Nancy Pope, "Postal Censorship of the Press during World War I"

During the First World War the biggest challenge to freedom of speech was the Post Office Department. Armed with the Espionage and Trading with the Enemy Acts, Postmaster General Albert Burleson sought to squelch socialism through restricting access to the nation’s primary communication medium – the mail. Postmasters were charged with rooting out any challenge to the war in publications that passed through their doors. What they sought, however, was a mystery to editors and publishers, even if where they found it was less of a surprise. Wilson had begun the war with a challenge to Americans to watch for dangers from the German American community, but its papers went unchallenged for the first months of the war while socialist and pacifist, and pro-Irish and African-American publications were regularly pulled from the mails for undisclosed violations. The few who have written on this topic rely on a number of 400 papers deemed nonmailable during the war, quoting a 1941 poorly cited article that relied on a suspect memo. No in-depth research has been made on this statistic until now. More than 2,760 publications were brought to the attention of the Postmaster General during the war, of which 265 were declared nonmailable in some manner. The massive censorship of the American socialist press swept up not just the 265 nonmailable publications, but the thousands pulled repeatedly for days or weeks from the mails for “determination,” ensuring that subscribers received issues late, if at all. Many publications were repeatedly stuck in these bureaucratic black holes. The constant harassment helped reduce the socialist party to a shadow of its former self by the end of the war.