
TWO AMERICAS · twoamericas.us

ERA V · WORLD WARS, MIGRATION & SEGREGATION · 1915–1954

PERSECUTION TRACK

Red Summer 1919:

When America Came Home Swinging

A Two Americas Companion Document

ERA: ERA V — World Wars, Migration & Segregation
YEAR: 1919
TRACK: Persecution
LENS: Secular & Political
250 BADGE: Yes — event postdates 1776

"If we must die — let it not be like hogs"

— Claude McKay, 'If We Must Die,' 1919

twoamericas.us · Two Americas Project · ERA V

Red Summer 1919: When America Came Home Swinging

ERA V

PERSECUTION

SECULAR &
POLITICAL

250 BADGE

In the summer of 1919, the United States returned from the battlefields of Europe and turned its violence on Black communities at home. In at least 26 cities across the country, white mobs attacked Black neighborhoods, Black veterans, and Black homes. The federal government watched, documented, and in some cases participated. The NAACP called it the Red Summer. Historians call it a turning point. The 20,000 Black men and women who joined the NAACP in the months that followed called it a declaration.

THE RETURNING SOLDIER

More than 380,000 Black men served in the United States military during World War I. The 369th Infantry — the Harlem Hellfighters — fought for 191 consecutive days on the Western Front, longer than any other American unit. France awarded the Croix de Guerre to the regiment and to 171 individual soldiers. They came home to a country that had sent them to die for democracy while denying them its practice. They came home in uniform to cities that would not hire them, neighborhoods that would not house them, and a federal government that surveilled them as threats. The Department of Justice, under newly appointed Special Assistant J. Edgar Hoover, opened a unit specifically to monitor Black radicalism — and named A. Philip Randolph's newspaper *The Messenger* as the most dangerous publication in America. The war had changed Black America's expectations. The summer of 1919 was the country's answer.

THE MASSACRES

The violence of 1919 was not spontaneous. It was organized, geographically distributed, and in many cases led by white veterans and law enforcement. In Charleston, South Carolina (May), white sailors attacked Black residents in the city's Black business district. In Longview, Texas (July), a white mob burned Black homes and ran a Black newspaper editor out of town after he reported truthfully on the lynching of a Black man. In Washington, DC (July), white servicemen and civilians rampaged through Black neighborhoods for four days. Black residents — including veterans — armed themselves and fought back. In Chicago (July-August), the worst of the urban riots: 38 dead, 537 injured, and more than 1,000 Black families left homeless after 13 days of violence triggered by the drowning of a Black teenager who crossed an invisible racial boundary in Lake Michigan. In Knoxville (August) and Omaha (September), white mobs attempted to seize Black prisoners from jails, burning city hall in Omaha. In Elaine, Arkansas (September-October), the most lethal episode: Black sharecroppers attempting to organize a union were met by a white posse and federal troops. Estimates range from 100 to 237 Black people killed. Twelve Black men were sentenced to death. The Supreme Court's 1923 ruling in *Moore v. Dempsey* — that a mob-dominated trial violated due process — was the first major civil rights victory in the federal courts of the twentieth century.

THE GOVERNMENT'S ANSWER

The federal government's response to Red Summer was surveillance, not protection. J. Edgar Hoover's General Intelligence Division produced a report in November 1919 titled 'Radicalism and Sedition Among the Negroes as Reflected in Their Publications.' The report catalogued Black newspapers, Black socialist organizations, and returning Black veterans as threats to domestic order. It named Randolph, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Cyril Briggs by name. The federal government deployed troops in multiple cities — not to protect Black residents, but to suppress Black

resistance. The Chicago Commission on Race Relations, established after the riot, produced a 672-page report in 1922 that documented the structural causes of racial violence: housing segregation, job discrimination, and law enforcement complicity. The report's recommendations were almost entirely ignored. No federal anti-lynching legislation passed in 1919, 1921, 1922, or for decades afterward.

LEGACY

Claude McKay's sonnet 'If We Must Die,' written in response to Red Summer, became one of the most widely reprinted poems in African American literary history — read decades later by Winston Churchill as a statement of Allied resolve, without acknowledgment of its origin in Black American survival. The NAACP grew from 9,000 to 90,000 members in the months following Red Summer. Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association expanded to over a million members by 1920 — the largest Black mass organization in American history to that point. A. Philip Randolph accelerated his labor organizing, founding the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters in 1925. The Great Migration accelerated. Black Americans who had believed that military service would produce civic inclusion concluded that different strategies were required. Red Summer did not produce despair. It produced organization.

Location	Event / Connection
Camp Bragg (Fayetteville, NC)	Established 1918 as a training base for WWI artillery. Black soldiers trained and deployed from NC installations under segregated conditions. The post-war return of veterans to Fayetteville occurred against the backdrop of ongoing racial terror in the state.
Camp Greene (Charlotte, NC)	1918 race riot: white soldiers attacked Black residents near the camp. Demonstrates the pattern of military-adjacent racial violence that characterized 1919 was already present in NC in 1918.
Winston-Salem, NC	November 1918: white mob attacked Black neighborhood in the days following the Armistice. The violence predates the official Red Summer but is part of the same national pattern documented in the BOI report.
Wilmington, NC	The 1898 Coup d'état (ERA IV) had already dismantled Black political power in the state. By 1919, NC's Black community operated under legal disenfranchisement and ongoing threat — the Wilmington pattern shaped the statewide context in which Red Summer's national violence occurred.
Statewide NAACP	Red Summer's national shock drove NAACP membership growth across NC. The Raleigh and Durham chapters expanded in 1919–1920. The Carolina Times (Durham, founded 1921) emerged from this organizing surge.

KEY FIGURES

James Weldon Johnson — NAACP field secretary who coined the term 'Red Summer.' His 1919 Crisis dispatches remain primary documentation of the violence.

Claude McKay — Jamaican-American poet whose sonnet 'If We Must Die' became the literary response to Red Summer. His work anchors the Harlem Renaissance contribution entry.

A. Philip Randolph — Editor of The Messenger, named by Hoover's GID as a subversive. The political consciousness forged in 1919 directly preceded his 1925 founding of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters.

J. Edgar Hoover — Head of the BOI General Intelligence Division. His 1919 radicalism report institutionalized federal surveillance of Black political organizing.

Ida B. Wells — Anti-lynching journalist whose documentation of racial violence provided the evidentiary framework for NAACP advocacy during and after Red Summer.

CHICAGO-STYLE CITATIONS

[1] McWhirter, Cameron. *Red Summer: The Summer of 1919 and the Awakening of Black America*. New York: Henry Holt, 2011.

TYPE: Peer-Reviewed Secondary

[2] Johnson, James Weldon. 'The Riots: An NAACP Investigation.' *The Crisis* 18, no. 5 (September 1919): 241–243. NAACP Records, Library of Congress.

TYPE: Primary Source · Library of Congress

[3] Chicago Commission on Race Relations. *The Negro in Chicago: A Study of Race Relations and a Race Riot*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1922.

TYPE: Primary Source · Government Document

[4] McKay, Claude. 'If We Must Die.' *The Liberator* (July 1919). Reprinted in *Harlem Shadows*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1922.

TYPE: Primary Source · Literary Archive

[5] U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Investigation. 'Radicalism and Sedition Among the Negroes as Reflected in Their Publications.' Report to the Senate, November 1919. National Archives, RG 65.

TYPE: Primary Source · National Archives

[6] Stockley, Grif. *Blood in Their Eyes: The Elaine Race Massacres of 1919*. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2001.

TYPE: Peer-Reviewed Secondary

[7] *Moore v. Dempsey*, 261 U.S. 86 (1923). United States Supreme Court.

TYPE: Primary Source · Legal Record

[8] Equal Justice Initiative. 'Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror.' Montgomery, AL: EJI, 2017. <https://eji.org/reports/lynching-in-america/>

TYPE: Institutional Report · eji.org

[9] Greenwood, Janette Thomas. 'The Winston-Salem Race Riot of 1918.' *Documentary Heritage of the South*. Chapel Hill: UNC, DocSouth Digital Library.

TYPE: Primary Source · NC · DocSouth

PAIRED CONTRIBUTION ENTRY

V-C6

A. Philip Randolph & the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (1925) · ERA V · Contribution — The political consciousness born in Red Summer's aftermath drives Randolph's 1925 labor organizing; the Brotherhood becomes the organizational backbone of the civil rights movement.

entry_research_status: needs_citation · entry_content_warning: true · entry_250_badge: true · entry_present_day_nc: true