

Racial Problems in 1920s America



AIM: To explain how and why the problems faced by racial minorities in 1920s USA

Starter: Listen to the song 'Strange Fruit' by Billie Holiday (Nina Simone)

[Strange Fruit](#)

Strange Fruit

Strange Fruit

Southern trees bear a strange fruit
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root
Black body swinging in the Southern breeze
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees
Pastoral scene of the gallant South
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth
Scent of magnolia sweet and fresh
and the sudden smell of burning flesh!
Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck
For the sun to rot, for a tree to drop
Here is a strange and bitter crop.



Think to
yourself

What do you think the song is about?

What is meant by 'Strange Fruit'?

Discrimination against Black Americans

In 1900, 12 million black people lived in the USA, 75 percent of whom lived in the south. They were discriminated against in housing, jobs, education and few of them had the right to vote.

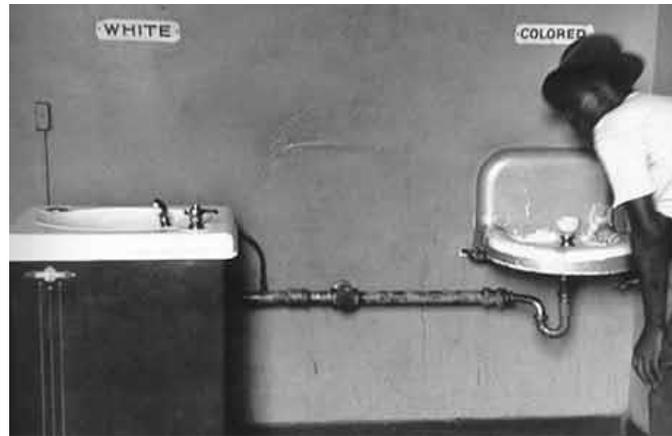
SEGREGATION - In the south, Blacks and Whites were kept separate

JIM CROW LAWS - official laws that made segregation legal

Qu1. Look at these sources and make a list of ways in which blacks and whites were kept separate

Ray Stannard Baker:

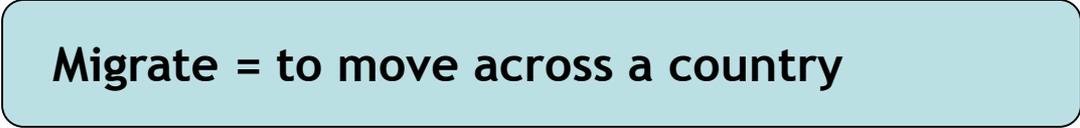
One of the points in which I was especially interested was the Jim Crow regulations, that is, the system of separation of the races in street cars and railroad trains.



Frequently Negroes paid their fare at the front door of buses, and then were forced to get off and reboard at the rear. An even more humiliating practice was the custom of forcing Negroes to stand over empty seats reserved for "whites only".



Migration to the north and west



Migrate = to move across a country

Life was hard for black people in the south and in contrast the north seemed like a place free of segregation. Industrial expansion during WWI helped generate more jobs in northern cities. As a result black people from the south began to migrate north and south in search of better jobs and conditions. They flocked to cities like New York, Philadelphia and Chicago.

The influx of black people caused race relations to deteriorate in the northern cities where black neighbourhoods known as ghettos sprang up, such as Harlem in New York.

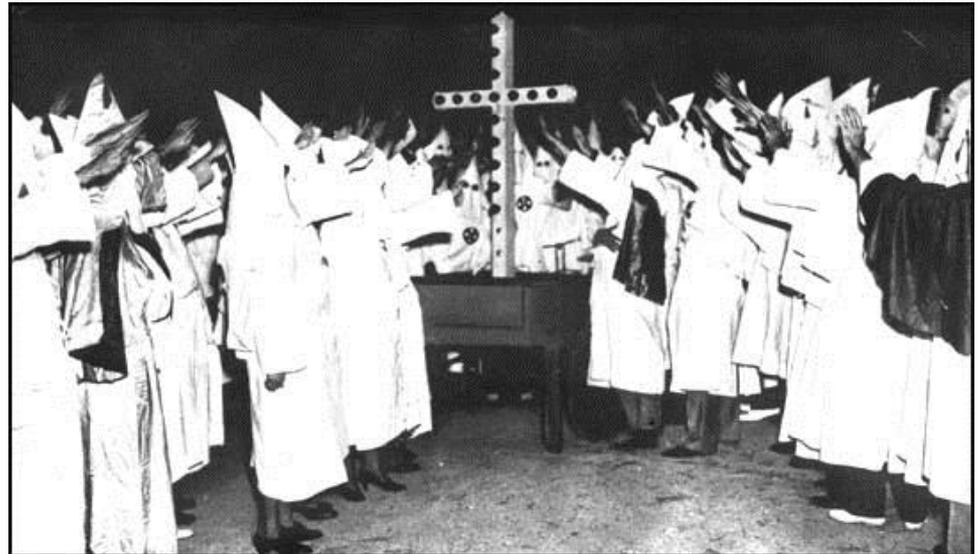
Qu2. Why did many blacks migrate in the 1920s?

The Ku Klux Klan

The 1920s saw the revival of the Ku Klux Klan (or KKK). This had started in the deep south at the end of the American civil war. The KKK was a racist group, founded by people who believed in white supremacy.

By 1921, the KKK had over 1000,000 members.

The idea that whites were superior to (better than) blacks



Whom did the KKK target?

6) R. A. Patton, writing about the activities of the Ku Klux Klan in *Current History* (1929)

A lad whipped with branches until his back was ribboned flesh: a Negress beaten and left helpless; a white girl, divorcee beaten into unconsciousness in her home; a naturalized foreigner flogged until his back was pulp because he married an American woman; a Negro lashed until he sold his land to a white man for a fraction of its value.

Discuss: What kinds of people did the Klan target?

Only WASPs could join the Klan. They discriminated against black people, Catholics, Jews and Mexicans.

What did the Klan do?

Klan members carried out lynchings of black people and often took the law into their own hands. Whipping, branding and castration were often used as punishments, as was stripping some of their victims and covering their naked bodies with tar and feathers.

A burning cross became the symbol of their night time meetings. Members wore white masks and cloaks, carried the US flag and took part in elaborate ceremonies.



From 1922, their leader was Hiram Wesley Ewen, who adopted the title 'Imperial Wizard'. They felt that the USA was becoming a 'garbage can' of different races and religions and so action was needed to purify it.



Look at this image of a lynching in the 1920s.

Is there anything that shocks you about this picture?

What does this tell us about the way black Americans were treated?

Why weren't the Klan stopped?

Editorial in *The Charleston* (1918)

There is scarcely a day that passes that newspapers don't tell about a Negro soldier lynched in his uniform. Why do they lynch Negroes, anyhow? With a white judge, a white jury, white public sentiment, white officers of law, it is impossible for a Negro accused of a crime, or even suspected of a crime, to escape a white man's vengeance or his justice

Klan members often had friends in high places.

People were intimidated by them and too scared to try and stop them.

Many policemen, judges, officials were Klansmen

The Government was scared of losing white votes if they supported Blacks

Decline of the Klan in the late 1920s

The Klan had a violent reputation and its actions often attracted media attention.

In 1925, David Stephenson, the 'Grand Dragon' of the Klan was found guilty of the rape and mutilation of a woman on a Chicago train.

The scandal destroyed his reputation.

Klan membership declined sharply and by 1928 there were just a few thousand members.



TASK

On the worksheet you have been given, fill in everything you have learnt about the KKK. When you have finished, compare yours with 3 other people in the class to see if you can add more information to it.

Remember to use these key words:

KKK, Ku Klux Klan, intimidation, lynching, Imperial

Wizard, purify, whipping, tarred and feathered, WASPs,

white supremacy

The black population fights back

Marcus Garvey

Formed the UNIA in 1914

Encouraged Black people to set up their own businesses employing only black workers

Wanted black to return to Africa

‘Black is Beautiful’

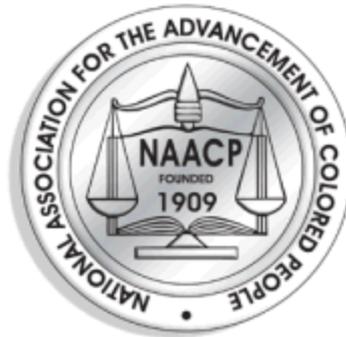


William Du Bois

Set up the NAACP

Opposed racism and segregation through legal action and non-violent strikes, marches and demonstrations

Wanted integration and equal opportunities for all



Write a paragraph to explain the similarities and differences between the UNIA and the NAACP.

The treatment of Native Americans

During the late C19th, the US government introduced laws to force Native Americans to live like the white settlers.

- Forced to live on reservations, set aside for them, but the land was often of poor quality
- Poor housing and not enough food
- Children sent to boarding schools and taught the lifestyle of white pupils
- Not allowed to continue customs and traditions
- Men forced to cut their hair
- Women forbidden to paint their faces
- Tried to convert them to Christianity



Group of Oto people about 1920. Note the man on the far right with the bandolier bag.
Source: Nebraska State Historical Society, BC2084-F-2

1924 - Granted US Citizenship. Could vote and be protected by the US legal system BUT still faced segregation and discrimination