Reporting Rumors in the Reconstruction South: The Aftermath of the New Orleans Riot of 1866

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Abstract
At the end of the American Civil War, political divisiveness, economic turmoil, and violence plagued the South. Riots occurred across the Reconstruction South, from New Orleans to Memphis. Though scholars have examined the causes of Reconstruction violence, this study examines the role of newspapers in promulgating fear, paranoia, and violence in Southern communities in the wake of the New Orleans Riot of 1866. This thesis analyzes nine Louisiana newspapers to investigate whether newspapers published local and national rumors of violence or potential uprisings in the first three months after the riot. Though the rise of telegraphic news aided the rapid spread of information, it also enabled the pervasive circulation of rumors, gossip, and paranoia. Conservative newspapers often offered stories of mob activity, chaotic insurrections, and senseless violence, occurring within the state and in other regions of the South. The menace of Radical Republicanism appeared real to conservative editors, and publishing elaborate radical conspiracies, distorting the number of fatalities, and spreading rumors of instability seemed viable outlets for changing public opinion in favor of the Democratic Party.

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The murderous Memphis and New Orleans race riots of 1866 proved that Reconstruction needed to be declared and enforced, and the Military Reconstruction Act jump-started this process. Congress chose to send the military, creating “radical regimes” throughout the secessionist states. Radical Republicans hoped that by declaring martial law in the South and passing the Second Reconstruction Act, they would be able to create a Republican political base in the seceded states to facilitate their plans for Radical Reconstruction. Though most southern whites hated the “regimes” that Congress established, the Memphis massacre of 1866 was a series of violent events that occurred from May 1 to 3, 1866 in Memphis, Tennessee. The racial violence was ignited by political, social and racial tensions following the American Civil War, in the early stages of Reconstruction. After a shooting altercation between white policemen and black soldiers recently mustered out of the Union Army, mobs of white civilians and policemen rampaged through black neighborhoods and the houses of freedmen, attacking, raping and...