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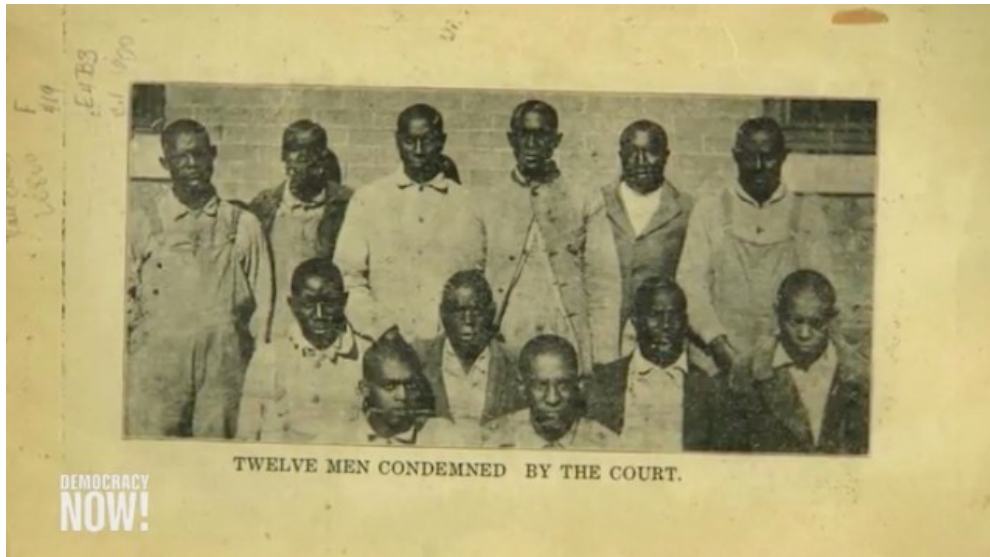
afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

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By Amy Goodman - Denis Moynihan
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Why America Should Remember the 1919 Elaine Massacre in Arkansas



Sources: Democracy Now!

A little more than a century ago, on September 30, 1919, a group of African-American sharecroppers gathered in the town of Elaine, Arkansas, in the fertile delta of the Mississippi River, to attend a union meeting...

Only a generation or two after the end of slavery, these sharecroppers were organizing to demand a fair distribution of the income from the crops they grew. Enraged by the struggle of these black farmers against the misery to which they were subjected, a patrol of armed white men attacked the sharecroppers who had gathered at the meeting. Shots were fired and one of the white men was killed. What followed is known as the "Elaine Massacre." Hundreds of African Americans from Elaine were massacred by a violent mob

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of white men, who likely enlisted the help of security forces and federal troops. Historians estimate that no fewer than 200 black residents died in those tragic events: men, women and children. No white person was held accountable to justice for what happened.

That wasn't the first time racists had terrorized Elaine's black population. In 1916, Silas Hoskins was lynched in that locality. Hoskins was a prosperous owner of a bar frequented by African Americans. White people who coveted Hoskins' business threatened him several times with death. One night, Silas did not return from work. He had been lynched. At the time, Hoskins was living with a 9-year-old nephew of his, Richard Wright, who later became one of the most influential American writers of the twentieth century. Wright captured in his works the experiences of the black community, especially in the novel "Son of this Earth" and in the autobiographical book "The Black Boy".

In "The Black Boy," Richard Wright describes the moments following the murder of his uncle Silas Hoskins:

"There was no funeral. There was no music. There was no mourning period. There were no flowers. There was only silence, silent cries, whispers and fear. I didn't know when or where Uncle Hoskins had been buried. Aunt Maggie was not even allowed to see the body nor could she claim any of her assets. They had simply ripped Uncle Hoskins out of our lives, and we made the mistake of looking the other way, to avoid looking straight at that terrifying, hot white face that we knew was looming over us. That was the time I felt the white terror most closely and my mind was shocked. 'Why didn't we defend ourselves?' I asked my mother. The fear in her made me silence with a slap." Wright was forced to flee the city along with his family.

Then came the Elaine Massacre. In conversation with Democracy Now!, Paul Ortiz, a history professor at the University of Florida, contextualized the 1919 massacre:

"The price of cotton was on the rise. But most importantly, the African-American population was making great strides and economic improvements as landowners in places like Elaine, in [the so-called] Black Belt of Alabama, in northern Florida, throughout the south. And because of these advances and the role that African Americans played in

World War I, [black] expectations were rising. The white power structure mobilized against the growing aspirations [of the black population]."

Twelve African-American men were tried after the massacre. An all-white jury sentenced them to death after just a few minutes of deliberation. Legendary African-American activist and journalist Ida B. Wells traveled to Elaine to stand in solidarity with them and report on their struggle. The convicted men appealed the sentence, arguing that their due process rights enshrined in the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution had been violated. In 1923, in *Moore v. Dempsey*, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in favor of the convicts and ensured greater protection for black people in the South who were being subjected to trials and juries dominated by white supremacists. The case set a crucial precedent, leading to some of the most important legal victories of the civil rights movement era in the decades that followed.

Richard Wright's daughter, poet Julia Wright, who describes the murder of her great-uncle Silas in 1916 as "the black canary in the coal mine" — that is, as an advance warning of what was coming — told Democracy Now!: "Silas Hoskins had an enormous weight in my father's life. His lynching can be seen as a thread, a fiery red thread, which weaves together virtually all of his works."

Earlier this year, soil was collected from the site where Silas Hoskins is believed to have been lynched. Two jars of the collected soil were moved from Elaine to the city of Montgomery, Alabama, for display in the Equal Justice Initiative's Community Memory Project. In that project, more than 800 glass jars with soil extracted from lynching sites commemorate those terrible practices that plagued the United States for so long. The jars are housed in the Legacy Museum in Montgomery, a museum that shockingly displays the transition from the era of slavery to the current situation of mass incarceration of people as key tools used to oppress the African-American population. Founded by anti-death penalty activist and defense attorney Bryan Stevenson, the Equal Justice Initiative is also in charge of the National Monument for Peace and Justice, a large outdoor facility that commemorates, in a deeply moving way, the thousands of victims of lynchings in the United States.

The Elaine Museum and the Richard Wright Center for Civil Rights are currently being built in Elaine, Arkansas, to preserve the memory of the terrible massacre that occurred in that locality and to continue the legacy of the struggles for equity and racial justice that followed the massacre. The debate on racism and reparation measures must continue and deepen throughout the country.

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Amy Goodman is the host of Democracy Now!, an international newscast that airs daily on more than 800 English-language radio and television stations and more than 450 Spanish-language stations. She is co-author of the book "Those Who Fight the System: Ordinary Heroes in Extraordinary Times in the United States," published by Le Monde Diplomatique Southern Cone.

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