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978-1-107-06179-8 - 1919, The Year of Racial Violence: How African  
Americans Fought Back

David F. Krugler

Excerpt

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## Introduction

“In view of the sacrifices the negro soldiers made in this war to make the world safe for democracy it might not be a bad idea to make the United States safe for democracy.”

– Colonel William Hayward, commanding officer of the 369th Infantry  
Regiment, Ninety-third Division (a.k.a. the Harlem Hellfighters),  
speaking in May 1919<sup>1</sup>

Aaron Gaskins was fed up. Never again would he submit to the pressure to buy Liberty Loans. Not one day more would he sit meekly at the back of the electric train during his morning commute from Alexandria, Virginia, to Washington, D.C. And no longer would he keep quiet about these indignities. On October 9, 1918, as his train crossed the Potomac River, Gaskins strode to the front and announced to the startled passengers: “I am as good as white people riding in this car.” Gaskins, a tall black man with a scar on his cheek, loudly asked why he could not have the same rights as whites. Every morning he boarded the train with them in Alexandria and yet, because of the color of his skin, had to sit in the back until the car entered Washington. And this in the country that, Gaskins said, had just forced him to buy a bond for the war to make the world safe for democracy. “After this war is over,” he proclaimed, referring to World War I, “we are going to get our rights – we will have a race war if we don’t.”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> “Lynching Report Arouses Hayward,” *New York Sun*, May 10, 1919, clipping in NAACP Papers, Part 7, Series A, reel 13, frame 1053.

<sup>2</sup> Francis Boyle to Harry A. Taylor, October 10, 1918, Case File 10218–284–1; S. J. DeVeau to Henry G. Pratt, November 17, 1918, Case File 10218–284–3; H.M. Raymond to

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Gaskins's statement alarmed engineer William Smith. The federal government had warned Americans that the enemy, Germany, would try to damage homefront morale. To Smith, a black man demanding his rights in public seemed just the sort of trouble Germany might stir up, and he promptly reported the incident to the War Department's Military Intelligence Division. It dutifully investigated but found no evidence that German propaganda had swayed Gaskins. He led a modest life, worked at Washington's Union Station, and boarded in a house in Alexandria. The war ended a month later, and investigators dismissed the incident as the outburst of one angry black man.<sup>3</sup>

But plenty of other black Americans shared Gaskins's sentiment about equal rights and the war. In March 1919, attorney William L. Houston spoke at a reception for black soldiers who had just returned from France. Houston urged the men to now fight for democracy at home as they had done abroad.<sup>4</sup> Reverend Francis J. Grimké of Washington, D.C., offered the same message to black veterans during an April address, declaring that their military service in France would not help the race "unless you have come back with the love of liberty, equality, fraternity burning in your souls, and the determination to set other souls on fire with the same spirit."<sup>5</sup> Both men presaged the eloquent, forceful words of W. E. B. Du Bois. It is time, argued Du Bois in the May issue of the *Crisis*, to force America, the nation that disfranchises, robs, insults, and lynches us, to end its shame and fulfill its democratic promise: "*We return from fighting. We return fighting. Make way for Democracy! We saved it in France, and by the Great Jehovah, we will save it in the United States of America, or know the reason why.*"<sup>6</sup>

Defenders of white supremacy did not make way for democracy. Jim Crow laws and customs held firm. So, too, did the decades-old disfranchisement of black men, the sharecropping that bound so many blacks

Henry G. Pratt, November 20, 1918, Case File 10218-284-4 (both quotes), RG 165, copies in box 1, reel 5, Kornweibel Papers.

<sup>3</sup> Raymond to Pratt, November 20, 1918, Case File 10218-284-4. Such investigations were not uncommon. During World War I, the federal government maintained an extensive surveillance program of African Americans. See Kornweibel, *Investigate Everything*.

<sup>4</sup> Major W. H. Loving to General Churchill, March 17, 1919, Case File 10218 (no suffix number given), RG 165, copy in box 1, reel 1, Kornweibel Papers.

<sup>5</sup> "Address of Welcome Given at a Reception Tendered to the Men Who Have Returned from the Battle Front," April 24, 1919, *NAACP Papers*, Part 7, Series A, reel 2, frames 318-19.

<sup>6</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, "Returning Soldiers," *Crisis* 18, no. 1 (May 1919), reprinted in Kerlin, *Voice of the Negro*, 35-7.

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to twentieth-century serfdom and debt peonage, and the violence used to protect white supremacy. Between January and May 1919, more than twenty lynch mobs hanged, shot, burned, or dismembered two dozen African Americans.<sup>7</sup> “There are in this country 90,000,000 white people determined not to extend political and social equality to the 10,000,000 Negroes,” Rep. James Byrnes (D-S.C.) declared on the floor of Congress, and the war, he said, had not in any way changed their position.<sup>8</sup> So Aaron Gaskins’s prophecy came true: in 1919 America had a “race war,” the most intense outbreak of racial conflict in the United States since Reconstruction.

Du Bois’s and Byrnes’s respective predictions pinpoint the major cause of the racial conflict. Wartime changes had unsettled the status quo of race relations based on the expectation of black subservience and white dominance. In particular, African Americans’ military service molded the prewar New Negro movement into a potent force to confront the structure and practices of white supremacy. Well aware of this challenge, defenders of white supremacy acted swiftly, fiercely, and violently to suppress African Americans’ efforts to secure political, economic, and social equality. Black resistance, which Gaskins, Du Bois, and Byrnes each anticipated, was the most prominent feature of the frequent violent clashes between blacks and whites that occurred right after World War I.

**1919’s Racial Conflict and African Americans’ Three-Front War**

Between late 1918 and late 1919, the United States recorded ten major race riots, dozens of minor, racially charged clashes, and almost 100 lynchings as white Americans tried to enforce the continued subjugation of black Americans in the postwar era. The major riots examined in this study took place in Charleston, South Carolina (May 1919); Longview, Texas (July 1919); Bisbee, Arizona (July 1919); Washington, D.C. (July 1919); Chicago, Illinois (July 1919); Knoxville, Tennessee (August 1919); Omaha, Nebraska (September 1919); Phillips County, Arkansas (October 1919); Gary, Indiana (October 1919); and Bogalusa, Louisiana (November 1919).<sup>9</sup> Nationally, the official death toll exceeded

<sup>7</sup> “The Lynching Industry, 1919,” *Crisis* 19, no. 4 (February 1920), 183–6.

<sup>8</sup> The Editors, “A Reply to Congressman James F. Byrnes of South Carolina,” *Messenger* vol. II, no. 10 (October 1919), 13.

<sup>9</sup> Tallies of 1919’s racial clashes vary. Using the NAACP’s file on 1919’s mob activity, Arthur Waskow counts seven major riots and fifteen minor episodes. See Waskow, *From Race Riot*, 304–7. Citing W. E. B. Du Bois, Ann V. Collins counts twenty-six riots

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150; the majority of the victims were black. Time and time again, white mobs provoked the violence and often had the sympathy and support of local law enforcement. Yet African Americans refused to surrender. Throughout 1919, they waged a three-front war against mob violence, not just to protect themselves but to also force the United States to recognize their constitutional rights.

On the first front, ordinary African Americans mobilized self-defense forces to repel armed white mobs that formed for many reasons: to drive blacks from industrial jobs or white neighborhoods; to punish blacks for their wartime prosperity; to “protect” white women against the alleged depredations of black men. Focusing on race riots as well as numerous lynchings, *1919, The Year of Racial Violence* tells the stories of the black men and women who rose, in city after city, to confront white mobs. In Longview, Texas, a black doctor organized a self-defense force to defend his friend from a lynching after city authorities refused to protect him. On Chicago’s South Side, armed veterans of the all-black 370th Infantry Regiment, Ninety-third Division, donned their uniforms and patrolled to protect black residents from white ethnic gangs. In Knoxville, Tennessee, Joe Etter, a veteran of the Spanish-American War, lost his life while apparently trying to disarm state militia firing on black civilians; in Washington, D.C., teenager Carrie Johnson took up arms with her father to defend herself against a mob attacking their home. As the book describes the origins of postwar mob violence across America, it also relates the deeds and fates of these and many other ordinary black heroes.

The self-defenders came from many places within the black population. Black veterans and active-duty servicemen consistently repelled antiblack collective violence or resisted the assertion of white supremacy. Working class and professional black men also organized self-defense efforts: Arkansas sharecroppers, Indiana steel workers, the Texas doctor, a Chicago editor. Nor was armed resistance limited to men; black women took up arms to defend besieged homes in Washington and Chicago. Whether coordinated or unplanned, resistance to mob violence brought together diverse sections of the black population. African Americans’ sustained, armed self-defense during the year of racial violence stands out as an early – and, as yet, understudied – landmark of the twentieth century

between April and October 1919. See Collins, *All Hell*, 71 n. 2. Cameron McWhirter puts the number of “major riots and mob actions” at twenty-five. See McWhirter, *Red Summer*, 13. My selection of major and minor riots and lynchings is not meant to be a definitive list; rather, it is based on the degree of resistance mounted by African Americans.

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black freedom struggle. A major purpose of this book is to pinpoint the sources, features, and historical significance of this armed resistance.

The second front, the battle for the truth about the riots, opened even as the street clashes continued. Mainstream newspapers blamed African Americans for the riots, characterizing self-defense and armed resistance as unprovoked violence against whites. The black press, supported by the NAACP, fought back against these fallacious stories using eyewitness accounts, affidavits, and other evidence. At the same time, the black press celebrated resistance to mob violence and proclaimed the arrival of a “New Negro,” one who had served his country in the fight to make the world safe for democracy. The New Negro now expected – now demanded – democracy in his native land. Across the country, black editors and writers lauded the manly virtues of armed resistance, issued calls for self-defense, and excoriated black leaders who urged restraint. These writers, who included William Monroe Trotter, Robert Abbott, James Weldon Johnson, A. Clement MacNeal, and many others, also demanded that white Americans and the federal government recognize and grant equality. The New Negroes warned that failure to make America safe for democracy invited further racial violence – not because uprisings were imminent, but because blacks refused to yield any longer to the violent enforcement of white supremacy.

On the third front, African Americans fought for justice. Hostile law enforcement officers and biased courts wrongfully arrested and prosecuted black self-defenders while letting white rioters go free. In city after city, white authorities pressed capital charges against blacks who had lawfully protected themselves against mob attacks, yet were portrayed as murderous criminals – lives thus hung in the balance as juries weighed the competing stories. Specially organized legal defense committees and the NAACP fought to right the scales of justice by providing attorneys for black defendants and by pressuring authorities to prosecute whites who had committed acts of violence. In one of the most successful legal battles, black attorneys in Washington won acquittals or dismissal of charges for numerous defendants, including Carrie Johnson, the teenager who defended her home against a white mob. In Chicago, a judge dismissed charges against A. Clement MacNeal and upbraided the state’s attorney for prosecuting the editor for his self-defense actions. Success in court often required victory on the second front, the fight to publicize the facts about the riots, showing how intertwined the struggles were.

The racial violence of 1919 has received much attention, but four features make this book unique. First, while other studies focus primarily

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on the actions of mobbing whites, here African Americans are at the forefront of the story.<sup>10</sup> The book relates black veterans' massive resistance to white supremacy, explaining how returned black soldiers drew upon their military training and combat experience to halt mobs. In order to understand the scope and variety of black armed resistance, it is necessary to examine the ways in which black veterans led and inspired forceful stands against mob violence. Second, *1919, The Year of Racial Violence* describes how white paramilitary and patriotic associations fomented violence against blacks. During World War I, voluntary organizations such as the American Protective League (which enrolled 250,000 members) blurred the line between official and volunteer law enforcement, compelled support for the war, and quashed dissent. Vigilance became vigilantism, resulting in public violence that caused more than seventy deaths on the homefront.<sup>11</sup> The mustering out of soldiers and the founding of the American Legion swelled the ranks of voluntary vigilance associations after the war, as white veterans melded their military training with the practice of citizen policing. This book, as part of its analysis of black armed resistance, documents the extensive participation of white veterans, special deputies, home guards, and armed vigilantes in the postwar violence. Third, to deepen our understanding of the postwar backlash against African Americans, this study examines federal and state restrictions on arms sales to blacks. Fourth, and most important, *1919, The Year of Racial Violence* shows the year's racial violence from all significant sides: the fighting in the streets, the battle for the truth in the press, and the struggle for justice in the courts. Such an approach is needed because existing studies of 1919's racial violence generally focus on a single riot or court case.<sup>12</sup>

African Americans' three-front fight during 1919 fits into the historic spectrum of resistance to white supremacy in several ways.<sup>13</sup> Most obviously, the taking-up of arms to repel mobs was a direct – and dangerous – form of resistance. African Americans who purchased, carried, and used firearms did not act without forethought. At the same time black writers

<sup>10</sup> Waskow, *From Race Riot*; Collins, *All Hell*; Voogd, *Race Riots*.

<sup>11</sup> Capozzola, *Uncle Sam*, 3–20.

<sup>12</sup> Tuttle, *Race Riot* (Chicago); Stockley, *Blood in Their Eyes* (Arkansas); Cortner, *Mob Intent* (Arkansas); Whitaker, *On the Laps* (Arkansas). McWhirter, *Red Summer*, examines several race riots but does not treat the ensuing court battles.

<sup>13</sup> By “spectrum,” I mean an array of resistance to white supremacy, from seemingly hidden or obscure forms (jokes, conversations, folklore) to overt acts (boycotts, mass protest, armed self-defense). My usage draws on Kelley, “We Are Not What We Seem.”

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and leaders denounced the state's failure to halt mob violence, they urged African Americans to arm, to do for themselves what authorities would not do. Veterans, drawing on their military training, did not rush head-long into armed battle with mobs but rather planned and organized their martial efforts. As another form of resistance, rebuttal of the dominant national narrative that blacks were responsible for the racial violence shows African American writers and leaders attacking the bias, misinformation, and stereotyping that excused white mob actions and justified state reprisals against blacks. The resistance was not merely rhetorical. As noted, establishing accurate, factual accounts of the mob violence was indispensable to the legal defense of African Americans charged with crimes against whites during riots. This interrelated resistance also cast a penumbra. Apprehension about armed blacks prompted some mobs to abandon or change their plans. In Omaha, for example, a white man warned a mob not to carry out an attack on the city's black neighborhood because of the expectation that its residents were armed.<sup>14</sup>

As a form of agency, the three-front fight was shaped by both national trends and local conditions. African Americans' wartime contribution and the concurrent New Negro movement (which are the subject of Chapter 1) provided national inspiration to resist racial violence, to "return fighting," but the individual responses of blacks much depended on local circumstances. In Chicago, for example, the Great Migration, the wartime movement of some 500,000 black southerners to northern cities, swelled the city's so-called Black Belt and greatly increased the number of black workers. Chicago's week-long riot in late July 1919 sprang from a variety of white efforts to enforce the boundaries of the Black Belt and to protect racial lines within the industrial workforce. For the black workers assaulted outside of Chicago's largest stockyard, self-defensive actions were an instinctive, life-saving response, whereas black veterans who took up arms to repel mobs attacking black-occupied homes were methodically acting to protect their community. The first action appears to be a natural human response to danger; the second, the premeditated deed of a set of individuals with a shared experience and history (military service). Both actions show agency and resistance, but failure to note their differences risks generalization.<sup>15</sup> Throughout the narrative, I have therefore tried to capture the unique features of black agency within each occurrence

<sup>14</sup> See Chapter 5.

<sup>15</sup> For more on the importance of contingency and particularity in understanding agency, see Johnson, "On Agency," and Emirbayer and Mische, "What Is Agency?"

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of violence and resistance while also identifying the similarities of these episodes.

### Mob Violence, White Supremacy, and the Roots of Black Resistance

It is helpful to situate 1919's racial violence in its historical context. Mob activity has a long history in the United States, from the colonial era to the twentieth century. During the eighteenth century, riots – which historian Paul Gilje defines as the extralegal actions of twelve or more people – commonly expressed dissatisfaction with a specific law enforcement act or regulation of property. Mob actions were a vital part of the American Revolution, as colonists regularly demonstrated their opposition to British policies through crowd actions. Starting in 1765, when the Stamp Act was introduced, hundreds of riots broke out in the colonies. Rioting remained common in the new republic, providing free men with an outlet to manage emerging social and economic tensions.<sup>16</sup>

Prior to the Civil War, mobs frequently targeted African Americans, especially in the urban North. (Mob violence was less common in the antebellum South, where slave owners and overseers used whippings, beatings, and other methods of physical harm to control the slave population.) Between 1824 and 1849, thirty-nine race riots broke out in northern cities. In each, whites reacted violently to actual or perceived challenges to white supremacy.<sup>17</sup> Columbia, Pennsylvania, experienced a wave of rioting in 1834 when white laborers attacked black artisans and craftsmen. In 1838, a mob destroyed a newly constructed abolition meeting hall in Philadelphia because it planned to allow nonsegregated gatherings – a step toward interracial equality, many whites feared. “Living together violently,” as Richard Maxwell Brown puts it, was a fact of life for white and black Americans.<sup>18</sup>

After the Civil War, white opposition to abolition and to citizenship for African Americans ushered in a new era of racialized mob violence.

<sup>16</sup> Gilje, *Rioting in America*, 1–86. For more on colonial mob and vigilante violence, see Brown, *Strain of Violence*, 39–81.

<sup>17</sup> John M. Werner, “Race Riots in the United States during the Age of Jackson: 1824–1849” (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1972), 4, 273ff., cited in Brown, *Strain of Violence*, 206 n. 41.

<sup>18</sup> Brown, *Strain of Violence*, 185–7 (quote on 185), 205–8. For more on antebellum northern race riots, see Gilje, *Rioting*, 87–91. For the national surge in antiabolitionist rioting during the 1830s, see Richards, *Gentlemen of Property*. For the prevalence of violence in the antebellum South, see Bruce, *Violence and Culture*, and Franklin, *Militant South*.



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Reconstruction, directed by congressional Republicans and policed by federal troops, enabled black men's participation in the democratic process as voters and officeholders. Almost all of these newly enfranchised voters supported the Republican Party. In 1868, black Republicans held 85 of the 155 seats in the South Carolina legislature; all told, close to 800 black men served in the legislatures of the former Confederate states after the war. Although the Fifteenth Amendment did not enfranchise women, black women were politically active. They attended rallies, helped get out the vote, and supported men's runs for office.<sup>19</sup> Despite the presence of federal troops, white southerners deployed violence in a sustained campaign to topple the new Republican majorities, oust black officeholders, and disfranchise black voters. At times, the violence resembled warfare: between 1865 and 1875, whites in Louisiana killed 2,141 blacks and wounded another 2,115.<sup>20</sup> By 1877, the formal end of Reconstruction, the "redemption" of the South was complete: mob terrorism had suppressed black voting rights. That same year, the last federal troops were withdrawn from the South.<sup>21</sup>

The restoration of white-only rule enabled the creation of racial segregation, while the use of lynching to carry out vigilante justice continued the tradition of Reconstruction violence.<sup>22</sup> The number of black lynching victims in the United States rose steadily after 1865, particularly in the South. Between 1880 and 1930, 3,943 lynchings occurred in southern states (723 whites and 3,220 blacks). During the same period, by contrast, the Midwest experienced a total of 260 lynchings (181 whites and 79 blacks).<sup>23</sup> In his study of lynching in the South, Midwest, and West between the 1870s and 1940s, Michael J. Pfeifer argues that *rough justice* was the primary motive of mobs: rather than wait for the courts to act, mobs intervened to carry out swift death sentences. Vigilantism reflected widespread dissatisfaction with due process and the protection of accused criminals' rights. Rough justice thus helped protect social hierarchies and was viewed as a legitimate punishment of African Americans who defied white supremacy.<sup>24</sup> Much of 1919's rioting had rough justice

<sup>19</sup> Brown, "To Catch the Vision"; Hahn, *Nation Under*, 185, 217–19.

<sup>20</sup> Lemann, *Redemption*, 11.

<sup>21</sup> Shapiro, *White Violence*, 5–29.

<sup>22</sup> Key studies of American lynching include Brundage, *Lynching in the New South*; Wright, *Racial Violence in Kentucky*; Dray, *At the Hands*; Tolnay and Beck, *Festival of Violence*; Pfeifer, *Rough Justice* and *Roots of Rough Justice*.

<sup>23</sup> Brundage, *Lynching in the New South*, 7–8.

<sup>24</sup> Pfeifer, *Rough Justice*.

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origins. In Knoxville, Tennessee, and Omaha, Nebraska, mobs stormed courthouses to attempt to lynch black men accused of crimes against white women. In Washington, D.C., mobs formed after a series of reported rapes. Rioting in Charleston, South Carolina, and Longview, Texas, aimed to punish blacks for defying Jim Crow or otherwise asserting equality with whites.

Rough justice was but one part of the ideology and practice of white supremacy. I use the term *white supremacy* to refer to the racial caste system entrenched throughout the United States during this era.<sup>25</sup> Built on a foundation of scientific racism, white supremacy depended on numerous fictions: that blacks were biologically inferior to whites, that Africans and African Americans were inherently uncivilized, that miscegenation endangered the so-called purity of the white race. As a system, white supremacy disfranchised and segregated African Americans; it exploited their labor; and it corrupted the courts, laws, and police, which used their authority and power to oppress blacks. As evidenced by the frequency of mob attacks and lynchings in the post-Civil War United States, violence was a mainstay of white supremacy.<sup>26</sup> This caste system was neither static nor uniform, however. Shaped by forces of class, gender, and local custom, the practice of white supremacy varied regionally. In Virginia, for example, the white upper class developed a “managed” system that used paternalism and token concessions to keep blacks subjugated. Virginia’s elites were committed white supremacists, yet they disdained the Ku Klux Klan.<sup>27</sup> In Chicago, streetcars were not racially segregated as they were across most of the South, but Jim Crow still thrived up north: throughout 1918 and 1919, dozens of home bombings were used to try to keep African Americans contained to a specific neighborhood.<sup>28</sup> These bombings were just one example of the violence used to defend white supremacy after World War I.

The connection between mobs, white supremacy, and violence raises a question: what should organized attacks on African Americans be called? *Race riot* is the most commonly used term. Consider the titles of two important works on 1919’s racial conflict: *From Race Riot to Sit-In, 1919 and the 1960s: A Study in the Connections between Conflict and Violence*, by Arthur Waskow; and *Race Riot: Chicago in the Red*

<sup>25</sup> For a comparative study of the origins and evolution of the racial caste system in the United States, see Frederickson, *White Supremacy*.

<sup>26</sup> Shapiro, *White Violence*.

<sup>27</sup> Smith, *Managing White Supremacy*, 3–75.

<sup>28</sup> Tuttle, *Race Riot*, 175.