Position Paper For Knoxville’s Red Summer 1919

Posted on December 13, 2023

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Introduction

Knoxville’s Red Summer: The Riot of 1919 and the account of the 1946 Columbia, Tennessee, uprising examine two episodes of racial violence separated by more than a quarter century. The events differed in immediate cause and institutional response, yet both developed within systems of segregation, unequal policing, racial rumor, and the threat of collective violence against Black communities. In Knoxville, the arrest of Maurice Mays for the murder of Bertie Lindsey triggered an attempted lynching, invasion of the county jail, looting of weapons, and armed conflict. In Columbia, a dispute involving Black Navy veteran James Stephenson, his mother Gladys, and a white shopkeeper escalated into a broader confrontation centered on the Mink Slide Black business district. In both cases, African American residents prepared to defend themselves because they had reason to doubt that public authorities could guarantee equal protection. A responsible comparison should therefore examine who created the initial threat, how state power was used, and how legal and community responses changed between 1919 and 1946.

Knoxville in the Red Summer of 1919

The Knoxville violence occurred on August 30 and 31, 1919, during the national period known as the Red Summer, when racial conflict erupted in numerous American cities following World War I. Black veterans returned from military service with stronger expectations of citizenship, while labor competition, migration, white supremacist politics, and sensational reporting intensified racial tension. The immediate Knoxville crisis began after Maurice Mays, a Black man, was accused of murdering Bertie Lindsey, a white woman. Authorities moved Mays away from the Knox County jail because they anticipated mob violence, but a large white crowd gathered there, demanded access to him, broke into the building, and seized weapons. The violence therefore began as an attempted lynching and assault on lawful custody rather than as an equal confrontation between two communities. Black residents armed themselves as the danger spread toward their neighborhoods and businesses. Their response reflected a wider postwar willingness to resist racial terror, although individual uses of force still require evaluation according to the circumstances in which they occurred.

Local authorities lost control and National Guard units were deployed as gunfire spread through

Knoxville. Reports of deaths and injuries varied, making exact casualty totals difficult to establish, but the military intervention restored order after civil institutions failed to prevent mob escalation. The riot did not end the legal controversy surrounding Mays. He was prosecuted, convicted, and executed in 1922 even as serious questions persisted about the evidence and fairness of the proceedings. The sequence matters because the failure of the mob to lynch him immediately did not resolve the broader problem of racial inequality in the justice system. Public accounts often emphasized armed Black resistance while giving less attention to the white mob's attack on the jail and seizure of weapons. Historical interpretation must therefore distinguish the event that created the immediate danger from the defensive actions that followed. Knoxville also demonstrates how a city that considered itself comparatively moderate could rapidly abandon that self-image when racial accusation, rumor, and mob action overwhelmed formal legal procedure.

Columbia in 1946 and the Mink Slide Community

The Columbia uprising unfolded after World War II, when Black veterans again returned from military service with heightened expectations of equal citizenship. The local dispute began when James Stephenson and his mother Gladys became involved in a confrontation with a white shopkeeper over the repair and payment for a radio. Arrests and negotiations did not eliminate the threat of wider violence. White crowds gathered, and Black residents of the Mink Slide district prepared to defend homes and businesses. As tension increased, streetlights were shot out and gunfire injured several white law-enforcement officers. State highway patrol officers and other authorities then entered the Black district in force, conducted searches, damaged property, and arrested more than one hundred Black residents. The term "race riot" can obscure the power relationship if it suggests that two communities entered the conflict on equal terms. Black residents were not attempting to invade a white neighborhood; they were reacting to an anticipated attack in a segregated town where impartial police protection could not be assumed.

The treatment of William Gordon and James Johnson became one of the most disturbing parts of the Columbia episode. The two Black detainees were removed from custody by Tennessee Highway Patrol officers on the stated purpose of identifying hidden weapons. Officers later claimed that the men attempted escape or tried to obtain weapons, but both detainees were shot and killed while in police custody. They did not kill police officers in that episode. The Columbia prosecutions subsequently attracted national civil-rights attention. The NAACP organized a major legal defense in which Thurgood Marshall participated alongside other attorneys. More than two dozen Black defendants faced serious charges, including attempted murder, yet most were acquitted and two were convicted of lesser offenses. This organized legal response marks an important change from 1919. By 1946, the NAACP possessed greater national capacity, legal expertise, fundraising, publicity networks, and strategic experience for turning a local criminal case into a broader challenge to discriminatory policing and prosecution.

Continuity, Change, and Historical Responsibility

The two events reveal continuity in racial inequality while also showing how Black political organization developed between the world wars. Both followed wars publicly associated with democracy, making the contradiction between military service abroad and segregation at home especially visible. In Knoxville, the immediate threat came most clearly from a white mob attempting to seize a prisoner, while Columbia became especially significant for the conduct of state and local law enforcement after the initial crowd threat. These are distinct mechanisms of power: mob violence can operate outside formal law, whereas searches, detention, prosecution, and custodial violence use legal authority. Rumor and media framing mattered in both places because reports about accusations, gunfire, and supposed Black rebellion could mobilize fear and justify force. The comparison should not rank suffering through a simple casualty count. Knoxville involved attempted lynching, jail destruction, armed conflict, displacement, and Mays's later execution; Columbia involved property damage, mass arrests, custodial killings, and prosecutions. The more useful comparison identifies how violence was produced and how institutions responded.

Conclusion

Knoxville in 1919 and Columbia in 1946 demonstrate that racial violence cannot be understood as an isolated breakdown of public order without examining segregation, mob threat, policing, and unequal access to legal protection. Knoxville began with an attempted lynching after Maurice Mays was accused of murder; the mob invaded the jail, seized weapons, and helped turn the city into an armed conflict. Columbia began with a store dispute involving James Stephenson and escalated into threatened mob action, armed community defense, a large police operation in Mink Slide, mass arrests, and the killing of William Gordon and James Johnson while in custody. The events also reveal change. By 1946, national civil-rights organizations and lawyers such as Thurgood Marshall were better prepared to challenge mass prosecution and shape the public narrative. Remembering both episodes requires identifying the initial threats, distinguishing allegation from established fact, and recognizing Black self-defense and legal organizing without assuming that every action taken during the conflicts was automatically justified.

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