

E. James West. "The Watts Riots (1965)." In M. Newton-Matza, ed. *Disasters and Tragic Events: An Encyclopedia of Catastrophes in American History*. Bloomsbury, 2013.

The Watts Riots, also known as the Watts Rebellion and the Watts Uprising, was a major civil insurrection which took place over six days in and around the predominantly black neighbourhood of Watts in South Los Angeles between the 11th and the 17th August, 1965. Although designated the Watts Riots, this does not fully indicate the size of the uprising, with arson and looting extending over a zone of 46 square miles that was cordoned off and then deserted by police. Altercations between rioters, spectators and law enforcement officers left at least 34 people dead and over 3000 injured. The district of Watts was devastated, with hundreds of buildings damaged or destroyed costing hundreds of millions of dollars in property damage. It was the largest riot in the history of Los Angeles until the Rodney King riots in 1992, and remains one of the most serious civil insurrections to have occurred in the history of the United States.

The root causes of the riots can be traced to a number of historical factors. Whilst the first great wave of African American migration from the South during this period largely bypassed Los Angeles, the city became a major destination for many black migrants from the start of the 1940s as part of the second wave of African American migration. The black population of Los Angeles more than quadrupled in the short period between the outbreak of the Second World War and the start of the 1960s, however extreme housing limitations meant that the majority of non-white migrants drawn to Los Angeles during this period were forced into underdeveloped and overpopulated racial enclaves such as Watts, which shifted from a mixed demographic of whites, Mexicans and blacks to an overwhelmingly black community. This rapid population growth during the post-war period - compounded by increasing minority prejudice exhibited by the Los Angeles police force, inter and intraracial tension

between new black migrants, older black residents and other minority groups, massive educational and housing inequality and the increasing scarcity of inner city jobs due to rapid suburbanisation and white flight - placed huge pressure on already underdeveloped and highly racialised inner city districts (Abu-Lughod, 2007).

The catalyst for the riots was the arrest of 21 year old African American Marquette Frye along with his younger brother Ronald and mother Rena. Marquette and his brother were pulled over by a California Patrol Officer on suspicion of drunk driving by highway patrolman Lee Minikus at around 6pm, close to but not in the district of Watts. Additional officers arrived on the scene as a crowd began to gather, and Rena Frye arrived from her nearby home. Whilst Marquette Frye contended that animosity was instigated by the police authorities who roughed up his mother and physically accosted both him and his brother during the course of arrest, the version of events given by patrolman Minikus apportioned blame to the antagonism shown by the Frye family in resisting arrest and crowd hostility. Police attempts to subdue and arrest Frye angered the growing crowd of local residents, who retaliated by pelting the officers with stones and bottles. Onlookers refused to disperse despite officers pulling firearms, and the officers retreated with the three members of the Frye family who were later transferred to the central jail. Following the arrests the crowd continued to grow and subsequent arrests further antagonised local residents. Within a few hours of the Frye brothers being pulled over the situation had escalated beyond police control as the riot grew and intensified throughout the night. The first night of unrest set the pattern for the subsequent ebb and flow of the riots, with hostilities increasing as darkness fell and a period of high tension but less disruption during the day.

A leadership vacuum helped to contribute to the general air of confusion and a delayed federal response, with State Governor Pat Brown in Greece on the day the riot started and County Sheriff Peter Pitches also outside of Los Angeles. As the riot showed no signs of

abating, Los Angeles police chief William Parker turned to California Lieutenant Governor Glenn Anderson to call up thousands of National Guardsmen. These additional forces joined the Los Angeles police in attempting to maintain control of the streets. Escalating crowd violence, police militancy and the influx of additional guardsmen led to an intensification of the rioting on Friday 13th. Gerald Horne contended that the shooting of Deputy Sheriff Ronald Ludlow marked a key juncture in the riots, as what up until that point had been a community revolt against police authorities transformed into a police reaction against the community (1995). Whilst television and newspaper reports emphasised the level of black violence, the majority of deaths occurred at the hands of the LAPD and other law enforcement agencies that appeared at best overzealous in their armed response to the rioting. Alongside escalating violence the emergency services were struggling to contain the spread of fires. Their task was made harder by the aggression shown by Los Angeles residents, due in part to the makeup of the fire service which endorsed the same exclusionary policies as other federal institutions. Following a peak in hostilities between residents and police authorities on Friday 13th and Saturday 14th August, Anderson imposed a curfew and the riot was slowly suppressed, although fires continued to rage through Watts and surrounding areas. On Saturday 14th around 200 fires were burning, with major grocery and liquor stores targeted. Most of the continuing arson and looting was aimed at white owned businesses and properties although a number of black stores were also gutted, suggesting a class dimension to the rioting. By August 16th the mass rioting of the initial nights had been suppressed with only pockets of resistance remaining, although the scars of urban unrest remained. In one three block area around 103rd Street over forty buildings had been completely destroyed. Within days of the riots ending Governor Brown had appointed a Commission to produce a detailed report into the uprising. Headed by former director of the CIA John A. McCone and consisting of six white and two black advisors, the Commission published its report in

December 1965. Despite maintaining that the primary objective of its investigation was to assess the underlying causes of the riots, the report focuses on explaining why the riots should not have happened instead of why they did, and presented a positive image of black opportunity in the city which largely ignored the major racial inequalities and prejudices which had in part led to the uprising. The report stressed that the riot was a senseless protest in which a violent minority caused great distress for the majority, which sought to distance the riot from civil rights activism and black political protest and also underplay the number of people involved in the unrest, either as active rioters or sympathetic bystanders. By presenting the riot as the work of a violent minority the report mistakenly implied that the lack of violent protest by the majority of the city's black citizens should be understood as support for the city's treatment of minority residents (Fogelson, 1967).

The leaders of the southern based civil rights movement were caught off guard by the magnitude of the Watts Riots, which was reflected in the failure of the NAACP and the National Urban League to come to grips with the revolt. The uprising highlighted both the gap between the advocacy of nonviolent direct action espoused by many movement leaders and the widespread support for open revolt shown by the rioting in Los Angeles, and also the inability of middle-class oriented civil rights organisations to effectively channel the disquiet of the black majority. Although many commentators have pointed to the Watts Riots as setting in motion a wave of nationalist sentiment within Los Angeles and as a crucial juncture in the transition from nonviolent direct action to more radical black protest in the second half of the 1960s, this perspective underplays the historical significance of civil unrest in Los Angeles, the increasingly fraught relationship between different racial groups in the city throughout the first half of the twentieth century, and an established history of radical militant protest within the black freedom struggle. Despite the attempts of federal institutions and Commissions such as the Governor's Commission on the Los Angeles Riot to present the

Watts rebellion as an apolitical and disorganised response by an alienated minority of black Los Angeleans, when viewed within the context of the city's own history of racial uprising and hundreds of civil disorders and ghetto uprisings throughout the 1960s, the Watts Riots can be read as an extension of previous reactions to marginalisation and inequality by the black population of Los Angeles and also the most explicit outbreak of a long-standing history of radical black protest and rebellion (Theoharis, 2006).

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