

Historical Moments of Policing, Violence,  
and Resistance Series  
– Volume 6 –

# Chicago's Red Summer of 1919



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Series Conceived and Published by *Project NIA* ([www.project-nia.org](http://www.project-nia.org)) and *Chicago Prison Industrial Complex (PIC) Teaching Collective* (<http://chicagopiccollective.com>)

## ABOUT THIS SERIES

In the last few months of 2011 into early 2012, the issue of police violence once again burst into the mainstream with the treatment of Occupy protesters.

While we were appalled at the violence directed at peaceful protesters by law enforcement, we were also dismayed that this phenomenon was treated as a novel one. The incidents were discussed in a way that was divorced from historical context. After all, the black and white images of police dogs being unleashed on peaceful protesters during the black freedom movement of the 1950s and 60s would not have been alien to the young people who were abused by law enforcement in New York and Oakland at the Occupy protests. Police violence is unfortunately not new.

In an attempt to inject some historical memory into the current considerations of police violence, Project NIA and the Chicago Prison Industrial Complex (PIC) Teaching Collective decided to develop a series of pamphlets to inform and educate the broader public about the longstanding tradition of oppressive policing toward marginalized populations (including some activists and organizers).

This series titled *"Historical Moments of Policing, Violence & Resistance"* features pamphlets on various topics including: Oscar Grant, the Mississippi Black Papers, Slave Patrols, the Young Lords, the 1968 Democratic Convention, the Danzinger Bridge Shootings, Black Student Protests on College Campuses, Timothy Thomas, Resistance to Police Violence in Harlem, and the 1937 Memorial Day Massacre, among others.

The pamphlets are available for free downloading at <http://policeviolence.wordpress.com>. Please spread the word about the availability of these publications.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## The Violence of Red Summer

The summer of 1919 was a period of horrific racial violence and terror on a national scale. It occurred in the wake of more than 350,000 Black Americans returning from World War I, and working to exercise their rights to full citizenship. In 22 American cities and towns, whites instigated violence against both Black veterans and civilians. According to NAACP records, at least 25 major riots occurred,<sup>1</sup> and more than 70 people were lynched, at least 10 of whom were Black veterans in uniform.<sup>2</sup> Hundreds more people were killed, the majority of whom were Black, and thousands were injured. Tens of thousands more were forced to flee their homes or saw their homes destroyed, and millions had their lives disrupted, finding it difficult to go to work, or even to feel a modicum of safety.

The period was one of collusion between local political power with white gangs and local police forces against African American communities, in cities both North and South of the Mason-Dixon line. Demobilized white military forces also attacked Blacks, both their fellow soldiers and civilians. The coincidence of Red Summer with the Palmer Raids of 1919 had the added effect of intensifying repression of African Americans by federal agents, as paranoia regarding radicalism created connections between leftist movements and civil rights movements where there were none.

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1 McWhirter, Cameron. *Red Summer: The Summer of 1919 and the Awakening of Black America*. Henry Holt and Company, New York, NY. 2011.

2 Ellis, Mark. "J. Edgar Hoover and the 'Red Summer' of 1919." *Journal of American Studies*. Vol 28, No. 1. April 1994 pp. 39-59.

Violence and mob actions orchestrated and carried out by whites took place in cities and towns large and small throughout the nation. In Bisbee Arizona, Black Veterans arrived in town to march in a fourth of July parade. These men, members of the 10th Cavalry regiment, a celebrated all-Black unit known as the Buffalo Soldiers, were attacked by a group of white police, sheriff's deputies, and "deputized" white men, who attempted to disarm the Black soldiers.<sup>3</sup> In Omaha, Nebraska, a riot ended with the vicious lynching of Willie Brown, a 41-year-old Black packing house worker debilitated by arthritis.<sup>4</sup>



*Willie Brown*

In Boston, Massachusetts, white sailors attacked African Americans and burned and looted homes.

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3 McWhirter, p. 91

4 McWhirter, p. 194



*A flier from the period immediately preceding the Elaine, Arkansas massacre of Sharecroppers. Similar articles were printed in media outlets nationwide.*

The violence of Red Summer was widespread and had no geographic boundaries. Both those who went north and those who remained in the south found themselves the targets of brutal repression for attempting to improve or maintain their social and economic status. In one example of this violence, in Macon, Mississippi, a mob that counted a banker, a deputy sheriff, and a city marshal attacked prominent blacks, including a school principal and a merchant.<sup>5</sup> Sharecroppers from the Progressive Farmers and Household Union attempting to sue landowners for their share of the returns on the crop in Phillips County, Arkansas clashed with a sheriff's deputy and a railroad special agent, causing the death of one. In response, Federal troops joined local posses in the killing of 100 to 200 blacks. Only five whites were killed in the massacre.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> McWhirter, p. 73.

## The Promise of Full Citizenship

African American men made substantive gains through World War I military service. Both support and combat units were segregated, yet through NAACP legal challenges and constant vigilance on the ground, Black infantrymen were able to become officers, and a few officer training camps became integrated.<sup>7</sup> Black veterans returned home with a renewed zeal to fight for true democracy and equality for African Americans within American society, a freedom promised then denied in the aftermath of the Civil War.

Carl Sandburg recorded the aspirations and awareness of these men in his book on the violence:

“We made the supreme sacrifice - they didn't need any work or fight law for us; our record, like Old Glory, the flag we love because it stands for our freedom, hasn't got a spot on it; we 'come clean' ; now we want to see our country live up to the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence.”<sup>8</sup>

Sandburg, commissioned to write a series about Chicago's Black community, found that many African Americans moved North for similar reasons.

“Better jobs, the right to vote and have the vote counted at elections, no Jim Crow cars, less race discrim-

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6 Stockley, Grif. *Elaine Massacre of 1919*

<http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?entryID=1102>

7 Bryan, Jami. *Fighting for Respect: African-American Soldiers in WWI*

<http://www.militaryhistoryonline.com/wwi/articles/fightingforrespect.aspx>

8 Sandburg, Carl. 1919. *The Chicago race riots, July 1919*. Harcourt, Brace and Howe, New York, NY. p. 6-7.

ation and a more tolerant attitude on the part of whites, equal rights with white people in education – these are among the attractions that keep up the steady movement of colored people from southern districts to the North.”

Instead, African Americans found great, though not officially codified, intolerance and hatred. For many who had moved to the urban centers of the North, the injustice was felt even more acutely because many had so hoped for better.

“With many who have come north, the attraction of wages and employment is secondary to the feeling that they are going where there are no lynchings. “

Indeed, according to Sandburg, Chicago served as a ‘release valve’, or an escape route from the racial violence of the South, and that following a lynching in the towns and cities of the South, those who had the means would relocate to the northern cities.

A large portion of the racial violence was due to pervasive job discrimination against Black workers in the factories of the era, and labor competition between migrating Black workers and whites, including new immigrants and those who had immigrated a generation or two before. Unionized white workers of all ethnicities engaged in sometimes bloody combat with non-unionized black workers, and Black Workers formed their own self-defense groups, like the Wilson Efficiency League <sup>9</sup> to battle union men. Wildcat strikes followed these skirmishes, and in at least one instance, union and non-union Black workers found themselves in lethal conflict. The overall climate was one of high tension in the labor market – “by late July, over 250,000 workers in Chicago were on strike, about to strike, or locked out”.<sup>10</sup> Rising prices led to con-

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<sup>9</sup> McWhirter p. 119



flict over needed resources, which increased the potential for even more violence.

However, despite these bleak conditions, there were also efforts at interracial labor solidarity and peace during the worst of the violence. In Carl Sandburg's book *The Chicago Riots, July 1919*, he estimates that between 6,000 and 10,000 African American workers belonged to unions, and that the majority of skilled and semi-skilled trades encouraged the integration of unions. Union social events were also integrated. The Stockyards Labor Council was critical of the American Federation of Labor, who upheld and enforced segregation within their ranks. Because of its integrated character, this group was able to avoid conflict during the worst of the violence.

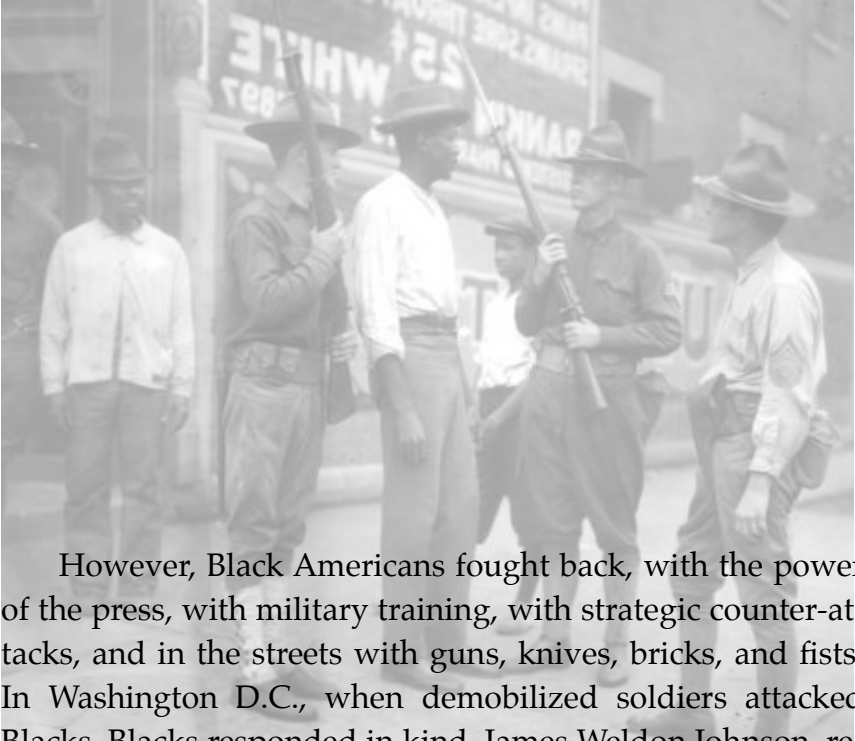
Sandburg notes,

“Thousands of white men and thousands of colored men stood together during the riots, and through the public statements of white and colored officials of the Stockyards Labor Council asked the public to witness that they were shaking hands as 'brothers' and could not be counted on for any share in the mob shouts and ravages. This was the first time in any similar crisis in an American community that a large body of mixed nationalities and races - Poles, Negroes, Lithuanians, Italians, Irish-men, Germans, Slovaks, Russians, Mexicans, Yankees, Englishmen, Scotchmen - proclaimed that they were organized and opposed to violence between white union men and colored union men.”<sup>11</sup>

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10 McWhirter, p. 120

Red Summer, and the era more broadly, were defined by violence initiated by local white power structures, violently enforcing their dominance and the subjugation of African Americans seeking full citizenship.



However, Black Americans fought back, with the power of the press, with military training, with strategic counter-attacks, and in the streets with guns, knives, bricks, and fists. In Washington D.C., when demobilized soldiers attacked Blacks, Blacks responded in kind. James Weldon Johnson, reporting for the *Crisis*, remarked that the black resistance in Washington D.C. prevented the carnage from escalating even further, saving lives and causing less damage. There would be no quiet acquiescence to white brutality, regardless of the source, and no passive acceptance of racist subjugation on any level.

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11 Sandburg, p. 3.

## If We Must Die

Claude McKay, a sleeping car porter and poet from Jamaica, penned these words, angry and saddened, carrying a revolver because he feared for his own safety. He wrote poetry about the condition of Black America while hidden in a locked railroad car bathroom:

*If we must die, let it not be like hogs  
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,  
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,  
Making their mock at our accursèd lot.  
If we must die, O let us nobly die,  
So that our precious blood may not be shed  
In vain; then even the monsters we defy  
Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!  
O kinsmen! we must meet the common foe!  
Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,  
And for their thousand blows deal one death-blow!  
What though before us lies the open grave?  
Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,  
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!<sup>12</sup>*

McKay's poem was a clarion call to Black Americans, and was emblematic of the attitude evinced throughout the community. Self-defense was not abstract philosophy to Blacks in this era, but a concrete and immediate necessity to protect life and property. Black Veterans who fought in segregated units and had seen their brethren die rightly regarded themselves as inheritors of the freedom promised them as United States citizens. These men who fought, and the women who lived and fought side by side with them, had no intention of being victimized in the nation they had fought for, in the nation they called home, where recourse or accountability for the perpetrators was scant if not non-existent.

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<sup>12</sup> McKay, Claude. *If We Must Die*. Retrieved from: <http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15250>

## Chicago's Red Summer

The summer of 1919, like most Chicago summers, was oppressively hot and humid. The city, already tense with heat, and incipient change, found its youth, black and white, seeking respite on the beaches that lined Lake Michigan, officially open to all, but unofficially the site of racial boundary policing by whites, deep-seated racial resentment, and ultimately, a killing that kicked off the deepest, most prolonged, and most devastating wave of Red Summer's violence.

On Sunday, July 27, 1919, five boys, Charles and Lawrence Williams, Paul Williams, John Turner Harris, and Eugene Williams, met up for a trip to Lake Michigan. They boarded a makeshift raft that they stored at the inlet of the 29th St. Beach, and they drifted out into the lake, and towards the white beach. Unbeknownst to the boys, a conflict was breaking out on the beach, in which Black bathers were attempting to exercise their legal right to use the beach, and whites were attacking them with stones and epithets. A man named George Stauber began throwing rocks at the boys on the raft, until one hit Eugene Williams, and not realizing what was happening, his friend John shook him off of his leg and let him drift under the water.<sup>13</sup>



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<sup>13</sup> McWhirter, pp 128-148.

After police recovered the body from the lake, the boys who had been riding the raft identified George Stauber as the rock-thrower. A white policeman on the scene refused to arrest Stauber, and would not allow a black policeman to arrest him, either. Moments later, the same white policeman, Daniel Callahan, arrested a black bystander on the complaint of a white man, which created deeper resentments amongst the crowd. Two hours later, 1,000 Blacks arrived at the beach, demanding that police turn over both Callahan and Stauber. At 6 p.m., James Crawford, a member of the crowd, fired on police, and police returned fire and killed him. A fight broke out, and by its end, four whites were beaten, five stabbed, and one shot. In response, over the course of that dark summer night, white gangs began attacking the 'Black Belt'<sup>14</sup> of Chicago. By Monday morning, 27 blacks had been beaten, 7 stabbed, and 4 shot.



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14 A strip near 47<sup>th</sup> and Wentworth, just east of Washington Park, a park still in existence today, and which still demarcates the boundary line between more affluent Hyde Park and Kenwood, somewhat racially integrated communities, and poor Washington Park, which remains an almost entirely African American community.

The following days saw white gangs attacking Black neighborhoods and Black people walking to and from work. Police arrested Mose Thomas, a black man, for firing on white workers, and were known to treat white gangs more lightly, although selected whites were sometimes arrested by police when caught participating in anti-black violence. Snipers in the 'Black Belt' took aim at police officers and white rioters alike, and a rumor claiming that a white sniper had killed a black boy led to a clash with police that resulted in the shooting deaths of three men by police – Joseph Sanford, Hymes Taylor, and John Walter Humphrey. Gangs of white teenagers terrorized black people in their homes.

Roi Ottley, a black journalist, recalled the story of a black Army veteran who spent 5 and a half hours running from whites attempting to attack him, crying out, 'There's a n----r! Let's get him!' Ottley was so enraged at this treatment of his fellow blacks that when he saw a white man heading to work that morning, he remarked, "My first impulse was to jump on him and beat him up". A transit strike in the midst of the violence exacerbated the crisis, filling the streets with thousands of people walking to work. Thousands more just decided to stay home to avoid violence altogether.

## The Hamburg Social Club, Ragen's Colts and the Stockyards

In Chicago, the violence of Red Summer was the most deadly, the most destructive, the most pervasive, and the most prolonged. Battles in the streets lasted for 13 days, leaving 38 dead, 23 Black, and 15 white.

One of the critical factors that made this level of violence possible was the organization of white street gangs and the Social and Athletic Clubs, such as the Hamburg Social Club and the Ragen's Colts. The Hamburg Social Club, which counted then Alderman Joseph McDonough and his mentee, the future Mayor Richard J. Daley among their ranks, played a pivotal role in the violence. One of the first actions Ragen's Colts took after the drowning of Eugene Williams was to wait for Black meatpackers to leave the stockyards and then assault them with bricks, bats and stones, killing a few men and wounding more.

A corps of the Ragen's Colts formed the professional football team the Chicago Cardinals, today the Arizona Cardinals. Frank Ragen, the founder and president of Ragen's Colts, would later become Chicago's police commissioner.<sup>15</sup> No one who became a higher level official was ever directly implicated in the violence, but the presence of future officials in these organizations belies the role that the city's nascent power structure played in Chicago's Red Summer. Though violence was far from confined to these organizations, these groups often led or consciously provoked the assaults on the Black community, largely confined at the time to Chicago's 'Black Belt.'

The acts of the Athletic Clubs included efforts to provoke other, relatively uninvolved whites to violence against Blacks. In one instance, Colts donned blackface and set fire to Lithuanian and

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15 Hagedorn, John. *Riot Begins*. Retrieved from: Gang Research.Net  
<http://gangresearch.net/ChicagoGangs/earlygangs/Riotbegins.html>

Polish homes in the Back of the Yards neighborhood in a deliberate attempt to incite the immigrant community to join them in committing heinous acts against African Americans.<sup>16</sup> These new immigrant groups did not perceive themselves as 'white', in the same way that the Irish or other more established immigrant groups were, and thus, did not see the conflict as involving them. The Colts attempted to draw the immigrant communities into the violence they were perpetrating by whatever means available to them. Information on their success rate, however, is unavailable.



The Colts and other political clubs were instrumental in much of the violence, according to the testimony of one youth to the Commission on Human Relations, when a group of whites began arguing with a black man on Halsted Street, they were overhead to say,

"Remember it's the Ragen Colts you're dealing with. We have two thousand members between Halsted and Cottage Grove, and Forty-third and Sixty-third streets. We intend to run this district. Look out."<sup>17</sup>

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16 Roediger, David R. *Racism, Ethnicity and White Identity*. Retrieved from: <http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/1033.html>

17 Landesco, John. *Organized Crime in Chicago, 1929*. University of Chicago Press. Chicago. P. 171. Retrieved from: <http://www.uic.edu/orgs/kbc/ganghistory/Industrial%20Era/Ragen.html>



When these gang members were arrested, they were quickly released by the police, and when a large groups of 200 Ragen's Colts descended upon Black homes at 51<sup>st</sup> and Shields, 10 mounted police arrived and left quickly thereafter.<sup>18</sup>

The Social Clubs participated in stirring up racial antagonism between South Side white ethnics and African Americans, colluding with white gangs, and perpetrating violence themselves. The Chicago Commission on Human Relations declared that the violence "would not have gone beyond the first clash" if not for the Social Clubs. Leadership within the Hamburg Social Club, specifically then- Alderman Joseph McDonough, incited both club members and white South Side residents to "take up arms" against the Black community, whom he claimed were stockpiling weapons for a race war.



This assertion was repeated in the *Herald-Examiner*, which published a story on July 28 entitled "Negroes Have Arms", claiming that blacks were stockpiling weaponry in preparation for a full-scale assault on white neighborhoods. McDonough repeated his assertions that white 'self-defense' was necessary to the Chicago police Chief, John T. Garrity. McDonough claimed that he heard police precinct captains stating the same thing.

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18 Tuttle, William Jr. *Race Riot: Chicago in the Red Summer of 1919* 1970/1996 Urbana. Illini Press. P. 54-55

It was true that Black Veterans and others were defending themselves, sometimes with arms, as a matter of necessity. 'Flying Squadrons', or trucks full of armed whites that would drive through both white and black neighborhoods and shoot at pass-

ers-by, were a particular target for Black armed self-defense. In Harry Haywood's autobiography, *Black Bolshevik*, he describes the self-defense of the Black Community in Chicago, whether veterans or civilians, to the onslaught of white violence.



Harry Haywood

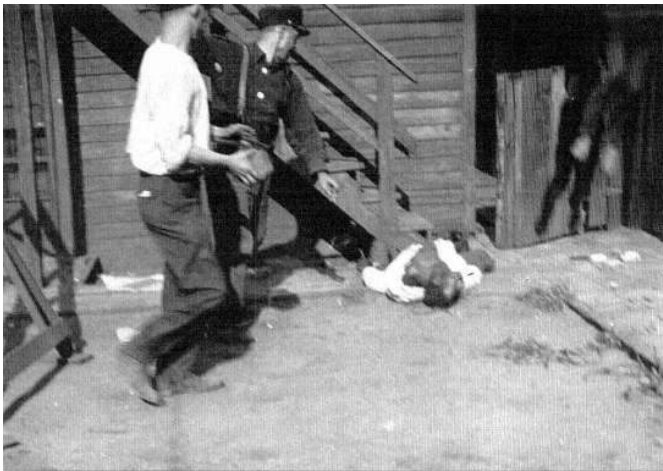
Haywood, a World War I veteran and later a commander in the Abraham Lincoln brigade that fought against Franco's forces in Spain, wrote,

“The Black veterans set up their ambush at Thirty-fifth and State, waiting in a car with the engine running. When the whites on the truck came through, they pulled in behind and opened up with a machine gun. The truck crashed into a telephone pole at Thirty-ninth Street; most of the men in the truck had been shot down and the others fled. Among them were several Chicago police officers — “off duty,” of course!”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Haywood, Harry. *Black Bolshevik*. Retrieved from: <http://gangresearch.net/ChicagoGangs/earlygangs/haywood.html>

White mobs rampaged relatively unchecked for three days. On July 30, the Republican mayor of the city, Bill Thompson, requested the intervention of the state militia, and temporarily closed the headquarters of Ragen's Colts. 6,200 militiamen were deployed to end the violence, which officially ended on August 2<sup>nd</sup>, but sputtered for another week before finally truly coming to a halt. None of the members of the Ragen's Colts, or any other whites, were arrested for their role in the violence. Chicago's Police Chief admitted only that police had been "grossly unfair" in their arrests, apprehending double the number of Black men as they did white, and releasing those white men that they did apprehend, even those who were known to be members of the Athletic Clubs.<sup>20</sup>



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<sup>20</sup> Hagedorn, John. *Riot Begins* . Retrieved from:  
<http://www.uic.edu/orgs/kbc/ganghistory/Industrial%20Era/Riotbegins.html>

## Red Summer, The Palmer Raids, and J. Edgar Hoover

The repression directed at African Americans was not limited to mobs involving local police forces. In the wake of the bombing of the home of A. Mitchell Palmer by anarchists, suspicion of African American efforts at self-determination and violence against African Americans was also carried out by at the federal level by the FBI. J. Edgar Hoover, then cutting his teeth as an anti-communist crusader within the FBI, was convinced that Black self-defense was not merely a product of necessity and burgeoning pride, but emblematic of the proselytizing Hoover believed radical groups were undertaking among American Blacks.

This line became the official position of the government on November 17, with the submission of Palmer's 187-page report to the Senate Judiciary Committee.<sup>21</sup> The promotion of self-defense as an ethos and an act of necessity by African Americans was taken as evidence of Communist infiltration. The *New York Times* pointed to W.E.B. Du Bois's writing in *The Crisis* as evidence of Bolshevism among Black Americans when he said, "Today we raise the terrible weapon of self-defense... When the armed lynchers gather, we too must gather armed."

In Washington D.C., Hoover's assistant and Federal agents accompanied police patrols, who stopped all vehicles with Blacks inside, beating up any who were armed, and arresting large numbers of Blacks, but no whites. In one instance, police beat a detained man unconscious in front of NAACP observers.<sup>22</sup> Again, in Chicago, Hoover and the FBI were present during the violence, contending that the unrest was a result of anarchism and bolshevism. Despite the lack of evidence that radicals were behind Black resistance, Hoover continued to push this line in justifying his repression and surveillance of both movements.

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<sup>21</sup> McWhirter, 239.

<sup>22</sup> Ellis, p. 43.

## The Legacy of Chicago's Red Summer

Though organizations such as the Hamburg Social Club and Ragen's Colts that incited and perpetrated the majority of the violence are now defunct, the power they built remains a strong force in Chicago politics to this day. Washington Park, the dividing line between what were once all-white neighborhoods and the Black Belt, is today the dividing line between the glittering high-rises of the University of Chicago community of Hyde Park and the economically depressed and relatively socially isolated Black community of Washington Park nearby. At no time in Chicago's history has official segregation been in place. However, in 1959, the U.S. Civil Rights Commission declared Chicago the most residentially segregated city in the nation.<sup>23</sup> In 2012, the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research found Chicago still retains this shameful designation.<sup>24</sup>

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23 Stillmaker, Sean. October 31, 2010. "Chicago Still the Most Segregated U.S. City." *The Chicagoist*. Retrieved from: [http://chicagoist.com/2010/10/31/chicago\\_still\\_the\\_most\\_segregated\\_c.php](http://chicagoist.com/2010/10/31/chicago_still_the_most_segregated_c.php)

24 Glaeser, Edward and Vigdor, Jacob. *The End of the Segregated Century: Racial Separation in America's Neighborhoods, 1890-2010*

## Questions to Consider:

1. What factors led to violence against African Americans becoming so pervasive in this time period?
2. Why do you think the Federal government was so invested in the idea of African American resistance and leftist movements being inherently connected?
3. What was the role of violence in creating and buttressing power structures that lasted beyond Red Summer?
4. What were the multiple roles that African Americans played during this period, culturally, politically, and economically? How do you think this period may have informed the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s?
5. What impact do you think this sort of violence has on our lives today?

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