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A Century of Segregation
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Jim Crow Stories

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RED SUMMER (1919)

The Red Summer refers to the summer and fall of 1919, in which race riots exploded in a number of cities in both the North and South. The three most violent episodes occurred in Chicago, Washington, D.C., and Elaine, Arkansas. On the afternoon of July 27, 1919, a stone-throwing melee between blacks and whites began after a black youth mistakenly swam into territory claimed by whites off the 29th Street beach in Chicago. Amidst the mayhem, Eugene Williams, a black youth, drowned. When a white police officer refused to arrest the white men involved in the death, and instead arrested a black man, racial tensions escalated. Fighting broke out between gangs and mobs of both races. Violence escalated with each incident, and for 13 days Chicago was in a state of turmoil. By the time the riot ended, 23 blacks and 15 whites were dead, 537 injured, and 1,000 black families were left homeless. The Chicago riot was part of a national racial frenzy of clashes, massacres, and lynchings throughout the North and the South. All of the incidents were initiated by whites. In Washington, D.C., from July 19 to 23, four whites and two blacks were killed; whites were astonished that blacks dared to fight back. The NEW YORK TIMES lamented the new black militancy: "There had been no trouble with the Negro before the war when most admitted the superiority of the white race." A "Southern black woman," as she identified herself, wrote a letter to THE CRISIS, praising blacks for fighting back. "The Washington riot gave me a thrill that comes once in a life time ... at last our men had stood up like men. ... I stood up alone in my room ... and exclaimed aloud, 'Oh I thank God, thank God.' The pent up horror, grief and humiliation of a life time -- half a century -- was being stripped from me."

The summer of 1919 saw a national racial frenzy of clashes, massacres, and lynchings throughout the North and the South. All were started by whites.

From October 1-3, a race war exploded in Phillips County, Arkansas. On the night of September 30, a small group of black men and women were gathering a rural church to organize a sharecroppers' and tenant farmers' union -- the Progressive Farmers and Household Union of America. When two white law-enforcement officers arrived at the church, one later claiming they were looking for a bootlegger, shots were exchanged. One white officer was killed and the other wounded. As word of the shootings spread throughout the county, the local sheriff sent out a call for men "to hunt Mr. Nigger in his lair." The call went out to Mississippi to come to the aid of white men in Phillips County. Hundreds of armed men jumped into trains, trucks, and cars and, crossing into Arkansas, fired out of windows at every black they saw. Some said that if it was black and moving, it was target practice. Frank Moore, one of the farmers at the church, saw

Did you know ...

Claude McKay wrote the poem "If We Must Die" in response to the race riot in Harlem in 1919.

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the massacre as it unfolded: "The whites sent word that they was comin down here and kill every nigger they found. There were 300 or 400 more white men with guns, shooting and killing women and children." Soldiers from the United States Army eventually restored order, although some claimed the military participated in the killings. By the time the shooting ended, 25 blacks and five whites were listed as officially dead. Many blacks believed that perhaps as many as 200 were killed, their bodies dumped in the Mississippi River or left to rot in the canebrake. The white establishment charged that blacks had formed a secret conspiracy to rise up and overthrow the white planters, take their land and rape their women. No evidence was ever produced to substantiate the charge.

-- Richard Wormser

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