

Tulsa Commemorates Centenary of 1921 Race Massacre

Millions more becoming aware of the horrendous legacy of African American oppression in the United States

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May 31-June 1 represents the 100th anniversary of the attack by white mobs against an entire African American community in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

This somber centenary is being marked with numerous press reports and television segments about a racist massacre which has been largely hidden since the 1920s.

Previously coined as the “Tulsa Riot”, was in actuality a full-scale assault on the rights of African Americans to live in peace and stability in the United States. During the course of a two-day rampage by gangs of armed white men accompanied by the police and National Guard, it is estimated that 300 African Americans were killed.

In addition to the murders, hundreds of families had their homes, churches, fraternal organizations and small businesses destroyed. The belongings of the victims were stolen by the white mobs and authorities while several hundreds Black people were unlawfully detained for several days in the aftermath of the massacre.

The Greenwood Business District in Tulsa was largely owned and operated by African Americans. The educator and founder of Tuskegee Institute, Booker T. Washington, had labelled Greenwood Street and adjacent areas in Tulsa as “Black Wall Street” due to the proliferation of African American owned businesses. Washington in the late 19th and early 20th centuries was a proponent of Black business development as a means to overcome national oppression.

Of course, Washington’s views were challenged on a political and ideological level by African American leaders such as Dr. W.E.B. DuBois, Monroe Trotter, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, among others. Nonetheless, the targeting of an entire community based on false allegations of an assault against a Caucasian woman in a department store elevator, prompted shock and outrage within the Black community during the early 1920s.



Tulsa African American church burned in race massacre of 1921 (Source: Abayomi Azikiwe)

The Tulsa massacre occurred within an historical context where lynching, false imprisonment and capital punishment were directed towards containing the African American people. Any efforts aimed at creating a semi-independent existence away from the total domination by the racist system were often attacked through mob violence.

Although “separate but equal” and Jim Crow were enshrined within the legal framework of the U.S. by the close of the 19th century, Blacks were not allowed to build any institutions which would threaten the total domination of the nationally oppressive system of racism and super-exploitation.

Tulsa Finally Recognizes Race Massacre

Within Tulsa and surrounding areas, the centenary is being promoted even within the corporate media. There are reports that President Joe Biden will visit Tulsa in order to participate in the events surrounding the commemoration.

An [article reprinted in USA Today](#) from the Oklahoman newspaper says of the anniversary events that:

“President Joe Biden will visit Tulsa on June 1 to mark the centennial of the Tulsa Race Massacre, according to the White House. Biden’s visit will cap off a long weekend full of events, speakers and concerts to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the tragedy that marks one of the lowest points in Oklahoma history. Last week, voting rights activist and Georgia politician Stacey Abrams was announced as the keynote speaker at the ‘Remember & Rise’ Tulsa Race Massacre Centennial commemoration event.”

This presence by the president of the U.S. represents a departure from the official denial that the incident never took place within Oklahoman history. The events of 1921 were not recognized by the educational institutions in the state and therefore were never taught for many decades in schools or universities.

There have also been other attempts to minimize and trivialize the magnitude of the

massacre and the destruction of property. Reports of the use of airplanes to drop incendiary devices on homes, churches and businesses were denied officially up until recently.

Two Known Survivors Speak on the Events of 1921

The broader knowledge and understanding of the race massacre in Tulsa during May-June 1921 has provided a platform for survivors to discuss their recollections of events. One survivor, who is said to be the oldest at 107, Ms. Viola Fletcher, testified before a panel in the U.S. Congress during May.

Fletcher said that she was seven years old at the time of the massacre. She noted that the memories are still quite vivid. She said that this had been her first time visiting the capital of the U.S. and that justice for the victims and their descendants was imperative.

A [quote from Fletcher in her speech](#) before Congress said:

"I will never forget the violence of the white mob when we left our home. I still see Black men being shot, Black bodies lying in the street. I still smell smoke and see fire. I still see Black businesses being burned. I still hear airplanes flying overhead. I hear the screams. I have lived through the massacre every day."

Archaeologists and forensic scientists have been examining an area in Tulsa where mass burials of victims took place. Over the last year more information on the location and the examination of the burial site has been published in various press agencies.

The existence of mass graves has been denied as well by Oklahoman authorities. Fortunately, the oral history of the survivors provided a guide to finding the location of the massacre victims.

During her testimony before Congress, Fletcher also emphasized:

"Our country may forget this history, but I cannot. I will not and other survivors do not, and our descendants do not. When my family was forced to leave Tulsa, I lost my chance of an education. I never finished school past the fourth grade. I have never made much money. My country, state and city took a lot from me. Despite this, I spent time supporting the war effort in the shipyards of California. But most of my life, I was a domestic worker serving white families. I never made much money. To this day, I can barely afford my everyday needs. All the while the city of Tulsa has unjustly used the names and stories of victims like me to enrich itself and its white allies through the \$30m raised by the Tulsa Centennial Commission while I continue to live in poverty."

Another survivor, Lessie Evelyn Benningfield Randle, 106, spoke to Congress noting:

"It means a lot to me to finally be able to look at you all in the eye and ask you to do the right thing. I have waited so long for justice."

The survivors were given a standing ovation by members of Congress present in the room. Yet the demand for reparations over the last two decades has not been met by the State of Oklahoma or the U.S. government which today is profiting from the broad interest in the massacre of a century ago.



Tulsa African Americans taken into custody after their community was destroyed in 1921
(Source: Abayomi Azikiwe)

Oklahoma Governor Removed from Tulsa Centennial Commission

There is a struggle unfolding again within the U.S. over how to teach or ignore the legacies of racism and national oppression. Several states such as Oklahoma have passed legislation banning what they describe as “critical race theory” from being taught in K-12 educational institutions. Other states such as Louisiana and Georgia are developing legislation in order to ban the teaching of the actual history and social development of the U.S.

This is not a new development since the advent of African American, Black and Pan-African Studies in K-12 and higher education resulted from a political struggle waged by people since at least the 1960s. The notion of “critical race theory” can be defined by the capitalist class and right-wing politicians as anything they deemed to be undesirable. Documented scholarship on the origins, character and social impact of African enslavement along with racist violence, such as the Tulsa massacre, could be prohibited from discussion in these states.

When Oklahoma Governor Kevin Stitt, a ceremonial member of the Tulsa Centennial Commission, signed into law the bill that outlaws the teaching of social studies which does not glorify white supremacist mythology about the U.S., other members of the body voted to have him removed. The ultimate logic of these laws would in essence prohibit an honest evaluation of the events of 1921 in Tulsa.

The history of African and other oppressed peoples in the U.S. has been one of exploitation and state-sanctioned violence designed to suppress the struggle for equality, self-determination and liberation. Although the Tulsa race massacre been exposed for the world to see, the ultimate objective is to remove the system that continues to oppress and exploit the people of color communities in the U.S.

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Featured image: Tulsa fires burn during race massacre of May-June 1921 (Source: Abayomi Azikiwe)

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