

Explaining the Red Summer of 1919

By Zinn Education Project, adapted by Newsela staff on 09.30.19

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Image 1. State militia faces off with an African-American veteran during the 1919 Chicago race riots. Photo by Chicago Tribune.

The racist riots of 1919 occurred 100 years ago this summer. During a national wave of white mob violence, 1919 was a time when black people defended themselves. They fought back and demanded full citizenship in thousands of acts of courage and daring, small and large, individually and as a group. These events came to be known as the Red Summer.

Both the racist violence and black defiance are important patterns in our history. But pull a standard U.S. history textbook off the shelf and you're unlikely to find more than a paragraph on the 1919 riots. What you do find downplays both racism and black resistance. Our textbooks provide twisted facts and a dangerous "both sides" framing. They leave students ignorant about white supremacy at this moment of revived racist backlash. Students, and the rest of us, need to learn the lessons of 1919.

Those lessons from 1919 can give perspective to modern protests that took place in Ferguson and Baltimore. They can help us understand Bree Newsome's removal of the Confederate flag from the South Carolina statehouse and the fierce backlash to Colin Kaepernick's on-field protest.

White Rage, Black Self-Defense

The anti-black violence in 1919 occurred in many cities and was usually described problematically as "race riots." White supremacists lynched nearly 100 black people. In Pittsburgh for example, the Ku Klux Klan made their goal of using violence clear with notices that read: "The war is over, negroes. Stay in your place. If you don't, we'll put you there."



Historian Carol Anderson, in her 2016 book, "White Rage," argues, "The trigger for white rage is always Black advancement. It is not the mere presence of Black people that is the problem; rather, it is Blackness with ambition, with drive, with purpose, with aspirations, and with demands for full and equal citizenship."

Throughout 1919, there was black agency, meaning a sense of their self, their history and their culture. There were black veterans wearing their military uniforms in public, black children swimming in the white section of Lake Michigan and black sharecroppers in Arkansas organizing for better wages and working conditions. These were met with white mob terror broadcasting the message: "Stay in your place."

But In 1919, Black People Did Not Stay In Their Place

In Knoxville, armed black men organized themselves to successfully force back hundreds of white rioters. In Chicago, African-Americans formed self-defense units after days of white terror in their neighborhoods. Many were World War I veterans like Harry Haywood, who explained, "I had been fighting the wrong war. The Germans weren't the enemy — the enemy was right here at home." While these happened independently, black refusal to back down in 1919 read as a display of united black agency and self-preservation.



"Dying, But Fighting Back!"

The black press established a powerful counter-narrative, "There will be no peace until white Americans . . . make up their minds to give the colored Americans equal justice and let them share the democracy at home for which our brave soldiers fought and died abroad." Claude McKay's 1919 poem, "If We Must Die," captured the mood and concluded: "Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack, Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!"

"Race Riots" In Textbooks

And what do students learn of the racist riots of 1919? Two major textbooks devote only one paragraph to the riots. Another focuses mostly on the Washington, D.C., riot story and leaves students mystified about racism's role in the violence seen there and in other cities.

These textbooks use the cloudiness of "racial unrest," "racial violence" and, the worst offender, "race riot," to describe the events of 1919. To describe white crimes, a more accurate term might be racist riot. But "racism" or "racist" are terms these textbooks avoid.

Their slanted coverage echoes in stories we see today with the same kind of backward reasoning that makes



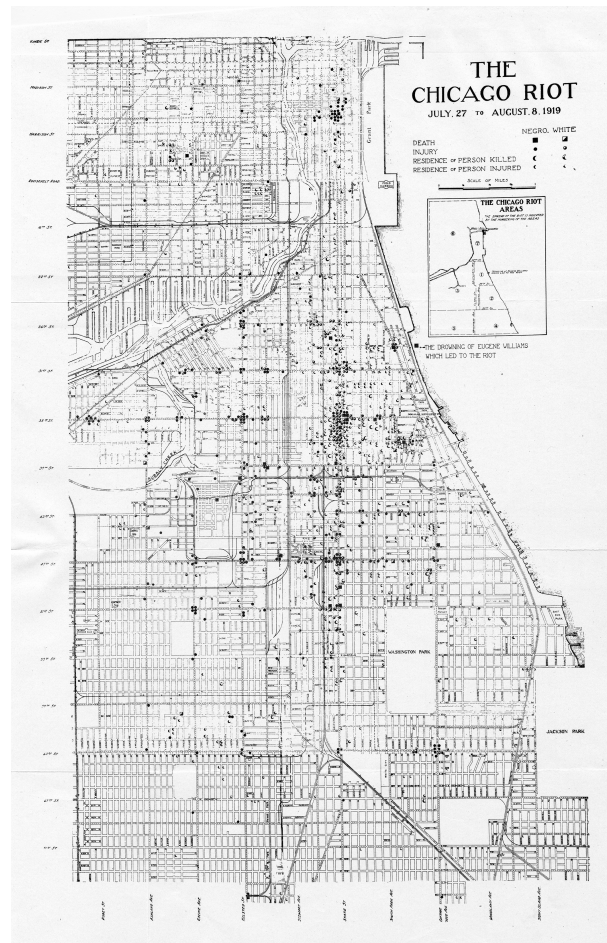
note of Trayvon Martin's hoodie or Tamir Rice's toy pistol in explaining their murders. In this framing, black people always "do" something that leads to the violence that follows. White violence is downplayed, never the cause.

Not having a full discussion of racism's role in these episodes of anti-black mob violence matters. By minimizing how white supremacy shaped our history in the 20th century, textbooks leave students unable to see racism as a key force today.

No wonder the question of reparations is so seldom discussed in mainstream U.S. politics. You cannot repair harm that you have been taught not to acknowledge or understand. When students are given access to the real history, reparations no longer seem outlandish, but simply fair.

One hundred years ago, black people across the United States met white mob violence with countless acts of self-defense. Today's Black Lives Matter activists fit into this centuries-long pattern of black resistance to white supremacy.

The resistance happens when black people organize against violent measures and militarized police that threaten their neighborhoods. We see it as they challenge the media's habit of framing victims of white racist violence as causing their own destruction. We see it as they demand that we confront the damage white supremacy causes. Our students deserve the opportunity to identify this through a line of black agency, rebellion and resistance. It is a powerful call to action for all of us: Red Summer is now.





Quiz

1 Which two of the following sentences from the article include CENTRAL ideas of the article?

1. *During a national wave of white mob violence, 1919 was a time when black people defended themselves.*
2. *But pull a standard U.S. history textbook off the shelf and you're unlikely to find more than a paragraph on the 1919 riots.*
3. *Claude McKay's 1919 poem, "If We Must Die," captured the mood and concluded: "Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack, Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!"*
4. *No wonder the question of reparations is so seldom discussed in mainstream U.S. politics.*

- (A) 1 and 2
- (B) 1 and 3
- (C) 2 and 4
- (D) 3 and 4

2 One of the article's central ideas is that learning about the Red Summer of 1919 can help us to better understand events going on today.

How does the author introduce this CENTRAL idea?

- (A) by bringing up the question of reparations and why they are not currently discussed
- (B) by providing different modern examples of black resistance to white supremacy
- (C) by explaining the biased ways that the media frames white racist violence now
- (D) by defining black agency and showing how it has changed over 100 years

3 Which conclusion is BEST supported by both Image 1 and the information in the article?

- (A) Black soldiers bravely fought and died in the war against the Germans.
- (B) Black agency was displayed by black veterans who had just returned from World War I.
- (C) Large groups of black men gathered to defend themselves from white mobs.
- (D) Many black people died or were seriously injured during the events of Red Summer.

4 Examine Image 4.

How does this image contribute to the reader's understanding of the Red Summer of 1919?

- (A) It shows how the history textbooks downplayed the violence of 1919.
- (B) It shows the casualties in several different cities during the summer of 1919.
- (C) It shows the extent of the race riots of 1919 in one particular city.
- (D) It shows the locations of defense units created by black people in 1919.

Answer Key

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1. *During a national wave of white mob violence, 1919 was a time when black people defended themselves.*
 2. *But pull a standard U.S. history textbook off the shelf and you're unlikely to find more than a paragraph on the 1919 riots.*
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