

Fighting for Civil Rights

The ACLU

During World War I, many Americans faced threats to their basic civil liberties. These liberties included the freedom of expression, equality before the law, and due process. During World War I, many people were arrested and put in jail for speaking out in opposition to the war. Others were imprisoned because they evaded the draft and refused to serve in the war. The Sedition Act of 1918 made it illegal to publicly express opposition to the war. This allowed government officials to prosecute anyone who criticized the president or the government. After the war, the Palmer Raids arrested thousands of people who were suspected of planning a revolution against the government. Many were held for long periods of time even though there was little evidence against them. Many were not allowed to have a lawyer. Many immigrants were deported without a trial or hearing. In other cases, immigrants like Sacco and Vanzetti were convicted of crimes mainly because of their political beliefs and ethnic background.

To fight these violations of civil rights, various groups formed the American Civil Liberties Union or ACLU. Its main purpose was to defend Constitutional rights. Lawyers who worked for the ACLU challenged laws that violated peoples' right to free speech and free expression. They fought against the Palmer raids and supplied lawyers free of charge to those who had been arrested. The ACLU provided the lawyers who defended Sacco and Vanzetti. The ACLU also supported the rights of labor unions to go on strike and defended the right of citizens to criticize the government.

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

Throughout the South and other parts of the United States, African-Americans continued to be denied their civil rights. Even though the Constitution guaranteed the right of African-Americans to vote, state laws continued to make it difficult for Blacks to vote. African-Americans often had to pass difficult literacy tests or pay poll taxes in order vote. Even then, some White officials simply refused to register African-Americans. Many African-Americans who tried to register to vote often faced violent attacks in response. African-Americans also continued to face segregation laws. These laws created separate facilities for Blacks and Whites. African-Americans had to go to separate public schools, drink from separate drinking fountains, and sit in the back of public busses. Such facilities were supposed to be "separate but equal", but they were rarely equal for Blacks. Black schools, for example, only received 1/10th the funding of White schools. African-Americans in the South also faced violence in the form of lynching. Groups like the K.K.K. would use lynching to terrorize Blacks who tried to fight back against segregation laws. Members of the Ku Klux Klan would kidnap Blacks from their homes, take them into the woods, and hang them. Even though it was often well known who was responsible for these murders, lynching was rarely prosecuted.

In response to these problems, a Black leader named W.E.B. Du Bois and 28 others formed a group called the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in 1909. The NAACP's primary goal was to get the federal government to pass tougher anti-lynching laws and punish those responsible. The also worked to get more African-Americans to register to vote. W.E.B. Du Bois and others believed that there could be no lasting change for African-Americans unless they could vote. The NAACP also fought for integration and improvement in the economic and political position of African Americans. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, lawyers for NAACP sued in federal court to allow African Americans to attend colleges and universities. They also sued to get equal funding for Black schools and equal pay for Black teachers.

Marcus Garvey

Other groups took a different approach to the problems faced by African-Americans. These groups emphasized black nationalism and black pride. Some began to call for black separation from white society.

One of these black nationalist leaders was Marcus Garvey. Marcus Garvey was born in Jamaica but lived in Harlem, New York. He took a more radical approach than the NAACP and focused on black pride. He called for "Negro Nationalism", which glorified black culture and traditions of the past. Garvey founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). The organization's goal was to promote black pride and unity. Garvey believed that African Americans could gain economic and political power by educating themselves. He also called for separation and independence from whites. He also believed that African Americans should return to Africa and create their own nation there. He called this "the Back to Africa" movement. He believed that only by forming their own nation and government could blacks be free from white oppression.

Anti-Defamation League

Jews were another group that had their civil and constitutional rights threatened in the 1920s. Jews often faced religious and racial discrimination. Some employers would not hire Jews and some landlords would not rent to Jewish tenants. Russian Jewish immigrants were often linked with communism and labor unrest. Jews, along with other groups, were targeted by the new Ku Klux Klan during the 1920s.

In response to these threats, a Jewish lawyer named Sigmund Livingston founded the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) in 1913. This organization fought to protect civil rights and civil liberties for Jews. They worked against the Ku Klux Klan. The ADL also fought discrimination in housing, employment, and education.