

# Urban Race Riots in the Jim Crow Era

An Overview Essay

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The violent, racial confrontations in which mobs of whites and blacks battled each other in U.S. towns and cities during the Jim Crow era were triggered by some of the same forces driving legalized segregation, disfranchisement, and the lynching of thousands of African Americans. These explosions of urban violence against blacks differed in several ways from the individual lynchings and systematic terror practiced by organizations, such as the Ku Klux Klan, in the 1870s. For one thing, the urban explosions were directed less at individuals and more at entire black communities. They also reflected more the anxieties felt by lower-class whites, who feared competition with blacks for housing, employment, and social status as African-American newcomers began moving into urban settings following the Civil War. Also, although whites—who felt enraged by some real or imaginary actions by blacks—always started these riots, black victims increasingly defended themselves as best they could. Clearly, the race riots also were backlashes by white Americans who reacted with contempt and rage to black Americans' cries for equality, justice, and decency.

In general, the riots can be studied according to different waves of white violence. The first wave occurred in the post-bellum era of Reconstruction. Southern defeat, emancipation, and the dramatic changes in the political and civil rights of blacks in the decade after the Civil War presented dramatic challenges to white supremacy. White supremacists, desperate to regain their political power and restore their control over the recently emancipated African Americans, instigated the birth of the Ku Klux Klan and its members' terrorist attacks on individual blacks and white Republicans in the South, as well as mob attacks on southern black communities. Relatively few whites were killed in these affairs, which peaked in the two years before the 1876 presidential election. Some of the more serious outbreaks occurred in New Orleans, Louisiana (1866), (1868), (1874), Memphis, Tennessee (1866), Meridian, Mississippi (1870), Vicksburg, Mississippi (1874), and Yazoo City, Mississippi (1875).

The second wave of riots, erupting in the last decade of the 19th and the first decade of the 20th centuries, reflected the new era of stepped-up Jim Crow rhetoric and attempts to legalize segregation and disfranchisement. Whites all over the nation participated in this outbreak of racial politics, including many who feared better relations among white and black farmers and the working poor posed by the Populist Movement. In this atmosphere, white supremacists used the same racist justifications to violence as those who lynched individual blacks: namely, the alleged desire of black men to rape white women. This decade also saw the codification of Jim Crow segregation laws and the passage of disfranchisement statutes and codes in most of the southern states. The United States Supreme Court upheld the "separate but equal" doctrine in their 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision, throwing the country's High Court on the side of white supremacy. At the same time, blacks began moving in ever-growing numbers to urban centers, competing with lower-class whites for housing and employment, while growing numbers of African-American professionals and officeholders began successfully competing with their white counterparts for jobs. With all of these factors in play, white violence erupted in many small towns and villages, and at least ten—four of them in northern cities—escalated into major race riots: Lake City, North Carolina (1898); Wilmington, North Carolina (1898); Greenwood County, South Carolina (1898); New Orleans, Louisiana (1900); New York City, New York (1900); Springfield, Ohio (1904); Atlanta, Georgia (1906); Greenburg, Indiana (1906); Brownsville, Texas (1906); and Springfield, Illinois (1908).

The cluster of race riots, the third wave, that broke out around the World War I period reflected both the demands for justice by angry African Americans and the increasing competition between blacks and whites brought on by the war and the black migration to urban areas in the North. In 1915, the new Ku Klux Klan spread nationwide and signs of more virulent racism appeared in

popular culture--such as in the film *Birth of A Nation* and in advertising--across the country. These events fueled the already uneasy fears of many lower-class whites about the growing presence of blacks in their midst. As thousands of young men went off to war, labor shortages lured larger numbers of black and white workers into urban centers throughout the nation. Blacks began moving into previously all-white neighborhoods, creating friction between the races. As black servicemen returned from Europe, they found the old racial hostilities unacceptable after having fought in a "war to make the world safe for democracy." These black veterans, in the minds of many whites, had become too "uppity" overseas and posed a threat to white women as well as the social status of all white men. Between 1917 and 1921, an unprecedented outbreak of racial violence swept across the nation. Over 20 race riots broke out between April and October 1919 alone, a six-month period remembered as the "Red Summer." Among the most deadly outbreaks were those in East St. Louis, Illinois (1917); Chester, Pennsylvania (1917); Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (1917); Houston, Texas (1917); Washington, D.C. (1919); Chicago, Illinois (1919); Omaha, Nebraska (1919); Charleston, South Carolina (1919), Longview, Texas (1919); Knoxville, Tennessee (1919); Elaine, Arkansas (1919); and Tulsa, Oklahoma (1921).

After the 1921 Tulsa riot and except for the 1935 New York (Harlem) disturbances, no major racial riots occurred until the world war era of the 1940s. Many of the same domestic demographic and social changes affecting blacks and whites that had unfolded during 1919 accompanied World War II, but this time, on a larger scale. The competition between increasing numbers of working-class blacks and whites for housing and employment in urban areas again set the stage for racial conflict. Though the race riots during the World War II era were far fewer (only three) than their World War I precursors, they no less violent. The 1943 Detroit riot, for example, resulted in the deaths of 25 African Americans and nine whites. The other two riots occurred in New York City (Harlem) and Columbia, Tennessee, in 1943. Eight years later, the last major race riot before the 1960s inner city explosions (which most historians view as rebellions rather than race riots) erupted in Cicero, Illinois (1951).

Although urban race riots in the United States between 1866-1951 were unique episodes rooted in the particular historic situation of each place, they shared certain characteristics. To begin with, the whites always prevailed, and the overwhelming majority of those who died and were wounded in all of these incidents were blacks. They also tended to break out in clusters during times of significant socio-economic, political, and demographic upheaval when racial demographics were altered and existing racial mores and boundaries challenged. Perhaps most importantly, the riots usually provoked defensive stances by members of the black communities who defended themselves and their families under attack. Seldom did the violence spill over into white neighborhoods. Finally, the riots greatly strengthened the resolve of blacks to challenge white supremacy legally, intellectually, and emotionally--producing greater efforts by organizations like the NAACP and leaders such as W. E. B. Du Bois, as well as an outpouring of black cultural manifestations of defiance identified with the "New Negro Movement" of the Harlem Renaissance.

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