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Utrecht University

Haye de Groot - 6290191

Supervisor - Dr. Devin Vartija

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From Race War to Massacre

*A Historical Study of the Depiction of Mass Racial Violence
in News Media in the Interwar United States*

Abstract

The early years of the interwar period in the United States are characterized by some of the most egregious instances of mass racial violence in the nation's history. A variety of social, economic and political tensions and racial antagonisms conspired to create a surge in the prevalence of racial violence, in particular white-on-black violence. Through looking at the depiction of the events of the Red Summer of 1919 and the Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921 in contemporary printed news media, this thesis examines the portrayal of both black and white racial identities in regard to the violence that was committed in order to assess what common narratives surrounding racial violence were prevalent during this time period. These narratives typically depict one group as the aggressor or instigator of violence and the other as the victim of violence, and in turn influence the conceptions and ideation of contemporary readers. This thesis ultimately posits that, in contrast to the spectacle-like elements of the depictions of lynchings which sought to emphasise white violence as a tool of oppression, the news depictions of instances of mass racial violence generally emphasized and connected the committing of violence to African Americans, while white Americans were depicted as victims. The disparate attention and coverage that resulted in the formation of this narrative fed into a broader trend of white supremacist thought, which presented and considered the actions and autonomy of African Americans as a threat to the existing racial hierarchy and white superiority enforced by white supremacy.

"The way to right wrongs is to shine the light of truth upon them."

- Ida B. Wells

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Introduction - Violence, Newspapers and Narratives

The Violence of the Interwar Period

Carloads of sailors poured out of the Charleston Naval Yard in the late evening of May 10th, 1919, attempting to make their way towards the lively downtown district. Word had reached them of ongoing street brawls and shootings around Beaufain and Charles Streets in the Historic District of Charleston, South Carolina. The area had broken into violence after a group of five white sailors were unable to find a black man who they felt had cheated them, and instead began attacking African Americans at random in retaliation.¹ The group was shot at by Isaac Doctor, a black man, whose defiant actions purportedly formed the impetus for wide-scale rioting.² Much of the commercial section was steadily engulfed in violent outbursts as more than a thousand sailors and some white civilians had joined into the fray. The growing mob raided two local shooting galleries on Beaufain Street, obtaining rifles with which they proceeded to attack black individuals, homes and businesses.³ For the following hours, the streets of downtown Charleston were practically in the hands of the rioters as they terrorized African Americans, wrecked local shops and pulled individuals from street-cars. It took until well into the night for police and local service-men to reestablish order and bring an end to the rioting. In the end, five African Americans had been killed, with another dying later, and dozens sustained either serious injuries or were admitted to hospital.⁴

The violence that occurred in Charleston was by no means an outlier. The year 1919 was unfortunately characterized by an outburst of numerous instances of racial violence, racial riots and lynchings that lasted until late autumn, and which took place in well over three dozen U.S. cities. In the wake of a violence-filled summer, the American sociology scholar and civil servant George Edmund Haynes wrote a report on these events which was published in — among others — *The New York Times* in the autumn of 1919, and which served as a prelude to inquiries made by the U.S. Senate Committee on the Judiciary. In that report Haynes identified thirty-eight separate racial riots perpetrated by white Americans against African Americans in a scattered array of cities.⁵ Together these events would be

¹ McWhirter, p.41.

² The exact actions undertaken by Isaac Doctor remain unsure, and many contemporary news depictions paint him in a less favorable light. An article in the *New York Tribune* on May 13, 1919 mentioned that “The riot began at Charles and Market Streets, after the wounding of Isaac Doctor, who is alleged to have shot a bluejacket.” The same article makes no mention of the original aggravating actions by the five white sailors. *New York Tribune*, May 13, 1919, p.9.

³ *The New York Times*, May 11, 1919, p.3.

⁴ McWhirter, p.48.

⁵ *The New York Times*, Oct. 5, 1919, p.1.

dubbed the Red Summer of 1919 by the American author and civil rights activist James Weldon Johnson, who at the time was employed by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) as a field secretary.⁶ In contrast to earlier instances of racial riots in the United States, the events that occurred throughout the year 1919 were among the first in which substantial resistance was offered as African Americans fought back against attackers, although most instances still consisted of white-on-black violence. A variety of social tensions — including demobilization in the aftermath of World War I, the First Red Scare following the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, labour competition and unrest which inflamed the resentment of white workers, and an economic slump in the post-WWI recession — spurred an increase in racial tensions and antagonism during the beginning of the interwar period.⁷ These tensions would ultimately give rise to a dreadful cornucopia of racially driven attacks, riots, and massacres in the ensuing years and decades; including notorious examples such as the 1921 Tulsa race massacre. As a result, the interwar period in the United States is characterized by some of the most violent and egregious instances of mass racial violence in the country's history.

In Search of the Nadir

Such a characterization can however only be made when contextualized within the wider perspective of the United States' history of race relations and racial antagonisms. These tenuous relations and deep, societal antagonisms did not originate solely from the heightened tensions that spurred after the First World War, but they instead were already deeply embedded within American society. Therefore, I would like to focus for a moment on the historiographical discourse concerning what is labelled as the 'nadir of American race relations'. This term roughly describes the period in U.S. history between 1877 and the early 20th century which was distinguished by the most pronounced and overt racism in the nation's history, the retrenchment of civil-rights and the dissemination of anti-black violence, discrimination, and expression of white supremacy. The phrase was originally conceived by the historian Rayford Logan in his 1954 book *The Negro in American Life and Thought: The Nadir, 1877-1901*, as he attempted to determine the specific year in which the status of African Americans in American society had reached its lowest point; its nadir.⁸ Logan argued this had happened in — as indicated by the book's title — the year 1901, and suggested that

⁶ Erickson, p.2293-2294.

⁷ McWhirter, p.13-15, p.56.

⁸ Logan, p.xxi.

following this year American race relations tended to improve on a national level.⁹ Other historians argue that this only occurred later, and should actually be drawn well into the Interwar period.

The history of racial equality and reform in the United States after the conclusion of the Civil War can be very broadly categorized into three distinct eras. First, directly following the American Civil War came what is known as the Reconstruction era, a period in American history which lasted from 1865 to 1877. Directed by the United States Congress, the process of Reconstruction aimed to ensure the abolishment of slavery and the proclamation of the rights and citizenship of the newly freed slaves, freedmen, and ‘blacks’ in general with the same ostensible civil rights and liberties that ‘whites’ had enjoyed freely.¹⁰ Three new constitutional amendments — the 13th, 14th, and 15th — which were collectively known as the Reconstruction amendments, were meant to guarantee these rights and civil liberties. In contrast, the latest of these three broad categories encompasses the 20th-century civil-rights era which still attempted to realize the promises made during Reconstruction. Originating roughly after the conclusion of the Second World War, this era is predominantly categorized by the actions of the civil rights movement between 1954 and 1968 and its campaign to end legal disenfranchisement, racial discrimination, and segregation of African Americans. Although this movement traces its ideological and activist origins to the Reconstruction era and before, it was the middle of the twentieth century that saw the largest and most influential legislative gains being made.

Between these two periods — after the Reconstruction era and before the emergence of the Civil rights era — lay numerous decades that were predominantly characterized by a stagnation in regards to the fight for racial equality after the era of reform that had occurred during Reconstruction had subsided.¹¹ Although various distinct civil rights movements can be traced through these decades, the period is foremost distinguished by events like the proliferation of Jim Crow laws, and important legal precedents such as the US Supreme Court deciding to uphold the ‘*separate but equal*’ doctrine of racial discrimination in the 1896 *Plessy v Ferguson* ruling. Encompassing both the expanses of the Gilded Age and the Progressive era, this time-period is furthermore characterized by the national ‘sundown town’

⁹ Logan, p.xxi.

¹⁰ This era of Reconstruction nominally also refers to the ending of the last remnants of the Confederate secession throughout the Southern states, and the congressional attempts by the Union states to transform the eleven former Confederate states, thus attempting to *reconstruct* a *United States* of America.

¹¹ Logan, p.xx.

phenomenon according to historian James W. Loewen.¹² Occasionally — and in a more colloquial fashion — it is dubbed the Lynching-era, in reference to the prevalence of lynchings during these decades.¹³ Lynchings were generally the norm in defending the white supremacist racial status-quo during this time period. These decades can be further subdivided in the ‘Jim Crow’ period between 1877 and 1914, as well as the War and Interwar period encompassing both World Wars and the intervening decades. This thesis will look specifically at the first few years of the interwar period — namely at the events of the Red Summer of 1919 and the Tulsa Race Massacre in 1921 — as the prevalence of instances of mass racial violence spiked heavily during this time frame compared to both the pre-war period, and the decrease in instances of mass racial violence in the latter half of the interwar period, making this a uniquely distinct periodization. The manners in which these events are represented and depicted in the news media furthermore provide an interesting glance at the prominent narratives surrounding racial violence and race relations in the United States at this time — as well as the possibility that ‘the nadir’ that Rayford Logan discussed extended well past the turn of the century.

What Can the Newspapers Show Us?

This thesis will examine the depiction of racialized violence and antagonism in the United States and the manners in which contemporary newspapers and media discourse in the interwar period framed these events. In doing so, I will attempt to research the difference in framing between different racial identities by pursuing the following general question.

‘How did the U.S. news media in the early interwar period frame ‘black’ and ‘white’ racial identities in the context of events of mass racial violence and antagonism?’

In addressing the complexity of this question, I make use of three succinct sub-questions which will form the basis for answering the main question that will be discussed in this thesis. These three sub-questions focus on the process and mechanisms by which depictions

¹² Sundown towns, also known as sunset towns, were all-white municipalities which excluded non-whites via a combination of violence, intimidation and discriminatory laws. The name refers to the signposts denoting that “colored people” needed to leave town before sunset. Loewen, p.1-5.

¹³ The practice of lynching refers to the mob-lead killing of an individual or small group of individuals. While these extrajudicial killings had long existed, been prevalent and could target different racial groups, the defeat of the Southern Confederacy and the emancipation of roughly four million previously enslaved people, led to African Americans becoming the primary target of the practice. Lynchings reached their height between the late 1880s and 1920s.

of racial identities in news and other media can be utilized to reinforce narratives of white supremacy.

- I. *What historical developments lay at the heart of the interwar period's prevalence of mass racial violence?*
- II. *'How did contemporary news-media frame occurrences of mass racial violence with reference to the concepts of instigation, victimhood, and aggression?'*
- III. *'What prevalent narratives can be distinguished in regard to events of mass racial violence in the interwar period, and how do these portray 'black' and 'white' racial identities?'*

The astute reader might at this point question why news media depictions are being used to expand upon the discourse surrounding mass racial violence. I look at media depictions because — as will be shown in this thesis — instances of racial violence were widely used in their portrayal to present certain narratives that had an impact far beyond the physical ramifications of the violence these portrayals represented.¹⁴

When examining these questions I will therefore draw upon, among others, the literature and theory around the concept of 'spectacle'. Historian Amy Louise Wood describes in her book *Lynching and Spectacle* how the practice of lynching worked to establish and affirm white supremacy, overlapping with a variety of cultural performances that provided social acceptability and encouragement for the engendered violence.¹⁵ In the introduction to her book, Wood writes that “narrative representations of lynchings — in news accounts, pamphlets, popular stories, and ballads — reproduced these rituals of white dominance for a larger public.”¹⁶ Through the dissimilar representation of different racial identities, pro-lynching narratives were employed to reinforce notions of white supremacy and justify the committed violence through appeals to moral superiority or the righteousness of the acts. Such narrativizations “of a forceful yet controlled white citizenry stood against opposing images of brutish black men.”¹⁷ Wood argues this aided in promoting the same

¹⁴ *A note on terminology:* This thesis will, inevitably — given its topic and historical periodization — be forced to portray an overabundance of racialized language that is both inappropriate and harmful in modern use. These stereotypes, depictions, and words were hurtful and wrong then and are so today. Nevertheless, it is important to show them here in order to avoid sanitizing a real part of history. Given the sensitivity of the subjects however, every effort will be made to strictly limit their portrayal to within the historical sources and contexts from which they originate.

¹⁵ Wood, p.1-16.

¹⁶ Wood, p.9.

¹⁷ Wood, p.9

narrative of white supremacy, but equally gives rise to broader and more fierce opposition. It was in fact modern technologies like film and photography — in conjunction with writings — that served to ensure “the emergence of modern spectacle.”¹⁸ In contemplating the dissimilarities between the post-Reconstruction decades and earlier periods, it is thus crucial to include these distinct aspects of modernity. In this thesis I argue that — especially when looking at instances of mass racial violence — media depiction of events should be seen in many of the same ways as the process of spectaclization, but essentially focuses on a different part of the mechanistic narrative of white superiority which is presented to a larger audience.

In terms of the employed methods of research; this thesis will consist primarily of a close reading analysis of numerous primary sources. These primary sources consist of newspaper articles, including headlines and other media — such as photographs or caricatures — that are embedded within these contemporary newspapers. These sources will be studied in concordance with the research questions and theories in order to study how these sources frame the particular cases in question and how they portray different racial identities. Relevant newspapers from the interwar period will be accessed through online initiatives like *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, an online initiative sponsored jointly by the National Endowment for the Humanities and the United States Libraries of Congress that provides access to a wide array of historical news sources.

The first chapter of this thesis will focus on the preceding, underlying factors and the historical pre-conditions that form both the background against which these instances of mass racial violence occurred during the first years of the interwar period. The variety of increasing social and racial tensions, political landscape, and the white backlash that lay at the heart of these events will be examined in reference to the violence they spurred.

Within the interwar period, there exists a tremendously large and varied array of instances of mass racial violence. The second chapter of this thesis will focus on a variety of events that can be classified as mass racial violence during the first years of the interwar period, which will serve as the case studies and background to the plethora of newspaper articles that will be examined with regard to their portrayal of the different racial identities and groupings involved. Among these events are the Chicago and Washington D.C. race riots of 1919 and a number of other riots that were part of the Red Summer of 1919, which consisted of riots throughout many U.S. cities, as well as the now infamous Tulsa race

¹⁸ Wood, p.10.

massacre in 1921.¹⁹ Within the historical sources themselves, the unit of comparison that I utilize will be the different racial identities — i.e. ‘black’ and ‘white’²⁰ — to compare their respective framings and see how this framing constructs certain narratives.

Furthermore, on an overarching scale, I will make a comparison between the different case studies and the corresponding newspaper articles *an sich*, to generate a wide overview and generalized insight into how media framing of mass racial violence transpired during the beginning of the interbellum period, as well as the possible differences and outliers within this framing. These overarching narratives, as well as the mechanisms through which these narratives come about, will form the subject of the third and final chapter of this thesis.

¹⁹ While these events taken together do not come close to the entirety of instance of mass racial violence that occurred during the interwar period or even merely the first few years of the interwar period — with events such as the Ocoee massacre of 1920 and the Rosewood massacre of 1923 being other notable examples from the early years of the interwar period; the Harlem race riot of 1935 occurring midway through the interwar period; and the 1943 race riots in Detroit, Beaumont and Harlem making up notable examples during the Second World War — they do form a representative example that can be studied.

²⁰ It must be noted that this is not the sole comparison that can be made. African Americans were not the sole racial minority that suffered from violence from white mobs. For example, Filipino minorities were targeted during the Yakima Valley riots in 1927 or the Wenatchee Valley riot in 1928, and many asian, native and hispanic individuals or groups were targeted on countless instances. Due to the limitations in length and scope of this thesis, the choice has been made to focus solely on this comparison so as to more accurately depict the framing in question.

Chapter I - The Interwar Period and Mass Racial Violence

Even a cursory glance at the extensive list of events chronicled by George Edmund Haynes in his *New York Times* report that came in the wake of the violence-filled summer of 1919 provides a daunting insight into the extent of the violence that swept across the United States. Haynes identified thirty-eight separate instances of white-on-black violence from racial riots “against blacks” perpetrated “by whites” in a vast array of cities scattered across the nation.²¹ The events of the Red Summer — in combination with the plentitude of similar incidents that were to follow in the subsequent years — are perhaps emblematic of the state of race relations during the early interwar period in the United States. With their perpetrators being commonly fueled by narratives of racism and white supremacy, these violent outbursts were frequently instrumentalized throughout U.S. history as violent means of upholding or enforcing the social subordination of people of colour.²² The ubiquitousness, proliferation and the extremely violent nature of these events during the early years of the interwar period, however, set apart this period of U.S. history.

As this thesis focuses on the manners in which the contemporary media portrayed these instances of mass racial violence in the beginning of the interwar period, this delineation — the choice to focus on the early years of the interwar period — should perhaps garner some attention first. The plethora of egregious and vicious instances of mass racial violence that here characterize the study of race relations during the interwar period in the United States did not arise spontaneously, let alone for the first time, following the signing of the Armistice agreement of Compiègne on 11 November 1918, which put an end to hostilities between the Allies and Germany — their last remaining opponent — and thus provided a conclusion to the First World War.

Instead, the occurrences of mass racial violence that were perpetrated during the early interwar period are characterized by a variety of interacting influential factors that collectively came to a head in the changing landscape that materialized as a result of the end of the First World War. Individually, many of these factors are rooted in developments that either coincided with the preceding time periods — those being the Progressive era or what was contemporaneously known as the Great War — or predate it altogether. On top of the nation’s long-standing history of racial inequality, the transition from the Progressive era to

²¹ *The New York Times*, Oct. 5, 1919, p.1.

²² Wood, p.8-9.

America's involvement in the First World War and the succeeding interwar period saw the combination of these multiple factors.

Wilson in the Oval Office

The tenure of then president Woodrow Wilson, who between 1913 and 1921 served as the 28th President of the United States, can be and often is noted for various progressive achievements in social and political reforms, marking the end of what is accepted to be the Progressive era of U.S. history just before its involvement in the war.²³ Wilson's time in office however simultaneously played host to some unprecedented regressions in terms of the fight for racial equality and an uptick in the adoption of discriminatory and racially segregationist Jim Crow laws. Woodrow Wilson initially secured the presidential office after a bitterly contested electoral race in 1912 with the lowest popular vote proportion since Abraham Lincoln's election in 1860. Notably, Wilson's 1912 electoral victory marked the first time a Democrat president would win the black vote, even though few African Americans were actually able or allowed to cast a ballot during this period.²⁴

Many African Americans initially appeared generally optimistic in light of Wilson's victory. William Edward Burghardt Du Bois — an American academic, civil rights activist and cofounder of the NAACP (in 1909), who was perhaps Wilson's most prominent black supporter and who campaigned passionately on his behalf during the 1912 election — saw in Wilson a candidate who would halt the advance of Jim Crow legislation, and who would not dismiss federal government employees or appointees on the basis of their race.²⁵ To say that Du Bois and various other African Americans who campaigned for Wilson and had staked their reputation in the process would quickly be bitterly and resolutely disappointed, would be an understatement.

Wilson's first term in office showed him to be very much in line with southern Democrats. Senior positions in Wilson's cabinet and administration would soon be filled predominantly by white Southerners who — although there existed some disparity — were overwhelmingly racist white supremacists in favor of institutionalized segregation.²⁶ A particularly poignant example of this, especially in regard to the topic of this thesis, was the appointment of Josephus Daniels as Secretary of the Navy. Daniels, then editor and owner of Raleigh's *The News & Observer* newspaper, was a violent white supremacist who also ranked

²³ O'Reilly, p.117.

²⁴ Du Bois, p.455-456.

²⁵ Du Bois, p.455-456.

²⁶ O'Reilly, p.119-120.

amongst the foremost leaders behind the infamous Wilmington Massacre of 1898.²⁷ Besides the domination of the cabinet by Southerners and the exclusion of African Americans from political appointments, Wilson's administration would go on to oversee the segregation of the federal bureaucracy and civil service.²⁸

Wilson's influence on race relations would exceed his executive actions. In early 1915, Wilson's White House administration hosted a screening of David Wark Griffith's 1915 film *The Birth of a Nation* — based on Thomas Dixon Jr.'s 1905 novel *The Clansman* — partially as a favour to Dixon, a former classmate of Wilson.²⁹ Although the picture revolutionized cinematic techniques and made breakthroughs, narratively it portrayed African Americans as both uncivilized and uncouth, promoted the Lost Cause narrative, and depicted the Ku Klux Klan as a heroic, moral force that serves as a necessary conduit for the preservation of 'American values' and the furtherance of white supremacy. On three separate occasions Wilson himself is quoted as a scholar of American history within the movie, and as the sole person referenced.³⁰ Wilson reportedly felt misrepresented by Dixon, but the president also did not protest the misquotation of his words.³¹ The quote depicted below which appeared in *The Birth of a Nation* serves to bolster the mythos of the KKK and the narrative that the south was the victim of a war of 'Northern Aggression';

“The white men were roused by a mere instinct of self-preservation until at last there had sprung into existence a great Klu Klux Klan, a veritable empire of the South, to protect the Southern country.”

Woodrow Wilson

Wilson was in fact personally opposed to the KKK, and in his book took the stance that most Southerners joined the clan out of desperation from government overreach during the

²⁷ The 1898 Wilmington Massacre, also known as the Wilmington Insurrection (or Coup), was an insurrection that occurred in the city of Wilmington, North Carolina which was carried out by white supremacists on the 10th of November, 1898. The event was initially described by the white press as a race riot perpetuated by black people, although later studies characterize it as a coup d'état and a violent overthrow of the legitimately elected, biracial and Fusionist government in Wilmington by a mob of approximately two-thousand white men led by white, southern Democrats. Political opposition leaders were expelled from Wilmington, the businesses and property of black citizens were destroyed, and an estimated sixty to over three-hundred people were killed. It holds a unique place in U.S. history as the only incident of mass racial violence resulting in the direct removal of elected officials. Wilmington served as an affirmation of white supremacy throughout the nation. For Daniels reference; 1898 Wilmington Race Riot Commission, p.5.

²⁸ O'Reilly, p.117.

²⁹ Stokes, p.111; Berg, p.95.

³⁰ Benbow, p.509-510.

³¹ Berg, p.347-348.

Reconstruction era; a common Southern viewpoint, stating that Republican overreach justified drastic measures in order to re-establish Democrat, white control of the South.³²

Excerpts from Woodrow Wilson's
"History of the American People:"

"..... Adventurers swarmed out of the North, as much the enemies of the one race as of the other, to cozen, beguile, and use the negroes In the villages the negroes were the office holders, men who knew none of the uses of authority, except its insolences."

The other statements of Wilson presented in *The Birth of a Nation* serve to both further the narrative of white supremacy through racist depictions of black people, as well as push racial antagonism through the supposed subjugation of white people in the South.

"... The policy of the congressional leaders wrought ... a veritable overthrow of civilization in the South in their determination to 'put the white South under the heel of the black South.'"

Woodrow Wilson

While initially uncritical of the film, Wilson started distancing himself from the release due to public backlash, eventually releasing a press statement that he was unfamiliar with the movie's plot, although it is considered highly unlikely that Wilson was unaware of Dixon's views before the screening occurred.³³ Wilson did furthermore enjoy the movie, congratulating the director in private correspondence.³⁴

In reality, Wilson's personal sentiments are perhaps inconsequential to the material effect that the release of *The Birth of a Nation* had on American society. The film was an incredible box-office success by grossing more than any previous motion-picture, was extremely popular among white audiences across the United States profoundly influencing American culture, and serving to further the process of racial segregation nationwide.³⁵ It was also instrumental as an inspiration for the rebirth of the KKK, with the founding of the Second Klan taking place only months after the film's release in 1915.

Antagonism and Economic Tensions

The interwar period also played host to increasing economic tensions that were intertwined deeply with existing racial tensions. A growing, widespread fear of far-left extremism was

³² Berg, p.348.

³³ Benbow, p.512; Berg, p.349-350.

³⁴ Berg, p.349-350.

³⁵ Stokes, p.110-111.

fueled by the hyper-nationalist sentiments boasted during the First World War. The 1917 Bolshevik Revolution in Russia signified a threat of a communist inspired revolution in the United States, and this perceived threat became the overriding explanation given for any supposed challenges to the existing social order.³⁶ The advocacy of African Americans for racial equality, an improvement in labour rights and non-discrimination, and the right to self-defence for victims of mob violence was thus viewed with alarming concern by many Americans, including authorities.³⁷ This ‘First Red Scare’ was intrinsically linked to the alleged spread of communist sentiments amongst the American labour movements. These labour movements themselves were in uptick over working conditions, unrest and labour competition, which particularly inflamed the resentment of white workers.³⁸ Simultaneously, many African Americans from rural Southern states were motivated by poor economic conditions, ubiquitous lynchings and the prevalence of racial segregation, discrimination under Jim Crow to move en-mass towards to the urban North-East and the West of the United States in what is known as the ‘Great Migration’.³⁹

The mobilization of troops during the War and the cut-off of migration from Europe caused many of those urban, industrial cities to experience extreme labour shortages; a problem northern manufacturers sought to resolve by recruiting from the South. Positions in many expanding industries during wartime, as well as many of the existing jobs that were formerly occupied by whites were filled by this influx. During the strikes of 1917 — and at a peak of the Great Migration — some cities specifically hired these African Americans as strikebreakers, further fueling resentment amongst white workers.⁴⁰ The rapid demobilization that occurred in the aftermath of World War I also saw many white workers who had left their jobs to fight on European battlefields return to an economic slump in the post WWI recession. There was no plan in place to absorb the returning veterans back into the job market, and with the removal of price controls, the increasing unemployment and inflation spurred competition for jobs as well as racial resentments among many working-class white people.⁴¹

Many black veterans on the other hand returned to the United States to be re-confronted with Jim Crow conditions, spurring a new wave of advocacy for social reform. The aforementioned Du Bois saw in this return and reinvigorated spirit the opportunity to

³⁶ McWhirter, p.8-9.

³⁷ Krugler, p.5.

³⁸ McWhirter, p.54-55; Ackerman, p.23.

³⁹ McWhirter, p.19, 22-24.

⁴⁰ McWhirter, p.18.

⁴¹ McWhirter, p.13.

“fight a sterner, longer, more unbending battle against the forces of hell in our own land.”⁴² This advocacy and critique of racial inequality in turn bolstered anti-Bolshevik sentiment and the furtherance of the Red Scare. In private conversations of president Woodrow Wilson that were had in March of 1919 in which the threat of the spread of communist sentiments throughout the United States after demobilization were discussed, Wilson is reported as having said the following;

"the American Negro returning from abroad would be our greatest medium in conveying Bolshevism to America."⁴³

The variety of growing social and racial tensions and antagonisms that conspired together to form this changing landscape formed a volatile base of kindling wood strewn over the fabric of U.S. society that combined could easily lend itself to a violent flashpoint. As is illustrated by the violent events of the Red Summer and beyond, such a flashpoint was easily found.

White Backlash

The concept of ‘white backlash’ — otherwise known as ‘white rage’ — encompasses the response that is often mounted by white people as the majority group to the racial progress achieved by other ethnic (minority) groups in terms of legal rights, economic opportunities, and the achievement of political self-determination, racial and cultural parity, or dominance. The concept is prominently examined by the American academic Carol Anderson in her book *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide* (2016). Anderson — who’s research has focussed on public policy and its relation to race, equality and justice — details an account of white backlash in the United States that shows how the country’s history and institutions that perpetuated the structural racism that benefited white people, have simultaneously fomented a sense of anger and resentment among white people against black people.⁴⁴ Anderson’s analysis of U.S. history chronicles a trend showing that whenever African Americans made gains in terms of social power, a considerable backlash from white people followed. Within this context, she describes the Jim Crow era and the accompanying spread of segregationist legislation as a direct response and backlash against the progress made during the Reconstruction era after the end of the Civil War.⁴⁵ Regarding this historical

⁴² McWhirter, p.14.

⁴³ McWhirter, p.56.

⁴⁴ Anderson, p.4-5.

⁴⁵ Anderson, p.6.

context and the cases of mass racial violence that will be studied in this thesis, I would extend this notion to these cases whereby instances of white supremacist narratives being publicly challenged equally inspire violent outrage.

In order to examine this sentiment it is important to understand these instances of mass racial violence — which are essentially examples of ethnic conflict in which racial *groups* clash, such as race riots — as a subset of racial violence. The United States has an equally long history of racial violence, perhaps best exemplified by the prevalence of the practice of lynching which was a common instrument of white supremacy. A common narrative within white supremacy related to the perpetration of violence relies on the notion that white violence is a necessary component to maintaining the existing racial hierarchy. Any supposed transgression on behalf of African Americans that can challenge either the privileged position of white Americans or their direct safety would thus justify the necessary violence to squash this challenge. When combined with the prominent portrayal of African Americans as being more prone to commit violence or as inherently dangerous to white people, these tropes (or ideas or narratives or beliefs) breed the circumstances under which mass racial violence, especially white-on-black mob violence, proliferates. Instances of mass racial violence furthermore tend to increase the focus on the universal characteristics of the groups involved; in essence the racial identities. This will be examined in the following chapter of this thesis with the proliferation of mass racial violence at the beginning of the interwar period.

A perhaps poignant example of this vitriolic backlash occurred some years before the First World War during the early twentieth century. In 1908, the African American boxer Jack Johnson managed to become the first black heavyweight champion — the sports' most elite title — by beating Canadian Tommy Burns, the reigning world champion.⁴⁶ Although he was initially denied the ability to compete for the title, Johnson ultimately was granted an opportunity after taunting Burns, beating him in front of thousands of spectators. Johnson's victory spurred incredible amounts of racial animosity, even leading to the call for a 'Great White Hope' to reclaim the title.⁴⁷ The taping of the fight became infamous and its dissemination was even banned in numerous countries. At the height of the Jim Crow era, the public challenge of the narrative of white supremacy and his publicized victory over — and literal beating of — a white man made Johnson into a public threat to white superiority.

⁴⁶ Early, paragraph 1.

⁴⁷ Early, paragraph 13.

Efforts were mounted to dethrone Johnson, and his subsequent victories spurred numerous race riots across the nation.

Examples like these serve to illustrate how white backlash, especially to challenges of the narratives of white superiority, could be deeply ingrained in the perpetration and perpetuation of racial violence. Such instances of explicitly visible violence functioned as an instrument for the proliferation of white supremacy and the social subordination of people of colour.

Chapter II - A Look at the Newspapers

The early years of the interwar period in the United States saw a proliferation of mass racial violence as a result of the conjunction of factors discussed in this thesis's first chapter. The violent outbursts that occurred during this period and their coverage form the underpinnings to the sources that will be discussed in this second chapter. Although these events will be discussed, as some notion of what occurred is essential to examining their coverage, they are not themselves the topic of study for this thesis. I highly encourage all who wish to learn more about these events themselves to delve into the plethora of popular and historiographical works written about events such as the Red Summer and the Tulsa Race Massacre. What is of particular interest to me is the manners in which these forms of violence were represented after they occurred and what prominent narratives can be distinguished. Before one can delve into the source material, it is thus important to bear in mind that — as is established in the introduction — this chapter is primarily concerned with the portrayal of these events and the impressions these portrayals would have left on contemporary readers.⁴⁸ The focus will therefore lie on how the different racial identities and groups of people are represented in these contemporary sources, and how the different elements of these violent events are portrayed. What garners the most attention? Who is portrayed as the instigator? Who as the victim?

Whereas the spectacle element of lynchings could in many cases be contained to those physically present — and the perception of that same reality was not necessarily filtered through a medium — that day's newspaper headlines could bring these events to an even wider audience.

The Red Summer

During the summer of 1919, a cascade of racial riots and white supremacist terrorism swept through the United States, as violence was sparked in dozens of cities. In most of these instances, white-on-black violence formed the primary component of the riots, although numerous African Americans also resisted the mob violence and fought back, primarily in the

⁴⁸ As will be shown in the following examples, the nature of unfolding events depicted in these newspapers will occasionally include a semblance of inaccuracies compared to our current-day understanding of how these events transpired. Since in many cases these events were being covered as they developed — and these inaccuracies are often published based on limited information available to the writers and could later be corrected — the focus of this thesis is on the manners in which these events were portrayed. It is not my intention to impune either the intentions of characters of these newspapers or their writers, or to 'fact-check' historical sources, as I feel that these papers should be viewed *an sich* for the impressions they left behind.

cases of the Washington D.C. and Chicago race riots, where fifteen and thirty-eight people died respectively, combined with a plentitude of injured and destruction.

Between July 19th and July 24th, 1919, Washington D.C. was roused by a wave of civil unrest. A mob of white men, many of whom were service members, had responded to the arrest of an African American man for the supposed rape of a white woman by perpetrating attacks against black individuals and businesses for a four-day period.⁴⁹ The mob rioted, pulled black people off streetcars and beat people at random. After law enforcement failed to intervene in the violence, the black population began to fight back against the mob violence. President Wilson eventually ordered federal troops to establish control in the capital after four days of police inaction. After the violence subsided, five black people and ten white people had died, including two police officers, marking one of the few instances in the country's history of racial violence in which white fatalities made up the majority.⁵⁰

During these four days, the violence was fanned by the four white-owned local D.C. newspapers — *The Evening Star*, *The Times*, *The Herald* and *The Post* — with inflammatory headlines, including calls for a “clean-up” operation to be mobilized published in *The Post* under the banner “Mobilization for Tonight,” according to *The Washington Post* themselves.⁵¹

The Washington Times opens on July 21st with the frontpage headline “Negroes in Automobile Fire at Group of Sailors; Escape”, describing how a group of “negro desperadoes” opened fire on white service members near a hospital.⁵²



The Washington Times, Final Edition of July 21st, 1919.

Only at the end of the succeeding article — near the bottom of the front page and in a comparatively miniscule font size — does the paper mention “Eight Negroes Hurt” as a result

⁴⁹ Krugler, p.12-14.

⁵⁰ Ackerman, p.59-62.

⁵¹ *The Washington Post*, Mar. 1, 1999.

⁵² *The Washington Times*, Jul. 21, 1919, p.1.

of the street fighting. The continuation of the article on the paper's second page finally makes mention of how a group of African Americans was pulled from streetcars, but does so beneath a headline that echoes that of the frontpage.⁵³ The following day, on July 22nd, *The Times* chronicles the further rioting, printing a map of downtown Washington highlighting the areas where rioting had occurred the previous night. Printed beside this map is a headline announcing calls for martial law to be introduced, above an article that mentions how "Both whites and blacks are warned of the consequences that will ensue if the streets are crowded tonight and another blood orgy is staged."⁵⁴ An emphasis is thereby put on how both groups are equally responsible for the agitation and escalation of violence.

The next two days of coverage are devoted to the calls for martial law to come into effect and the hope for federal troops under Maj.Gen. Haan to reestablish order in the capital.⁵⁵ On the 23rd — despite hostilities seemingly having continued on both sides — *The Times* devotes frontpage space to the shooting of two officers by a "feather-brained negro."⁵⁶ The article is referring here to two Home Defense League officers — these were volunteer special officers who during the First World War assisted the Metropolitan Police Department. On July 27th, *The Washington Times* ran a frontpage article with the headline "Negro Held for Death of Youth Shot During Riot" in all capital letters.⁵⁷ Between the outbreak of the riots and that point, no frontpage headline in *The Times* had been devoted to the violence and crimes committed specifically by the white mob.

Another newspaper, *The Washington Herald*, opened its own coverage on July 20th with a relatively modestly sized article, taking up a single column on the far right of the page, announcing "Two Shot; 4 Hurt in D.C. Race Riots," in which it describes a battle between "Blacks" and soldiers who sought to "Avenge Attack on White Woman."⁵⁸ In this article *The Herald* notably makes use of the term 'colored' as opposed to the language seen in *The Times*. It switched from this approach the following day, July 21st, featuring a modestly sized article headline reading "Score of Negroes Hurt as Race Riot Spreads."⁵⁹ Printed below is an article that mentions "unorganized mobs" attacking African Americans in a search for vengeance. During the following three days — there was no issue on the 22nd, so on the 23rd and 24th — *The Herald* devoted more and more attention to the fate of white residents and

⁵³ *The Washington Times*, Jul. 21, 1919, p.1-2.

⁵⁴ *The Washington Times*, Jul. 22, 1919, p.1.

⁵⁵ *The Washington Times*, Jul. 23, 1919, p.1; *The Washington Times*, Jul. 24, 1919, p.1

⁵⁶ *The Washington Times*, Jul. 23, 1919, p.1.

⁵⁷ *The Washington Times*, Jul. 27, 1919, p.1.

⁵⁸ *The Washington Herald*, Jul. 20, 1919, p.1.

⁵⁹ *The Washington Herald*, Jul. 21, 1919, p.1.

police officers who were hurt or targeted during the violence, calling the events a “Clash of Races.”⁶⁰

News of the events in Washington D.C. would make headlines across the nation in the days following the initial outburst of violence, and despite the fact that the Red Summer’s violent clashes visited many cities across the nation, the news cycle would mainly be dominated by the events in the capital. While the Washington D.C. riots were still ongoing, a comparatively smaller riot occurred for example in the Harlem neighborhood of New York City on July 20th. During this time however, the frontpages of the prominent *New York Tribune* made no mention of the tumult occurring in its own city even as it reports how “Washington is Swept by Race Riots” on July 22th, and printed “White Man Slashed; Woman is Attacked” on its frontpage on the 23rd while reporting on the fresh outbreaks of violence in the capital.⁶¹

The New York Times by contrast, does make note of this outbreak of violence, although its July 20th headline; “War Talk Starts Riot in Harlem; Negro Fires Upon Fleeing White Man Following an Argument” is relegated to a single column on page fourteen of that day’s publication.⁶² The article, describes how “an altercation between a white man and a negro” resulted from an argument about the ongoing war, when “in a few minutes the negro became very much excited”.⁶³ As the African American man — the gender of the African American in question is actually left unspecified in the article, being solely referred to as a or the ‘negro’, although it can be inferred the argument occurred between two men — pulled a pistol when the white man disputed some statement he had made.⁶⁴ Five shots were reportedly fired as the white man fled; “all of them wild and two of them striking persons in nowise [an archaic word meaning ‘in no way or manner’] concerned in the row.”⁶⁵ The sound of the gunshots drew a great crowd into the streets, as upon their arrival, local police officers found the block to be “jammed from curb to curb with several thousand excited negroes.”⁶⁶ As the police attempted to disperse the crowd, they were reportedly fired upon from windows along the street which flared up the rioting all over again.

⁶⁰ *The Washington Herald*, Jul. 23, 1919, p.1; *The Washington Herald*, Jul. 24, 1919, p.1.

⁶¹ *New York Tribune*, Jul. 22, 1919, p.1; *New York Tribune*, Jul. 23, 1919, p.1.

⁶² *The New York Times*, Jul. 20, 1919, p.14.

⁶³ *The New York Times*’s article also reports how the riot broke out in “the negro district of Harlem” shortly before midnight, and mentions how the police classified the riot as “one of the worst that has occurred in that part of the city” in recent months. *The New York Times*, Jul. 20, 1919, p.14.

⁶⁴ *The New York Times*, Jul. 20, 1919, p.14.

⁶⁵ *The New York Times*, Jul. 20, 1919, p.14.

⁶⁶ *The New York Times*, Jul. 20, 1919, p.14.



The New York Times, Edition of July 20th, 1919, page 14.

The New York Times's article depicts a narrative of an easily agitated African American, who wildly and recklessly resorted to the use of violence after what was supposedly an initially civil argument concerning the war, resulting in both the wounding of two bystanders and the sparking of a larger riot.

Another prominent newspaper in New York City at this time was *The Sun* — while going by many different names, including *The New York Sun*, since its inception in 1833 due to a variety of mergers and splittings, by 1919 it was known simply as *The Sun* — which much like the *New York Tribune* made no mention in their coverage of the events in Harlem during this time period instead devoting attention to the simultaneous riots in the capitol.



The Sun, Edition of July 22nd, 1919.

The coverage of the riots in Washington D.C. by *The Sun* echoes much of the coverage by other large newspapers mentioned earlier in this chapter. One of the snippet headlines above the column on the right-hand side of the passage describing the previous night's events plainly reads in all capital letters; "Near War In Capital", as directly below, another header reads; "800 Negroes Defy Guns and Attack Car with Theatregoers."⁶⁷ The article goes on to

⁶⁷ *The Sun*, Jul. 22, 1919, p.1.

make note of the deaths of detective Harry Wilson, who was shot through the heart by an African American woman, patrolman George Thompson, who died after having been shot earlier in the day, and the death of a young white boy who died en-route to the hospital. A header halfway down the column sums up the sentiment of the following content by simply stating; “Negroes Start Trouble.”⁶⁸ The writers state how African American residents, who had up until that day been the victims of the “race war”, had started all the reported violence of the previous night by gathering in the hundreds and attacking automobiles, streetcars and pedestrians with the streets of the capitol becoming ever more dangerous as “the crowds were getting into a dangerously ugly mood.”⁶⁹

A perhaps interesting mention is made at the end of the column on the first page, proclaiming that a situation such as this had only been witnessed once before, when the news broke that Jim Jeffries had failed to retake the heavyweight championship title from the first black champion, Jack Johnson — Jeffries was supposed to function as the ‘Great White Hope’ mentioned at the end of chapter one of this thesis — and riots ensued. *The Sun*’s article makes a comment on how the reader should perceive these two events by saying; “That was a riot. This situation was nearer to war.”⁷⁰

Different Types of Messaging

In contrast to the large and predominantly white newspapers, some smaller publications did attempt to provide a different narrative. *The Chicago Whip* — a weekly African American newspaper publishing under the moniker “Make America and “Democracy” Safe for the Negro” — wrote on the events in the capital in its July 25th edition and opens with a more neutrally worded headline.⁷¹

⁶⁸ *The Sun*, Jul. 22, 1919, p.1.

⁶⁹ *The Sun*, Jul. 22, 1919, p.1.

⁷⁰ *The Sun*, Jul. 22, 1919, p.1-2.

⁷¹ *The Chicago Whip*, Jul. 25, 1919, p.1.



The Chicago Whip, Edition of July 25th, 1919.

Its frontpage is dedicated to describing how U.S. service members “through the influence of the southern element” formed numerous violent mobs and attacked “peaceful colored residents,” and depicts the actions of African Americans as a just act of self defence against a “fiendish mob.”⁷² Just two days later, Chicago itself would be engulfed in a week-long spree of racial violence that lasted from July 27th to August 3rd. The next weekly issue which would have been printed amidst this week-long riot in Chicago, although having existed — as is indicated by the numbering of the two surrounding publications presented here — appears not to have been preserved for posterity. *The Whip*’s August 9th edition continues in the trend established in the issue discussed above, detailing the efforts to block Jim Crow legislation in the wake of the violence in Chicago and reporting on the court appearance of a white man accused of starting the riot and his impudent attitude towards the judge.⁷³

In stark contrast to *The Whip* and its message, *The Chicago Daily Tribune* — long considered as perhaps Chicago’s most antagonistic newspaper vis-à-vis African Americans — speaks in its July 28th edition of a “Crowd of Howling Negroes.”⁷⁴ In covering the events of that week, the Tribune details the violence perpetrated against and the injuries sustained by white policemen at the hands of black rioters and the good deeds of these officers sent into Chicago’s South Side.

The Whip’s August 15th edition remarks in its headline how many of the riot victims are planning on bringing legal action against the city of Chicago for the losses they sustained during the riots.⁷⁵ Interestingly enough in regard to the topic of this thesis, that same

⁷² *The Chicago Whip*, Jul. 25, 1919, p.1.

⁷³ *The Chicago Whip*, Aug. 9, 1919, p.1.

⁷⁴ *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, Jul. 28, 1919, p.1.

⁷⁵ *The Chicago Whip*, Aug. 15, 1919, p.1.

frontpage also contains an article which comments on the state of recent news coverage surrounding the riots that occurred around the United States during the summer of 1919, especially those in Washington D.C. Its headline reads “James W. Johnson Tells Acts Concerning Recent Riots in Washington. Washington Newspapers Failed to Tell Acts of Whites Committed.”⁷⁶ The article describes how James Weldon Johnson — the same field secretary for the NAACP also mentioned in the introduction of this thesis as having coined the term Red Summer — has performed an investigation in the Southern U.S. into a version of directed propaganda that has been successful “in establishing in the public mind the idea that there is a direct relation of cause and effect between rape and mob violence against the negro.”⁷⁷ According to the article, and by extension Johnson, the Washington riots echo this trend and act as proof of this propagandistic tendency as these “newspapers have been filled with “attacks on white women” as an excuse for mob violence and the riots.”⁷⁸ This tendency also shows how many newspapers call upon African Americans to first express their disapproval of and cease committing the underlying crimes that ‘caused’ the lynchings and riots before they protest these lynchings themselves. In essence, lynchings and riots are portrayed and justified as being logical and natural responses to crimes committed by African Americans.⁷⁹

Beneath the headline, *The Whip*’s frontpage also hosts an illustration entitled ‘Apologies In Order’, depicting “the editor of a certain weekly newspaper” who can be seen saying “If anybody wants to know where I am, tell em Im outa th’ city”, which provides commentary on the recent riots and their respective news coverage.⁸⁰

⁷⁶ The archived version of *The Whip*’s August 15th, 1919 edition has unfortunately been rather poorly preserved in places, including the headline in question here. While parts of this headline and article are illegible due to a set of physical problems with the scanned version of the paper, I have made an attempt to reconstruct these sentences. *The Chicago Whip*, Aug. 15, 1919, p.1, 10.

⁷⁷ *The Chicago Whip*, Aug. 15, 1919, p.1

⁷⁸ *The Chicago Whip*, Aug. 15, 1919, p.1, 10.

⁷⁹ The article does furthermore go on to mention that this propaganda is based on a statistical falsehood, wherein rape is not found to be the cause of the majority of lynchings, and violence often originates from white Americans in these cases. *The Chicago Whip*, Aug. 15, 1919, p.1, 10.

⁸⁰ *The Chicago Whip*, Aug. 15, 1919, p.1



The Chicago Whip, Edition of August 15th, 1919.

The man in the background can be seen saying “The Paper should be called The Chicago Surrender”, which appears to be a play-on-words in reference to the name of *The Chicago Defender* newspaper.⁸¹

As Chicago’s leading black newspaper, *The Chicago Defender* — much like the city’s leading white newspapers — aided in fomenting the escalation of rioting and racial violence that swept through Chicago. *The Chicago Defender* for example ran an article on August 2nd, which told an unsubstantiated account of an as yet unidentified black woman and her baby being beaten by a mob, and later ran the headline “Ghastly Deeds of Race Rioters Told” on September 2nd.⁸² The black press at *The Chicago Defender* can be seen to rival their counterparts at major white outlets in their daily efforts to provide and recount the most sensational, and often the most gruesome accounts of the ongoing clashes and riots.

One major white outlet, the *Chicago Daily News*, was one of the city’s daily newspapers that was perhaps the most balanced and even-handed in its coverage of the violence. Yet even the *Chicago Daily News* can be seen as having inflamed tensions by publishing unsubstantiated accounts of violence during the riots. The newspaper printed an article by the poet Carl Sandburg on its frontpage of July 28th, 1919, wherein Sandburg used and relied on black sources in his research, unlike most white reporters of the day. The same front page however also hosts a bulletin which describes the plans of “three hundred negroes” — many of whom were supposedly armed as they had gathered — to retaliate against white

⁸¹ *The Chicago Whip*, Aug. 15, 1919, p.1

⁸² *The Chicago Defender*, Sep. 2, 1919, p.1.

rioters, as “it is believed that they intend to start an immediate attack on whites of the neighborhood.”⁸³

Beyond the Major Cities

The ubiquitous and widespread nature of the violence that swept across the United States during the summer of 1919 meant that some of the comparatively less impactful events or outbreaks of violence would get significantly less attention in the nation’s newscycle, especially with the events in Washington D.C. and Chicago dominating headlines across the country for multiple days on end.

Emblematic of this phenomenon is perhaps the events in Syracuse, New York of July 31st, 1919 where an outbreak of racial violence occurred when striking white unionized workers were pitted against black strike-breakers by the management of the Globe Malleable Iron Works. The ironworks were dependent upon Italian and Polish workers, who went on strike during the summer. The plant brought in black workers as a replacement in hopes of breaking the strike. Rising animosity amongst the white workers resulted in a violent clash with the African American strike-breakers, and violence ultimately ended when the entire police force of Syracuse was activated by city officials. The incident illustrates the link between racial tensions and economic tensions during the start of the interwar period. In terms of reporting on the violence, much of the news coverage was relegated to a single news bulletin published verbatim in multiple newspapers.

“Feeling between white strikers and black strikebreakers at the Globe Malleable Iron Works here to-day was running following a clash late yesterday in which sticks and stones were used freely. Police stopped the battle.”

The Evening World, Final Edition of July 31st, 1919, page 8.

New York City’s *The Evening World* ran this bulletin under the headline “Rioting Quickly Checked in Syracuse.”⁸⁴ Newspapers around the United States ran the same bulletin, for example the *San Antonio Express News*, which ran the bulletin under the header “Strikebreakers In Race Clash.”

Although much of the violent outbursts swept through larger cities, outliers to this trend existed, such as the events that occurred in one rural Arkansas county. On October 5th, 1919, the headline “Evidence Found Of Negro Society That Brought On Rioting” ran in

⁸³ *Chicago Daily News*, Jul. 28, 1919, p.1.

⁸⁴ *The Evening World*, Jul. 31, 1919, p.8.

Oklahoma's *Daily Ardmoreite* above a reprint of a piece written in Helena, Arkansas, the previous day.⁸⁵ The article is referring to a massacre that occurred in Elaine, Arkansas, between September 30th and October 1st and, in an attempt to determine the “source of agitation in the negro uprising,” refers to the “existence of an organization adaptable as the instrument of insurrection.”⁸⁶ The organization in question was the Progressive Farmers and Household Union of America (PFHUA)⁸⁷ which aimed to improve the working conditions of black sharecroppers and alleviate exploitation by securing better payments from white plantation owners that dominated the area under Jim Crow. Several PFHUA leaders are named and depicted as agitators in the article. The article furthermore does make note of casualties, mentioning five white and fifteen black deaths — in an event which left as many as several hundred African Americans dead, compared to the five white men who were killed making it the deadliest event during the Red Summer — but squarely places the blame among black “ringleaders” who were the “prime movers in the agitation.”⁸⁸ *The New York Times* covered the events in Elaine as well. Its coverage begins on October 2nd, 1919, with a dispatch from Helena, Arkansas that reports the deaths of two white men and seven African Americans resulting from clashes with a white posse that sought to avenge the ambush of white railroad agent, and states the belief that the rioting was caused by propaganda distributed amongst African Americans.⁸⁹ The following day, on October 3rd, expands upon tallies of the deaths and suffering in the riots, with part of the headline of the article reading “Trouble Traced to Socialist Agitators.”⁹⁰ *The New York Times* ran a frontpage headline on October 6th, that stated in all capital letters “Planned Massacre of Whites Today”, continuing beneath that with “Negroes Seized in Arkansas Riots Confess to Widespread Plot Among Them” and reports that African Americans in Elaine had a secret password to communicate an uprising and a courier system to relay messages.⁹¹

The Tulsa Race Massacre

Between May 31st and June 1st, 1921, the city of Tulsa, Oklahoma was scarred by an event that could perhaps be described as one of the single worst incidents of racial violence

⁸⁵ *The Daily Ardmoreite*, Oct. 5, 1919, p.1.

⁸⁶ *The Daily Ardmoreite*, Oct. 5, 1919, p.1.

⁸⁷ In the article this organization is seemingly erroneously referred to as the *Protective** Farmers and Household Union of America.

⁸⁸ *The Daily Ardmoreite*, Oct. 5, 1919, p.1.

⁸⁹ *The New York Times*, Oct. 2, 1919, p.4.

⁹⁰ *The New York Times*, Oct. 3, 1919, p.6.

⁹¹ *The New York Times*, Oct. 6, 1919, p.1.

throughout American history, as Black residents were attacked by a White mob that tore through Tulsa's Greenwood District — colloquially referred to as Black Wall Street — leaving over thirty-five square blocks of the neighborhood in flames and ashes.⁹² The events that unfolded during those hours saw over eight hundred being admitted to hospitals, dozens of deaths, thousands of Black residents being interned, and many more being displaced from their homes.⁹³ A White mob invaded Greenwood during the night and following morning, killing men and setting fire to buildings. The events that unfolded throughout the night would make headlines the following morning and many newspapers, such as the local *The Morning Tulsa Daily World*, ran several editions and extras throughout the 1st of June to cover events as they progressed and information became available. *The Morning Tulsa Daily World*, henceforth referred to as *The World*, was a local Tulsa newspaper that had been established in 1905. By 1921 it had established its presence and credibility after a years-long editorial battle against its rival *Tulsa Democrat* paper.

The World's final edition of June 1st (i.e. the first print) opens with the headline “Two Whites Dead in Race Riot” in all capital letters.⁹⁴



The Morning Tulsa Daily World, Final Edition of June 1st, 1921.

⁹² The sparking incident in the massacre occurred on June 30th, when a 19-year-old Black shoeshine named Dick Rowland was accused of assaulting Sarah Page, a 17-year-old white elevator operator. It remains unclear to what extent Page and Rowland knew each other or what precisely occurred. After Rowland's arrest rumours spread throughout Tulsa that he would be lynched, and upon learning that a mob of hundreds of White men had converged on the jailhouse, some 75 Black men — some of whom were armed — arrived at the jail to prevent this. After being persuaded to leave by the sheriff, the group reportedly encountered an elderly White man who attempted to disarm one of the Black men resulting in shots being fired and chaos ensuing. The exchange of gunfire left 10 White and 2 Black individuals dead, after which the group fled back to Greenwood. As news of the shooting unfurled throughout Tulsa, mob violence exploded.

⁹³ A 2001 state commission that examined contemporary historical records such as death certificates and autopsy reports was able to confirm 39 deaths — of which 26 were Black and 13 White — although their estimates of actual fatalities range from 75 to well-over 300. Oklahoma Commission, p.13, 23, 114.

⁹⁴ *The Morning Tulsa Daily World*, Jun. 1, 1921, Final Edition, p.1.

A tiny bulletin by comparison — measuring shorter than the “Whites” in the page’s headline — added to an article seemingly written earlier in the day, notifies the reader that; “There are two dead negroes at the Frisco Depot”. The newspaper describes the events as a race war raging for hours throughout Tulsa’s streets, characterizing it as a “Battle Between the Races,” and notes the deployment of the National Guard. The bulletin is printed below a header which reads “Negroes Finally Driven Into “Little Africa” Where 1,000 Armed Blacks Are Reported at Bay...”.⁹⁵ Throughout the multiple headlines and articles, an emphasis is, to all appearances, put on the condition and fate of the white residents of Tulsa. *The World* ran three extra editions on the 1st of June, with the first extra including a header below the headline, in all capital letters, reading “Negro Death List is About 15” on the other side of the page from a rerun of the aforementioned bulletin and article describing events as a race war. The article printed below describes the actions of the armed white mob encircling “Little Africa” in cars and advancing into the neighborhood, resulting in the deaths of multiple Black residents.⁹⁶ Later in the day the headline of *The World*’s second extra of the day, again in all capitals, plainly reads “Many More Whites are Shot” and devotes its center page to “the scores of casualties among the whites”.⁹⁷



The Morning Tulsa Daily World, Second Extra Edition of June 1st, 1921.

The third and final extra chronicles the end of the rioting with state troops being in charge of the situation, and now makes note of Black Tulsa residents being “Driven From Burning ‘Black Belt’” and fleeing the city.⁹⁸

⁹⁵ *The Morning Tulsa Daily World*, Jun. 1, 1921, Final Edition, p.1.

⁹⁶ *The Morning Tulsa Daily World*, Jun. 1, 1921, First Extra Edition, p.1.

⁹⁷ *The Morning Tulsa Daily World*, Jun. 1, 1921, Second Extra Edition, p.1.

⁹⁸ *The Morning Tulsa Daily World*, Jun. 1, 1921, Third Extra Edition, p.1.

The following days would see many more words and headlines being devoted to the events that transpired, examining death toles, the amount of destruction, and — perhaps most interestingly — the reasons why violence broke out. On June 3rd, below a headline announcing a grand jury probe into the violence, *The World's* centerpage reads “Negro Deputy Sheriff Blames Black Dope-Head for Inciting His Race Into Rioting Here”.⁹⁹ The article describes how Barney Cleaver, the officer in question, depicts a group of black residents, some of whom were killed or wounded, as being responsible for the outbreak of violence and blames them for the ensuing carnage. Cleaver’s “True Version of Negroes’ Side in Terrorism...” describes these men as unemployed and as having no ambition other than to foment trouble. A frontpage article on June 6th moreover reads “Black Agitators Blamed For Riot” in all capital letters as it describes the sentiment of a local bishop, named Mouzon, who cited the visit of a “Radical Negro” as one cause for the “battle”.¹⁰⁰ The bishop is referring to W.E.B Du Bois, mentioned earlier in this thesis as the editor for *The Crisis* i.a. Bishop Mouzon goes on to assert how the white citizenry of Tulsa overlooked crime and allowed the now-destroyed neighborhood to become a “Festering Sore” in the city. The adjacent article also names the “Invasion of Business District by Armed Negroes” as a cause of the riots.¹⁰¹

Much like the events of the Red Summer, the riots in Tulsa would also break into the national news cycle to a certain extent. For example, *The New York Herald* — a split-off of the aforementioned *The Sun* newspaper — devotes an entire column on the frontpage of its June 2nd, 1921 edition to reporting on the events and rioting in Tulsa “which began when several hundred armed blacks poured out of Little Africa.”¹⁰² The article by *The Herald* mentions multiple blocks being burned by the white mob, and hosts discussion of the supposed death toll which is unknown at this point. The multiple headers above the article however, predominantly make mention of violence being committed by African Americans who started shooting at the jailhouse as well as the report that “White Women Are Being Dragged Into Dens.”¹⁰³

⁹⁹ *The Morning Tulsa Daily World*, Jun. 3, 1921, Final Edition, p.1.

¹⁰⁰ *The Morning Tulsa Daily World*, Jun. 6, 1921, Final Edition, p.1.

¹⁰¹ *The Morning Tulsa Daily World*, Jun. 6, 1921, Final Edition, p.1.

¹⁰² *The New York Herald*, Jun. 2, 1921, p.1.

¹⁰³ *The New York Herald*, Jun. 2, 1921, p.1-2.



The New York Herald, Edition of June 2nd, 1921.

This again highlights a portrayal of white Americans, especially women, as being the predominant victims in racial violence. National coverage of the Tulsa Race Massacre relied on the relay of information from Tulsa, and thus often lagged behind local coverage of the events.

Contemporary news coverage of the Tulsa Race Massacre, especially in the local sphere, outwardly put an emphasis on the supposed equal-sided contributions to violent escalations, often blaming the Black community in Tulsa for inciting or provoking the events. Even though much factual information is presented in the articles and newspapers highlighted here, and the atrocities committed by the white mob are discussed, the use of selective headlines and the emphasis on the plight of ‘whites’ who were wounded or killed creates a certain biased narrative or perspective that squarely pushes the blame for these events to one side.

Chapter III - Prominent Narratives

The second chapter of this thesis has examined a wide variety of U.S. newspapers that reported on instances of mass racial violence in the early years of the interwar period between the events of the Red Summer of 1919 and the Tulsa Race Massacre in 1921. While a single column, article or even a mere headline undoubtedly possesses the capacity to alter people's perceptions of events, when examining the wider impact of these events and portrayals on a national consciousness it is important to look at the broader picture being painted throughout the majority of these portrayals. Therefore, in this third and final chapter I will begin by describing the general narrative and impressions left behind by the sources examined in the previous chapter, and explore how the portrayal of different racial identities affects the conceptions of the involved violence.

A Common Story

Whether it be the streets of downtown Charleston, the blocks around the nation's Capitol building, a rural county in Arkansas, or Tulsa's 'Black Wall Street', the portrayals published by a wide variety of newspapers of the events that occurred in all of these places possess more than just a few commonalities. These commonalities tell a story of who was hurt and who was responsible; who was the aggressor and who the victim; who instigated and who was justified in their actions. To a contemporary reader opening the morning's newspaper over breakfast, these portrayals can shape perceptions surrounding the racial identities that they discussed. On the basis of the sourced that I have highlighted in chapter two of this these, I posit that in the majority of newspapers — especially in large white-owned publications with a majority of the readership — attention is primarily given to the fate of and hurt befalling white people involved in these instance of mass racial violence, while the actions and atrocities committed by white mobs garner significantly less attention. Conversely, in the case of the African Americans involved, their hurt, casualties and suffering are relegated to lesser importance, while the violence or supposed violence committed by black people is highlighted.

In general, the essence of victimhood is thereby ascribed predominantly to white Americans, whereas black Americans are primarily portrayed as the aggressors or instigators of the violence. This is often done through the use of headlines that gather the majority of attention. Although information 'positive to both sides' is often presented, the suffering of

white people will make a headline, while the suffering of black people can be a comparatively minuscule bulletin. This disparate attention influences readers' perceptions. In other instances, explicit mention can be made of who is supposedly at fault or responsible for the outbreaks of violence. In the vast majority of cases, this blame will be put squarely in the hands of African Americans, either through direct condemnations or addressing a subset of pivotal instigators. When the violence committed by white people or white mobs is discussed, this can often be downplayed through obfuscation or alternatively it can be depicted as a justified response to some perceived threat. As a result, the violence committed in these instances of mass racial violence is associated predominantly with African Americans in these portrayals, while notions of victimhood are primarily associated with white Americans, often and especially in regard to women. This disparity is the core narrative being presented to contemporary readers.

Employing Language

In many of the instances highlighted in the previous chapter, journalists made use of repeated and overtly racialized language, which was used to denote different connotations between the different racial identities involved in these instances of mass racial violence. Whereas white Americans are in most instances referred to as such — or alternatively without a racial descriptor at all; hinting at the normative 'default' status given to white Americans — African Americans are repeatedly described by terms as 'colored' or 'negro', driving home a certain message to the readers. It serves to connect the identity portrayed, that of black Americans, to the acts that the use of this language is contextualized within.

As much mention has been made in this thesis up until now of the repeated use of terms such as 'negro', a brief examination of this term within the relevant time period is of use, as it did not necessarily hold the same connotations as it does today. It should be noted that within the context of the time period, the use of this specific language — i.e. these words *an sich* — was of course far more prevalent than it is today, and was often used as a blanket racial descriptor due to the different public attitudes towards the use of this language. The term superseded the use of the term 'colored' as the politest way to refer to African Americans at a time period when 'black' was considered to be more offensive (than it is today).¹⁰⁴ During much of the late Progressive era and the interwar period, the term was in fact used in abundance by African American leaders. For example, the influential Marcus Garvey used the term in both the *Universal Negro Improvement Association and African*

¹⁰⁴ Smith, p.496-498.

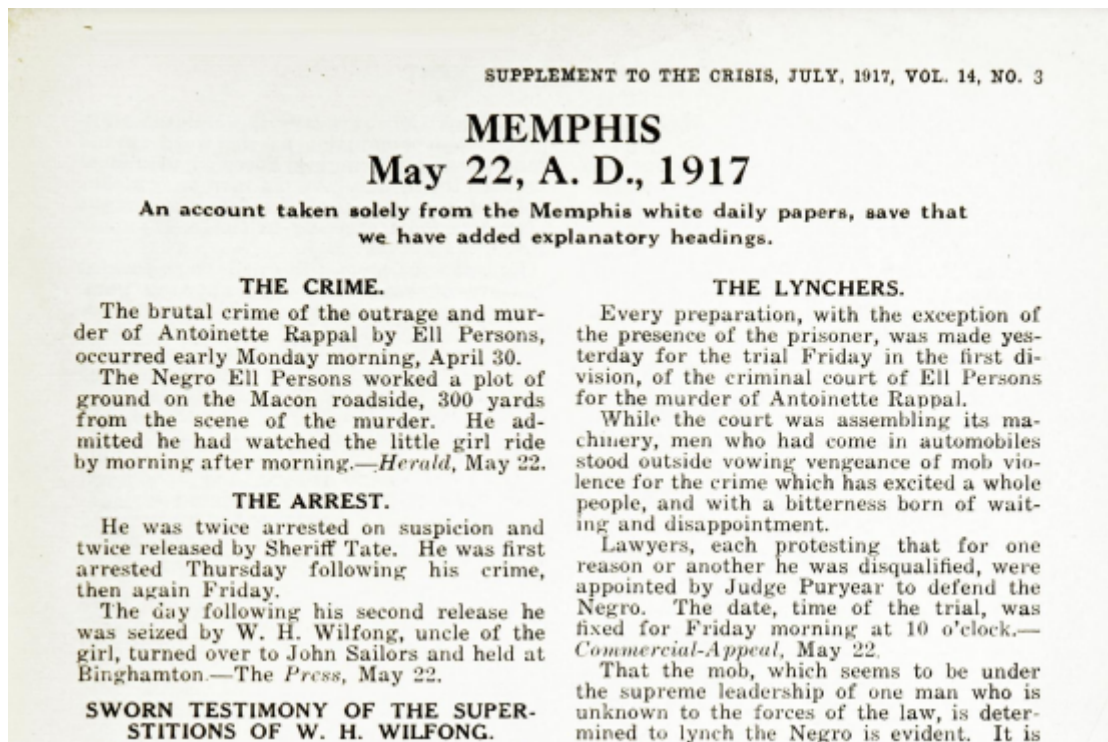
Communities League, which he co-founded, as well as the drafting of the 1920 *Declaration of the Rights of the Negro Peoples of the World*; the aforementioned W.E.B. Du Bois used it as the title of his 1915 book *The Negro* on African American history; and later The Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. used it as a term of self-identification in his famous 1963 ‘I Have a Dream’ speech. The second half of the twentieth century saw a rise of critique on the use of the term, both having deep connotations of racial subservience and being imposed upon African Americans by white people. The terms ‘black’ or ‘African American’ have since become the most commonly accepted descriptors.

It is thus not merely the use of these terms alone that warrant scrutiny within the context of the portrayals examined in chapter two — although some particular examples have been noted — but the combination of these racial descriptors with the certain acts of agitation, instigation and perpetration of violence that form the bulwark which defends and furthers the narratives of white supremacy. The frequency with which this language is invoked and the imbalance of its invocation between white and black racial identities is therefore emblematic of the narrative that is being presented to the reader. By using this continuously racialized language, in combination with an emphasis on white victimhood and the presentation of African Americans as perpetrators in these cases of violence, these examples of news media could be said to be an instrument for the furtherance of narratives that promote white supremacy.

The Construction of a Narrative

It is important to note that many of these prominent narratives that were present in both the portrayal and justification of racial violence — such as lynchings, race riots and massacres — during this time period, did not go completely ignored or unexamined by contemporary writers. One example of this includes the work of the aforementioned field secretary for the NAACP, James Weldon Johnson, who commented on the reporting surrounding the Washington D.C. riots of 1919, as is examined in chapter two. Before the events of 1919, Johnson’s work as a field secretary saw him rise quickly through the NAACP, notably through examples such as his travel to Memphis, Tennessee in 1917 to investigate the brutal lynching of Ell Persons. Johnson’s reporting was fashioned into a supplement entitled ‘Memphis’ which was published nationally alongside the July, 1917 issue of *The Crisis*.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵ Johnson, p.1-4.



‘Memphis’, issued as a supplement to the July, 1917 edition of *The Crisis*.

Johnson himself made a connection between the race riots in the Northern cities and the lynchings that proliferated throughout the Southern states, seeing a propagandistic tendency in the portrayal of both wherein news portrayals establish a relationship “of cause and effect between rape and mob violence against the negro.”¹⁰⁶ Johnson furthermore commented how the Washington D.C. newspapers remained largely silent on the atrocities committed by white mobs, while simultaneously being “filled with “attacks on white women” as an excuse for mob violence and the riots.”¹⁰⁷

Another notable contemporary, and one of the first to do so, who examined racial violence and the propaganda surrounding it, was the investigative journalist and co-founder of the NAACP, Ida B. Wells. Her work extensively documented lynchings during and following the 1890s in the United States, published in pamphlets such as *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in all its Phases* (1892) and *The Red Record* (1895), which documented a resurgence of white mob violence and lynchings through a study of mainstream white newspapers.¹⁰⁸ In doing so, Wells investigated propagandistic claims that lynchings were used against criminals — especially in cases of black rape — which were used to justify the practice. Needless to say, according to both Johnson and Wells’ investigations in many cases

¹⁰⁶ *The Chicago Whip*, Aug. 15, 1919, p.1.

¹⁰⁷ *The Chicago Whip*, Aug. 15, 1919, p.1.

¹⁰⁸ Wells-Barnett, p.iv-v.

where lynchings had occurred, this rhetoric concerning supposed rapes committed by African Americans turned out to either be grossly incorrect or completely fabricated.

Exposés such as these however, showed lynchings as a violent, barbaric and, crucially, as a visible practice that was utilized primarily by white Southerners to intimidate and further oppress African Americans, as historian Amy Louise Wood explains.¹⁰⁹ Lynchings acted as a form of psychological intimidation for African Americans, and as a form of spectacle and sensationalism for white Americans. Wood elaborates upon the same notions that contemporaries such as Johnson and Wells discussed, by remarking that “the specter of violated white women lay at the center of prolynching rhetoric.”¹¹⁰ The trope in question here relies on the figure of the supposed brute rapist who sought to brutalize and violate white women, that many white people associated with black men. This is a trend which resurfaces in some of the sources studied in chapter two, for example in James Weldon Johnson’s comments or the coverage of the D.C. riots, or in *The New York Herald’s* reporting on the Tulsa Race Massacre, which stated that white women in Tulsa were “being dragged into dens”.¹¹¹

**Fierce Attacks Made on Little
Africa When Report Spreads
White Women Are Being
Dragged Into Dens.**

The New York Herald, Edition of June 2nd, 1921.

According to Wood, this common figure of the black rapist struck at heart of American race relations and white supremacy, in the sense that “black autonomy not only diminished white men’s authority over African Americans but threatened their dominion over their own households and women.”¹¹²

In her book *White Fright: The Sexual Panic at the Heart of America's Racist History* (2020), historian Jane Dailey expands upon this same notion by arguing that a sense of white anxiety or fear surrounding black sexuality, as well as interracial sex and marriage has been a key component of white supremacy.¹¹³ Dailey posits that white Americans opposing racial equality were not merely motivated by some sense of innate superiority over black

¹⁰⁹ Wood, p.4-6.

¹¹⁰ Wood, p.7.

¹¹¹ *The New York Herald*, Jun. 2, 1921, p.1.

¹¹² Wood, p.7.

¹¹³ Dailey, p.10.

Americans, but that this white fright has undergirded their efforts.¹¹⁴ This anxiety was clearly also expressed in numerous of the most contentious events that characterize the study of U.S. race relations since the era of Reconstruction, including numerous lynchings and evidently — as shown by the examples mentioned above — in instances of mass racial violence.

However, whereas the term lynching is commonly used to refer to events involving violent (and white) mobs orchestrating attacks and killings, these events are usually focussed on singular individuals or small groups of people who are overwhelmingly but not exclusive part of minority groups; most commonly African Americans. The instances of mass racial violence discussed above, commonly described as race riots or massacres, differentiate themselves in the sense that — as is demonstrated previously — the violence they engendered was being perpetrated in a much more indiscriminate fashion against larger groups of people.¹¹⁵ In turn — and in contrast to some of the common spectacleized portrayals of lynchings that Wood highlights — an emphasis is put on the supposed violent nature of African Americans and the violence committed by African Americans in the portrayal of instances of mass racial violence in American newspapers. Many of the spectacle-like elements of the depictions of lynchings that Wood describes focus on the violence committed by white mobs. They depict a white violence and rage as being meant and utilized to frighten and suppress African Americans. These displays of violence are thereby a direct showcase of the white supremacy, racial hierarchies and the assumed innate superiority of white people that they enforce.

This can form a stark contrast to the depiction of white victimhood that is endemic to the narratives around mass racial violence explored in chapter two and formulated at the beginning of this chapter. Thereby the focus shifts slightly towards a portrayal that depicts African Americans as a danger to white Americans in general, and not merely as a dangerous threat to white women. This relies on the notion that displays of black autonomy are a challenge to white superiority, or event that the mere existence of non-white people in the United States simultaneously poses an existential threat to the existence of white people.¹¹⁶ Yet these portrayals equally function as a reinforcement of white supremacy by invoking a sense of white anxiety and anger that can in turn inspire a violent backlash.

¹¹⁴ Dailey, p.12.

¹¹⁵ The term ‘indiscriminate’ is here used to denote that the violence was being perpetrated against larger groups of people, not against specific individuals, and could generally be directed at anyone fitting a specific racial description. It is still — obviously — discriminatory in the sense that it targets specific racial groups; such as in white-on-black violence.

¹¹⁶ Many of these sentiments can be found today in fringe and racist conspiracy theories such as the notions of a White Genocide or the Great Replacement Theory.

As the prevalence of both mass racial violence and lynching as a practice would diminish in the later half of the interwar period¹¹⁷, an interesting avenue for further research could aim at examining the possible change in depictions of events of mass racial violence during these later years. Threats and acts of violence were in-and-of-themselves used prominently as an instrument for maintaining white supremacy, and thus the disparate attention paid to certain victims or certain perpetrators, the portrayal of one group as agitators, and the occlusion of information that counters this narrative, skews public perceptions. I argue that, specifically in the early years of the interwar period, a dominant narrative in American news media presents African Americans as perpetrators and agitators, and by extension, as a danger to white Americans, who themselves are often painted as the victims and as vulnerable to the aggressive acts perpetrated by black Americans.

¹¹⁷ Wood, p.261-262.

Conclusion and Final Remarks

From the streets of large coastal cities to rural counties, throughout Northern and Southern states, after the end of the First World War the presence of mass racial violence in the United States took on an exceedingly ubiquitous form. The waves of violence that swept through the United States in the form of race riots, massacres and other forms of mass racial violence showed a common thread of characteristics and the news of these events would go on to make headlines not just in the local sphere where they occurred, but throughout the country. This thesis has therefore looked at numerous examples of instances of mass racial violence in the first few years of the United States interwar period between the Red Summer of 1919 and the Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921 in an attempt to answer the following question.

'How did the U.S. news media in the early interwar period frame 'black' and 'white' racial identities in the context of events of mass racial violence and antagonism?'

In the introduction to this thesis, I called this timeframe a uniquely distinct periodization. The start of the interwar period saw a sharp rise in the prevalence of race riots and racial tensions. A variety of social, economic and political factors conspired to cause this surge in instances of mass racial violence, such as race riots and massacres, at the start of the interwar period. The economic slump that occurred during the post-WWI recession, the return of veterans from Europe after the war, the increased labor competition and unrest that inflamed the resentment of white workers, the First Red Scare which followed the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, and the political decisions of the Wilson administration highlighted and exacerbated existing racial tensions and antagonism at the start of the interwar period. These tensions lay the foundation for numerous events, such as the economic competition between white and black americans on the labor market and the clashing white worker and strikebreakers seen in Syracuse, New York, or the prevalent exploitation of and the attempted unionization by black sharecroppers and the resulting massacre in Elaine, Arkansas. Furthermore, in stark contrast to instances of racial riots that occurred earlier in U.S. history, the events of 1919 were notably also among the first instances of mass racial violence wherein substantial resistance was offered against white mob violence as African Americans resisted their attackers, although the majority of instances are still characterized predominantly by white-on-black violence.

The prevailing narrative that would have been presented to contemporary readers when examining the broad array of newspaper coverage concerning the instances of mass

racial violence that occurred during the early years of the interwar period, ascribes different levels of culpability or blame to black and white racial identities. Acts of violence that are described in these newspapers are more likely to be attributed to black people, while acts of violence committed by white mobs or individuals are less likely to make headlines. As a result, 'black' as an encompassing racial identity is more commonly framed as being the instigators of violence, the source or reason of committed acts of violence, or being to blame for this violence. Conversely, 'white' as a racial identity is more commonly framed in connection to the suffering of casualties, being victims of injuries, crimes or violence, or as being otherwise justified in defending themselves from acts of violence (through the committing of counter-violence). This disparity between racial identities helps cement the notion that one group is often the victim of the violence committed by the other.

These events distinguish themselves in their news depiction from different types of racial violence that was prominent in the United States during this same time period, such as lynchings, which could often focus on the brutal actions committed by white Americans. The spectacle-like element of the coverage of lynchings, which goes to serve as a visible showcase of the dominance of white people over minorities in the existing racial status quo, focussed on violence perpetrated by whites and functioned to instill fear in African Americans and to reinforce white supremacy. In contrast, the narrative presented by the coverage of the Red Summer of 1919 and the Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921 is much more reminiscent of the incendiary and inflammatory calls to action that commonly preceded lynchings, which could for example focus on the trope of the 'brute black rapist' and the danger faced by white women. The prevailing narrative here extends this sense of danger as being applicable to white people in general.

At this point, I feel it is necessary to briefly revisit a sentiment I phrased in the introduction of this thesis and during the examination of sources in chapter two. The ultimate aim of this thesis was to examine the news media's portrayals of these events studied in this thesis, and not necessarily the events themselves. At this juncture therefore, I also find it to be crucial to plainly restate that the reality of these events doesn't line up with the skewed perception formed through these prevailing narratives. The events of the Red Summer of 1919 and the events in Tulsa in 1921 are overwhelmingly characterized by white-on-black violence, consisting mostly of white mobs attacking African Americans. The Washington D.C. riots of 1919 were notable for only being one of the few times in the nation's history where white casualties outnumbered black ones, with ten and five deaths reported respectively. Compared to the massacre that occurred in Elaine, Arkansas — with modern

estimates suggesting that several hundred African Americans could have lost their lives — this disparity of violence becomes all the more clear. Throughout these instances the brunt of the violence was wielded by white Americans and felt by African Americans. This reality is not lost on the scholars who have studied these events, nor on those experiencing its legacy, and is undisputed.

The importance of studying these events through newspaper coverage — i.e. the contemporary articles written about them, and the portrayals of different racial identities within them — is especially apparent in contrast to this disparity between reality and depiction. While the specific set of historical conditions that caused the surge of mass racial violence are bound to the beginning of the interwar period, the mechanisms that influence the resulting ideation of the contemporary reader can and has existed beyond this specific periodization and is emblematic of broader trends in the history of white supremacist rhetoric. Therefore, an examination of the depiction of these same types of instances of mass racial violence under different historical conditions and in different periods of time, could highlight the evolution of these narratives and further accentuate the mechanisms operating through these narratives. Reminiscent of the sentiments voiced by Ida B. Wells, to shine the ‘light of truth’ is to be capable of righting the wrongs of history, and to examine the narratives of white supremacy that cloud the depiction of the United States’s history of racial violence.

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