**How WWI Changed America**

**Podcast Series**

**Chris Cappazolla\_-\_The Red Summer** (18m 37s)

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**3 speakers** (Announcer, Libby O'Connell, Chris Cappozola)

**[0:00:11]**

**Announcer**: Welcome to the How World War I changed America podcast series, sponsored by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation with host Dr. Libby O'Connell.

**[0:00:26]**

**Libby O'Connell**: Welcome everybody to our podcast on Red Summer. This is Dr. Libby O'Connell. We're very pleased today to have as our guest, Dr. Chris Capozzola, professor at MIT. Welcome, Chris. Thank you for joining us today.

**[0:00:41]**

**Chris Cappozola**: Thank you for having me with you.

**[0:00:43]**

**Libby O'Connell**: I heard you speak about Red Summer a few years ago and I thought this is the guy I really want to have back talking about it because it's just an amazing story that I think very few Americans know about. I wanted to just back up a little bit and frame it because Red Summer is in 1919 the summer after the end of World War I, but I want you to talk a little bit about, or just sort of broad brush strokes about race relations in America before World War I. Well how would you describe race relations in the United States from the end of the 19th century into the 20th century?

**[0:01:22]**

**Chris Cappozola**: Well, I think that the short answer to that question is, it's a terrible time. That this is a point in American history when 40 years after the end of the Civil War, slavery is over, but racism is alive and well and it has taken a new form that goes by the name of Jim Crow, but it's a total system of segregation, of disfranchisement and losing the vote, of pressures on African American communities that make it very hard for white and black people in America to even really engage with one another as fellow citizens. And that's a deliberate set of policies that's enforced by law and also enforced by violence; violence, that African Americans community face, including the most extreme version of lynching, of extra legal killing. Now this is captured in the phrase the nadir of race relations, the low point. And for many Americans, white and black, who want to change that, it's a real challenge.

**[0:02:19]**

**Libby O'Connell**: Is this seen only in the South?

**[0:02:22]**

**Chris Cappozola**: Well, it's a national problem and although laws are more commonly used in the South to separate races, the practices are widespread. That said, at the turn of the 20th century, most African Americans live in the Southern part of the United States and most African Americans also live in rural areas. But the first World War is in some ways the big turning point for that history with the beginning of the so-called Great Migration as African Americans move to cities in the South end, in the North in search of jobs and also political opportunity. And those changes that are by the war, also lead to changes in the system that we call Jim Crow.

**[0:03:05]**

**Libby O'Connell**: So the United States joins the war in 1917 and that same year there were a major riot in East St. Louis. Could you talk to us about that?

**[0:03:17]**

**Chris Cappozola**: I think the East St. Louis riots are something that all Americans should know about, both the terrible things that happened and also the ways that local and national communities responded. And I think you can't understand that riot without also the long history of bad race relations that we just talked about, as well as the specifics of the war, right? So as early as 1915, the American economy is booming because of the war in Europe. The United States isn't involved, but we are selling and we're producing and this opens jobs in Northern cities that many African Americans leave the South to fill. St. Louis is a boom town. It's an industrial powerhouse in the early 20th century and its population is increasing. There are shortages of housing. There's competition for the really good jobs and there's pressure on working people of all races from bosses. They have jobs, they're getting paid, but the cost of living is rising even faster than their paychecks. And so workers are really seeing opportunities but they're not getting them. And for many workers, they are blaming other people for what they're not getting. So by the summer of 1917, there's real tension between white workers in the St. Louis area who've been there or migrated there for work, and African American workers who've recently arrived. And in May of 1917, those tensions boil over in a massive riot in East St. Louis, which is across the river in Illinois. Now the specifics are a little bit hazy of what causes it, but the general cause is that white workers feel that African American workers are being brought in to break strikes and they decide that they're going to respond to that with violence. And there's basically a series of what we call a riot, but it isn't really. What it really is is mob violence. Violence by whites against African Americans. Not necessarily protests or uprisings by black people against their conditions. And this violence leads to the deaths of at least 100 and maybe more African-Americans over the course of two days in May, 1917.

**[0:05:23]**

**Libby O'Connell**: So how does the nation respond to that? Was it covered by the press or was it brushed under the rug? I mean, this is a hundred people dying in mob violence. That's a big number.

**[0:05:34]**

**Chris Cappozola**: It is. It's a number that we haven't seen in years and hope that we never will again. And it's the national headline for sure. It creates controversy. It creates sort of demands for studies and inquiries and different people have a different solution to the problem. For some people, some of the people with more racist mindsets, the argument is, "Well, this just shows that the segregation of the races should be stricter," right? So some people even argue that that's the solution. Others say, "Well, you know, maybe we should understand the working conditions of people who've just arrived in our city." And you see social scientists and others, people going out and studying sort of African American communities and trying to understand the conditions. You see religious groups getting involved, trying to form dialogues and actually trying to make human connections between white and black communities. You have people trying to investigate the police and the National Guard, which was also active in the St. Louis riots. But I think in some ways the most interesting response comes from a new organization, the NAACP, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. And this had been founded in some ways as early as 1905. 1909 is when it takes on its current name. The NAACP, at this point, it's a pretty small organization, but during the first World War, its membership expands dramatically. The NAACP is based in New York. Its head is W. E. B. Dubois, the great sort of African-American thinker and organizer, and they understand that St. Louis is on the one hand, an old problem of violence that black communities are facing and also a new problem, that the war and war mobilization is exacerbating. And they convene a protest and protesting during the war is a challenge, right? Because you don't want to be seen as un-American. You don't want to be seen as undermining the war effort and you don't want to provoke more violence, right? The NAACP doesn't want a riot in New York because they're protesting a riot in St. Louis, so they decide to convene a silent protest through the streets of New York. Probably around 10000 people marched through the streets of New York in complete silence, just to draw attention to this. The NAACP's membership is overwhelmingly African Americans, but it was and still is an interracial organization. There are sort of white allies who are marching with them and also at the same time, this is one of the first protests where you really see participation by children, some young ones, school children as well as high school students are getting involved and speaking out and taking to the streets. So the silent protest is a really kind of important turning point in many ways. Many of those children who March in 1917 will later be part of the civil rights movement 50 years later.

**[0:08:26]**

**Libby O'Connell**: That's fascinating. And what date was that? When was the Silent Parade?

**[0:08:30]**

**Chris Cappozola**: The Silent Parade is in July of 1917, about a month after the riots which were in May.

**[0:08:36]**

**Libby O'Connell**: Wow, I've seen photographs of the Silent Parade and they are very, very powerful. So 1917, the East St. Louis riots. Then the war ends. Armistice is on 1918, November. The following summer is what is known as the Red Summer. Tell us about that.

**[0:08:55]**

**Chris Cappozola**: Well, it's called Red Summer for a reason. In part because people were seeing red, right? They were angry at the conditions in the United States in 1919, which goes through a postwar recession. They're also afraid of red in terms of communism and radicalism. They're afraid that this new Russian revolution might come to America, which makes them skeptical of all kinds of protest groups and there is actual red. There's blood. There's violence, and in many ways, 1919 is the most violent period in American history other than, of course, the Civil War in terms of the sort of violence in particular that African American communities face. And this is really a backlash against some of the steps that African Americans had made either individually or in organizations during the war. Captured in this sort of famous line by W. E. B. Dubois, "We returned from fighting, we returned fighting," which is to say we're fighting for our rights. And there were efforts to fight for rights and to demand equality that had been denied to them, but often that's met with violence all across the country. Over the summer of 1919 there's violence that targets African American communities. Two enormous riots, one in Washington DC, one in Chicago that really capture national headlines, but they're happening all across the country in Southern cities and in Northern cities. In small towns such as Elaine, Arkansas, even in places like Duluth, Minnesota.

**[0:10:27]**

**Libby O'Connell**: Yeah, so my question was these riots were taking place all over the United States and I think the riots in Chicago and Washington DC were very violent. Certainly helped give the name Red Summer to that time, but I think they got more press perhaps than some of the riots that were going on in Southern cities because there was more press coverage of them. Is that your understanding as well?

**[0:10:50]**

**Chris Cappozola**: Yes. I think that the riots in Washington and Chicago were bigger. They were covered by the press more. They were, I think, more shocking in some ways to area residents who had come to understand anti-black violence as something that happened regularly in the South, but maybe it didn't happen where they lived. And so as violence spreads across the country, many white Americans are surprised to see it coming to their communities as well. I think you often see the same dynamic at work in all of these incidents of violence, which is the communities that are at the breaking point where there is competition for jobs, shortage of housing, often kind of difficult living conditions and where white and black people who had been living rather separately are sort of right up next to each other because of the pressures of cities during the war can sometimes just get sparked by some something. Often it's competition for a job. In Chicago, it's actually something really quite simple that sparks the riot, which is that an African American boy who had been swimming and then Lake Michigan basically swims over into a part of the beach that whites had understood as reserved for themselves. That something as small as that could trigger violence that could last for a day or even a couple of days and that could destroy black lives, but also black communities, businesses, symbols of a community could be targeted and destroyed. And recovering from these riots was no small matter. And I think a lot of times that recovery work was left to black communities themselves rather than sort of from municipalities or states that could've taken a greater hand in helping them rebuild.

**[0:12:34]**

**Libby O'Connell**: So Chris, African-Americans fight in World War I. They're in uniform. Often they are in combat under French command, but they all do their war service. In fact, they over-enlist. I know that the American military, but a limit on how many African Americans could enlist because so many immediately tried to sign up and the military wasn't sure how to handle that over-enlistment. So they come home. They've done their duty as citizens and some of them come home in uniform. How does the white community respond to the return of the African American soldiers?

**[0:13:13]**

**Chris Cappozola**: Well, I think that part of the reason that there's so much violence in 1919 is that returning African American soldiers pose a real threat to the status quo and the threat is both imagined and real. The imagined threat is that African American soldiers who have been armed with weapons and now know how to use them might use them against white Americans. That's largely an imagined fear among some people. The real threat is that they will claim to be and have the rights of the citizens that they've just asked to be and that is real. And there is organizing, there is protests and demands and that in some ways triggers a backlash that is violence. 1919 as a year is the year in which organizations that track this recorded the largest number of lynchings in US history. 76 known lynchings and there may have been more and certainly more attempted killings. Now for me, one of the greatest ironies or tragedies of American history is that of those 76 killings, at least 10 were lynchings of African American soldiers in their US army uniforms. People who had just risked their lives for the United States in France and then were deprived of their lives and liberties here in the United States when they returned.

**[0:14:33]**

**Libby O'Connell**: With all of this violence throughout America, what was the federal government response? How did the Wilson administration handle it?

**[0:14:39]**

**Chris Cappozola**: For the most part, the administration of President Woodrow Wilson responded with silence, as it generally saw this not as a sort of systematic sort of attack on black communities, but as occasional instances of crowd misbehavior or police not keeping things under control. There were, however, a couple of responses that in 1918, President Woodrow Wilson makes a public statement against mob violence in general and is sort of critical of that. And this is taken as sort of by many African American communities as too little too late or not specific enough because it didn't specifically criticized lynching and anti-black violence. There are also efforts by members of Congress to make lynching a federal crime, and this is put forward by Leonidas Dyer, who's a Republican Congressman from Missouri. That law doesn't actually pass until the 21st century, although the civil rights movement does sort of make some inroads on that. But there are some efforts to respond, but most people understand this as a local issue that the federal government doesn't have the power to address.

**[0:15:48]**

**Libby O'Connell**: What was the result of Red Summer? Did race relations improve in the 1920s? Just what happened?

**[0:15:55]**

**Chris Cappozola**: I'd like to say that race relations improved in the 1920s, but I don't think that they did. And certainly, the systematic violence of 1919 does taper off, although there are big riots again in Tulsa, Oklahoma and in Rosewood, Florida over the course of the '20s. What I think does come out of this is the NAACP as an organization speaks more aggressively and starts to explore legal and courtroom challenges to the system of Jim Crow. So although in the short-term. There's not very much improvement, there is a long-term transformation that African American communities will sort of build on and in many ways try very hard to prevent this from happening again in the second World War.

**[0:16:45]**

**Libby O'Connell**: So this is also a time that the Ku Klux Klan starts to grow, right? Increased membership and I think there's a Ku Klux Klan March in Washington.

**[0:16:56]**

**Chris Cappozola**: Yeah, we associate the Klan with the 1920s. But in many ways, it's also a product of the first World War, from a sense that American society was changing too rapidly. And in particular, that American racial and religious minorities were getting too much power.

**[0:17:12]**

**Libby O'Connell**: People forget that the Ku Klux Klan was strongly anti-immigrant as well.

**[0:17:17]**

**Chris Cappozola**: Absolutely. And all of those things are sort of being made visible during the war and the Klan in some ways mobilizes some white Americans to take action against it. The Klan of the 1920s is less likely to practice violence as it had done during reconstruction in the 1860s and during the civil rights movement of the 1960s. But nevertheless, the Klan is a powerful force, a dangerous threat to democracy in the 1920s and it's a real issue for public life in the years after the war.

**[0:17:51]**

**Libby O'Connell**: Well, I just want to thank you, Chris, for joining us today. I think this is an important history that you're sharing with us, and I think it's something that gets overlooked. So I'm very proud you could be here and join us.

**[0:18:04]**

**Chris Cappozola**: Yes, I do hope that more Americans know this history.

**[0:18:10]**

**Announcer**: Thank you for listening to this episode of How World War I changed America. The podcast series is made possible by a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the collaboration of the U S World War I Centennial commission, the Doughboy foundation, the National World War I Museum and Memorial in Kansas City, National History day, and the Gilder Lehrman Institute for American history.

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