What caused the Chicago Race Riots of 1919?

Do Now: Answer the following questions in response to the short trailer for the movie *Up South*. (located on the class website – if you don’t have internet access at home, visit the school library)

1. Why did many African Americans leave the South and move North?
2. What was it like in the North for African Americans?
3. Why did racial tensions rise right after WWI?

Today we’re going to look more closely as the Chicago Race Riots of 1919?

**Activity 1 ➔ Analysis of Documents A and B**

*Read documents A and B and fill in the chart below.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Similarities</th>
<th>Differences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Which account do you trust more – the textbook or the history book (secondary source)? Explain your answer below.

**Document A: Textbook**

In the summer of 1919, over 20 race riots broke out across the nation. The worst violence occurred in Chicago. On a hot July day, African Americans went to a whites-only beach. Both sides began throwing stones at each other. Whites also threw stones at an African American teenager swimming near the beach to prevent him from coming ashore, and he drowned. A full-scale riot then erupted in the city. Angry African Americans attacked white neighborhoods while whites attacked African American neighborhoods. The riots lasted for several days. In the end, 38 people died—15 white and 23 black—and over 500 were injured.

The most serious racial outbreak occurred in Chicago late in July of the so-called Red Summer. The riot that began on July 27 had its immediate origin in a fight at Lake Michigan beach. A young Negro swimming offshore had drifted into water that was customarily used by whites. White swimmers commanded him to return to his part of the beach, and some threw stones at him. When the young man drowned, the Negroes declared that he had been murdered. Rumors spread among blacks and whites. Mobs sprang up in various parts of the city. In the next afternoon, white bystanders bothered some blacks who were returning from work. Some were pulled off streetcars and whipped. On the Negro South Side a group of young Negroes stabbed an old Italian peddler to death, and a white laundry operator was also stabbed to death. When authorities counted the casualties, 38 people had been killed, including 15 whites and 23 blacks. Of the 537 people injured, 342 were black. More than 1,000 families, mostly Negroes, were homeless due to the burnings and destruction of property.


**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

- Do you believe that one boy’s death could start a massive riot? Why or why not?
- What other conditions were probably in place that created a climate for a riot?
Activity 2 → Analysis of Documents C, D, and E

Read documents C, D, and E and fill in the chart below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Document</th>
<th>Date/Author</th>
<th>According to this document, what caused the Chicago Race Riots of 1919?</th>
<th>Provide evidence from the document that supports these reasons.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Document C</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Document D</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Document E</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Document C

Since 1915 the colored population of Chicago has more than doubled, increasing in four years from a little over 50,000 to what is now estimated to be between 125,000 and 150,000. Most blacks lived in the area called the “Black Belt.” Already overcrowded, this so called “Black Belt” could not possibly hold the doubled colored population. One cannot put ten gallons of water in a five-gallon pail.

Whites who are afraid that blacks will move out of the “Black Belt” and into “white” neighborhoods have formed the “Property Owners' Association” to keep blacks out of white neighborhoods. They discuss ways to keep Negroes in “their part of town.” In a number of cases during the period from January 1918 to August 1919, there were bombings of colored homes and houses occupied by Negroes outside of the “Black Belt.” During this period no less than twenty bombings took place, yet only two persons have been arrested and neither of the two has been convicted.

Source: The document above was published in an African-American newspaper in 1919. Its author was a leader of the NAACP, an organization devoted to protecting African American rights.
Race Riots and Their Remedy

By W. S. Scarborough, D.D.

President of Wilberforce University

There is but one remedy for race riots, and that is, the determination of every man—black and white—to accord to every man, his civil and political rights. This is the only solution of the vexed question of race prejudice, which is at the root of all the race troubles in all sections of our country.

Riots at all times are to be deplored and rioters themselves punished: and nothing I say in this article must be construed as an apology for lawlessness or crime.

The negro is the unfortunate victim in all these outbreaks—unfortunate because of his color, and unfortunate because the odds are against him, and because few people, nowadays, seem to think that he has rights that other men are bound to respect. This is the situation as we face it today.

The spirit of the negro who went across the seas—who was in action, and who went “over the top”—is by no means the spirit of the negro before the war. He is altogether a new man, with new ideas, new hopes, new aspirations and new desires. It will not quietly submit to former conditions without a vigorous protest, and we should not ask him to do so. It is a new negro that we have with us now, and may we not hope also that we have new white men? The war has revolutionized the entire world; it has changed our mode of thinking and our mode of action. New peoples with new thoughts must come to the front now.

When that horde of crude, unlettered and unclouded negroes was brought from the South—drafted against their will—disenfranchised and repressed—when they were thrust into the excitement to be converted into soldiers, little did the War Department think that it was creating a new race problem that would have to be dealt with later. This act transformed those men into new creatures—citizens of another type—that which they could not get in times of peace, came to them in times of war. I verily believe that it was providential. Many of these returning soldiers will not go South, but those who do will demand a change in the treatment of their race.

It was rather unfortunate that the greatest of all wars—the World War—should have found the South in the saddle. It was an opportunity for that section and it made the most of it, so far as the black man is concerned.

The policy of the Administration has been against the black man. The avowed purpose of the Federal authorities, from the beginning of the war until its close, was to make the negro feel that he is a negro and must occupy a negro’s place. This spirit was taken by the white men in uniform across the seas, where every effort was used to have the Allied people understand that the negro had no standing on this side of the Atlantic.

If the negro had not been sent to camp—if he had not been trained in commissary work and in the army; if he had not gone across the seas, and if he had not gone “over the top,” and made good; and if he had not expected better treatment on his return to his native land at the hands of those who drafted him and sent him to the trenches, I am sure that he would not be so exasperated over the situation.

He feels the injustice keenly. The negro officers and men now returning have one story to tell, and they tell it with bitterness and in tears. Yet there is no redress, there is nothing that the negro can do, but wait. He does not—he must not take the law into his own hands. That is anarchy and leads to riots and lawlessness. The higher and better classes of colored people, like the higher and better classes of white people, are not in sympathy with mob law or anything that is destructive of good government.

The war is now over, the negro soldier has returned. Note his treatment on the railroads, all of which are under Government control. Many of these men in going to their homes with laurels of victory won in their country’s defense are not permitted to ride in other than the Jim-crow cars. Many of them have been assaulted and thrown off the cars by Government officials—not withstanding their record across seas—simply because of their color. Many of them have not only suffered in this way, but have met death, because they sought better treatment. This is a terrible chapter in our American life, and only the negro’s love for good government prevents serious trouble.

The negro is law-abiding and only occasionally shows a revolutionary spirit. Will not the American white people cease halfway—put aside their prejudices and play fair with this people that has done so much to help win this war? Negroes are not rioters, but can be made so. It is a heavy burden they carry. They ask no favors, but simply a man’s chance in the race of life, and an opportunity to develop the powers that God has given them.

 Xenia, Ohio
The article above was published on August 16, 1919 in The Independent, a New York magazine. The author is writing about black soldiers who served in World War One in Europe. More than 350,000 African Americans served in World War One, which ended in 1919. W.S. Scarborough (1852-1926), was an African American author, educator, and lecturer. He was born a slave but eventually became a professor of Latin and Greek, and later president, at Wilberforce University. He wrote frequently about civil rights issues.

Document E (MODIFIED)

Many people in Chicago worked at meat-packing factories, where they prepared meat to be shipped around the country. These factories were also called “stockyards.

PACKERS’ FORCE CUT BY 15,000; NO COLOR LINE
Report of Discrimination Brings Tribute To Negroes.

Outsiders who are thinking of coming to Chicago to take a “job at the yards” will not find the “welcome” sign out awaiting them.

It became known yesterday that since the end of the Great War the force of workers has dropped by nearly 15,000. This is due both to a big drop in war orders. . . .

Another problem is that the factories promised to return every employee who enlisted in the armed forces to “as good or better” a job than he held when he put on a uniform. [White] men are now returning in increasingly large numbers and none are being turned away.

“No discrimination is being shown in the reducing of our forces,” said an official of one of the packing companies, in discussing reports that southern colored men, who were hired during the war job shortage, were being fired. “It is a case of survival of the fittest, the best man staying on the job. It is a fact that the southern Negro cannot compete with the northerner.”

Source: The article above is from the Chicago Tribune, the main newspaper in Chicago, April 12, 1919.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

According to the documents, what caused the Chicago Race Riots of 1919?

Do you think one of these causes (i.e., housing, jobs, or New Negro) led to the violence more than the other causes? Why?

Why do you think there were 20 riots across the nation that summer?

Do you think the Chicago Race Riots would have happened even if that boy didn’t get killed in Lake Michigan? Why or why not?