow of the communist system which, seen by events in Chapter 2 such as the Wall Street bombing, did not gain the ideology much footing. Another reason that communism did not thrive in the United States was the economic fallacies within its system. Brasol points out that the *Communist Manifesto* focuses solely on quantity of labor in means of production rather than quality of labor. While quantity is an important form of the capitalist system, capitalism focuses itself also on the quality of labor in creating competition within industry.

Analyzing the communist system through Brasol's work gives one a good baseline perspective in understanding the relationship between the United States and the communist ideology; however, mere ideology does not explain the distrust and hatred of the system by the majority of the American people in full. One must look at historical events that occurred within the United States that led to the distrust of this ideology. Looking back at news reports from the 1920s, it can be established that historically that communism gained support from a moderate amount of American people during the turn of the century. The greatest breeding ground for this support was within workers' unions, which were preparing to strike against their employers. When key industries such as the police force struck in Boston Massachusetts in 1919, anarchy was seen in the streets and the people within the city were fearful and blamed the unions and the communists

for the destruction that occurred during the strike. Despite mild success in encouraging unions to strike, the Communist Party was heavily divided. Not all members of the group had the same goals and methods of how to integrate Communism into the United States' political system. This led to factions to form within the Communist Party. Communist factions were seen responsible for several bomb plots directed at key members of industry. With their destructive nature communists were dismissed as no more than a terrorist group and thus were left with that stigma for the rest of the century.

This stigma defined the negative relationship the United States would have with communism for the rest of the century. Although support and sympathy for the idea dwindled towards the end of the 1920s, the effects and fears from the aforementioned events during the turn of the century and during the First Red Scare continued to influence the United States' internal policy, foreign policy, and laws up until the Second Red Scare in the 1950s. This policy included deportation of alleged anarchists or communists in the 1920s, limiting immigrants from Russia and other Eastern European countries based on immigration quotas and finally not recognizing the Soviet Union government as legitimate up until a few years before the Second World War.

What can therefore be concluded by these findings? It is clear that the political and economic ideology of communism did not function well within the United States due to the aggressive nature that communism had towards dismantling the current capitalist system. The United States was also filled with patriotic vigor during and after the First World War and therefore opposition groups such as the communists were deemed unpatriotic and discriminated against through deportation and imprisonment. It can also be seen that large unpopular industrial strikes in key parts of American industry during the years of 1919 and 1920 led to the beginnings of anti-communist propaganda within the United States. Although the common consensus of researchers today is that the First Red Scare ended in intensity at the end of the year 1920, its effects continued until the Cold War with both a discriminatory immigration policy against Eastern and Southern Europe immigrant-hopefuls and the non-recognition of the communist government of the Soviet Union.

The relationship the United States has with the ideology of communism has a fascinating history. In understanding the roots of its history in the early 1900s one can gain much insight on the Cold War, US-Soviet Relations, and a deeper understanding of the United States' culture. Culture is however, ever changing and therefore it will be interesting to see how communism is treated in the United States over the next Century.

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