



## The Harlem Riot

### Background Reading

#### *New York City Riot of 1943*

On August 1, 1943, a New York City police officer arrested an African American woman for disturbing the peace at the Braddock Hotel in Harlem. Robert Brady, a black soldier in the U.S. military, observed the fracas. He intervened by trying to get the police officer to release the woman. In the ensuing scuffle, the police officer was allegedly hit by the soldier. The police officer retaliated by shooting the soldier in the arm as he attempted to run from the scene. In the process of taking the servicemen away to a nearby hospital, a crowd of nearly 3,000 began to gather. It picked up momentum and fervor as the two, police officer and soldier, moved toward the hospital. Someone in the crowd shouted that a white cop had shot and killed a black soldier. It was not true, but the rumor ignited the crowd. Emotion escalated to mob proportion. The result was a full-fledged riot. The mostly black rioters set fires, broke windows and doors, turned over vehicles, and otherwise wreaked a wave of destruction, mainly against property. This led to looting. Most of the residents of Harlem at the time were black, while most of the businesses were under Jewish or white ownership. Black and white law enforcement officers moved in to restore order, but not before the rioters were beaten and bludgeoned.

Writer James Baldwin provided a firsthand account of the riot in an August 9, 1943, article in *Newsweek*. He wrote, "Windows of pawnshops and liquor stores and grocery stores were smashed and looted. Negroes began wielding knives and the police, their guns. Thousands of police reserves, many of them Negroes, were rushed to the district... All Traffic was rerouted around Harlem. It came down chiefly [to] a battle between the police and the Negro looters." **Walter White**, the head of the **National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)**, wrote in the *New York Times* on August 4, 1943, that Harlem boiled over. His article described the extent of the damage and great loss as a consequence of the riot.

The Negro press and especially the New York-based Amsterdam

News published a detailed description of the riot; the details spread throughout the country. After all, the Harlem Renaissance had established Harlem as the cultural center of black Americans. It was also perceived by many as the political center of all black Americans. The mayor at the time was Fiorello LaGuardia. He took swift action to end the riot. He appealed over the radio for calm. Afterward, he sent food to the residents of Harlem. This gesture endeared the mayor to many in the African American Community.

Depending on the source, 6 African Americans were killed, from 500 to 1,000 were arrested, and 40 law enforcement officers were injured. It took 6,600 city, military, and civil police officers; 8,000 state guardsmen; and 1,500 civilian volunteers to finally end the riot after nearly two days.

After it was all over, there was much speculation about the causes of the riot. Some advanced the notion that the riot occurred because there were no recreational facilities and parks for the residents of Harlem. Others said the reason was the high cost of food and price gouging by the merchants who owned stores, shops, and other businesses in Harlem. Still another reason given was the need for better housing. **Police brutality** and overall discrimination of Harlem's black population were also cited as reasons.

Those who have studied race riots have found that there are certain sociological and psychological commonalities among race riots. A rumor is one and an environment of mob violence is another. Accepting that observation, the New York City Riot of 1943, which is sometimes called the Harlem Riot of 1943, had these two key elements. According to others, it happened not only as a violent spontaneous response to a specific incident and rumor, but it was also a reaction to **racism**, poverty, **segregation**, and other related socioeconomic factors.

By 1920, Harlem had become predominantly black. The residents were blacks from the West Indies and other states in the United States, especially Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia. As blacks arrived, whites fled. During the 1920s, 118,792 white people left Harlem, while 87,417 blacks replaced them there. Unrest in numerous towns and cities around the country was erupting. Some of these disorders, including the events in **Detroit** in 1943, rose to the level of a race riot. In 1944, the year after the Harlem riot, there were 250 race riots in 47 cities and towns in the United States. **Lynchings**, mostly in the south, were common. Blacks who served in World War II were stationed around the city, visited the city, or were moving there after returning home from the

war. Many for those seeking a better life encountered segregation and other barriers to their successful attainment of the American Dream in Harlem. Although life for some blacks in Harlem at the time was vibrant, colorful, and intellectually stimulating, this was not the case for blacks who were struggling. Even though it was the home of such luminaries as Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Zora Neale Hurston, **Clause McKay**, Congressman Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., **A. Phillip Randolph**, **James Weldon Johnson**, and a host of others, as well as the home of such established institutions as Small's Paradise, the Cotton Club, the Savoy Ballroom, the Apollo Theatre, and the Abyssinian Baptist Church, prosperity existed parallel to poverty in Harlem. The residents of Harlem were ready for a change in the social order regardless of their station in life; the riot of 1943 was a sign of pent-up frustration. It only took a single incident to spark the riot.

Perhaps James Baldwin expressed the seething, underlying frustration best when he reflected on the riot years later by writing, "It would have been better to have left the plate glass as it had been and the goods lying in the store. Would have been better, but it would have also... been intolerable, for Harlem needed something to smash" (Baldwin 1943).

The Harlem Riot of 1943 has become an important part of history. It was an aftershock of the Harlem Riot of 1935, and a forerunner of the **New York City Riot of 1964**. All pioneered the way for the **civil rights movement** that swept the country in the 1950s and 1960s.

--Betty Nyangoni

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