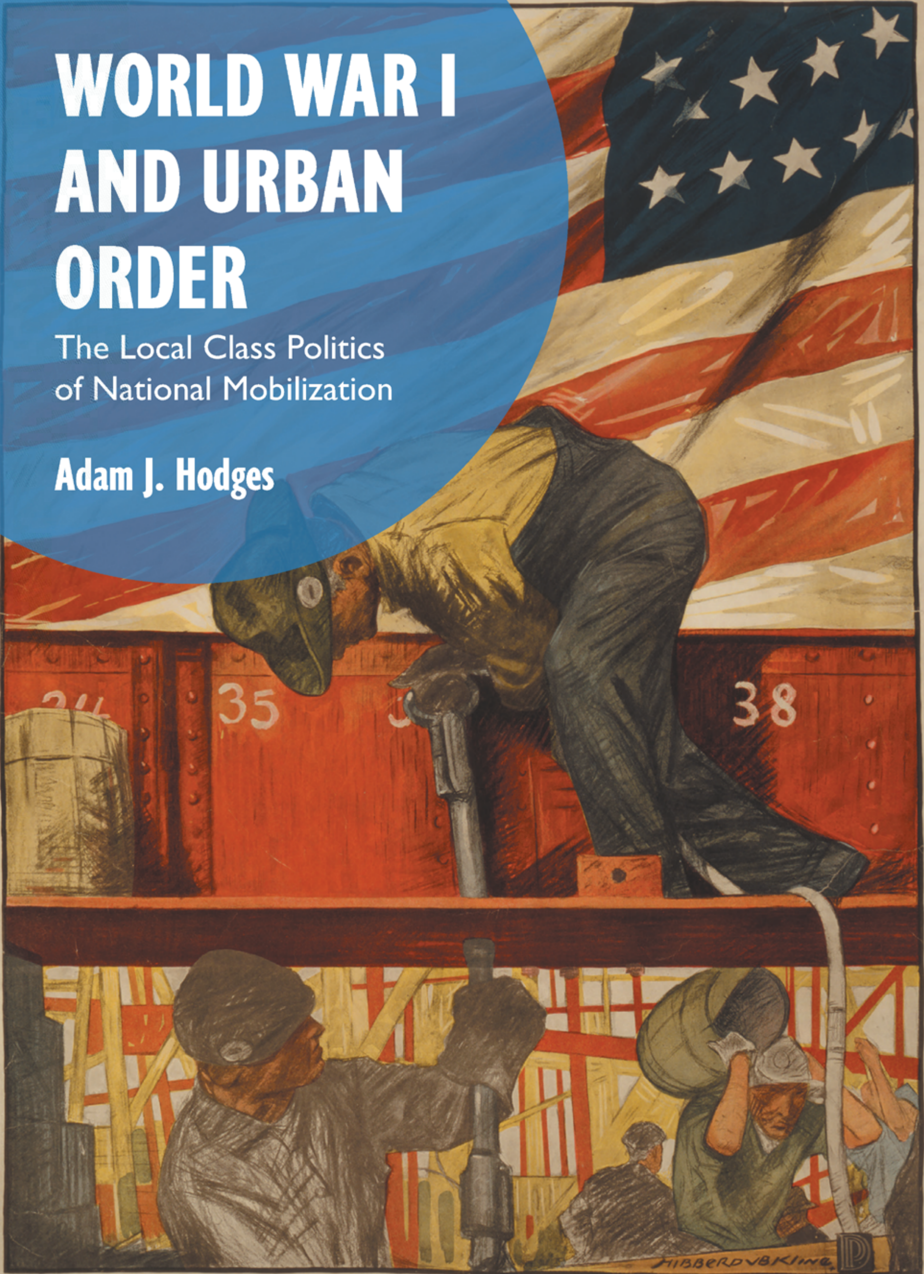
WORLD WAR I AND URBAN ORDER

The Local Class Politics of National Mobilization

Adam J. Hodges



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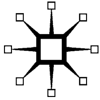

WORLD WAR I AND URBAN ORDER
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To the Memory of My Father
Dr. Michael R. Hodges

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PREFACE

We still have a limited understanding of the ambition of federal intervention in urban life toward carrying out a coast-to-coast mobilization of unprecedented scale in the World War I era. This campaign presented an opportunity to a burgeoning array of federal agencies and their local allies to bring increased order to the nation's rapidly transforming cities even as the war effort accelerated the pace of change. It was a mission of daunting complexity. Diverse regional conditions combined with competition both among state agencies and among their potential allies and certain enemies. Were we to examine one program, or even just several interlocking efforts, our conclusions would be misleading. Local labor adjusters for the Emergency Fleet Corporation (EFC) might often support union complaints because of a luckily sympathetic member of the agency field staff active at the moment or because shipyard owners just then held a more intractable position. At the same time, staff at other agencies could work toward weakening organized labor even as the EFC office in the same city needed its strength to minimize the production impact of shop floor disputes and to contain militancy. Single local constituencies could be at least as complex. Some doctors committed to "social hygiene" reform in Portland, Oregon, allied with the state to push the criminalization of venereal disease while others resisted interference with patient relationships and treatment.

It is important to examine the evolution of the state apparatus in Washington, DC, but for those who seek to write a social history of federalism we must move outward. How does an expansion of state prerogatives impact everyday life and ongoing contests over power in cities? The sheer diversity of the nation's locales necessitated flexibility and encouraged opportunism in the federal field service in the war era and often rendered drives toward uniform policy emanating from Washington, DC, pointless, when agencies even attempted it. Once we understand how a diverse and experimental array of government programs interacted within a number of inevitably different cities, shaped by the conditions of their own locations and pasts, then we will be moving toward a social history of the evolution of

federalism, a history from the bottom-up of how interaction with a broad swathe of local people changes US government.

The records of federal agencies reveal an extraordinary amount about the localities they enter seeking alliances in the pursuit of their goals and the containment, or elimination, of opposition. There are rich resources for studying the history of Portland, Oregon, beyond government documents. However, a great deal of what I learned came from federal sources. The lives and struggles of so many people with no official position and little power are buried in the intimidating volume of paper the functionaries of the state produced, which escalated in keeping with their ambition for urban order and optimism in its pursuit. Many of these individuals never got their name in the local newspapers and nobody bothered to keep what they wrote, if anything. However, if a person so much as disputed their rent in a shipbuilding city with scarce housing, the National Archives will remember them. The more agencies we examine per locale, the more we will piece together the fabric of everyday life. The possibilities toward recovering a fuller picture of urban life through federal records are enormous and still largely unfulfilled. It is not just a project that should be limited to moments of crisis, such as war mobilization. The federal field service contracted in some areas, persisted in others, and continued to expand in new ways after World War I. The New Deal was another stage in this evolution, not a departure from the past.

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I have incurred many debts while unearthing local life through federal documents and other critical supporting material. The work of archivists and librarians makes the work of historians possible. The staff at the National Archives in College Park, Seattle, and Washington, DC, deserve more than mere thanks from me. As a nation, we should make supporting their endeavors a much higher priority. A more expansive social history of federalism across time and locale demands this commitment. I owe a great deal to the dedicated people who work in the library and archives of the Oregon Historical Society in Portland. Their farsighted predecessors also deserve thanks for building up the wonderful collections we may now explore. The efforts of the small Portland Police Historical Society to preserve this crucial aspect of the city's past have been quietly heroic. It is easy to dwell on how much is lost, so I am grateful for such reminders of how hard a few people are working to preserve. The staff of the Library of Congress and the Department of Labor library in Washington and the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) Archives in Silver Spring, Maryland, were very helpful and my time in each was all too brief. The amazing work of University of Oregon librarians to

preserve and now gradually digitize the state's newspapers for the public deserves thanks and encouragement. Librarians at the University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign and later the University of Houston—Clear Lake helped me find important materials. I am grateful for their professionalism and patience. Grants from both of these universities and the Museum of the Great War in France helped develop this project.

I have benefited from the critiques and insight of a number of scholars and their involvement was critical in innumerable ways as the project developed. Alan Lessoff, Kathryn J. Oberdeck, and David R. Roediger all offered great advice. Mark H. Leff worked with me in the early stages, insistent that I must—and could—further develop and clarify the argument. His death is a blow to the many who learned from him and I so wish I had better thanked him for his crucial help toward this project taking coherent form. I still consider myself incredibly lucky to have been one of James R. Barrett's students at the University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign. Jim was both a tough critic and a good friend while this project was taking shape. He has continued to be a source of indispensable advice and friendship. Nobody has been more instrumental in my development as a historian. The dean of Portland historians, Carl Abbott, has been helpful to me since I was a graduate student. I am thankful not only for his advice but also for his necessary scholarship on both the city of our mutual interest and the urban West more broadly. Robert D. Johnston has done more to illuminate and complicate the class politics of Portland in the Progressive Era than any other scholar. His book on the city has important national implications and is a powerful argument for the pursuit of local studies. He has read my work on Portland in more incarnations and through more stages than anyone else and has been a superb critic. I am grateful for his insight and generosity.

The editorial staff at two journals, and the peer reviewers they consulted, helped chapters 6 and 7 greatly improve and that process valuably informed my work on the rest of the manuscript. Chapter 6 previously appeared as "'Enemy Aliens' and 'Silk Stocking Girls': The Class Politics of Internment in the Drive for Urban Order during World War I," *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 6 (Oct. 2007): 431–458. The version in this book appears with the permission of Cambridge University Press. Chapter 7 previously appeared as "Thinking Globally, Acting Locally: The Portland Soviet and the Emergence of American Communism, 1918–1920," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 98 (Summer 2007): 115–129. I would also like to acknowledge a minor overlap in text between the section of chapter 5 on Dr. Marie Equi and Kathleen O'Brennan and an introduction I wrote to a piece featuring several edited documents. The introduction was part of "At War over the Espionage Act in Portland: Dueling Perspectives from Agent William Bryon and Kathleen O'Brennan," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 108 (Fall 2007): 474–486.

My editor at Palgrave Macmillan, Kristin Purdy, has been very supportive and I am thankful for her friendly efficiency. I am grateful that she and her colleagues are enthusiastic about this book and have done so much to make it a reality. My mother and stepfather, Marilyn and Marshall Mazer, have always been generous hosts while I conduct research in the Washington area and are always eager to talk when I come home excited about the day's find. My wife, Elizabeth, and daughter, Miranda, are together the very best part of my life. They sustain me every day and that is the most important acknowledgment of all.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: WORLD WAR I AND THE CITY

World War I wrought truly staggering change in the US government. Prior to the conflict, annual federal budgets never reached $800 million. After the smoke had cleared, the government had spent an average of about $43 million per day during wartime. Some recent historical work has connected this dramatic change in the scope of governance to everyday living. Historian Robert H. Zieger has noted that the federal government "created a host of new agencies and bureaus, employed an army of clerks and secretaries, and intruded into virtually every area of private life." Historian Christopher Capozzola has rightly asserted that the government had help:

> During the war, Americans policed their fellow citizens as part of a culture of obligation that pervaded nearly every facet of national life. At the factory and at school, in churches and in dance halls, on the streets and on the telephone, ordinary Americans were watched and governed by their fellow citizens.

However, historians of the war home front usually have a national focus and have failed to really explain how the many people who encountered the federal government as a prominent force in their own daily lives for the first time dealt with the experience. Wartime mobilization was particularly transformative for cities, though we still know little of what this enormous and unprecedented nationwide process meant to urbanites in the United States, and even the fascinating work that has emerged on Europe is largely restricted to the capital cities of the major powers.[1]

When the United States entered the war in 1917, there was no more-pressing question in American cities than how to create industrial peace. Over 9 percent of all workers had been involved in strikes during 1916, over double the percentage for 1915. Because the federal government required peace to accomplish its war production aims, it had to solve the

problem of increased militancy. However, the state exacerbated conflict by accelerating industrial growth, thus raising the stakes and even further removing a solution. To create détente, the government established a heavy local presence. During the crisis, the state expanded its own capacity to at least partially fulfill the needs of the groups whose immediate cooperation was essential—and it had to do so in each production center. Although the industrial workforce expanded during the war, dramatically in some locales, the number of strikers decreased significantly from prewar levels. To understand how the war production effort increased the stability of labor relations, we have to examine the local level because industrial peace was built there—one city at a time.[2]

I argue in this book that this program represented a novel form of and scope for federal policing. The new approach relied upon executive branch agencies working in tandem with local authorities and cooperative interest groups—a more regularized and persistent strategy than the sporadic use of the military and court injunctions that preceded the war. I consider the intersection of interest groups, both cooperative and oppositional, with the needs of the government and I keep the arenas of industrial relations and civil liberties, critical to the organizations of workers, at the center of inquiry. We need to analyze a wide variety of interest groups in order to make conclusions about how working people in Portland experienced the war crisis, including the local political establishment, shipyard owners, unions affiliated with the American Federation of Labor (AFL), doctors and social hygiene activists, anticapitalist organizations, and the various and mushrooming agencies of government at every level. There were also individuals, notably Marie Equi and Kathleen O'Brennan, who intersected with key local interest groups though they held no office or formally belonged to any key organization, yet loomed large in the struggle to define and impose order in wartime Portland. Beyond interest-group clashes with the state, I also investigate how Portlanders experienced this new federal presence in their daily lives through the impact of the registration of enemy aliens, housing and social hygiene reform, pressure to buy war bonds, and conflict over food rationing. The war reached many urbanites, not just those connected to the fighting in France or the diverse array of activists engaged in other wars at home.

The war dramatically transformed Portland, Oregon; even prior to mobilization, it was one of the most dynamic urban centers in the nation. In the first decade of the twentieth century, it had the second highest growth rate among US cities with over 50,000 residents. Between 1885 and 1915, Portland's population increased from 32,000 to 232,000 and its land area grew from 6 square miles to 66. Although it was a booming commercial city, its industrial sector was stagnant. Prior to the war,

an economic monoculture based on timber processing had hampered the ability of Portland's labor movement to achieve recognition from employers. The closed shop was already common in more economically diverse San Francisco and Seattle. Portland's location and dock facilities made it ideal for shipbuilding, and federal money and hired expertise created the industry from virtually nothing in a matter of months. By the end of the war, Portland had 28,000 shipyard workers and at least 5,000 more laborers producing materials for the yards. This boom more than doubled the population of industrial workers present in the city in 1910. By early 1920, the shipyards were comparatively dormant—and would remain so for 20 years until the next global war. However, the federal presence in Portland did not disappear and it transformed as it persisted, setting patterns of expectation in Portland for future crisis intervention.[3]

Political scientist Marc Allen Eisner has argued that the federal government engaged in "compensatory state building" during World War I to make up for its lack of ability to administer a national war effort. In his model, "state capacity was expanded by appending the capacities of private-sector associations on to the state." Private organizations such as unions and industrial firms proved vital to maintaining industrial peace on the local level. However, my research on Portland shows that in this arena the federal state expanded its own powers and appended those of local and state governments more than it relied on the national industrial associations emphasized by Eisner. National associations could not create local order.[4]

The operation of federalism during the war has been largely ignored. Historians have tended to examine the national implementation of programs or internal wrangling in Washington, DC, despite limited federal capacity and heavy reliance on state and local administrative resources. Two fine books by historian William J. Breen on the Council of National Defense and the US Employment Service are notable exceptions, but they are also overly ambitious attempts to describe federal interaction with every region in the country. Historian Gerald E. Shenk's book on the Selective Service System during the war highlights four states in different regions but this laudable attention to locality gives us just a chapter exploring each before moving on. All three of these works focus on just a single program administered in a range of places, while I take the opposite approach. Because the literature is situated at an overly broad level in an underdeveloped area of inquiry, scholars have missed the most transformative element of the World War I home front: the complexity of newly forged federal-local relationships. The state has tended to appear monolithic in scholarship, as have the regions of the nation. According to Breen, regional leaders hoped that active local and state coordination of the federal war effort "would avert or contain any drive toward the aggrandizement of power in Washington."

This generalization does not work well for Oregon, whose elites saw the coordinated effort as an opportunity to consolidate their own power by encouraging the federal government to *expand* its own local prerogatives.[5]

The regional elite fears of encroaching federalism that Breen has found do not seem at all likely in West Coast cities, which for years had been requesting federal help to crush radical organizations and contain unions. The Pacific Northwest economy was dominated by seasonal work and plagued by a cycle of labor shortages and surpluses. The region's elites wanted federally subsidized industry and law enforcement. There is not much evidence that Oregon's political leadership was worried about ceding power to the capital. Political elites wanted to impress, not contain, Washington, DC, because the potential spoils of war were immense. In shipbuilding alone, a US workforce of 45,000 in April 1917 expanded to 375,000 by October 1918 solely because of government contracts.[6]

It is impossible to make broad conclusions about the national war mobilization before coming to terms with regional divergences, which complicated, and could even preclude, uniform policy. Focused investigation of the implementation of a range of intersecting federal programs in one place over the course of the war also reveals divisions within the state itself, where local reality conflicts with national policy. Historian James Weinstein argued in 1968 that the federal government had fallen fully under corporate sway by the end of World War I and his thesis still influences interpretations of the state among labor historians. But historian Melvyn Dubofsky's superb survey of the relationship between organized workers and the state has since suggested that the federal government has helped labor at critical moments. I believe that specific cases, limited in time and geographic area, can show us a divided state that could work both for and against workers simultaneously. I have sought to understand the federal state's role in urban life during the war through its local agents. Sociologist Theda Skocpol's notion of a "structured polity" approach designed to explain changes in the welfare state can be applied to industrial relations and civil liberties battles in Portland. These conflicts were transformed by the insertion of the federal government, an agent with independent goals and a rapidly expanding capacity to achieve them. Skocpol is interested in how policymakers transform the state in order to pursue their goals, as well as the identities of social groups that become involved in this process. Her concept of a "fit" between certain organized groups and the mechanisms of the state at a particular time has helped to shape my thinking about industrial relations in Portland during the war.[7]

During the 1970s, labor history—the study of unions and the industrial relations process—became working-class history, which focuses more on social movements and communities. The new scholarship tends to exclude

deep analysis of the impact of other social classes on working-class social movements and often also leaves out the enormous impact of a complex and changing federal state. Historian and political scientist Ira Katznelson has already pushed for state-oriented innovations in the study of class with his call for the inclusion of "political, institutional, and state-focused themes…to join issues of class and identity to provide the third main pillar for labor history." I argue that the state is indeed crucial but its local impact is so varied that an understanding of major patterns can only emerge through a collective process of examining cases. Historian Joseph A. McCartin's *Labor's Great War*, the reigning interpretation of the subject, attempted to move labor historians away from an emphasis on workers' struggles for shop floor control, which varied by region and industry, and toward a national synthesis based on a fight for "industrial democracy." This innovation tends to essentialize the aspirations of a massive group of workers and ignores the preeminence of localism and the problems of regional exceptionalism in this period.[8]

The notion of regional difference during World War I is still in its infancy. Historians Jeanette Keith and Christopher C. Gibbs have written insightful books recovering grassroots resistance to the war in the rural Southeast and the state of Missouri, respectively. Keith has demonstrated that local and state authorities tended to subvert federal goals to their own ends and resisted the encroachment of federal power. While the former was inevitable in any region, the latter was clearly untrue for the West Coast. Oregon was particularly far removed from this pattern: a large and underdeveloped state with one city—but a city that was actively competing with Seattle to become the "second city" (after San Francisco) west of the Rockies. Portland boosters were desperate to attract industry while barring unions and imposing greater order, so they embraced federal paternalism.[9]

Grassroots resistance to the war does not work well as a narrative for Portland either. Like elites, workers (even radicals) also saw the war crisis as an opportunity for gain if properly manipulated. Portland's AFL craft unions sought the same power their counterparts in Seattle and San Francisco had, and after a brief struggle to go it alone, accepted the paternal protection of the state. The federal government determined whether or not Portland would sprout industrial firms and whether those shops would have unions. It is important that Portland was a city on the make and not one in decline. Historian Marc Scott Miller, in his study of Lowell, Massachusetts, during World War II, argued that the city's terminal decline strongly affected its reaction to the war boom. It "had all the makings of a dying city" and "only a major event could have saved Lowell or even delayed its death." It was once one of the great centers of capitalist innovation in the nation but the time of this textile mill town had passed. Portland, in contrast, was a new

and growing city with every hope, held by a broad swathe of its residents, that future prosperity might emerge from the war boom.[10]

It also mattered that Portland was in a region where cities are still particularly important. As the twentieth century began, the West was more urban than any region of the country except the North Atlantic. And as historian Carey McWilliams argued just after the explosive urban growth of World War II,

> The cities of the West, paradoxical as the statement may sound, are socially more important than their counterparts in the other major regions. Where people are so thinly distributed over such vast areas the concentration of population, no matter how small they may be…come to possess a unique importance.

Urban studies scholar Carl Abbott's definitive synthesis of western urban history argued for "the ubiquity of the city-building imagination and city-building impulse in shaping western North America" and historian Richard White has asserted that "while the federal government shaped the West…the West itself served as the kindergarten of the American state," but the connections between the two remain underexplored and we must approach the notion of a vast yet coherent West with skepticism.[11]

Historian Robert D. Johnston has argued that although White's landmark synthesis of western history "offers a great deal of evidence and analysis for its argument about a strong federal presence in the West, the book's argument for the link to national state development is simply *asserted*." Johnston also doubted that the federal role in the West has consistently been greater than in other regions. Federal intervention, he pointed out, repeatedly transformed the Southeast in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The key to implementing Johnston's important critique of common assumptions in western history without abandoning regionalism as a useful analytical tool is to examine more precisely and intentionally constructed areas that correspond carefully to both historical aspect and period. This book will, based upon the issue under examination, view Portland during the World War I era in the alternating specific contexts of Oregon, the Pacific Northwest, or the urban West Coast.[12]

The relationship between West Coast cities and the government prior to the New Deal of the 1930s is still little understood. Historian Roger W. Lotchin has touched upon the urban-military nexus in California in this early period, yet he noted that scholars have largely ignored the impact of World War I throughout the West. Historian Karen R. Merrill has called for examination of "the institutional structures, histories, cultures, and organizational ideologies of the [federal] agencies involved in the region." Historical

work, she argued, lacked specificity and also failed to address "the larger context of American state formation." This book investigates the local branches of the government agencies that transformed both urban life and space in Portland during the war. I highlight their impact on a particular place in the context of their role in a national crisis and as part of a changing state.[13]

The precedent of bureaucratic federal mediation in local labor disputes established during the war remained a continuous feature of government even during the supposed lull of the 1920s. Dubofsky has argued that "the 1920s saw no sudden shrinkage in federal power to intervene in the domestic economy" even though "the most expansive of the wartime federal powers, agencies, and policies had been eroded in the reaction of 1919–20." He credited an active Department of Labor mediation service and the Railway Labor Board created in 1920. There were serious proposals for a broader system but it had many opponents on the Left and Right according to historian Morton Keller:

> Both the Socialist party and the AFL opposed a scheme to establish a national industrial tribunal with full judicial powers. And conservatives rejected a proposal to establish regional boards of industry and adjustment modeled on the Federal Reserve system: these, they held, too closely resembled the dreaded Soviets of the Bolsheviks.

There were also internal changes in the labor movement that caused federal activism in this sphere to temporarily diminish. Dubofsky has noted that "those unions that had been in the forefront of labor militancy from 1916 through 1922 suffered the severest losses" until the New Deal and "by contrast, the less militant and more conservative sectors of the labor movement…either maintained their strength or grew slightly."[14]

Eisner has found continuity in federal economic intervention between World War I and the New Deal: "The Roosevelt administration constructed a recovery program and the welfare state from policies, agencies, and patterns of state-economy relations that originated in World War I mobilization and evolved throughout the 1920s." To evoke just one facet of that evolution, historian Daniel Amsterdam has analyzed an unprecedented federal push toward local efforts to ameliorate unemployment in the early 1920s. Historian Ronald Schaffer, in his survey of the "war welfare state" during World War I, has given state expansion during the conflict even broader long-term implications:

> The centrally managed society of World War I both presaged and contributed to the rise of federal power in the 1930s. And it also foreshadowed much of what happened in the decades that followed as the United States entered a long era, as Wilson had foreseen, of warfare and continuous preparation for war.

That long era, I suggest in the epilogue, is still not over. The state clearly did not, and never would again, entirely leave the realm of labor arbitration and the attendant project of tracking internal anticapitalist enemies.[15]

Federal field agents were largely successful at balancing local interest groups but those that were both nonessential and had the potential to upset détente were relentlessly persecuted. Radicals who rejected industrial peace under capitalism were the state's primary targets. After the war, the government still sought to crush these groups and harassed leftist unions within the AFL, which were no longer essential adjuncts of a war production program. Anticapitalist activists, closely watched and short on resources, operated in local cells. The Department of Justice (DOJ) reacted on a local basis to prevent radicals obtaining the capacity to act on a national level. The notion that the local level provides the critical view toward understanding anticommunism has gained traction among scholars for the early Cold War period but the more important evolutionary stage of the World War I era remains underexplored.[16]

Revolution was sweeping Europe in the war's destructive wake and this threat seemed very real to the intelligence community that had formed during the conflict. Civil liberties lawyer and scholar Frank Donner has argued that "if labor strife and political anarchism were the parents of non-federal intelligence, World War I and the Russian Revolution played the same role in the federalization of intelligence." And the local component of the anticapitalist alliance remained continuous and vital:

> The hysterical antiradicalism of World War I and the postwar red scare fostered the further growth and development of urban police red squads and provided them with the momentum that carried them through the 1920s until the next major burst of radical activity in response to the Great Depression.

Locally based surveillance and attack systems were already in place from the war but with postwar budget cuts and the expiration of emergency wartime laws, DOJ needed to rely heavily on the ability of individual cities to respond to their own problems. Still, the federal antiradical program continued overtly until at least 1924 and informally afterward until a revival in 1936 when labor militancy flourished once again. That there was continuity even during the lull is not in doubt. Historian Robert Justin Goldstein, introducing a volume of over a dozen essays on the subject, argued that "the red scare never really ended" and, in fact, "the 1921–46 period witnessed a whole series of 'little red scares.'" Historian Regin Schmidt has concluded that "the open shop campaign, which began in 1920–21 and continued well into the thirties…used red-baiting to discredit organized labor and reform movements and cooperated closely with the Bureau." He has also asserted