

We Charge Genocide: An Examination of Racism as Black Genocide in America

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The US Civil Rights Movement and race relations in the US have been met with recent academic popularity, with different historiographies being hotly contested (Hall, 2007) – the result is a complex understanding of African American history (Dwyer, 2000; Lawson, 1991). African Americans were enslaved, segregated, massacred, beaten, raped, and lynched for hundreds of years, leading some academics to believe that African Americans faced a genocide, specifically a ‘Black Genocide’ (Wright, 1969). For the purpose of this essay, the term genocide will follow Lemkin’s original conception of the word as well as the United Nation’s definition, where genocide is not necessarily to kill but to destroy a group, in part or in whole, through other means i.e. social, political and economic means (Lemkin and Power, 1944; United States. Department of State. Office of Public et al., 1949). The historical context of slavery, the creation of a race and the treatment of African Americans in America suggests genocidal intentions against black people. The violence that African Americans faced and the continuation of Jim Crow Laws shows *dolus specialis*, an intent to destroy. Furthermore, the legacy of racism and continuation of violence against African Americans further suggests genocidal intentions.

The context of Black Genocide is a long one and can be split into political, economic, and social context. Slavery was not a new concept before the transatlantic slave trade (Dierenfield, 2013; Thornton and

Thornton, 1998; Ferro, 2005); however, this slave trade was the start of a Black Genocide. Although Africans played a direct role in the slave trade (Tunde, 2000), the British Empire was the main driver of the slave trade, providing a new market in an existing trade and therefore an economic drive (Thornton and Thornton, 1998). The Slave Trade led to the initial destruction of African societies and culture in Africa and the slave ships were specifically designed to remove the agency of the slaves, starting the process of dehumanization. This mirrors what African Americans would come to experience in the US over the next 100 years.

Slavery of African Americans was heavily influenced and justified by the racist views of western culture that Africans were less human. Racism predates the slave trade as prejudice against people of colour was evident in the Middle Ages (Dierenfield, 2013). However, The Enlightenment Era had a large impact on racism (Poliakov, 1982; Hourly History, 2017). During this time, scholars speculated about the differences between groups; scientific racism was the result of The Enlightenment Era which was used to justify European imperialism and the exploitation of African resources and slavery (Tyson et al., 2011; Solomos, 1996; Blakey, 1999). Furthermore, scholars such as Rodney (1972) argue Africa's role in the slave trade was unequal to that of the more economically developed Europeans, with Africans being forced into colonial trades. The colonisation that the British Empire inflicted on Africa resulted in 21 million African slaves between 1750 and 1800 (Brown, 2010). The Transatlantic Slave trade "was not one genocide but many" (Powell, 2007, pg. 547), leading to a structural genocide against African Americans in the US.

Slavery within the south, pre-civil war, was economically driven as slavery was concentrated in the poorest states in the US, shown in Figure 1 (Sowell, 2005). Historians have claimed that slave agriculture was considerably more efficient and economically profitable than non-slave farming, with some arguing that the wombs of black fe-



*Figure 1 , Slave Auction,
(Smith Collection, 1840).*

males became sites of economic sexual slavery (Davis, 2002; Whaples, 1995). Slavery and racism became a social issue with the release of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) by Harriet Beecher Stowe and a political issue when Lincoln made emancipating all 3.5 million slaves a Civil War aim. Some have claimed Lincoln declared, "So this is the little lady who started this great war" to Stowe (Stowe and Stowe, 1911, pg. 203). With the abolition of slavery, the south lost \$2,000,000,000 in slave property (Brown, 2010) – \$62,705,783,132.53 today – resulting in racist views being reinforced and more genocidal acts being committed, furthered by the failure of The Reconstruction Era.

Attempts at Reconstruction to raise the social, political and economic status of African Americans failed (Couvares and Saxton, 2000). Radical Republicans and African Americans were targeted by the first Ku Klux Klan (KKK), shown in Figure 2, who started as a fraternal social club but later became a defining feature in African American History as a white supremacist terrorist group, with the first and third Klan specifically targeting African Americans (Parsons, 2015; Jackson, 1992). For example, while attempting to get the thirteenth amendment extended to African Americans, massacres took place. The 1866 New Orleans Massacre resulted in around 200 casualties with 50 black people dead (Vandal, 1983). Before the 1968 election, more than 2000 people were killed in Louisiana alone. The KKK used armed guerrilla warfare to kill thousands of black republicans (Searls Giroux, 2003) as they hunted African Americans like



Figure 2, Ku Klux Klan Members Plot a Murder, (Corbis Historical, 1900)

pray through the woods with thirteen captives taken from jail and shot. A pile of 25 bodies was found in the woods and many more bodies were left on the road (Du Bois, 1935). This KKK display coordination through these individual acts of violence. Black Codes, derived from Slave Codes, were legal means of infringing on

the rights of African Americans, imposed by the government, after emancipation which manifested into grandfather clauses, literacy tests voting fees, sharecropping and other social, political, and economic measures to allow the south to get back what they felt like they had lost – their slaves. Black Codes were just slavery by a different name (Graff, 2011; Du Bois, 1935). This aids the argument that African Americans faced a genocide as they were being used as means to an end, rather than as people. Here, it is evident that dehumanization was taking place. Furthermore, the KKK and the government influenced each other; coordination in this genocide was not as intensely organised as other genocides, but there is systematic planning and organisation from the government and organisations which fed into the Jim Crow Era, existing until Civil Rights Act of 1964.

The historical context makes it evident that this was a genocide, as do the events of the twentieth century before the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The coining of genocide as a concept, by Raphael Lemkin, fits Black Genocide as Lemkin's definition of genocide focuses on the destruction of a group, not necessarily by outright killing them (Totten

and Bartrop, 2009). For example, White Americans used distorted drawings and paintings to emphasize 'ape-like' features in African Americans as a form of social and political propaganda (Lockshin, 2007; Stanley, 2015). Intelligence tests relied on pseudo-science to reinforce ideas about African Americans that they were less human and less intellectual (Tate, 2004). The groundwork for this 'ape-like' idea of African Americans lies in *Jump Jim Crow* (1828), a mockery caricature of black people that later came to define African American stereotypes (Nowatzki, 2006). These stereotypes made it incredibly hard for African Americans to do basic things like vote or get jobs. African Americans were therefore among the poorest in America and this can be considered a form of economic genocide (Chossudovsky, 1998). Furthermore, the propaganda and social mockery of African Americans removed their humanity; a key component of genocide.

Lemkin and Power (1944) later go on to say that his definition is intended to signify a coordinated plan of destruction. This is also evident in the treatment of African Americans with the release of *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). This film is considered the first film to be released in Hollywood, but it is remembered for the portrayal of African Americans (Jackson, 1992), where a good versus evil narrative is portrayed with the KKK acting as the heroic force against unintelligent and sexually aggressive blackface characters, shown in Figure 3 (Griffith, 1915; Lennig, 2004). It should be noted that although the portrayal of African Americans was aided by psychological and political propaganda, racist pseudo-science developed independently of the KKK. However, the release of *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) resulted in the KKK's membership climbing to well over five million (Jackson, 1992; Lay, 2004). This can be considered a coordinated plan of destruction as Griffin claims it took him six months to shoot, cost \$500,000, featured 25,000 soldiers, 50 companies of cavalry, and 25 batteries of artillery (Lennig, 2004). Although Griffith may not have foreseen the second rising of the KKK, he was intending for his film

to have some impact and intentionally displayed African Americans in a certain light that aligned with the American stereotypes of black people. He was unapologetic about the film's impact and there were plans for another KKK to restore home rule (Jackson, 1992). As evidenced above, the historical context of genocide for African Americans is deep rooted in American society, with a focus on retaining a whiteness to their society.

Under the 1948 Genocide Convention, the United Nations has adopted the definition that genocidal acts are committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group. These acts include killing; causing serious bodily or mental harm; inflicting conditions of life, calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; imposing measures to prevent births; and forcibly transferring children of the group to another group (United States. Department of State. Office of Public et al., 1949).

Many of the acts listed above are evident in race relations in America. White people and organisations such as the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) caused major mental harm to leaders of the Civil Rights Movement. The FBI's links to the civil rights movement are most visible during Kennedy's years but their expansion of responsibilities is linked in Roosevelt's years. By 1938, the FBI had a dedicated "Negro" category tied to its communist infiltration investigations; many of the FBI reports including the March on Washington reports were sent to the White House (O'Reilly, 1988). This was heavily influenced by McCarthyism and The Red Scares (a



Figure 3, Scene from The Birth Of A Nation, 1915, (Smith Collection, 1915)

period of hysteria in the US surrounding communism and the Bolsheviks in Russia) that plagued the US for many decades (Satow, 1973). Under Hoover, director of the FBI during Kennedy's presidency, the FBI investigated black activists thoroughly. Hoover had claimed a close advisor to Martin Luther King Jr. was part of the communist party (Garrow, 2015; O'Reilly, 1988). Black activists had major invasions of privacy with current research suggesting the impacts of this are severe mental harm, far greater than any bodily harm that could be inflicted (Brandeis and Warren, 1890).

Moreover, The Eugenics Movement was used to prevent births in Black American women. As part of the Jim Crow Era and Civil Rights Era, African American women were the focus of eugenics and forced sterilisation. Lower class African American women were forced into having their tubes tied by threats of having their welfare cut (Hattery and Smith, 2007); statistics suggest that 64 percent of African Americans had been sterilized by the end of the Civil Rights Movement (Schoen, 2005). According to some scholars, America was toying with creating a biological superior race, deliberately excluding ethnic minorities, including Black people, during the Holocaust times (Price and Darity Jr, 2010; Leonard, 2005).

Furthermore, it is important to note that the critical aspect when discussing genocide is the intent to destroy (LeBlanc, 1984) which is what makes it different from a crime against humanity (Totten and Bartrop, 2009). This is known as *dolus specialis* which is both evident and absent in Black Genocide. For example, for Goldsmith (2010) an individual's expressed intentions are irrelevant if they are still actively involved in genocide and plays a crucial part. Arguably, some white Americans played a role in Black Genocide by not fighting for African Americans until the Civil Rights Movement simply because of economic gain and not ideological hatred (Irvin-Erickson, 2016; Hobson, 2019). This was particularly evident during the Great Depression where thirteen million people were unemployed and African Americans were

last hired and first fired (Greenberg, 2009; D'Alessio et al., 2014).

Equally, white Americans also show *dolus specialis* in their treatment of African Americans through the stages of genocide. Black Genocide is evident in theoretical frameworks for genocide, including that of Gregory Stanton's. For Stanton, there are eight stages of genocide (Stanton, 2009); evidence for these stages comes from the historical context or the context of the act itself. The first stage, classification, is evident throughout the whole period of Black Genocide. The classification of black people began with Galton and Goddard's pseudo-science and eugenics. For Galton, high cognitive abilities were the result of hereditary passing and only for the elite, resulting in racist views as the majority of black Americans were in the lower class. This was influenced by Goddard's work on the Kallikak Family which came to create the underpinning notions of the eugenics movement – that the reproduction of one 'feeble-minded' person could create generations of poverty and crime (Doll, 1936; Zimmer, 2019; Jensen, 2002; Maltby et al., 2010; Stanton, 2009). This notion is forwarded by the next stages of genocide, symbolisation and dehumanization. Words such as 'boy', 'nigger' and 'negro' are important for the classification, symbolisation and dehumanization of blacks and they were paired with untrue portrayals of blacks, such as distorting ape-like features in drawings or as sexually aggressive such as in *The Birth of A Nation* (1915) leading to the denial of African American humanity (Brunson, 2015; Lennig, 2004; Stanton, 2009).

The next four stages of genocide, organisation, polarization, preparation, and extermination, are all conducted by the KKK. The fact that the KKK even exist fulfils the stages of organisation and polarization as they make plans for genocidal killings, shown in Figure 4. For example, the sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing in 1963 (Hewitt, 2005; Klobuchar, 2009). Stage six, preparation, involves victim identification (Stanton, 2009) which has two stages. General identifi-



Figure 4, Lynching of a black man, (Universal Images Group, 1882).

cation is done by skin tone or by ancestry. This was the case for Homer Plessy who was an octo-
rtoon: he appeared to be a white man but was one eighth black and therefore was legally treated as a black man. Challenges to the Black Codes and Jim Crow

Laws by Plessy resulted in a supreme court ruling in the Plessy vs. Ferguson case of 1896 of ‘separate but equal’ which came to define the Jim Crow Era (Smolla, 1996; Golub, 2005; Lofgren, 1988). The other type of identification is individual identification of victims which was the case for Emmett Till, who was lynched and mutilated due to him allegedly winking at a white woman, a fact later found to be false (Harold and DeLuca, 2005; Carson, 1991). Finally, extermination occurs. This was carried out by lynchings for hundreds of years and was linked to sexual aggression. Pre-civil war, there was a case of three black men lynching a white rapist who raped a 13-year-old black girl, with the governor claiming they were simply following in the footsteps of “their enlightened white neighbours” (Litwack, 1999, pg. 303; Waldrep, 2008). However, post-civil war lynching became a method of terrorism against African Americans. Hostility against African Americans manifested into frequent violence, known as the wave of terror, and was directed at educating blacks after the Reconstruction Era (Litwack, 1999; Verney, 2020). Furthermore, events such as the Tulsa Race Massacre (1921) heavily suggest intended extermination. Just from this event alone, up to 300 people died, with 800-6000 people hospitalized. A further 10,000 blacks were left homeless and \$2.25 million worth of damage – over \$32 million now – was done to an all-black neighbourhood, Greenwood

(Gates, 2004; Nowell, 2014; White, 1921). This was not the worst of the massacres as two years prior to The Red Summer of 1919 occurred where 26 race riots occurred (one of which is shown in Figure 5), some claiming up to 300 victims each (McWhirter, 2011). Lynchings and racial killings were a representation of economic frustration and a rough sense of justice to the south but in reality, this was unjust genocide as there is a clear desire to remove African Americans from society (Green et al., 1998; Verney, 2020).

The final stage of genocide in Stanton's stages, denial, is not part of the genocide but does follow a genocide (Stanton, 2009). Denial is evident in this genocide.

Horowitz (1976) has claimed that there is no such thing as a Black genocide in the US and United Nations Del-



Figure 5, Omaha Race Riot, 1919, (University of Washington, 1919)

egate Eleanor Roosevelt has claimed long term discrimination is not genocide (Martin, 1997). Despite the 1951 petition of *We Charge Genocide* – where 10,000 unjust black deaths, nine years after the American Civil War, were listed - and *The Ballot or the Bullet* (1964) speech from Malcolm X, Black Genocide has even been denied as genocide from the United Nations (Bucki, 2009; Terrill, 2010).

The result of hundreds of years of racism has not been erased by the 1964 Civil Rights Act; a legacy has been left behind. Politically, the 1965 Voting Rights Act had to be brought in by President Johnson as the Black Codes that stopped African Americans from voting still existed nearly 100 years later as a means of preventing black people from reclaiming their agency (Garrow, 1978). Two

prominent members of the Civil Rights Movement were assassinated, Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X (Marable, 2016). Socially, the white saviour narrative was created as a way to warp the historical narrative of African American History. Films such as *Mississippi Burning* give an impression of the FBI thoroughly investigating the deaths of three Civil Rights activists (two white, one black) who went missing in 1964; the film showcased the FBI's investigation with the lead characters being two white FBI federal agents and primarily focused on these characters (Denzin, 2014; Smith, 2008). Furthermore, incarceration rates are heavily affected by race as one in seventeen white males are expected to go to prison while one in three black males are expected to in the same population (Bonczar, 2003). This year, the Black Lives Matter Movement has been reignited due to police brutality against blacks and the structural systems that reinforce racial oppression and marginalization in America, evident in the deaths of individuals such as George Floyd (Cappelli, 2020; Dreyer et al., 2020). Racism is still prevalent in today's society; de jure segregation is gone but de facto racism still exists; a result of the history and violence African Americans had to live through.

To conclude, the racism African Americans experienced in the US was a genocide. The groundwork laid by The Transatlantic Slave trade, slavery, Black Codes and Jim Crow Laws allowed for continuous violence to take place for many years. In the US, there was a system of terrorism and guerrilla warfare creating a race war against blacks that African Americans were losing (Litwack, 1999). Black Genocide fits the original definition of genocide and other theoretical definitions of genocide. Blacks faced many kinds of violence: social, political, economic, physical, intellectual, psychological, and more through different aspects of the US society. The result of this is a system of racism built into the US society that encourages racism of all kinds – a legacy of racism is evident from Black Genocide. The term genocide encompasses the full extent of the destruction and dehu-

manisation that African Americans experienced. American society has always sought to retain the whiteness of their societies, despite the personal, physical, emotional, economic, political, and societal cost this may have against African Americans.

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