

PROQUEST USE CASE

Eugene V. Debs: “Traitor to his Country” and “Modern Messiah”¹

Examining the imprisonment and 1920 presidential candidacy of Eugene V. Debs, Socialist and activist

By Jolie McCarty, History Vault Content Editor

Top image: Eugene V. Debs with his running mate 1920, Seymour Stedman, outside of Atlanta Federal Prison in October 1920. From Socialist Party of America Papers in ProQuest History Vault.



To talk to the sales department, contact us at
1-800-779-0137 or **sales@proquest.com**.



One hundred years ago in the 1920 presidential election, Eugene V. Debs became the first person in U.S. history to run for president while imprisoned. Debs was a well-known labor activist, Socialist, and, at the time, imprisoned for his political beliefs. History Vault's *Socialist Party of America Papers* can be used to examine this fascinating story from several perspectives.



World War I Causes Controversy

Debs' imprisonment was due, in no small part, to dissension over the role of the U. S. in World War I. In April 1917, President Woodrow Wilson encouraged the United States to fully enter World War I, declaring, "The world must be made safe for democracy."² Congress agreed, and on April 6, the United States declared war against Germany.

The United States also ratified the Espionage Act in 1917, which played a part in many interesting and contentious legal battles, Eugene V. Debs' trial among them. The Act was created with World War I in mind, as war with Germany put the loyalty of German Americans and others in question.

Among the Act's provisions was the ability to convict individuals who "... willfully cause or attempt to cause insubordination, disloyalty, mutiny, refusal of duty, in the military or naval forces of the United States" with "a fine of not more than \$10,000 or imprisonment for not more than twenty years, or both."³

However, not all of the United States' citizens endorsed U. S. entry into World War I. Eugene V. Debs, noted 'radical,' Socialist, and activist, was vehemently against the war. On June 16, 1918, while on a speaking tour, Debs gave a rousing speech in Canton, Ohio at the Ohio Socialist Party's annual picnic. Among the statements he made included the following:

They have always taught and trained you to believe it to be 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, have never had a voice in declaring war, and strange as it certainly appears, no war by any nation in any age has ever been declared by the people.⁴

In September, this speech would form the bulk of the evidence against him as he stood trial under the Espionage Act.

Sedition or Free Speech? The Trial of Eugene V. Debs

Debs was an avid anti-war campaigner, and his Canton speech could be construed as a federal offense. However, Debs believed that the Espionage Act itself was unconstitutional, and he rested his defense on this. History Vault's *Socialist Party of America Papers* has significant documentation of the trial, with pamphlets on the trial and transcripts of Debs' courtroom defense.

In the courtroom, he defended himself:

I believe in the right of free speech, in war as well as in peace. I would not, under any circumstances, gag the lips of my bitterest enemy. I would under no circumstances suppress free speech. It is far more dangerous to attempt to gag the people than to allow them to speak freely of what is in their hearts. [...] If the Espionage law finally stands, then the Constitution of the United States is dead. If that law is not the negation of every fundamental principle established by the Constitution, then certainly I am unable to read or to understand the English language.⁵

In *Democracy's Prisoner: Eugene V. Debs, the Great War, and the Right to Dissent*, historian Ernest Freeberg describes the question of the trial as this: "What the jury had to determine, then, was what Debs intended when he spoke in Canton. Was he simply sharing his political views with his fellow citizens, or did he mean to encourage men to avoid the draft? Was he simply providing useful information on an important public issue, or was he inciting his followers to break the law?"⁶

Debs was ultimately sentenced to ten years in prison.

1. Socialist Party of America biography, undated, in *Socialist Party of America Papers Addendum, 1919-1976*, ProQuest History Vault Socialist Party of America Records, Folder ID: 201902-001-156 (pg. 3); Ned A. Bush Sr., "In Memoriam," undated, in *Socialist Party of America Papers, 1897-1964*, ProQuest History Vault Socialist Party of America Records, Folder ID: 201901-137-1115 (pg. 2). Note: The Socialist Party references Woodrow Wilson's reference to Debs as "traitor to his country" in the Biography. Ned A. Bush Sr. refers to Debs as a "modern messiah" in his piece, "In Memoriam."
2. ProQuest Congressional Insight, Address of President to Congress, April 2, 1917, asking for declaration of war against Germany.
3. ProQuest Congressional Insight, Espionage Act, Public Law 65-24 [H.R. 291]. https://congressional.proquest.com/congressional/docview/t41.d42.65_pl_24?accountid=131239.
4. Eugene V. Debs speech, June 16, 1918, in *Socialist Party of America Papers, 1897-1964*, ProQuest History Vault Socialist Party of America Records, Folder ID: 201901-136-1021 (pg. 12).
5. Eugene V. Debs courtroom speech, September 14, 1918, in *Socialist Party of America Papers, 1897-1964*, ProQuest History Vault Socialist Party of America Records, Folder ID: 201901-136-1004 (pg. 6).
6. Freeberg, pg. 104.

His lawyers brought the case to the Supreme Court, once more arguing the unconstitutional nature of the Espionage Act. In March the Supreme Court unanimously confirmed the guilty verdict. Debs would go to prison.

And thus, Debs' statement at Canton that "I would rather a thousand times be a free soul in jail than to be a sycophant and coward in the streets" proved prophetic.⁷ It is, of course, quite possible that Debs went into this speech knowing that he would be arrested for its contents, and fully intending to go to court and even to prison to emphasize the wrongness of the law.⁸

Presidential Candidate and Convict No. 9653: Debs' 1920 Election Campaign

Debs' incarceration did not stop the Socialist Party of America from nominating—and to great applause—Eugene V. Debs for President of the United States. This was the fifth and final time Debs ran for President. Records of the 1920 Socialist Party National Convention can be found in History Vault's *Socialist Party of America Papers*.

Imprisonment also did not stop Eugene V. Debs from accepting the presidential nomination or from campaigning as best as he was able, from jail. In his book, *Walls and Bars*, which is included in the *Socialist Party of America Party Papers* in ProQuest History Vault, Debs admits to feeling somewhat reluctant about running, writing that he "at first positively declined to be considered a candidate," but that ultimately, he "yielded to the wishes of the delegates."⁹

His campaign work was limited. During the campaign, the attorney general permitted him to issue a weekly statement of 500 words. Debs sent these statements through the mail to his home in Terre Haute, where they were typed and sent onward to the headquarters of the Socialist Party of America. The party then distributed these messages to press associations and party newspapers. Debs writes, "In this manner the convict candidate's messages were given a wide and oftentimes sympathetic reading."¹⁰ Some of Debs' communications from prison as well as the Socialist Party's official platform are available in the *Socialist Party of America Papers*.

In response, Debs received letters and the occasional visitor.

No one, Debs most of all, expected a victory in the 1920 election. Debs received 3.5 percent of the vote, or approximately 919,000 votes. He writes that, "the sincere regret expressed the following

DEBS' ARGUMENT TO THE JURY

May it please the court, and gentlemen of the jury:

For the first time in my life I appear before a jury in a court of law to answer to an indictment for crime. I am not a lawyer. I know little about court procedure, about the rules of evidence or legal practice. I know only that you gentlemen are to hear the evidence brought against me, that the court is to instruct you in the law, and that you are then to determine by your verdict whether I shall be branded with criminal guilt and be consigned, perhaps to the end of my life, in a felon's cell.

Gentlemen, I do not fear to face you

day by my prison mates that I had not been transferred from Atlanta to Washington by the American people would have compensated me for any disappointment I might have felt over the conduct of the campaign and its final results."¹¹

A Christmas Present for the Nation: Eugene V. Debs' Release from Prison

Throughout Eugene V. Debs' three years in prison, people campaigned for his release. Upton Sinclair, Mae West, and Katherine Richards O'Hara (after her release for prison under the same Espionage Act) were among those who campaigned for his release. History Vault's *Socialist Party of America Papers* includes extensive documentation of the campaign to free Debs and other political prisoners.

Woodrow Wilson complained to his secretary in private that "While the flower of American youth was pouring out its blood to vindicate the cause of civilization, this man, Debs, stood behind the lines, sniping, attacking, and denouncing them. [...] This man was a traitor to his country and he will never be pardoned during my administration."¹²

7. Eugene V. Debs Canton speech, June 16, 1918, in *Socialist Party of America Papers, 1897-1964*, ProQuest History Vault Socialist Party of America Records, Folder ID: 201901-136-1073 (pg. 9).

8. Ernest Freeberg, *Democracy's Prisoner: Eugene V. Debs, the Great War, and the Right to Dissent*, Harvard University Press, 2008, pg. 68-69.

9. Eugene V. Debs, *Walls and Bars*, 1927, in *Socialist Party of America Papers, 1897-1964*, ProQuest History Vault Socialist Party of America Records, Folder ID 201901-136-1289 (pg. 57).

10. Eugene V. Debs, *Walls and Bars*, 1927, in *Socialist Party of America Papers, 1897-1964*, ProQuest History Vault Socialist Party of America Records, Folder ID: 201901-136-1292 (pg. 60).

11. Eugene V. Debs, *Walls and Bars*, 1927, in *Socialist Party of America Papers, 1897-1964*, ProQuest History Vault Socialist Party of America Records, Folder ID: 201901-136-1293, (pg. 61).

12. Joseph P. Tumulty, *Woodrow Wilson as I Know Him*, Doubleday, Page & Co., 1921, pg. 505. <https://search.proquest.com/docview/58012048/22E95A38C7F84EF6PQ/1?accountid=131239>

After Warren G. Harding was elected, Bertha Hale White, Director of the Amnesty Campaign at Washington, presented a petition asking for Debs released, which was signed by more than 30,000 people. In this petition, she asked for Debs to be released as "a Christmas gift to the Nation."¹³

On Christmas Day, 1921, President Warren G. Harding released Eugene V. Debs and several other political prisoners from prison. Harding's decision to release Debs cannot be explained merely by courtesy. World War I was over, and President Woodrow Wilson had finished his eight years. The release of Debs coincided with a call to the nation to return to normalcy, symbolically moving away from World War I and its concerns.

Debs served nearly three years in prison.

He wrote about his exit: "As the noon hour approached the Warden and Deputy Warden called to inform me that the time had come for me to take my leave. [...] For a moment I was rooted to the spot and shaken with emotion. I felt as if I was deserting my friends and a sense of guilt gripped my conscience. I could see their anxious eyes peering at me from all directions, and how could I turn my back on them and leave them there!"¹⁴

Debs lived another five years, dying in 1926. However, his legacy would live on.

The Socialist Party of America wrote about him extensively, including the following compliments:

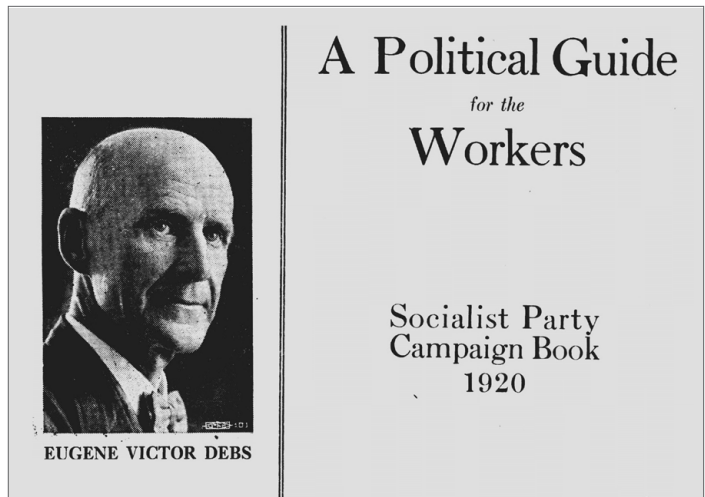
"Oh, how he was hated by those clinging insecurely to power and wealth, by the pompous, by the status-seeking, by the money-grubbing, by conservatives and by the Big Business press which ritualistically terrified their gullible readers with frantic denunciations of that 'red,' that radical, that labor agitator, that strike leader who would destroy private property, the most sacred of all the icons in the temple of America."¹⁵

The story of Eugene V. Debs's imprisonment and 1920 presidential campaign is just one of many episodes that researchers can investigate in the Socialist Party of America Papers. Like Debs, Victor Berger was arrested and tried for violating the Espionage Act of 1917 and records from the Berger trial can be found in the collection. Other topics that researchers can explore in the Socialist Party of America Papers include the Socialist Party's response to the Great Depression and the New Deal; internal disputes within the party; Norman Thomas's leadership of the Socialist Party; role of women in the Socialist Party; role of 3rd

13. National Office Socialist Party, *Debs and the War*, undated, in Socialist Party of America Papers, 1897-1964, ProQuest History Vault Socialist Party of America Records, Folder ID 201901-136-1042 (pg. 33).

14. Eugene V. Debs, *Walls and Bars*, 1927, in Socialist Party of America Papers, 1897-1964, ProQuest History Vault Socialist Party of America Records, Folder ID: 201901-136-1303 (pg. 71).

15 Socialist Party of America biography, undated, in Socialist Party of America Papers Addendum, 1919-1976, ProQuest History Vault Socialist Party of America Records, Folder ID: 201902-001-0156 (pg. 3).



parties in American politics; the Party's efforts on behalf of civil rights for Black Americans, especially in the 1940s through 1960s; and the evolution of the Party in the 1960s and 1970s.

Researchers interested in the Socialist Party and the American Left can find relevant documentation in other History Vault modules. *Workers, Labor Unions, and the American Left in the 20th Century* includes material on the prosecution strategy in the case of U.S. v. Eugene Debs and Department of Justice and U.S. Military investigations of the Industrial Workers of the World. *Labor Unions in the U.S., 1862-1974: Knights of Labor, AFL, CIO, and AFL-CIO* includes the papers of Adolph Germer who was involved with the Socialist Party early in his career. The Papers of Socialist Party members A. Philp Randolph and Bayard Rustin can be found in History Vault's *Black Freedom Struggle in the 20th Century: Organizational Records and Personal Papers, Part 1*.

ProQuest's E-Book Central can also be a useful tool for researchers. Titles on the Socialist Party include H. Wayne Morgan's 2019 *Eugene V. Debs: Socialist for President*, Ernest Freeberg's 2008 *Democracy's Prisoner: Eugene V. Debs, the Great War, and the Right to Dissent*, and Jack Ross's 2015 *The Socialist Party of America: A Complete History*. Ross's book is particularly notable for its coverage of the Socialist Party after World War II, a period that has received less attention from historians. Finally, researchers might investigate the Socialist Party's relationship with the Communist Party by using the Socialist Party Papers in History Vault together with the American Communist Historical Newspapers that are available in the ProQuest Historical Newspapers collection.



proquest.com

To talk to the sales department, contact us at
1-800-779-0137 or **sales@proquest.com**.

