# *The following excerpt is taken from a July 2019 Carnegie Council podcast entitled "*[*The Crack Up: Eugene Debs & the Origins of Socialism in the U.S., with Maurice Isserman.*](https://www.carnegiecouncil.org/studio/multimedia/20190708-crack-up-eugene-debs-origins-socialism-usa-maurice-isserman)*” The podcast is based off* The New York Times *opinion piece “*[*America’s Original Socialist*](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/20/opinion/americas-original-socialist.html)*” written by historian* [*Maurice Isserman*](https://www.hamilton.edu/academics/our-faculty/directory/faculty-detail/maurice-isserman)*. This transcript has been edited for classroom use.*

…The Socialist Party in the Debsian era, from 1900 through the First World War, was very much oriented towards electoral politics. It put forth its own candidates at every level… There were revolutionaries—[or] people who thought of themselves as revolutionaries—in the Socialist Party, but they didn't conceive of revolution as something that was going to happen in one fell swoop on the later model of the Bolshevik Revolution…

This was a movement committed to legal democratic (small D) forms of advancing their program. Of course, that vision comes under severe stress when the First World War breaks out, when the United States in 1917 enters into the First World War… Early in the war the government passes something called the Espionage Act, which sounds like it's going to punish people who spy on behalf of the enemy, [which is] the definition of espionage. But really it was a measure designed to punish those who opposed the war effort in any way—in public speeches, in writings, and so forth.

For one thing, it was used to suppress the Socialist press. Much of the Socialist press was printed in big cities and sent out by the mails, and the U.S. postmaster, citing the Espionage Act, basically shut down the Socialist press, because it expressed anti-war views. Anti-war magazines, like *The Masses*, which was published in Greenwich Village was shut down and its editors were tried for violation of the Espionage Act. Individual Socialists at the state level were tried and convicted.

1. What was the Espionage Act?

2. Was the Espionage Act a violation of civil liberties or a justified wartime measure? Explain.

3. Socialism was a “terrifying” word in the early and mid-20th century because of the Bolshevik Revolution and Cold War. Do you think “socialism” is still feared in the 21st century? Explain.