Book review: *American Midnight: The Great War, a violent peace, and democracy's forgotten crisis*

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American Midnight: The Great War, a violent peace, and democracy's forgotten crisis. Adam Hochschild. Mariner Books, 2022, 448 pp.

Adam Hochschild's *American Midnight: The Great War, A Violent Peace, and Democracy's Forgotten Crisis* uncovers the massive World War I-era attack on civil liberties and the violent repression of labor, socialists and immigrant communities carried out under the liberal Democratic Party administration of Woodrow Wilson.

Hochschild's vivid, engaging account of the political subordination of the society to the needs of a ruling class waging an imperialist war deserves a wide readership. The crimes it documents, including attacks on immigrants, imprisonment of thousands for political speech, systematic use of torture, state-sponsored terrorist violence and naked profiteering, are central to an understanding of the rise of the United States to leading imperialist power—all the more timely given the return of these forms of repression under the fascistic Trump administration in the twilight of American imperialism.

Hochschild (*King Leopold's Ghost; Spain in Our Hearts*) opens the book with the paradox around which the narrative is organized. The US entered World War I, as Woodrow Wilson claimed, to "make the world safe for democracy," and yet the war became "the excuse for a war against democracy at home." More striking still is the scale and severity of the repression that intensified after the war had already ended. This, *American Midnight* shows, was directed against organized resistance in the working class.

It is a history, Hochschild observes, "not marked by commemorative plaques, museum exhibits, or Ken Burns documentaries." The author offers *American Midnight* as a corrective to a sanitized official memory in which the heroism of the "Great War" simply dissolves into the libertinism of "the Roaring Twenties." In this, he has succeeded.

Woodrow Wilson: "War Means Autocracy"

Woodrow Wilson, the Democratic Party president from 1913-1921, is central to Hochschild's account. A figure whose official reputation as a progressive idealist obscures the bloody record, Wilson's political role was no mystery to contemporary Marxists. In 1919, Leon Trotsky identified Wilson as "a philistine and hypocrite on whom the white stitching still shows, an oily (Quaker-vegetable-oil) Tartuffe" who crosses "blood-drenched Europe as the supreme representative of morality, as the Messiah of the American Dollar; punishing, pardoning, and arranging the fate of the peoples."

Hochschild explains that Wilson's determination to bring the United States into the European war expressed the interests of American finance capital. American banks, foremost among them that of JP Morgan, had extended enormous loans to Britain and France. Receiving any return then depended on an Allied victory. So long as Russia remained in the war, forcing Germany to fight on two fronts, Wilson could maintain a fiction of official neutrality while billions in money and arms flowed eastward across the Atlantic.

The Russian Revolution of 1917 shattered this arrangement. It also demonstrated to millions of workers in the US and around the world that ordinary people could stop the war, which had already killed millions, overthrow capitalism and begin building a society free from exploitation. The specter of that revolution—an active, dynamic and growing movement for socialism—terrified the US ruling class that American workers might follow the Russian example.

Russia's exit from the war, threatened first by the February Revolution and completed by the Bolshevik-led October Revolution, meant the American bourgeoisie could no longer sustain its moralistic posture of "armed neutrality." Freed from the Eastern Front, the German army could bear down with its whole force on the French and British in the West. The victory of German imperialism, and its domination of the Continent, seemed assured.

The prospect was unthinkable for Wilson. Entering the war meant both securing repayment of the Allied debts and opening the door to American imperialism striving to dominate the politics of Europe and the world— the imperialist project that would define the remainder of the 20th century and into the 21st.

But war abroad would require war on the working class at home. Somewhere around 3,000 strikes erupted in 1917, the year the US entered the war, struggles driven by spiraling inflation and stagnating wages. Strikes meant fierce, often armed, confrontations with company thugs and police. The most militant union in the US emerged as the most formidable threat: The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) organized workers regardless of craft or trade, race or citizenship—lines that the craft-based American Federation of Labor refused to cross—and was gaining momentum.

By then, the ferocious effort to block working class organization had a long history—as did imperialist adventures abroad. Hochschild is most compelling in the passages that describe the ruthless class policies of American capitalism:

> No other country, for instance, had anything comparable to Pennsylvania's Coal and Iron Police, a force essentially dedicated to battling unions and breaking strikes. Rare was the militant labor

> leader who had not spent a term in jail. American workers who tried to form unions had virtually no laws protecting their right to do so… In the 20 years starting in 1890, 75 strikes saw workers killed, for a total toll of 308 deaths and thousands of injuries. In 1913 and 1914, more than 70 people, including women and children, died in battles between Colorado miners and National Guardsmen defending a Rockefeller-owned coal mine.
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> Fifteen years earlier, the Colorado National Guard had fought in the Philippine War, and many of the soldiers shooting down those miners were veterans. One, a notoriously ruthless officer named Karl Linderfelt, remarked, of ransacking miners' homes for arms, "In the Islands, we done exactly the same thing." (Chapter 5, Those Who Stand in Our Way)

After the Russian Revolution, capitalist fear of the American working class reached a fever pitch. The war effort was welded to crush the threat. Hochschild quotes Wilson instructing a cabinet member: "War means autocracy. We shall be dependent upon the steel, oil and financial magnates. They will run the country."

Run it they did, securing dizzying profits from the carnage in Europe, and dramatically widening the already extreme gap between the rich and the poor.

The average annual return on investment for the steel industry rose from 7.4 percent in 1915 to 20 percent in 1918. US Steel's annual income increased more than tenfold between 1914 and 1917. In 1919, it earned a surplus of nearly half a billion dollars after paying a 14 percent dividend to shareholders. Bethlehem Steel's stock price rose 17 times over during the war, paying a 200 percent dividend in 1917. DuPont quadrupled its assets and increased its dividend payments by a factor of sixteen between 1914 and 1918. Four major meatpacking firms saw their profits soar 400 percent.

No effort was made to conceal the connections between political power and war profiteering. Cleveland Dodge, lifelong friend and major campaign contributor to Woodrow Wilson, was vice president of the Phelps, Dodge mining empire, a director of the National City Bank and a director of the Winchester Repeating Arms Company. J.P. Morgan & Co., which held stakes in more than a dozen major military contractors and floated loans to Britain and France, secured a highly profitable contract to act as purchasing agent for Allied war supplies.

The War Industries Board was staffed by executives from J.P. Morgan and the steel industry, who awarded themselves "cost-plus" contracts that transferred virtually unlimited costs to the public treasury. One firm used such a contract to build a rent-free hotel for its executives and charged the expense to the government.

To secure this wealth required non-stop production. The result was repression on a scale never before seen in US history.

The Machinery of Repression

The legal foundation of the Wilson administration's repressive apparatus rested on two sweeping pieces of legislation. The Espionage Act of June 1917 criminalized virtually all opposition to the war, imposing fines of up to $10,000 (about $255,000 in 2026) and imprisonment for up to twenty years. It granted Wilson's appointee to Postmaster General, Albert Burleson, near-total authority to declare newspapers and magazines "unmailable"—a death sentence for publications that depended on postal distribution. Burleson exercised this power with enthusiasm, targeting the socialist press and what he called "offensive Negro papers."

The following year, the Sedition Act extended these measures by making it criminal to "utter, print, write, or publish any disloyal, profane, scurrilous or abusive language" about the government. States rushed to pass their own copycat legislation and criminal syndicalism laws. Immigration statutes were weaponized to mandate the deportation of any non-citizen belonging to an anarchist organization. Hochschild documents a figure recently uncovered: 11,000 Americans were jailed in this period for what they wrote or said, or for belonging to perfectly legal organizations.

The institutional machinery of repression was no less elaborate. The US Military Intelligence division, led by Lieutenant Colonel Ralph Van Deman, a veteran of the brutal colonial war in the Philippines, grew rapidly to 282 officers and more than 1,000 civilians. Van Deman modeled his domestic surveillance system on his experience with the subjugation of the Filipino independence movement, compiling dossiers on American citizens on what would by the end of the war be hundreds of thousands of cross-indexed file cards mapping overlapping social and political circles.

The Bureau of Investigation, predecessor to the FBI, created a Radical Division under Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer to compile lists of subversives and build deportation cases targeting labor organizers. That division was soon taken over by a fast-rising, 24-year old bureaucrat named J. Edgar Hoover, who systematized the surveillance of nearly 150,000 individuals. The Wilson government established the Committee on Public Information, a lavishly funded propaganda agency operating in every available medium—films, posters, newspaper articles and 75,000 volunteer speakers who delivered more than seven million patriotic, pro-war talks nationwide.

The Wilson administration also cultivated and empowered civilian vigilante networks. The American Protective League, founded by wealthy Chicago advertising executive Albert Briggs, operated as a quasi-official auxiliary of the Department of Justice, boasting a quarter-million members organized along military lines. APL operatives conducted "slacker raids" to round up draft evaders, assisted government agents in mass arrests and beat up protesters.

The methods of the Ku Klux Klan, including tarring and feathering, public whippings, lynchings and bombings, were deployed systematically against IWW organizers. Frank Little, an IWW organizer in Butte, Montana, was lynched in August 1917. The perpetrators were never prosecuted. Other IWW leaders were publicly hanged, whipped, burned and run out of towns by mobs led by prominent businessmen, elected officials and police chiefs. Workers' homes and families were not spared in the atrocities.

The government's assault on the IWW was methodical and devastating. A significant figure in *American Midnight* is Bureau of Investigation's agent Leo Wendell, operating under the alias "Louis Walsh," who rose to become secretary of the IWW's Pittsburgh branch, actively reporting on and provoking its members. In September 1917, coordinated federal raids seized approximately five tons of the organization's materials, including its financial records, membership rolls, cash and printing press plates, empowering the state to effectively dismember the union.

The US attorney in Philadelphia was quite candid about his office's aim: "Our purpose being, as I understand it, very largely to put the IWW out of business." In July 1917, the IWW called a strike of more than 1,000 copper miners in Bisbee, Arizona against the Phelps Dodge corporation, which was already accruing bumper profits from the carnage in Europe. The strikers were rounded up, kidnapped, loaded onto cattle cars and deposited in a stockade in the southwest New Mexico desert without water or shelter from the blistering heat, an action coordinated by their employer, Phelps Dodge and local officials. They were left with only the warning never to return. Two men died in the course of the 16-hour transport and abandonment.

The Socialist Party of America, then a mass political organization, was also targeted for its opposition to the war. Eugene Debs, who had won 6 percent of the presidential vote in the 1912 election, was imprisoned for his Canton Speech opposing US entry into the war. Debs declared: “They have always taught you that it is your patriotic duty to go to war and to have yourselves slaughtered at their command. But in all the history of the world you, the people, never had a voice in declaring war.”

Debs, then 62, was quickly convicted under the Espionage Act, and sentenced to 10 years in federal prison from which he conducted a popular presidential run as the Socialist candidate, garnering 900,000 votes. He was not released until 1921.

Among Hochschild’s most striking findings concern the treatment of conscientious objectors who were arrested and housed in US military prisons, many of whom were religious minorities. The military tortured conscientious objectors in the same way as it did Filipino rebels two decades earlier, cuffing them in standing position on tiptoe and employing the “water cure”—the technique the US military would later call waterboarding in its neocolonial occupations of the Middle East after 2001.

The oppression did not stop the movement of the American working class. The year 1919, the first after the war’s conclusion, saw the largest strike wave in US history. Hochschild writes, “four million people, one out of every five American workers, would go on strike.” In February 1919, more than 60,000 workers in Seattle, Washington joined in one of the most significant general strikes in US history. Workers across industries wrested control of the economic life of that city for several days in response to appeals from shipyard workers. Thousands of federal troops were brought in, and 3,000 new police sworn in, to suppress the struggle. With the help of local vigilantes, federal and city authorities again raided the Seattle Socialist Party and the IWW offices.

The wartime repression transformed seamlessly into the post-war Red Scare, now aimed squarely at the militant working class. Russian workers, Wobblies and socialists were targeted for arrest, detention and deportation. Leading anarchist Emma Goldman, just been released from prison, was deported to Russia with other “dangerous Reds.” This was only the beginning of the mass repression and surveillance organized by Wilson’s attorney general, A. Mitchell Palmer, and his lieutenant, the viciously anti-communist J. Edgar Hoover.

Hochschild writes,

> There are no complete records of how many people were seized and interrogated in the raids of November 1919, January 1920, and the smaller roundups that followed, but several estimates place the total at about 10,000… And Palmer promised that deportations by the tens of thousands would follow.

In this poisonous atmosphere the Italian anarchists Nicolo Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti were arrested for a 1920 robbery that no evidence tied them to; the men were convicted, largely on the basis of their political beliefs, and executed in 1927.

The role of the Democratic Party, and Wilson, an icon of liberalism, in leading nativist and racist agitation and violence not just in the South, but across the US, is perhaps even less well-known.

Wilson, the scion of a pro-Confederate and slaveholding family, took it upon himself to resegregate the federal workforce within weeks of his inauguration. Wilson’s appointment to Secretary of the Navy, Josephus Daniels, was a white supremacist agitator whose work as a newspaper editor was cited as a contributing cause of the 1898 Wilmington coup, in which racists overthrew the city’s elected biracial city government, killed at least twenty black residents, and burned homes and businesses.

The promotion of racism had deadly consequences. The year 1919 saw racist pogroms where white supremacist mobs attacked black communities in dozens of US cities. In Chicago, the riot erupted in July after a black teenager, Eugene Williams, was stoned and drowned for drifting into a “white beach” on Lake Michigan. When police refused to arrest the assailants, violence exploded. Over five days, white mobs burned homes, looted stores, and attacked black residents. State militias were mobilized to control the situation, but not before 38 people were killed (23 black, 15 white), more than 500 were injured and more than 1,000 black families were left homeless.

In Tulsa, the deadliest riot occurred two years later in May 1921, following a false accusation that a young black man, Dick Rowland, had assaulted a white female elevator operator. After a white mob gathered at the courthouse to lynch Rowland, a group of armed black veterans moved to defend him. A confrontation led to a white rampage in the prosperous black neighborhood of Greenwood, known as “Black Wall Street.” Over 16 hours, racist mobs burned and bombed homes, churches, schools and businesses from the air using private planes and from the ground. Official reports listed 36 deaths, but historians estimate up to 300 killed, drawn overwhelmingly from the city’s black residents. Thousands more were left homeless. Greenwood was virtually destroyed.

Conclusion

American Midnight deals with a period rich in critical political and strategic lessons for the working class, extracted and explained in the great contemporary writings of Lenin and Trotsky. Among these was the insistence that there was no “progressive faction” of the ruling class. In the age of imperialism, Lenin wrote in *State and Revolution*, it is “political reaction all along the line.”

It was probably not Hochschild’s intention to support Lenin’s crucial point. His book offers no specific class analysis; the word “imperialism” appears only once. Perhaps unable to approach the significance of his own findings, the author limply concludes his book by calling for vigilance in defense of “America’s version of democracy.”

But whatever his intentions, Hochschild’s honest and lifelike account completely destroys the myth of a “Golden Age” of liberal reformism. Wilson sought to drape American imperialism in the mantle of “Progress,” democracy and freedom. But his response to organized working class resistance against inequality, repression and nationalist propaganda was to level the most ruthless attacks on democratic and social rights ever waged.

It must be stressed that this attack came at the near apogee of American capitalism, when it was still on the rise. Today, the American ruling class, led politically by the fascist Donald Trump, is utterly bankrupt—both morally and financially. In its unprovoked attacks on Iran, its support for the Israeli genocide in Gaza, and in aiming for the destruction of virtually all that remains of working class living standards won in the hard struggles of the last century, it has shown it is prepared to carry out crimes today that would put those of the 20th century in the shade.

When Hochschild writes that what is needed is “above all, a vigilant respect for civil rights and constitutional safeguards, to save ourselves from ever slipping back into the darkness again,” one is prompted to ask the question: From whom will come a commitment to social equality and democratic rule?

The answer to this question is the international working class, which can and must mobilize to fight this lawlessness and cruelty with the higher principle of social equality, for the expropriation of the oligarchy and the establishment of genuinely democratic forms of rule. The struggle for

socialism is not just politically necessary, but remains the only humane, decent and emancipatory path left.