

Native Son

PRODUCTION RESOURCE PACKET

Antaeus Theatre
spring 2018

by Nambi E. Kelley
from the novel by Richard Wright

director: Andi Chapman
dramaturg: Dylan Southard

Table of Contents

- Richard Wright
 - childhood
 - Jim Crow & The Red Summer of 1919
 - moving north
 - affiliations with the Communist Party
 - literary career
 - “How Bigger Was Born”
- The Great Migration
 - Chicago riots
 - Bronzeville
 - The Great Depression
 - images
- Communism
 - The Russian Revolution
 - The Red Scare
- additional historical influences
 - Leopold & Loeb
 - Robert Nixon
- the concept of “double consciousness”
- timeline
- other *Native Son* adaptations
- odds & ends
- additional links

Richard Wright

[Timeline of Wright's Life](#)

Richard Nathaniel Wright was born on September 4, 1908, near Natchez, Mississippi. He was the son of Nathan Wright and Ella Wilson. His parents were born free after the Civil War; both sets of his grandparents had been born into slavery and freed as a result of the war.

Wright was largely raised by his mother after his father left the family when Wright was five years old. In the summer of 1916 Ella moved with Richard and his younger brother to live with her sister Maggie and her husband Silas Hoskins in Elaine, Arkansas. Hoskins had achieved substantial business success as the owner of a saloon and several rental houses serving the needs of black people working in Elaine's prosperous lumber mills. Wright got along well with his new uncle and came to see him as a father figure.

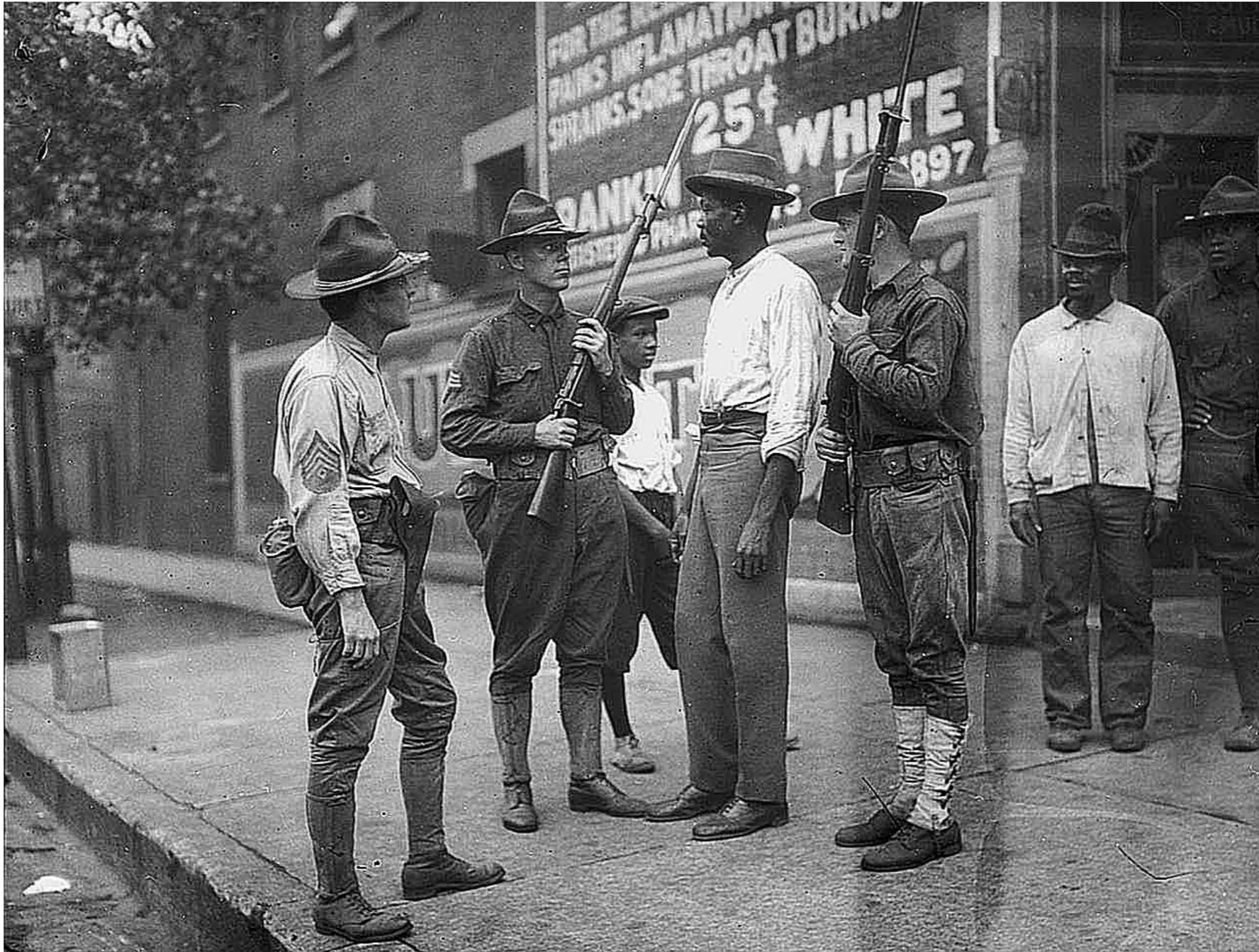
All of this ended tragically when Silas was murdered by whites jealous of his prosperity. Wright's family had to leave in the middle of the night, fearing for their lives because the men who had murdered Silas also bragged they would kill the rest of his family.

"The birth of Bigger Thomas goes back to my childhood, but there was not just one Bigger, but many of them, more than I could account and more than you suspect... The Bigger Thomases were the only Negroes I know who consistently violated the Jim Crow laws of the South and got away with it, at least for a sweet brief spell. Eventually, the whites who restricted their lives made them pay a terrible price. They were shot, hanged, maimed, lynched, and generally hounded until they were either dead or their spirits broken."

-Richard Wright, "How Bigger Was Born"



"In Dixie there are two worlds, the white world and the black world, and they are physically separated. There are white schools and black schools, white churches and black churches, white businesses and black businesses, white graveyards and black graveyards, and, for all I know, a white God and a black God...."



In 1919, Ella Wright was left paralyzed by a stroke, and the family settled in Jackson, Mississippi to live with Wright's maternal grandparents, who were restrictive Seventh-day Adventists. Wright moved from school to school, graduating from the ninth grade at the Smith Robertson Junior High School in Jackson as the class valedictorian in June 1925. Wright had published his first short story, "The Voodoo of Hell's Half-Acre," in three parts in the *Southern Register* in 1924, but no copies survive. His staunchly religious and illiterate grandmother, Margaret Bolden Wilson, kept books out of the house and thought fiction was the work of the devil. Wright kept any aspirations he had to be a writer to himself after his first experience with publication.



The year that Wright moved to Jackson, MS, 1919, was also the year of the “**Red Summer**”, during which approximately 25 race riots occurred throughout the country. One such riot broke out in Wright’s former home of Elaine, AR, arising from white minority resistance to labor organizing by black farmers. In a confrontation, a white man was fatally shot and another wounded. The planters formed a militia to arrest the black farmers, but the mob got out of hand and attacked black people at random. In the riot, they killed an estimated 237 black people, and five whites also died in the violence. Arkansas Governor Charles Hillman Brough appointed a committee composed of prominent local white businessmen to investigate. They concluded that the Sharecroppers' Union was a Socialist enterprise and "established for the purpose of banding negroes together for the killing of white people.”

Wright attended Lanier High School in Jackson but dropped out after a few weeks to work; he took a series of odd jobs to save enough money to leave for Memphis, which he did at age seventeen. While in Memphis he worked as a dishwasher and delivery boy and for an optical company. He began to read contemporary American literature as well as commentary by H. L. Mencken, which struck him with particular force. Determined to leave the South before he would irretrievably overstep the bounds of Jim Crow restrictions on blacks, Wright took the train to Chicago in December 1927.

"It was not until I went to live in Chicago That I first thought seriously of writing of Bigger Thomas...My contact with the labor movement and its ideology made me see Bigger clearly and feel what he meant...Then there was the fabulous city in which Bigger lived, an indescribable city, huge, roaring, dirty, noisy, raw, stark, brutal; a city of extremes: torrid summers and sub-zero winters, white people and black people, the English language and strange tongues, foreign born and native born, scabby poverty and gaudy luxury, high idealism and hard cynicism! A city so young that, in thinking of its short history, one's mind, as it travels backward in time, is stopped abruptly by the barren stretches of wind-swept prairie! But a city old enough to have caught within the homes of its long, straight streets the symbols and images of man's age-old destiny, of truths as old as the mountains and seas, of dramas as abiding as the soul of man itself! A city which has become the pivot of the Eastern, Western, Northern, and Southern poles of the nation. But a city whose black smoke clouds shut out the sunshine for seven months of the year; a city in which, on a fine balmy May morning, one can sniff the stench of the stockyards; a city where people had grown so used to gangs and murders and graft that they have honestly forgotten that government can have a pretense of decency!"

Wright secured employment as a United States postal clerk but lost it once the Great Depression hit. He was forced to go on relief in 1931 and it was through a social worker that he was encouraged to begin attending meetings of the John Reed Club, an American federation of local organizations targeted towards Marxist writers, artists, and intellectuals and an offshoot of the Communist Party.

[read Richard Wright's "I Tried To Be a Communist" *The Atlantic*, 1944](#)



"It was not the economics of Communism, nor the great power of trade unions, nor the excitement of underground politics that claimed me; my attention was caught by the similarity of the experiences of workers in other lands, by the possibility of uniting scattered but kindred peoples into a whole. It seemed to me that here at last, in the realm of revolutionary expression, Negro experience could find a home, a functioning value and role. Out of the magazines I read came a passionate call for the experiences of the disinherited...It said: 'If you possess enough courage to speak out what you are, you will find that you are not alone.' It urged life to believe in life."

In the 1930s, Wright ardently belonged to the considerable segment of Great Depression activists that gravitated precipitously toward a romanticized image of the Soviet Union and an estimation of the U.S. Communist movement as the advance guard of humanity. Such an outlook then seemed warranted by the remarkable events of the 1917 upheaval in Russia, along with the ideals and brilliant writings of its Bolshevik leaders. Wright and others witnessed at first hand the unmatched heroism and self-sacrifice of U.S. Communists who positioned anti-racism at the top of the political agenda and organized the industrial working class.

Wright formally joined the Communist Party in late 1933 and was hired to supervise a youth club organized to counter juvenile delinquency among African-Americans on the South Side

"I found my work in the South Side Boys' Club deeply engrossing. Each day black boys between the ages of eight and twenty-five came to swim, draw, and read. They were a wild and homeless lot, culturally lost, spiritually disinherited, candidates for the clinics, morgues, prisons, reformatories, and the electric chair of the state's death house. For hours I listened to their talk...Their figures of speech were as forceful and colorful as any ever use by English-speaking people. I kept pencil and paper in my pocket to jot down their word-rhythms and reactions. These boys did not fear people to the extent that every man looked like a spy. The Communists who doubted my motives did not know these boys, their twisted dreams, their all to clear destinies; and I doubted if I should ever be able to convey to them the tragedy I saw here."

Although he was convinced that the political philosophy of Communism was correct, he did not see a book as a political weapon. He thought that the creative genius of a writer should be freed from all restrictions and restraints, especially those of a political nature, and that the writer should write as he pleased. Wright insisted that young communist writers be given space to cultivate their talents. These factors would eventually lead to a public falling out with the party and leading members.

In 1937, Wright moved to New York, where he worked on the Federal Writers' Project guidebook to the city, *New York Panorama* (1938), and wrote the book's essay on Harlem. Wright became the Harlem editor of the *Daily Worker*, a Communist newspaper. Through the summer and fall he wrote more than 200 articles for the *Daily Worker* and helped edit a short-lived literary magazine *New Challenge*. The year was also a landmark for Wright because he met and developed a friendship with the writer Ralph Ellison that would last for years.

Wright's literary career was launched when his short story collection, *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938), won first prize for the *Story* magazine contest open to Federal Writer's Project authors for best book-length manuscript. Harper's published this collection with "Fire and Cloud," "Long Black Song," "Down by the Riverside," and "Big Boy Leaves Home"; in 1940 the story "Bright and Morning Star" was added, and the book was reissued. The publication and favorable reception of *Uncle Tom's Children* improved Wright's status with the Communist party and enabled him to establish a reasonable degree of financial stability. By May 1938, excellent sales had provided Wright with enough money to move to Harlem, where he began writing the novel *Native Son*,

Published in 1940, the book sold 215,000 copies in its first three weeks of publication. *Native Son* made Wright the most respected and wealthiest black writer in America; he was awarded the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's prestigious Spingarn Medal in 1941

He became a galvanizing figure in the movement now referred to as the third wave (1930s-40s) of the "Chicago Renaissance" — Nelson Algren, William Attaway, Gwendolyn Brooks. His principal affinity was with realists, naturalists and select high modernists.



more from “How Bigger Was Born”

...let me start with the first Bigger, whom I shall call Bigger No. 1. When I was bareheaded, barefoot kid in Jackson, Mississippi, there was a boy who terrorized me and all of the boys I played with. If we were playing games, he would saunter up and snatch from us our balls, bats, spinning tops, and marbles. We would stand around pouting, sniffing, trying to keep back our tears, begging for our playthings. But Bigger would refuse. We never demanded that he give them back; we were afraid, and Bigger was bad....We never recovered our toys unless we flattered him and made him feel that he was superior to us. Then, perhaps, if he felt like it, he condescended, threw them at us and then gave each of us a swift kick in the bargain, just to make us feel his utter contempt. That was the way Bigger No. 1 lived. His life was a continuous challenge to others.

...the hardness of this Bigger No.2 was not directed toward me or the other Negroes, but toward the whites who ruled the South. He bought clothes and food on credit and would not pay for them. He lived in the dingy shacks of the white landlords and refused to pay rent....When we asked him why he acted as he did, he would tell us...that the white folks had everything and he had nothing. Further, he would tell us that we were fools no to get what we wanted while we were alive in this world.

But why did Bigger revolt?...there were always two factors psychologically dominant in his personality. First,...he had become estranged from the religion and the folk culture of his race. Second, he was trying to react to and answer the call of the dominant civilization whose glitter came to him through the newspapers, magazines, radios, movies, and the mere imposing sight and sound of daily American life.

I don't mean to say that I think that environment *makes* consciousness ...but I do say that I felt and still feel that the environment supplies the instrumentalities through which the organism expresses itself, and that if that environment is warped or tranquil, the mode and manner of behavior will be affected toward deadlocking tensions or orderly fulfillment and satisfaction.

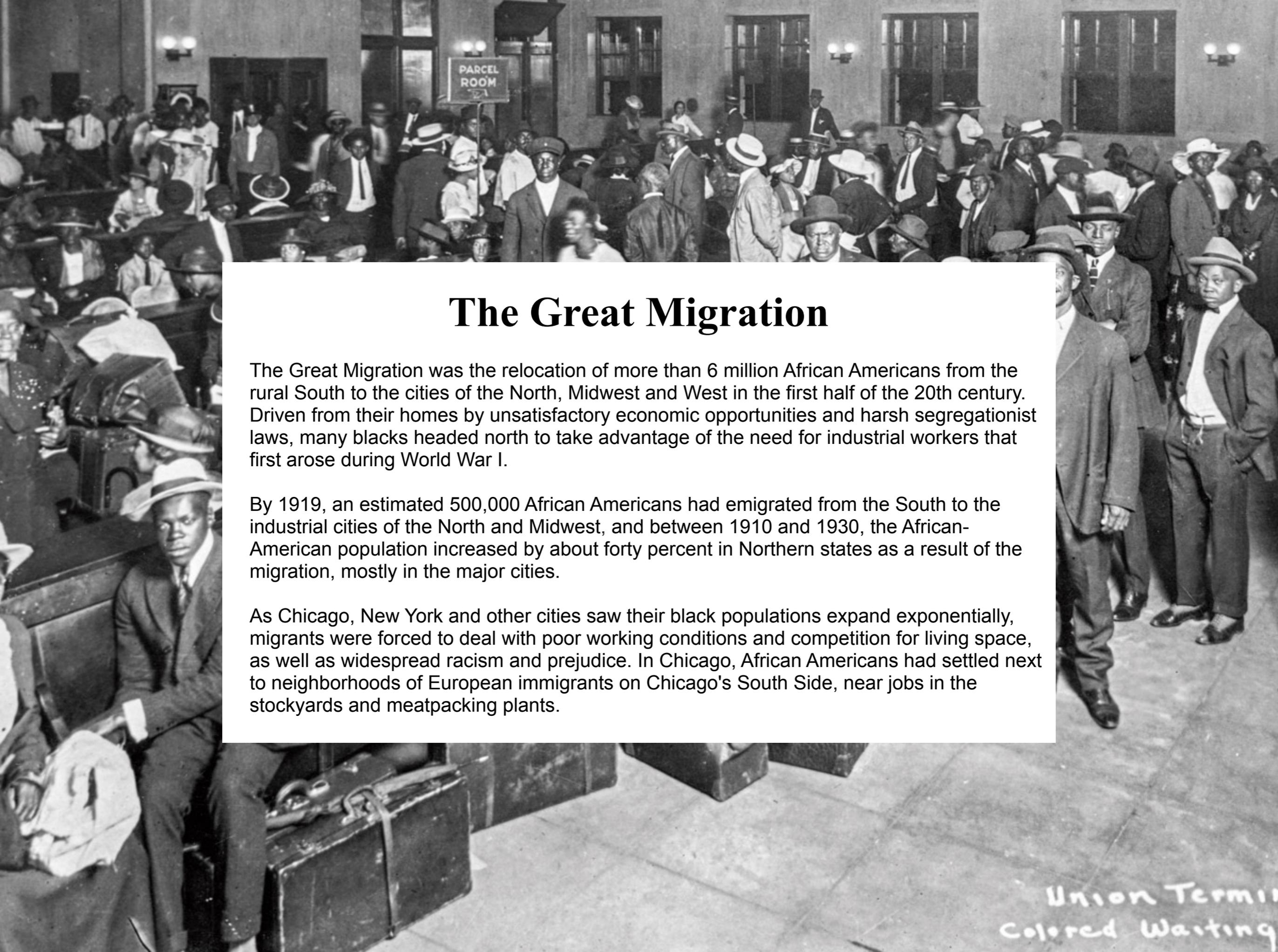
[read the full text here](#)

James Baldwin's reaction to *Native Son*



from “Everybody’s Favorite Protest Novel”, *Notes on a Native Son*, 1955

All of Bigger’s life is controlled, defined by his hatred and his fear. And later, his fear drives him to murder and his hatred to rape; he dies, having come, through his violence, we are told, for the first time, to a kind of life, having for the first time redeemed his manhood. Below the surface of this novel lies, it seems to me, a continuation, a complement of that monstrous legend it was written to destroy. Bigger is Uncle Tom’s descendent, flesh of his flesh, so exactly opposite a portrait that, when the books are placed together, it seems that the contemporary Negro novelist and the dead New England woman are locked together in a deadly, timeless battle; the one uttering merciless exhortations, the other shouting curses. And, indeed, within this web of lust and fury, black and white can only thrust and counter-thrust, long for each other’s slow, exquisite death; death by torture, acid, knives and burning; the thrust, the counter-thrust, the longing making the heavier that cloud which blinds and suffocates them both, so that they go down into the pit together. Thus has the cage betrayed us all, this moment, our life, turned to nothing through our terrible attempts to insure it. For Bigger’s tragedy is not that he is cold or black or hungry, not even that he is American, black; but that he has accepted a theology that denies him life, that he admits the possibility of his being sub-human and feels constrained, therefore, to battle for his humanity according to those brutal criteria bequeathed him at his birth. But our humanity is our burden, our life; we need not battle for it; we need only to do what is infinitely more difficult - that is, accept it. The failure of the protest novels lies in its rejection of life, the human being, the denial of his beauty, dread, power, in its insistence that it is his categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended.



The Great Migration

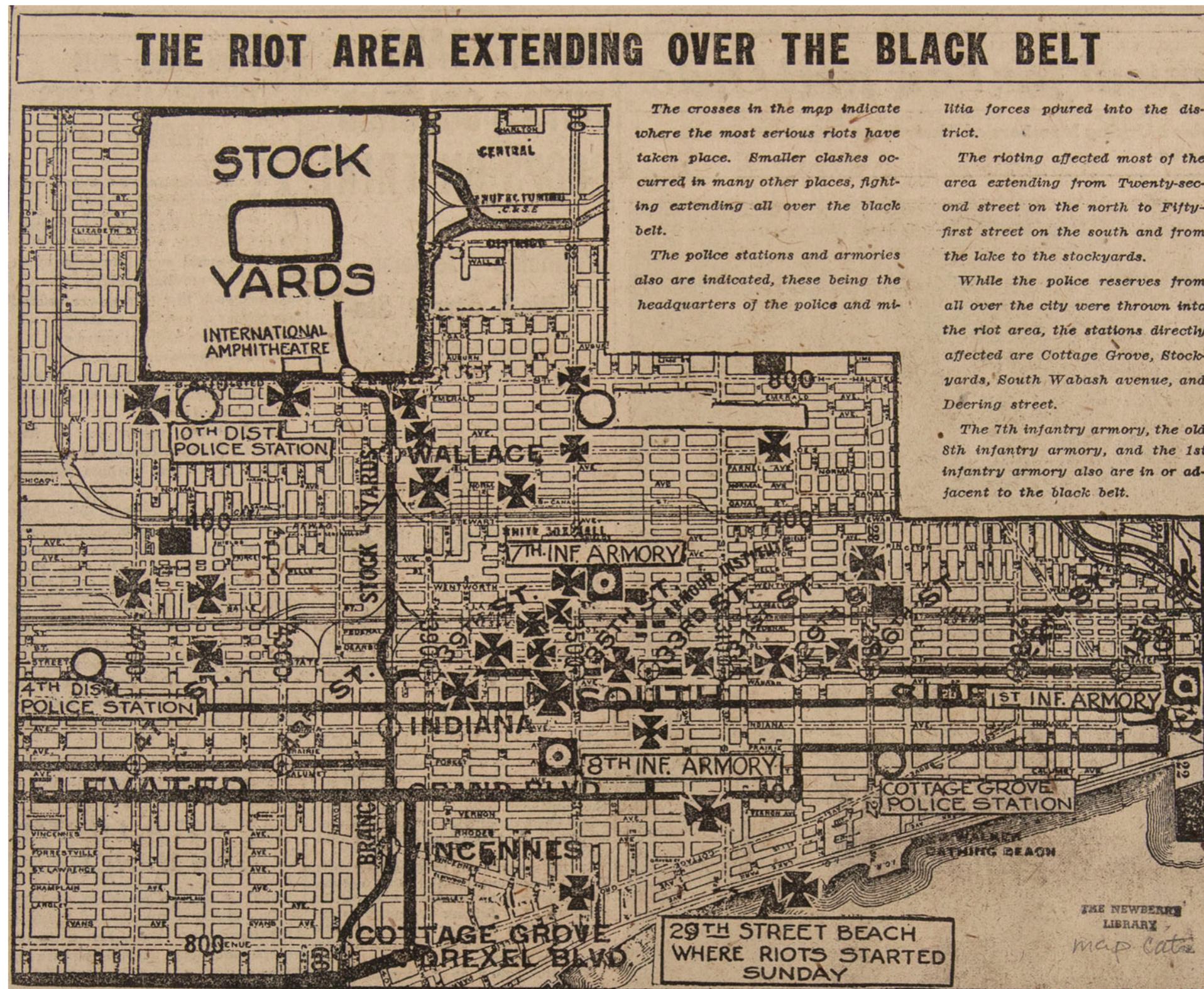
The Great Migration was the relocation of more than 6 million African Americans from the rural South to the cities of the North, Midwest and West in the first half of the 20th century. Driven from their homes by unsatisfactory economic opportunities and harsh segregationist laws, many blacks headed north to take advantage of the need for industrial workers that first arose during World War I.

By 1919, an estimated 500,000 African Americans had emigrated from the South to the industrial cities of the North and Midwest, and between 1910 and 1930, the African-American population increased by about forty percent in Northern states as a result of the migration, mostly in the major cities.

As Chicago, New York and other cities saw their black populations expand exponentially, migrants were forced to deal with poor working conditions and competition for living space, as well as widespread racism and prejudice. In Chicago, African Americans had settled next to neighborhoods of European immigrants on Chicago's South Side, near jobs in the stockyards and meatpacking plants.

Union Terminal
Colored Waiting

During the **Red Summer**, a race riot began in Chicago on July 27, 1919. During the riot, which lasted six days, thirty-eight people died (23 black and 15 white) and over five hundred were injured. It is considered the the worst race riot in the history of Illinois. According to official reports, the turmoil came to a boil after the death of an African American youth who had accidentally drifted into a swimming area at an informally segregated beach. Tensions between groups arose in a melee that blew up into days of unrest.



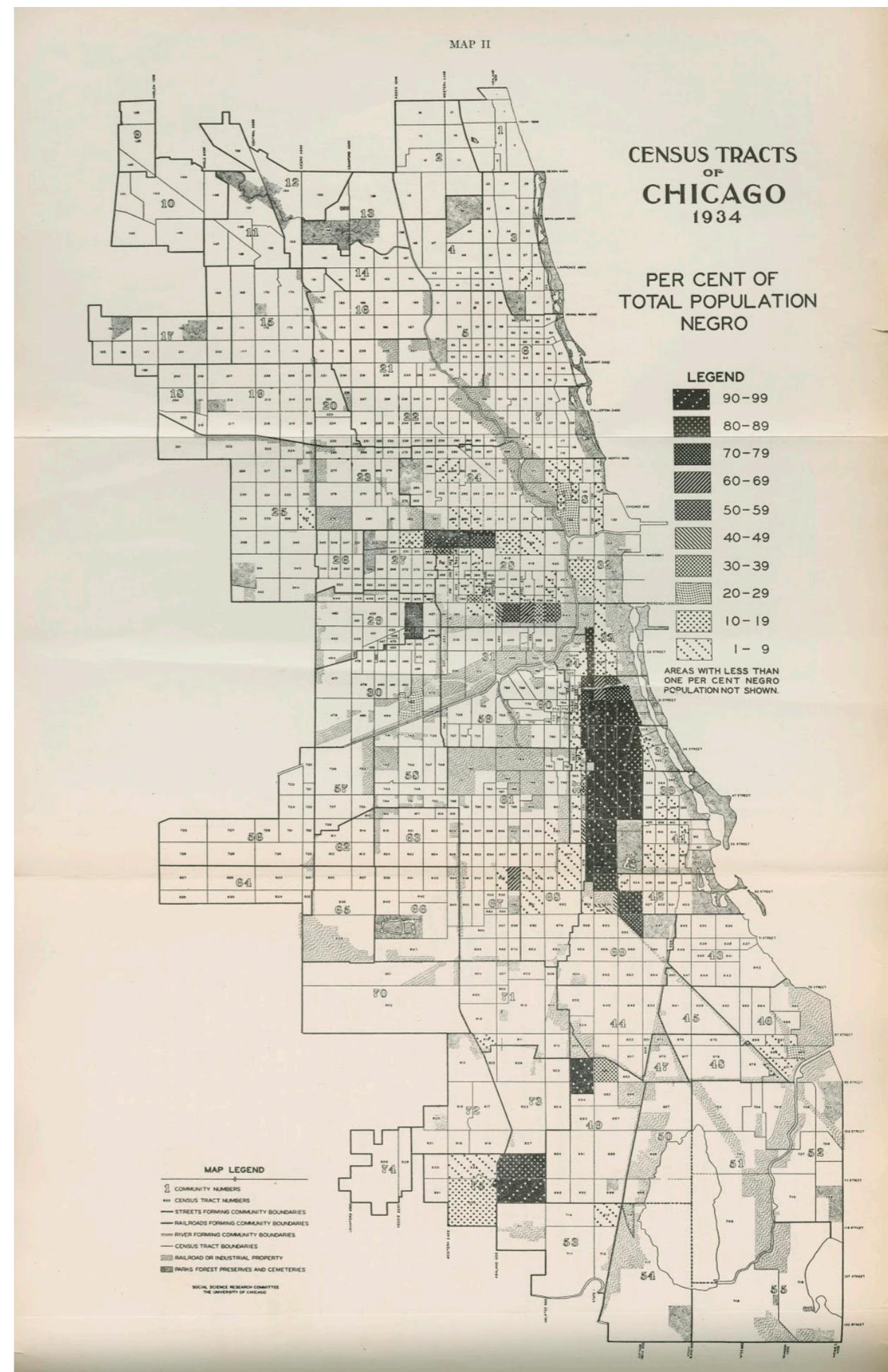
As a result of housing tensions, many blacks ended up creating their own cities within big cities, fostering the growth of a new urban African-American culture. The most prominent example was Harlem in New York City, a formerly all-white neighborhood that by the 1920s housed some 200,000 African Americans. The black experience during the Great Migration became an important theme in the artistic movement known first as the New Negro Movement and later as the Harlem Renaissance, which would have an enormous impact on the culture of the era. The Great Migration also began a new era of increasing political activism among African Americans, who after being disenfranchised in the South found a new place for themselves in public life in the cities of the North and West.

In Chicago, many African-American migrants settled on the South Side in what became known as the "Black Belt" or "**Bronzeville**". By the mid-20th century, three-quarters of the city's African American population lived in this area of aging, dilapidated housing, stretching along 22nd to 63rd streets between State Street and Cottage Grove.

The pulsing energy of Bronzeville was located at the corners of 35th and State Street and 47th Street and South Parkway Boulevard (later renamed Martin Luther King, Jr. Drive). At those intersections, people came to shop, conduct business, dine and dance, and experience this bustling black metropolis. The crowds reflected the diverse mix of people living in the black belt: young and old, poor and prosperous, professionals and laborers.

Bronzeville was well known for its nightclubs and dance halls. The jazz, blues, and gospel music that developed with the migration of Southern musicians attracted scores of diverse listeners and admirers. In the 1920s, the Regal Theater opened its doors and hosted the country's most talented and glamorous black entertainers. The community was also home to many prominent African-American artists and intellectuals, including dancer Katherine Dunham, sociologist Horace Clayton, journalist and social activist Ida B. Wells, musician Louis Armstrong, and poet Gwendolyn Brooks

Nevertheless, with such a large population within this confined area, overcrowding often lead to numerous families living in old and dilapidated buildings. The problem was exacerbated by the racist housing covenants adopted by the city. These were contractual agreements among property owners that prohibited the purchase, lease, or occupation of their premises by African Americans. Rare in Chicago before the 1920s, their widespread use followed the Great Migration, the wave of housing-related racial violence and a Supreme Court decision in 1926 which tacitly upheld these private, restrictive agreements and paved the way for their proliferation.







A 1934 census estimated that black households contained 6.8 people on average, whereas white households contained 4.7. With the buildings so overcrowded, building inspections and garbage collection were below the minimum mandatory requirements for healthy sanitation. This unhealthiness increased the threat of disease.

A description of the Chicago neighborhood known as “Little Hell” - future location of Cabrini-Green housing project

“a rabbit warren of vermin-infested, garbage-strewn alleys, gangways and dangerous streets in which residents endured a rate of violent crime 12 times that of non-slum neighborhoods. There were no parks or playgrounds and few yards for children to play in. Half the rotting tenements that housed the residents had no bath or shower facilities. Whole families were living in makeshift, dirt-floor basement apartments partitioned off with cardboard. Many of the buildings had no running water at all, providing only backyard outhouses for toilet facilities.”



**“kitchenette building” from the collection
A Street in Bronzeville by Gwendolyn Brooks**

We are things of dry hours and the
involuntary plan,
Grayed in, and gray. “Dream” makes a giddy
sound, not strong
Like “rent,” “feeding a wife,” “satisfying a
man.”

But could a dream send up through onion
fumes
Its white and violet, fight with fried potatoes
And yesterday’s garbage ripening in the hall,
Flutter, or sing an aria down these rooms

Even if we were willing to let it in,

Had time to warm it, keep it very clean,
Anticipate a message, let it begin?

We wonder. But not well! not for a minute!
Since Number Five is out of the bathroom
now

We think of lukewarm water, hope to get in it.

The **Great Depression** that began in 1929 was particularly severe in Chicago because of the city's reliance on manufacturing, the hardest hit sector nationally. Only 50 percent of the Chicagoans who had worked in the manufacturing sector in 1927 were still working there in 1933. African Americans and Mexicans were particularly hurt. By 1932, 40 to 50 percent of black workers in Chicago were unemployed. By 1939 blacks constituted 40 percent of relief rolls, and half of all black families relied on some government aid for subsistence.

With unemployment so high and people not getting paid for their work, landlords began giving out eviction notices all over the city, using the legal system and the Chicago police to physically force people out of their homes. The more that people witnessed this kind of brutality the more it caused people to want to resist this injustice.

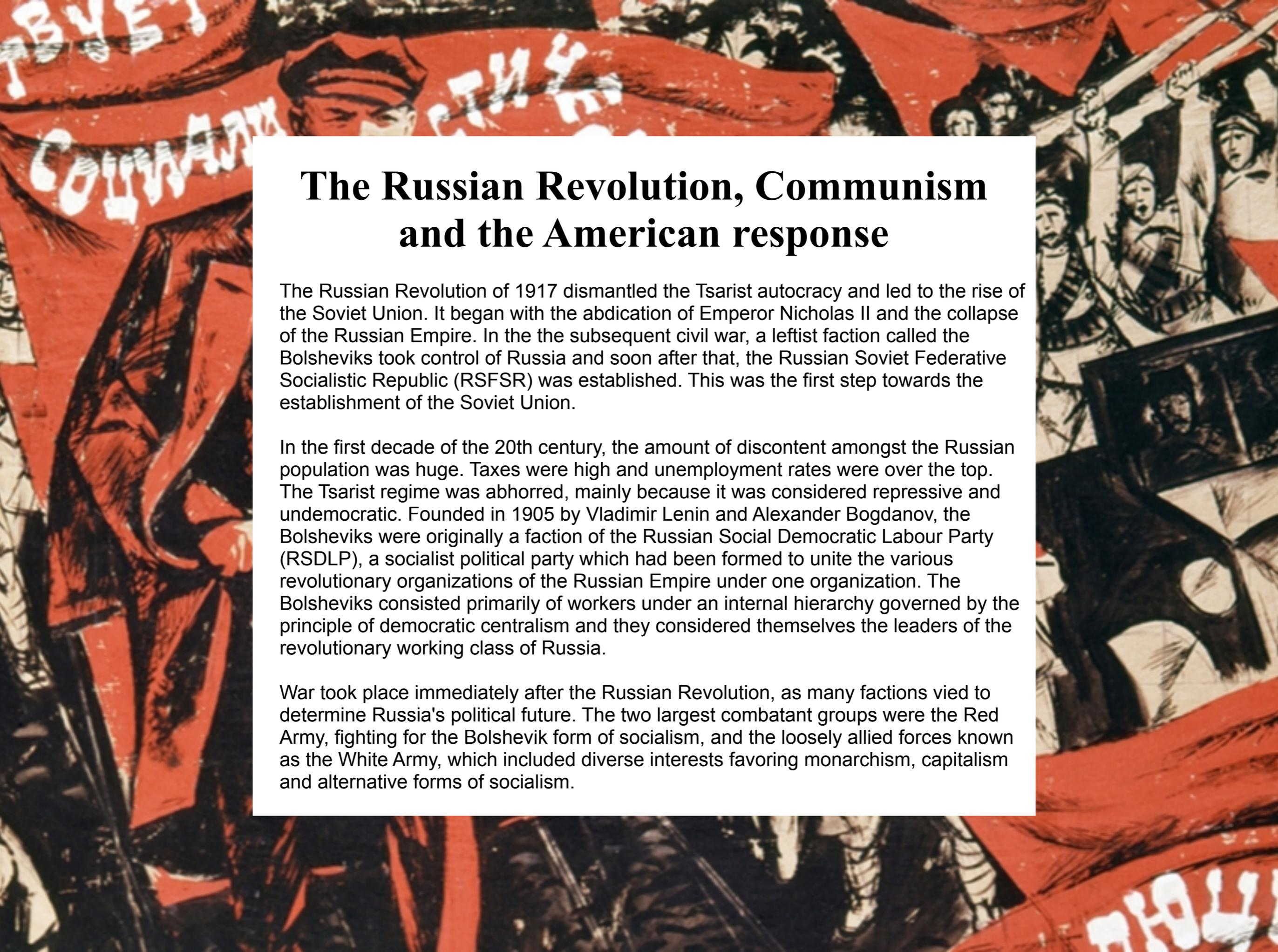
People would pile up their furniture near the entrance of the door so that it was nearly impossible for landlords or the police to get in. Other times people would stack their furniture in front of the house near the sidewalk as visible sign of protest. People also took action that was more organized and in early August of 1931 an estimated 60,000 people marched to protest the new eviction laws in Chicago. The march turned ugly when police began attacking protestors. At least 3 protestors were killed and several cops injured, but the eviction uprising also led to the creation of unemployment councils and unions in Chicago and around the country.



A NEGRO FAMILY JUST ARRIVED IN CHICAGO FROM THE RURAL SOUTH







The Russian Revolution, Communism and the American response

The Russian Revolution of 1917 dismantled the Tsarist autocracy and led to the rise of the Soviet Union. It began with the abdication of Emperor Nicholas II and the collapse of the Russian Empire. In the subsequent civil war, a leftist faction called the Bolsheviks took control of Russia and soon after that, the Russian Soviet Federative Socialistic Republic (RSFSR) was established. This was the first step towards the establishment of the Soviet Union.

In the first decade of the 20th century, the amount of discontent amongst the Russian population was huge. Taxes were high and unemployment rates were over the top. The Tsarist regime was abhorred, mainly because it was considered repressive and undemocratic. Founded in 1905 by Vladimir Lenin and Alexander Bogdanov, the Bolsheviks were originally a faction of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP), a socialist political party which had been formed to unite the various revolutionary organizations of the Russian Empire under one organization. The Bolsheviks consisted primarily of workers under an internal hierarchy governed by the principle of democratic centralism and they considered themselves the leaders of the revolutionary working class of Russia.

War took place immediately after the Russian Revolution, as many factions vied to determine Russia's political future. The two largest combatant groups were the Red Army, fighting for the Bolshevik form of socialism, and the loosely allied forces known as the White Army, which included diverse interests favoring monarchism, capitalism and alternative forms of socialism.

The United States responded to the revolution by participating in the Allied intervention in support of the White movement. With the Reds defeating the Whites however, the RSFSR became the chief constituent of the Soviet Union in December 1922. American involvement in the Russian Revolution became the key event that pitted the United States and the Soviet Union against each other for the next seventy years.

Inevitably, Americans became concerned about Bolshevism in the United States. World War I had brought about strong nationalist and anti-immigrant tendencies. The end of the war also caused production needs to decline and unemployment to rise. Many workers joined labor unions, and many others came to view these unions as the primary method by which radicals acted in American society.

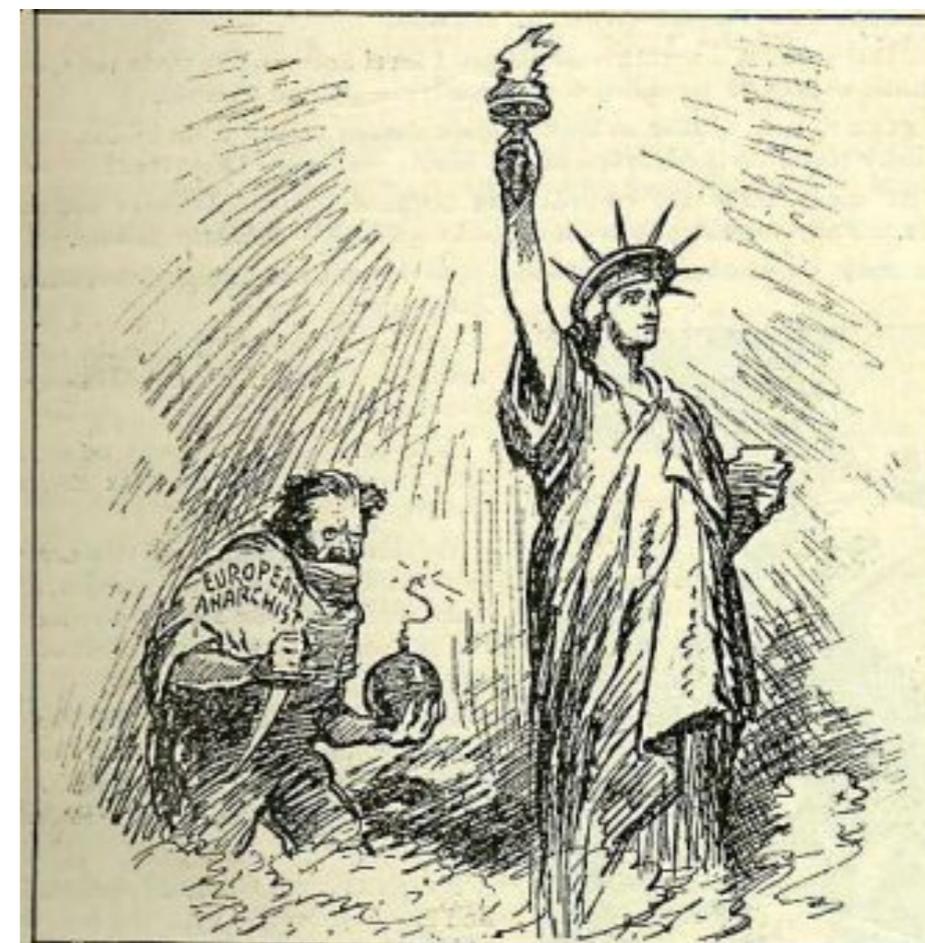
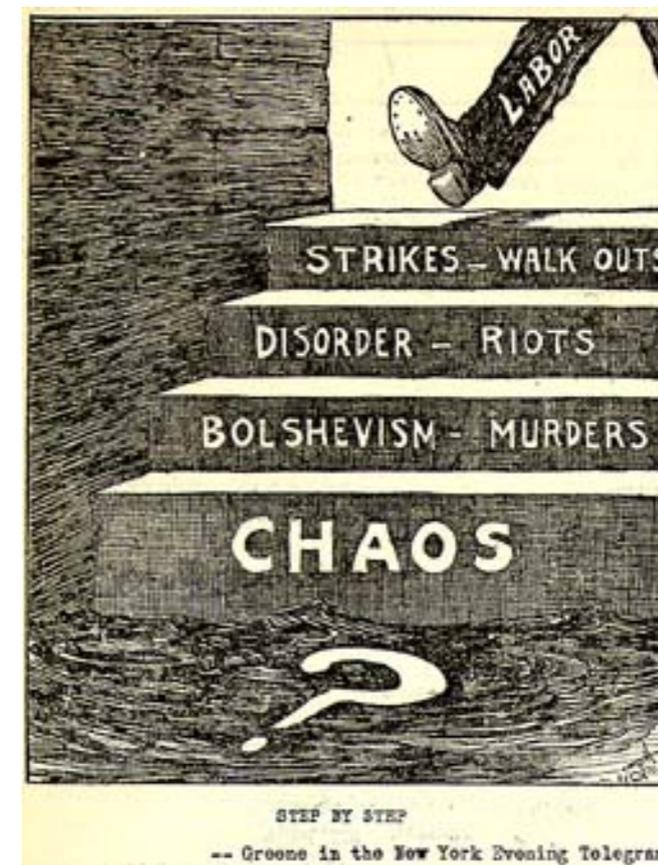
In 1919, Vladimir Lenin invited the left wing of the Socialist Party of America to join the international communist organization, Comintern. That spring, the party's Left Wing Caucus attempted to wrest control from the smaller controlling faction of moderate socialists. A referendum to join Comintern passed with 90% support, but the incumbent leadership suppressed the results. A few months later, the caucus formed their own party, the Communist Party of America, at a separate convention.

Also in 1919, a series of bombings and attempted bombings were carried out by anarchist followers of Luigi Galleani. In late April, at least 36 booby trap dynamite-filled bombs were mailed to a cross-section of prominent politicians and businessmen including the Attorney General of the United States, A. Mitchell Palmer and John D. Rockefeller. The bombs were intended to be delivered on May Day, celebrated as the international day of communist, anarchist, and socialist revolutionary solidarity.

Terror and outrage, remembered as the Red Scare, swept the country. Riots broke out in cities across the country against the Union of Russian Workers and other organizations that the public believed to be filled with Communist conspirators. In response to these riots, J. Edgar Hoover was selected as the leader of this new division that would investigate the identities and actions of suspected revolutionaries.

The Communist Party was forced underground and took to the use of pseudonyms and secret meetings in an effort to evade the authorities. The party apparatus was to a great extent underground. It re-emerged in the last days of 1921 as a legal political party called the Workers Party of America.

The Party devoted much of its energy in the Great Depression to organizing the unemployed, attempting to found "red" unions, championing the rights of African-Americans and fighting evictions of farmers and the working poor. They recruited more disaffected members of the Socialist Party and an organization of African-American socialists called the African Blood Brotherhood.



additional historical influences - Leopold & Loeb



Nathan Freudenthal Leopold Jr. and Richard Albert Loeb were two wealthy students at the University of Chicago who, in May 1924, kidnapped and murdered 14-year-old Robert Franks in Chicago. They committed the murder—widely characterized at the time as "the crime of the century"—as a demonstration of their perceived intellectual superiority, which, they thought, rendered them capable of carrying out a "perfect crime", and absolved them of responsibility for their actions.

At the time of the crime, Leopold was 19 years old and had already completed an undergraduate degree at the University of Chicago with plans to begin studies at Harvard Law School. He reportedly had studied 15 languages and spoke at least five fluently, and had achieved a measure of national recognition as an ornithologist.

Loeb was 18, the son of Anna Henrietta and Albert Henry Loeb, a wealthy lawyer and retired vice president of Sears, Roebuck & Company. Like Leopold, Loeb was exceptionally intelligent. Though he skipped several grades in school, and became the University of Michigan's youngest graduate at age 17, he was described as "unmotivated", and "obsessed with crime", and spent most of his time reading detective novels.

Leopold was particularly fascinated by Friedrich Nietzsche's concept of supermen (*Übermenschen*) - transcendent individuals, possessing extraordinary and unusual capabilities, whose superior intellects allowed them to rise above the laws and rules that bound the unimportant, average populace. The pair began asserting their perceived immunity from normal restrictions with acts of petty theft and vandalism. Breaking into a fraternity house at the university, they stole penknives, a camera, and a typewriter that they later used to type their ransom note. Emboldened, they progressed to a series of more serious crimes, including arson, but no one seemed to notice. Disappointed with the absence of media coverage of their crimes, they decided to plan and execute a sensational "perfect crime" that would garner public attention, and confirm their self-proclaimed status as "supermen"

On May 21, 1924 at about five o'clock in the afternoon, Franks was walking home from school when an automobile pulled up near him. Loeb asked Franks to come over to the car and get in to discuss a tennis racquet. Most likely, Loeb killed the boy with several chisel blows to the head. Leopold and Loeb drove their rented car to a marshland near the Indiana line, where they stripped Franks naked, poured hydrochloric acid over his body to make identification more difficult, then stuffed the body in a concrete drainage culvert. The boys returned to the Loeb home where they burned Franks' clothing in a basement fire.

That evening Mrs. Franks received a phone call from Leopold, who identified himself as "George Johnson." Leopold told Franks that her boy had been kidnapped, but was unharmed, and that she should expect a ransom note soon. The next morning the Franks family received a letter asking that they immediately secure \$10,000 in old, unmarked bills. That afternoon, "Johnson" called Bobby's father, shortly before three o'clock to tell him a taxi cab would take him to a specified drugstore in South Chicago. Franks, however, had just received another call, this one from the police, spoiling hope that the perfect crime would be executed. The body of Bobby Franks had been discovered.

Police found a pair of eyeglasses near the body, equipped with an unusual hinge mechanism purchased by only three customers in Chicago; one was Nathan Leopold. The two men were summoned for formal questioning. They asserted that on the night of the murder, they had picked up two women in Chicago, using Leopold's car, then dropped them off sometime later without learning their last names. Their alibi was exposed as a fabrication when Leopold's chauffeur told police that he was repairing the car that night, while the men claimed to be using it. Loeb confessed first. He asserted that Leopold had planned everything, and had killed Franks in the back seat of the car while he, Loeb, drove. Leopold's confession followed swiftly thereafter but he insisted that he was the driver, and Loeb the murderer.

Loeb's family hired Clarence Darrow, one of the most renowned criminal defense lawyers in the country. On August 22, 1924, Clarence Darrow began his summation for the defense. For over twelve hours Darrow reminded Judge Caverly of the defendants' youth, genetic inheritance, surging sexual impulses, and the many external influences that had led them to the commission of their crime. Never before or since the Leopold and Loeb trial has the deterministic universe, this life of "a series of infinite chances", been so clearly made the basis of a criminal defense.

In pleading for Loeb's life Darrow argued, " Nature is strong and she is pitiless. She works in mysterious ways, and we are her victims. We have not much to do with it ourselves. Nature takes this job in hand, and we only play our parts....What had this boy had to do with it? He was not his own father; he was not his own mother....All of this was handed to him. He did not surround himself with governesses and wealth. He did not make himself. And yet he is to be compelled to pay." In pleading that Leopold be spared , Darrow said, "Tell me that you can visit the wrath of fate and chance and life and eternity upon a nineteen- year-old boy!"

The judge was persuaded; in September 1924 he sentenced both men to life imprisonment for the murder, and an additional 99 years for the kidnapping.

Robert Nixon

Robert Nixon confessed to five murders and multiple assaults, including the Los Angeles "brick bat murders" of 1937. Depicted with racist imagery in the mainstream press after his arrest, he was given the nickname the "Brick Moron" as he killed his victims with bricks and was depicted as dimwitted. Convicted of murder, he was executed in Chicago in 1939.

From the *Chicago Tribune*, 5 June 1938 --

BRICK SLAYER IS LIKENED TO JUNGLE BEAST

BY CHARLES LEAVELLE

Beneath an alley fire escape policemen and detectives stand three and four deep. From a fifth floor window others lean out and call: "Let him come."

Handcuffs click. A slouchily dressed colored youth detaches himself from the crowd of detectives and begins making his way up the side of the building effortlessly. At the second floor, where the fire escape begins, he poises himself lightly and swings over on to it.

"Look at him go," says a policeman. "Just like an ape."

By the time this has been said the youth has swung himself over the sill and is in the fifth floor room where two years ago he raped and murdered with a brick Mrs. Florence Thompson Castle. As detectives watch he shows in pantomime how he committed the crime, one of the five savage murders he has confessed.

Comes from Little Town.

The Negro youth is Robert Nixon. He is 18 years old and comes from a pretty little town in the old south -- Tallulah, La. But there is nothing pretty about Robert Nixon. He has none of the charm of speech or manner that is characteristic of so many southern darkies.

That charm is a mark of civilization, and so far as manner and appearance go, civilization has left Nixon practically untouched. His hunched shoulders and long, sinewy arms that dangle almost to his knees; his out-thrust head and catlike tread all suggest the animal.

He is very black-- almost pure Negro. His physical characteristics suggest an earlier link in the species.

Notes on “double consciousness”



Double consciousness is a term describing the internal conflict experienced by subordinated groups in an oppressive society. It was coined by W. E. B. Du Bois with reference to African American "double consciousness," and published in his work, [The Souls of Black Folk](#).

“It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder... The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife – this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He does not wish to Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He wouldn’t bleach his Negro blood in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face.”

Double consciousness arises as a result of the “Veil.” The Veil is the most frequently mentioned symbol in Du Bois’ book, and one of his most important ideas. In some ways, it is possible to think of the Veil as a psychological manifestation of the color line. The color line exists in the world, defining people’s access to opportunities and to institutions from universities to bathrooms to the justice system. The Veil, on the other hand, exists in people’s minds, and compels white people to structure society according to a racist logic—to build and police along the color line. Du Bois argues that the Veil prevents white people from seeing black people as Americans, and from treating them as fully human. At the same time, the Veil in turn prevents black people from seeing themselves as they really are, outside of the negative vision of blackness created by racism.

Du Bois saw the Veil and double consciousness as a model for understanding the psycho-social divisions existing in the American society. He saw the prevalence of racism and figured out that sometimes peoples internalized their oppression. Their behavior is influenced by what the other people think and is distorted through others’ negative image of their race. This leads to low self-esteem because of the racism.

Any socially-aware, present-day African-American has had the same two life-altering experiences— the moment they realized they were Black, and the moment when they realized that was a problem. Like many, DuBois can pinpoint the exact instance at which both of these encounters took place. It was during a youth ball, at which his card was “peremptorily” refused by a Southern, white girl simply because he was Black. Of this encounter he writes the following:

Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like [them perhaps] in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil. I had thereafter no desire to tear down that veil, to creep through; I held all beyond it in common contempt, and lived above it in a region of blue sky and great wandering shadows.

DuBois describes African-Americans as “a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world— a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world.”

Timeline 1919 - 1939

1919
Treaty of Versailles officially ends World War I

"Red Summer" of race riots throughout the country

Inflation from the Post-World War I recession leads to the strike of 4 million workers

Claude McKay publishes "If We Must Die"

1923
The small, predominately black town of Rosewood, FL is destroyed by a mob of white residents from nearby communities.

The Cotton Club opens in Harlem.

1927
The Jazz Singer, notable for being the first motion picture with sound and for featuring Al Jolson in blackface, is released

1929
The stock market crashes, signaling the beginning of The Great Depression

1932
The Tuskegee Experiments begin

The film version of "The Emperor Jones" starring Paul Robeson is released

1936
The National Negro Congress is formed. Officially affiliated with the Communist Party, it works to unite black and white workers and intellectuals

Jesse Owens wins 4 gold medals at the Olympic Games in Berlin

1937
The Hindenburg zeppelin catches fire in Lakehurst, NJ; killing 36

William H. Hastie, former advisor to President Roosevelt, is confirmed as the first black federal judge

1921
Shuffle Along by Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake opens on Broadway. This is the first major play of the Harlem Renaissance.

1920
The Wall Street bombing by anarchist Luigi Galleani

Prohibition begins

1925
The National Bar Association, an organization of black attorneys, is established, as is the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and Maids, a labor union organized by black employees of the Pullman Company

1931
The Scottsboro Boys are arrested in Alabama

1933
Giuseppe Zangara assassinates Chicago Mayor Anton Cermak in an attempt on President-elect Roosevelt's life.

The first programs of the New Deal begin

Prohibition ends

1939
Germany invades Poland

Marian Anderson sings at Lincoln Memorial before 75,000 people on Easter Sunday after the Daughters of the American Revolution refuse to allow her to perform at Constitution Hall



Canada Lee as Bigger



**Richard Wright and Gloria Madison
in the 1951 film adaptation**

The Broadway adaptation of *Native Son*, written by Richard Wright and Paul Green, directed by Orson Welles and starring Canada Lee as Bigger, opened in March 1941 and closed three months later after 114 performances.

From the *New York Times* review by Brooks Atkinson

"...the first performance of a play that represents experience of life and conviction in thought and a production that represents a dynamic use of the stage...In ten savory scenes, acted on different levels with a resourceful use of the stage, [Welles] runs through the narrative, giving motion to static scenes by flares of light and putting 'Native Son' into its urban environment by a varied use of sound accompaniment. Mr. Welles is a dramatic showman; he likes big scenes, broad sweeps of color and vigorous contrasts in tempo....Once or twice, perhaps, the exigencies of the script drive him into a melodramatic absurdity, like the rumble of the automatic furnace stoker."

Green worked to "lighten up" the portrayal of Bigger, making him more sympathetic, and so the draft given to producer John Houseman had a sentimental ending that he regarded as dreadful. Houseman refused to produce it and worked secretly with Wright to restore the book's ending to the play, without ever informing Green.

Native Son was adapted twice for film. In 1951, the film was produced by an Argentinean company at five times the cost of their normal productions. Wright himself played Bigger after Canada Lee had difficulties with his visa. *Variety* lamented its anti-American sentiment and the film received great resistance in the US. It was rejected outright in Ohio for "present[ing] racial frictions at a time when all groups should be united against everything that is subversive."

In 1986, it was adapted again, directed by Jerrold Freeman, and starring Carroll Baker, Victor Love, Matt Dillon, and Oprah Winfrey

Odds & Ends

aviation in the 1930s (pg 13)

The years between World War I and II saw great advancements in aircraft technology. Airplanes evolved from low-powered wood biplanes to sleek aluminum monoplanes. Experienced fighter pilots became barnstormers, flying into small towns across the country and showing off their flying abilities. Air shows sprang up around the country, with races, and acrobatic stunts. By 1929, technology had advanced to the point that the first round-the-world flight and the first commercial transatlantic service was completed.

Bughouse Square (pg 21)

Bughouse Square (bughouse is slang for mental health facility) is the popular name for Washington Square Park. This park was Chicago's most boisterous and radical free-speech space from the 1910s through the 1960s. Bohemians, socialists, atheists, and religionists of all persuasions mounted soapboxes, spoke to responsive, vocal crowds, and competed informally for attention and donations. The square's core contributors, however, came from the Industrial Workers of the World union members whose radical views and wit made them perennial crowd favorites. In the park's heyday during the 1920s and 1930s, thousands of people gathered on summer evenings.

Can drinking bad moonshine actually cause blindness? (pg 26)

In short, yes. Methyl alcohol (methanol) is the bad stuff that could be found in moonshine. Pure methanol is very dangerous and it is definitely able to cause blindness and even kill people. As little as 10 ml of pure methanol could blind someone and as little as 30 ml could kill someone. 30 ml is equivalent to the amount of liquid in a standard shot glass.

"Trader Horn" / Edwina Booth (pg 28)

"Trader Horn" is a 1931 film depicting the adventures of real-life trader Alfred Aloysius "Trader" Horn, while on safari in Africa. The fictional parts of the plot include the discovery of a white blonde jungle queen, the lost daughter of a missionary, played by Booth. It is the first non-documentary film shot on location in Africa. Many accidents occurred during filming in Africa. Many of the crew, including the director, contracted malaria. Booth became infected, probably with malaria or schistosomiasis, during filming. It took six years for her to fully recover from this and other conditions she endured. She retired from acting soon after and sued Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.



J.P. Morgan / U.S. Steel (pg 30)

John Pierpont Morgan was an American banker known for corporate financing and consolidation in the early 20th century. After financing the creation of the Federal Steel Company, he merged it in 1901 with the Carnegie Steel Company and several other steel and iron businesses to form the United States Steel Corporation. In 1901 U.S. Steel was the first billion-dollar company in the world, having an authorized capitalization of \$1.4 billion, which was much larger than any other industrial firm and comparable in size to the largest railroads.

The Loop (pg 38)

The Loop is the central business district of Chicago. The community area is bounded on the north and west by the Chicago River, on the east by Lake Michigan, and on the south by Roosevelt Road. The name apparently derives from the place where the strands powering cable cars turned around on a pulley in the center of the city. The concept was extended to the ring of elevated rail tracks for rapid transit lines connecting downtown with the neighborhoods. Completed in 1897, this loop created an integrated intracity transportation system that helped insure the dominance of Chicago's historic core in the development of the metropolis.

Scottsboro (pg 49)

The Scottsboro Boys were nine young black men, falsely accused of raping two white women on board a train near Scottsboro, AL in 1931. The American Communist Party immediately took the case on, and largely through activist efforts, sparked a mass defense movement. After two trials in which an all-white jury convicted the nine, a national protest campaign to overturn the conviction was organized, marked by numerous street marches, and speaking tours. Although initially hostile to the Communists, the NAACP ultimately joined with them and other civil rights organizations to form the Scottsboro Defense Committee. Eventually, one of the women, Ruby Bates, came forward to repudiate her testimony, acknowledging that she had been pressured into a false accusation. The case went to the United States Supreme Court in 1937, and the lives of the nine were saved, though it was almost twenty years before the last defendant was freed from prison.

public transportation in Chicago

Public transportation began in Chicago with the introduction of horse-drawn streetcars. The original streetcars were 12 ft long, held 18 passengers, and operated at 3mph. 1882 saw the introduction of cable cars. The first overhead trolley car went into service in 1890. Electrification of horse car and cable car routes was completed in 1906. Motor bus service began in Chicago in 1927. This was followed by the introduction of trolley bus service on April 17, 1930.

additional links

[a train trip through 1920s Chicago](#)

[home movie of Chicago, 1937](#)

[slideshow images of Chicago, 1941](#)

[growing up in Chicago's Black Belt](#)

[The Elaine race riots, pt 1](#)

[average prices - 1939 & 1940](#)

[location of Bigger's family's apartment](#)

[location of the Dalton home](#)

[1939 newsreels](#) [1](#) [2](#) [3](#)