

Commission of Public Safety

America's entry into World War I created a climate of fear of "otherness" and suspicion about the allegiance of those who expressed reservations about joining in a conflict that was not of our making. Minnesota's long-established German population was not spared from the frenzy of anti-German feeling that swept the nation. German citizens who expressed any hesitancy about having to fight against Germans risked being seen as disloyal. Who were the enemies among us? Not only the Germans, but all immigrants, those who spoke a foreign language, those who belonged to unions and supported strikes and those who belonged to suspect organizations such as the [Nonpartisan League](#) or the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). "Patriotism" became a powerful political weapon, legitimized by the creation by the Minnesota Legislature of the Commission of Public Safety, whose excessive jurisdictional latitude allowed for unbounded control and trampling of civil rights. The Alien Registration Act of 1918 required all aliens to register, to declare their holdings, and to state why they had not become citizens. Foreign language instruction was discontinued in many schools. Foreign language speakers were disparaged as unpatriotic. It was a dark chapter in the history of a state renowned as progressive.



GET STARTED WITH SECONDARY SOURCES:

- **Civil Liberties in Minnesota, World War One Period**, by Willis H. Raff.
M.A. thesis (University of Minnesota), 1950.
MHS call number: JK 6189 .R34.
- **"Conflict in the Classroom: Anti-Germanism in Minnesota Schools, 1917-19,"** by La Vern J. Rippley.
In [Minnesota History](#), vol. 47, no. 5 (spring 1981): pp. 170-183.
MHS call number: Reading Room F 601.5 .M66 v.47:5, or view an [electronic version of the article \(PDF\)](#).
- **"Loyalty As a Political Weapon: The 1918 Campaign in Minnesota,"** by Carol Jenson.
In [Minnesota History](#), vol. 43, no. 2 (summer 1972): pp. 42-57.
MHS call number: Reading Room F 601.5 .M66 v.43:2, or view an [electronic version of the article \(PDF\)](#).
- **The Minnesota Commission of Public Safety and the Peace Movement in Minnesota, 1917**, by Allen H. Gibas.
Honors paper (Macalester College), 1967.
MHS call number: D 570.8 .C8 M653.
- **"The Minnesota Commission of Public Safety in World War I, 1917-1919,"** by Ora A. Hilton.
In Bulletin of the Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College, vol. 48, no. 14.
MHS call number: D 570.8 .C8 M65 1919h.
- **The Minnesota Commission of Public Safety in World War One: Its Formation and Activities**, by Charles S. Ward.
M.A. thesis (University of Minnesota), 1965.
MHS call number: D 570.8 .C8 M658.
- **"A Minnesota Pacifist During World War I: The Ordeal of S.A. Stockwell,"** by William P. Everts.
In Hennepin History, vol.55, no. 4 (autumn 1996): pp. 4-21.
MHS call number: Reading Room F 612 .H52 H42 v.55:4.
- **New Ulm and World War I**, by Martin Henry Steffel.
M.A. thesis (Mankato State College), 1966.
MHS call number: D 570.85 .M61 N478 1966.
- **Patriotic Pressures WWI: The Dutch Experience in Southwest Minnesota During World War I**, by Robert Schoone-Jongen.
Marshall, Minn.: Southwest State University, 1992.
MHS call number: F 615 .D9 S36 1992.
- **"Professor William S.[A.] Schaper: War Hysteria and the Price of Academic Freedom,"** by William E. Matsen.
In [Minnesota History](#), vol. 51, no. 4 (winter 1988): pp. 130-137.
MHS call number: Reading Room F 601.5 .M66 v.51:4, or view an [electronic version of the article \(PDF\)](#).
- **[Watchdog of Loyalty: The Minnesota Commission of Public Safety During World War I](#)**, by Carl H. Chrislock.
St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1991.
MHS call number: Reading Room D 570.8 .C8 M63 1991.

- [Minnesota History index](#) terms that may be useful for this topic:
- Minnesota Commission of Public Safety
- World War I

PRIMARY RESOURCES:

- **J.A.A. Burnquist Papers.**

Papers of Governor Burnquist for the World War I years, 1917-1920, focus on the Minnesota Commission of Public Safety, which was granted broad powers to protect the state and assist in the war effort. There is information on its work and that of the Minnesota Home Guard in surveillance of alleged subversive activities, in mobilizing opposition to labor unions and strikes, in locating draft evaders, in imposing a curfew on saloons and restaurants, in discouraging the use of languages other than English in schools, and in registering and monitoring aliens, as well as criticism of its suppression of political activities and civil liberties.

MHS call number: P448; see the green Manuscript Notebooks for a detailed list of boxes (there are 35 boxes of material, but not all relate to this topic).

- **Minnesota Commission of Public Safety**

There are many types of records from the Commission of Public Safety in the State Archives. Here is just a sampling of some of those records. Please check the [library catalog](#) for the full list.

- **Agents' Reports to T.G. Winter, 1917-1919.**

Special agents' or investigators' reports on the alleged subversive activities of various persons, and card index to them.

MHS call number: See the black State Archives Notebooks—filed under Public Safety Commission—for a detailed list of contents and the locator number (there is only .5 cubic feet of material).

- **Alien Registration and Declaration of Holdings.**

Forms containing information on aliens residing in Minnesota in February, 1918, who were ordered by the Minnesota Commission of Public Safety to register and make sworn declarations about themselves, other family members, and their property holdings.

MHS call number: SAM 169 (State Archives Microfilm; there are 394 reels of microfilm); see the black State Archives Notebooks—filed under Public Safety Commission—for a detailed list of each reel.

Note: Microfilm may be borrowed on [Interlibrary Loan](#).

- **Americanization Committee Records.**

This series contains records relating primarily to the establishment or appointment of county and local committees.

MHS call number: See the black State Archives Notebooks—filed under Public Safety Commission—for a detailed list of folders and the locator number (there are only 13 folders of material).

- **Main Files, 1917-1919.**

Series of commission correspondence (1917-1919) in subject files—referred to as "rerum files" by commission office staff—relating to all commission activities including (generally) the issuance and enforcement of orders, investigations, and the organization of county and local public safety committees; and (specifically) employment, the draft, patriotic meetings and speakers, publicity, labor problems, liquor and saloons, marketing and sale of food and goods produced, use of foreign languages, forest fire relief, shortages of fuel, food, and fodder, and alleged subversive and anti-American activities.

MHS call number: See the black State Archives Notebooks—filed under Public Safety Commission—for a detailed list of boxes and locator numbers (there are 19 boxes of material), or use an [electronic version of the inventory](#).

- **Minutes.**

The minutes (1917-1920) record all actions of the commission, including full texts of orders issued and resolutions adopted, lists of bills allowed for payment, and lists of "communications" received and actions taken on them. There is a three-volume set of official minutes and several folders of draft minutes. In some cases, items recorded on a draft "list of communications received" (with draft minutes) were not recorded in the official minutes.

MHS call number: See the black State Archives Notebooks—filed under Public Safety Commission—for a detailed list of volumes and folders, and locator numbers (there are 3 volumes and 7 folders of material).

- **Records of County Branches, 1917-1920.**

Articles of association, minutes, correspondence, circular letters, orders, resolutions, and pamphlets of public safety associations in the following counties: Anoka, Becker, Beltrami, Blue Earth, Clay, Cottonwood, Hennepin, Kandiyohi, Kittson, Pennington, Polk, Ramsey, Renville, St. Louis, Todd, and Washington.

MHS call number: See the black State Archives Notebooks—filed under Public Safety Commission—for a detailed list of boxes and locator numbers (there are 5 boxes of material).

- **Report of Minnesota Commission of Public Safety.**
[St. Paul, Minn.: L.F. Dow Co., 1919].
MHS call number: D 570.8 .C8 M65 1919.
- **Report of Special Committee on German Text Books Used in Public Schools of Minnesota.**
St. Paul, Minn.: [s.n., 1917?].
MHS call number: PF 3068 .U5 M55 1917.
- **Reports and Publications of the Commission, 1917-1918.**
MHS call number: See the black State Archives Notebooks—filed under Public Safety Commission—for more details and the locator number (there are 5 folders plus 1 volume of material).
- **Reports and Publications of the Women's Division, 1917-1919.**
MHS call number: See the black State Archives Notebooks—filed under Public Safety Commission, Women's Division—for more details and the locator number (there is only 1 folder of material).
- **William A. Schaper Papers.**
Letters, typed copies of newspaper articles, and other materials concerning Schaper's dismissal (1917) by the University of Minnesota board of regents for alleged pro-Germanism and disloyalty to the United States during World War I; Governor Elmer A. Benson's efforts to have the action rescinded (1937); Schaper's exoneration by the regents in 1938 and payment of compensation to him; and public reactions to the case.
MHS call number: P521; see the green Manuscripts Notebooks for more details (there is only 1 folder of material).
- **Newspapers** that may be useful for this topic:
 - Minneapolis Star
 - Minneapolis Tribune
 - St. Paul Dispatch
 - St. Paul Pioneer Press
- [Visual Resources Database](#) subjects that may be useful for this topic:
- [Commission of Public Safety](#)
- Check the [library catalog](#) for other materials.