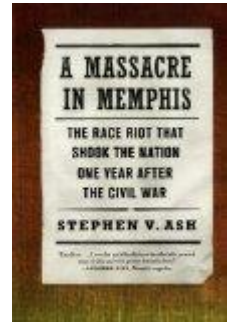


**Stephen V. Ash.** *A Massacre in Memphis: The Race Riot That Shook the Nation One Year after the Civil War.* New York: Hill and Wang, 2013. 286 pp. \$19.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-8090-6830-2.



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## Race, Rioting, and Reconstruction

In the first book-length treatment of the 1866 Memphis race riot, Stephen V. Ash argues that the massacre of at least forty-six African Americans by mostly Irish American police was a signifier of ongoing race hatred. While the Memphis riot continued antebellum and Civil War violence against African Americans, it also predicted violence to come, from the Ku Klux Klan to the lynchings of the Jim Crow era. Radical Republicans responded to the riot with greater congressional action, while conservative southerners saw the violence as an unfortunate but justified response to undisciplined freed people influenced by Yankee meddling. Regardless, Ash says, the Memphis riot, “having helped usher in the extraordinary experiment of Radical reconstruction, also help[ed] obliterate it and pave the way for its successor, the New South era of black disenfranchisement and Jim Crow segregation” (pp. 188-189).

*A Massacre in Memphis* is a brief and well-written account. The book is organized into three

parts that detail the main population groups—Yankee, rebel, Irish, and black—of post-Civil War Memphis, a timeline of the riot itself, and analysis of the riot’s aftermath. Ash situates the Memphis riot in the broad contexts of Reconstruction politics and racial violence while creating a rich microcosm of daily life in Memphis itself.

The first four chapters detail the day-to-day tensions between various Memphis residents, what was at stake for each group, and who maintained positions of power. After the city’s capture by Union troops in June of 1862, Yankee missionaries, businessmen, teachers, and Freedmen’s Bureau officials flocked to Memphis. Tensions between Republican Yankees and former Confederates centered on black rights and rebel disenfranchisement, but many white northerners and southerners held the common belief that slavery had left blacks unfit for citizenship and that former slaves must be forced into productive labor. Conservative newspapers railed against

Radical Republican ideas, and in the spring of 1866 the Conservative movement gained traction with those white men, mostly Irish, who retained the right to vote. Propelled by Irish votes, many local officials, such as the mayor, city recorder, county sheriff, and most policemen, were Irish. Other Memphians were outraged by the police force's unprofessional conduct. Former slaves comprised about half of Memphis's population, compared to nearly 20 percent Irish, and competition for jobs and housing was fierce between the mostly working-class groups. The 3rd US Colored Heavy Artillery, whose families lived in Memphis, was mustered out on April 30, but the men stayed at Fort Pickering awaiting back pay. An altercation between black soldiers and Irish police set off the violence that very day.

In the second section of the book, Ash uses present tense to describe how the events unfolded. The shift in language is jarring but effective. Ash's choice of tense reveals the difficulty of understanding what individuals did or did not know at each moment. One challenge of studying collective violence—at the time or in the past—is that actions are influenced by rumor, hearsay, and perception. Ash's method of storytelling gives the reader clear insight into the precarious nature of timing, lack of communication, and misperceptions.

As in other instances of post-Civil War violence, white rioters sought to exert power over freed people, especially those who challenged white dominance. One Irish policeman demanded the death of Samuel Cooper, a man who "gets up and talks to the colored people, and tells them that they are as good as white men" (p. 146). White rioters demonstrated their hatred of all forms of racial uplift by targeting homes and businesses of black leaders and white supporters. One group intended to burn "every nigger building, every nigger church, and every God damn son of a bitch that [teaches] a nigger" (p. 150). Although readers may find it difficult to keep track of locations and

players, Ash narrates the story admirably and provides detailed maps to assist in tracing violence from one section of town to another. Most important, Ash makes the human element real, exploring possible motivations and reactions, and fulfilling his goal of restoring to victims "the personhood that death and history have taken" (p. xiii). This is only possible with the extensive testimony available from victims and witnesses.

Ash notes how the outbreak of violence in Memphis revealed the postwar tensions among local, state, and federal authorities, whether as elected officials or as a military presence. Because local police had actively participated in violence against black Memphians, Ash argues that the massacre threatened the very legitimacy of government, namely, "its guarantee to protect its citizens from being murdered" (p. 6). Yet various groups continued to argue that they were best upholding the law, even if that "law and order" came at the expense of order and safety altogether. The ineptitudes and conflicts between officials, from drunken Memphis mayor John Park to the achingly slow military response of General George Stoneman, demonstrate the lack of procedures and infrastructure that was being debated fiercely at all levels. Even those with similar sympathies struggled with how to work together to achieve their goals. While US Attorney General James Speed was appalled at the lack of action by the city of Memphis, he believed that the federal government and military "have and can have nothing to do with the redress of private grievances, or prosecutions for public wrongs" (pp. 181-182). Such matters had to be addressed at the local or state level. Ash argues that the Memphis massacre prompted Radical Republicans to take bold actions at the national level. Ironically, Tennessee was exempt from congressional Reconstruction because it was under Republican control.

In the final section of the book, Ash notes what the Memphis riot has in common with other collective violence of the Reconstruction era as

well as what is unique. He lists several possible ways to interpret the actions of the Irish, former Confederates, and Yankee officials. Ash explores the historiography of the riot and notes where he agrees or diverges. And he explains several possible outcomes dependent on how one fits the massacre into various contexts. The book closes with a lament for the lack of public memory and a call for renewed commemoration of the riot.

This study is a result of the arduous work required to piece together the disparate accounts of a riot, especially given the political leanings of newspapers, editors' desire to place immediate blame while exonerating others, and the wild rumors that inevitably circulated during the violence. Ash offers a detailed explanation of his sources and describes how they differ from the ways that other historians have used them, primarily in his use of manuscript records versus published reports. Investigations into the violence by the Freedmen's Bureau, US Army, and a congressional committee offer extensive witness interviews, albeit lacking testimony from rioters themselves, who were not interviewed to avoid tipping off perpetrators in case of indictments. Those indictments never came, either from a Memphis grand jury or from any part of the federal government.

In Ash's words, the extraordinary evidence left from such investigations are what historians long for, "yet they simultaneously vex the histori-

an, whose job it is ... to make order out of chaos.... The Memphis riot raises challenging questions about the history historians write." Such questions include why so few ex-Confederates joined in the riot and just how much influence the Rebel press had on the small percentage of Irish men who participated in the violence. Ash is correct in stating that the riot "resists easy characterization," but I wish that he concluded the section on those interpretive challenges by forcefully reiterating his own explanation (p. 189).

Ash provides a noteworthy and practical model of how to write about riots and collective violence, from the process of recovering the names and lives of the victims and bearing witness to the acts of brutality to his analysis of the larger possible meanings of the riot. Ash's work complements other recent works—such as *The Great Task Remaining before Us: Reconstruction as America's Continuing Civil War* (2010), coedited by Paul A. Cimbala and Randall M. Miller; Douglas R. Egerton's *The Wars of Reconstruction: The Brief, Violent History of America's Most Progressive Era* (2014); and Gregory P. Downs's *After Appomattox: Military Occupation and the Ends of War* (2015)—that emphasize the centrality of violence and Reconstruction to understanding race relations, military and government policies, and economic development in the late nineteenth century and beyond.

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