INTRODUCTION: REASSESSING THE RED SCARE OF 1919–20 AT ITS CENTENNIAL

As the centennial of the First Red Scare arrives, the time has come for a substantial scholarly reconsideration of the event. The first attempt at scholarly synthesis of the Red Scare appeared in 1955, its release delayed by the pall of fear spread by McCarthyism. Robert K. Murray’s book, *Red Scare: A Study in National Hysteria, 1919–1920*, focused mainly on understanding the repression of radicals and labor militants enabled by a frenzied press in the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution. According to Murray, the Red Scare was a temporary, irrational, and focused phenomenon—a meteoric hysteria. Despite the fact that historians have since produced much valuable work on diverse aspects of the period, Murray’s book remains crucial because no scholar has attempted a multifaceted synthesis entirely focused on and encompassing the whole period of the Red Scare of 1919–20 that moves beyond his narrow theme.

The Red Scare had an unprecedentedly wide chilling effect on union organizing and radical politics in the United States, but it went considerably beyond that and was only partly a reaction to the global ambitions of Bolshevism. It was also a complex array of campaigns to reverse increasing momentum toward a rapidly diversifying polity. “Red Summer” violence against African Americans and a powerful push to shut out immigration while accelerating deportation were reactionary retaliations in domestic battles over economic and political inclusion. A growing civil libertarian consciousness and a commitment to cultural modernism among progressives also generated conflict. Fears over the transformation of gender roles as women were poised to gain meaningful citizenship created another major front between emancipation and containment.

This special issue of *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* offers a reassessment of the Red Scare that goes beyond Murray through examination of several key perspectives that are underdeveloped or absent in his book, with the goal of broadening our understanding of the event’s overall nature and importance. The authors examine how African Americans, conservatives, feminists, immigrants, progressives, revolutionaries, and striking workers both shaped and were impacted by the Red Scare while also tracing overlap and crucial connections between these groups as well as suggesting new ways of seeing them. These essays capture the breadth of the Red Scare in both its national and global reach, its immediacy in local life, and its transformation over time within its moment as well as in strands of continuity reaching beyond the period. This issue is the first substantial scholarly collaboration entirely focused on the Red Scare.
of 1919–20 and marks the onset of its centennial with a much-needed new understanding that unites exciting and recent, but previously disparate, perspectives.

While Murray was clearly cognizant of the importance of the longer-term growth of U.S. radicalism and the reaction against it despite limited success, alongside recent national and global shifts engendered by World War I, the Bolshevik Revolution, and U.S. intervention in the ensuing civil war, he rooted the onset of the Red Scare in the escalation of the Seattle shipbuilding strike of late January 1919 to a general strike in that city in early February.3 It is important that he constructs the Red Scare as a period in its own right and not as a coda to an era focused on the war. It was not an inevitable decision as 1918 was in important ways not a dissimilar year: it had also witnessed an emboldened labor movement, radical organizing and raids upon it by both local and federal authorities, violent racial conflict, and a political culture intolerant of dissent that was focused on internal unity and vigilance against a foreign threat.4 On the day that the Seattle strike began, the New York Times had a front page story titled: AMERICANS ROUT ARCHANGEL REDS IN FIERCE FIGHT. It opened with an announcement that “Heavy losses were inflicted on the Bolsheviki by the American forces and the enemy was driven back in disorder …”—the enemy.5 However, the intervention was small in scale, there was little public appetite for escalating it, and the Wilson administration was moving toward winding it down.6 It was by then a relic of the summer of 1918, when the decisive Meuse-Argonne Offensive on the Western Front had yet to begin and the imminent end of the war was hardly clear.7 Though anger against Germans lingered on after war’s end, the United States in 1919 did not have a wartime culture. I disagree with Murray’s assertion that “insofar as the 1919 social mood was concerned the nation was still at war,” despite the widely perceived foreign nature of the Bolshevik threat.8

The period of the Red Scare is defined by its contest of power in the immediate aftermath of the war, not just amidst a shifting political culture and new economic imperatives and conditions, but among a host of groups and individuals in need of crisis in order to shape the postwar future. For Murray, this included “Every ambitious politician, overzealous veteran, antunion employer, super-patriotic organizer, defender of white supremacy, and sensational journalist.” They all “jumped into the fray, using the issue of radicalism as a whipping boy for their own special purposes.”9 If his focus on a broad public successfully lured into a transient hysteria by a cynical press, which then enabled a range of opportunists, was an understandable framework in the context of his work taking form during the Second Red Scare, it is no longer compelling. This was no one-sided contest and it was much more than a story of villains, victims, and manipulated eager spectators.

However, his notion that this was an enormously complex phenomenon that involved a vast and varied host of actors with as many ambitions rings more true as time has passed and makes both synthesis and periodization difficult. If early 1919 marks the onset, 1920 is a very gradual denouement. Murray, wisely, looked for a point at which opportunities ripe for Red Scare exploitation passed by with little such attempt or attention. An absence of panic following the Wall Street bombing of September 1920 (though it was the most substantial terrorist act in the United States until the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995), and even more so during the ensuing fall presidential campaign, indicated that the moment of easy opportunity had passed, even if the repression of radicalism, large-scale race rioting, and the push against feminism, unions, and progressive politics had not.10
The Red Scare was a pivotal moment toward the redefinition of liberalism, which Laura Weinrib posits as a shifting mantle contested by both progressives and conservatives in the first article. While the former were characterized by the persistence of prewar “social democratic ambitions,” the latter “depicted federal meddling with business prerogatives as a threat to cherished American liberties,” which framed their responses to the Red Scare. Her focus on divisions over the legal system and within the profession of law during the crisis and its near aftermath reveals no clear winner in this contest and that “the Red Scare helped to establish which elements of each worldview would infuse the broadly resonant strain of American liberalism that blossomed in the late New Deal and prevailed in the postwar period.”

Emily Pope-Obeda continues the examination of the transformation of the legal system and state capacities in the second article through an analysis of deportation. “The Red Scare both coincided with an existing and growing regime of immigrant removals and fueled its further acceleration.” Importantly, the Red Scare led to the “familiarization of the public with the idea that ‘letting out’ immigrants could be a useful safety valve for a variety of mounting social pressures.” She also argues that beyond the novel “degree of national coordination” that marked deportation during the Red Scare, it is important to place this phenomenon as “part of a broader global trend of expanding efforts by nation-states to police their borders and track and control the mobility of foreign-born individuals.”

There is further work on internationalism focused on the key battleground of gender politics in the third article, by Julia L. Mickenberg, who “makes a case for revolutionary Russia’s real appeal to American feminists and suggests the significance of that appeal for understandings of the First Red Scare.” She observes that it is because “the attacks upon women who praised elements of the Bolshevik Revolution were so vicious that historians have tended to focus almost entirely upon how out of proportion the attacks were in relation to the threat that radicals posed.” In response, Mickenberg asserts that, at this pivotal movement during which the Red Scare coincided with the transformation of female citizenship, “it is also worth examining the extent to which and reasons why American women were looking toward revolutionary Russia.”

My own article, to conclude the issue, suggests that the field “still struggles with the reality that the incidents we have collected as the ‘Red Scare’ and ‘Red Summer’ and made national, manifested often as disparate local events that responded to immediate conditions.” I argue “that responding to the local events of the Red Scare/Red Summer to better understand regional history … is not an inadequate response that distracts us from a more worthy attempt to synthesize primary national currents.” Through analyzing smaller-scale strikes and incidents of racial violence, looking at the variance in form and response of local governments, and seeing the global interconnections of the Red Scare through the lens of localities, we can gain new ground toward a broader, more multifaceted understanding of this transformative era.

NOTES

1Murray recounted this extraordinary and sorry tale in an interview, many years later: Lee W. Formwalt, “Robert Murray’s Two Red Scares,” OAH Newsletter (Nov. 2003): 4. He hints at the impact of the current


3The first three chapters of Murray’s *Red Scare* establish a sophisticated context for the rest of the book to build upon. It then proceeds roughly chronologically through 1919–20 over the next twelve chapters before concluding. The Seattle general strike is the focus of Chapter Four and marks the onset of his ordered examination of the period.

4On repression and political culture during the war, a good starting point is Christopher Capozzola, *Uncle Sam Wants You: World War I and the Making of the Modern American Citizen* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).


8Murray, *Red Scare*, 58, makes brief mention of the persistence of strong anti-German feeling. Quote on p. 15.


