

The Haymarket Affair, 1886

Introduction

The Haymarket Affair is considered a watershed moment for American labor history, at a time when fears about the loyalties and activities of immigrants, anarchists, and laborers became linked in the minds of many Americans.

On May 3, 1886, unarmed strikers clashed with police at Chicago's McCormick Reaper Works factory. The deaths of six workers became a call for direct action, and a public rally was called for the following day to be held in Haymarket Square. Again, the police and the strikers clashed, but this time a bomb was thrown, resulting in the death of seven policemen and many in the crowd were injured. The police, uncertain about the source of the bomb, fired into the crowd, killing four of the demonstrators.

The identity of the bomb thrower is still a mystery, but eight men were indicted on charges of conspiracy to commit the act. All eight were convicted of the conspiracy charge even though it was understood none had made or thrown the bomb. August Spies, a German anarchist, laborer, and activist, and Albert Parsons, a socialist laborer, activist, and former Confederate soldier from Texas, had been among the fiery and well-known speakers at the rally. Spies and Parsons, along with Adolph Fischer and George Engel, were executed by hanging. Louis Lingg, the fifth condemned to die, managed to commit suicide while awaiting his sentence by biting down on a blasting cap in his cell. Three other defendants, Samuel Fielden, Oscar Neebe, and Michael Schwab, were sentenced to prison terms, but were pardoned in 1893.

Dyer D. Lum, a close confidant of the strikers and a well-known author and editor of anarchist texts, compiled *A Concise History of the Great Trial of the Chicago Anarchists in 1886*, which carries his contemporary view that the eight men were victims of an inquisition to weed out and destroy labor activism:

The eight social heretics of Chicago who dared to defend their beliefs when tried for an act, of which it was openly admitted they were not personally guilty, have challenged the attention of the world and the admiration of the oppressed of all lands.

Questions for Discussion

Read the introduction and read the Preface to the book. Then apply your knowledge of American history to answer the following questions:

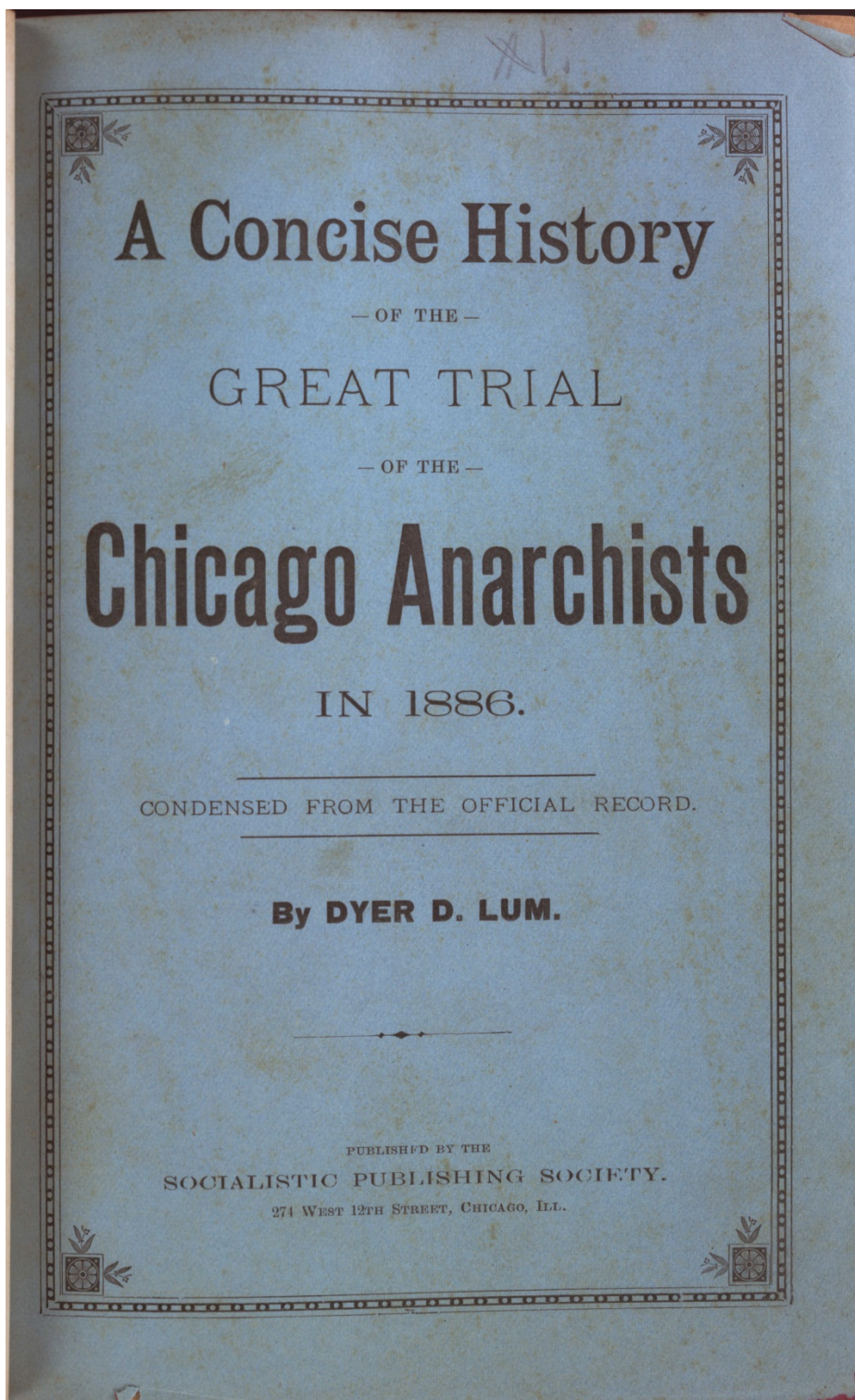
1. Describe the events at Haymarket Square which led to the arrest and trial of eight men.
2. Why are the events at Haymarket Square linked with American labor history?

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3. Define *anarchist* and *heretic*.
4. Why would Dyer D. Lum sympathize with the men put on trial following the events at Haymarket Square? Why did he also refer to them as “social heretics”?
5. Explain why Lum claimed that the “oppressed of all the lands” would be vitally interested in the trial of the “Chicago Anarchists”?
6. How did Lum attempt to develop a connection between past examples of religious intolerance and conflict between “Capital and Labor” in the late 1900s?

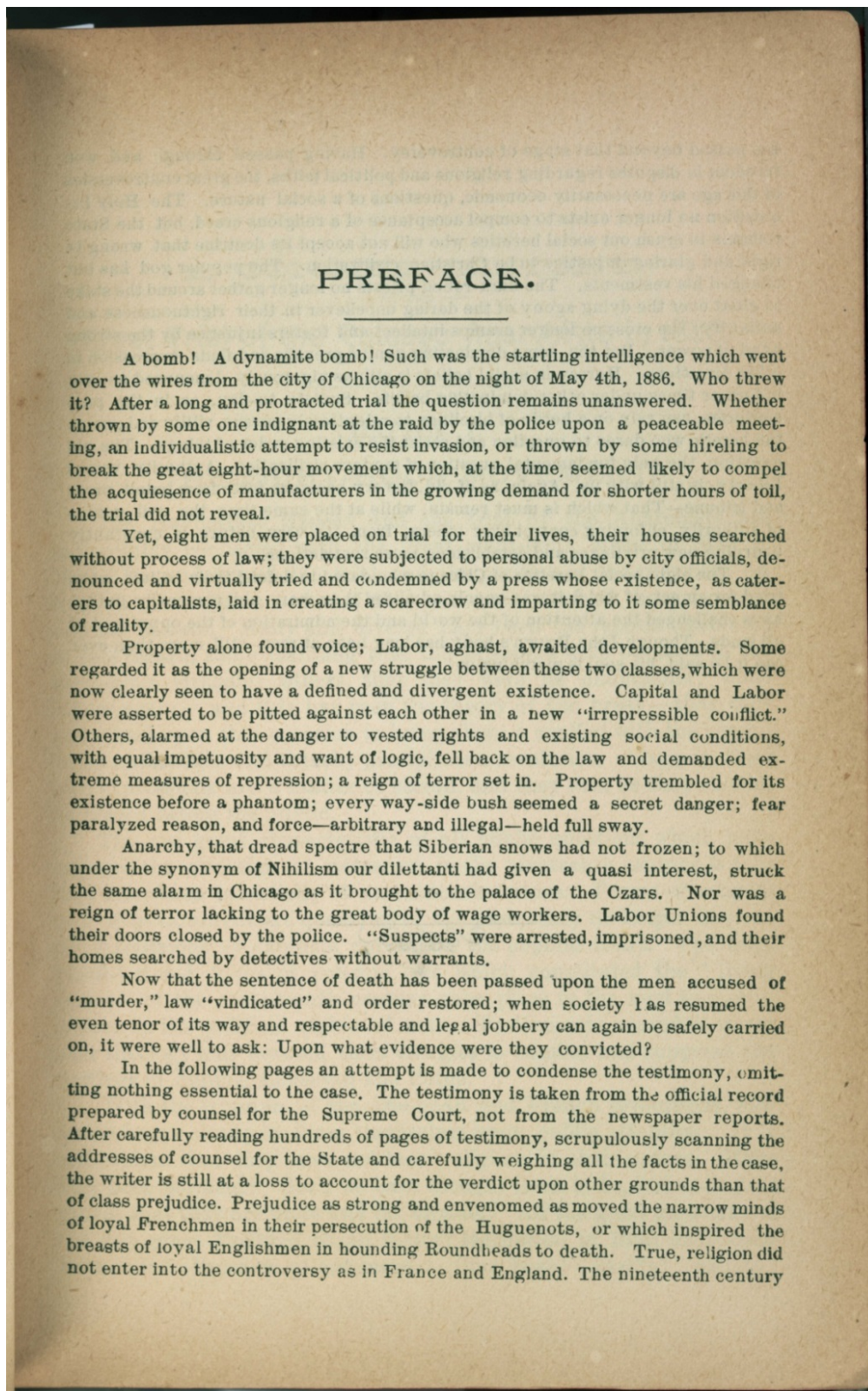
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Image



Dyer D. Lum, *A Concise History of the Great Trial of the Chicago Anarchists in 1886* (Chicago: Socialistic Publishing Society, [1886]), Title Page. (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC05640)

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PREFACE.

A bomb! A dynamite bomb! Such was the startling intelligence which went over the wires from the city of Chicago on the night of May 4th, 1886. Who threw it? After a long and protracted trial the question remains unanswered. Whether thrown by some one indignant at the raid by the police upon a peaceable meeting, an individualistic attempt to resist invasion, or thrown by some hireling to break the great eight-hour movement which, at the time, seemed likely to compel the acquiescence of manufacturers in the growing demand for shorter hours of toil, the trial did not reveal.

Yet, eight men were placed on trial for their lives, their houses searched without process of law; they were subjected to personal abuse by city officials, denounced and virtually tried and condemned by a press whose existence, as caterers to capitalists, laid in creating a scarecrow and imparting to it some semblance of reality.

Property alone found voice; Labor, aghast, awaited developments. Some regarded it as the opening of a new struggle between these two classes, which were now clearly seen to have a defined and divergent existence. Capital and Labor were asserted to be pitted against each other in a new "irrepressible conflict." Others, alarmed at the danger to vested rights and existing social conditions, with equal impetuosity and want of logic, fell back on the law and demanded extreme measures of repression; a reign of terror set in. Property trembled for its existence before a phantom; every way-side bush seemed a secret danger; fear paralyzed reason, and force—arbitrary and illegal—held full sway.

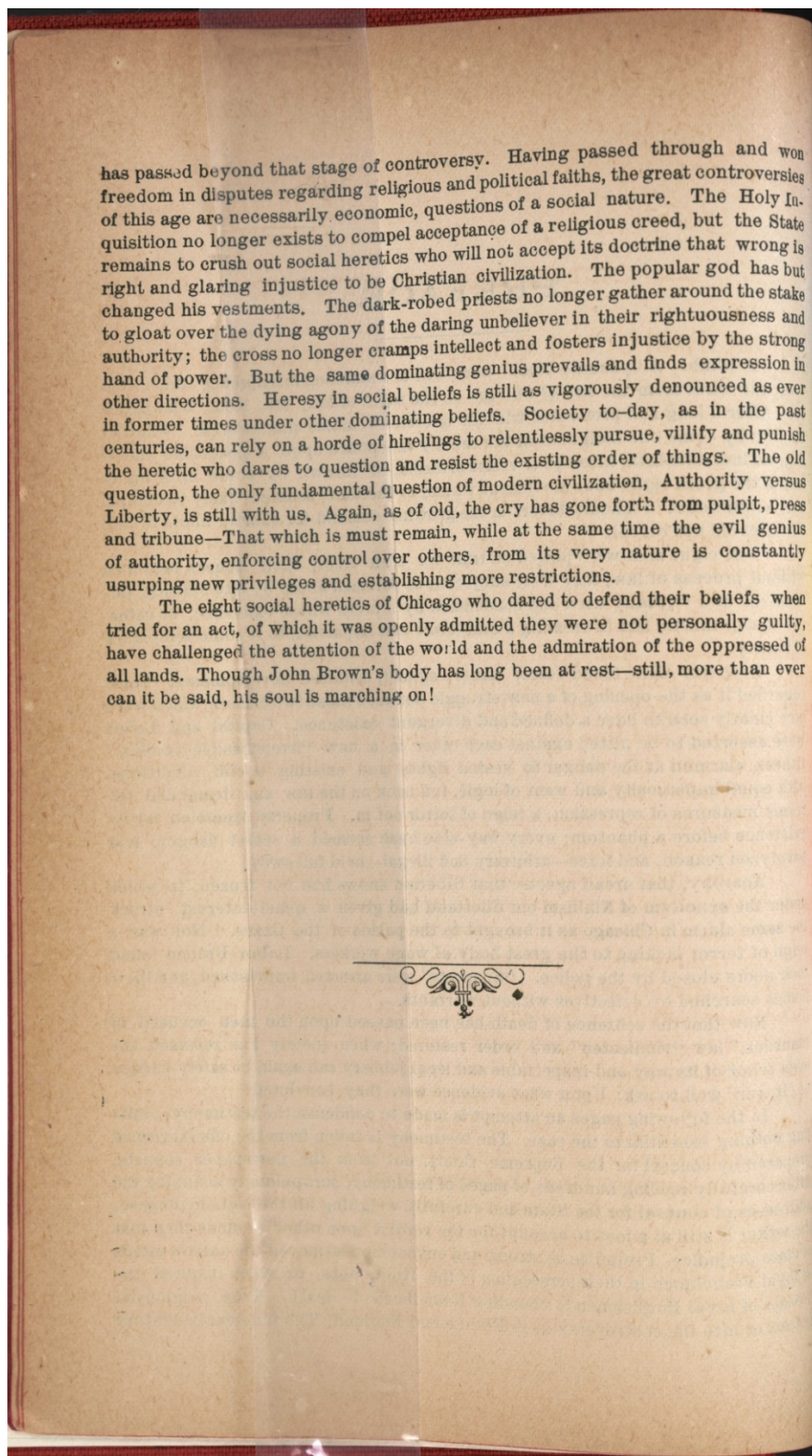
Anarchy, that dread spectre that Siberian snows had not frozen; to which under the synonym of Nihilism our dilettanti had given a quasi interest, struck the same alarm in Chicago as it brought to the palace of the Czars. Nor was a reign of terror lacking to the great body of wage workers. Labor Unions found their doors closed by the police. "Suspects" were arrested, imprisoned, and their homes searched by detectives without warrants.

Now that the sentence of death has been passed upon the men accused of "murder," law "vindicated" and order restored; when society has resumed the even tenor of its way and respectable and legal jobbery can again be safely carried on, it were well to ask: Upon what evidence were they convicted?

In the following pages an attempt is made to condense the testimony, omitting nothing essential to the case. The testimony is taken from the official record prepared by counsel for the Supreme Court, not from the newspaper reports. After carefully reading hundreds of pages of testimony, scrupulously scanning the addresses of counsel for the State and carefully weighing all the facts in the case, the writer is still at a loss to account for the verdict upon other grounds than that of class prejudice. Prejudice as strong and envenomed as moved the narrow minds of loyal Frenchmen in their persecution of the Huguenots, or which inspired the breasts of loyal Englishmen in hounding Roundheads to death. True, religion did not enter into the controversy as in France and England. The nineteenth century

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