“Global Revolts in Leavenworth Penitentiary: WWI and the Unanticipated Struggles against Empire”

Christina Heatherton  
Center for Place, Culture, and Politics, CUNY Graduate Center, United States  
c.heatherton@gmail.com

By World War I, the U.S. state expanded its hegemony through intensified investments in global militarism. For the first time in its history, the U.S. became the world’s largest creditor nation by extending private loans to Allied countries, increasing its manufacture and trade in munitions, and, significantly, by enhancing its own internal security regime. In the wake of the war as well as the Mexican Revolution and the Bolshevik Revolution, the U.S. created its first federal police system as well as a new security infrastructure designed to monitor, infiltrate, and suppress dissent across during the consolidation of U.S. Empire. This paper investigates the development of this security infrastructure and the anti-imperial alliances it inadvertently created. Between 1917 and 1922, Leavenworth Federal Penitentiary in Kansas was occupied by a unique mix of soldiers, war dissenters, radical labor organizers, foreign-born radicals, Black militants, and Mexican Revolutionary figures such as Ricardo Flores Magón who had offered one of the earliest and most trenchant critiques of U.S. imperialism. This chapter observes how incarcerated revolutionaries and working class soldiers coordinated night schools, produced their own newspaper, maintained a radical library, led May Day marches, initiated strikes, and continued agitating and educating one another in the prison. Drawing from prison records, inmate book collections, correspondence, memoirs, open letters to the U.S. President, and federal surveillance records, it explores the unanticipated alliances and political struggles that arose from this unique convergence space. It analyzes the insurgent prisoners’ discourses around racism, security, and the class struggle as they fought, taught, and learned from one another. It subsequently describes how a unique form of radical internationalism was theorized within and against this emergent security infrastructure.