‘Red Summer’ details time of intense violence against Blacks

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SPECIAL TO THE COURIER

In his 1919 Thanksgiving Day Proclamation, Woodrow Wilson boasted that the democracy of the United States "remains unshaken in a world torn with political and social unrest."

Referring of course, to World War I and the Russian Revolution, the president did not mention the bloodshed, lynching and race riots that had swept the country, from Charleston, S.C. to Washington, D.C., Chicago, Ill., Omaha, Neb. and Knoxville, Tenn., between April and November.

In “Red Summer,” Cameron McWhirter, a reporter for the Wall Street Journal, provides a detailed account of the tidal wave of anti-Black violence.

A "spasm of brutality," he argues, the riots produced "something vital, and ultimately unstoppable – Black Americans' collective will to reach equality."

Chilling account of public murder
Blacks fought back, with baseball bats, bricks, and bullets. And they started to organize themselves to demand their civil rights. With fewer than 10,000 members at the start of 1918, McWhirter points out, the NAACP grew to 91,000 members, in 299 chapters, and began laying the groundwork for the dismantling of state-sponsored segregation and discrimination.

“Red Summer” documents, in chilling detail, White on Black violence – and the indifference of politicians and law enforcement officials to it.

In Ellisville, Miss., for example, 10,000 people watched as vigilantes hoisted "wild-eyed, screaming" John Hartfield, an accused rapist, up a sweet gum tree, let him dangle from a branch, shot him as many as 2,000 times, and then burned his corpse.

‘Turning point’ in race relations
With vendors selling flags, trinkets, souvenir photographers, and one of the Black man’s fingers, bobbing up and down in a jar filled with alcohol, McWhirter writes, "it was like a county fair, political rally, and public murder all rolled into one."

Asked to intervene on the day of the killing, Governor Theodore Bilbo stated publicly that "nobody can keep the inevitable from happening."

The next day the federal government turned down an NAACP request to send troops to Mississippi to restore order.

There was nothing new, of course, about these hate crimes. What was new, McWhirter insists, was the collective courage, resolute determination, and "triumphant spirit" of Black Americans in the face of the tribulations of the Red Summer.

It is not all that clear, however, that 1919 marked "a turning point in American race relations."

A time Whites ‘misremembered’
McWhirter does not make a compelling case that significant numbers of Whites "were mortified" by anti-Black outbursts. Or that, the wake of the riots, especially in urban areas in the North, there was "prompt, forceful, and unbiased government enforcement of law and order."

Indeed, as McWhirter acknowledges, those in political power either forgot 1919 "or misremembered it" as a time of Communist or trade union-inspired agitation among Blacks.

The NAACP, moreover, was not able to accomplish all that much during the rabidly racist 1920s.

The anti-lynching legislation sponsored by the organization and its efforts to promote voting rights, equal educational opportunities, and equal access to public services, went nowhere.

Some afraid of stirring up ‘mess’
Under intense pressure from the Ku Klux Klan, many NAACP chapters in the South folded. In the North, de facto segregation prevailed in the workplace, in schools, and in most neighborhoods.

For Blacks as well as Whites, McWhirter admits, "1919 was hushed up and forgotten."

Jack Ruffin grew up a 20-minute drive from Carswell Grove, Ga., where his grandfather had been lynched. But his mother, who worked as a laundress, did not allow him to visit the place.

She mentioned the incident only to warn him, "Don't get in trouble with White folk."

When Jack told her he wanted to go to law school and work for civil rights, she was furious that he might stir up "the mess" at Carswell Grove.

Not a positive legacy
The legacy of Red Summer, it seems to me, was not positive. The riots did not "awaken" Black America, politically, socially, and artistically. They did not energize Black leaders, not for very long. Nor, alas, did they "force millions to examine America's ugly race relations and their individual role in those
The Red Summer came and went, leaving in its wake destruction and death. It would take a second World War, and a church-based mass movement, before Blacks could begin to realize the aspirations for freedom, justice, and equality they had had for centuries.

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