



Chicago Historical Society

The Haymarket Riot

Directions:

Read the following article. As you read, write down important questions that you think need to be answered concerning the historical circumstances surrounding this event and the historical period in which it occurred. Write your questions on a separate piece of paper. Turn in the questions you create. The questions will be checked for whether they are sufficient to explain the circumstances surrounding the event and relevance to the event.

An event was to occur in Chicago, Illinois, on May 4, 1886, known as the Haymarket Riot. A bomb was thrown, people were killed, and revenge was sought and found. It was bound to happen, a creation of the times. Born of the social upheaval occurring during the latter part of the nineteenth century, it made a certain amount of sense. The following description of the event would be incomplete without a feeling of time and place.

Some of the defining conditions of this time and place were the upheavals of the nineteenth century. These upheavals were a product of the Industrial Revolution. This technological and social revolution altered virtually every aspect of human experience. Another contributing factor born with the Industrial Revolution was the uncertainty in Europe during this period. European nations experienced an uncertain pattern of reform and often-repressive reaction that, along with uncertain economic conditions, brought masses of immigrants westward across the Atlantic to the United States. This immigration of thousands of Europeans would help define and change our nation. This movement helped transform a largely rural republic with a homogeneous population to an urban nation steeped in diversity. These immigrants mostly settled in our cities and worked in our factories. They contributed to the industrialization and urbanization of America.

If urbanization was a important trend in American life in this period, then Chicago would be considered this trend's most compelling example. Beginning as a small trading outpost at the southwestern end of the Great Lakes, it became the nation's second largest city in just sixty years. As Chicago grew, it changed from a trading center to a manufacturing giant. This was due to several factors. It had access to raw materials, new technologies, investment capital, and a seemingly endless supply of workers. After the Great Chicago Fire of October 8, 1871, wealth and prosperity increased even more than before. This wealth remained in the hands of the privileged few. The relationship between these manufacturers and the workers in their factories and plants was to be the crux of the fateful event of this story.

Many of these workers came from Europe as immigrants. In 1850, half of Chicago's residents were foreign-born. Most of the native-born Americans living in Chicago came from somewhere else in the United States. Few people were born in Chicago. Such rapid growth and such a mixture of people contributed to the instability of the new metropolis. This instability would be a factor in the events leading up to and during the actual Haymarket Riot. There were other contributing factors.

The types of jobs that Chicagoans held were most often determined by whether the worker was native or foreign born. Native-born Americans most often held the professional and office jobs. They were considered the middle class. Foreign-born individuals predominantly held skilled and unskilled blue-collar occupations. They composed the working or lower class. This division of classes would also contribute to the instability of the social situation of Chicago.

A fundamental characteristic of the Industrial Revolution was the conflict between labor and capital, which was mirrored in the rise of manufacturing in Chicago during this period. Capital, in this case, is defined as the stockholders, executives and managers, and even many office workers. Labor, on the other hand, is defined as those who earned their living by selling their physical skill and effort for an hourly wage or for how much they produced. Much of the social instability of the late nineteenth century was over who was to control wages, hours, and the process of production. Manufacturers had initial control of these factors and tried to maximize profits with little regard for their workers' welfare. Workers, on the other hand, wanted better working conditions and a share of the wealth coming from manufacturing. Workers felt that their only hope for controlling their situation came from organization, which took the form of unions. Unions faced powerful resistance from a middle-class public, which included most political and economic leaders, as well as most journalists. They were suspicious of unions, either on principle or for self-interested reasons.

Several economic downturns, or economic depressions, during the latter part of the nineteenth century made the class conflict between capital and labor increasingly tense. This situation inspired attempts by workers to rectify the inequities between labor and capital. Labor organizers denounced the arrogant practices of their bosses. Many of the organizers were socialists and were not content with peaceful strikes and demonstrations, but advocated more violent actions. Businessmen, government officials, and journalists lumped immigrants, tramps, union leaders, socialists, and communists together as enemies of the public. Labor turned to the strike and other demonstrations to attempt to rectify an inequitable situation. Angry demonstrations were widespread during this time. The police met some of these demonstrations with violence.

An example of these types of demonstrations occurred on May 1st, 1886, when approximately 340,000 workers across the nation went on strike. Their goal was to establish an eight-hour workday. The largest demonstrations occurred in Chicago, where an estimated 80,000 workers went on strike. Most of the "May Day" strikes were fairly quiet, as well as productive. However, some of the employers refused to comply with the strikers, among them the McCormick Harvesting Machine factory on the west side of Chicago. The McCormick plant, instead of granting shorter hours, opted to hire more non-union workers, called scabs. These Chicago strike breakers or scabs caused hostility among the striking workers. There were several conflicts between these two groups and also with the police. The culmination of these clashes took place on May 3, 1886. Striking workers met the scabs as they were leaving the McCormick plant and confronted them. The police were called and after being provoked, they shot above and into the crowd. This police action effectively stopped the conflict. People ran for their lives and six protestors were killed. The scene was set for the Haymarket Riot, which occurred in response to this unfortunate event.

In answer to the violent response of the police, Chicago socialists called for a protest meeting the following evening at the Haymarket Square. The Haymarket was a place where rural farmers came to exchange produce for cash. August Spies, one of the more revolutionary socialists, wrote in a pamphlet, that workers should arm themselves and come out in force. Spies, later changed these words, fearing that they would attract too much attention to a police force that was already upset.

On May 4th, 1886, around 8:30 in the evening the protest rally began with the first of three scheduled speakers. August Spies, a German emigrant and professed anarchist spoke first. He climbed on a wagon and addressed approximately 1,200 spectators. The audience was varied. It included all types of people from staunch socialists to passive bystanders and even the mayor of Chicago, Carter H. Harrison. Mayor Harrison was there to determine if the gathering was peaceful. Spies' speech discussed the status of the workers' strike for an eight-hour workday and harshly condemned the brutal and unnecessary display of force by the Chicago police at the McCormick plant the previous day.

Next, Albert Parsons, a Texan and socialist that advocated non-violent protest, addressed to the crowd. He spoke about the rights and responsibilities of the American working people. Upon completing his speech, Parsons left the meeting and went home. The overall meeting at this time was very peaceful and uneventful and many other people left early, as well, including Mayor Harrison.

On his way home, Mayor Harrison stopped by the nearby Desplaines Street Police Station and told the officers on standby that the meeting was peaceful and that they could be released to their ordinary duties. However, the police captain, John Bonfield, had other plans in mind. After the Mayor departed, Bonfield readied a force of 176 policemen and marched them down to Haymarket Square. Captain Bonfield ordered the depleted crowd to disperse. Samuel Fielding, the third speaker, who was speaking at the time, told the police the meeting was peaceful and they would not cause any trouble. At this point, a bomb sailed over his head into the ranks of the police force. The dynamite bomb exploded killing one sergeant immediately and knocking down nearly sixty other officers. After this, total pandemonium broke loose. The police let loose a volley of gunfire into the crowd. It was never determined whether the police or the demonstrators shot first. Testimony in the trial that followed indicated the police panicked, initiated the gunplay, and fired in every direction, including into their own ranks. Regardless of who fired first, the volley of bullets was murderous.

Six policemen died and dozens were injured, some by other panicked police officers. Four demonstrators were also killed and many more were injured. The injured police officers were taken back to the Desplaines station where they were treated. The injured demonstrators were also taken there and placed in the downstairs cell rooms, but not treated until the injured police officers were attended to.

The nation was in shock. Spies, Parsons, and Fielden were accused of throwing the bomb, a ridiculous accusation considering that Parsons had already left the area when the bomb exploded. The media bombarded the nation. For example, "Anarchy's Red Hand!" was the front-page headline in the *New York Times* on May 5, 1886. The American public was furious due to biased and overblown news reports. America wanted these "revolutionaries" to be punished immediately, regardless of the facts.

While the mayor pleaded for calm, police Captain Bonfield and police Inspector Michael Schaak took it upon themselves to find the individuals who had thrown the bomb or the individuals who caused the bomb to be thrown. The officers began a reign of terror in Chicago. All rights were suspended and hundreds of suspects were arrested, beaten, and interrogated at all hours of the night. False confessions were violently extracted from those thought to be anarchists, socialists, communists, or just sympathizers of the labor unions. Whoever threw the bomb was probably never caught and just faded into history. Eventually eight men were brought to trial. Spies, Parsons, and Fielden were among the eight.

All eight were accused of the murder of Mathias Degan, the police sergeant that had been killed by the bomb explosion itself. Even though the identity of the bomb thrower was never known, these men were all to be tried for the murder of Degan. A special bailiff, Henry Ryce, handpicked the jury for the trial. From then on, the lives of the defendants were in serious jeopardy. Ryce was quoted as saying, "I am managing this case, and know what I am about. Those fellows are going to be hanged as certain as death." After many illegal proceedings including false evidence, limiting of the right for the defense to cross-examine, and stacking the witnesses, all of the men except one, Oscar Neebe, were sentenced to death. Neebe was sentenced to 15 years in prison. The nation was ecstatic that these anarchists and perpetrators of violence would die.

After the Illinois Supreme Court upheld the lower court's decision and the U.S. Supreme Court denied their appeal, the defense had to appeal to the state governor. On the day of the executions, one of the defendants committed suicide. Later that day, Governor Harrison commuted the sentences of two of the defendants to life in imprisonment, giving in to the national and worldwide pressure exerted on him. The remaining four men were to be hanged.

Shortly before noon on November 11, 1886, the four were walked to the gallows. They proceed quietly and with dignity. Each was bound by straps and handcuffs, their bodies draped with white shrouds, their heads covered with rough hoods, and their necks in the noose. At the last moment, Spies spoke quietly,

but firmly and said, "There will come a time when our silence will be more powerful than the voices you are going to strangle today!" The four men were immediately hanged without being given further chances to speak. The country had gotten the revenge that it wanted, at the price of human sacrifice and injustice.

The accused perpetrators of the Haymarket Riot were generally hated across America, but, approximately 15,000 people went to the burial of the executed men at Waldheim Cemetery. A monument was later erected there with the last words of August Spies engraved into its base. The eight-hour workday law was passed and the labor movement lived on. The honor of these men was restored when Governor John P. Altgeld fully pardoned all eight of the accused for the jury stacking, lack of sufficient evidence, and illegal rulings on June 26, 1893. The three men serving life sentences were released from prison. The injustice of the rulings handed out during the Haymarket Riot trial was at last shown for what it was. Although the mystery of who threw the bomb was never solved, the event opened the eyes of Americans around the country to the turmoil of the labor movement that was entangling and encompassing America.

The legacy of the Haymarket Riot took many forms. On one side of the issue were the workers themselves. Workers and unions that believed in the principles or goals of the convicted men continued to wage their struggle. The memory of the event became a rallying point for friends of labor and of those who saw economic and political inequity as a fundamental principal worth working toward. Most leaders of organized labor shared the convicted men's concern for working people, but they disagreed with their anarchistic beliefs and had no toleration for bombs and armed confrontation. The harsh punishment handed out to the convicted men made unions have to work doubly hard at increasing their power, because it revealed the extent to which the authorities would go to break the spirit of the workers. On the other side of the issue were the forces of social control. The Haymarket Riot and its aftermath was considered responsible for the stereotyping of radical dissenters of many different kinds as crazed bomb-throwers and enemies of the people. Anyone with unpopular political beliefs would forever be considered as an anarchist. This term now took on the meaning of a dangerously deranged person, who would seek any means to further his cause by doing violence to the public order and the "American way." The bombing initiated restrictions like restricting political radicals, and limiting immigration in the early decades of the twentieth century.

Both sides of the Haymarket Riot's legacy would be recognizable well into the twentieth century. A small event can gain a life of its own. The social fabric of our society is forever being stretched, torn, mended, and used again.

Credit:

Chicago Historical Society Website Online Projects: *The Haymarket Drama*
(<http://www.chicagohs.org/dramas/index.htm>)