



**@LARGE**  
**AI WEIWEI**  
**ON ALCATRAZ**

## ALCATRAZ BACKGROUND

### Prisoners of Conscience Who Served Time on The Rock

Although best known for its 29 years (1934 -1963) as the toughest and most feared federal penitentiary in America housing the “worst of the worst,” Alcatraz also incarcerated hundreds of non-violent offenders who were imprisoned for expressing and upholding their political convictions or religious beliefs. The artworks created for *@Large: Ai Weiwei on Alcatraz* will expose broad audiences to the national park’s multi-layered history as a place of civil detainment and protest during its eras as both a military and federal prison. The following men are among those who served time on The Rock for following their conscience.

- **The Hopis**

*“They were held in confinement, at hard labor, until they shall show they fully realize the error of their evil ways...until they shall evince, in an unmistakable manner, a desire to cease interference with the plans of the government for the civilization and education of its Indian wards.”*

During its years as a military prison, inmates at Alcatraz included Confederate sympathizers and citizens accused of treason during the American Civil War (1861-65). Alcatraz also housed a number of “rebellious” American Indians, including 19 Hopis from the Arizona Territory who were sent to the prison in 1895 for refusing to adhere to federal requirements that they farm as the government instructed and who opposed forced education of their children in government boarding schools. Both “offenses” were part of widespread resistance to U.S. policies designed to erase the Hopi language and religion. The Hopis were incarcerated on Alcatraz for eight months in 1895 before being released and returned to Arizona. Native American people continued to be confined as prisoners in the disciplinary barracks on the island through the remainder of the 1800s and the early 1900s.

- **The Hofer Brothers, Hutterite Pacifists**

*“During our four month’s stay on Alcatraz, we were kept in locked cells all the time, except on Sunday for one hour we were allowed to walk around in the yard, but only under guard.”*

In the summer of 1918 four Hutterites living in South Dakota were drafted into the Army against their will. Joseph, Michael, and David Hofer were brothers, who together with their brother-in-law, Jacob Wipf, were ordered to report to Camp Lewis. Though their religious devotion prevented them from training or acting as soldiers, they were expecting to accept a civilian duty once in Washington State. Instead, because they objected to military service on grounds of conscience and refused to cooperate with even the most basic induction procedures, they were considered military prisoners subject to military discipline. Following a two-month court martial, the four were transferred to Alcatraz to serve a 20-year sentence.

On arrival, the Hutterites refused to wear what was given to them as their prison dress—United States military uniforms—and as a result they were beaten and thrown naked into solitary confinement and received no food and a ½ cup of water a day for the first four-and-a-half days. Over the next four months, the brothers were kept in solitary confinement for 14-day stretches at a time, locked in cells



24/7 when not in “the Dungeon,” and beaten and tortured repeatedly. The four were transferred to Fort Leavenworth with other Conscientious Objectors in November 1918, where Joseph and Michael Hofer died two days later from exposure. David Hofer was released a month later, while Joseph Wipf remained imprisoned by the military for his beliefs until April 1919.

- **Phillip Grosser, Anarchist/Conscientious Objector**

*“Neither exploitation nor government is natural or necessary, and a society should be based on freedom, mutual aid, and equal shares of the good things in life.”*

A World War I conscientious objector who opposed the war on political grounds and was turned over to the military for punishment as an “erring soldier,” Grosser was transferred from Fort Leavenworth to Alcatraz in May 1919. Upon arrival, when he refused a formal military order to work, he was sentenced to his first two weeks of solitary confinement. During numerous weeks in “the Dungeon,” this introverted anarchist endured complete darkness, subsisted on bread and water, was forced to sleep on a damp concrete floor, and did not see or speak to any other human being. Further daily punishment over a two-month period in the Alcatraz “Vestibule Doors”—barbaric iron cages where occupants were chained and forced to remain standing for eight hours a day—alternated by 16 hours of solitary confinement ultimately led Grosser to determine that his mind and body could take no more punishment and he agreed to work. On December 2, 1920, the U.S. War Department ordered him released.

- **Jackson Leonard, Member of the Industrial Workers of the World**

*“I was a member of the Industrial Workers of the World, a Radical. I expected to be discriminated against because of this, by both administration and fellow prisoners. My one advantage was that I felt no guilt. Whatever my actions had been, I did them because I thought them the right thing to do. You may be sure I received no preferential treatment.”*

Leonard was court martialed and sentenced to Alcatraz in 1919 for distributing IWW literature at Fort Lewis in Washington; he ultimately served three years of a five-year sentence before receiving amnesty by President Warren Harding in July 1921. Of his time on Alcatraz, Leonard wrote that “Alcatraz was to confine a special kind of prisoner, under the severest possible, within the law, confinement. They sought to break them down, caring little whether they destroyed either manhood or mind in the process.”

- **Robert George Thompson, World War II Veteran**

*“I never advocated the violent overthrow of the U.S. government; I advocate for change through the ballot box, not by force of arms.”*

Thompson served in the Army during World War II, where he was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for leading a charge against two Japanese machine-gun batteries. After his return to civilian life, Thompson joined the Communist Party USA, and was one of the party leaders charged and convicted of violating the Smith Act during the Foley Square trial in the early 1950s. He appealed his conviction up to the Supreme Court, which upheld his sentence for “conspiracy and advocating the violent overthrow of the United States government.” He was sent directly to Alcatraz. Shortly thereafter, during a transfer to an East Coast prison, Thompson was attacked by a fellow prisoner who wanted to prove that he was a “good American” by striking out at an American Communist. Thompson survived the assault, won early release, and was active in the anti-Vietnam war movement until his death in 1966. Thompson’s wife, following her late husband’s wishes, arranged for his burial at Arlington National Cemetery. When the U.S. Congress interceded, his internment at Arlington was denied.

###

**MEDIA CONTACT:** David Shaw  
Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy  
(415) 561-3064  
[dshaw@parksconservancy.org](mailto:dshaw@parksconservancy.org)