

# *How a “Red” is Made*

Robert Benchley



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## **OVERVIEW**

During the "Red Scare" of 1919–1920, the United States government arrested many political and labor agitators and deported immigrants, many of whom had become American citizens. Humorist Robert Benchley's view of the situation produced the following satirical piece on the "Red Menace," which was first published in the *Nation* on March 15, 1919.

**GUIDED READING** As you read, consider the following questions:

- At whom is the author poking fun?
  - How does this story exaggerate the government's fear of communism?
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**Y**OU COULDN'T HAVE ASKED for anyone more regular than Peters. He was an eminently safe citizen. Although not rich himself, he never chafed under the realization that there were others who possessed great wealth. In fact, the thought gave him rather a comfortable feeling. Furthermore, he was one of the charter members of the war. Long before President Wilson saw the light, Peters was advocating the abolition of German from the public-school curriculum. There was, therefore, absolutely nothing in his record which would in the slightest degree alter the true blue of a patriotic litmus. And he considered himself a liberal when he admitted that there might be something in this man Gompers [Samuel Gompers, labor leader], after all. That is how safe he was.

But one night he made a slip. . . . Shortly before the United States entered the war, Peters made a speech at a meeting of the Civic League in his home town. His subject was: "Interurban Highways: Their Development in the Past and Their Possibilities for the Future." So far, 100 percent American. But, in the course of his talk, he happened to mention the fact that war, as an institution, has almost always had an injurious effect on public improvements of all kinds. In fact (and note this well—the government's sleuth in the audience did) he said that, all other things being equal, if he were given his choice of war or peace in the abstract, he would choose peace as a condition under which to live. Then he went on to discuss the comparative values of macadam and wood blocks for paving.

In the audience was a civilian representative of the Military Intelligence Service. He had a premonition that some sort of attempt was going to be made at this meeting of the Civic League to discredit the war and America's imminent participation there in. And he was not disappointed (no Military

Intelligence sleuth ever is), for in the remark of Peters, derogatory to war as an institution, his sharp ear detected the accent of the Wilhelmstrasse.

Time went by. The United States entered the war, and Peters bought Liberty Bonds. He didn't join the Army, it is true, but, then, neither did James M. Beck, and it is an open secret that Mr. Beck was for the war. Peters did what a few slangy persons called "his bit," and not without a certain amount of pride. But he did not . . . know that there was an investigation going on in Washington to determine the uses to which German propaganda money had been put. That is, he didn't know it until he opened his newspaper one morning and, with that uncanny precipitation with which a man's eye lights on his own name, discovered that he had been mentioned in the dispatches. . . .

### PRO-GERMAN LIST BARED

BY ARMY SLEUTH

Prominent Obstructionists

Named at Senate Probe

And then came the list. Peters' eye ran instinctively down to the place where . . . the name "Horace W. Peters, Pacifist Lecturer, Matriculated at Germantown (Pa.) Military School." Above his name was that of Emma Goldman, "Anarchist." Below came that of Fritz von Papen, "agent of the Imperial German Government in America," and Jeremiah O'Leary, "Irish and Pro-German Agitator."

Peters was stunned. He telegraphed to his senator at Washington and demanded that the outrageous libel be retracted. He telegraphed to the Military Intelligence office and demanded to know who was the slanderer who had traduced him, and who . . . this Captain Whatsisname was who had submitted the report. He telegraphed to Secretary Baker and he cabled to the President. And he was informed, by return stagecoach, that his telegrams had been received and would be brought to the attention of the addressees at the earliest possible moment.

Then he went out to look up some of his friends, to explain that there had been a terrible mistake somewhere. But he was coolly received. No one could afford to be seen talking with him after what had happened. His partner merely said: "Bad business, Horace. Bad business!" The elevator starter pointed him out to a subordinate, and Peters heard him explain: "That's Peters, Horace W. Peters. Did'je see his name in the papers this morning with them other German spies?" At the club, little groups of his friends dissolved awkwardly when they saw him approaching, and, after distant nods, disappeared in an aimless manner. After all, you could hardly blame them.

The next morning the *Tribune* had a double-leaded editorial entitled "Oatmeal," in which it was stated that the disclosures in Washington were revealing the most insidious of all kinds of German propaganda—that disseminated by supposedly respectable American citizens. "It is not a tangible propaganda. It is an emotional propaganda. To the unwary it may resemble

real-estate news, or perhaps a patriotic song, but it is the pap of Prussianism. As an example, we need go no further than Horace W. Peters. Mr. Peters' hobby was interurban highways. A very pretty hobby, Mr. Peters, but it won't do. It won't do." The *Times* ran an editorial saying, somewhere in the midst of a solid slab of type, that no doubt it would soon be found that Mr. Peters nourished Bolshevist sentiments, along with his teammate Emma Goldman. Emma Goldman! How Peters hated that woman! He had once written a letter to this very paper about her, advocating her electrocution.

He dashed out again in a search of someone to whom he could explain. But the editorials had done their work. The doorman at the club presented him with a letter from the House Committee saying that, at a special meeting, it had been decided that he had placed himself in a position offensive to the loyal members of the club and that it was with deep regret that they informed him, etc. As he stumbled out into the street, he heard someone whisper to an out-of-town friend, "There goes Emma Goldman's husband."

As the days went by, things grew unbelievably worse. He was referred to in public meetings whenever an example of civic treachery was in order. A signed advertisement in the newspapers protesting . . . against the spread of Bolshevism in northern New Jersey, mentioned a few prominent snakes in the grass, such as Trotzky, Victor Berger, Horace W. Peters, and Emma Goldman.

Then something snapped. Peters began to let his hair grow long and neglected his linen. Each time he was snubbed on the street he uttered a queer guttural sound and made a mark in a little book he carried about with him. He bought a copy of "Colloquial Russian at a Glance," and began picking out inflammatory sentences from the *Novy Mir*. His wife packed up and went to stay with her sister when he advocated, one night at dinner, the communization of women. The last prop of respectability having been removed, the descent was easy. Emma Goldman, was it? Very well, then, Emma Goldman it should be! Bolshevist, was he? They had said it! "After all, who is to blame for this?" he mumbled to himself. "Capitalism! Militarism! Those Prussians in the Intelligence Department and the Department of Justice! The damnable *bourgeoisie* who sit back and read their *Times* and their *Tribune* and believe what they read there!" He had tried explanations. He had tried argument. There was only one thing left. He found it on page 112 of a little book of Emma Goldman's that he always carried around with him.

You may have read about Peters the other day. He was arrested, wearing a red shirt over his business cutaway and carrying enough TNT to shift the Palisades back into the Hackensack marshes. He was identified by an old letter in his pocket from Henry Cabot Lodge Republican thanking him for a telegram of congratulation Peters had once sent him on the occasion of a certain speech in the Senate.

The next morning the *Times* said, editorially, that it hoped the authorities now saw that the only way to crush Bolshevism was by the unrelenting use of force.