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## Chicago Riots of 1919

by Eric Pingel

(English 1102)

World War One began July 28<sup>th</sup>, 1914, and lasted till November 11<sup>th</sup>, 1918. The United States entered into the war on April 6<sup>th</sup>, 1917 (Williams). The troops returned from war during one of the largest immigration booms in United States history. These immigrants flooded Chicago and other core cities in the United States. Also, a large portion of the southern African Americans moved to Chicago in search of jobs in the core industries such as meat packing, steel, and on the rail roads (“Causes of the 1919 Race Riots”). A large number of African Americans filled in for the soldiers while they were gone. This combination of immigrants, African Americans, and returning soldiers all supplied a strain on the available jobs as a post-war recession took place. Tensions grew as this forced integration further stimulated the Irish Americans resentment towards their African American neighbors in Chicago. Also, the middle class African Americans pushing their way into predominantly Irish neighborhoods to create better lives for their families were met with hostility and violence (“Causes of the 1919 Race Riots”). While this tension was inevitably going to explode out of control, an inciting action was needed to spark a major event. This inciting action came in the form of Eugene Williams. Williams crossed the invisible border that the Irish neighborhoods kept at the beach and was met with a volley of rocks. A rock struck his head, knocking him unconscious, causing him to drown (“Causes of the 1919 Race Riots”). However, this is not what sparked the riots. The refusal of the predominantly white Chicago police to arrest the stone throwers is what aided in initiating the riots. Though it was the beginning of the riots, it was not the cause of the riots. This essay will argue the Chicago Riots of 1919 occurred due to economic competition between white Chicagoans and African Americans, accompanied by defensive disputes between ethnic and racial neighborhoods, resulting in countless acts of violence and murder, which ultimately left the issue of racism unresolved.

In 1917 the United States entered into World War One (Williams). The demand for soldiers caused many American men to enlist in the army and others to register for the draft under the Selective Service Act. Of the 4.8 million soldiers to serve in the war, 2.8 million were draftees. While some African Americans looked at the war as an opportunity to fight and earn their place as an equal citizen, others took advantage of the open labor positions left by the soldiers (Williams). In what is known as the Great Migration, 6 million African Americans moved out of the south into the urban areas from 1910-1970. Three quarters of these African Americans moved into Chicago on the south side in a region referred to as the Black Belt. From the Black Belt the African Americans would travel through predominantly white neighborhoods to their new jobs (Baldwin). During this time period industry was booming in Chicago. The industries that employed these African Americans were the stockyards, steel, and railroads. After the Civil War, African Americans were free but not entirely accepted into white communities. As the white soldiers returned from war, some of whom did not join willingly, they found their jobs taken by people whom they considered a lesser class, which further stimulated hatred. With the addition of all these African Americans, the job market became very slim. The usual labor cost in the south for unskilled work was \$2.50 for a ten-hour day and in this urban setting the workers would have made \$4.25 in that same day. The African Americans working for less than the average salary caused the whites to be undercut. The scarcity of jobs left a lot of white workers unemployed (“The Great Migration”). The African Americans worked as the perfect scapegoat for the whites’ anger. The surplus of African American labor along

with the racism of white unions allowed businesses to take all the power away from the unions. The businesses hired African American workers and the unions refused to adopt these workers into their party. The white unions being cut out, along with angry unemployed workers, played a large role in setting up the Riots of 1919 by placing a stress on the job market.

Chicago's population grew rapidly in the late 1800's and early 1900's due to the Great Migration and opportunities brought upon by industry. This growth brought competition for housing. The white Chicagoans at the time were not prepared to have blacks integrate into their neighborhoods. Imaginary borders were formed by the white neighborhoods that were enforced only by the inhabitants of said neighborhoods. As a result, the African American migrators were forced into one area on the south side of Chicago. This area was known as the Black Belt ("The Great Migration"). The Black Belt housed a majority of the African American community and was severely overpopulated. White neighborhoods in the east, south, and west of the Black Belt took tentative measures to keep their neighborhoods white. These measures involved promotion of not selling any housing to African Americans, burning of African American houses, and violence ("The Great Migration"). The neighborhoods to the north known as the Chicago Loop proved too expensive to migrate to. The Chicago Loop was home to more wealthy Chicagoans. The movement of people in Chicago was very centralized around wealth, race, and schools. The upper class Americans lived in the Chicago Loop. The middle class surrounded the Black Belt. As African Americans gained enough success to be lower middle class, they fled the Black Belt to get away from the poverty and live where the middle class whites did. By doing this they could receive better schooling for their kids and escape the overcrowded Black Belt. In turn, the upper middle class whites fled from these African Americans to what is now considered the suburbs (Rothstein). Those who stayed frequently assaulted African Americans and set their houses on fire. These acts of violence were unjustified, but the desire of the white communities to stop the spread of African Americans clouded their judgement and brought them to take extreme measures (Stanford). The Irish communities were given a common enemy to unite against. This enemy was the African Americans. It was easy to blame all of the problems in one person's life on another. As a result, the communities suffered from the herd behavior. Herd behavior, a term in psychology that refers to the actions and thoughts of people around an individual, affects his or her behavior and causes the individual to act differently than they normally would (Donley). Due to this herd affect, I believe the communities around Chicago used excessive violence in dealing with the African Americans. The combination of the whites' belief in the African Americans being lesser beings and the forced integration the African Americans were subjecting the white communities to build up the tension that led to the Chicago Riots of 1919.

The Chicago Riots of 1919 were inevitable because the combination of social and economic tension built hatred towards African Americans. This hatred led to acts of violence from the white community. Many of these acts of violence came from the Athletic Clubs. These Athletic clubs were groups of young Irish men who played sports while attending school (Kass). Most were formed through politics. A former Conservative Vice Lord Benny Lee referred to these clubs as gangs. They used physical force to grab political positions and sway people's votes the way the gangs wanted them. One member of the Hamburg Athletic Club was future Mayor Richard J. Daley. Mayor Daley was a leader of the Hamburg Athletic Club but was never confirmed to be a part of the violence. This does however give good justification on how he climbed his way to the position of Mayor (Kass). There were many gangs such as the Hamburg Athletic Club who played a big role in causing the riots. A majority of the African American community that was killed or injured were victims of the Athletic clubs. They would do most of the dirty work by walking the streets at night and preying on anyone unfortunate enough to cross their path. A point Benny Lee makes is that our stereotype for gang members is so askew that we do not usually picture a white guy in a cap and gown. As the gangs grew in political power they were able to cover up their past while today we

generally think of African Americans and Hispanics to be gang members (Kass). Groups of Irish men murdered African Americans and set their houses on fire in the night and then ran for political positions in the 1920-60's. The ironic part is that the victims of these crimes have now turned into the gang members killing each other, while the original gang members got off free with no negative stereotypes. These gangs sparked much of the fighting and increased a lot of the tension between the whites and African Americans. This tension helped ignite the Chicago Riots of 1919.

The Chicago Riots of 1919 were the largest of the 25 riots during the Red Summer (Stephan 369). These riots and the large number of deaths contributed to them were in vain. After the riots the Irish had the same, if not worse, opinion of African Americans. Real progress was not made until 1955 when Martin Luther King Jr. began peaceful protests. He realized that the only way to combat violence was with peace. It becomes much less justifiable to attack people who will not fight back. This opened the eyes of the whites as they realized they were not only attacking fellow neighbors, but fellow humans. Martin Luther King Jr. was very well educated. He wrote books and gave very profound speeches that helped to push the idea of equality into the minds of the inhabitants of Chicago. Two speeches that really pushed the future that King wanted were his "I Have a Dream" and "The World House" (King 167). In both of these speeches King explains that racism is not only a problem that is seriously affecting African Americans, but the world in general suffers from judging one another. In his "The World House" speech, he makes a point explaining that the world is like taking different people with different beliefs and ideas and asking them to live together peacefully (King 170). All people from different backgrounds have to look past the differences in one another and instead need to coexist in harmony. He believes this is the only way the world can progress.

The Chicago Riots of 1919 is one of many blemishes of Chicago history. We know that the white communities did have valid reasons to dislike the African Americans given the added economic, job, and housing competition, but we do not justify the extremes they took ("Causes of the Race Riots"). The African American communities were the perfect targets for the whites to release their stress on. Blaming the African Americans took the burden of being unsuccessful off of the whites. This blame caused violence and riots in the 1919's. A common misconception however, is how much better things are today. The majority of us are not out on the streets looking for the first person we can assault like they did in the 1900's, but racism still exists. Along with that racism the gangs remain present today as well. The gangs have changed from Irish scholars to undereducated African American teens. The racism has transformed from burning down houses to making sure we have a hand on our bag when an African American teen gets on the subway. The ghetto of Chicago is being overrun by gang violence as the education system provides less and less opportunities for the students to succeed and make it out of the ghetto. This is not the future Martin Luther King Jr. had in mind. We need to turn Chicago around before history repeats itself once again. If we can improve the education system and spread the economic wealth towards the low income neighborhoods, we can avoid another case like the Chicago Riots of 1919.

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