

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نباشد تن من مباد بدین بوم و بر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

BY AL RONZONI

02.06.2021

Shame of the Nation: The 1921 Tulsa Massacre in Historical Context



American Red Cross Photograph Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

With the 100th anniversary of the Tulsa Race Massacre upon us, I've heard a lot of discussion about it on shows like Democracy Now! but not as much detail as I would have liked on the background of this shameful episode in American history and exactly what triggered it. So, I decided to dig further myself, picking up a copy of journalist Tim Madigan's, 2001 book, *The Burning: The Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921*, re-released this year with a new afterward.

Early on, Madigan tells us:

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

“Not long into my research, I realized that what happened in Tulsa in 1921 was scarcely an isolated event. It might have been the worst incident of its kind in our history but almost every month, American newspapers of that time carried new accounts of racial bloodshed in another town or city, new atrocities perpetuated against Black people by mobs of white people. Rather than an exception, I learned, what happened in Tulsa was a metaphor for that period of our history.”

According to Madigan, there were at least two dozen race riots in 1919 alone, in Houston, Chicago, Washington D.C., Atlanta, even Duluth, Minnesota. Every month it seemed that another city was consumed. White men worried that blacks would take “their” jobs, that black men would deflower “their” women or white people were enraged by uppity coloreds no longer content to ride in segregated rail cars. So, tensions rose and the smallest things could set off an apocalypse.

Even white women got into the act. Madigan recounts how during a race riot in East St. Louis in 1917, a white woman slashed a black woman’s throat, while gangs of white girls roamed the streets beating every black female they could find. White people also shot a black toddler and then tossed its body from a burning building. African American veterans were strung up in uniform. More and more white people insisted on torturing black people before lynching them, as if killing a black person itself did not satisfy their lust for blood. Newspapers ran ads inviting the public to witness the burning of live colored men.

Not surprisingly, this angered some black people, particularly young men in Greenwood, the prosperous black section of Tulsa. Hundreds had served in World War I and had been treated by the French with dignity and respect. They had fought and bled to defend “freedom” only to find that their brothers and sisters were still being treated like dirt at home. Andrew J. Smitherman, editor of the *Tulsa Star*, Greenwood’s leading newspaper and most authoritative public voice, never missed a chance to rail in print against the injustices perpetrated against his people and had intervened personally in attempted lynchings in neighboring towns. An early banner headline summed up his belligerent disposition where race matters were concerned: YOU PUSH ME AND I’LL PUSH YOU! Smitherman was a friend of John B. Stradford, one of Black Tulsa’s most successful entrepreneurs, including among his ventures the famously luxurious, fifty-four room Stradford Hotel on Greenwood Avenue, one of the state’s largest Black-owned businesses. Like Smitherman, Stradford’s overriding concern was the plight of African-Americans and, like the editor, he was not shy about saying so. Madigan tells us Stradford had once, “beaten a white delivery boy within an inch of his life for a racist remark made within

earshot.” On issues of race, some of Greenwood’s black citizens no doubt shared the confrontational notions of Smitherman and Stradford, while others preferred a quieter course. But each resident of Greenwood in his or her own way had put the lie to the prevailing theories of Black inferiority with which white people of that time continued to justify so much of their cruelty. They were educated, literate and affluent, in fact undoubtedly more so than some white residents of Tulsa.

The post-World War I period was also one of extreme political and social volatility. Mass immigration from Eastern and Southern Europe in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, along with the radical politics of some of the new arrivals fueled “native,” white Anglo-Saxon Protestant fears they’d be overrun by people of inferior racial stock, who didn’t share American values. The success of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia also provoked fears that a worker’s revolution could happen in the U.S. as well.

Into this already volatile mix, African-American intellectuals like W.E.B. Dubois added a new, far less accommodating philosophy than that which had been advocated earlier by Booker T. Washington. Following the Chicago race riot of 1919, in an editorial for the *Crisis*, the national journal of the NAACP, Dubois wrote:

“We have cast off on the voyage which will lead to freedom or death. For three centuries we have suffered and cowered. No race ever gave passive submission to evil a longer, more piteous trial. Today we raise the terrible weapon of self-defense. When the murderer comes, he shall no longer strike us in the back. When armed lynchers gather, we too must gather armed.”

One form of white Protestant response to all of this was the resurrection of the Ku Klux Klan. After its first post-Civil War incarnation had been ruthlessly stamped out by the Grant administration, the stunning success of the 1915 film *Birth of a Nation*, the first Hollywood blockbuster, inspired a rebirth of the Klan, which took place at a ceremony on Stone Mountain only a few months after the film’s release. This new Klan was active in many places outside of the South, where by 1921 it counted many of Tulsa’s leading politicians, law-enforcement officers, judges, businessmen and even an Oklahoma governor and U.S. senator, among its membership.

But, as Madigan shows us, to truly understand the Tulsa Massacre, we also need to understand the kind of mass psychosis that gripped many white males after the Civil War, engendered by fear and guilt about interracial sex; a mass psychosis that still has reverberations today. Madigan reminds us about how many lynchings and race riots started over something as harmless as a black man smiling at a white woman. Why? Well,

for one thing, there were the tens of thousands of multiracial men and women, “everywhere you turned in African-American neighborhoods across the United States.” As Madigan relates further:

“That was the final proof that white men never hesitated to find their pleasure with black women. Before the Civil War Southern slave owners kept their white women on pedestals, hidden away from the slaves; they made those women icons to white purity and the Southern way of life. But such veneration came with a cost. Women on pedestals tend to be frosty in bed, so the white man had his way with black women and girls...But then the Union triumphed and the slaves were freed. Mingles with the Southern white man’s fury at the destruction of his way of life was this fear: What sort of retribution might the “black buck” now exact on white women?”

It was precisely an incident involving a black man and a white woman that created the spark that ignited the Tulsa Massacre. And, as Madigan shows, we know quite a lot about what happened. The girl was seventeen-year-old Sarah Page, who’d already been married and divorced. According to Madigan’s research, “People said,” she had ditched her husband in Kansas City and come to live in Tulsa to live with a relative, while the Tulsa’s sheriff who served divorce papers on her that spring was heard to comment that if half the charges in the divorce petition were true, “she was a notorious character.” A young black man named Dick Rowland developed a nearly fatal attraction to Sarah. Originally an orphan named Jimmie Jones, he had been adopted by Damie Rowland, who owned a small grocery store and had fallen in love with the boy when he showed up hungry at her door one day. By all accounts, Jimmie was a smart and charming child with a lot of promise. Damie had ambitions for him to become a doctor or lawyer but Jimmie, who renamed himself “Dick” as a teenager, found he was satisfied with the substantial money he made shining rich white men’s shoes and the freewheeling lifestyle it afforded him.

Sarah ran an elevator in a building downtown, where Dick’s employer at the shoeshine stand had arranged for his bootblacks to use the bathroom on the fourth floor, a dirty little cubicle marked COLOREDS ONLY. Dick didn’t mind, the bathroom gave him an excuse to ride Sarah’s elevator several times a day. On May 30, 1921, Dick arrived home to Damie early in a highly agitated state. It had been a busy day for Dick with crowds who had come for the Memorial Day Parade downtown. He had taken a different elevator upstairs to use the bathroom, then waited for Sarah’s to take him back down. When the door opened, Dick smiled at Sarah and hurried onto the elevator. But in his rush, he slipped, fell into Sarah by accident and stepped on her toe, which was already tender from

an ingrown nail. He tried to apologize but she laid into him in anger from the pain, hitting him repeatedly over the head with her purse, so hard the leather handles snapped. When the elevator reached the ground floor, Sarah screamed, “I’ve been assaulted!” Dick took off. A clerk from a clothing store right next to the elevator on the ground floor ran after him but Dick outran him.

All night long Dick and Damie waited for a knock on the door or worse but it passed quietly. But Dick snuck out for a bit to see his friends the next day and got picked up by the police. In tears, he called Damie from jail to plead with her to get him a lawyer. At the courthouse, the sheriff made her feel a little better. His name was William McCullough. Madigan tells us he was “a tall kindly man with a thick handlebar mustache.” McCullough said the Page girl was nothing but trouble and that Tulsa detectives were already skeptical of her story. He promised Damie that Dick would get his day in court and even arranged for her to contact a prominent white attorney named Washington Hudson, who would later become the Democratic Party leader of the Oklahoma State Senate. What McCullough didn’t tell her was that Hudson would also soon become a leading member of Tulsa’s Ku Klux Klan.

It was at this point the local press, in the form of publisher Richard Lloyd Jones’s *Tulsa Tribune* decided to fan the flames. Jones was a complex character. He was a devotee of Abraham Lincoln, who had been instrumental in purchasing the Great Emancipator’s birthplace in Kentucky and turning it into a memorial, while also being a virulent racist and ally of the Tulsa Klan. Despite his love for Lincoln, Jones used racism to sell papers. Madigan tells us the *Tribune* referred to Tulsa’s black community as “Niggertown” or “Little Africa” and described it as a “veritable human cesspool that needed to be cleaned up.” During a week when the *Tribune*’s front page had been dominated large photos of smiling young white beauties, vying for the title of “Miss Tulsa,” Jones ran a headline against them that read: TO LYNCH NEGRO TONIGHT. But he didn’t stop there. Jones also wrote a scathing, inflammatory editorial on the incident. After hundreds of papers with the editorial had already gone out, some of Jones’s own editors prevailed upon him to have them retrieved. Only a handful were ever recovered. Unfortunately, no copies with the editorial have survived. It was torn out of a lot of the papers that were recovered that day, including an archival copy that is still in the Tulsa Public Library. According to Madigan, “*arguably, it was Jones and his editorial—Jones more than any other single person—who’s actions precipitated the obliteration of America’s most thriving Black community.*” (italics are mine)

Within hours after Jones's papers hit the streets, first hundreds, then thousands of armed white men surrounded the Tulsa courthouse where Dick Rowland was being held. But following the examples of Andrew J. Smitherman and John B. Stradford and the exhortations of W.E.B. Dubois, many of the black male residents of Greenwood, including World War I veterans, decided they weren't going to allow another lynching to take place in their city. They rushed to the scene, also armed, to protect Rowland. A shot was fired and "all hell broke loose," a massacre survivor recalled later.

While smoke still rose from the ashes of Greenwood, McCullough hustled Rowland out of town and he later disappeared without a trace, adding to some of the uncertainties that still surround this now century-old vicious, unrestrained attack on a black community. There's no question that we've made racial progress since then, largely because of the sacrifice and struggle of African-Americans for equality. But we can't, we shouldn't, try to pretend that the United States is not still plagued by the racial demons of 1921. There is still much work to be done.

Al Ronzoni is a writer, historian and political activist based in New York City

CounterPunch 01.06.2021