[**Living history**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1627031/living-history)

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LAST week the United States marked the first anniversary of the very public murder of George Floyd. The inescapable brutality of the police killing sparked protests on an unparalleled scale that were echoed far from American shores in other countries with a legacy of racist violence.

This week’s commemoration revolves around the centenary of the Tulsa massacre, which has been described by a local historian as an “American Kristallnacht”. On May 31-June 1, 1921, Greenwood, a thriving African-American section of the segregated Oklahoman town, was razed to the ground.

Greenwood’s relative prosperity led it to being dubbed the ‘Black Wall Street’ — a red rag to the white supremacist bull that dominated Tulsa. The racists needed an excuse to live out their fantasies. They found it in a non-event.

Dick Rowland, a 19-year-old African American shoeshine boy in downtown Tulsa, needed to empty his bladder. He headed for the only nearby facility for blacks, in what was known as the Drexel Building. He apparently tripped as he entered the elevator, and inadvertently touched the arm or shoulder of the 17-year-old elevator operator, Sarah Page.

The Tulsa massacre has been called the ‘American Kristallnacht’.

She screamed, and Rowland sprinted out of the building. Someone called the police, and Rowland was subsequently arrested. The local afternoon rag, the Tulsa Tribune, published a lurid report the following day, alleging a sexual assault, and an incendiary editorial headlined ‘To Lynch Negro Tonight’.

A burgeoning mob thirsting for vengeance thronged to the city courthouse. A much smaller contingent of black World War I veterans turned up to protect Rowland. They were turned away, but as they were leaving a shot was fired — in anger, or perhaps accidentally. That’s when all hell broke loose, and 16 hours later Greenwood was a smouldering ruin.

Scott Ellsworth, the aforementioned historian, says the first time he saw a photograph of the aftermath, “it looked just like Nagasaki or Hiroshima or Frankfurt”. The hotels, cinemas, clinics, pharmacies and groceries were all gone. So were most of the churches. At least 300 people were killed, but the death toll is disputed.

A substantial proportion of the community simply disappeared. Some fled to neighbouring states, but the fate of others remains unknown. There were bodies floating down the Arkansas River, and mass graves are still being unearthed 100 years later.

The atrocity included the first instance of an American city being bombed from the air, as biplanes dropped incendiary turpentine shells on to buildings and streets in Greenwood. (The napalm indiscriminately showered on Vietnam had not yet been invented.)

To their credit, the Tulsa sheriff and his black deputy spirited Rowland safely out of the state, and the charges against him were dropped a few months later. Page, the supposed victim, wrote a letter exonerating him. It has even been claimed that the two of them were not only well acquainted, but intended to defy the law against interracial marriage.

Be that as it may, what cannot be denied is the continuum between the Tulsa massacre and the deaths of so many others before and since the cold-blooded murder of Floyd. The main culprit has been found guilty — which in itself is an unusual judicial outcome, given that most police officers continue to go scot-free after killing black citizens. But the systemic racism that Joe Biden acknowledges remains pretty much undiminished.

Of course, the Tulsa massacre itself did not come out of the blue. Embedded in it were the entire legacy of slavery — the perpetuation of which was a key motivation for the war of independence — and the white supremacist back­­­­lash that followed its bitterly

contested abolition and accompanied the brief triumph of the late 19th-century Re­­­cons­­truction.

It comes as no surprise to discover that the Ku Klux Klan used the Tulsa massacre as a recruiting tool — or that Adolf Hitler and the Nazis looked upon Jim Crow as a role model.

The Tulsa massacre was effectively wiped out from history, referred to in hushed tones by white families as a ‘riot’ or ‘race riot’ rather than a pogrom, and edited out of conversations by black families when children were around. Most descendants of the victims and survivors knew next to nothing about it until they were adults.

The USSR began filling up the ‘blank pages of history’ in the Gorbachev era. It’s taken longer in the US. Marking the “solemn centennial”, President Biden has called on “the American people to reflect on the deep roots of racial terror … and recommit to the work of rooting out systemic racism”.

The stated intent is admirable, even if it comes from someone who had no qualms about befriending segregationist fellow senators such as Strom Thurmond. Whether it is anything more than lip service to a worthy cause remains to be seen. But the alternative is writ large in the living history of the United States of America.

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