Lynching A Legacy of Terror | Black History Month | The Middle Passage |

Lynching in the United States

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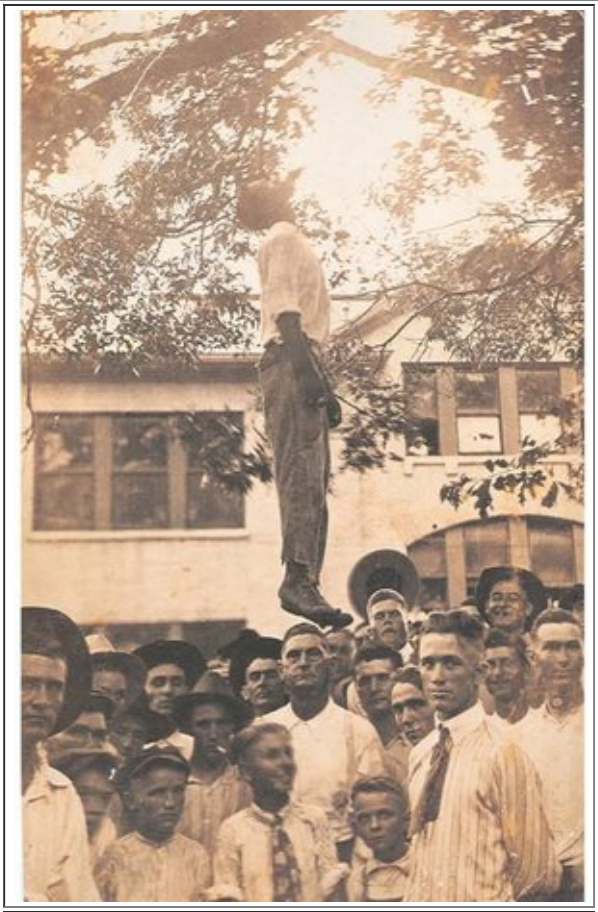
Lynching, in the United States, has influenced and been influenced by the major social conflicts in the country, revolving around the American frontier, Reconstruction, and the American Civil Rights Movement. Originally, lynching meant any extra-judicial punishment, including tarring and feathering and running out of town, but during the 19th century in the United States, it began to be used to refer specifically to murder, usually by hanging.

On the American frontier, where the power of the police and the army was tenuous, lynching was seen by some as a positive alternative to complete lawlessness. In the Reconstruction-era South, lynching of blacks was used, especially by the first Ku Klux Klan, as a tool for reversing the social changes brought on by Federal occupation. This type of racially motivated lynching continued in the Jim Crow era as a way of enforcing subservience and preventing economic competition, and into the twentieth century as a method of resisting the civil rights movement.

More recently, lynching has come to have a contemporary informal use as a label for social vilification, particularly in the media, and particularly of African-Americans.

For legal definitions of lynching, see the section on "Laws" below.



Postcard depicting the lynching of Lige Daniels, Center, Texas, USA, August 3, 1920. The back reads, "This was made in the court yard in Center, Texas. He is a 16 year old Black boy. He killed Earl's grandma. She was Florence's mother. Give this to Bud. From Aunt Myrtle." As discussed in the article, lynchings were often motivated by economics, or were retaliations for violations of Jim Crow etiquette, with false accusations of murder made in order to justify them.

Early History

Lynching began with vigilance committees which formed to keep order during the Revolutionary War. Lynching is thought to be named for Colonel Charles Lynch, who headed an irregular court circa 1782 to deal with Tories and criminal elements.

Lynching on the frontier

There is much debate over the true historical facts surrounding lynchings and violence on the frontier, which have often been obscured by the mythology of the American Old West. Some historians have argued, for example, that the California mining camps were relatively peaceful places, while others point to contemporary accounts stating, e.g., that "We scarce ever take up a paper from the mining districts but what the eye is pained and the heart made sick with accounts of robberies and brutal murders, committed, it would seem, with almost entire impunity."[1]

Compared to their mythologized version, real lynchings on the frontier did not focus as strongly on "rough and ready" crime prevention, and often shared many of the same racist and partisan political dimensions as lynchings in the South and Midwest. It was true that in unorganized territories or sparsely-settled states, security was often provided only by a federal marshal who might, despite the appointment of deputies, be hours or even days away by horse. But many lynchings on the frontier were carried out against accused criminals who were already in

1774 British propaganda print depicting the tarring and feathering of Boston Commissioner of Customs John Malcolm four weeks after the Boston Tea Party.

custody, and frequently the goal of lynching was not so much to substitute for an absent legal system as to provide an alternative system that would favor a particular social class or racial group. One historian writes, "Contrary to the popular understanding, early territorial lynching did not flow from an absence or distance of law enforcement but rather from the social instability of early communities and their contest for property, status, and the definition of social order."[2]

The San Francisco Vigilance Movement, for example, has traditionally been portrayed as a positive response to government corruption and rampant crime, but revisionists have argued that it created more lawlessness than it eliminated. It also had a strongly anti-immigrant tinge, initially focusing on the Irish, and later evolving into mob violence against Chinese immigrants.

Another well documented episode in the history of the American West is the Johnson County War, a dispute over land u

se in Wyoming in the 1890's. Large-scale ranchers, with the complicity of local and federal Republican politicians, hired mercenary soldiers and assassins to lynch the small ranchers (mostly Democrats) who were their economic competitors, and whom they portrayed as "cattle rustlers."

Charles Cora and James Casey are lynched by the Committee of Vigilance, San Francisco, 1856.

Reconstruction (1865-1877)

A cartoon threatening that the KKK would lynch carpetbaggers. Tuscaloosa, Alabama, Independent Monitor, 1868.

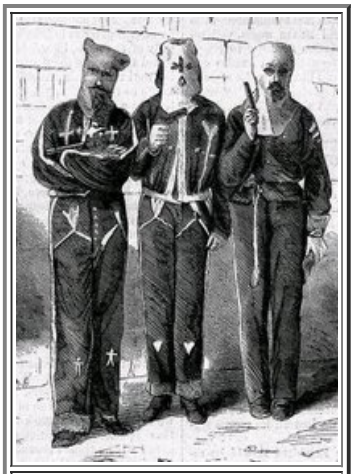
After the Civil War, lynching became particularly associated with the South, and with the first Ku Klux Klan, founded in 1866.

The first heavy period of lynching in the South was between 1868 and 1871. It began with a purge of black and white Republicans by white Democrats. Whites had decided to prevent the ratification of new constitutions by preventing people from voting. Failed attempts at terrorization led to a massacre during the 1868 elections, with the systematic murder of about 1300 voters across various southern states ranging from South Carolina to Arkansas.

After this orgy of partisan political violence had ended, lynchings in the South focused more on race than on partisan politics, and can be seen as a latter-day expression of the slave patrols, the bands of poor whites who policed the slaves and pursued escapees. The lynchers sometimes murdered their victims, but sometimes whipped them, to remind them of their former status as slaves.[3] White vigilantes often made nighttime raids of black homes in order to confiscate their firearms. Lynchings aimed at preventing freedmen from voting and bearing arms can be seen as extralegal ways of enforcing the Black Codes, which were largely invalidated by the 14th and 15th amendments in 1868 and 1870, and were followed by the Jim Crow laws.

After years of terror, President Ulysses S. Grant and Congress passed the Anti KKK Act of 1871. This permitted authorities to use martial law in some counties in South Carolina, where the Klan was the strongest. At about this time the Klan dissipated, but the US would see a reemergence in the early 20th century. Vigorous federal action, and the disappearance of the Klan, had a strong effect in reducing lynching. From 1868 to 1876, most years had seen 50-100 lynchings, but from 1877 to 1888, the toll ranged from 1 to 17 victims per year (see Statistics, below).

Lynching with a racial tone was not limited to the South; the New York Draft Riots were sparked in part by job competition between Irish-American immigrants and free blacks, and during the riots 11 blacks were murdered, with many more beaten, and their property destroyed. The riots led to a brief exodus of blacks from New York, and helped establish Harlem as the center of black society in the city.[4]



Three Ku Klux Klan members arrested in Tishomingo County, Mississippi,

1877 to World War II

Enforcing Jim Crow

September 1871, for the attempted murder of an entire family.

After 1876, the frequency of lynching decreased, and it became a threat used to terrorize blacks and maintain the new, racist social order that was being constructed. Congress had housed many southern Republicans who sought to protect black voting rights by using federal troops. A congressional deal to elect Rutherford B. Hayes as President in 1876 included a pledge to end Reconstruction in the South. The Redeemers, white racists who often included White Cappers and Ku Klux Klan members, began to break any political power that blacks had gained during Reconstruction. Lynchings were seen as supporting the new status quo, and were carried out in public. Another reaction against Reconstruction was the creation of the Jim Crow laws beginning in the 1890's.

Terror and lynching were used to enforce both these formal laws and a variety of unwritten rules of conduct meant to assert white domination. From 1889 to 1923, most years saw 50-100 lynchings (see Statistics section). It should be noted that while the vast majority of lynchings were of blacks, Italian-Americans were the second most common target of lynchings. On March 14, 1891 eleven Italian-Americans were lynched in New Orleans after a jury found them not guilty in the case of the murder of a New Orleans police chief. The eleven were falsely accused of being associated with the Mafia. This incident was the largest mass lynching in US history. Lynchings of Italian-Americans occurred mostly in the South but also occured in NY, PA, and CO. The toll of lynchings in general began to taper off strongly in the 1930's and 1940's. This period drew to a close in the early 1940's with the rise of black political power in the northern cities, the advent of the 2nd World War and the early stages of the civil rights movement.

Political cartoon about the East St. Louis massacres of 1917. The caption reads, "Mr. President, why not make America safe for democracy?"

Often Jim Crow tensions went hand in hand with economic tensions. In 1887, ten thousand workers at sugar plantations in Louisiana, organized by the Knights of Labor, went on strike for an increase in their pay to $1.25 a day. Most of the workers were black, but some were white, infuriating Governor Samuel Douglas, who declared that "God Almighty has himself drawn the color line." The militia was called in, but then withdrawn to give free rein to a lynch mob in Thibodaux, which killed somewhere between 20 and 300 people. A black newspaper described the scene:[5]

"Six killed and five wounded" is that the daily papers here say, but from an eye witness to the whole transaction we learn that no less than thirty-five Negroes were killed outright. Lame men and blind women shot; children and hoary-headed grandsires ruthlessly swept down! The Negroes offered no resistance; the could not, as the killing was unexpected. Those of them not killed took to the woods, a majority of them finding refuge in this city.

Labor conflict was also behind the 1917 massacre of over 200 black workers in East St. Louis, at the hands of white workers who were angry at them for competing for jobs.

The new Klan


THE ATLANTA CONSTITUTION

MOB TAKES FRANK FROM JAIL

Contraband Stamp Going on Cotton

Prisoner Rushed From State Farm In An Automobile

Cover of the Atlanta Constitution with Leo Frank

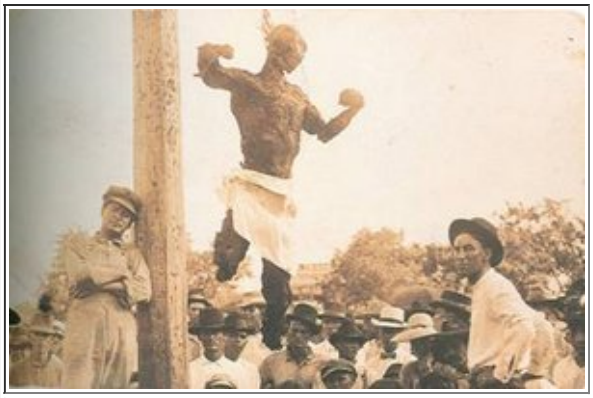
In 1915, three closely related events occurred: the lynching of Leo Frank, the release of the film The Birth of a Nation, and the reorganization of the Ku Klux Klan with a new emphasis on violence against immigrants, Jews, and Catholics.

The 1915 murder of factory manager Leo Frank, an American Jew, was one of the more notorious lynchings of a non-African-American. In sensationalistic newspaper accounts, Frank was accused of fantastic sexual crimes, and of the murder of a Mary Phagan, a girl employed by his factory. He was convicted of murder after a questionable trial in Georgia (the judge asked that Frank and his counsel not be present when the verdict was announced due to the violent mob of people in the court house). His appeals failed (Supreme court justice Oliver Wendell Holmes dissented, condemning the intimidation of the jury as failing to provide due process of law). The governor then commuted his sentence to life imprisonment, but a mob calling itself the Knights of Mary Phagan kidnapped Frank from the prison farm, and lynched him. Ironically, the evidence in the murder actually pointed to the factory's black janitor, Jim Conley, who had a criminal record, was seen washing a bloody shirt, and repeatedly changed his story. It later came out that Conley had confessed to three different people that he had been Phagan's murderer. Many black Americans believed that the extensive national attention focused on Frank as an "American Dreyfus"[6] would never havehappened if Frank had been black.

The Frank trial was used skillfully by Georgia politician and publisher Tom Watson as a strategy to build support for the reorganization of the Ku Klux Klan, with a new anti-Jewish, anti-Catholic, and anti-immigrant slant. The new Klan was inaugurated in 1915 at a mountaintop meeting attended by aging members of the original Klan, along with members of the Knights of Mary Phagan. The recreation of the Klan was also greatly aided by D. W. Griffith's 1915 film The Birth of a Nation, which glorified the Klan. The film resonated strongly with many southerners who believed Frank to be guilty, because they saw an analogy between Mary Phagan and the film's character Flora, a young virgin who throws herself off a cliff to avoid being raped by the black character Gus, described as "a renegade, a product of the vicious doctrines spread by the carpetbaggers."

A scene from The Birth of a Nation.

Social



A postcard showing the burned body of Jesse Washington, Waco, Texas, 1916. Washington was a 17-year-old retarded farmhand who had confessed to raping and killing a white woman. He was castrated, mutilated, and burned alive by a cheering mob that included the mayor and the chief of police. An observer wrote that "Washington was beaten with shovels and bricks. . .[he] was castrated, and his ears were cut off. A tree supported the iron chain that lifted him above the fire. . . Wailing, the boy attempted to climb up the skillet hot chain. For this, the men cut off his fingers." This image is from a postcard, which said on the back, "This is the barbeque we had last night. My picture is to the left with a cross over it. Your son, Joe."

Characteristics

There were often two motives for lynchings in the United States. The first was the social aspect--righting some social wrong or perceived social wrong (such as a violation of Jim Crow etiquette). The second was the economic aspect. For example, upon successful lynching of a black farmer or immigrant merchant, the land would be available and the market opened for white Americans. A black journalist, Ida B. Wells, discovered in the 1890s that black lynch victims were accused of rape or attempted rape only about one-third of the time. The most prevalent accusation was murder or attempted murder, followed by a list of infractions that included verbal and physical aggression, spirited business competition and independence of mind.[7]

Lynch mobs enforced the racist social order through beatings, cutting off fingers, burning down houses, and/or destroying the crops of African-Americans. Murder was a common form of lynch mob "justice," sometimes with the complicity of law-enforcement authorities who participated directly or held victims in jail until a mob formed to carry out the murder. Most lynchings terminated with a hanging but prior to the final act victims were sometimes tortured prior to being killed by such methods as beating, burning, stabbing, sexual mutilation and eye-gouging. Photographs of these events frequently show the perpetrators laughing and smiling. Next to hanging, the most common methods of killing were burning alive, shooting, and beating to death.

Often victims were lynched by a small group of white vigilantes late at night. Sometimes, however, lynchings became mass spectacles with a circus atmosphere. Children often attended these public lynchings, which anti-lynching advocates saw as a form of indoctrination. A large lynching might be announced beforehand in the newspaper, and there were cases in which a lynching was started early so that a newspaper reporter could make his deadline. It was common for postcards to be sold depicting lynchings, typically allowing a newspaper photographer to make some extra money. These postcards became popular enough to be an embarrassment to the government, and the postmaster officially banned them in 1908. However, the lynching postcards continued to exist through the 1930's.

Many lynchings were carried out with full participation by law enforcement and government officials. Police might detain a lynching target, then release him into a situation where a lynch mob could easily, and quietly, complete their deed. Fewer than 1% of lynch mob participants were ever convicted. Trial juries in the southeastern United States were typically all-white, and would not vote to convict lynchers, and often coroner's juries never let the matter go past the inquest. In a typical 1892 example in Port Jervis, New York, a policeman tried to stop the lynching of a black man who, it was revealed after his death, had been wrongfully accused of assaulting a white woman. The mob responded by putting the noose around the officer's own neck as a way of scaring him off. At the coroner's inquest, the officer identified eight people who had participated in the lynching, including the former chief of police, but the coroner's jury found that the murder had been carried out "by person or persons unknown."[8]

The circus-style lynching of Will James, Cairo, Illinois, 1909.

More than 85% of the estimated 5000 lynchings in the post-Civil War period occurred in the southern US states, but the problem was nationwide, peaking in 1892 when 161 African-Americans were lynched.

Not all racially motivated lynchings in the United States took place in the South. One such incident occurred in Duluth, Minnesota on June 15, 1920, when three young African-American travelers were dragged from their jail cells (where they were confined after being accused of raping a white woman) and lynched by a mob believed to number more than one thousand. The event became the subject of a non-fiction book, The Lynchings in

Postcard of the Duluth lynching.

Duluth, published in 2000, by Michael Fedo.

Since lynchings were often carried out on the pretext of protecting white women, e.g., from rape by black men, in 1930, white women formed the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching to repudiate the claim that this was the true purpose of lynching[9]. Further doubt was cast on this claim in 1965, when Viola Liuzzo, a white mother of five who had been raised in the South, was murdered by Ku Klux Klan members after she participated in the civil rights march from Selma to Montgomery

Anthony and Viola Liuzzo, 1949.

Rather than seeing racial lynching in the post-Civil War South as unique, social historian Michael J. Pfeifer emphasizes the continuity of lynching with other forms of legal and extralegal violence, such as dueling, the Regulator Movement, and even capital punishment: "Eventually the rural and working class 'rough justice' enthusiasts who endorsed mob murder in the Midwest, West, and South compromised with the bourgeois advocates of due process law. In the early twentieth century, states in those regions, aping the punitive innovations of northeastern states, revamped the death penalty into a comparatively efficient, technocratic, and highly racialized mechanism of retributive justice, and lynchings ceased."[10] In this view, America had two legal systems running in parallel, a formal one in the courts and an informal one that operated via lynching, but both were highly racially polarized, and both operated to enforce white social dominance. In the opinion of Senator Mary Landrieu, however, "Lynching was a form of terrorism practiced by Americans against other Americans."[11] Neither explanation fits the facts in every case. Terrorism is a more natural explanation of the highly political violence of the 1868 massacres, as well as the bulk of the Ku Klux Klan's actions, and especially examples such as the random lynching of Michael Donald, or a 1981 Klan action at a marina in Galveston, in which robed and armed klansmen frightened Vietnamese shrimp fishermen by sailing a boat up and down, with a dummy hanging by its neck in the rigging.[12] On the other hand, Pfeifer's hypothesis that lynchings expressed a desire for personalized, retributive justice is supported by examples such as the circus-style lynching of Jesse Washington, a retarded man who had already confessed to murder and rape.

Resistance

Ida B. Wells-Barnett led a crusade against lynching.

By the late 19th century, black Americans had the political experience and confidence to begin to push back against what was, in effect, a gradual decrease in civil rights. In 1888 the Tuskeegee Institute began to assiduously document lynchings, a practice it would continue until 1968. [13] Ida B. Wells-Barnett, a black journalist, was shocked when three of her friends in Memphis, Tennessee were lynched for opening a grocery that competed with a white-owned store. Outraged, Wells-Barnett began a global anti-lynching campaign that raised awareness of the American injustice.

Some blacks, believing that the government would never protect them against lynching, fought back. During a nationwide rash of race riots in 1919, for example, a young black Chicagoan, Eugene Williams, paddled a raft near a Lake Michigan beach into "white territory," and drowned after being hit by a rock thrown by a young white man. Witnesses pointed out the killer to a policeman, who refused to make an arrest, and an indignant black mob attacked the officer.[14] Violence broke out across the city, and while the police stood by, white mobs, many of them organized around Irish clubs, began pulling blacks at random off of trolley cars, attacking black businesses, and beating victims with baseball bats and iron bars. Blacks began to fight back, and eventually 23 blacks and 15 whites were killed.[15]

A white gang looking for blacks during the Chicago race riots of 1919.

Black resistance against lynching carried horrible risks. In 1921 in Tulsa, a group of black citizens attempted to stop a lynch mob from taking a 19-year old black man and assault suspect, Dick Rowland, out of jail. There was a scuffle between a white man and an armed black veteran, and the white man was killed. Whites retaliated by burning 1,256 homes and as many as 200 businesses in the segregated black Greenwood district, and leaving a confirmed 39 dead (26 black, 13 white). Recent investigations suggest the number of black deaths could be much higher. According to some reports, white rioters were shooting at black refugees from airplanes and dropping explosives on them. Dick Rowland was not lynched and was later exhonorated.

By the 1930s, the rate of lynchings was reduced to ten per year in southern US states. With the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt as president in 1932, anti-lynching advocates such as Mary McLeod Bethune and Walter Francis White who had campaigned for Roosevelt were hoping for progress toward ending lynching. Senators Robert F. Wagner and Edward P. Costigan drafted a bill (the Costigan-Wagner bill) to require local authorities to protect prisoners from lynch mobs. A lynching in Miami, Florida affected the political atmosphere of the bill. On July 19, 1935, Rubin Stacy, a homeless African-American farmer, went knocking on doors begging for food. Frightened, Marion Jones complained to the authorities. Six Dade county deputies were bringing Stacy to jail when he was killed by a lynch mob. Because Stacy's original actions were so innocuous, lynching opponents considered Stacy's murder an egregious example. Nevertheless, Roosevelt did not support the bill, believing that it would cost him the votes of Southern whites, and thus the 1936 election. In 1939, Roosevelt did create the Civil Rights Section of the Justice Department, which made efforts to combat lynching, but failed to win any convictions until 1946.[16]

In the 1930's, communist organizations, including a legal defense organization called the International Labor Defense (ILD), became active in the anti-lynching cause (see The Communist Party and African-Americans). The ILD defended the Scottsboro Boys, and three black men accused of rape in Tuscaloosa in 1933. In the Tuscaloosa case, two of the defendants were lynched under circumstances that suggested police complicity, and the ILD lawyers themselves narrowly escaped lynching. Black Americans in general remained unreceptive toward communism, however, and the ILD lawyers aroused passionate hatred among many southerners. In a typical remark to an investigator, a white Tuscaloosan said, "For New York Jews to butt in and spread communistic ideas is too much."[17]

World War II to the present

Federal action

After World War II, the federal government began to take its first productive actions against lynching.

In 1946, the Civil Rights Section of the Justice Department gained its first successful prosecution against a lyncher. Florida constable Tom Crews was sentenced to a $1000 fine and a year in prison for civil rights violations in the killing of a black farm worker.

In 1946, a mob of white men shot and killed two young black men and two young black women near Moore's Ford Bridge in Walton County, Georgia. The savagery of this lynching shocked the nation, and was a key factor that led President Truman to make civil rights a priority.[18] In 1947, the Truman administration published a report titled **"To Secure These Rights,**" which advocated, among other civil rights reforms, making lynching a federal crime. Truman had paid a $10 membership fee to join the Ku Klux Klan in 1924, but at a meeting with a Klan officer arranged by Truman's friend, Klansman Edgar Hinde, the Klan officer demanded that Truman pledge not to hire any Catholics if he was reelected as county judge; Truman refused, because many of the men he had commanded in World War I had been Catholic, and his membership fee was returned,[19] and he was later much reviled by the Klan for his civil rights activities.

FBI poster asking for information in the 1946 lynching at Moore's Ford Bridge, Georgia.

Lynching, red-baiting, and the cold war

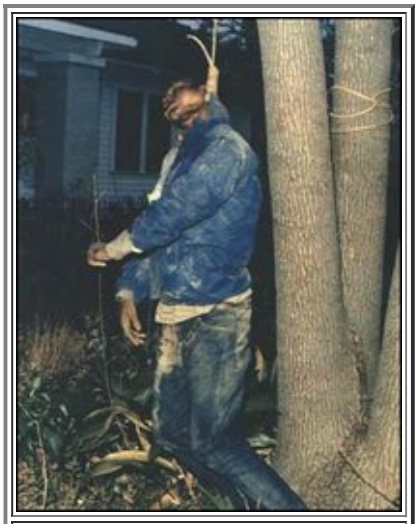
In the period after World War II, with the beginning of the Cold War, the Soviet Union made effective use of the existence of lynching in the U.S. as propaganda, and lynching began to be seen as an embarrassment to the U.S., which was now becoming a global power. Paul Robeson, in a tense meeting with Truman in 1946, urged him to take action against lynching, and began to be attacked in the press for his communism. In 1951, the Civil Rights Congress (CRC) made a presentation on lynching to the United Nations titled "We Charge Genocide," which argued that the federal government, by its failure to act against lynching, was guilty of genocide under Article II of the UN Genocide Convention.

Because of the Soviet exploitation of lynching for propaganda purposes, there was a tendency in right-wing government circles to portray anti-lynching groups as communist, and although there was sometimes some truth to these claims (Robeson was a communist, and the CRC had been created by a merger of the communist ILD with another group), the label was applied indiscriminately. Even Albert Einstein was branded a communist sympathizer by the FBI, because of his membership in such "communist-front" organizations as Robeson's American Crusade Against Lynching.[20] In one particularly egregious example, the FBI spread false information in the press that lynching victim Viola Liuzzo was a member of the Communist Party, and had abandoned her five children in order to have sexual relationships with African Americans involved in the civil rights movement.[21]

The civil rights movement

By the Fifties, the civil rights movement was gaining momentum. A case that sparked public outrage was that of Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old Chicagoan who was spending the summer with relatives in the South, and was mutilated and killed for allegedly having whistled at a white woman.

In 1964, three civil rights workers were lynched by white racists in Neshoba County, Mississippi. Michael Schwerner (24), Andrew Goodman (20) of New York, and James Chaney (22) from Meridian, Mississippi, members of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), were dedicated to non-violent direct action against racial discrimination. They disappeared in June of that year while investigating the arson of a black church being used as a "Freedom School". Their bodies were found six weeks later in a partially constructed dam near Philadelphia, Mississippi. In 2005, 80-year-old Edgar Ray Killen was convicted of manslaughter for the killings, and sentenced to 60 years in prison.



The lynching of Michael Donald, 1981.

After the civil rights movement

Although lynchings became much more rare in the era following the civil rights movement, they do still occur sometimes. In 1981, KKK members in Alabama randomly picked out a nineteen-year-old black man, Michael Donald, and murdered him in retaliation for a jury's acquittal of a black man accused of murdering a police officer. The Klansmen were eventually caught, prosecuted, and convicted, and a seven million dollar judgment in a subsequent civil suit bankrupted a subgroup of the Klan, the United Klans of America.[22]

On June 13, 2005, the United States Senate formally apologized for its failure in previous decades to enact a federal anti-lynching law, all of which fell victim to filibusters by powerful Southern senators. Prior to the vote, Louisiana Senator Mary Landrieu noted, "There may be no other injustice in American history for which the Senate so uniquely bears responsibility."[23]

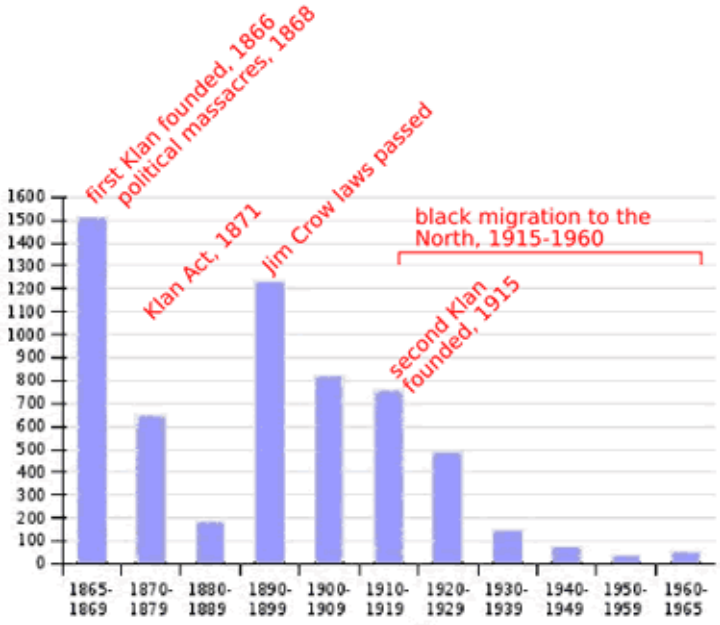
The resolution was passed on a voice vote with 80 senators cosponsoring, causing some to point out that the remaining 20 did not have to take a position on the matter through either cosponsorship or a recorded vote in favor or against.

he resolution expresses "the deepest sympathies and most solemn regrets of the Senate to the descendants of victims of lynching, the ancestors of whom were deprived of life, human dignity and the constitutional protections accorded all citizens of the United States."

An inflammatory KKK cartoon that was used as evidence in the civil trial resulting from Michael Donald's murder.

Statistics

The following graph gives the number of lynchings and racially-motivated murders in each decade from 1865 to 1965. Data for 1865-1869 and 1960-1965 are partial decades. [24]



The same source gives the following statistics for the period from 1882 to 1951. 88% of victims were black, and 10% were white. 59% of the lynchings occurred in the Southern states of Kentucky, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and Florida. Lynching was not uncommon in the west and midwest, but was virtually nonexistent in the northeast. The most common reasons given for the lynchings are murder and rape, but as documented by Ida B. Wells, such charges were often pretexts for lynching blacks who violated Jim Crow etiquette, or engaged in economic competition with whites. Other common reasons given include arson, theft, assault, and robbery; sexual transgressions (miscegenation, adultery, cohabitation); "race prejudice," "race hatred," "racial disturbance;" informing on others; "threats against whites;" and violations of the color line ("attending white girl," "proposals to white woman").

Popular culture

Famous fictional treatments

In The Virginian, a seminal novel that helped create the genre of Western novels in the U.S., the protagonist participates in the lynching of an admitted cattle thief, who had been his close friend, during the Johnson County War. The lynching is represented as a necessary response to the government's corruption and lack of action, but the protagonist feels it to be a horrible duty. He is especially stricken by the bravery with which the thief faces his fate, and the heavy burden it places on his heart forms the emotional core of the story.

In To Kill a Mockingbird, Tom Robinson, a black man wrongfully accused of rape, narrowly escapes lynching because of his lawyer's bravery, and the disarmingly innocent behavior of the lawyer's daughter. The lawyer tells his daughter that he isn't angry at the mob, because once the feeling of mob violence gets into people, they don't act normally. Robinson is later killed trying to escape from jail, after having been wrongfully convicted.

In Fury, German expatriate Fritz Lang depicts a lynch mob hanging innocent men, apparently modeled on a 1933 lynching in San Jose, California that was captured on newsreel footage and in which Governor of California James Rolph refused to intervene.

In The Ox-Bow Incident, two drifters are drawn into a posse formed to find the murderer of a local man, and suspicion centers on three innocent cattle rustlers who are then lynched, deeply affecting the drifters. The novel was filmed in 1943 as a wartime defense of American values versus the characterization of Nazi Germany as mob rule.

Regina M. Anderson's Climbing Jacob's Ladder was a play about a lynching performed by a Harlem theater company, the Krigwa players. Several lynchings are depicted in Peter Matthiessen's Killing Mr. Watson trilogy.

Lynd Ward's 1932 book, [printed in woodblock prints, with no text] Wild Pilgrimage includes three prints of the lynching of several black men.

"Strange Fruit"

Among artistic works referring to lynching is the Billie Holiday song "Strange Fruit", written by Abel Meeropol in 1939:

> ***Southern trees bear strange fruit, blood on the leaves and blood at the roots. Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze, strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees. Pastoral scene of the gallant south, the bulging eyes and the twisted mouth. Scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh. Then the sudden smell of burning flesh. Here is fruit for the crows to pluck, for the rain to gather, for the wind to suck, for the sun to rot, for the trees to drop, here is a strange and bitter crop.***
> ***The stark, disturbing lyrics were rejected by Holiday's label, but she recorded it independently; the song became an anthem for the anti-lynching movement which joined the groundswell of the American civil rights movement. A documentary, also titled Strange Fruit, has aired on U.S. television.***

The song has been performed by other artists, including Nina Simone and Cassandra Wilson. It was also remixed by the British artist Tricky.

Clarence Thomas

The word lynching returned to popular culture with the nomination to the U.S. Supreme Court of Clarence Thomas, an African-American government attorney nominated by the Republican President George H.W. Bush and supported by Republican Senators. His nomination received heavy criticism from Democratic Senators on the Judiciary Committee, and in particular allegations of sexual harassment of a female subordinate, Anita Hill, while he was head of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Frustrated with the detailed and embarrassing questioning, Thomas appeared before the committee and shot back a prepared statement:

> ***Mr. Chairman, I am a victim of this process and my name has been harmed, my integrity has been harmed, my character has been harmed, my family has been harmed, my friends have been harmed. There is nothing this committee, this body or this country can do to give me my good name back, nothing. I will not provide the rope for my own lynching or for further humiliation.***

The phrase was repeated later that same day:

There was an FBI investigation. This is not an opportunity to talk about difficult matters privately or in a closed environment. This is a circus. It is a national disgrace. And from my standpoint, as a black American, as far as I am concerned, it is a high-tech lynching for uppity-blacks who in any way deign to think for themselves, to do for themselves, to have different ideas, and it is a message that, unless you kow-tow to an old order, this is what will happen to you, you will be lynched, destroyed, caricatured by a committee of the U.S. Senate, rather than hung from a tree.

Democrats viewed this as a calculated tactic to make them appear racist for opposing him, but Republicans defended Thomas vigorously. Thomas went on to successful confirmation, and the phrase high-tech lynching is still heard in this context.

Laws

For most of the history of the United States, lynching was rarely prosecuted, and when it was, it was under state murder statutes. In one extraordinary example in 1907-1909, the Supreme Court tried its only criminal case in history, 203 U.S. 563 (U.S. v. Sheriff Shipp). Shipp was found guilty of criminal contempt for lynching Ed Johnson in Chattanooga.

Starting in 1909, over 200 bills were introduced to make lynching a federal crime, but they failed to pass. During the Roosevelt administration, the Civil Rights Section of the Justice Department tried, but failed, to prosecute lynchers under Reconstruction-era civil rights laws. The first successful federal prosecution of a lyncher for a civil rights violation was in 1946, and by that time, the era of lynchings as a common occurrence was over.

Many states now have specific anti-lynching statues. California, for example, defines lynching, punishable by 2-4 years in prison, as "the taking by means of a riot of any person from the lawful custody of any peace officer," with the crime of "riot" defined as two or more people using violence or the threat of violence. A lyncher could thus be prosecuted for several crimes arising from the same action, e.g., riot, lynching, and murder. Some states, South Carolina for example, require premeditation. Although lynching

in the historic sense is virtually nonexistent today, the lynching statutes are sometimes used in cases where several people try to wrest a suspect from the hands of police in order to help him escape, as alleged in a July 9, 2005 violent attack on a police officer in San Francisco.[25]

External links

Wikimedia Commons has media related to:
Lynchings

- Houghton Mifflin: The Reader's Companion to American History - Lynching
- Origin of the word Lynch
- Lynchings in the State of Iowa
- *Without Sanctuary* website
- *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*, James Allen et al
- *Without Sanctuary*, front cover
- The 1856 Committee of Vigilance - A treatment of the San Francisco vigilante movement, sympathetic to the vigilantes.
- The San Francisco Committee of Vigilance of 1851, and the San Francisco Committee of Vigilance of 1856 - an opposing perspective
- American Lynching - web site for a documentary; links, bibliographical information, images

Notes

1. ^ Daily Alta California, September 16, 1850, quoted in the New York Times, July 1, 2005, p. A18.
2. ^ Pfeifer, 2004.
3. ^ Dray, 2002.
4. ^ http://www.press.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/317749.html, retrieved June 25, 2005.
5. ^ Zinn, 2004; http://www.dougriddle.com/essays/sk20021220.html, retrieved July 21, 2005.
6. ^ Dray, 2002.
7. ^ http://www.nellpainter.com/nell/cv/articles/32_WhoWasLynched.html
8. ^ Pfeifer, 2004, p. 35.
9. ^ http://lists.econ.utah.edu/pipermail/margins-to-centre/2005-February/000201.html
10. ^ http://academic.evergreen.edu/p/pfeiferm/home.htm, retrieved June 27, 2005.
11. ^ USA Today, June 13, 2005, http://fullcoverage.yahoo.com/s/usatoday/senatemovestoapologizeforinjustice, retrieved June 28, 2005.
12. ^ Stanton, 1991.
13. ^ Editorial by Laura Wexler, "A Sorry History: Why an Apology From the Senate Can't Make Amends," Washington Post, Sunday, June 19, 2005, page B1; http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/06/18/AR2005061800075.html
14. ^ Chicago Daily Tribune, http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/4975/
15. ^ Dray, 2002.
16. ^ Wexler, 2003.
17. ^ Dray, 2002.
18. ^ Wexler, 2003.
19. ^ Wade, 1987, p. 196, gives essentially this version of the events, but implies that the meeting was a regular Klan meeting, rather than an individual meeting between Truman and a Klan organizer. An interview with Hinde at the Truman Library's web site (http://www.trumanlibrary.org/oralhist/hindeeg.htm, retrieved June 26, 2005) portrays it as a one-on-one meeting at the Hotel Baltimore with a Klan organizer named Jones. Truman's biography, written by his daughter (Truman, 1973), agrees with Hinde's version, but does not mention the $10 initiation fee; the same biography reproduces a telegram from O.L. Chrisman stating that reporters from the Hearst papers had questioned him about Truman's past with the Klan, and that he had seen Truman at a Klan meeting, but that "if he ever became a member of the Klan I did not know it."
20. ^ Fred Jerome, *The Einstein File*, St. Martin's Press, 2000; foia.fbi.gov/foiaindex/einstein.htm
21. ^ Detroit News, September 30, 2004; http://www.detnews.com/2004/metro/0409/30/c01-289311.htm
22. ^ http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/USAkkk.htm, retrieved June 26, 2005.
23. ^ Washington Post, June 14, 2005, page A12. http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/06/13/AR2005061301720.html, retrieved June 26, 2005.
24. ^ data compiled from http://users.bestweb.net/~rg/lynching_century.htm, retrieved June 26, 2005
25. ^ http://abclocal.go.com/kgo/news/070905_nw_officer_injured.html, retrieved July 13, 2005.

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