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Abstract: On September 16, 1920, a bomb would go off in the middle of Wall Street killing forty people and injuring over a hundred more. To this day the perpetrator remains unknown, and in the absence of resolution one might question how the contemporary public reacted to this terrorist attack in the heart of Manhattan. Through an archival examination of newspapers printed in the period after the attack it can be seen how this unsolved mystery would fuel persecution and public hysteria in the ensuing months targeting “suspect” political dissidents and ethnic minorities. From studying newspapers published following the bombing more can be understood about those who wrote and consumed misleading news as well as those whom they would scapegoat in an attempt to placate their own anxieties.

### **Fallout from the Wall Street Bombing**

On September 16, 1920 a bomb would go off during the Wall Street lunch rush. This bombing would become the deadliest terrorist attack in American history at the time. To this day the mystery of who was responsible remains unsolved, and while that might be an interesting tidbit of information to modern historians at the time this was a source of great concern. The Wall Street Bombing succeeded in the primary objective of most attacks in its ability to inspire fear across the population. This fear would motivate years of fruitless investigation into the attacks in search of a motive and corresponding perpetrator who could be brought before the law to face justice. This closure would never come, but the paranoia grew as more already alienated groups came under increased public scrutiny.

While I cannot hope to solve the mystery of who perpetrated the attack within the scope of this essay I became interested in the public response to the attack in the aftermath. Because this event happened a century ago this year there are no surviving witnesses, but the news media reflecting the atmosphere of the time persist in archived form. To this end I have investigated newspaper archives to gauge how the public responded to the attacks not to determine who actually committed the attacks, but to gauge who the public believed did the crimes based on the primary news source these people had available: the newspaper. These newspapers do not tell the accurate history of the events that they describe, but instead speak more to the people who created and consumed them because newspapers are products of history themselves.

Before any time can be taken to discuss the aftermath of the attack the event itself should be explained. At a little past noon on Thursday, September 16, 1920, in the Financial District of Manhattan a horse-drawn wagon stopped by lunchtime crowds on Wall Street across the street from the J.P. Morgan bank headquarters. Suddenly the cart exploded as 100 pounds of dynamite loaded with iron shrapnel tore through the crowded street. All trading was immediately suspended as rescue workers and police attempted to contain the panic while transporting hundreds of wounded to nearby hospitals. An extortionist leaflet demanded the release of political prisoners would be found nearby. When all was said and done thirty eight people had been killed by the attack while a hundred and forty three were seriously wounded along with hundreds more with less severe injuries (Gage 2010 p.160).

Most of the victims were young daytime workers at the New York Stock Exchange like clerks and brokers; not the financial executives for whom they worked. In addition to loss of life the bombing was estimated to have caused more than two million dollars in property damage as described by the *New York Times* the next day; equivalent to over twenty five million dollars today and damage from the explosion is still visible on the nearby buildings to this day (New York Times 1920). This sudden attack right at the heart of American Capitalism would elicit a reaction in the public which kept updates on the aftermath as front page news for years to follow.

When examining this attack and its aftermath it is important to consider the atmosphere of the time in which it occurred: the interwar period. The unacceptable working conditions of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries gave rise to social unrest, labor struggles, and anti-capitalist agitation. These socialist and anarchist groups were limited in their resources and thus resorted to campaigns of early terrorism including bombing and assassinations which targeted their

identified oppressors. Powerful heads of state like Tsar Alexander II had been assassinated by such anarchist radicals and in 1901 American anarchist Leon Czolgosz had assassinated President William McKinley. Not only had these attacks created a paranoid tension across the world, but years prior the Bolsheviks had overthrown the Russian provisional government to establish the Soviet Union dedicated to the international advance of Communism. A threat made prescient in people's minds.

World War I had only recently ended and the world was still reeling from the impact of its conclusion. With the power of hindsight we are privileged to already know that this inter war tension will inevitably result in a second cataclysmic period of geopolitical chaos not even two decades after the events on Wall Street in the fall of 1920. The so called Gilded Age had ended and the Roaring Twenties were just beginning, but the problems of the socio-economic conditions endured by most Americans were beginning to bubble up after decades of suffering. While at the same time the USSR had demonstrated that it was not only possible for political dissident to seize power, but that they could also pose a genuine threat to the interests of the American and European bourgeoisie.

Among the first responses to the attack were the newspapers printed in the days immediately following the attack. These give first hand insight into the response of the public which would develop as the case continued. *The Sun and New York Herald* would release one of the first updates on the story to a public who still relied heavily on newsprint to receive any news beyond the local area. First they begin listing the victims and their names before they elaborate, in several articles, some of the far reaching effects of the attack. It is noted that officials in cities like Boston and Philadelphia implemented "heavy guard night and day" to guard against the threat of attacks (New York Herald 1920 p.3). This not only demonstrates the spreading paranoia

inspired by the attacks, but also that the public suspicion has already targeted anarchists at this point. The newspaper notes that the police are using the attack as justification to force “radicals” and “Reds” to give accounts of all movement to police.

A second early newspaper response can also be seen stoking the fears of the general public in the aftermath of America’s worst terrorist attack at the time. Here in the September 18<sup>th</sup> edition of the New York *Daily News* we find one of the first suspects of the attack coming under police and media scrutiny as Americans desperation for resolution began. This first ultimately innocent suspect to have their name paraded in national publication was Edwin P. Fischer a tennis player who supposedly predicted the attack and had been warning his friends (The News 1920 p.3). As the newspaper details he was taken into police custody in Canada soon after the attack, but what is not detailed in this newspaper is that the police very quickly discovered that Fischer was suffering from a mental disorder and found that he regularly issued warnings based on his paranoid delusions. Fischer would subsequently be committed to the Amityville Asylum after his innocence became clear (Byrk 2005). He would not be the last innocent whose guilt was implied by the police and media, and as evidenced by the *New York Herald* the targets of these persecutions would increasingly be political dissidents.

On September 21, 1920 *The New York Times* would publish a series of columns updating various aspects of the story including discrediting the accusation against Fischer before moving on to the next suspect: three Italian looking men claimed to have been seen fleeing the scene. Expounding upon the growing racialization of the case *The New York Times* published another related article that day stating that explosive manufacturers announced that they would “bar all suspicious aliens from our laboratories,” in response to growing paranoia focusing on foreigners (The New York Times 1920). While narrowing the search to political subversives like anarchists

made some sense given the nature of the bombing targeting the heart of American finance and the note found demanding the release of political prisoners. But it is here where we see some evidence of the xenophobic atmosphere of the period. Italian anarchists especially were seen to have a motive after the controversial murder convictions of Italian migrant anarchists Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti in April of that year. Historians point to the followers of anarchist Luigi Galleani as the primary suspect in this theory given their members committed smaller scale bombings the past year (Gage 2010 p.207).

While no indictments were ever made and Galleani himself was in Italy newspaper stories like these feed into the anti-left and xenophobic attitudes of the American public inflamed by the bombing. Alongside this article is another that read “move to expel socialist sidetracked” which covers the efforts of Albany legislators to remove five elected socialists to disenfranchise their political ideology (The New York Times 1920). This also elucidates the nature the political climate at the time; where at times democracy came second to upholding the political/economic status quo. The subsequent otherization of the entire political Left by this narrative of guilt by association to the Wall Street act of supposed anarchist terror would be a symptom of this trend during a period time known as the First Red Scare.

We can see how the media coverage of the events is both inciting and reflecting public reaction to the attack which increasingly becomes increasingly paranoid as blame targets out groups in American society. This can further be demonstrated by the October 7<sup>th</sup> *Olean Evening Times* story covering the arrest of four suspected anarchists with the headline: “THEY’RE ALL ITALIANS” (Times Herald 1920). Of course we know that these men would all be let go, but this is another example of the news perpetuating the narrative of blame with these men facing arrest without evidence based only on a racial profile and unconfirmed political sympathies. The

American people are attempting and failing to find the cathartic justice they desire and attempting to confirm their suspicions of rabble they find objectionable prior to the attack.

By March 22, 1921 this same pattern of paranoid arrests followed by failure to indict for lack of any substantial incriminating evidence whatsoever has continued. That day's issue of *The Chattanooga News* would feature a story very similar to what the previous one covered; here we find the case has spread internationally but is playing out much the same way with German men in Rio de Janeiro being imprisoned then extradited to the United States only to discover a complete lack of evidence connecting these men to the crime (Chattanooga News 1921). The police refused to discuss this extended mistake as they often do and once again we see a paranoid fear of the other as German resentment was still high in America following the First World War. In the article a journalist attempted to interview the imprisoned men only to be met with dismissal from the men who did not care to talk to newspapers which "vilified and misrepresented him," (Chattanooga News 1921).

As the case carried on from days into months suspects are repeatedly detained and cleared only for a new undesirable to be targeted as the police and public desperately search for who was responsible. No sooner has one case been discredited than another claims to have solved the mystery of the bombing each being met with a news media storm to publish the story of the supposed closing of the case. On December 17, 1921 the *Reno Gazette* would like many papers run as their front page story "WALL STREET EXPLOSION PLOT IS RUN DOWN AT LAST." Like the preceding claims to have apprehended the perpetrators this one is again humorous to read with hindsight as the investigators and journalists boast of the successful effort to capture the bomber in Warsaw, Poland. The German suspect, Wolfe Lindenfeld, had been tracked down for his supposed role and under questionable circumstances been interrogated

before confessing to the crime which even at the time the police “bomb squad” in New York dismissed (Reno Gazette 1921).

Again the exploitation of fears following the bombing continue as this case attempted to paradoxically claim that Lindenfeld was both an anarchist terrorist and an agent of the Communist Third International based out of the Soviet Union. They would attempt to claim the Third International was the sponsor of the attack to associate the rival ideology with the tragedy of the bombing. This shows how the narrative was manipulated to combine people’s fears of terrorism with a xenophobic anti-socialist political agenda connecting Communism directly and falsely with the Wall Street attack to demonize left wing political groups both associated and unassociated with the Third International alike.

The authorities would never solve the mystery of who orchestrated the Wall Street Bombing, and while new investigations would open over the decades to come none would conclusively reveal what happened as the public and newspapers gradually lost interest. As the timeline of news stories show there are serious problems with this variety of primary source. Like we have observed in other primary sources the creation of the document has biases baked into it. Newspapers are operated as a business and to stay profitable they must make sales of their news; hence the reason the news most pressing on the minds of reads becomes a featured story. Whenever there was even the possibility that the case was solved newspapers across the country would publish cover stories which smeared and defamed both the individuals wrongly accused and the groups to which they belonged. Even if the news published an admittance of error the damage was often already done. The newspapers fed off fear to get buyers and in doing so often wittingly or not participated in vilification which furthered certain political ends. In an editorial piece on the topic in January of 1922 outspoken socialist Upton Sinclair would write “there is no



particle of doubt in my mind any longer that the attribution of this Wall Street explosion to the radicals was a part of a deliberate plot of the authorities to discredit the radical movement.”

(Sinclair 1922).

Newspapers are also for this reason great evidence for examining certain questions about history when taking certain considerations of the material. The contents of these articles ought not to be read and evaluated at face value as much of the information contained within is now understood to be misleading or inaccurate historically. While the narrative the newspapers presented are not a source of historical truth when read literally, but in conjunction with other materials like Beverly Gage’s *The Day Wall Street Exploded: a Story of America in Its First Age of Terror* to better understand the events with the privilege of historical perspective. Like has been discussed in the course these newspapers speak more to the history of the people who wrote and read them than the subjects that they are written about. Later articles like the one featured in *The Hutchinson Gazette*’s February 4<sup>th</sup> 1922 front page article where a psychic claims that “the bomb was planted by a dark complexioned foreigner,” which in no way speaks to reality, but rather the tropes which publishers and readers found acceptable (Hutchinson Gazette 1922).

While the US government would use the bombing to investigate subversive political groups “such as the Union of Russian Workers, the I.W.W., Communist, etc. [...] and from the result of the investigations to date it would appear that none of the aforementioned organizations had any hand in the matter,” (Gage 2010 p.325). None the less the damage of media smears and guilt-by-accusation in the public eye played a role in the Red Scare campaign against Communism in this period. The result of this terror attack was not the furtherance of radical ideas, but a harsh public and policy reaction against them. A conspiratorially minded person might posture that the attack was a false flag carried out by the enemies of anarchism/socialism

to discredit their cause, but while this claim is dubious there can be no doubt that the bombing was exploited in a way that resulted in public vilification of political and ethnic minorities. Newspaper readers were afraid of foreigners and the rise in 'radicals' who threatened the status quo. The newspaper media then played to this fear in the sensationalist coverage of the repeatedly/ultimately failed investigation for financial success as a news product. This had the effect of reinforcing existing hostilities along ethnic and political lines aiding a reactionary political agenda. When viewed with the hindsight of historical perspective these newspapers seem like manipulative misleading primary sources; it makes one wonder how modern news coverage will be reflected on in a century.

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