

U.S. Race Riots

By [Charlene Fletcher Brown](#)

Summary

A race riot is a mob-related domestic disturbance in which specific racial groups are targeted for violence. The United States experienced a significant increase in race riots during and after World War I; much of the violence resulted from a variety of factors including African-American migration, labor shortages and post-war demobilization.

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Introduction

The [United States](#) experienced an economic boom as a result of the First World War and the increase in manufacturing resulting from wartime production needs. This led to the mass [migration](#) of Americans, including African-Americans from the southern United States, to the northern states in search of manufacturing jobs and a more open racial climate. This migration exponentially increased populations of urban centers such as Chicago, Detroit and New York City, resulting in increased competition for employment and housing. When the war ended, so did the need for war materials and manufacturing jobs decreased. Post-war [demobilization](#) increased tensions among Americans as troops returned home and sought to reenter the workforce.

The riots that occurred during the war had multiple causes, including labor and housing shortages, worker organizations, the presence of [African-American soldiers](#), blatant racism, and African-American resentment of racial violence and segregationist policies. During this period, lynchings increased dramatically and racial violence was used as a method of suppressing African-American social and political advancement. Many African-Americans engaged in direct resistance to racial tensions and violence as a result of their wartime experiences.

East St. Louis Riot

One of the main race riots during World War I occurred in East St. Louis, Illinois, an industrial town across the Mississippi River from Missouri. Whites in the town resented the influx of African-Americans and the increased competition for labor with local wartime industries such as the American Steel Works and Aluminum Ore Works. Racial tensions in the city continued to increase, and on the evening of 1 July 1917, rumor spread that a black man had killed a white man. Over the next week, the riot raged and much of the violence was aimed at the African-American community. Nine white residents and hundreds of African-Americans were killed during the riots. The East St. Louis Riot enraged the African-American community. Many leaders, including [Marcus Garvey \(1887-1940\)](#), criticized the war effort and questioned the existence of democracy in America when African-American citizens were subject to such race-based violence.

Camp Logan Riot

Houston also witnessed a race riot during the summer of 1917. On 23 August, while investigating reports of gunfire, two Houston police officers removed a scantily-clad African-American woman from her home, publicly beat her, and arrested her. A crowd formed to witness the spectacle and a soldier of the Third Battalion of the 24th Infantry Regiment, an all black unit, stepped forward to inquire about the situation. The police officers beat and arrested him as well, charging him with interfering with an officer. After the arrests, Corporal [Charles Baltimore \(18-1917\)](#) visited the police station to question the officers about the arrest, whereupon the police arrested and beat him. That evening, 156 soldiers of the Third Battalion ignored the orders of their officers, armed themselves, and marched on Houston. The riot resulted in the death of fifteen whites, including four policemen, and four black soldiers. Military officials placed the city under martial law and the entire battalion was later reassigned to the Philippines. More than fifty soldiers were subsequently arrested and tried in three separate court-martials, the largest court-martial in American history. Led by General [John Wilson Ruckman \(1858-1921\)](#), the proceedings occurred between 1 November 1917 and 26 March 1918. 118 African-American soldiers were tried, of whom 110 were convicted; nineteen soldiers were hanged on 10 December 1917 without proper review of their sentences, and sixty-three were sentenced to life in prison. Two white officers faced court-martial, but were released. No white civilians were prosecuted.

1919 “Red Summer” Riots

Post-war America witnessed an increase in racial violence. Approximately twenty-six race riots occurred between April and November 1919, in what [James Weldon Johnson](#)

[\(1871-1938\)](#) would later call the “Red Summer.” These riots occurred nationwide and each location had underlying causes including labor disputes, the organization of sharecroppers, increasing fear of armed and trained African-American servicemen, and the stereotype of African-American men as sexual predators; however, each riot was rooted in racism. The major riots of the period occurred in Chicago, Washington, D.C., and Elaine, Arkansas. In many instances, local law enforcement failed to quell the disturbances, demanding military intervention by local National Guard units and in some cases, active military personnel.

On 27 July 1919 heightened racial tensions in Chicago boiled over when an African-American boy crossed an imaginary boundary in a segregated public swimming area in Lake Michigan. The boy was stoned by white swimmers and subsequently drowned. African-American residents responded violently to his death. In Washington D.C., a four-day riot began on 19 July 1919, when rumors circulated that a local black civilian had sexually assaulted a sailor’s wife. In response, white mobs began attacking African-Americans. The rumors were never substantiated, but the riot resulted in six deaths and significant property damage before President [Woodrow Wilson \(1856-1924\)](#) mobilized federal troops to quell the riot.

Riots were not only confined to major cities, but also occurred in rural areas. Local sharecroppers in Elaine, Arkansas began organizing to demand better wages from local landowners. On the evening of 30 September 1919, two white deputies and a black trustee opened fire on the sharecroppers during an organizing meeting. The sharecroppers returned fire and a riot ensued, killing one white deputy. The trustee returned to Helena, the county seat, to report the death. A group of a hundred white deputies returned to Elaine and attacked black residents. Five whites and over two hundred blacks were killed in the riot. Seventy-nine African-American men were arrested in connection with the killing and tried; twelve were condemned to death. The Elaine riot was the only event that led to a Supreme Court decision, *Moore v. Dempsey* (1923), ruling that the State of Arkansas had violated the constitutional right to due process of the twelve condemned men.

Legacy

The African American determination to fight back in many of these riots is often referred to as a turning point in the modern Civil Rights Movement. Wartime experiences at home and abroad resulted in the emergence of the “New Negro,” a spirit among African Americans that demanded social justice and blatantly defied racist policies throughout the United States. Organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) organized rallies and silent marches to protest racial violence, and the United States Congress conducted inquiries into race riots and lynchings. Most notably, the riots and lynchings led to the call for the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill in 1920. The Bill was introduced by

[Leonidas Dyer \(1871-1957\)](#), a Republican representative from Missouri, and fully endorsed by the NAACP. Although the Bill generated significant support, it failed to pass in the U.S. House of Representatives.

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- [Rudwick, Elliott M.: **Race riot at East St. Louis, July 2, 1917**, Carbondale, 1964: Southern Illinois University Press.](#)
- [Tuttle, William M.: **Race riot. Chicago in the Red Summer of 1919**, New York, 1970: Atheneum.](#)
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External Links

- [Anti-Lynching Bill, NAACP History, 20 April 1922 \(NAACP\) \(Primary Source\)](#)
- [Houston Mutiny and Riot Records \(South Texas College of Law Digital Records\) \(Database\)](#)

- [Wheeler, W. Bruce: Knoxville Riot of 1919, 2009, Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture \(Article\)](#)

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