Haymarket Riots

Albert Parsons was the leader of the American branch of the International Working People's Association (I.W.P.A.), an anarchist group whose stated goal was to engineer a social revolution that would empower the working class. Parsons himself was a paradox: a Confederate soldier who became a Radical Republican after the Civil War and married a former slave.

August Spies was the editor of the English-language anarchist newspaper, The Alarm. Together, Parsons and Spies addressed the working class German community of Chicago, calling for demonstrations and organizing parades. The I.W.P.A. had, at most, only five thousand members, but its tactics were so confrontational that it had an undue influence.

Demonstrators would snake by the clubs and homes of the elite, or around the Chicago Board of Trade, shouting slogans and waving fists. Articles in the anarchist newspapers explained how to make bombs with dynamite, and editorials supported the assassination of public officials in Europe. On his desk, Spies kept a length of pipe that he claimed was a bomb.

Dynamite had just been invented, and its properties were both exaggerated and feared. It "made one man the equal or an army." Bombs "could be carried around in one's pocket with perfect safety." Many Chicago capitalists anticipated an armed revolution.

In 1886, the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions organized a May Day general strike to demand an eight-hour day. The anarchists saw an opportunity to increase membership and joined the event. Because Chicago had a sympathetic mayor in Carter Harrison, the nationwide movement focused on that city. On May 1st, 80,000 workers lay down their tools and marched up Michigan Avenue behind Spies. Hundreds of private security and militia groups monitored the march, but the day ended peacefully.

Meanwhile, a strike was on at the McCormick Reaper Works. On May 3, strikers attacked scabs leaving the McCormick building. Immediately, two hundred policemen led by Captain "Black Jack" Bonfield attacked the crowd, swinging nightsticks and firing their guns. Two workers were killed.

The anarchists called for a rally the next night at Haymarket Square to protest the deaths. Mayor Harrison had Bonfield and his men stand by, a block from the square. Harrison himself was in the crowd, making himself as conspicuous as possible: "I want the people to know their mayor is here." After Spies and Parsons spoke, rain began to fall, dispersing the crowd. Harrison left the rally, stopping by Bonfield to let him know that the meeting posed no threat.

After Harrison left, however, Bonfield sent in his troops. From somewhere in the crowd, a bomb was thrown in front of the columns of police. When the dust settled, seven police officers were dead and sixty were injured, many of them hit by wild shots from fellow policemen. A like number of civilians were killed and injured, although the number is uncertain because few would admit to being at the rally.

The police rounded up suspicious foreign workers and anarchist leaders. Seven men stood trial for murder. On June 21, they were joined by an eighth -- Parsons himself. He had fled the city after the bombing, but turned himself in to be tried with his comrades. No one had been identified as the bomber, but the eight defendants were tried as accessories to murder based on their inflammatory speeches.

The judge, Joseph E. Gary, allowed men who had already decided on a guilty verdict to sit on the jury. The defense lawyer, William Perkins Black, provided alibis for all eight men. The only two who were at the rally at the time of the bombing had been on stage, in full view of the crowd and police.

The mayor, Carter Harrison, testified that the rally was peaceful and attended by women and children.

The prosecuting attorney, Julius S. Grinnell declared, "Law is on trial. Anarchy is on trial... Gentlemen of the jury, convict these men, make examples of them, hang them and you save our institutions, our society."

The jury reached a verdict in three hours: death by hanging for seven of the men, including Parsons and Spies, 15 years in prison for the eighth, August Neebe.

The wives of the defendants immediately initiated the appeal process. Journalist and reformer Henry Demarest Lloyd led a national campaign to grant clemency. Even bankers like Lyman J. Gage favored clemency, believing that moderation would lead to improved relations between capital and labor. Potter Palmer and Charles Hutchinson were inclined to agree, but Marshall Field was not. A number of other men confided to Gage that they were not willing to publicly disagree with Field, the wealthiest and most powerful businessman in Chicago.

Even Judge Gary wrote to the governor on behalf of the two men, Samuel Fielden and Michael Schwab, who had asked for mercy. Their sentences were commuted to life in prison. Governor Richard J. Oglesby said that he could only pardon the two because the law required each prisoner to ask for clemency.

One of the prisoners, Louis Lingg, had a dynamite cigar smuggled into his cell. He committed suicide in prison, blowing his face off in the process.

On November 11, 1887, the prisoners were brought out to the hangman's platform. Albert Parsons, August Spies, George Engel, and Adolph Fischer stood before the crowd with hoods covering their faces. And then Spies spoke: "The day will come when our silence will be more powerful than the voices you are throttling today."

The trapdoor opened.

In June 1893, a Haymarket monument was unveiled in Chicago's Waldheim Cemetery. That same month Governor John Altgeld unconditionally pardoned Field, Neebe and Schwab because the trial and the conduct of the judge had been shamefully unjust. Even anarchists "were entitled to a fair trial,"the governor declared, "and no greater damage could possibly threaten our institutions than to have the courts of justice run wild or to give way to popular clamor."