

Lynching in the United States. Violent History of National Oppression

Timely review coincides with upsurge in unpunished police killings of African Americans

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A recently published report entitled “Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror”, published by the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI) in Montgomery, Ala, has illustrated the need for re-examining a sordid period in United States history which has never been acknowledged on an official level.

Although the practice originated during slavery, after the conclusion of the Civil War and beginning of Reconstruction, extra-judicial killings of African Americans became an integral part of the methods of exploitation and social containment of the former enslaved people. The Ku Klux Klan was formed in 1866 as a secret organization led by former plantation owners and Confederate military officials such as Nathan B. Forrest, who is often credited as the engineer of one of worst massacres of the Civil War at Fort Pillow, Tennessee in 1864.

The study places the rise of lynching within an historical context. After the Civil War and the legal abolition of slavery, European Americans sought to re-establish their dominance over African people.

In a section entitled “Second Slavery After the Civil War”, the authors emphasize that “white southern identity was grounded in a belief that whites are inherently superior to African Americans. Following the war, whites reacted violently to the notion that they would now have to treat their former human property as equals and pay for their labor. Plantation owners attacked black people simply for claiming their freedom. In May 1866, in Memphis, Tennessee, forty-six African Americans were killed; ninety-one houses, four churches, and twelve schools were burned to the ground; at least five women were raped; and many black people fled the city permanently.” (EJI Report, p. 7)

Study Contributes to Field Started by African American Woman

This report by EJI continues the work of other scholars and Civil Rights organizations since the late 19th century. By 1892, the phenomenon of public lynchings attracted the attention of former school teacher and journalist Ida B. Wells, who started an international campaign after three African American men were taken from a jail cell in Memphis, Tennessee and shot to death by law-enforcement agents.

A PBS documentary from 2002 entitled “The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow” notes “Tom Moss and two of his friends, Calvin McDowell and Henry Stewart, were arrested for defending themselves against an attack on Moss’ store. Moss was a highly respected figure in the

black community, a postman as well as the owner of a grocery store. A white competitor, enraged that Moss had drawn away his black customers, hired some off-duty deputy sheriffs to destroy the store.”

This tragic narrative continues recounting that “Moss and his friends, not knowing the men were deputies, resisted. A gun battle broke out and several deputies were wounded. Moss, his two friends, and one hundred other black supporters were arrested. Several nights later, masked vigilantes dragged Moss and his two friends from their cells, took them to a deserted railroad yard, and shot them to death.”

Wells was later driven out of Memphis after she had exposed the false pretext under which many lynchings were justified. This series of events resulted in thousands of African Americans leaving Memphis in mass, migrating to Oklahoma during the subsequent months and years.

The following year, 1893, Wells toured Britain to lecture on lynching in the U.S. further revealing to an international audience the plight of African Americans. She would re-locate to Chicago and continue the work from there after the Memphis newspaper offices that she owned were fire bombed by a white mob empowered by a local magistrate.

Wells wrote and published the first social scientific study of the mob killings of African Americans. The report was published as a pamphlet initially in 1895 under the title “The Red Record: Tabulated Statistics and Alleged Causes of Lynching in the United States.”

Later the anti-lynching organizer went on to be a co-founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909. The NAACP campaigned for decades against lynching and unsuccessfully for federal legislation to outlaw the widespread practice.

In 1951 under the sponsorship of the Civil Rights Congress (CRC), Atty. William L. Patterson, Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois and cultural worker and activist Paul Robeson published “We Charge Genocide”, a petition submitted to the United Nations which documented years of racial violence against African Americans carried out with impunity in full view of white officials, law-enforcement agencies and the courts. Even during the height of the mass Civil Rights Movement during 1955-1968, many more African Americans and their allies were murdered at the hands of white police officers and racist mobs.

Study Finds Additional Cases Previously Undocumented

According to the publication, “EJI researchers documented 3959 racial terror lynchings of African Americans in Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia between 1877 and 1950 – at least 700 more lynchings of black people in these states than previously reported in the most comprehensive work done on lynching to date. Lynching in America makes the case that lynching of African Americans was terrorism, a widely supported phenomenon used to enforce racial subordination and segregation.” (Introduction)

This study utilizes sources which indicate that the practice was far more widespread than previously suggested. The authors acknowledged the work of academic Stewart E. Tolnay as well as Tuskegee University in Alabama, but also drew upon additional cases found in the

African American press which was in its classical period during the late 19th and early decades of the 20th century.

The Death Penalty as Legalized Lynching

After World War I with the Great Migration of African Americans from the rural South to urbanized regions of the North and West of the U.S., there was a decline in public lynchings. Nonetheless, these acts of racial terror continued through other means including state-sanctioned executions.

The report says:

“By 1915, court-ordered executions outpaced lynchings in the former slave states for the first time. Two-thirds of those executed in the 1930s were black, and the trend continued. As African Americans fell to just 22 percent of the South’s population between 1910 and 1950, they constituted 75 percent of those executed in the South during that period.” (p. 21)

This study documents the continuation of this process into the modern era citing that “In the 1987 case of *McCleskey v. Kemp*, the Supreme Court considered statistical evidence demonstrating that Georgia decision makers were more than four times as likely to impose death for the killing of a white person than a black person. Accepting the data as accurate, the Court described racial bias in sentencing as ‘an inevitable part of our criminal justice system’ and upheld Warren McCleskey’s death sentence because he failed to identify a ‘constitutionally significant risk of racial bias’ in his case.”

Legal Lynching Continues Across the U.S.

The report reaffirms that the current wave of police killings and other racist attacks are part and parcel of the system of national oppression and social control utilized by the ruling class to exploit and contain African people from the 19th century to the present. Today in the aftermath of Civil Rights legislation passed during the 1950s and 1960s and the ascendancy of African American elected officials including the president, people are still being denied justice.

Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Aiyana Stanley Jones, Tamir Rice and countless others have been killed by police officers who remain unscathed by prosecutors and the courts. The Justice Department has not brought any charges against these officers after local authorities failed to indict and arrest the perpetrators.

Undoubtedly it will take a revolution to overthrow the legacy of racial terrorism in the U.S. The African American and other oppressed peoples must be totally liberated from national oppression before they can expect any real justice that protects and values their lives from the ravages of state-supported violence and political repression.

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