

Podcasting the Past
European and world history
Part G: USA, 1918-1968

This document is part of a series that summarises recent research published on the key issues outlined in Section G of the [Higher History Course Specification](#). Although the summaries are wide-ranging, they do not cover all the literature ever published on the key issues. Instead, the summaries highlight some new research findings and directions, and illustrate how new historical research informs old historical debates, broadening our understanding of the past. This document is intended to supplement, not replace, pre-existing guidance on this topic.

2. An evaluation of the obstacles to the achievement of civil rights for black people, up to 1941

A) Legal impediments

- Recent research has focused on the impact of Jim Crow laws on urban, suburban, rural, and coastal environments (**e.g., Hines, 2018**). **Lieb (2019)** has found that, after racial zoning laws were struck down by the Supreme Court in 1910, segregated schools became the basis for segregated neighbourhoods. After 1910, it was illegal for states to make laws specifying who could live where, but black Americans could not easily live where their children could not go to school. For racist legislators, school segregation became a convenient, legal basis for segregating towns and cities generally.
- Building on this body of research, **Benjamin (2021)** has concluded that segregated schools often determined the whole layout of the urban and suburban environments. In Raleigh, N.C., for example, the local board of education ignored opposition when it relocated the district's 'premier schools' to new 'racially restricted' north-western suburbs while simultaneously refusing to build new schools in black middle-class suburbs in the southeast of the city. Over time, black communities in the southeast became ever more economically and politically isolated from the rest of their city and meaningful integration became virtually impossible without extensive busing later in the century.
- Several historians have written about segregation as the basis for police surveillance in the post-WW1 era (**e.g., Adler, 2020; Harris, 2018**). In towns like Asheville, N.C., for example, the efforts of the police to surveil 'morally suspect' venues like dance halls and pawn shops in African American neighbourhoods 'informed urban governance within the context of white supremacy' (**Epstein, 2015**).

- **Adler (2018)** has recently challenged the view that the Guerdand murder trial (New Orleans, 1930) was an 'epochal' event in the fight for equal justice. Guerdand, a white police officer, was found guilty of, and sentenced to death for, the murder of a black girl, Hattie McCray. Adler argues that, during the interwar period, 'criminal justice officials believed that social order hinged on 'protecting the racial hierarchy from all perceived threats to the racial order, including challenges from working-class whites whose violent and predatory behaviour undermined notions of white superiority and civilization.'

B) Popular Prejudice

- **Johnson (2020)** describes the Tulsa Race Riot (1921) as a manifestation of 'fear and jealousy' within Tulsa's white community as 'African American economic successes, including home, business, and land ownership, mounted.' Johnson also notes that, in 1919, America witnessed more than two dozen similar events in which white people attacked black people and destroyed their property.
- In his study of 'the Jim Crow routine', **Berrey (2015)** examines the case of Mississippi between the 1930s and 1960s to uncover how black and white Mississippians followed a 'racialised script of expected behaviours' in their interactions with each other. Although Jim Crow is generally understood as a system of legal segregation, Berrey shows that there was also a performative aspect that governed the everyday interactions of black and white Americans in the South.
- **Gillespie McRae (2018)** has recently argued that 'segregationist women' were the 'grassroots workforce for racial segregation' as they empowered 'Jim Crow order with a flexibility and a kind of staying power' (**Gillespie McRae, 2018**). Verifying this conclusion in different parts of the country, **Knott (2015)** finds that 'middle-class white women' ensured that public libraries remained 'mostly white spaces. Similarly, **Wyman and Muirhead (2017)** stress that segregation continued in Northern cities like Bloomington and Norma. Popular prejudice was far from being unique to the South.
- **Pettengill (2018)** shows how Jim Crow practices were just as pervasive in sport as they were in every other area of American social and cultural life. The United Automobile Workers, for example, had a bowling league that excluded the participation of non-white members of the union. The union was silent on the issue of civil rights in recreation through the late 1930s and early 1940s.

- According to **Couvares (2011)**, Hollywood took ‘cinematic violations of racial and sexual norms’ very seriously during the interwar period. The 1933 film *This Is Africa* was censored because of, among other things, its representation of interracial relationships. It is worth noting, however, that the film was ‘cut’ by the censors for many reasons, including the representation of subjects that even modern audiences would likely find shocking.

C) Activities of the Ku Klux Klan

- In the early 1920s, the Ku Klux Klan reemerged on to the American scene. The ‘second Klan’ offered white Protestant Americans ‘an expanded list of social scapegoats including Catholics, Jews, and immigrants’ and had close to 4 million members nationwide. **Pegram (2011)** highlights the Klan’s emphasis on white Protestant supremacy, its attempts to reform public schools and enforce Prohibition, and its efforts to establish itself as a political force at the state and national level. Engaging with an earlier debate about what the Klan aimed to achieve, Pegram concludes that ‘while the 1920s Klan interacted with the mainstream’ it was not a ‘mainstream organisation’ even at the highpoint of its membership.
- **Portz (2015)**, however, argues the Klan was ‘highly successful’ in gaining political influence in Dallas, Texas. In 1922, the local Klan chapter ran candidates for every office in the county and won virtually every contest. According to Portz, the Klan ‘bested entrenched political forces that had ruled Dallas since the turn of the century.’
- Even though the Klan is often associated with the South, historians have recently emphasised that it was just as active in the North in the 1920s (e.g., **Richard, 2019**). **MacKenzie Fehr (2018)**, for example, notes that the KKK won over white protestants who were formerly members of the Detroit Citizens League after the latter endorsed a Catholic candidate for mayor in 1924.
- Cultural historians (**Lennard, 2015; Rice, 2016**) have concluded that films played a major role in the rebirth of the Klan in the 1920s, especially D.W. Griffiths *The Birth of a Nation*. Moreover, Rice notes that the Klan ‘embraced modern mass media: it was both a film producer and exhibitor.’ According to Rice, these films indulged many of the Klan’s racist fantasies and helped it to recruit more members even though many cinemas opted not to show these films.

D) Lack of political influence

- **Johnson (2010)** argues that black and white Jim Crow reformers in the First World War era aimed to improve race relations in the South, but for different reasons. White reformers maintained a belief in the essential 'rightness' of white supremacy but also hoped to reduce the violence, injustice, and poverty that tarnished the image of the New South. Black reformers practiced a 'pragmatic accommodationism' that recognised the limits of what they could achieve. According to Johnson, 'both groups apparently shared a conviction in the immutability of white domination.'
- **O'Brien (2015)** shows that federal policymakers often had to compromise with racists – and ignore the views of black Americans – to complete federal infrastructure projects. O'Brien focuses on the segregated national parks created in the South during the interwar period. This so-called compromise was born of the need to pacify racist, Southern Democrats who would not stand for integrated facilities. **Thomas (2011)** makes a similar case in relation to New Deal-era hospitals in the South: the federal government had to build segregated hospitals because that is all racists in town halls and statehouses would agree to. Thomas notes that, although this state of affairs was undoubtedly 'humiliating' for black Southerners, it also improved their healthcare and paved the way to hospital integration decades later.
- **Harold (2016)** decentres the New Negro Movement and argues that New Negro activism was just as effective in the South as the North. She argues that 'the struggles of the black working class produced an economics-based black nationalist politics that paved the way for subsequent labour organising in the South, including A. Philip Randolph's Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters.' The New Negro Movement, North and South, was an attempt to secure greater political and industrial influence.

E) Divisions in the black community

- A recent trend in the literature focuses on the emergence of a new black cultural and political identity between 1918 and 1941. From the Harlem Renaissance to black workers and labour activists who fought for equal access to jobs and equal treatment in the workplace, a new radical politics emerged during the interwar period with a perceptibly racial edge that extended well beyond intellectual and cultural elites in cities like New York (**Baldwin and Makalani, 2013; Harold, 2016**).
- **McDuffie (2015)** notes the role of Marcus Garvey, a Jamaican black nationalist, in advancing the cause of racial pride, African redemption, and black self-determination across the American Midwest. Garvey's

Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) was not without its critics in the black community, however. The *Chicago Defender*, an African American weekly edited by Robert Sengstacke Abbott, was fiercely critical of Garvey and his Black Star Line Steamship Corporation. The dispute ended up in court and Abbot and Garvey remained 'sworn public enemies.'

- In their study of the Gold Star Mother and Widow Pilgrimages of the early 1930s, **Clarke and Plant (2015)** show that there was a disagreement in the black community on how to oppose, and resist, segregation. The federal government organised segregated tours of First World War cemeteries for the mothers and widows of fallen American servicemen. Some in the black community regarded this arrangement as 'the crowning insult'. Civic leaders, black newspapers, and the NAACP launched a campaign to pressurise the government to desegregate the tours. When this campaign failed, they contacted all eligible black women and urged them to boycott the tours. 25 women cancelled their trip to Europe, but 279 of them travelled there between 1930 and 1933. Upon returning to the United States, many disputed the negative coverage of the pilgrimages in the black press and urged other eligible women to participate.