

## East St. Louis Riot 1917

The East St. Louis Race Riot was a series of labor and racially motivated acts of violence in 1917. This riot is one of the worst outbreaks of labor-related bloodshed in the 20th century. It is also one of the worst riots in American history.

The United States was experiencing a surging domestic economy after World War I. During the war, many men were recruited to fight, so employment opportunities opened for African Americans across the United States. Many African Americans had moved from the South to East St. Louis, Illinois, and other major cities in the North and Midwest. They found employment with the Aluminum Ore Company and the American Steel Company. As a result, many white workers felt threatened by African Americans moving to the area and competing for jobs. Some whites resented the blacks, and tension between the two races grew. Rumors of black men possibly socializing with white women at labor meetings also incensed some whites.

One day in late May 1917, a group of 3,000 white men congregated in downtown East St. Louis and began attacking defenseless African Americans. The whites destroyed buildings and severely beat people. The Illinois governor had no choice but to call in the National Guard. Once the guard arrived, it contained the insurrection. Rumors began to circulate, however, that the African Americans were organizing an attack.

On July 1, 1917, an 18-year-old black man shot his white attacker. The whites fired back. When the police arrived, the young black man still was returning fire. He mistakenly thought the police were shooting at him, and he shot at them as well as his attackers. He killed two officers. The next day, a white mob of thousands marched to the black section of town and rioted. They cut all the fire hoses at the fire departments and began to burn the area. Blacks who tried to escape the burning buildings were shot. Many others were lynched. The National Guard was called in again, and there were



*Mr. President, why not make America safe for democracy?*

reports the guardsman were joining rioters. White women even took part in the violence. Wielding bats and clubs, they chased young black women. African-American journalist and civil and women's rights activist Ida B. Wells believed that more than one hundred and fifty African Americans died during the riots.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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### Discussion Questions:

1. Why were there some employment opportunities opening for African Americans?
2. What was the cause of the first riot?
3. What was the cause of the July riot?
4. What was the role of the National Guard during the riots?