

Introduction

ON JULY 2 and 3, 1917, rampaging white men and women looted and torched black homes and businesses and assaulted African Americans in the small industrial city of East St. Louis, Illinois. The mob, which included police officers and National Guardsmen, wounded or killed many black residents and terrorized others into fleeing the city. The rampagers acted upon a virulent form of racism that made “black skin . . . a death warrant,” in the words of white newspaper reporter Jack Lait of the *St. Louis Republic*. According to one African American eyewitness, “When there was a big fire, the rioters . . . stop[ped] to amuse themselves, and [threw black] children . . . into the fire.” The riots disrupted interstate commerce and industrial production, prompting Illinois authorities to mobilize additional National Guard units to suppress the mass violence. When the terror ended, white attackers had destroyed property worth three million dollars, razed several neighborhoods, injured hundreds, and forced at least seven thousand black townspeople to seek refuge across the Mississippi River in St. Louis, Missouri. By the official account, nine white men and thirty-nine black men, women, and children lost their lives. Some thought that

more white than black people had been killed. And others said that more than nine white people and many more—perhaps up to five hundred—black citizens had perished.¹

Scholars generally think of East St. Louis, Illinois, as the site of the first of the major World War I-era urban race riots. They attribute the clashes mainly to interracial competition for jobs and housing in the city, then a railroad freight center second in size only to Chicago and the industrial hub of meatpacking plants, iron, glass, and aluminum processing factories, and other manufacturers for the St. Louis, Missouri, metropolitan region. The publications of pre-1945 residents no longer exist, but the voluminous transcripts of a congressional investigation of the July violence are readily accessible, leading scholars to assign the causes of the racial tumult to white reactions to job-seeking black southern laborers rather than to the increasingly assertive black drive for independence from white political machines. In one of the two scholarly monographs that examine pre-1945 East St. Louis, sociologist Elliott Rudwick uses social strain theory to argue that the Great Migration of black southerners moving north to fill labor shortages during World War I exacerbated racial animosity and existing tensions between black and white working people over employment, housing, politics, and other issues. Rudwick finds white industrial workers chiefly responsible for the horrific massacre. Similarly, American studies scholar Malcolm McLaughlin explores “why the local white community broke out in such savagery on 2 July.” He discusses, more so than Rudwick, the city’s saloon culture, connections between organized criminals and local politicians and businessmen, the presence of white women rioters, and black residents’ armed self-defense during the riot. Still, McLaughlin accepts Rudwick’s argument that white workers bore major responsibility for the antiblack atrocities.²

American Pogrom centers African Americans in East St. Louis, from the colonial era to 1945, in the context of the black quest to achieve freedom, a multiracial democracy, and human rights.³ It concurs with the findings of Rudwick and McLaughlin on many of the particulars, but places the violence within context of African American politics and grassroots efforts to attain equality and power. Politics, in this sense, encompasses not only political parties and government but also a wide array of groups, including community institutions and voluntary and advocacy organizations, interested in influencing events, shaping policy, and wielding power. *American*

Pogrom follows a community-centered approach similar to that used by historian Richard W. Thomas in his treatment of African Americans in Detroit, Michigan. Thomas sees “the community building process as the sum total of the historical efforts of black individuals, institutions, and organizations to survive and progress . . . and to create and sustain a genuine and creative communal presence” in the context of the black “struggle for freedom and equality.” But in adopting this approach, this work neither negates nor minimizes African American struggles that occurred, for example, at the workplace. African Americans often tied noncommunity issues to concerns of their community and used their culture and institutions to shape and sustain their workplace and other noncommunity experiences. *American Pogrom* regards the May and July 1917 violence as a political watershed, when white city leaders derailed the black quest for power by institutionalizing limits on black residents’ ability to advance black community interests. Black East St. Louisans continued to participate in the political arena, and their participation was tolerated, if not welcomed, as long as they neither challenged white residents’ entitlement to resources and control of city government nor asserted independence from white political leaders.⁴

This work sees the origins of mass racial violence, in the words of historian William Tuttle Jr., “embedded deep in the social, economic, and political structure[s]” of cities. It concurs with sociologist Allen D. Grimshaw that no direct relationship exists “between the level of social tension and the eruption of social violence” and agrees with historian Roberta Senechal that social strain theory lacks the precision to explain adequately why race riots occur. Senechal observes that since the 1830s, social instability and racial tension had been persistent features in northern cities but notes that only some of these cities experienced race riots. Placing the East St. Louis race riots within a long-term historical framework demonstrates that social strain and racial animosities had existed for decades before and after the 1917 race riots. The race riots, therefore, had much to do with white reaction to perceived threats to white racial entitlements by black community building and politics in context of the historic African American quest for freedom and equality.⁵

American Pogrom reconstructs black residents’ community building and political actions, including their pursuit of patronage—a form of resource distribution—and political power. African American voters in East St.

Louis had recognized before the end of the nineteenth century that patronage provided a modicum of representation and a sense of empowerment (an understanding shared by other communities, as noted in William Grimshaw's scholarship on black Chicago). Black East St. Louisans interacted significantly, and at times dramatically, with white working-class residents and employers. But their relations with land-interest politicians and businessmen were pivotal, largely because these men controlled patronage, directed the local economy, and wielded much political power. Most politicians in East St. Louis, including the political bosses, were businessmen involved in real estate activities, from rental and sale of commercial and residential properties to land speculation and development. African Americans engaged influential local real estate factions not only over issues of housing, residential segregation, and landlord-tenant relations but also concerning matters of urban land development, landownership, homeownership, and private property rights. From the 1890s into the 1940s, black townspeople confronted this coterie of real estate politician-businessmen and their allies who sought to control, channel, or otherwise restrict black people's community institutions and political actions. In 1917, some of these land-interest men, with the assistance of the police, used mass physical violence against the black populace and nearly succeeded in turning East St. Louis into an all-white, or sundown, town. For several years after 1917, black residents struggled to overcome that violent political derailment that brought in its wake ghettoization, intensified de facto housing segregation, and widespread discrimination. By the mid-1920s, they had rebuilt their political infrastructure and continued their historic quest against those who sought to deny them political equality and participation in municipal government.⁶

In the late nineteenth century, African Americans in East St. Louis were busily building institutions and expanding their political influence. African Americans established a vibrant community in a border region where northern industrial and southern folk cultures overlapped. Like African Americans in Ohio River border cities such as Pittsburgh and Cincinnati, black East St. Louisans confronted varying patterns of racism, cleaved into social classes, and engaged in many forms of political action. African Americans in East St. Louis, like those in Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, and other industrializing midwestern cities, lived and worked among white people yet apart from them. After 1870, black East St. Louisan men voted

and exercised other rights of citizenship; all black residents availed themselves of integrated public transportation and, earlier than black Americans in other cities, entered industrial employment in appreciable numbers. But like African Americans in much of the United States, black East St. Louisans endured segregation and discrimination in employment and public education. The vast majority of the men, barred by employers and trade unions from higher-paying, skilled positions, found themselves in manufacturing occupations in meatpacking, iron founding, glassmaking, railroad yards, and freight houses. Most women who entered the workforce toiled as domestics and laundresses. Black children attended segregated schools, even though black families resided within majority white neighborhoods across the city despite state legislation banning school segregation. Black residents, however, pursued their interests by using their community institutions and politics to extract patronage and other concessions from city leaders.⁷

Leading white politician-businessmen who shaped industrial East St. Louis held the key to black townspeople's social, political, and economic advancement. These men, including mayors John Bowman, Melbern M. Stephens, and John Chamberlain as well as machine boss politicians like Thomas Canavan and George Locke Tarlton (generally known as Locke Tarlton), positioned themselves at the center of the city's economic and political development, combining real estate ventures with politics. Just as scholar Edward Greer describes local businessmen as decisive political actors in Gary, Indiana, an industrial satellite of Chicago, so, too, were the politician-businessmen of East St. Louis. Similarly, in industrializing nineteenth-century American cities like Paterson, New Jersey, as historian Herbert Gutman illustrates, it was nonindustrial property owners, not industrialists, who commanded local politics and economic growth. Politician-businessmen in East St. Louis, no different from their counterparts in Gary or Paterson, maintained their rule over challengers, including industrialists and black and white working-class and middle-class residents.⁸

Black East St. Louisan voters, politicians, and activists devised various tactics and strategies in their increasingly difficult encounters with the politician-businessmen, who commanded politics, directed economic growth, and tolerated, if they did not actually encourage, a saloon culture of gambling, prostitution, and organized crime. African American residents held their own in the political arena, swinging closely contested

elections, demanding and receiving patronage, and running for—and sometimes winning—political office. They achieved such gains while the city's black population was on the increase, swelled by the continuous arrival of black southerners who joined with long-term black residents in using the ballot to exert political influence. But while black townspeople positioned themselves to obtain their share of resources and power, white politician-businessmen began to view them as a threat to their political interests.⁹

The period from 1900 to 1915 witnessed a black East St. Louisan community full of political vitality and social ferment, one ready to protest to improve conditions and to maintain rights of citizenship—not a nadir of deteriorating race relations. Like African Americans in other locales, those in East St. Louis often faced a seemingly “tragic sameness” of “caste-like discrimination and prejudice,” as described by David Katzman and other historians. But in East St. Louis, black people did more than just react to white hostility; they organized their community to advance their interests. They built institutions and a rich urban culture, and, as historian Joe William Trotter Jr. observes regarding African Americans in the border region of the Ohio River valley, they developed complex patterns of “occupational status and class structure.” In addition, black activists in East St. Louis formed numerous political and social clubs to achieve specific objectives as they confronted a multifaceted racism. Black East St. Louisans did not face unrelenting racial hostility: their leaders did succeed in winning a certain level of patronage as well as appointive and elective offices. But this success in the political arena concerned white political bosses. Black community leaders remained influential in city government, for instance, gaining political positions while African Americans in Detroit, Cleveland, and other cities saw their opportunity to seek office drastically diminished when white officials rendered the black vote ineffective through the institution of citywide direct primary elections. Black East St. Louisans' achievements in the political arena also worried progressive reformers who saw African American influence in city government as a black cog in the white political machine they sought to dismantle. These reformers considered black people's support of white bosses to be evidence of an African American proclivity, dating back to Reconstruction, toward inefficient and corrupt government. By 1915, African Americans found themselves at the center of a heated power struggle between white machine politician-

businessmen and progressive reformers as these groups vied for control of city hall and the future of East St. Louis.¹⁰

Unsure of the outcome of this struggle, certain politician-businessmen decided to employ mass racial violence to eliminate the threats that they perceived from rapid shifts in East St. Louis's political culture between 1915 and mid-1917. The mass antiblack violence of May 1917, relatively benign when compared to the July massacre, revolved not around social strain between black and white workers but around politicized interactions between black residents and various white groups. Black and white factions pursued their interests during the booming wartime economy, and the sharp upsurge in the number of black southerners arriving in East St. Louis as part of the Great Migration altered the existing political balance. Black politicians, noting that migrants boosted the African American vote, demanded more patronage. Several black politicians, thinking they had the numbers and votes to compete effectively with political machines, began renegotiating their relationship to white boss politicians. They maneuvered to end their status as a political "submachine" by forging an independent black political apparatus. Their actions worried not only machine boss politicians and progressive reformers but also Central Trades and Labor Union (CTLU) officials. Union leaders, viewing industrial labor shortages and workers' willingness to strike as opportunities for mass union organizing, prompted white laborers to unionize by raising fears of black migrants. The labor organization ignored the fact that black workers often cooperated in work actions and strikes with white workers, occasionally acted as strike leaders, and usually refused to break strikes and that pro-labor union black politicians and workers had sought the CTLU's assistance in organizing African American laborers. At the same time, white political bosses—chiefly those associated with the real estate industry—orchestrated a terrorist assault in May in an effort to destroy a nascent black political machine capable of altering the balance of power. When these white leaders and their allies failed to achieve their desired results, they plotted another round of mass antiblack violence.¹¹

The East St. Louis massacre of July 1917 and its immediate aftermath represent one violent episode in the ongoing American story of mobilizing people by race to achieve certain objectives. White machine politicians, through their proxies, unleashed murderous antiblack violence to terrorize African Americans into leaving the city en masse. The July event

was an American pogrom, or ethnic cleansing, in which officials directed the organized, physical destruction of a racially defined community. The July rampage followed nearly three decades of an unbroken series of mass antiblack attacks, a number of which also deserve the label “pogrom.” The most dramatic and best-known of these episodes occurred in 1898 in Wilmington, North Carolina; in 1900 in New Orleans and New York City; in 1906 in Atlanta; and in 1908 in Springfield, Illinois. In each case, local white business and political leaders, policemen, and others instigated, encouraged, or participated in assaults to destroy African American businesses, institutions, communities, and lives. The July havoc served as a model for later mass antiblack violence, for instance, in August 1917 in Houston, Texas; in 1918 in Philadelphia; in 1919 in many urban and rural locales, including Chicago, Washington, D.C., and Elaine, Arkansas; and in 1921 in Tulsa, Oklahoma. The East St. Louis pogroms were but one episode in a violent and protracted struggle by various white factions to maintain legalized racism in the South and to reconfigure white supremacy into a form appropriate for the urban industrial North. The violence dramatized the limitations imposed upon any attempt by black Americans to build a political structure that advocated African American interests in a manner equal to and independent of white-dominated political institutions. Local authorities, progressive reformers, and real estate men used the pogrom to oust black politicians from office; to neutralize, if not eliminate, African American influence in electoral politics; to reconstruct city government; and to institute a rigorous *de facto* residential segregation.¹²

Between 1917 and 1929, black East St. Louisans engaged in a wide range of political activities as they recovered from the violence of July 1917. They articulated through various New Negro movements such ideals as militant defense against mass racial violence, economic self-help, building a black city within a white city, and racial solidarity. These New Negro actions spanned the ideological spectrum from working outside the white-dominated political system to asserting African American interests within mainstream politics. At the same time, African American men and women, many arriving from the South, obtained industrial employment, expanded black community institutions and culture, and, together with established townspeople, rebuilt black political influence. Black residents used ghettoization, a process by which white authorities created all-black residential districts, to mobilize for various causes, from improving neighborhoods to

regaining political power. By the mid-1920s, black East St. Louisans concentrated their efforts on political actions to improve their conditions and gain patronage. They overcame their fear of another outbreak of mass racial violence and again challenged white politician-businessmen and others for a share of resources and power, but this time within the framework of established political parties. Black politicians and activists, both men and women, rebuilt their presence in the city's political arena through the precinct committee system, the very structure that progressive reformers had instituted after July 1917 to replace ward-based elections in an attempt to weaken black political strength.¹³

African Americans, working against the legacy of the pogroms, built interracial coalitions to overcome economic privations of the Great Depression and to end segregation and discrimination at the workplace during World War II. They made social and economic advances and formed alliances with all-white or white-dominated organizations and institutions as diverse as labor unions, the Communist Party of the United States of America, and the Democratic and Republican parties. Black Americans saw their need for economic relief addressed by several New Deal agencies whose high-level administrators included them in job programs. Black workers became deeply involved in the labor movement, especially in organizing unions through the Congress of Industrial Organizations, which welcomed black working people into its ranks. Their campaign for equal access to industrial employment received a boost when President Franklin Delano Roosevelt agreed to demands advanced by the leaders of the March on Washington Movement to end discrimination in war production industries. They also utilized government agencies—the Fair Employment Practice Committee, for example—to obtain war production jobs that had been denied them. Still, African Americans, depending in part upon their social class and gender, encountered varying levels of segregation or discrimination in employment, housing, public facilities, and other arenas of public life. Black East St. Louisans, even working through interracial coalitions, failed to break the power of the real estate politician-businessmen or to dismantle segregation, eliminate discrimination, and secure civil rights. But black and white civic, labor, political, and business leaders, remembering the July pogrom, congratulated themselves that East St. Louis did not erupt into mass racial violence, as Harlem and Detroit did during World War II.¹⁴

This study of African American political actions in East St. Louis ends in 1945, on the eve of the post–World War II civil rights movement that came to galvanize the nation in the 1950s and 1960s. The movement in East St. Louis began in earnest in the late 1940s, when black men, women, and youth at the grassroots level, through the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, embarked on a program of militant but nonviolent action to desegregate the school system. Their actions proceeded without mass racial violence largely because black and white leaders had reached an accord. City officials included black residents in postwar planning and political life, hoping to avoid racial strife in order to attract industry for economic growth. White politicians acknowledged that East St. Louis had failed to expand its industrial base during the 1920s and the booming economy of the World War II years, as major postwar manufacturers chose to locate new plants elsewhere, and existing industry continued to vacate. Political and business leaders remained wedded, however, to a pre–World War I industrial economic policy, financial indebtedness, and machine politics—and their legacy was a deindustrialized, mainly impoverished, majority African American, and politically black-dominated East St. Louis.¹⁵