

A History of Racial Terror in the United States

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Racial terror lynching arose in the South in the years after the Civil War. As the enslavement of African Americans ended, those wanting to continue white supremacy used widespread violence to maintain racial hierarchy in the American economy, politics, and society. As an extralegal punishment, the purpose of racial terror lynching was to hold Black individuals and communities in fear, afraid to violate both racist laws and unspoken customs labeling them as inferior. While other types of lynchings occurred infrequently, mostly as a form of mob punishment against union organizers or leftist activists, the term racial terror lynching is used to describe the killing of African Americans in order to terrorize entire Black communities.

The Ku Klux Klan was one of the groups to employ lynching to terrorize Black communities throughout the South, but they were by no means alone in these efforts. One of the myths that grew alongside the rise of lynching was that elite whites attempted to prevent their occurrence but were unable to control the activities of poor and low-class whites. Studies of lynch mobs, however, have disproven this assumption. They found that community leaders – businessmen, newspaper publishers, police, and politicians – inspired and directed lynchings. Their blaming of poor whites for the violence was an attempt to direct culpability away from themselves and from the image of a genteel Southern society.

Another myth which arose with lynching was that it was a justified response to the sexual assault of white women. But that, also, is contradicted by the evidence. Even looking at reports and accounts from the era, that excuse was given less than a quarter of the time. Many lynching victims were a perceived threat, in some way, to white

supremacy. Some were Black business owners whose success was resented by white entrepreneurs, some were sharecroppers seeking fair treatment from landlords, some were political activists or attempting to vote, and some were Black labor organizers. For others, all it took was a glance, or a word, or a refusal to step aside for whites walking toward them on the street.

The numbers are staggering. According to the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI), during the peak decades of 1877 and 1950, over 4384 lynchings occurred across the U.S., with 4084 in the South. To further support a system of white supremacy, lynchings were often public spectacles, with hundreds or even thousands of whites in attendance. Parents brought their children to lynchings, vendors sold picture postcards of the events, and victim's body parts were displayed as souvenirs. All of these activities marked the Black community as inferior and even subhuman, and reinforced economic, social and political racism throughout the U.S.