

## OPINION

# Chicago blows up



## LAW 'n HISTORY

By R. Marc Kantrowitz

The city was simmering. On May 3, 1886, workers were shot and killed by the police. The next day, laborers again assembled and again called for an eight-hour work day. Their employers bristled at the outrageous demands and proclaimed that anarchists and socialists were behind the turmoil. Marches were held and speeches were made. And more tragedy awaited.

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Following the Civil War, industrial production grew rapidly and Chicago soon found herself at the epicenter of the labor movement. Capitalists grew rich and powerful, often at the exploitation of un-

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skilled workers, many of them immigrants. In Chicago, their 10-hour, six-day work week garnered them \$1.50. With every powerful institution against them, they were powerless.

A national trade union set May 1, 1886, as the day the eight-hour work day would become the standard. Chicago was at the forefront with thousands participating.

Leading the charge was German-born August Spies, the editor of the revolutionary newspaper Arbeiter-Zeitung, and his radical comrade Albert Parsons.

On May 3, Spies spoke to a large gathering outside the McCormick Reaper Works, urging resistance and solidarity. During his oratory, the closing bell blared, releasing the strike breakers.

Those leaving McCormick met the strikers, who surged away from Spies and rushed toward the factory gates. The police intervened. Shots were fired and people were killed.

Seeing the carnage, an enraged Spies returned to his newsroom and gathered his forces to plan a response. Later dubbed by the prosecution as the Monday Night Conspiracy, what was actually planned remains in doubt.

Meanwhile, Louis Lingg made his bombs.

On Tuesday, there was a late protest at Haymarket Square. Again, the police were out in force. Spies, Parsons and Samuel Fielden spoke, often in incendiary terms: "Keep your eye on the law! Throttle it! Kill it! Do everything you can to wound it!"

It was now late and the crowd had thinned to 500. As Fielden concluded his speech, a large col-

umn of police advanced, ordering everyone to disperse.

Suddenly, an object in the sky arched its way through, heading toward the front line of officers. A policeman recognized the missile and cried out.

The bomb detonated. Relentless gunfire followed. Seven cops died. Scores were injured.

The officers claimed that they were fired upon first. Others maintained that no one other than the police participated in the shooting. Public sympathy for those killed ran strong.

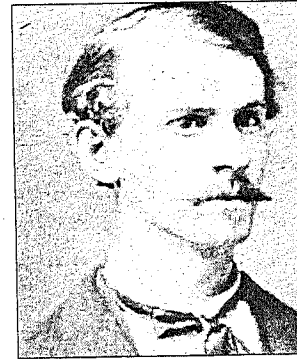
The city was at war, with the niceties of search warrants and legal process tossed aside. Nearly 200 arrests were made, including Spies and three of his fellow Arbeiter-Zeitung associates, Michael Schwab, Adolph Fischer and Oscar Neebe.

Spies was soon indicted for conspiracy to murder, alongside bomb-maker Lingg, speakers Parsons and Fielden, and militant radical George Engel, who was home playing cards at the time of the slaughter.

The trial, overflowing with spectators and reporters, commenced on June 21, 1886. Jurors were selected; many openly harbored a bias against the defendants.

Prosecutor Grinnell argued that Spies had provoked the McCormick incident and then organized a group to battle the police. Grinnell took advantage of the many turncoats who cooperated, as well as dynamite and anarchist propaganda advocating destruction and death found at the homes of the defendants.

Material seized from Lingg's house matched that found in the remnants of the bomb.



ALBERT PARSONS

The defense countered that none of the defendants threw the bomb; indeed, the identity of who did remained unknown.

Counsel, seemingly more intent on defending anarchy than their clients, engaged in a faulty trial strategy. Lingg's attorney argued that his client had every "right to have his house full of dynamite." Spies testified and acknowledged owning dynamite.

Grinnell took advantage of the missteps and beseeched the jury to protect America from foreign-born anarchists.

The verdict came quickly: guilty. At sentencing, the defendants decried the injustices against them. Spies said that he was ready to die a martyr.

Judge Gary took Spies at his word and sentenced him and six others to death. Only Neebe escaped the noose, receiving a 15-year prison sentence. It was doubtful that he had anything to do with the incident.

As the anarchists awaited their fate, they became martyrs, receiving countless visitors. Many decried the trial as a disgraceful sham, more intent on convicting



AUGUST SPIES

radicals than murderers. As the date for their executions approached, protests erupted worldwide. Only a request for clemency could save them.

True to their ideals, Parsons, Engel, Fischer and Lingg demanded their release, not forgiveness. Fielden and Schwab were granted clemency. Lingg cheated his accusers, chomping on a dynamite cap smuggled into his cell.

At noon on Nov. 11, 1887, Parsons, Spies, Fischer and Engel, all bound and in white robes, marched to the gallows. As Parsons started to speak, the trap door opened, plunging the four to a painful death.

### Epilogue

In 1893, Gov. John Peter Altgeld, declaring the trial a mockery, pardoned Fielden, Schwab and Neebe.

Once released, the three lived quiet lives until their deaths.

The same year they were pardoned, a graveyard memorial was erected. The identity of the bomber remains a mystery to this day. So, too, does the involvement of the defendants.