

# The centenary of the Tulsa, Oklahoma race massacre

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This week marks the centenary of the Tulsa, Oklahoma race massacre, one of the deadliest and most destructive antiblack pogroms in the history of the United States.

Officials confirmed 39 deaths—26 black and 13 white people—but it is estimated that the true toll could be as high as 300, with many African American victims uncounted and buried in mass graves. An Oklahoma state commission estimated in 2001 that the present day cost of the damage was \$30 million.

On the night of May 31 and into June 1, 1921, a marauding mob of several thousand armed white men with the complicity of the police rampaged through the segregated African American section of Tulsa, Oklahoma, known as Greenwood, looting and burning businesses and homes. Eyewitnesses relayed that airplanes flew overhead, dropping firebombs onto rooftops.

Black residents, many of them veterans of World War I, fought back with rifles and pistols, but it was not enough to hold back the mob. When the attack subsided and the smoke cleared, 35 square blocks of Greenwood had been burnt to the ground, including the business district and the city's largest African American church. Some 1,470 homes were burned or looted. With the aid of deputized marauders, 6,000 black residents were rounded up by the police and National Guard and imprisoned for several days. Many men were held in the livestock pens at the city's fairgrounds.

The trigger for the violent rampage was an encounter between Dick Rowland, a black 19-year-old shoeshiner, and Sarah Page, a white 17-year-old elevator operator, in an elevator in downtown Tulsa on May 30, 1921.

According to the most widely accepted account, Rowland had tripped on Page's foot and grabbed her arm, and she screamed out before running away. There is speculation that the two had a romantic relationship, and Page refused to pursue charges against Rowland. The next day Rowland was arrested and charged with attempting to rape a white woman, an accusation that had ended in the violent lynching of many other black men. The *Tulsa Tribune* ran an article with the headline, "Nab Negro for Attacking Girl in Elevator."

Fearing that Rowland would be lynched, a group of armed black men twice went to the courthouse to offer to protect him but were denied by the police. On the second occasion, a white man attempted to disarm a black veteran. A shot was fired, triggering the violence that ensued.

The Tulsa massacre is a genuinely horrific moment in American

history, which has been concealed from public consciousness for far too long and has never been dealt with and confronted as it should. Its commemoration and memorialization should be welcomed. However, like all such events, how it is presented and analyzed is critical to drawing the necessary political lessons.

How could such an outrage take place nearly 60 years after the end of the Civil War, in which tens of thousands of white men died to end slavery? The narrative that is now being promoted is one that focuses entirely on race. It would be absurd to remove race and racism from the narrative, as the victims were overwhelmingly African American. However, it is impossible to understand what happened, and why, except within its broader historical and political context.

The period surrounding 1921 was one of intense class conflict, to which the ruling class responded with savage violence.

The United States experienced its largest strike wave to date in the years between 1916 and 1922. In spite of the American Federation of Labor's efforts to keep workers on the job during the war, more than 1 million went on strike each year.

The growth of the class struggle throughout the world was intensified by the Russian Revolution of 1917, which showed that it was possible for the working class to take political power into their own hands. In February 1919, more than 65,000 workers in Seattle, Washington participated in a five-day general strike, part of a massive strike wave that involved 4.5 million workers that year. The Communist Party was founded in the United States at the end of 1919 after a split in the Socialist Party.

The American ruling class responded to this radicalization by launching an open war against the working class. No ruling class feared more the influence of Bolshevism than the American bourgeoisie. Every form of prejudice was promoted, against Italians, Irish, Catholics and Jews. African American workers were often brought from the South to the North by company bosses to be used as strike breakers, with the express aim of inflaming racial tensions.

The US entry into World War I and its aftermath gave rise to a wave of political reaction across the United States known as the First Red Scare, much of it centered on stamping out labor radicals. Internationally, fascism was on the rise in Italy under the leadership of Benito Mussolini, and Hitler was consolidating his control over the fledgling Nazi Party in Germany.

This was the period of the Palmer Raids, anti-immigrant hysteria, the trial of Sacco and Vanzetti, and the transformation of

the FBI, with J. Edgar Hoover at the helm, into a national police force devoted to the struggle against left-wing radicalism. Immigrants and socialist union organizers, who opposed the war or failed to swear their loyalty, were imprisoned and lynched. Socialist Party of America leader Eugene Debs was arrested in 1918 and sentenced to 10 years in prison for giving a speech opposing US intervention in the world war.

The lynching of African Americans intensified, especially as a growing number of veterans returning home from the war in Europe challenged Jim Crow restrictions. Democratic President Woodrow Wilson expressed his concern in private remarks in March 1919 that “the American Negro returning from abroad would be our greatest medium in conveying Bolshevism to America.” The modern Ku Klux Klan, which terrorized European immigrants and African Americans, boasted half a million members throughout the country by 1921.

The massacre in Greenwood was preceded by the Tulsa Outrage in 1917, when the Knights of Liberty, an outfit similar to the KKK, drove 12 members of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), who were organizing oil workers, out of town, tarring, feathering and whipping them.

The Socialist Party of Oklahoma, which had over 9,000 dues-paying members in the state in 1916, was subjected to repeated attacks for opposing the war and defending equal rights for African Americans. Its 1912 platform upheld the basic socialist principle that “safety and advancement of the working class depends upon its solidarity and class consciousness. Those who would engender or foster race hatred or animosity between the white and black sections of the working class are the enemies of both.” The party was disbanded in 1917 under the pressure of intense persecution by vigilantes and state prosecution and after the suppression of the Green Corn Rebellion, an interracial uprising against wartime conscription in central Oklahoma.

Reaction reared its head far and wide in these years. Frank Little, a member of the IWW’s General Executive Board, was lynched in Butte, Montana in 1917 while fighting to organize miners. Little was grabbed by masked men, beaten and dragged from the back of a car before being hanged from a bridge on the edge of town. IWW member Wesley Everest was castrated and lynched in Centralia, Washington after a deadly confrontation with members of the American Legion in November 1919.

The Red Summer of 1919 saw attacks on black neighborhoods by white mobs in at least 60 cities. In the worst instance of urban violence, 38 were killed in fighting in Chicago, 23 black and 15 white persons, after a black youth was stoned to death by a white mob at a beach on the segregated lakefront. That year also saw the Elaine Massacre, in which up to 237 African Americans and five whites were killed. The attack was part of an effort to crush the unionization of poor black sharecroppers and tenant farmers across Arkansas.

Just three months after Tulsa, between August and September 1921, 10,000 striking miners squared off with police and company strike breakers in West Virginia in the Battle of Blair Mountain. As many as 100 miners were killed and 1,000 arrested. The miners strike was finally broken by a combined assault of the US Army, West Virginia National Guard, the Baldwin-Felts Detective

Agency, and local and state police. A million rounds were fired, and airplanes were used to drop bombs on entrenched miners.

A review of the historical background and context of the Tulsa massacre makes clear that it was part of a broader offensive of the ruling class against left-wing and socialist opposition in the working class. Racism was promoted as part of this offensive, employed consciously to divide workers and utilized as a spearhead of political reaction.

The massacre in Tulsa is presented by the Democratic Party and the mainstream media as the product of the all-consuming racial hatred that all whites hold toward blacks. As with the 1619 Project, which posits that American history is driven by white racism and that blacks have fought back alone, this narrative is anti-historical and profoundly dangerous, stoking racial animosities that have been created to weaken and divide the working class.

President Joe Biden issued a proclamation Monday declaring a national day of remembrance and calling on Americans to “reflect on the deep roots of racial terror in our Nation and recommit to the work of rooting out systemic racism across our country.” On Tuesday he traveled to Tulsa, where he met with survivors of the massacre, and announced vague policy proposals that he claimed would close the “wealth gap” between blacks and whites and combat racial discrimination in the housing market.

Historical falsifications have contemporary political motives and consequences. The current effort to blame “systemic racism” for all of society’s ills and to portray the United States as torn between “white America” and “black America” absolves the capitalists of any responsibility, places blame on the general population, especially white workers, and pits workers against each other along racial lines.

The most fundamental problem of the socialist movement in the United States has been the fight to unify all workers in one of the most racially and ethnically diverse countries in the world. It is only on this basis that all forms of backwardness and reaction can be vanquished and the rights and interests of all workers defended.

There will be no solution to the social and economic problems which black workers confront today outside of a united struggle of workers in the US and internationally against the capitalist system and the fight for socialism—the establishment of the democratic control over society by the working class and the end of the profit system.



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