

The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921

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Bachelor's Thesis
2022



Tomas Bata University in Zlín
Faculty of Humanities

Univerzita Tomáše Bati ve Zlíně
Fakulta humanitních studií
Ústav moderních jazyků a literatur

Akademický rok: 2021/2022

ZADÁNÍ BAKALÁŘSKÉ PRÁCE

(projektu, uměleckého díla, uměleckého výkonu)

Jméno a příjmení: **Nikola Kreuzigerová**
Osobní číslo: **H18909**
Studijní program: **B7310 Filologie**
Studijní obor: **Anglický jazyk pro manažerskou praxi**
Forma studia: **Prezenční**
Téma práce: **Rasové nepokoje v Tulse v roce 1921**

Zásady pro vypracování

Vyhledání a shromáždění odborné literatury
Nastudování vybrané literatury
Formulace cílů práce dle získaných informací z vybrané literatury
Analýza rasových nepokojů v Tulse z roku 1921
Formulace závěrů práce

Forma zpracování bakalářské práce: **tištěná/elektronická**
Jazyk zpracování: **Angličtina**

Seznam doporučené literatury:

Brophy, Alfred L. *Reconstructing the Dreamland: The Tulsa Riot of 1921: Race, Reparations, and Reconciliation*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Ellsworth, Scott. *Death in a Promised Land: The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992.

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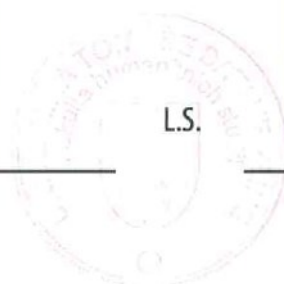
Vedoucí bakalářské práce: **PhDr. Katarína Nemčoková, Ph.D.**
Ústav moderních jazyků a literatur

Datum zadání bakalářské práce: **8. listopadu 2021**

Termín odevzdání bakalářské práce: **9. května 2022**



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ABSTRAKT

Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá jedním z nejhorších rasových incidentů ve Spojených státech. Práce zkoumá rasové nepokoje v Tulse roku 1921, pozadí této události, především její příčiny a počínání, které následovalo. První část popisuje ekonomicky prosperující komunitu a rasové vztahy mezi bílými a černými obyvateli Oklahomy před rokem 1921. Dále práce analyzuje tento incident a faktory, které k němu přispěly. Poté zakončuje s následky, dvěma různými rámci obviňování, dopady na černošskou komunitu v Tulse a také to, zda by událost měla být označována jako nepokoje nebo masakr. Primárním argumentem této práce je, že tento incident byl způsoben jak rasovými vztahy mezi bílými a černými občany Tulsy, podtrženými rasovou ideologií převládající ve Spojených státech na počátku 20. století, tak ekonomickou prosperitou černošského Greenwoodu, která byla vnímána jako hrozba a konkurence pro bílé Tulsany.

Klíčová slova: Tulsa, Oklahoma, Afroameričané, nepokoje, masakr, rasismus, davové násilí, segregace, bohatství černochů, Black Wall Street

ABSTRACT

This bachelor's thesis deals with one of the worst racial incidents in the United States. The thesis examines the Tulsa race riot of 1921, the background of the event, chiefly the underlying causes, and the subsequent actions. The first section describes the economically prosperous community and the race relations between white and black Oklahoma residents before 1921. Further, it analyses this incident and the contributing factors. The thesis then concludes with the aftermath, two different frames of blaming, the impacts on the black community in Tulsa, and whether the event should be labelled a riot or a massacre. The primary argument of this thesis is that it was caused by both the race relations between white and black Tulsa citizens, underlined by racial ideology prevalent in the United States in the early 20th century, and the economic prosperity of the black community of Greenwood, perceived as a threat and competition to white Tulsans.

Keywords: Tulsa, Oklahoma, African Americans, riot, massacre, racism, mob violence, segregation, blacks' wealth, Black Wall Street

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisor PhDr. Katarína Nemčoková Ph.D., for her support, professional approach, and countless valuable pieces of advice, while I was writing this bachelor's thesis. Further, I owe my deepest gratitude to my family for their emotional and financial support throughout my studies.

I hereby declare that I did the bachelor's thesis myself and the printed version of my thesis coincides with the electronic version of my thesis in the IS/STAG.

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INTRODUCTION

The study of race and race relations between white and black communities in the United States has been undertaken by many scholars since the first enslaved blacks landed in Virginia, an English settlement back then, in 1619. There is a long and violent history between these two races throughout the United States, marked by slavery that has lasted for more than two centuries. This was followed for nearly a century by Jim Crow laws, which enacted racial segregation in almost all aspects of public life, a crucial point in American race relations. Socioeconomic inequalities have emerged, as have racist terrorist organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan, which have resulted in a deterioration of race relations between black and white citizens and an increase in violence in the 19th century. As race superiority and inferiority have arisen, proponents of white supremacy enforced the notion through violence, riots, and lynching of thousands of blacks that took place throughout the state in the early 20th century.

Nevertheless, among the worst racial outbreaks of violence in American history was the one that occurred in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in 1921. Within several hours, a thriving black community called Greenwood was levelled to the ground by a white mob. Many people were wounded or dead, and more than a thousand homes and businesses were looted and subsequently set on fire. After decades of silence, due to a city official's attempts to cover up the violence, the riot became taboo, and the story has just recently entered the public consciousness. Some are still debating whether one of the worst racial incidents in U.S. history should be labelled as a Tulsa race riot or a Tulsa race massacre. For this reason, without bias, the word "riot" is predominantly used in the text, as this designation has been presented for almost a century in nearly all official documents, reports, press, and most interviews with survivors.

Initially, the incident was perceived differently in Tulsa by both whites and blacks. White Tulsans interpreted the riot as a black uprising and assigned the blame to African Americans, whereas black Tulsans accused the white mob. Several factors contributed to the Tulsa tragedy in 1921, nevertheless, the underlying causes of this racist violence were not only the race relations between white and black citizens, underlined by racial ideology prevalent in the United States at that time but the sudden economic and social prosperity of Greenwood as well as the improvement of the socioeconomic status of blacks.

1 AFRICAN AMERICANS IN OKLAHOMA BEFORE THE RIOT

Before Oklahoma became a member state of the Union in 1907, it was an Indian Territory that belonged to the Indian tribes called the Five Civilian Tribes – the Seminole, Creek, Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Cherokee, forcibly relocated there during the Trail of Tears in the 1830s and 1840s by the federal government.¹

African Americans came to Oklahoma long before the statehood. After Indians, they were the second racial group who came to this land, as their slaves – moving black slavery to the West. During the Civil War (1861–1865), The Five Tribes supported the Confederacy, and their slaves became the first African Americans who fought alongside the Union. In 1866, a new treaty arose between the United States and the Five Tribes, cancelling all preceding treaties and forcing Indians to free all their slaves. Each tribe had an option to give, or not to give, citizenship rights to black tribal members. Furthermore, the treaty divided Indian Territory into two parts; while the eastern part remained to the Tribes, the western part was a possession of the federal government and named Oklahoma Territory. Native Americans were continued to be pressed, and when the Dawes Act came into force in 1887, collective land ownership of the tribes was abolished. The U.S. government allowed American colonists to buy land in the newly opened Oklahoma Territory in 1889, and later in Indian Territory in the 1890s. This process was known as the Oklahoma land rush. By the end of the century, Americans owned most of the land in Indian Territory, which in 1907 became the state of Oklahoma.²

Oklahoma's population density rose seven and a half times between 1890 and 1920. In 1920, the overall population exceeded two million residents, due to immigration. Except for Texas, Oklahoma had the largest population growth during this period.³ They arrived for various reasons but mainly because Oklahoma represented a new beginning. For thousands of black Americans who were suffering worsening racial oppression in the South, Oklahoma was a land of opportunity.⁴ They were thrilled by the promise of equality in post-emancipated Indian and Oklahoma Territories. Until 1900, it was usual that white children and children of former slaves attended the same school; African American politicians also

¹ Victor Luckerson, "The Promise of Oklahoma," *Smithsonian* 52, no. 1 (April 2021): 29.

² Douglas Flamming, *African Americans in the West* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, 2009), 78–79.

³ Scott Ellsworth, *Death in a Promised Land: The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 8.

⁴ Flamming, *African Americans in the West*, 80.

held public offices in the area. In recently founded Tulsa, several black citizens owned lands, houses, and businesses, some even employed whites.⁵

After the Civil War, African Americans were establishing their own settlements in Indiana Territory to escape racial discrimination from elsewhere, with a dream to create a prosperous community that evolved in All-Black towns.⁶ Then in 1889, during the land rush era, several black leaders endeavoured to make Oklahoma a Black state. It was a vision of Edward P. McCabe, who visited President Harrison to introduce him this proposal. Oklahoma had fifty-eight all-black towns and communities, more than any other American state. However, after the declaration of statehood in 1907 and bringing Jim Crow laws and segregation, some of those towns and communities did not have a long duration; cities were usually racially mixed but very often segregated.⁷

James Hirsch notes that William H. Murray, a powerful and influential political figure in Oklahoma during this era, upheld his racist conviction, describing the state of race relations in Oklahoma, in his inaugural convention speech in 1906:

“[B]lacks were failures as lawyers, doctors, and in other professions and must be taught to remain in their place as porters, bootblacks, and barbers and many lines of agriculture, horticulture, and mechanics... It is an entirely false notion that the Negro can rise to the equal of a white man in the professions or become an equal citizen.”⁸

When President Roosevelt declared statehood in Oklahoma in November 1907, the country's constitution enacted Jim Crow laws, with Murry being one of many supporters. These laws excluded African Americans from several areas of public life. In addition, the legislation contained a “grandfather clause” that forbade African Americans from voting, arguing that only Americans who could vote before 1866 had the right to vote.⁹

⁵ Luckerson, “The Promise of Oklahoma,” 29.

⁶ James M. Smallwood, “Segregation,” *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, accessed January 25, 2022, <https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry?entry=SE006>.

⁷ Charles P. Henry, *Long Overdue: The Politics of Racial Reparations* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 79.

⁸ James S. Hirsch, *Riot and Remembrance: The Tulsa Race War and Its Legacy* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2003), 34–35.

⁹ Luckerson, “The Promise of Oklahoma,” 30–32.

1.1 Tulsa

Tulsa is a distinct city in Oklahoma which experienced a great boom by the turn of the 20th century. The remarkable rapid growth in size and wealth was primarily a result of the discoveries of oil nearby Tulsa in 1905. Later, Tulsa became known as “The Oil Capital of the World.” The city was an important commercial centre where the oil industry was not only directed but also produced and supplied, and thereafter in 1920, it counted 50% of Oklahoma’s work force.¹⁰

According to census statistics, the population of Tulsa in 1890 reported approximately 1,000 settlers. By the statehood in 1907, Tulsa’s population had grown to 7,298. In 1910, the census counted 18,182, and in 1920, the number of residents skyrocketed to 72,075.¹¹ Prior to the riot in 1921, the city was the home of 98,874 Tulsans.¹²

Tulsa was called the “Magic City,” where many people moved because of its thriving oil wealth. With a constant inflow of settlers, workers, and fortune hunters, Tulsa experienced a unique development that cannot be compared to any other American city in the early 20th century. It became one of the Southwest’s richest cities practically overnight.¹³ Whites and African Americans shared an American optimism and dream, and especially African Americans saw Tulsa as a place of promise and opportunity.

Nevertheless, that was not accepted very well by white Tulsans. Segregation and discrimination occurred in the early days of Oklahoma,¹⁴ so due to racial separation, the city was divided into two parts. As Tulsa grew, the black community did as well, causing increased tension between black and white Tulsans. Along with the development came the necessity for separate education, health care, business, and entertainment, which resulted in establishing a black business district called Greenwood.¹⁵

1.2 Greenwood

At the beginning of the 20th century, the African American community was growing and developing. Before the neighbourhood was burned to the ground, the 1921 census listed

¹⁰ Ellsworth, *Death in a Promised Land*, 8–11.

¹¹ Carl E. Gregory, “Tulsa,” *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, accessed February 2, 2022, <https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry?entry=TU003>.

¹² Ellsworth, *Death in a Promised Land*, 9.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 11–17.

¹⁴ Smallwood, “Segregation.”

¹⁵ Ellsworth, *Death in a Promised Land*, 14.

almost 11,000 African Americans in Tulsa, of whom around 10,000 lived in the Greenwood district, located in the northeast of the city.¹⁶ The area covered thirty-five city blocks.¹⁷

By 1921, the Greenwood community had established their business network, which prospered economically. Consequently, Greenwood became one of the wealthiest black communities in the United States. The neighbourhood was called “Negro Metropolis” or the “Negro Wall Street” of America, later known as “Black Wall Street.” This lured many African Americans to come to the city from all areas of the region.¹⁸ As journalist Mary E. Jones Parrish mentioned, a reason why she decided to arrive in the city was the cooperation and solidarity among African Americans in Tulsa.¹⁹ The Greenwood district provided a place to live and work for black Oklahomans and constituted an upper-middle class neighbourhood.²⁰

The core of the African American business community was called “Deep Greenwood” and comprised the first two blocks of Greenwood Avenue. The Greenwood area contained two newspapers, two schools, two movie theatres, a hospital, one public library, four hotels, and several houses, churches, groceries, restaurants, billiard halls, and other business and professional institutions.²¹ The final number of black-owned businesses in the Greenwood area before the riot is estimated at 191, as well as more than a thousand houses.²² It was also a place for the black professionals, according to the 1920 Census; among them were evidenced 15 physicians, 3 lawyers, 4 pharmacists, 2 dentists, 6 insurance, loan, and real estate agents, and others.²³

Even though this dynamic community worked hard to establish economic sovereignty and independence, the land in the district was still partly owned by white Tulsans and many black Tulsans were reliant on wages paid by whites.²⁴ Furthermore, several African

¹⁶ Ellsworth, *Death in a Promised Land*, 12–14.

¹⁷ Alexis Clark, “Tulsa’s ‘Black Wall Street’ Flourished as a Self-Contained Hub in Early 1900s,” *History*, last modified January 27, 2021, <https://www.history.com/news/black-wall-street-tulsa-race-massacre>.

¹⁸ Chris M. Messer, Thomas E. Shriver, and Alison E. Adams, “The Destruction of Black Wall Street: Tulsa’s 1921 Riot and the Eradication of Accumulated Wealth,” *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 77, no. 3–4 (2018): 789–791, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajes.12225>.

¹⁹ Luckerson, “The Promise of Oklahoma,” 34.

²⁰ Messer, Shriver, and Adams, “The Destruction of Black Wall Street,” 794.

²¹ Ellsworth, *Death in a Promised Land*, 15–16.

²² Oklahoma Commission to Study the Race Riot of 1921, *Tulsa Race Riot: A Report by the Oklahoma Commission to Study the Race Riot of 1921* (hereinafter “Tulsa Race Riot Report”), (Oklahoma City, OK, 2001), 144, <https://www.okhistory.org/research/forms/freport.pdf>.

²³ National Park Service U.S. Department of the Interior, *1921 Tulsa Race Riot Reconnaissance Survey: Final*, (2005), 39–40.

²⁴ Ellsworth, *Death in a Promised Land*, 15–16.

Americans had higher positions than lower-ranked whites. These and other circumstances in Tulsa had caused bitterness, envy, and fear, which increased over time and added to the hostility between black and white Tulsans that erupted in the Summer of 1921.²⁵

²⁵ Chris M. Messer, "The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921: Toward an Integrative Theory of Collective Violence," *Journal of Social History* 44, no. 4 (2011):1223–1227, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jsh.2011.0053>.

2 TULSA RACE RIOT

2.1 Preceding and triggering events

The incident that preceded the actions that ultimately resulted in the Greenwood district being burned down occurred on the morning of May 30, 1921, when Dick Rowland, a black nineteen-year-old shoe shiner, entered the Drexel building and took the elevator, presumably to visit the public toilets. Rowland worked near the Drexel building on Main Street, and he and other bootblacks had an agreement with their boss to use the bathrooms there, several of which were available for African Americans on the top floor, approachable by an elevator. On that morning, the elevator operator was a white seventeen-year-old Sarah Page. A few minutes later, after Dick Rowland entered the elevator, something happened that made Sarah Page scream.²⁶

It is a matter of speculations on what exactly happened between these two in the elevator. The most likely conclusion is that Rowland inadvertently trod on Page's foot and took her arm to protect her from falling when she flinched.²⁷ Indeed, Page later confirmed that Rowland had no intention of harming her and that she was anxious when he touched her, which made her scream.²⁸ However, when Tulsa police officers arrived at the scene, they were reported an attempt of sexual assault by an eyewitness who saw Rowland run away, but even white police officers were doubtful about the accusation and did not arrest Rowland until the following day, or even fill in the victim's name in the report.

Nevertheless, rumours concerning the incident spread the next day. Two police officers put Dick Rowland under arrest either to protect him from retaliation or to appear to be investigating the incident seriously. At around 3 p.m., the *Tulsa Tribune*, a white-owned newspaper, published the information about the incident in the elevator and the arrest of Rowland on the front page, presenting it as a white woman being raped by a black man, which led to attention that quickly engulfed the city. The *Tribune* article included, among other things, that "[Rowland] attacked her, scratching her hands and face and tearing her clothes."²⁹ As a result, rumours of lynching were spouted through Tulsa. There was rife speculation among some people that Richard Lloyd Jones in the *Tulsa Tribune* released an editorial headlined "To Lynch Negro Tonight" encouraging the lynching of Rowland. But

²⁶ Ellsworth, *Death in a Promised Land*, 45–46.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 46.

²⁸ Hirsch, *Riot and Remembrance*, 86.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 79–80.

the entire editorial page was removed from the newspaper's records.³⁰ According to scholars, the instigative front-page article entitled "Nab Negro for Attacking Girl in Elevator" and the threat of a possible lynching of an African American is a trigger that flared the Tulsa race riot.³¹

2.2 Actions that precipitated the destruction of the Greenwood district

As the news circulated in the city, a crowd of white Tulsans flocked to the courthouse near the city centre, where Dick Rowland was being held. By dusk, the crowd had swollen to hundreds. At 8:20 p.m., three white men entered the building and called for Rowland's release, but Sheriff McCullough refused and ordered the assembled people outside to scatter.³² The crowd stayed, and more and more white Tulsans followed. Eventually, the sheriff secured the entrance to the building and assigned his deputies to barricade themselves on the floor where the jail was.³³

Meanwhile, black residents in Greenwood seriously feared that Rowland would be lynched. By that evening, African American community leaders gathered in the office of the *Tulsa Star*, a black newspaper, to discuss options. Some of them agreed to wait, be patient, and referred to the sheriff's promise that he and other authorities would protect Rowland.³⁴ Sheriff McCullough had assured them that police knew Rowland was innocent and he would not be charged with any crime and would be released the following morning.³⁵ Still, some blacks did not rely on that and decided to help them to prevent lynching. Someone later declared: "We're not going to let this happen. We're going to go downtown and stop this lynching."³⁶ Around 9 p.m., A group numbering about 25 blacks, some wearing army uniforms, armed with rifles, pistols, axes, rakes, and other tools, headed to the courthouse.³⁷ But the police rejected their services and claimed that everything is under control, so the group drove back to the black neighbourhood.

However, the arrival of armed blacks at the courthouse affected the white crowd, which at that time counted one thousand; they decided to obtain guns as well. Some of them

³⁰ Hirsch, *Riot and Remembrance*, 80–81.

³¹ Messer, "The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921," 1222.

³² Scott Ellsworth, "*The Tulsa Race Riot*," *A Report by the Commission to Study the Tulsa Race Riot* (2001), 59–60.

³³ Ellsworth, *Death in a Promised Land*, 49.

³⁴ Tim Madigan, "American Terror," *Smithsonian* 52, no. 1 (April 2021): 39.

³⁵ Hirsch, *Riot and Remembrance*, 86.

³⁶ Kweku Larry Crowe, and Thabiti Lewis, "The 1921 Tulsa Massacre: What Happened to Black Wall Street," *Humanities* 42, no. 1 (2021), <https://www.neh.gov/article/1921-tulsa-massacre>.

³⁷ Madigan, "American Terror," 39.

returned home and took their weapons, while others, comprising of a group of three to four hundred people, chose to plunder the armoury and exacted guns and ammunition.³⁸ They were stopped by James A. Bell, major of the city's National Guard units, but the white mob constantly grew and was estimated at as many as 2,000 people, including men, women, and children, together with more and more weapons. At about 10:30 p.m., armed African Americans appeared at the courthouse for the second time, driven by reports about chaos and crowd enlargement. This time the group counted approximately 75 African Americans. As before, they offered to assist police officers, who faced major numerical superiority, and were rejected. According to historian Scott Ellsworth, police Chief Gustafson did not even call up all the police force of Tulsa to the courthouse, nor did he or the sheriff seriously initiate the dispersal of the white mob.³⁹ The tension among people in front of the courthouse was palpable and heightened increasingly. An African American observer said that when the group of armed blacks was leaving the scene, a white man came near and tried to disarm an African American veteran carrying a revolver, which provoked a scuffle during which an accidental shot was fired. Sheriff McCullough declared, "all hell broke loose"⁴⁰ and noted that at that point, "the race war was on and I was powerless to stop it."⁴¹

2.3 Escalation of the Greenwood destruction

The chaos that immediately arose in front of the courthouse ensued several people being wounded or dying in a volley of bullets. The number of dead and injured is unknown but was estimated up to a dozen on both sides. The blacks, who stood against numbered superiority, tried to withdraw toward the black section of Tulsa, with whites pursuing them. The white mob became more aggressive and did not even allow physicians and ambulances to access the injured blacks. Dr. Miller affirmed in a later interview that he had not been given a chance to save an African American man who was surrounded by whites. He stated that "the Negro had been shot so many times in his chest, and men from the onlookers were slashing him with knives."⁴²

Meanwhile, approximately 500 men, some of whom had just a moment ago participated in the lynch-seeking crowd, became the latest recruits of the police department and even received police stars. The police wanted to increase their force as soon as possible. Those

³⁸ "Tulsa Race Riot Report," 61–2.

³⁹ Ellsworth, *Death in a Promised Land*, 50–52.

⁴⁰ Hirsch, *Riot and Remembrance*, 89.

⁴¹ Ellsworth, *Death in a Promised Land*, 52.

⁴² "Tulsa Race Riot Report," 63.

commissioned men were reportedly ordered to “get a gun and get a nigger.”⁴³ Afterwards, several “special deputies” broke into almost every shop in the city where weapons could occur.⁴⁴

Evidence indicates that African Americans returned fire on the white Tulsans. Thus, both whites and blacks suffered casualties after the violence that flared at the courthouse. After midnight, the riot eased up, and scattered and irregular conflicts took place around the city. The worst fighting raged along the Frisco tracks, which divided the white and black parts of Tulsa.⁴⁵

After 1 a.m., the white Tulsans ignited the first flames in the Greenwood district, destroying at least twenty businesses and houses of African Americans by 4 a.m.⁴⁶ Many black residents prepared for war, fought for their neighbourhood, and resisted the invasion alongside black war veterans in their uniforms.⁴⁷ Some waited and wished for the dawn to end the violence, while others preferred to leave Tulsa and head to safety in the nearest towns. At about 2 a.m., a lull in the fighting occurred, but with the dawn, the violence resumed and got worse.⁴⁸

Early in the morning, around 5 a.m., groups of white Tulsans, who were gearing up overnight, gathered again to invade the black community, along with machine guns and heavy superiority. As many as 10,000 armed men, women, and children looted black houses and businesses, taking valuable personal properties such as jewellery, clothes, furniture, cash, and many others. After that, they usually burned down the building and murdered black residents who were defending themselves, as well as some who were not.⁴⁹ For example, a group of white rioters killed an old African American couple when they went home from visiting a church.⁵⁰ Eldoris McCondichie, then a nine-year-old girl, recalled that she was woken up that morning by her mother, saying, “We have to go! The white people are killing the colored folks!”⁵¹ Mrs. Dimple Bush, a resident of Greenwood and a witness of the attack, later said that after daybreak she saw “the machine guns were sweeping the valley with their

⁴³ “Tulsa Race Riot Report,” 64.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 65.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 66.

⁴⁷ Alfred L. Brophy, *Reconstructing the Dreamland: The Tulsa Riot of 1921: Race, Reparations, and Reconciliation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 41–42.

⁴⁸ “Tulsa Race Riot Report,” 68–9.

⁴⁹ Madigan, “American Terror,” 39–41.

⁵⁰ “Tulsa Race Riot Report,” 59.

⁵¹ Madigan, “American Terror,” 40.

murderous fire and [her] heart was filled with dread as [they] sped along. Old women and men, children were running and screaming everywhere.”⁵²

But after a while, a new threat emerged. Accounts of eyewitnesses confirmed that airplanes had appeared over the black neighbourhood. But it is somewhat questionable what exactly happened. Some sources argue that “planes dropped streams of liquid fire,”⁵³ while some claim that whites dropped “nitroglycerin on buildings, setting them afire”⁵⁴ or rather “fiery turpentine bombs.”⁵⁵ *Chicago Defender*, for instance, wrote about the bombing of Greenwood “by a private plane equipped with dynamite.”⁵⁶ Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the aircraft passengers shot with rifles at black residents and their houses from the planes.⁵⁷

Tulsa National Guard units had been involved in the riot since the beginning, initiating some first steps to protect the community, and trying to ease tensions. However, they had trouble restoring order, and their actions helped the white mob to advance in destruction.⁵⁸ When around midnight Major Daley, a police inspector, and the inspector of the local units of the National Guard, arrived back to the city, he was notified by several people that “the Negroes were trying to take over the city.” Daley and other authorities then commanded to “gather up all the Negroes.” According to a report of the National Guard, this violent incident was largely referred to as a “Negro uprising” and African Americans as “enemy.”⁵⁹ Police force and the National Guard have therefore been mostly occupied with disarming African Americans and their temporary imprisonment in internment centres, rather than taking actions to protect their lives and homes.

Adjutant General Charles Barrett with more than one hundred troops arrived in Tulsa from Oklahoma City at 9:15 a.m. In response to the riot, Governor Robertson, at Barrett’s request, declared martial law at around 11:30 a.m., which recognized the military in command instead of civilian authorities. By that time, the riot was drawing to a close and there was virtually nothing to save from the black district. Nevertheless, the National Guards were continuing to intern African Americans.⁶⁰

⁵² “Tulsa Race Riot Report,” 73.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Brophy, *Reconstructing the Dreamland*, 46.

⁵⁵ Crowe and Lewis, “The 1921 Tulsa Massacre.”

⁵⁶ Ellsworth, *Death in a Promised Land*, 63.

⁵⁷ “Tulsa Race Riot Report,” 74.

⁵⁸ Brophy, *Reconstructing the Dreamland*, 42.

⁵⁹ Hirsch, *Riot and Remembrance*, 92–94.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 106–107.

Not all white Tulsans shared the hostility, racial hatred, and discrimination against blacks. Some of them even saved African Americans' lives, yet many people were killed. The accurate number of victims from the night of May 31 to June 1 will probably never be determined due to a lack of irrefutable evidence. The confirmed death toll began at 36.⁶¹ For instance, a study in an official report by the Oklahoma Commission indicated 39 victims, 26 blacks and 13 whites, on account of the discovered death certificates.⁶² However, historians currently estimate that as many as 300 people, mostly African Americans, were killed in the attack. White rioters practically burned Greenwood to the ground; the 35 city blocks known as Black Wall Street became charred ruins.⁶³ According to a Red Cross report, the white mob set fire to 1,256 buildings, and 314 more were looted but not incinerated, leaving thousands of people homeless.⁶⁴

2.4 Immediate actions after the riot

As mentioned earlier, Tulsa police officers, the National Guard, and "special deputies" disarmed and arrested thousands of black Tulsans during and shortly after the riot.⁶⁵ Eventually, they apprehended and held approximately 6,000 African Americans in custody in detention camps as prisoners, some for a week or longer.⁶⁶ Thousands of African Americans also fled Tulsa and never returned. They left their families behind with no means of a reunion and without knowing their whereabouts. This contributed to the fact why the exact number of victims during the attack remained undetermined.⁶⁷ Also, Byron Kirkpatrick, the Major of the local National Guard, admitted that the "difficulty in determining the number of dead negroes is caused by the fact that the bodies were apparently not handled in a systematic manner."⁶⁸ There have been many speculations regarding the disposal of the victims' corpses; the white Tulsans presumably dropped them into the near Arkansas River or put them into the Tulsa's incinerator or took them away and buried them in a deep pit or coal mine.⁶⁹ In addition, the confirmed death toll varies in many reports,

⁶¹ "1921 Tulsa Race Massacre," Tulsa Historical Society & Museum, accessed March 3, 2022, <https://www.tulsaohistory.org/exhibit/1921-tulsa-race-massacre/#flexible-content>.

⁶² "Tulsa Race Riot Report," 114–116.

⁶³ Tulsa Historical Society & Museum, "1921 Tulsa Race Massacre."

⁶⁴ "Tulsa Race Riot Report," 144.

⁶⁵ Amy Irvine, "What Caused the Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921?" *History Hit*, June 1, 2021, <https://www.historyhit.com/what-caused-the-tulsa-race-massacre-of-1921/>.

⁶⁶ Tulsa Historical Society & Museum, "1921 Tulsa Race Massacre."

⁶⁷ Madigan, "American Terror," 41.

⁶⁸ Randy Krehbiel, *Tulsa, 1921: Reporting a Massacre*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2019), 88.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

newspaper articles, witnesses accounts, and rumours. But what most whites and blacks agreed on was that more Tulsans had died during the attack than originally indicated.

Not a single white resident was criminally prosecuted after the riot, whether at the federal, state, or municipal level. African Americans, on the other hand, could only leave detention camps located around the city if a white resident vouched for black and thus agreed to hold accountability for their actions.⁷⁰ Many people did not want to do it due to either racial ideologies or because they were afraid that hatred by the white mob and the KKK would turn on them as they would make a target of themselves.

The Red Cross Society came to Tulsa after the riot to provide support and care for the many injured survivors. According to their report, they helped 531 wounded during the first three days after the riot, and another 184 blacks and 48 whites received the surgical intervention and hospitalization during the first twenty-four hours.⁷¹ Besides the health care, they also provided food, water, tents, and secured job and legal assistance. It was the first time the Red Cross had to intervene in a disaster caused by humans on American soil, and eventually remained in the city for about seven months.⁷² Almost all aid for wounded and homeless black Tulsans was on the Red Cross' shoulders. The city did not accept the responsibility, as the Tulsa mayor wrote after the first few days since the outbreak a letter to the Red Cross, stating: "bring all organizations that can assist you to your aid, the responsibility is placed in your hands entirely."⁷³ None of the state or federal authorities provided any relief work. They generally accepted that the responsibility rested with Tulsa and its people. But apart from significant financing of the Red Cross, the county and city officials did not undertake any relief work for blacks.

Regarding the incident that sparked the violence, Dick Rowland was safely taken away from the city the following morning and probably never came back.⁷⁴ Sarah Page did not press charges against him, thus Rowland's case was thrown out.⁷⁵

⁷⁰ Tulsa Historical Society & Museum, "1921 Tulsa Race Massacre."

⁷¹ American Red Cross, *Report: Tulsa Race Riot Disaster Relief*, Tulsa Historical Society & Museum (Tulsa, OK, 1921) chap. I, https://www.tulsaohistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/1984.002.060_RedCrossReport-sm.pdf.

⁷² Konstantinos D. Karatzas, "Interpreting Violence: The 1921 Tulsa Race Riot and Its Legacy," *European Journal of American Culture* 37, no. 2 (2018): 130–131, https://doi.org/10.1386/ejac.37.2.127_1.

⁷³ American Red Cross, *Tulsa Race Riot Relief*.

⁷⁴ Hirsch, *Riot and Remembrance*, 113.

⁷⁵ "Tulsa Race Riot Report," 147.

3 UNDERLYING CAUSES OF THE TULSA RACE RIOT

This thesis examines the underlying causes of destruction in Tulsa. The root cause of the Tulsa race riot seems not to be the reported attack of an African American on a white woman, but both the economic prosperity of Greenwood and the race relations between white and black Tulsans, underlined by racial ideology prevalent in the United States at that time.

The race violence, lynching, and riots throughout the country illustrated the values and beliefs of the American culture at that time. Tulsa represented one of many American cities that were highly segregated in the early 20th century. Particularly African Americans in Oklahoma experienced racism increasingly after the entry into the Union.

The primary argument of this thesis is that the rise in the socioeconomic status of blacks in Tulsa and the increase in earnings for many of them, and the subsequent years of prosperity of the Greenwood community were among the root causes of the racial violence in Tulsa in 1921. The black community in Tulsa rapidly increased and extended to the borders of the city's white areas. As Messer explains, they threatened the white hegemony of Tulsans and challenged the status quo by resisting the existing social order.⁷⁶ The thriving Greenwood district symbolized the loss of power and control by white Tulsans. Whites dreaded equality with blacks. Thus, the devastation of the district preserved the appearance of white supremacy and suspended African Americans' emancipation in Tulsa.⁷⁷

3.1 Racial ideology

The term "race" indicates a social construct with no biological foundations.⁷⁸ Nowadays, this term is used to distinguish people into categories or groups according to their physical appearance, mostly skin colour. Racism is "the product of a particular cultural context—a part of a belief system," based on various historical and psychological issues, likewise social and cultural backgrounds.⁷⁹

There is no other constructed phenomenon in American culture with social meaning that controls and influences people's perceptions and behaviour as much as race. Prejudice and

⁷⁶ Messer, Shriver, and Adams, "The Destruction of Black Wall Street," 791–795.

⁷⁷ Kimberly Fain, "The Devastation of Black Wall Street," JSTOR Daily, accessed February 10, 2022, <https://daily.jstor.org/the-devastation-of-black-wall-street/>.

⁷⁸ Megan Gannon, "Race Is a Social Construct, Scientists Argue," *Scientific American*, accessed February 14, 2022, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/race-is-a-social-construct-scientists-argue/>.

⁷⁹ Richard J. Perry, *Race and Racism: The Development of Modern Racism in America*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 2–3.

racism have enormous influence and represent one of the most significant impacts on people's lives with social consequences in the United States.⁸⁰

It is common for one or more groups to be superior or inferior to the other, politically, materially, or socially, thus creating a social hierarchical system based on race, class, and gender. In addition, superior groups have higher political authority, education, and wealth, whereas subordinate groups share aspects such as rising unemployment, lack of education, less political authority and power, and wealth.⁸¹

In the United States, racial ideologies have their roots in slavery, which during the 17th and 18th centuries modified race relations between white and black communities. Thousands of slaves suffered from oppression by white slaveholders, and the position of inferiority assigned to African Americans was used to justify the ideology and slavery. Consequently, it sparked debates to support these practices and white superiority, which in the 19th century required more evidence of racial differences. For instance, researcher Samuel George Morton asserted that African Americans have smaller brains, therefore they are less intelligent than white Americans or Europeans, by measuring hundreds of skulls and cranial capacities. His data were skewed but strengthened the ideology of white supremacists.⁸²

The Civil War and the conflicts between anti- and pro-slavery groups ended with the abolition of slavery. However, contemporary racial ideologies influenced the nation at least for another century.⁸³

The image of African Americans during slavery was portrayed as incompetent, clownish, and docile characters in need of protection from their slaveholders. Nevertheless, in the second half of the 19th century, after the Civil War, there was a strong association of African Americans with crime, violence, and sexual assaults. The general perception of Black people, especially Black males, embodied brute monsters and savages continued in the 20th century. As the myths and stereotypes expanded and stories about black monsters were spread, so did racial violent incidents such as riots, white vigilantism, and lynching.⁸⁴

⁸⁰ Cynthia Willis-Esqueda, ed., *Motivational Aspects of Prejudice and Racism: Nebraska Symposium on Motivation*. (New York: Springer Science & Business Media, 2007), 1–2.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁸² Perry, "Race" and Racism, 140–142.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 144.

⁸⁴ Calvin John Smiley and David Fakunle, "From "brute" to "thug:" The demonization and criminalization of unarmed Black male victims in America," *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment* 26, no. 3–4, (2016): 352–353, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10911359.2015.1129256>.

The Ku Klux Klan and other racist groups also emerged for the first time in the second half of the 19th century.

When the Civil Rights Act in 1866 allowed African American men to vote and participate in politics, the balance of power shifted, and racism and hatred grew. White men in the South felt particularly humiliated and paranoid about the idea of ex-slaves longing for white women to avenge.⁸⁵

Novelist Thomas Dixon Jr. has published “Trilogy of Reconstruction” containing *The Leopard’s Spots* (1902), *The Clansman* (1905), and *The Traitor* (1907), which express the racial ideology of that time. He worshiped white superiority and the Klan members who intervened against black savages while accusing African Americans of the American Civil War. His most famous novel, *The Clansman*, served as an adaptation for the screen of D. W. Griffith 1915 *The Birth of a Nation*.⁸⁶ The film is propaganda about the Ku Klux Klan; it celebrates their “honourable” actions and portrays African Americans as aggressive savages attacking white women.⁸⁷

Indeed, evidence suggests that white Tulsans perceived African Americans as criminal rogues, drug and alcohol abusers, reckless and dangerous, without any moral standards. Local media owned by whites usually referred to the Greenwood district as “Little Africa” or “Niggertown.” Prior to the riot, a local journalist declared, “It was in this sordid and neglected ‘Niggertown’ that the crooks found their hiding place. It was a cesspool of crime...There, for months past, the bad ‘niggers,’ the silk-shirted parasites of society, had been collecting guns and munitions.”⁸⁸ In 1921, many white citizens and extremist white supremacy groups in Tulsa upheld the nationwide racial ideologies of self-superiority and supported the segregation and unequal rights of blacks. The aim of white Tulsan rioters in 1921 was to restore order in general by putting the blacks back in line, not a mere lynching.⁸⁹

⁸⁵ Perry, “Race” and Racism, 154–155.

⁸⁶ “Thomas Dixon Jr., Segregation, and Author born,” African American Registry, accessed February 16, 2022, <https://aaregistry.org/story/thomas-dixon-jr-segregationist-and-author/>.

⁸⁷ Smiley and Fakunle, “From “brute” to “thug,” 353–354.

⁸⁸ Messer, “The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921,” 1225.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 1226.

3.2 Greenwood wealth

Before the Tulsa riot, Oklahoma and the thriving business district represented new freedom and a safe place for affluent African American entrepreneurs, especially in pre-statehood Oklahoma.⁹⁰

Several black entrepreneurs serve as illustrative examples. J. B. Stradford, an African American who was born as a slave in Kentucky, arrived in Tulsa at the end of the 19th century, and eventually became one of the wealthiest black men in Tulsa. He had the largest hotel among African Americans at that time in the United States.⁹¹ Another African American James Cherry worked as a plumber and subsequently became the owner of a favourite billiards hall.⁹²

Other examples of economic initiatives followed. O.W. Gurley was an affluent African American landowner and reportedly the first black man who owned a business in the district in 1906.⁹³ Black physician R. T. Bridgewater owned 17 houses, which he leased to other black residents. A. J. Smitherman was an editor and owner of the *Tulsa Star*, Tulsa's leading black newspaper. The weekly often defended the rights of the black Tulsans. Mabel B. Little had a popular beauty salon.⁹⁴ The couple Loula and John Williams owned the Williams Dreamland Theatre with 750 seats, as well as confectionery, a garage, and two houses. African American doctor Andrew C. Jackson, highly respected and described as "the most able Negro surgeon," lived in Greenwood Avenue.⁹⁵ Almost every building was destroyed in a fire or looted (or both) during the attack. Dr. Jackson was killed by a group of white Tulsans after surrendering to them, and others mostly left the city.⁹⁶

Walter White, the NAACP investigator of racial violence, wrote in *The Nation* newspapers in June 1921:

"The Negro in Oklahoma has shared in the sudden prosperity that has come to many of his white brothers, and there are some colored men there who are wealthy. This fact has caused a bitter resentment on the part of the lower order of whites, who feel that these colored men, members of an

⁹⁰ Clark, "Tulsa's 'Black Wall Street' Flourished as a Self-Contained Hub in Early 1900s."

⁹¹ Hirsch, *Riot and Remembrance*, 28–31.

⁹² Luckerson, "The Promise of Oklahoma," 33.

⁹³ Alexis Clark, "Tulsa's 'Black Wall Street' Flourished as a Self-Contained Hub in Early 1900s," *History*, last modified January 27, 2021, <https://www.history.com/news/black-wall-street-tulsa-race-massacre>.

⁹⁴ Yuliya Parshina-Kottas et al, "What the Tulsa Race Massacre Destroyed" *New York Times*, May 24, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/05/24/us/tulsa-race-massacre.html>.

⁹⁵ Etamaze Nkiri, "What Was Lost: Greenwood was the heart of Black Tulsa, Oklahoma," *American History* 56, no. 5 (December 2021): 46–48.

⁹⁶ Ellsworth, *Death in a Promised Land*, 59.

“inferior race,” are exceedingly presumptuous in achieving greater economic prosperity than they who are members of a divinely ordered superior race.”⁹⁷

Three African Americans in Oklahoma had assets of more than \$1,000,000 each. A black man named J. W. Thompson amassed half a million dollars. There were several black citizens whose possessions were priced at \$100,000. Specifically in Tulsa, there were cases of two African Americans whose fortune was estimated at \$150,000 each and two worth \$100,000.⁹⁸

The sudden Greenwood success and African Americans’ growth in power resented and alarmed wealthy white Tulsans. The economic progress of the “inferior race” added to the feeling that the middle-class white men felt like their world was out of control and they tried to regain control of their lives. For example, one African American owned “a printing plant with \$25,000 worth of printing machinery in it,” whereas a white mob leader who kindled a fire and damaged the plant and eventually died during the attack, was a long-serving employee of the African American, who had a salary of \$48 a week. Many more were upset that “lethargic Negroes” achieved greater success than they did.⁹⁹

Black Tulsans held many different types of jobs in Greenwood. According to the U.S. census from 1920, it is estimated that 40% of Greenwood residents were professionals and artisans like lawyers, doctors, carpenters, hairdressers, blacksmiths, etc.¹⁰⁰ Nevertheless, not everybody worked or lived in the neighbourhood, and many adults had menial jobs and worked as porters, shoe shiners, cooks, waiters, domestic servants, and housekeepers working for white families and white-owned businesses.¹⁰¹

However, money that African Americans earned in Tulsa or somewhere else, was spent in the Greenwood district due to segregation. So, on the other hand, the Greenwood community gained an advantage of self-sufficiency. As Messer explains, segregation in business, education, society, and housing, had supported the initiative but also limited opportunities.¹⁰² Director of the Tulsa Historical Society and Museum noted that “every dollar would change hands 19 times before it left the community.” She also admitted that jealousy should be considered during that time, “If you have particularly poor whites who

⁹⁷ Walter F. White, “The Eruption of Tulsa,” *The Nation*, June 29, 1921, <https://www.thenation.com/article/society/tulsa-1921/>.

⁹⁸ Fain, “The Devastation of Black Wall Street.”

⁹⁹ White, “The Eruption of Tulsa.”

¹⁰⁰ Parshina-Kottas et al, “What the Tulsa Race Massacre Destroyed.”

¹⁰¹ Ellsworth, *Death in a Promised Land*, 16.

¹⁰² Messer, “The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921,” 1223.

are looking at this prosperous community who have large homes, fine furniture, crystals, china, linens, etc., the reaction is ‘they don’t deserve that.’”¹⁰³

Historian Paul Gardullo said that white people targeted Greenwood because of what it represented. He declared that Greenwood constituted not only affluence but also “community, churches, schools, businesses, homes, social clubs, people pulling together to demonstrate Black power in a Black community in a world that was denying them Black power and a sense of authority.”¹⁰⁴

Other factors in economic and social anxiety were an economic recession and labour unrest. After WWI, many companies experienced a drop in revenue of almost 90%. People were losing their jobs or were afraid of it because bankruptcies were three times more common between 1919 and 1920.¹⁰⁵ Besides, oil-rich Tulsa was severely affected by the imports of Mexican oil and the excess of supply over demand, causing oil prices to fall. Thus, many oil companies had to dismiss lots of their employees, predominantly white, to stay afloat. Eventually, the jobs were filled by cheaper labour – non-white and non-union workers.¹⁰⁶ As a result, the lower-class whites saw blacks as competition for employment and a threat to their territory, which added fuel to the already existing racial tension and racism in Tulsa.¹⁰⁷

An analysis of race riots from 1996¹⁰⁸ supports the primary argument of this thesis by the contention that social and economic deprivation of race/ethnic groups correlates with race riots in U.S. cities. Researchers found that cities with houses in dilapidated conditions and higher African American poverty and higher-income differences between African Americans and whites significantly reduce the rate of racial unrest. On the contrary, the improvement of living conditions in black communities, high-status occupations for blacks, and comparable incomes to whites (or higher) increase the number of race riots. Unemployment and competition play a crucial role. Experts note that “competition that is

¹⁰³ Clark, “Tulsa’s ‘Black Wall Street’ Flourished as a Self-Contained Hub in Early 1900s.”

¹⁰⁴ DeNeen L. Brown, “The devastation of the Tulsa Race Massacre,” *Washington Post*, May 28, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/interactive/2021/tulsa-race-massacre-centennial-greenwood/?itid=ap_deneenl.%20brown&itid=lk_inline_manual_2.

¹⁰⁵ Krehbiel, *Tulsa, 1921*, 17.

¹⁰⁶ Konstantinos D. Karatzas, “Interpreting Violence: The 1921 Tulsa Race Riot and Its Legacy,” *European Journal of American Culture* 37, no. 2 (2018): 128, https://doi.org/10.1386/ejac.37.2.127_1.

¹⁰⁷ Smiley and Fakunle, “From ‘brute’ to ‘thug,’” 363.

¹⁰⁸ Susan Olzak and Suzanne Shanahan, “Deprivation and Race Riots: An Extension of Spilerman’s Analysis,” *Social Forces* 74, no. 3 (1996): 931–953, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2580387>.

expressed as the contraction of job opportunities created by demographic pressures and unemployment significantly increase the rate of race riots.”

To sum up, it is suggested that race riots have often occurred due to ascending job competition, because of a growing minority population, and decreasing minority deprivation. This was also the case of Tulsa’s race riot in 1921; the white Tulsans felt simultaneously envious and intimidated by the increasing number of African American population and the economic success of Black Wall Street.

4 CONTRIBUTING FACTORS OF THE TULSA RACE RIOT

Several factors significantly contributed to the worsening interracial tensions in Tulsa, which subsequently resulted in desolation of the Greenwood neighbourhood. The early 20th century is a period in the history of the United States that has been marked by the Great Migration, segregation and rising Jim Crow Laws, the Great War and the return of war veterans, Prohibition, the re-foundation of the Ku Klux Klan, woman suffrage, police brutality and the growing liberalization of law enforcement against vice, as well as biased white-owned newspapers and an emboldened black press, and the overall black resistance and empowerment. These issues and changes have manifested in growing racial violence across the United States.¹⁰⁹

4.1 Segregation and Jim Crow Laws

Jim Crow laws were constitutional laws practised chiefly in the South of the United States, which enforce to make the racial segregation compulsory rather than voluntary.¹¹⁰

After the laws were enacted in the state constitution, journalist Luckerson defined them as “Oklahoma’s formal and fully legalized racism” and added that it “was actually more rigid than that in much of the Deep South where Jim Crow was sometimes upheld by custom and violence rather than legal mandate. In the South, segregation emerged from the vestiges of slavery and failed Reconstruction; in Oklahoma, it was erected statue by statue.”¹¹¹

Oklahoma’s legislation segregated almost every aspect of personal life, such as schools, hospitals, cemeteries, housing, carriages, waiting rooms, and telephone booths. The constitution also did not allow interracial marriages, punishing them by several years in prison. Furthermore, the legislation forbidding African Americans to vote came into effect in 1901. Likewise, African Americans were not allowed to contribute to the Oklahoma legislation until 1964.¹¹²

In 1909, J. B. Stradford sued the railway company after being forced to change his seat from a first-class car for which he paid a ticket to a Jim Crow car, after crossing Oklahoma’s borders, while the Jim Crow car was not equal to the previous one due to less comfortable seats and only non-smokers car. Stradford lost the lawsuit in the Oklahoma Supreme Court. Later in 1916, around six hundred African Americans assembled in Tulsa to protest the

¹⁰⁹ Cameron McWhirter, *Red Summer: The Summer of 1919 and the Awakening of Black America* (New York: Henry Holt, 2011), 16–17.

¹¹⁰ Hirsch, *Riot and Remembrance*, 41.

¹¹¹ Luckerson, “The Promise of Oklahoma,” 32.

¹¹² Hirsch, *Riot and Remembrance*, 36.

discrimination of Jim Crow laws, but with no effect. The law remained in Oklahoma for another five decades and Tulsa became one of the most segregated cities in the United States until the end of the 20th century.¹¹³

4.2 Race Riots and mob violence across the nation

The racial tension in Tulsa reflected the interracial conflicts that had been occurring in the South for decades. Before the mob violence flared up in Tulsa, there were several race riots in cities throughout the United States including New Orleans, LA (1900), Springfield, OH (1904), Chicago, IL (1905, 1919), Atlanta, GA (1906), Springfield, IL (1907), East St. Louis, IL (1917). Those conflicts were between the blacks who resisted the enforced views of social hierarchy and the whites who enforce it through brute force. Each riot was different, but they all pursued a similar pattern – white mobs attacking African American communities. “As blacks asserted their rights, restive whites grew alarmed. Then some catalyst, often a newspaper article tapping into sexual fears, would trigger a furious response by whites.”¹¹⁴

4.3 Lynching

Lynching was a killing of a person in public without any due process or trial and conducted by violent mobs. They typically inflicted torture, mutilation, hanging from trees, or burning alive. Moreover, it was a public act shown to a large audience, sometimes consisting of whole families.¹¹⁵

Lynching was common in the Progressive Era, especially in the Southern territories. During this period, 3,224 men and women were lynched from 1889 to 1918, of whom 2,522 were African Americans, overall, 78%.¹¹⁶ Between 1907 and 1921, thirty-two people were lynched in Oklahoma, including twenty-six blacks. In the two decades following the riot, the figure of lynching dropped to two.¹¹⁷

However, it is impossible to know the exact numbers with absolute certainty due to a lack of formal tracking. Only 1% of the lynching led to prosecution.¹¹⁸

¹¹³ Ibid., 39–42.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 56.

¹¹⁵ “History of Lynching in America,” NAACP, accessed February 10, 2022, <https://naacp.org/find-resources/history-explained/history-lynching-america>.

¹¹⁶ Richard M. Perloff, “The Press and Lynchings of African Americans,” *Journal of Black Studies* 30, no. 3 (2000): 315, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2645940>.

¹¹⁷ “Tulsa Race Riot Report,” 24.

¹¹⁸ Perry, “Race” and Racism, 158.

White mobs often justified lynching by bringing accusations against African Americans. These allegations comprised sexual assault, murder, robbery, or vagrancy. The most frequent accusation was a crime directed toward white women by a black male. Nevertheless, lynching was created to frighten African Americans and strengthen the racial hierarchy. Whites often did not need any criminal accusation. The victims were lynched for an infringement of segregation, racial expectations, and social customs.¹¹⁹

Whites saw rape as the inability of African Americans to control themselves. The fear of such assaults increased the racial and sexual insecurities among white people. Therefore, lynching was publicly defended by some whites that their acts are “a logical response to such perceived bestiality.”¹²⁰

Harlow’s weekly, an Oklahoma newspaper, published in June 1921: “It may be said with relative accuracy that in Oklahoma among thousands of people it is not considered a crime for a mob to kill a negro... The feeling seems to be that when a number of people gather together to commit murder it ceases to be a murder and becomes a worthy deed.”¹²¹

Messer notes that “lynching was part of a larger ‘culture of vigilantism’ in which white citizens took matters into their own hands, bypassing legitimate governmental procedures of due process.”¹²² In addition, African Americans were gradually fighting back in large numbers which resulted in a bloody period in 1919, called Red Summer.

4.3.1 Red Summer of 1919

In April 1919, white-on-black racial violence known as the Red Summer began; lynching, and riots spread from south to north throughout the United States. Racial violence continued until November 1919, mostly targeted towards the black veterans of World War I who returned from France. Historian John Hope Franklin argues that the Red Summer of 1919 is “the greatest period of interracial strife the nation has ever witnessed.”¹²³

During those few months, an estimated fifty-two black people were lynched, and twenty-five race riots or mob violence occurred. These riots typically involved white mobs attacking African American men and women, and their neighbourhood frequently burned to the ground. The worst riots in 1919, which lasted several days, were in Elaine, AR,

¹¹⁹ NAACP, “History of Lynching in America.”

¹²⁰ Hirsch, *Riot and Remembrance*, 53–54.

¹²¹ Victor E. Harlow, ed., “Let us Return to a Reign of Law,” *Harlow's Weekly* 20, no. 20, June 10, 1921, <https://gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc1601116/>.

¹²² Messer, “The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921,” 1222.

¹²³ McWhirter, *Red Summer*, 13.

Knoxville, TN, Washington, DC, and Chicago, IL. After the Red Summer, the social, economic, and political aspects of race relations were greatly changing.

African Americans founded and remoulded political organizations, chiefly the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), to quell the violence, discrimination, and segregation in the courts. African American Jean Toomer stated that the Red Summer began a new era in interracial relations as blacks were encouraged to fight more and more to end black inferiority and political deprivation.¹²⁴ Jean Toomer wrote in a New York newspaper:

“As long as the Negro here was passive the true solution of the race problem could wait. The South burned and lynched, and the North aided by its silence. But now, with the Negro openly resolved and prepared to resist attacks upon his person and privileges, the condition assumes a graver aspect. Immediate steps toward cooperative relations are imperative. It now confronts the nation.”¹²⁵

This spate of race riots, lynching, and rising militancy significantly contributed to the Tulsa race riot, even though it happened two years later, by establishing the atmosphere of racial violence and demonstrating the increasing black resistance and their efforts to end black subordination.

4.4 Local violence

As Ellsworth noted, before the riot in 1921, several local incidents in Tulsa may have affected the events of the riot. The first happened in 1917, the second in 1919, and another in 1920.¹²⁶

The first incident began with the bombing of the house of J. Edgar Pew, a rich oilman and vice-president of the oil company. A week later, seventeen Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) members, a radical labour organization, were arrested and declared guilty of vagrancy. They were attacked and tortured during the escort to the jail by up to fifty armed men, the so-called Knights of Liberty. After that, the seventeen IWW members were persuaded, at gunpoint, to leave Tulsa. This case triggered mob vigilantism in the city and pointed out to the Tulsans that the local police department was probably cooperating with the Knights.¹²⁷

¹²⁴ Ibid., 13–16.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 16.

¹²⁶ Ellsworth, *Death in a Promised Land*, 25.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 25–33.

The second episode was the case of a white worker called O. W. Leonard, who was confronted by two black men on the street and shot in the back. Before he died, he had provided the police a statement and a scanty description of the assailants. The authorities later arrested three black men. However, speculations in Greenwood about a lynch that may occur have encouraged a group of fifteen armed African Americans to come to the city jail to make sure that the three defendants were safe.¹²⁸ We could see a similar pattern in the behaviour of African Americans in the case of Rowland's lynching in 1921.

The third incident, which probably contributed the most to the race riot a year later, was the murder of a white taxi driver Homer Nida. The authority pressed charges against an eighteen-year-old white man named Roy Belton, who eventually confessed. Later, several men gathered before the courthouse where Belton was being held in custody and approximately fifty of them were armed with guns. Some of them came into the courthouse and ordered the sheriff to hand over Belton; they took him out about three miles southwest of Tulsa. The crowd extended to several hundred people, and apparently, about a thousand cars were spotted on the scene. There were also Tulsa police officers, but they did not intervene. Roy Belton was eventually lynched. Police Chief Gustafson later claimed that the Belton's lynching "will prove of real benefit to Tulsa and vicinity. It was an object lesson to the hijackers and auto thieves, and I believe it will be taken as such."¹²⁹ Similarly, Sheriff Woodley added: "I believe that Belton's lynching will prove beneficial...It shows to the criminal that Tulsa men mean business."¹³⁰

All three incidents were widely reported in the city newspapers and contributed to concerns in the African American community living in Tulsa. Especially the Belton case showed, that if a white prisoner was taken from the County jail and lynched, no black prisoner was safe in police custody from lynching and mob violence. Moreover, there was little or no trust and reliance on the police force. Thus, when Dick Rowland was held in jail, many black Tulsans believed that he was in danger.¹³¹

4.5 Crime and Police Force

Tulsa's economic boom has created not only work opportunities, but also great possibilities for robbers, burglars, bootleggers, and others. There were not many employees who worked

¹²⁸ Ibid., 33–35.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 38–44.

¹³⁰ Hirsch, *Riot and Remembrance*, 68–69.

¹³¹ Ibid., 69.

for the police department and the courthouse in Tulsa. For example, in May 1921, more than 6,000 people were awaiting court sentences. Local law enforcement authorities were often inefficient, inadequately equipped, and short-staffed. In addition, corruption played a major role in the Tulsa police department. The police force was associated with undiscipline, dishonesty, misogyny, police brutality, and racism.¹³² Many police officers were members of the Ku Klux Klan, who usually stood nearby and did nothing to interfere or even perpetrate violence themselves.¹³³

The crime in Tulsa flourished, which led many white and black Tulsans to disregard the law. For example, many companies have cancelled all car insurances in the city, due to a large amount of car theft. As Walter White stated, a large bulk of Tulsa's citizens were not interested in electing county or city officials because they intended only to obtain money and move away. As a result, certain people only strived to vote for someone who would allow them to continue their transgression and further their agenda.¹³⁴

Before the riot, particularly African Americans had developed a commonly held belief that law enforcement officers were highly incapable of protecting prisoners. In 1914, Tulsa's newspaper upheld this assumption and explained the reaction of blacks in response to Dick Rowland's lynching by writing:

“These lynchings are getting to be far too common in Oklahoma, and something must be done to stop it. There is no hope of protection from the State authorities, and the federal government is silent on the question. Women and children have been lynched in Oklahoma, to say nothing of the scores of negro men who have been murdered, and not a single man of these infernal mobs has been punished...Negro men, it's up to us to act. We must have justice!... Let us respect the law and enforce it to the point of guns... If bloodshed must come, let us welcome it, and die if need be in defense of the law and justice.”¹³⁵

Scholar Alfred Brophy explains that written Oklahoma laws and law enforcement officers should protect the black community from being lynched, but without punishment to be meted out in practice, it would be apparent that “when there is a gap between what the society believes and what the law commands, both the law and social system tend to break down.”¹³⁶

¹³² Ibid., 65–71.

¹³³ Perry, “*Race and Racism*,” 158.

¹³⁴ White, “The Eruption of Tulsa.”

¹³⁵ Messer, “The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921,” 1227.

¹³⁶ Brophy, *Reconstructing the Dreamland*, 11–12.

In 1920, when Roy Belton was kidnapped from the Tulsa County Jail and lynched, there were several eyewitnesses who claimed that the local police officers “directed traffic at the scene of the lynching, trying to afford every person present an equal chance to view the event.”¹³⁷

In 1921, the police department and the local National Guard had a tremendous impact on the riot and significantly contributed to the destruction of the prosperous black community. Not only did they let the mob gather before the courthouse and did not ask for external assistance, but they also eagerly supported white Tulsans by providing them weapons, deputizing them, and even actively opening fire at the black residents and setting the business district on fire.¹³⁸

During and after the riot, the local police and Tulsa units of the National Guard ignored or rather dishonoured the due process, whether they arrested solely blacks and interned them into the detention centres or did not punish and imprison any murderer, looter, or arsonist after the riot.¹³⁹

4.6 Immigration

The Great Migration was one of the greatest relocations of people in American history, an event in which about 6,000,000 African Americans moved from the American South to Northern and Western territories between 1910 to 1970 while seeking shelter mainly from racial oppression and poverty. Their vision was to live decent social life with solid professional and educational opportunities, but the reality was still challenging as they lived in the segregated parts of the cities. They faced distrust and harassment rooted in prejudice from white citizens because they had been forced to adjust to their new neighbours as well as increasing the lack of employment opportunities.¹⁴⁰

According to a survey from 2005, the influx of African Americans from southern cities to the North between 1910 and 1920, is estimated at more than 500,000. By the early 1920s, the annual migration rate of blacks reached 75,000.¹⁴¹

¹³⁷ R. Halliburton, Jr., “The Tulsa Race War of 1921,” *Journal of Black Studies* 2, no. 3 (Mar 1972): 334. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2783722>.

¹³⁸ Crowe, and Lewis, “The 1921 Tulsa Massacre.”

¹³⁹ Fain, “The Devastation of Black Wall Street.”

¹⁴⁰ “The Great Migration (1910-1970),” National Archives, accessed February 16, 2022, <https://www.archives.gov/research/african-americans/migrations/great-migration>.

¹⁴¹ National Park Service U.S. Department of the Interior, *1921 Tulsa Race Riot Reconnaissance Survey*, 9.

Particularly Tulsa, from 1910, experienced a large movement of African Americans when thousands of people streamed to the city.¹⁴² In 1920, 10,903 African Americans were living in Tulsa County, of whom 8,878 were Tulsa's residents, which counted 10,8% of the population. At the time of the riot, the federal census reported almost 11,000 African Americans.¹⁴³

4.7 World War I

Thousands of African Americans fought for their country and democracy in World War I in Europe. When they returned home, they thought that their effort had earned them a new place in society as well as peace, and freedom. Journalist William A. Sweeney wrote that "America will be prouder of her Negro citizens and will be a happier, a more inspired and inspiring nation; a better home for all her people."¹⁴⁴

But after experiencing lynching, race riots, and lawlessness, they lost the vision of equality they had hoped for. Former soldiers felt angry and confused, and after encountering life without the Jim Crow laws overseas, they thought the government had spurned them. They believed they had to protect themselves and their communities, and in the war, they taught them how to do it. Indeed, it is reported that the armed African Americans grouped at the courthouse before the Tulsa riot erupted were war veterans and African Blood Brotherhood members who believed in self-defence at all costs.¹⁴⁵ The Tulsa Sheriff's Deputy Cleaver stated that they were "Army vets who wanted to show whites that they could not be bluffed into submission."¹⁴⁶

In addition, the war had created a gap in the labour market, which allowed many African Americans to gain jobs that they previously very often could not afford. Many WWI veterans, blacks and whites, were looking for job opportunities when they returned from abroad, which represented several hundreds of thousands of jobs that had to be filled. This added tensions among people because of the increasing competition and lack of vacancies.¹⁴⁷

4.8 The Ku Klux Klan

The "revived" or "second" Ku Klux Klan was established in 1915 throughout the country, wearing well-known hooded robes. The most widespread white racist organization was most

¹⁴² Ibid., 39.

¹⁴³ "Tulsa Race Riot Report," 144.

¹⁴⁴ McWhirter, *Red Summer*, 15.

¹⁴⁵ Messer, "The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921," 1229.

¹⁴⁶ Hirsch, *Riot and Remembrance*, 152.

¹⁴⁷ McWhirter, *Red Summer*, 17.

notably active in the 1920s. It is believed that the Klan was extremely strong in Tulsa, where it counted more than 3,200 Klansmen in 1921. In addition, in Tulsa, a higher number of women belonged to the Klan, and the so-called Junior KKK also operated in the city. The Klan targeted their terror not only at African Americans but also at Catholics, Jews, immigrants, and others.¹⁴⁸

The influence of the Ku Klux Klan was most noticeable in Tulsa in the 1920s. Several prominent politicians, sheriffs, mayors, county attorneys, and leaders were admitted members of the Klan. For example, in 1923, more than half legislators who represented Tulsa County in the Oklahoma House of Representatives were the Klan members.¹⁴⁹

However, there is a lack of evidence that members of the KKK existed in Tulsa before the race riot. Previous research admitted that Klan occurred in Oklahoma, so it was very likely that they were also in prosperous Tulsa, but if so, they were not very active or had a restricted presence.¹⁵⁰

Nevertheless, the attack helped Klan with recruiting new members and after two months of the riot, Tulsa experienced rapid growth of Klan members. As the Klansman who arrived in Tulsa said, “the riot was the best thing that ever happened to Tulsa.”¹⁵¹ The Organization continued to expand, and by 1925, between 2 and 5 million people had joined the Klan nationwide.¹⁵²

4.9 The local media

Newspapers had catastrophic and influential consequences for a group of people in Tulsa and the ensuing incident in 1921. There were several newspapers in the city; the most significant were the *Tulsa World* and the *Tulsa Tribune*, owned by whites, and the popular black *Tulsa Star*.¹⁵³ Local media often had biased reports promoting their racial beliefs and inciting racial hatred, which applied to the Tulsa politicians and law enforcement as well. They favoured whites and blamed blacks as the root of the problem. To counter these presumptions, *Tulsa Star* attempted to counter the biases by posting their points of view, but

¹⁴⁸ Ellsworth, *Death in a Promised Land*, 20–22.

¹⁴⁹ “Tulsa Race Riot Report,” 47.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 47–48.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹⁵² Joshua D. Rothman, “When Bigotry Paraded Through the Streets,” *the Atlantic*, December 4, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/12/second-klan/509468/>.

¹⁵³ Ellsworth, *Death in a Promised Land*, 33–39.

since most media at the time were predominantly racist, black newspapers had a hard time finding support outside their ethnic community.¹⁵⁴

Before the 1921 attack, the *Tulsa World* referred to the lynching as “righteous protest,” in contrast to the editor of the *Tulsa Star* who claimed that “there is no crime, however atrocious, that justifies mob violence.”¹⁵⁵ In addition, the *Tulsa Star* invited black Tulsans to strike back in response to lynching. The paper claimed that “the proper time to afford protection to any prisoner is BEFORE and during the time he is being lynched.”¹⁵⁶

Perloff declared that newspapers provided thorough descriptions with dreadful details and visual coverage of lynching, especially those that took place locally but even outside of the area. For instance, in 1893, the *New York Times* published an article on the lynching of Henry Smith in Texas, describing it as “Smith was placed on a 10-foot-high scaffold and was tortured for 50 minutes by red-hot irons thrust against his body, after which he was set on fire and transformed from a human being to charred human remains.”¹⁵⁷

Rarely do we find press editors across the U.S. who did not write about black victims as ‘Negroes’ who had deserved the punishment bestowed upon them, with headlines emphasizing the victim’s race and the alleged crime for which they were to blame. The media maintained the image of these actions as justifiable responses on the grounds of the immorality of blacks. Newspapers mainly added the racist coverage to project and strike fear into African Americans and reinforce racial prejudices.¹⁵⁸

As a result, certain media were supporting organizations such as the notorious KKK. This attitude led to the mindset reflected in articles like this one printed in Tulsa a few days before the riot erupted:

“It would be easy enough to indulge in academics against such a movement, but strange enough, we feel a thrill of hope instead. Possibly it will prove the balance wheel in every great community which will hold society together.”¹⁵⁹

Furthermore, biased white-owned newspapers reported and exaggerated every crime committed by African Americans and seldom mentioned the success of Greenwood and

¹⁵⁴ McWhirter, *Red Summer*, 17.

¹⁵⁵ Luckerson, “The Promise of Oklahoma,” 35.

¹⁵⁶ Ellsworth, *Death in a Promised Land*, 25.

¹⁵⁷ Perloff, “The Press and Lynchings of African Americans,” 319.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 319–321.

¹⁵⁹ Messer, “The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921,” 1225–1226.

black Tulsans.¹⁶⁰ Consequently, newspapers not only had fuelled the gas to the violence, but the *Tulsa Tribune* also sparked off the riot by reporting the alleged rape of Sarah Page and the arrest of Dick Rowland with the headline “Nab Negro for Attacking a Girl in Elevator” on the front page. This inflammatory article initiated and motivated the assembly of a white mob and served as a symbol to lynch an African American and principally uphold social order.¹⁶¹

¹⁶⁰ Luckerson, “The Promise of Oklahoma,” 34.

¹⁶¹ “Tulsa Race Riot Report,” 58.

5 AFTERMATH, RESULTANT FRAMES, AND REPARATIONS

Researchers define frame as a term that forms a collective designation, and perception of certain events, which legitimize actions and strengthen shared facts, values, and beliefs about those events. This racially violent incident, which broke out on May 31, 1921, was perceived differently by both races. Many white Tulsans, local media, city and law enforcement officials interpreted the riot as a black uprising and blamed armed African American men who came to the courthouse to prevent lynching.¹⁶² Tulsa mayor T. D. Evans, in particular, has publicly declared that these aggressive African Americans were squarely culpable of the riot, adding that the destruction of Greenwood was salutary and positive for Tulsa.¹⁶³

Perhaps the arrival of armed blacks was perceived as an uprising due to racial bigotry, prejudice, and hostility between white and black Tulsans prevalent at that time. In addition, racial segregation aroused mistrust and fear of the unknown as they did not know each other well. Consequently, whites might have assumed that the militancy of those men who stormed into the white part of the city mirrored the notion of all blacks in Greenwood. Although this assumption was misinterpreted, the general impression created consternation and overreaction by whites.¹⁶⁴ On the other hand, framing this violent event as an uprising and thus illustrating the black community as criminals and culprits of the riot was beneficial for perpetuating Jim Crowism, segregation, and reinforcing the black inferiority and white supremacy.¹⁶⁵

Indeed, shortly afterwards, a grand jury examining the causes of the riot announced a verdict that assigned responsibility to African Americans:

“We find that the recent race riot was the direct result of an effort on the part of a certain group of colored men who appeared at the courthouse on the night of May 31, 1921, for the purpose of protecting one Dick Rowland.”¹⁶⁶

The jury also stated that “[t]here was no mob spirit among the whites, no talk of lynching and no arms.”¹⁶⁷ The only white person to whom the jury assigned responsibility for the riot

¹⁶² Chris M. Messer, and Patricia A. Bell, “Mass Media and Governmental Framing of Riots: The Case of Tulsa, 1921,” *Journal of Black Studies* 40, no. 5 (May 2010): 854–857, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40648610>.

¹⁶³ Ellsworth, *Death in a Promised Land*, 88.

¹⁶⁴ Hirsch, *Riot and Remembrance*, 112–113.

¹⁶⁵ Fain, “The Devastation of Black Wall Street.”

¹⁶⁶ Messer and Bell, “Mass Media and Governmental Framing of Riots,” 858.

¹⁶⁷ Hirsch, *Riot and Remembrance*, 127–128.

was Police Chief Gustafson. He was arraigned for negligence and dismissed from the office but never imprisoned. According to the jury, the rest of the white Tulsans were innocent; they acted in self-defence.¹⁶⁸

However, Greenwood residents identified the incident as a massacre of their people and neighbourhood.¹⁶⁹ According to their accounts, blacks viewed the growing crowd at the courthouse as an alert that the lynching of a black man was coming and experienced valid fear about him.¹⁷⁰ What followed seemed to be perceived as unjustified violence and injustice. Blacks were placing blame on a large number of whites who participated in the destruction.

5.1 Greenwood Rebuilding

In the early days after the riot, several white city officials, leaders, and newspapers expressed support and empathy for African Americans and promised to rebuild the burned black district. That changed as a disseminated consensus view emerged regarding the accusation of the blacks of the incident.¹⁷¹ Not only did the white Tulsans refuse the obligation for the reconstruction and handed it over to the victims, but some white Tulsa residents also tried to prevent restoring Greenwood to its original state.¹⁷²

City officials set up the Reconstruction Committee, a group of white citizens, who focused mainly on purchasing land in the burned district from black owners and turning it into an industrial area while removing black residents to the northern part of Tulsa.¹⁷³ But they could not persuade some African Americans to sell their land, so their next move was to enforce a fire ordinance in Greenwood, which required the use of only fireproof structures and materials to build a house in the area, which many black families could not afford because of the prices. Unsurprisingly, this city ordinance did not cover the area farther to the north of the district. Nevertheless, their determined efforts to relocate black Tulsans and develop an industrial district failed on account of the involvement of black lawyers. These actions by white city officials and leaders flared new tensions and hostility among Tulsans, and questions arose as to whether the destruction of Greenwood and the subsequent attempt

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 128–129.

¹⁶⁹ Messer, “The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921,” 1225.

¹⁷⁰ Hirsch, *Riot and Remembrance*, 113.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 117.

¹⁷² Ellsworth, *Death in a Promised Land*, 89.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 82–84.

to seize the African Americans' land had not been a plan from the beginning rather than spontaneous acts of rioters.¹⁷⁴

Ultimately, the blacks who survived and decided to remain in Tulsa had rebuilt the black district without any financial contributions and assistance, but many of them had to spend several months and even winter in tents beforehand.¹⁷⁵ They reconstructed most of the houses and businesses similarly as they had originally been, trying to pretend that things were back to normal, but many people never really recuperated from the tragedy.¹⁷⁶

5.2 Conspiracy of Silence

The riot was not a topic that people publicly discussed for decades. There was a lack of public recognition of the riot, no memorials, ceremonies, or even funerals to express regret or honour the dead. Instead, Tulsa residents mostly attempted to cover up this incident and bury facts. This happened, for instance, by disposing of police and the National Guard documents regarding the riot and the *Tulsa Tribune's* editorial page and the front page with the "Nab Negro for Attacking Girl in Elevator" article.¹⁷⁷

Hirsch noted that white Tulsans responded to the riot in a way that has been called "a conspiracy of silence or a culture of silence."¹⁷⁸ Most white Tulsans did not want to discuss this subject and sharply separated themselves from the riot and Greenwood. Blacks were cautious about talking of this violence and probably afraid that something similar could happen again. This topic disappeared almost completely from all pillars of public life for more than five decades.¹⁷⁹ The first public alludes to the riot was briefly described in *American Guide Series* in 1941, but Tulsans maintained a stony silence.¹⁸⁰ If it were not for the investigative and persisting journalists, historians, amateurs, the survivors' narratives, and the report of the Red Cross director, Maurice Willows, who provided key documents and information, we would either know very little today, or this incident would have entirely vanished from history.

¹⁷⁴ Hirsch, *Riot and Remembrance*, 136–139.

¹⁷⁵ Scott Ellsworth, "Tulsa Race Massacre," *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, accessed February 6, 2022, <https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry?entry=TU013>.

¹⁷⁶ Jeremy Cook, and Jason Long, "How the Tulsa Race Massacre Caused Decades of Harm," *The Atlantic*, May 24, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/05/1921-tulsa-race-massacre-economic-census-survivors/618968/>.

¹⁷⁷ Hirsch, *Riot and Remembrance*, 168–169.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 169.

¹⁷⁹ Madigan, "American Terror," 42–43.

¹⁸⁰ "Tulsa Race Riot Report," 26.

Among the first people who slowly broke the silence was a survivor Mary E. Jones Parrish, who recollected the African Americans' testimonies in the book called *Events of the Tulsa Disaster*, published in the 1920s but with only 21 copies and reprinted in 1998.¹⁸¹ Another one is Tulsan Ed Wheeler, who wrote an article called "Profile of a Race Riot," published in 1971. It has changed the perception of the incident, especially among white citizens. However, when doing research for the article, he had to face serious obstacles and threats against him and his family.¹⁸² A year later, university professor R. Halliburton Jr. wrote a journal article called "The Tulsa Race War of 1921," which riveted scant and mostly academic attention.¹⁸³

The first comprehensive work capturing the history of one of the worst racist violence in U.S. history was written by Scott Ellsworth in his influential book *Death in a Promised Land*, released in 1982.¹⁸⁴ Thanks to their effort and the rising awareness, the Tulsa Race Riot Commission with 11 members was established in 1997 to re-examine the circumstances and details of what had happened and put things right by placing the blame on the white rioters and the city officials. In 2001, they issued an official report with nearly 200 pages; nevertheless, some things may never be known with absolute certainty of what happened during these dark hours.¹⁸⁵ Shortly afterwards, other publications were released, and it finally became a discussed topic in history classes at public schools in Oklahoma at the beginning of the 21st century. Thus, the silence was shattered, and especially now, due to the centennial in 2021, it has returned into the public eye.

5.3 Impacts of the Tulsa race riot

Although many African Americans continued to live in Tulsa and Greenwood, they had to contend with the economic, social, and cultural effects of the 1921 racist violence. Thanks to digitized census records, researchers have recently been able to measure the impacts more comprehensively. They discovered that African Americans who stayed in the city and the newly renovated Greenwood were suffering from economic depression. Many black

¹⁸¹ Joshua D. Mackey, "Breaking a Century of Silence: A Historiography of the Tulsa Race Riot," *Fairmount Folio: Journal of History* 19 (May 2019): 49–50.

¹⁸² Tim Stanley, "50 years ago, the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre was a taboo subject when Tulsan Ed Wheeler set out to write an article 'to find out what happened.' He had no idea the threats and resistance he would face just for trying.," *Tulsa World*, last modified May 29, 2021, https://tulsa-world.com/news/local/racemassacre/50-years-ago-the-1921-tulsa-race-massacre-was-a-taboo-subject-when-tulsan-ed/article_58c4ad0c-918c-11eb-a5f5-8bb30424d29b.html.

¹⁸³ Hirsch, *Riot and Remembrance*, 212.

¹⁸⁴ Madigan, "American Terror," 44.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 44-45.

professionals lost their positions and were forced to take menial and low-paid jobs. On the contrary, there are cases of Tulsans who left the city and were more economically successful and with better occupational status than those who stayed. Data derived from consensus records reflect the deviation in the Greenwood economy – flourished prior to the riot and flagged afterwards. The data indicate that between 1920, 1930, and 1940, black economic prosperity and wages of blacks in Tulsa gradually and vastly decreased, although Tulsa's economic boom, due to the oil industry, continued to grow. This is in contrast to white residents of Tulsa who had broadly consistent incomes over the same period. In comparison to various black communities in and around Oklahoma, they have managed to achieve a stable level of earnings, unlike Greenwood. In 1940, unemployment in Greenwood rose, the probability of building ownership by blacks declined, and so did the rate of marriages.¹⁸⁶

Eventually, in the 1960s and the 1970s, a new economic downturn came as Oklahoma and Tulsa officials began urban renewal. Many houses and businesses were demolished in Tulsa, the vast majority in Greenwood, causing the removal of blacks mainly to the north, some to the east and west, but none to the south, which virtually and slowly destroyed the welfare of the black community. Racial disparities and bigotry deepened, and Tulsa remained segregated – southern Tulsa for whites and the northern part for blacks.¹⁸⁷

In addition, many black affluent entrepreneurs and leaders were discouraged from moving into the city. Those who were once in Tulsa, left when the neighbourhood was burned down, and the new ones, for obvious reasons, did not want to come, which led to a lack of investments in the black community. Yet the black community in Tulsa was growing; in 1970 the figures counted 35,277.¹⁸⁸

In sum, the devastation of Greenwood – the loss of property and lives changed Greenwood and the African American community in ways that lasted at least for the next decades. The incident altered their lives and almost every aspect of the social structure.

The impacts of the racist violence from 1921 can be seen in Tulsa in the present day, particularly in the de facto existing segregation. Today's Tulsa seems still contend with racial tensions, biases, and disparities in living standards, housing, health, and educational conditions.¹⁸⁹ In 2020, the population of Tulsa numbered more than 400,000 people, and as

¹⁸⁶ Cook, and Long, "How the Tulsa Race Massacre Caused Decades of Harm."

¹⁸⁷ Hirsch, *Riot and Remembrance*, 195.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 198.

¹⁸⁹ Human Rights Watch, "The Case for Reparations in Tulsa, Oklahoma: A Human Rights Argument," May 29, 2020, https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/29/case-reparations-tulsa-oklahoma#_Toc41573961.

the federal census shows, more than 60% are white Tulsans and about 15% are blacks.¹⁹⁰ According to a 2019 report published by the Human Rights Watch, most African Americans live predominantly in the northern area of Tulsa, which is associated with economic deterioration and more than 30% of people living in poverty, in comparison with South Tulsa, where about 13% of white Tulsans suffer hardship. The likelihood that black Tulsans own their houses is 43% opposed to 72% of whites. Furthermore, the southern Tulsans have a higher life expectancy, on average 14 years longer than African Americans in the North.¹⁹¹ North Tulsa has poor-quality infrastructure and houses, a low number of businesses and a scarcity of large grocery and supermarket chains, shopping centres, theatres, and hospitals.¹⁹² Moreover, blacks are nowadays reportedly co-ordinately excluded from councils, managerial positions, and classroom representations.¹⁹³ The educational system in Tulsa is excessively segregated and insufficiently funded. Schools in North Tulsa show a similar pattern; the number of absenteeism, suspensions, and school turnovers is higher than in the South.¹⁹⁴

Moreover, according to a report regarding police brutality across the United States, blacks in North Tulsa receive overly aggressive treatment by the Tulsa police department. The number of arresting of blacks is three times higher as well as stopping black drivers and investigating for violations is more frequent than throughout the city and with white Tulsans.¹⁹⁵

Hannibal Johnson, an attorney and author of the books about the Greenwood tragedy, mentioned two main issues that are the legacy of 1921. Firstly, there is a fragile trust between these two communities, and between blacks and the police. Johnson explains that “[many whites involved in the destruction] were deputized by local law enforcement. You have an incident like that, then the breach in trust is huge,” and he also added that trust is a problem

¹⁹⁰ “QuickFacts: Tulsa city, Oklahoma,” U.S. Census Bureau, accessed March 10, 2022, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/tulsacityoklahoma>.

¹⁹¹ Randi Richardson, “Tulsa Race Massacre, 100 years later: Why it happened and why it's still relevant today,” *NBC News*, last modified May 29, 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/tulsa-race-massacre-100-years-later-why-it-happened-why-n1268877>.

¹⁹² Hirsch, *Riot and Remembrance*, 321–322.

¹⁹³ Neda Ulaby, “Artist's Black Wall Street Project Is About Tulsa 100 Years Ago — And Today,” *NPR*, last modified June 8, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/05/31/1000215563/artists-black-wall-street-project-is-about-tulsa-100-years-ago-and-today>.

¹⁹⁴ Human Rights Watch, “The Case for Reparations in Tulsa, Oklahoma.”

¹⁹⁵ Human Rights Watch. ““Get on the Ground!”: Policing, Poverty, and Racial Inequality in Tulsa, Oklahoma: A Case Study of US Law Enforcement.” September 12, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/09/12/get-ground-policing-poverty-and-racial-inequality-tulsa-oklahoma/case-study-us>.

because promises to rebuild Greenwood have not been kept.¹⁹⁶ The second legacy shown in everyday life is viewed on the wealth gap between white and black citizens. In general, an average African American household show a tenfold reduction in net worth compared to a standard white household.¹⁹⁷ In Tulsa, the median earnings of a typical white family have exceeded \$50,000, in contrast with less than \$30,000 in the case of a black household.¹⁹⁸ Johnson concluded that African Americans were unable to amass wealth due to history, and now face more obstacles in accessing capital. He noted, “Slavery was obviously a huge example of an inability to accumulate wealth — uncompensated labor. But the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre is an example of the inability to transfer wealth intergenerationally because of disruptors — some of these wealthy Black men, their wealth was lost in the massacre, and it was not restored.”¹⁹⁹

Although this outbreak of racial violence is more than 100 years old, it is not history at all, but something that can be seen in everyday life in Tulsa and beyond.

5.4 Riot vs Massacre

There has been a long-standing debate about what to call this act of racist violence in 1921. Some refer to it as a riot, some as massacre, war, or pogrom. Formally and historically, it has been known as a “riot.” This designation was most commonly used in United States history to describe any violent attacks between whites and blacks. Subsequently, many historians adopted and preferred this terminology. Furthermore, early 20th-century insurance policies are an important factor that influenced the use of the word “riot” because when events were defined as riots, insurance companies were not obligated to pay any insurance benefits.²⁰⁰ The incident in Tulsa was also labelled as a “riot” by most of the newspaper coverage from both communities, even though there were two different frames in the immediate aftermath formed by whites and blacks.

On the contrary, riots are characterized by a spontaneous outbreak of violence, mutual and commensurate aggression, and legitimate grievance.²⁰¹ That could partly correspond to

¹⁹⁶ Richardson, “Tulsa Race Massacre, 100 years later.”

¹⁹⁷ Kriston McIntosh, Emily Moss, Ryan Nunn, and Jay Shambaugh, “Examining the Black-white wealth gap,” *Brookings*, last modified February 27, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2020/02/27/examining-the-black-white-wealth-gap/>.

¹⁹⁸ Human Rights Watch, “The Case for Reparations in Tulsa, Oklahoma.”

¹⁹⁹ Richardson, “Tulsa Race Massacre, 100 years later.”

²⁰⁰ Tulsa Historical Society & Museum, “1921 Tulsa Race Massacre.”

²⁰¹ Brett Kunkel, “Relics From White Supremacy: Why Historians Need to Reevaluate Their Use of the Word “Riot” to Describe Racial Violence in the South During the Reconstruction and Post-Reconstruction Eras,” *Ramifications* 1, no. 1 (2019): 1, <https://digitalcommons.wcupa.edu/ramifications/vol1/iss1/3>.

the beginning of the incident, which took place at the courthouse. As white Tulsans claimed, they saw the onset of the black uprising, which could cause a legitimate grievance, and the violence started spontaneously when the shot was fired. They also faced mutual aggression from the armed group of black war veterans. However, this does not apply to the white invasion that occurred on the morning of June 1.

Oklahoma senator Kevin Matthews has urged that the state commission would be renamed and used the word “massacre.” Eventually, in 2018, the name was changed to the 1921 Race Massacre Commission. He also admitted that the label could bring controversy.²⁰² On one hand, we have the word “massacre,” which can be a biased and loaded word and can carry a negative connotation. On the other hand, some people believe that the massacre would describe the events of 1921 more accurately.

According to an official dictionary, a riot is defined as “a tumultuous disturbance of the public peace by three or more persons assembled together and acting with a common intent.”²⁰³ Opposed to that, a massacre is described as “the act or an instance of killing a number of usually helpless or unresisting human beings under circumstances of atrocity or cruelty” or “an act of complete destruction.”²⁰⁴

From my point of view, the word “massacre” describes the brutal nature of the incident and meets all aspects of the word’s definition. A large number of armed whites who were outnumbered invaded and attacked Greenwood residents, where the innocent elderly, women, and children also lived, resulting in an unknown number of deaths. Moreover, they left behind a trail of destruction in the form of levelling of 35-city blocks. In this respect, I would support the assumption that “riot” was misused and agree with renaming it the Tulsa race massacre.

5.5 Reparations and Reconciliation

The idea of financial reparations for the victims and their descendants has been discussed for decades and continued with the 2001 official report of the Oklahoma commission, which put forward a recommendation to provide financial compensations to the survivors. But until today, the recommendation went unheard, and survivors did not receive any restitution. It is

²⁰² Randy Krehbiel, “1921 centennial commission to replace 'riot' with 'massacre' in official title,” *Tulsa World*, November 27, 2018, https://tulsa-world.com/news/local/1921-centennial-commission-to-replace-riot-with-massacre-in-official-title/article_128d9304-6d59-5b5f-872a-f72509d3ecd8.html.

²⁰³ Merriam-Webster, “Riot,” Merriam-Webster.com, accessed March 16, 2022. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/riot>.

²⁰⁴ Merriam-Webster, “Massacre,” Merriam-Webster.com, accessed March 16, 2022. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/massacre>.

estimated that African Americans have lost assets worth at least \$1.4 million, which would be adjusted for inflation today by approximately \$25 million. Yet according to experts, these figures are a substantial underestimate of the true number.²⁰⁵ The survivors did not receive any money from the insurance companies because the claims of compensation were rejected on the grounds of the riot clauses.²⁰⁶

Several survivors and later their descendants sued the city in court but never succeeded. In 2005, the U.S. Supreme Court denied the lawsuit without a hearing. Lower courts proclaimed that the limitation period for claim reparations, which is only two years, had already passed in 1923.²⁰⁷ Consequently, in 2021, a congressman drafted legislation that would facilitate seeking restitution for all survivors and descendants by eliminating the statutes of limitations.²⁰⁸ On May 19, 2021, three remaining survivors gave their testimony at the congressional hearing before Congress seeking reparations for them and descendants and called for acknowledging the truth.²⁰⁹ Subsequently, on the centenary of June 1, 2021, US president Joe Biden announced, “My fellow Americans, this was not a riot. This was a massacre... among the worst in our history, but not the only one, and for too long forgotten by our history. As soon as it happened, there was a clear effort to erase it from our memory.”²¹⁰

In addition, in 2018, Tulsa Mayor T. D. Bynum pledged that the city would investigate the possible mass graves in Tulsa. Several historians and scientists later discovered 19 bodies in a few-blocks-distant Oaklawn Cemetery.²¹¹ This evidence strongly supports the earlier assumptions about the mass graves and the burial of potential victims somewhere in the city, nevertheless, there is no evidence that these bodies relate to the events in 1921.²¹² The

²⁰⁵ Richardson, “Tulsa Race Massacre, 100 years later.”

²⁰⁶ Hirsch, *Riot and Remembrance*, 141.

²⁰⁷ Brown, “The devastation of the Tulsa Race Massacre.”

²⁰⁸ DeNeen L. Brown, “Tulsa Race Massacre reparations bill introduced in Congress,” *Washington Post*, May 21, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2021/05/21/tulsa-massacre-reparations-bill/>.

²⁰⁹ Juana Summers, “Survivors Of 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre Share Eyewitness Accounts,” *NPR*, last modified May 19, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/05/19/998225207/survivors-of-1921-tulsa-race-massacre-share-eyewitness-accounts>.

²¹⁰ “Remarks by President Biden Commemorating the 100th Anniversary of the Tulsa Race Massacre,” The White House, accessed March 14, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/06/02/remarks-by-president-biden-commemorating-the-100th-anniversary-of-the-tulsa-race-massacre/>.

²¹¹ DeNeen L. Brown, “Descendants of Tulsa Race Massacre victims protest reburial of mass grave remains,” *Washington Post*, last modified August 3, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2021/08/03/tulsa-mass-grave-reburial-protest/>.

²¹² Brown, “The devastation of the Tulsa Race Massacre.”

analysing of evidence and searching for other buried victims will probably continue for a longer period.

Recently, to mark the 100th anniversary and for lasting reconciliation, a 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre Centennial Commission was formed with the word “riot” crossed out in the title. The centennial commission aims to educate and commemorate Greenwood and its devastation.²¹³ Their projects include the renovation of the local Greenwood Cultural Center and the construction of Greenwood Rising, which senator Matthews described as “a history center dedicated to telling the entire history, before, during, and after the massacre.”²¹⁴ A project director added that “[i]t literally will be a room where people can have difficult conversations around race. You can change policies and laws, but until you change someone’s heart and mind, you’re never going to move forward. That’s what Greenwood Rising is all about.”²¹⁵

Furthermore, in 2020, the city and state officials have made this topic a required part of the Oklahoma high schools’ curriculum and introduced a new thorough educational approach in schools in the state, which should challenge and encourage students to talk about these events and racism.²¹⁶

Finally, this topic is no longer taboo and has entered the national consciousness, which was boosted after releasing two popular HBO shows: *Watchmen* (2019) and *Lovecraft Country* (2020).²¹⁷ To some extent, they address the Tulsa tragedy of 1921 and subsequently acknowledged the unsightly American history in public. Recently, there have also been several documentaries, articles, books, and even children’s books that readdressed this atrocity. With growing wider attention and revelation of the truth, the Tulsans can begin to acknowledge, confront, and come to terms with their past, like much of America.

²¹³ “Who We Are,” 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre Centennial Commission, accessed March 23, 2022, <https://www.tulsa2021.org/about>.

²¹⁴ “Greenwood Rising dedicated: 'A history center dedicated to telling the entire history',” 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre Centennial Commission, accessed March 23, 2022, <https://www.tulsa2021.org/news/greenwood-rising-dedicated>.

²¹⁵ Madigan, “American Terror,” 82.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 51.

²¹⁷ Alex Noble, “Tulsa Race Massacre: How ‘Watchmen,’ ‘Lovecraft Country’ Raised Public Awareness for the Tragedy,” *The Wrap*, June 1, 2021, <https://www.thewrap.com/tulsa-massacre-watchmen-lovecraft-country/>.

CONCLUSION

One of the worst racial incidents in US history occurred within 18 hours, during which the white Tulsans had systematically burned the black district, 35-city blocks known as Black Wall Street, to the ground. More than 1,200 buildings were incinerated and looted, leaving thousands of African Americans homeless. The exact number of victims is unknown, but it is estimated that up to 300 people, most of them African Americans, have been killed. The Tulsa case is not a rare incident of white-black violence, but it varies in the scope of its brutality and its impacts on the black community in the city. Indeed, the controversy surrounding the renaming of the incident to the massacre should be terminated.

The effects of 1921's economic, social, and cultural impacts are visible today in racial segregation, discrimination, mistrust, and unequal socioeconomic conditions. Schools, living areas, and workplaces remain considerably segregated. There is a tremendous link between Tulsa's geography, race, and economic backwardness. The black community lives predominantly in the north part of Tulsa, suffering from a higher rate of poverty, economic underdevelopment, and overly aggressive policing as well as worse educational and health conditions than the white south part. As Tulsa deal with the reconciliation of the past and recovering from the lingering race-related issues in the city, it is essential to acknowledge and confront the history. For this reason, the aim of the thesis is to analyse the background of the massacre, chiefly the underlying causes, and responses that followed.

Immediately after the massacre, white Tulsans framed the incident as a black uprising and assigned the blame to African Americans, instead of instantly transferring responsibility to the white Tulsans, who acted out of malice and hatred against blacks. The survivors and their descendants received no reparations or insurance compensations, and more importantly, not a single white Tulsan was ever criminally prosecuted in connection with the massacre. Moreover, the massacre has been for a long time forgotten in American history, with emerging the so-called conspiracy of silence and the evident efforts to erase this topic from people's memories. Under the consideration of the background, black-white race relations in Oklahoma and the United States, along with social structure and hierarchy, underlined by white superiority and black inferiority, are deeply rooted in American history as a legacy of slavery. Before the massacre, Greenwood was a prosperous black district with exceptional independence and accumulation of enormous wealth. They posed a potential threat to white supremacy and challenged their position in the social hierarchy, and several African Americans even made some lower-class whites feel inferior to them. The

Greenwood community demonstrated black success, and the rise in the status of African Americans symbolized the loss of power and control by whites. In addition, they had to face newly emerged fierce competition in the job, housing, economic, and political areas. Consequently, the underlying causes of the massacre were both the race relations between white and black Tulsans, underlined by racial ideology prevalent in the United States in the early 20th century, and the social and economic prosperity of the black community.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AR	Arkansas
DC	District of Columbia
GA	Georgia
IL	Illinois
IWW	Industrial Workers of the World
KKK	Ku Klux Klan
LA	Louisiana
NAACP	National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
OH	Ohio
TN	Tennessee
WWI	World War I