

Brown, Earl Louis  
Why race riots?  
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PUBLIC AFFAIRS PAMPHLETS

# WHY RACE RIOTS?

## Lessons from Detroit

B Y E A R L B R O W N

What happened in Detroit  
—and Why?

How your community can  
avoid similar disturbances

PUBLIC AFFAIRS PAMPHLETS  
No. 87 1944

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# WHY RACE RIOTS?

By EARL BROWN

ON Sunday, June 20, 1943, one of the most serious race riots in American history broke out in the city of Detroit. Before it was brought under control some thirty hours later, twenty-five Negroes and nine white persons were killed and property worth several hundreds of thousands of dollars had been destroyed.

The forces which led to the outbreak in that city exist, to a greater or lesser degree, in most of our cities. Similar outbreaks have occurred elsewhere. A study of the factors leading to the outbreak in Detroit is important because it can show us how to avoid similar outbreaks, not only in Detroit, but in other cities.

Earl Brown, formerly a special correspondent for the New York *Herald Tribune*, is on the editorial staff of *Life*. He has made several trips to Detroit both before and after the riot of June, 1943. He is co-author of another Public Affairs Pamphlet, *The Negro and the War*.

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Yet a study of the special features of Detroit is necessary for a complete understanding of the riots. For although the city is typically American in many respects, it represents to an exaggerated degree the forces of conflict within our boundaries. The intent of this pamphlet is to show the anatomy of the conflict and how such collisions may be prevented. The discussion of the special aspects of the Detroit situation is not intended as a blanket criticism of all of the citizens of Detroit. Many, of both races, behaved admirably. If others behaved shamefully, that is no reason for self-congratulation by non-Detroiters. Responsibility for what happened in Detroit must be shared by every American.

### Discord Not New

My first visit to wartime Detroit occurred in July, 1942. I found that although Detroit is the munitions capital of the United Nations and its war production is essential to victory, there was a disturbing lack of unity of effort. The atmosphere was tense, and the tension was increasing. There were sudden gusts of strikes for unimportant reasons—a strike occurred at the Chrysler Tank Arsenal because the men were not allowed to smoke during work.

But racial feeling was the most alarming of all. Groups of Negro zoot-suiters were brawling with gangs of young white toughs; the determination of Negroes to hold the war jobs they had won was matched by the determination of numerous white groups to oust them. There were many signs of trouble.

Eleven months later, in June, 1943, came the Detroit riot, the most serious racial conflict in this country since the East St. Louis riot in 1917. Said Mayor Jeffries: "I've been conscious of the seriousness of the race problem here for more than a year." "We felt the riot coming," said William E. Dowling, the Prosecuting Attorney of Wayne County. "Race tensions have been growing here for three years."

## Why Was Nothing Done?

Here is something of a mystery. If these responsible officials had reason to fear riot, why didn't they take steps to prevent it? Since continuous production of munitions is vital to the prosecution of the war, why didn't the federal government act? In March, 1943, a local newspaperman wrote to Attorney General Biddle about the critical state of affairs in Detroit. Mr. Biddle replied: "Your letter has received careful consideration, although it does not appear that there is sufficient evidence of violation of any federal statute to warrant action by this department at this time." The federal government did not act until nearly midnight on June 21, when President Roosevelt declared a state of emergency and troops began to patrol Detroit—long after the murder, the burning, and the pillage began.

## DETROIT — A UNIQUE CITY

IN 1900, there were 76 million people in the United States, of whom fewer than 4,000 owned cars. Most of these automobiles were costly imitations of the luxury vehicles beginning to be made in Europe by Benz and Daimler. The Americans who built them had their shops in the northeastern states. It was left to a number of mid-western mechanics to grasp the fact that an enormous middle class had grown up in the United States; and that, although the members of this middle class could not maintain luxury cars, they could afford to spend a thousand dollars for an automobile and—what is more—desperately wanted to own a car. By chance, the mechanics who had such ideas and who, for various reasons, were the luckiest lived in the neighborhood of Detroit. Henry Ford, the superintendent of a local power plant, W. C. Durant, a local wagon salesman, and Robert Olds, a machine-shop worker, laid down the main designs which turned Detroit into the mass production center of the world.



## POPULATION GROWTH OF DETROIT



1900



285,704

1900 TO 1910  
AUTOMOBILE PRODUCTION UP FROM 4,000 TO 200,000

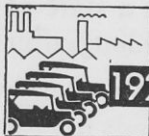


1910



465,766

1910 TO 1920  
PRODUCTION UP TO 2,000,000



1920



993,678

1920 TO 1930  
PRODUCTION EXCEEDS 5,000,000



1930



1,568,662

1930 TO 1940  
NO INCREASE IN PRODUCTION



1940



1,623,452

1940 TO 1943  
WAR PRODUCTION



1943



1,816,092 (EST.)

Each symbol represents 100,000 people.

PICTOGRAPH CORPORATION, FOR PUBLIC AFFAIRS COMMITTEE, INC.

What originally had been a self-contained little city, noted for its parks and drives, became a vast, sprawling industrial community. Here the Germans coined the word *Fordismus*, and here little parties of engineers from the Soviet Union studied to learn how the magic was done.

### **Its Mushroom Growth**

Obviously, mass production required workers in great numbers. As the automobile business grew in a series of booms, Detroit grew also; the city bulged and mushroomed to its limits and then expanded further. Near-by villages either were swallowed up or became cities themselves. In 1914, Henry Ford, to the consternation of other employers, set his minimum wage at \$5 a day. The news was flashed around the world. It set in motion a renewed stream of migration toward Detroit. But the war shut off European immigration, and after 1918 the effort to hold American jobs for Americans led to ever increasing restrictions against aliens. There were no such restrictions, however, against native Americans. Before the First World War the wonder story of \$5 a day had reached the gullies and draws of Kentucky and the Tennessee mountains. The Southerners began to move. All through the war and the boom years they kept coming—black and white. The flow ebbed during the depression and then came in full flood again when the United States began to get ready for the Second World War. Young colored men from the Alabama cotton fields and the Louisiana cane country, poor whites from the mountains and the hills, came in a never-ending stream. Trailing in their wake came the ecclesiastical camp followers—backwoods preachers, Southern white evangelists and shouters.

### **The War Boom**

By 1940 the city had grown in a dozen different directions. The population of the incorporated city was 1,623,000, and more were coming for war jobs. The War Man-

power Commission estimates that about 500,000 persons moved into the Detroit area between June, 1940 and June, 1943, the month of the riot. Of these, about 50,000 were Negroes. During the twelve months just before the riot between 250,000 and 300,000 new migrants arrived. Most of the whites—according to a number of investigations—were Southern whites. There were few extra workers in near-by industrial centers such as Chicago, Pittsburgh, Toledo, and Akron, so recruiting was concentrated in the deep South. Today, in Detroit and on its edges, there are believed to be about 210,000 Negroes and about a half million Southern whites. The total is far greater than the population of New Orleans, the biggest Southern city. In addition, all of the foreign nationalities are represented, led by the Poles, who number 350,000.

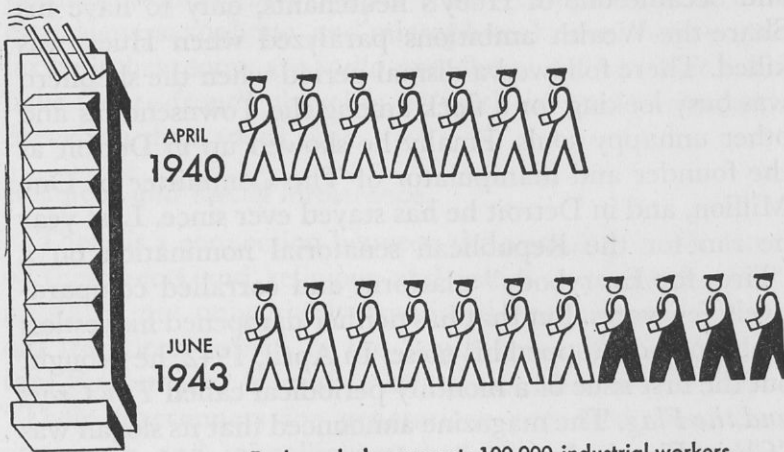
### Haven for Agitators

One of the features of Detroit that in many ways sets it off from many other cities is the presence of great numbers of religious and political fanatics. Even before the last war Detroit was known as the city of "jazzed-up religion." Today all shades of opinion are to be found in the city, all races, all creeds, all political attitudes and beliefs. The first figure to attract national attention was Father Charles Coughlin. Railing against Hoover and Wall Street from his radio pulpit, he soon attracted a great following in Detroit and through the Middle West. Next came the Black Legion, an organization of native white Americans and an offshoot of the Ku Klux Klan—with hoods, grips, and passwords. It was organized originally for the purpose of getting and holding jobs for Southern whites, but it quickly developed into an elaborate "hate" organization—its enmity directed against Catholics, Jews, Negroes, and "radicals." After the conviction of the Black Legion leader, Virgil F. Effinger, a former Klansman, for the murder of a Detroit Catholic named Charles Poole, the police had the clues to a long series of unsolved crimes



which included several murders, arson, the bombing of Father Coughlin's house and the Workers Book Store as well as the homes of a number of labor organizers. An investigation by a grand jury resulted in the listing of eighty-six persons as members of the Legion. In this list were found the names of a member of the state legislature, the manager of the state sales tax, a city treasurer, sheriffs, and other officials.

## GROWTH IN INDUSTRIAL EMPLOYMENT IN MICHIGAN



Each symbol represents 100,000 industrial workers

PICTOGRAPH CORPORATION, FOR PUBLIC AFFAIRS COMMITTEE, INC.

By the middle 30's, Detroit had a representation of every kind of panacea, political nostrum, and agitation. There were the Anglo-Saxon Federation and an anti-Negro organization called the National Workers League. But the most steady, day-in and day-out exhortation came from the sensational preachers. Of these the best known are the Reverend J. Frank Norris and the Reverend Gerald L. K. Smith. Norris was born in Alabama and has held pulpits in a number of Southern towns. He was an energetic politician and brought his brimstone gospel clear to

New York City, where he teamed up with the Reverend John Roach Straton and preached in a gospel tent west of Central Park. In 1935 he came to Detroit and took over the Temple Church, commuting to Fort Worth by plane in order to shepherd two flocks.

Gerald Smith has been even more active in politics than Norris. Smith was a minister and had a number of mid-western congregations before he went to Shreveport, Louisiana. He was great for muscular good will; he harangued luncheon clubs; he loved the radio; and then he fell for Huey Long. He fell so hard that he quit pastoring and became one of Huey's lieutenants, only to have his Share-the-Wealth ambitions paralyzed when Huey was killed. There followed a dismal period when the shepherd was busy looking for a flock among the Townsendites and other unhappy souls. Finally he showed up in Detroit as the founder and manipulator of The Committee of One Million, and in Detroit he has stayed ever since. Last year he ran for the Republican senatorial nomination on a "Tires for Everybody" platform and corralled comparatively few votes. But that has neither dampened his restless ambition nor stopped his noise. In April, 1942, he brought out the first issue of a monthly periodical called *The Cross and the Flag*. The magazine announced that its slogan was "Christ First in America" and recounted Smith's fights for justice and his numerous escapes from death by violence. Now he is trying to round up the remnants of the Detroit America First membership into an America First Party.

These three men—Coughlin, Norris, and Smith—are the best known of the Detroit religious-political demagogues, but there are thousands of others. Some have been in Detroit for years; others came during the recent migrations. It is estimated that there are more than 2,500 Southern-born evangelists of one kind or another in Detroit alone, not counting those in near-by communities. This war has caused an upheaval among the little shouting sects in the South; they have split and split again, and new sects have

been formed. When the flow to the war industry towns began, numerous piney-woods and sandy-bottom clerics went along representing the Last Days Church of God, the Church of God (Reformation), all brands of the Assemblies of God, the Firebrands of Jesus, the Pillar of Fire, the Pentecostal Baptists, the Christian Unity Baptists, the Two-Seed-in-Mind Baptists, and various splinters of the Holiness sects. One of the militant sects in Detroit is the American Bible Fellowship headed by a former Methodist preacher who refused to accept the merger of the Northern and Southern Methodist churches. Some of these pulpit-thumpers have gospel tents (complete with oil-cloth signs, saxophone, and microphone); some have regular churches; some are radio preachers; the humbler ones have "store-front" churches or work in war plants and preach in their spare time.

### Religious and Racial Intolerance

There is a connection between the apocalyptic doctrine of these sects and religious and racial intolerance. The appeal is not only highly emotional but is grounded on old traditions—which in the South mean White Protestant Supremacy. A local preacher described it this way: "Their forerunners for generations preached from the crossroads and schoolhouses that 'Christ came to His Own and His Own received Him not'—'His Own' being the Jews." On a Friday night in January, 1943 at Missionary Tabernacle, the Reverend R. H. W. Lucas said that Jesus had destroyed Jerusalem because it was a Christ-crucifying city. The next Sunday morning it was stated over a national radio hook-up that the history of the Jews for the last 2,000 years is proof that God punishes a nation because of its sin. Many of these exhorters are members of the Klan off-shoot organizations, defiantly "American," suspecting "radicals," and completely at home with White Supremacy. For more than a decade—and increasingly during the past three years—these rustic

preachers have been spreading their brand of the Word. As feeling in Detroit became more aroused over the race issue, the effect of this kind of preaching was like pouring gasoline on a bonfire.

### Union League and Labor Unions

Feelings also have been kept on edge by labor conflicts. Detroit had never been a union town, but in the bad days of the depression a number of attempts were made to organize the auto workers. The Communists, through their Trade Union Unity League, led four little strikes of auto workers in January and February, 1933. Other groups made several attempts, mostly futile, to organize the auto industry. These moves excited the alarm of the local manufacturers, and the Detroit Union League called for strong measures against labor agitation. Many prominent industrialists were members of the Union League and its utterances were judged to be the voice of business.

Efforts to organize automobile unions—in the shape of the Associated Automobile Workers, the Automotive Industrial Workers Association, the Mechanics Educational Society of America, and others—were increased after the passage of the National Recovery Act. Gradually, the results began to show. The early unions were consolidated into the United Automobile Workers (affiliated with the C.I.O.), and in October, 1936 the Chrysler Corporation recognized the union. Early in 1937 General Motors also made a contract with the union.

### The Union and the Race Issue

Ford was left as the only big open-shop employer in Detroit. In order to assure its position with the other firms, the new auto workers' union had to organize Ford. It hesitated to act, however, not only because of the size of the job but because of Ford's Negro employees. There were thousands of Southern whites in the union, and it was too clear what their attitude toward Ford's Negro

workers would be. Further, many of Ford's Negro workers were anti-union. They were loyal to Ford as the one big industrialist who would hire Negroes.

When a Negro migrant from the South arrived in Detroit looking for a Ford job, he generally discovered that it was a good thing to get a letter from one of the Negro preachers before applying. Many of these pastors warned the migrants against listening to talk about unions and urged them to remember at all times that the one powerful friend the Negro had in Detroit was Henry Ford.

For years Ford had maintained a private police and detective system, and a part of the system was devoted to the oversight of Negro employees. What Ford's colored workers did at home and during their hours of recreation were matters of great interest to these Ford detectives. Organization of Ford's colored employees by the union meant not only overcoming their devotion to Ford, but also combating the influence of the spy system. Finally, in 1940, the campaign was undertaken. The C.I.O. sent money and its best organizers to help in the campaign. The full strength of the U.A.W. was enlisted in the effort, and the color line was declared to be a thing of the past.

The thing that eventually brought success in this campaign was an unexpected strike, which was not initiated by the union at all. Once the strike had developed, it became a question of whether Ford's Negro help at the River Rouge plant would go out or stay at work and break the strike. The union decided to make the strike official and redouble its efforts to win over the Negroes. A group of prominent Negro citizens of Detroit urged the Ford Negro employees to stand by the union. The result was a tremendous victory for the union in the ensuing National Labor Relations Board election and the collapse of the last opposition to the U.A.W. Today the largest union local in the world is U.A.W.-C.I.O. Local 600, the River Rouge Ford plant local. It has about 90,000 members, of whom 18,000 are Negroes.

The U.A.W.-C.I.O. now found itself one of the most important influential forces in Detroit, with 450,000 members. About 50,000 of these union men are Negroes. Negroes are prominent, and they occupy positions of responsibility in the organization. The recording secretaries at the River Rouge, Willow Run, and Highland Park Ford plants are all Negroes, and these jobs pay up to \$4,500 a year. The union leadership clearly recognizes the decisive role played by Negro participation, and it has tried to eliminate the color line. But many of the rank and file do not see it that way.

When the great crowd of 450,000 workers was swept into the union, each individual carried his private opinions with him. The help of the Negroes was so plainly essential that in the crisis all opposition was stilled. But as soon as the victory was won prejudice began to reassert itself. It would be difficult to find a more varied crowd than the union embraces. Nearly half are Catholics, and of them there is a very large Polish contingent. There are Jews and Christians, hard-shelled Southern Baptists, Socialists, Communists, and followers of Coughlin and Smith. Factionalism is nothing new for the union. It has been present from the beginning. The first blow-up came in 1938, when the union president, a Baptist preacher from Kansas City named Homer Martin, was thrown out. The Communist issue was present in the early stages and continues today. The racial and religious issues have smoldered constantly, intermittently bursting into flame.

There are two principal wings in the union. The right wing is led by Walter Reuther, international vice president and author of the Reuther Plan for "all-out" conversion of the auto industry to war purposes. The Socialists support this wing. The left wing, supported by the Communists, is led by George Addes, the international secretary-treasurer. The president, R. J. Thomas, has the job of trying to keep these two wings sufficiently reconciled to move forward at all.

This is the organization which has become one of the biggest things in Detroit today, poised as a counterbalance to the three big manufacturers—Ford, Chrysler, and General Motors. By the fall of 1942 both the union and the manufacturers had accomplished some remarkable triumphs, but nevertheless the war production program was bumping along. There was a labor shortage in some plants and hoarded labor in others. Skilled workers, not needed at the moment, were put to sweeping floors and paid big wages to prevent their going elsewhere. The slackness at Willow Run was a scandal; workers in the Chrysler Tank Arsenal went out on their “quickie.”

### **Political Corruption**

As the city expanded and near-by neighborhoods were swallowed up, the political organization of Detroit grew also, adapting itself clumsily to the demands of a mushroom town. Gone were the days of the tight machine of Zach Chandler. The record of corruption in Detroit's government has been duplicated in other American cities; there is nothing particularly novel about it. A generation ago, following a particularly bad case of graft, the board of aldermen was abolished and a nonpartisan city government installed. The councilmen, elected on a city-wide basis, are often men—such as baseball players and football coaches—who have been popular in other fields; and the council meetings have never been notable for close and careful attention to business.

In 1939, another of Detroit's periodic waves of reform struck the city. Homer Ferguson, a former Circuit Judge, was named as a one-man grand jury to investigate renewed charges of graft. As a result of his efforts enough evidence was discovered to convict a former mayor, prosecuting attorney, superintendent of police, sheriff, three city councilmen, and a number of police officials and gamblers. All went to prison except Mayor Reading and two Negro “numbers bankers.”

The investigation revealed, among other things, that the "policy racket" was in the control of Negroes and was run with the knowledge and protection of city officials. The Detroit police were found to be keeping white competition out of this racket, presumably because they felt they could keep the Negroes in line more easily.

It is interesting to note that despite the racial collisions and the frequent enforcement of Jim Crow practices in Detroit, Negroes have succeeded in getting some political preferment. There are two Negro assistant prosecuting attorneys, the State Labor Commissioner is a Negro, and one of the State Senators is a Negro. The Detroit Street Railway Company, which is owned by the city, employs about a thousand Negroes—both men and women—as motormen, bus drivers, conductors, and workers of other kinds. With the police it is another matter, and this has been a burning issue. Out of 3,600 policemen, only forty are Negroes. In addition, Southern whites have been taken into the force freely, and they have frequently shown a hostile attitude toward Negroes.

### **Housing Has Been Neglected**

The local political machine was perfectly willing to cooperate with Negro gamblers, but they had no interest whatever in the fact that most of Detroit's Negroes lived in two wretched slum areas. The two principal Negro districts in Detroit cover about thirty square blocks on the West Side and a larger district on the East Side called Paradise Valley. This latter name goes back to First World War days and the wonder of \$5 a day. "Goin' to Paradise" meant going to a job that paid more money than there was in the world. But the section did not look like Paradise in the beginning and it does not now. There are few city areas in the United States more jam-packed. Hastings Street, a dirty thoroughfare lined with dives and gin mills, is filled from dawn to dark and until the small morning hours with a dense crowd. Here—on the East



## DETROIT HOUSING HAS NOT KEPT UP WITH POPULATION

1930-1940

ADDITIONAL  
FAMILIES



ADDITIONAL  
DWELLING  
UNITS



1940-1942

ADDITIONAL  
FAMILIES  
(OF 4 PEOPLE)



ADDITIONAL  
DWELLING  
UNITS



Each family represents 10,000 families

Each house represents 10,000 dwelling units

PICTOGRAPH CORPORATION, FOR PUBLIC AFFAIRS COMMITTEE, INC.

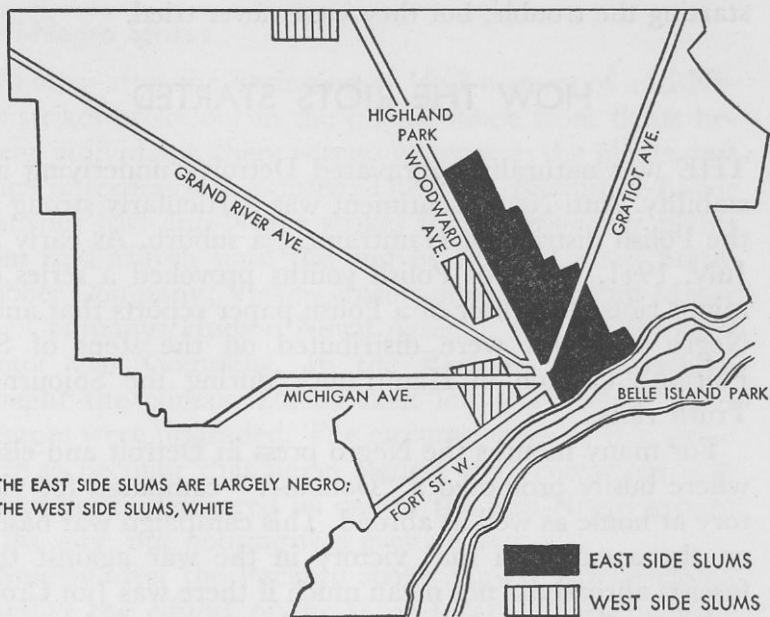
Side—live most of Detroit's Negroes. Almost everybody now has plenty of war wages to pay for lodging, but decent houses simply do not exist. The only recourse the Negroes have is to cram themselves into the filthy valley tenements.

The explanation of Paradise Valley may be found partly in the fact that public housing has never roused much enthusiasm in Detroit as an issue. The ups and downs of the city's growth paralleled the ups and downs in automobile manufacture. They were accompanied by alternate real estate booms and deflations. During the

booms whole districts of jerry-built two-family houses were constructed and rented for excessive prices. When the depression came, no money was spent for the upkeep of these flimsy shells. Arthur Pound says that "probably Detroit has lost enough in real estate values to provide really good housing for its Negro population," but real estate interests had other notions. There are many parts of town where Negroes cannot rent at all. As a result it costs a Negro family as much as \$50 a month to rent a single room. The real estate men have opposed government housing and rent control, and on one occasion when private enterprise undertook a housing project, the result was the conviction of three city councilmen on graft charges.

Over a period of many years there have been many Negroes who were determined to do better for themselves and who have settled in white neighborhoods. Frequently there has been trouble about this. One of the conflicts became a celebrated case. In 1925, Dr. Ossian Sweet moved with his family into a white district. This was at a time when the Ku Klux Klan was particularly strong—the Klan almost succeeded in electing a Detroit mayor in the early 1920's. A hue and cry was raised against Sweet. The house was rushed by a mob and one of the mob was killed. Dr. Sweet and his family were charged with murder. They were defended by Clarence Darrow in a trial before Judge Frank Murphy (now U. S. Supreme Court Justice), and finally acquitted. The most recent conflict over Negro real estate occurred in 1942, when strenuous attempts were made to prevent Negroes from moving into the Sojourner Truth Housing Project. (Sojourner Truth, once a slave, became a famous reformer. She lived in Detroit at one time and died at Battle Creek in 1883.) The situation was made the more difficult when the Federal Public Housing Authority reversed itself several times on the question of whether or not Negroes should be permitted to occupy the dwellings that

# THE COST OF SLUMS IN DETROIT



## INFANT MORTALITY

PER 1,000 LIVE BIRTHS, 1930

DETROIT AS A WHOLE

64.7

EAST SIDE SLUMS

122

WEST SIDE SLUMS

79.5



## TUBERCULOSIS DEATH RATE

PER 100,000 POPULATION, 1930-38

DETROIT AS A WHOLE

82.7

EAST SIDE SLUMS

418

WEST SIDE SLUMS

126



PICTOGRAPH CORPORATION, FOR PUBLIC AFFAIRS COMMITTEE, INC.

had been planned for them. In the end, troops moved them in. Three white men were indicted for their share in starting the trouble, but they were never tried.

## HOW THE RIOTS STARTED

THE war naturally aggravated Detroit's underlying instability. Anti-Negro sentiment was particularly strong in the Polish districts of Hamtramck, a suburb. As early as July, 1941, gangs of Polish youths provoked a series of minor riots. An editor of a Polish paper reports that anti-Negro handbills were distributed on the steps of St. Florian's Church in Hamtramck during the Sojourner Truth riots.

For many months the Negro press in Detroit and elsewhere busily promoted a "Double-V" campaign for victory at home as well as abroad. This campaign was based on the assumption that victory in the war against the fascists abroad did not mean much if there was Jim Crow at home. Colored soldiers had told a thousand bitter stories of discrimination and lack of respect for the uniform. The killings of colored soldiers at Alexandria, Louisiana, and in other Southern communities were taken to heart. The hopes roused by President Roosevelt's Executive Order 8802, issued June 25, 1941, forbidding job discrimination in plants with war contracts slowly faded.\* The Committee on Fair Employment Practice, set up by the President shortly after the issuance of the Executive Order, was left to pine away without money or authority and was finally placed under the War Manpower Commission. If the government would do nothing, there was nothing left but the union and the determination of the Negroes themselves. Colored workers who had been promoted to more skilled jobs were ready to hold on for dear life to their new

\* For the story of Executive Order 8802, see *The Negro and the War*, by Earl Brown and George R. Leighton, Public Affairs Pamphlet No. 72, 1942.

jobs, and the brimstone evangelists, viewing with alarm this resolution of the Negroes, whipped up resentment.

### Anti-Negro Strikes

Shortly after the beginning of 1943 a series of anti-Negro strikes broke out in the plants. Aside from fights between individuals, there was no violence in the plants, but much bitterness was aroused. The U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics lists anti-Negro strikes in the following plants from mid-March until the end of May: United States Rubber Company; Vickers, Incorporated; Hudson Motor Car Company; Hudson Naval Arsenal; and the Packard Motor Car Company. In the Packard strike, which brought the climax, 26,883 men left work when three Negroes were upgraded. The circumstances of this strike were so peculiar that union leaders were convinced that it had been engineered by one of the anti-Negro groups in the city, but nothing was ever proved.

Shortly after the Packard strike Mayor Jeffries called together the editors of the three local dailies, the *Free Press*, the *News*, and the *Times*, to take counsel. The conference over, nothing was done. A procession of Negro leaders and a few prominent white citizens besought the Mayor to take heed and act before the explosion. The Mayor listened, but appeared to be more confused after these visits than before. Then everyone relaxed to await the inevitable. It came on the evening of June 20, 1943.

### What Actually Happened

Belle Isle lies in the Detroit River, connected with the city and Grand Boulevard by a bridge. There were probably a hundred thousand persons in the park that hot, humid Sunday, and the greater number seem to have been Negroes. The atmosphere was anything but peaceful. Tension had increased to the breaking point. An argument between a Negro and a white man became a fist fight and the fighting spread.

A hurry call was made for the police, but by the time they arrived the brawl, involving some two hundred white sailors by this time, was eddying across the bridge into the riverside park on the mainland near the Naval Armory. The news that fighting had broken out traveled like the wind. A young man in a colored night club on Hastings Street is supposed to have grabbed the microphone about 11:30 and urged the five hundred customers present to "come on and take care of a bunch of whites who have killed a colored woman and her baby at Belle Isle Park." This rumor was, of course, false. It was matched by another story, which spread through the white districts, that Negroes had raped and killed a white woman on the park bridge. By midnight fighting and looting had spread into a dozen different districts and Paradise Valley was going crazy. By two o'clock that morning a crowd of Negroes stopped an East Side street car and stoned white factory workers who were passengers. White men coming from work at the Chevrolet Gear and Axle plant, three miles away from the center of Paradise Valley, were attacked by a Negro mob.

Alfred McClung Lee, chairman of the Sociology Department of Wayne University, and Norman Humphrey, Assistant Professor of Sociology at the same institution, have pieced together a remarkable timetable of the violence in *Race Riot*,\* a report on the riot. Both the authors were present and moved about the city while the fighting was in progress. Their report shows that:

At four o'clock in the morning (Monday, June 21) there was a meeting in the office of Police Commissioner Witherspoon to determine action. Mayor Jeffries, Colonel Krech (the U. S. Army commander of the Detroit area), Captain Leonard of the Michigan State Police, John Bugas (in charge of the local office of the F.B.I.), and Sheriff Baird were present. Colonel Krech told the Mayor that the military police could be on duty in Detroit in

\* Listed under *For Further Reading*, page 31.

forty-nine minutes after a request from the Mayor had been cleared through the Governor and the proper U. S. Army officials. Nothing was done about this at the time, and by 6:30 a.m. Commissioner Witherspoon decided that there was a let-up in "serious rioting."

### Negroes Ask for Troops

But there was no let-up. At 8:30 in the morning a Negro delegation asked the Mayor to send for troops. At nine o'clock Commissioner Witherspoon asked the Mayor for troops. Mayor Jeffries telephoned to the Governor, who transmitted the request by telephone to the Sixth Service Command Headquarters in Chicago. By eleven o'clock it was known that troops could not come unless martial law was declared. Governor Kelly hesitated to do so. By this time gangs of white hoodlums were roaming the streets burning Negro cars.

The police had already shown themselves to be helpless or negligent. On the previous night, police had been stationed outside the all-night Roxy movie theater. A witness reported that a threatening white crowd assembled at the entrance and every time a Negro came out of the theater the mob went for him. When the witness asked the police to get Negroes a safe-conduct through the mob, the officers replied, "See the chief about it!"

At four o'clock on Monday afternoon Major General Aurand arrived from Chicago. By that time, according to Lee and Humphrey, "the crowds of whites were increasing in size on Woodward Avenue. Milling packs of human animals hunted and killed any of the easily visible black prey which chanced into the territory."

At 6:30 Monday night, just as Mayor Jeffries was going on the air with a plea for a return to sanity, four white boys, aged 16 to 20, shot down Moses Kiska, a middle-aged Negro, "because we didn't have anything to do." Still no troops, and all through the evening, after even the Mayor had admitted that the city administration and

police were unable to deal with the situation, there went on an endless amount of official confusion until, at last, it was discovered precisely what had to be done to get federal intervention. Just before midnight President Roosevelt proclaimed a state of emergency, and by Tuesday morning 6,000 troops in trucks and jeeps were patrolling the city. The hold of the city authorities had so completely collapsed that it took the United States Army to get twenty-nine Negro members of the graduating class of Northeastern High School away from the closing exercises in safety.

Two days later Governor Kelly decided to ease restrictions a little, and by degrees the city began to breathe again. On Monday, June 28, Commissioner Witherspoon made a report to the City Council justifying his conduct and that of the police. "This was not believed to be the proper time," he said, "to attempt to solve a racial conflict and a basic antagonism which had been growing and festering for years. Such a policy would well have precipitated a race riot at a much earlier date and one of much more serious proportions. The fact remains that this department did not precipitate the riot."

### **Subsequent Investigations**

Councilman George Edwards urged that a grand jury be called to investigate fifteen unsolved murders. Both the Council and Police Commissioner rejected the idea.

"Don't get the impression that I'm afraid of a grand jury," Commissioner Witherspoon said, "but it would be an unfair position to put any judge in." In the end the Council smothered any action likely to uncover unpleasant facts, but it did appoint a five-man committee to plan and finance new housing and recreation facilities.

In the succeeding days and weeks there was much dodging of responsibility. The easiest "out" was to blame the Negroes, and this was done. On June 30, Mayor Jeffries said that he was "rapidly losing patience with those



Negro leaders who insisted that their people do not and will not trust policemen and the Police Department. After what happened I am certain that some of these leaders are more vocal in their caustic criticism of the Police Department than they are in educating their own people to their responsibilities as citizens."

Shortly after this, Prosecutor Dowling was visited by some members of the Mayor's Interracial Peace Board. Apparently unaware that a reporter was in the room, the Prosecutor not only announced himself as opposed to a grand jury but declared that in his opinion the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the *Michigan Chronicle*, the local colored weekly, were responsible for the riot. The report of the Governor's investigating committee, issued August 11, also attempted to whitewash the local authorities. In the official statements about the riot no real effort has been made to deal directly with the more obvious reasons for it.

One of the most extreme proposals for meeting the situation came from Attorney General Biddle—a proposal that has cropped up in other circles. It will be recalled that in the previous March he had written to a Detroit reporter that he, the Attorney General, could see no basis for action by the Department of Justice. But on July 15, he wrote a letter to President Roosevelt in which he suggested "that careful consideration be given to limiting, and in some instances putting an end to Negro migrations into communities which cannot absorb them, either on account of their physical limitations or cultural background. This needs immediate and careful consideration. . . . It would seem pretty clear that no more Negroes should move to Detroit. Yet, I know of no controls being considered or exercised. You might wish to have the recommendations of Mr. McNutt as to what could and should be done."

In commenting on this statement, John Chamberlain, economic and political specialist, declared that: "Only a

severe case of emotional shell-shock could have pushed Attorney General Biddle into suggesting that Negroes be chained to their places of abode, for all the world as if they were serfs on medieval manors, or slaves on the Roman *latifundia*. In Booker T. Washington's day the Negro might have taken Biddle's suggestion lying down. But no longer. Every Negro leader of any importance stresses the necessity of being polite but firm in insisting on the full protection of the Bill of Rights. This time the Negro is not going to be smacked down without making a fight of it."

## LESSONS FROM DETROIT

ALTHOUGH the peculiar forces in Detroit have made the racial situation much more acute there than in most other cities, it must not be forgotten that the same forces are at work, in greater or lesser degree, in other places. Meantime, because of the tensions that existed in Detroit months before the riot, it is reasonable to ask, what steps could have been taken to prevent the outbreak? The following are some of the suggestions that have been made by qualified observers after a careful study of the factors leading up to the riot.

### Emergency Measures for Detroit

1. The Federal Public Housing Authority should have taken a firm stand in seeing that Negro tenants moved into the Sojourner Truth Housing Project at the appointed time instead of pursuing a shifting course when objections were raised by anti-Negro whites. The Sojourner Truth riot in February, 1942, was, in many respects, a dress rehearsal for the bigger and more tragic outburst sixteen months later. By deciding to turn the project over to white tenants after it had been built expressly for Negroes, and then finally deciding to make it a Negro project anyhow, the Federal Public Housing

Authority not only encouraged those whites who opposed Negro occupancy to intensify their efforts to keep the Negroes out, but it also made the Negroes bitter.

Then, after three white men had been indicted by a federal grand jury for inciting a riot during the Sojourner Truth trouble, they should have been brought to trial. Not only is it unfair for the government to hold such serious indictments over American citizens' heads, especially in wartime, but it is equally unjust to permit persons to go free if they are guilty of such charges. If the government had taken positive action in the Sojourner Truth matter, it might have prevented more serious trouble later.

2. Strikes by white workers in protest against the up-grading of Negroes resulted in the loss of three million man-hours of war production in Detroit in the first six months of 1943. The National War Labor Board and the War Manpower Commission knew this. Together they had power to stop these strikes. If the responsible government agencies had stepped in and demanded that the employers and the unions end anti-Negro strikes, and then seen to it that they actually were abolished, in all probability there would have been no race riot in Detroit. These strikes were the fuses that touched off the dynamite.

3. It is evident that city and state authorities should have enlisted the cooperation of the proper federal authorities in arranging a plan to enable federal troops to take over as soon as local officials saw that the situation had gotten beyond the control of the police. According to Mayor Jeffries, there were thirteen hours—from 9:00 a.m. until 10:00 p.m.—between the request for troops and their arrival. Most of the killing, looting, and burning took place in that period.

### Long-Range Preventive Measures

1. A strong working committee of colored and white citizens representing all groups in the city should have been organized to help solve Detroit's race problems long

before the riot broke out. If such a committee had been set up with the full support of the city government, it would have improved the morale of both races and would have curbed black and white troublemakers.

2. If the city had started almost any kind of housing program to relieve the overcrowding in the Negro areas, much would have been done to lessen the tension that caused the riot.

3. By intimidating Negroes over a long period of time as a matter of routine and by encouraging and winking at vice in the Negro districts, the Detroit police had engendered hate, lawlessness, and a lack of respect for themselves among the colored population. This could have been avoided if the police department had insisted on fair, efficient, and thorough policing of the Negro districts.

4. By playing up crimes committed by Negroes and giving the impression that Negroes are more lawless than whites, several of the Detroit newspapers have aroused needless anxiety about the possibility of Negroes' attacking white persons. A more constructive news program on the part of the Detroit press would have helped to reduce racial tension in the city. Instead, sensational stories about crimes committed by Negroes grew into all kinds of wild rumors, thereby helping to bring about the riot.

5. The United Auto Workers union might have done more to prevent the unauthorized anti-Negro strikes that broke out in many plants. Under its contract with the automobile plants the union was responsible for the education of its members on such vital questions as giving Negroes a fair deal in employment opportunities.

6. The owners and managers of war plants in which anti-Negro strikes took place did little or nothing to punish the culprits. Nor did they start or aid in any civic program for better racial understanding. If the employers or their managers had shown leadership in this respect, they would have contributed much toward creating better race relations and preventing the riot.

7. Investigations have indicated that there are a number of teachers with strong anti-Negro prejudices in the Detroit public schools. If the city officials had uncovered those who brought these prejudices into the classroom and dismissed them from the school system, they would have struck a blow at a root of racial conflict: wild white and colored youths. Because of the activities of these teachers, hundreds of white young people were inflamed against Negroes.

## LESSONS FOR OTHER COMMUNITIES

THE lessons learned from the Detroit riot should, meanwhile, be used as far as possible by other cities in which racial tension is acute and may sooner or later break. For, after all, racial conflict is by no means confined to Detroit. It is, unfortunately, a grave national problem confronting cities in all sections of the country. The following suggestions for action are offered to the people of any city who are or may be confronted with such strife:

### I. Responsibility of Government

Wherever there are symptoms of racial trouble, the local and federal authorities should enlist the assistance of employers, unions, and leading white and colored citizens in formulating a program to prevent the symptoms from becoming more serious and to eradicate them, if possible. Although the local authorities are primarily responsible for maintaining order, Negroes generally have much more faith in the federal than in local governments. Such federal agencies as the Civil Liberties Unit of the Department of Justice, the Federal Public Housing Authority, the National Labor Relations Board, and the Fair Employment Practice Committee, can often do more to achieve racial tranquillity and cooperation among the Negroes than state or municipal officials.

## 2. Interracial Cooperation

Responsible white and colored citizens should form committees in those cities where trouble exists and work diligently to effect better relations. This has been done in some cities. These committees should not be composed entirely of professional social workers, racialists, dispensers of racial good will, or "name people" for window-dressing purposes. They should include employers, employees, and union officials. They should represent a cross-section of each community so that complaints and ideas of various groups could be heard and discussed. They should be backed by the city governments but must remain entirely free of political tint. In the final analysis, the Negro and white residents of a city must solve their common problems. In order to do it, they must learn to work together.

## 3. Education

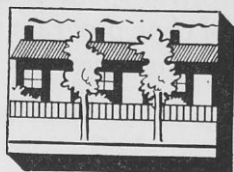
Both schools and churches should inaugurate a vigorous program of education designed to eliminate prejudice and to promote cooperation in overcoming racial discrimination and injustice.

## 4. Housing

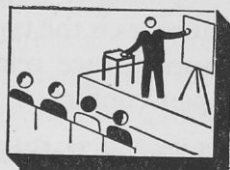
Housing conditions in every war center in the country are bad. But they are worst in Negro districts. In those cities with serious housing shortages every effort should be made to provide additional dwelling units immediately. Because it is often impractical or impossible to construct new houses today, city officials should use the press and the radio to stress the necessity for both white and colored citizens to forget their prejudices about living in the same neighborhood.

A similar program should be pursued regarding public parks and other recreational centers where racial friction often occurs. City officials and civic leaders of both races should promote public programs in which members of

## HOW TO LESSEN RACIAL TENSION



BETTER HOUSING



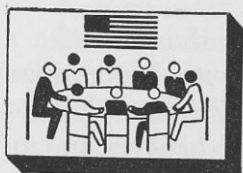
LEARNING DEMOCRATIC  
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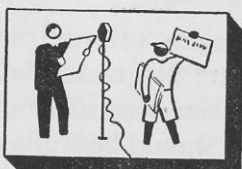
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DISCIPLINARY ACTION  
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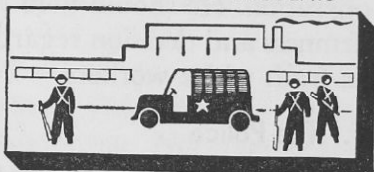
COOPERATION  
BY PRESS AND RADIO



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AND PROMPT ACTION  
IN ALL "INCIDENTS"



EFFICIENT POLICING  
OF NEGRO DISTRICTS



IMMEDIATE AVAILABILITY  
OF FEDERAL TROOPS

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both races could take part. These programs should be held in parks and other public places in order to bring the two races together in a wholesome and constructive way. A bi-racial community song festival sponsored by Negro and white churches is the type of civic program that would probably improve race relations in cities where there is danger of open conflict.

### **5. Responsibility of Unions**

Union officials should discipline any worker who causes trouble when a Negro is hired or upgraded. Where there is no union, the employer should do so. Resolute action by the government, employers, and unions, when anti-Negro strikes and other expressions of racial ill will occur in war plants, is necessary to prevent more serious outbreaks and also to maintain war production.

### **6. Employers' Responsibility**

Owners and managers of war plants should make a real effort to integrate Negro workers with a minimum of friction. This has been done successfully in many plants, and their experiences should be studied. Whenever an employer decides to hire or upgrade a Negro, he should inform the union and the foremen and ask their full cooperation. He should hold to his employment policy with firmness and decision regardless of opposition from unions or from white workers.

### **7. The Police**

The police should patrol the Negro districts of cities with the same efficiency and responsibility with which they patrol white districts. Negroes should not be intimidated; neither should they be handled with kid gloves. Either policy results in a loss of respect for the police as well as for law and order. It is particularly important that the police neither encourage nor tolerate vice in Negro districts.



## 8. The Press

Instead of playing up crime and other kinds of unsavory news about Negroes—a custom of most newspapers—the press should carry constructive news and feature stories about colored people, thereby helping to create better opinion of them. In cities where there are Negro papers, they too must be on guard against handling news in a way to cause friction. Both the Negro and the white press should point out to members of each race the necessity for respecting other people's rights on the job and in public places, regardless of color, religion, or national origin.

### FOR FURTHER READING

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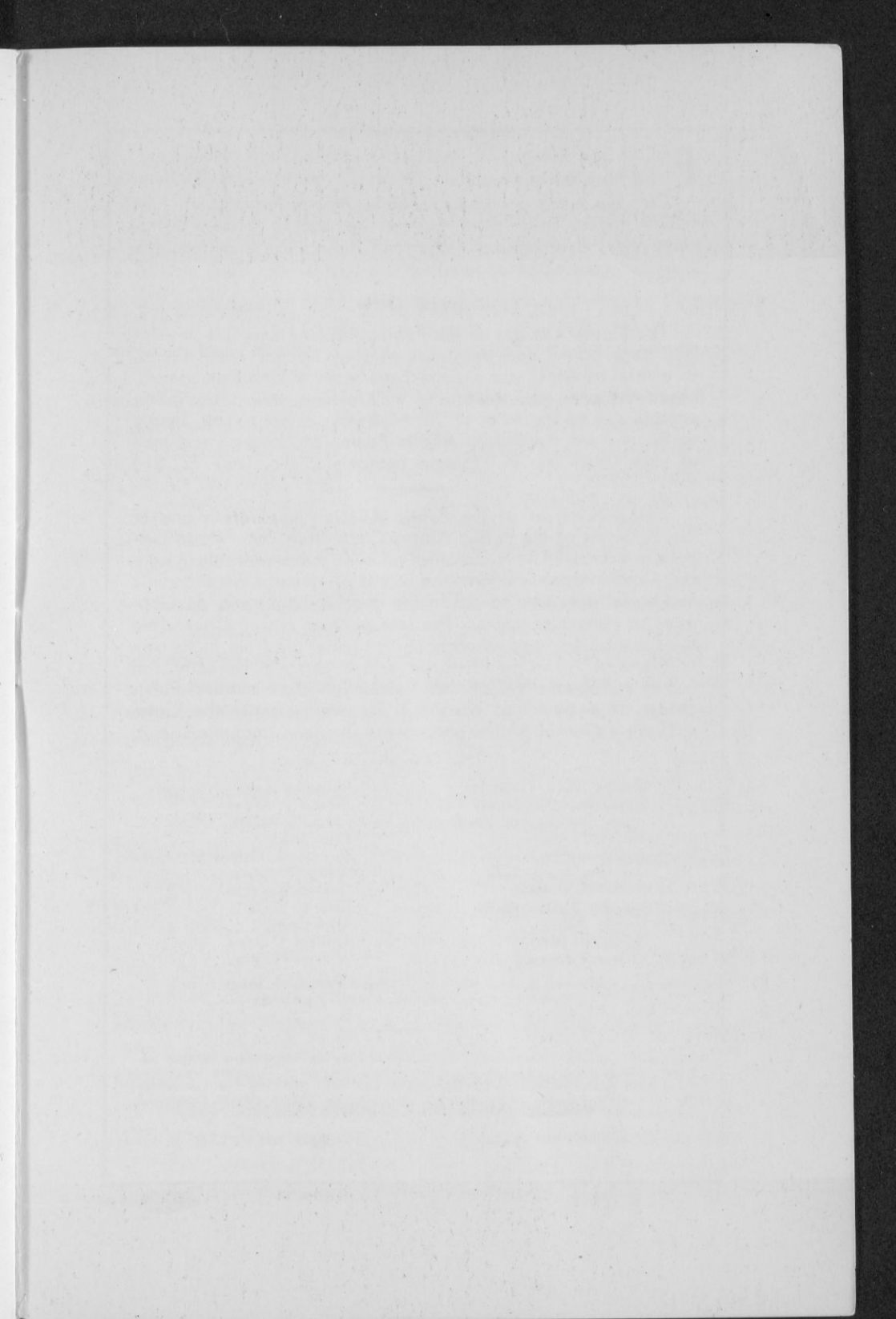
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