Analysis of the 1943 Detroit Race Riot

Humans are narcissistic, self-loathing, future-driven idiots. All throughout history they have only cared for themselves, developing ethnic, intelectual, and racial bias across the very broad spectrum of humans that there are. White supremacy drives the bus when it comes to these biases, and when it comes to analyzing history, it sure does show. An important historical example of this is the Detroit Race Riot of 1943. In this paper, I will be analyzing two pamphlets, *What Caused the Detroit Riot* (1943), published by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (N.A.A.C.P.) and *Why Race Riots? Lessons from Detroit* (1944) published by Public Affairs Pamphlets. These pamphlets outline the series of events and lifestyles that lead to the riot in Detroit, Michigan, as well as the story of what happened in Detroit during the riot.

Both pamphlets tell a similar story, outlining the events and tensions that lead to the two-day long riot that engulfed Detroit. The riot started on June 20th, 1943 on the bridge to Belle Isle Park. The argument was between an black and white motorist¹ and this conflict ignited the overflowing atomic bomb of hatred that was resting in Detroit. Two popular rumors made their way around Detroit during the riot. The first was that a group of whites threw a colored woman and her baby off the Belle Isle Bridge. According to *What Caused the Detroit Riot?*, these

¹ W. White, *What Caused...*, pg 12
rumors started around the streets of Hastings and Adams, the Negro section of town. The second was that a group of blacks raped and killed a white woman. These rumors started in the white neighborhood near Roxy Theatre, an establishment available to both blacks and whites. When these rumors started, chaos ensued. The people of Detroit were savage until President Franklin D. Roosevelt was contacted and a state of emergency was called for the violence to stop. The President sent 6,000 federal troops to patrol the city just to ensure that the riot had come to an end. Each pamphlet lays out the story pretty well. *What Caused the Detroit Riot?* even goes as far as to provide testimonies of those involved in the event.

Both pamphlets also give similar reasons as to what caused the riot. The general theme for both is that the riot started due to an increasing tension between Southern whites and Negroes that could not be contained by social etiquette any longer. The first problem was the increase in population with Detroit, which lead to the lack of housing for the increasing population. Thanks to Henry Ford’s “five-dollars a day” work offer, both blacks and whites moved to Detroit, causing the population of the city to sky rocket, requiring more housing to be built, leading to the inevitable fact that blacks and whites would have to live together. Both pamphlets mention the Sojourner Truth Housing Riot, where the housing project, named after an African American hero, was built for the residence of blacks, but instead was consistently tossed between blacks and whites. The fact that blacks and whites could not live in the same neighborhood, let alone the same community housing lot, lead to many biases and grudges against the other race. *Why Race Riots? Lessons from Detroit* brings up the point that many of the people living in Detroit at the

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2 T. Marshall, *What Caused...*, pg 31  
3 Ibid, pg 30  
4 E. Brown, *Why Race Riots?*, pg 22  
5 Ibid, pg 5
time had moved up from the South, where racism among whites was already powerful. Religious and political leaders even moved up from the South to find work in Detroit, sadly bringing their “anti-Negro” views with them. *What Caused the Detroit Riot?* frequently mentions the influence of the Ku Klux Klan and their off-brand sidekicks, National Workers League, and the Black Legion, which does not help with the already growing tension.

Then, to make matters worse, these people have to work with each other to provide weapons for a common war effort! White men would go on strike because a Negro was promoted. Employers, such as C.E. Weiss, who was the Personnel Manager for the Packard Motor Car Company, told employees they did not have to work alongside Negroes. Even the United Automobile Workers’ Committee for Industrial Organizations (UAW-CIO) was hesitant to promote black involvement and advance on the Ford Motor Company due to their dense Southern population within the union and Ford’s dense black population. The only time there seemed to be peace between blacks and whites was when they were fighting for unions against their employers. Once they won, the hate continued.⁶

A strong opinion between both pamphlets is also the influence of the Detroit Police Department on the issue of the riot. The Detroit Race Riot of 1943 might have been shorter or even non-existent if the police of Detroit actually did their jobs. Each pamphlet give testimonies of how the Detroit policemen added gas to the fire instead of trying to put it out. *What Caused the Detroit Riot?* tells us that policemen would stop in front of stores and open fire on them, and tell Negro bystanders to “run and not look back,” often shooting them as they ran away.⁷ It also told of a group of black men who were approached by police who told them they would be

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⁶ E. Brown, *Why Race Riots?*, pg 9-12
⁷ T. Marshall, *What Caused...*, pg. 31
protected by a mob that was headed in that director. Four of the men went with the police and the other four stayed in the car they were hiding in. The men who went with the police ultimately were given to the mob by the police who had promised their safety. In *Why Race Riots, Lessons from Detroit*, they state that outside the Roxy Theatre, there were white mobs outside the theatre doors, waiting for blacks to leave so they could jump them. According to a witness who provided the story, they asked policemen if they were going to give the blacks protection out of the theatre. The policemen brushed it off, basically saying it was not their problem. The police were extremely racist and no account ever stood in their favor between either of the pamphlets.

I believe that both of these pamphlets are extremely reliable in telling the story of the 1943 Detroit Race Riot. Both were written within a year or two of the riot, provided parallel information confirming its worth, and also that they both came to the same conclusion about not only how the riot started, but on how it can be prevented in the future. The only disadvantages I see is reading them without the other. *What Caused the Detroit Riot?* was published by the N.A.A.C.P, which lead to it being heavily focused on the story of the African American rather than the white Americans, providing a bias towards the white population of Detroit. However, *What Cause the Detroit Riot?* backs up a lot of details to topics mentioned in *Why Race Riots? Lesson from Detroit*, which gives thought to the idea that whites were victimized as well as blacks. The violence was not solely white attacks black, but it was also black attacks white. *What Caused the Detroit Riot?* focuses a lot on what was done to the African American population of Detroit, which of course is a big deal in the grand scheme of things. However, *Why Race Riots? Lessons from Detroit* mentions the violence blacks unleashed on whites during the

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8 W. White, *What Caused...*, pg 12
9 E. Brown, *Why Race Riots?*, pg 21
10 Ibid, pg 1
riot. For example, on page 20, Brown says mentions that a group of blacks had stopped a streetcar and stoned the white workers within it. It also mentions that white workers leaving the Chevrolet Gear and Axle Plant were attacked by a mob of blacks. The Negroes were not the sole victims of this riot.

My favorite part about both of these pamphlets is that they offer suggestions not just for Detroit, but for other cities as well on how to avoid another catastrophe such as the 1943 Detroit Race Riot. They both suggest ending segregation in many aspects of life. They suggest unity of races in schools staff, student bodies, government councils, police forces, religious bodies, and public groups. They urge that police treat all people fairly and that they earn back the trust of the Negro community. They demand that investigations for the Detroit Race Riot be done not only by whites, but by blacks as well. They ask for the rebuilding of homes, public property, and recreational areas that were either destroyed in the riot or in poor condition before, so that people living in poverty can live a better life. Both pamphlets provide so many good suggestions as to how to make a community stronger and happier. Whether or not they took this advice is apparent in the hundreds of other race riots there have been since 1943.

In conclusion, these pamphlets give an excellent insight into the fragile social structure of World War II Detroit. They outline the political, social, and economic tensions between Negroes and whites, particularly Southern. They address the issue of unions which brought blacks and whites together temporarily, and the issue of policemen and housing, which tore them further apart. They tell us that the 1943 Detroit Race Riot was a war within a war, the Allies fighting themselves. It is a worthless, meaningless fight that the soldiers fighting for the Allies should not

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12 W. White, *What Caused...*, pg 17-23
have to fuss over. If people could just get along in the United States, the war could have ended sooner. To quote Corporal James E. Ferriero, who was quoted in the Detroit Times:\(^{13}\);

“We who are doing the fighting, and will do the fighting to preserve this country from such acts of discrimination; we who recognize no discrimination in the trenches and fox-holes; we shed the same blood - one kind of blood - red. Things like race riots and strikes make us fighters think - WHAT ARE WE FIGHTING FOR? Americanism means everything to us, but it is swiftly turning to be an unfounded word… Things like this prolong war, and give the Axis time to strengthen their forces. They might possibly mean DEFEAT for us. Now more than ever we should pull together, and work side by side, unhampered by riots and strikes… We want to know so that we can fight harder and, if need be, die willingly.”

Racism is a concept that infuriates me. There is no reason to be ill-tempered towards those who may be different than you. Things will be done quicker, conflicts would be resolved faster, lives will go on happier if we all accepted each other for who we are and learned to deal with it. The Detroit Race Riot of 1943 is one of many examples of humanity’s arrogance getting out of hand, our white supremacy showing. What Caused the Detroit Riot? and Why Race Riots? Lessons from Detroit are both great documents that show the ugly side side of humanity, and whether we like it or not, it is a side we need to see in order for us to become better people.

\(^{13}\) E. Brown, What Caused…, pg 16