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Writing Process

The writing process for this historiography spanned a large portion of the semester. I started by writing a topic proposal where I identified my goal for the project as examining the way the classification of the Ku Klux Klan has evolved. Next, I gathered an array of sources which I later narrowed down to the eight used in my historiography. Using these eight sources, I submitted an annotated bibliography to my professor. I used the feedback given on my annotated bibliography to craft an initial draft of my historiography. After consulting the CORE write place consultants and utilizing the feedback of my classmates through peer review, I submitted my initial draft to my professor. Using the feedback my professor provided for my initial draft, I crafted this finalized historiography.

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Historiography of the Reconstruction Era KKK: Reconstructing Understandings of Racism

Born from the backlash against the Reconstruction policies of Radical Republicanism, the Ku Klux Klan attempted to combat efforts to integrate freedmen into Southern society as equal participants. While today's mainstream society tends to condemn the actions of the Ku Klux Klan as racially based atrocities, this has not always been the case. Before historians criticized the acts of the KKK, they first viewed the Klan through a lens of tolerance. In contemporary society, with white supremacy gaining an alarming platform in the political sphere, it is crucial that we critically evaluate the attitudes of prejudice and complacency people possessed in the past which lent themselves to sympathy for this racism so that we are best equipped to respond to these racist attitudes as they arise now. This historiography will serve as a guide for understanding the development of public attitude about the KKK from relatively uncritical to damning.

This historiography relies on sources from scholarly journals spanning the early twentieth century to the current day and will tell the narrative of the transformation in the way the KKK was received through three distinct interpretations that all grow progressively more critical of the violence and terrorism of the Klan. The first category of interpretation encompasses sources from the first third of the twentieth century. These sources are united by an unwillingness to label the KKK as overtly racist and a tendency to legitimize the Klan as a political entity. The middle category of interpretation encompasses the next two sources. These sources are bridges between the initial and current interpretation in that they are critical of the violence of the

KKK, but do not go as far as characterizing the organization as radical or terrorist. In the final and current view of the KKK, the Klan is characterized as terrorist perpetrators of racially motivated crimes. The original body of interpretation condones the racism of the KKK by legitimizing the Klan as a political organization, and the middle body of interpretation abets the racism by deeming it inconsequential to the Klan's purpose. However, the final body of interpretation frames the racial violence perpetrated by the Klan as central to its existence. The final view of the KKK most accurately assesses the prominence of white supremacy during Reconstruction by recognizing the violence of the KKK as racially motivated terrorism linked to the larger spirit of racism in the Democratic Party and the South, and condemning the agenda and actions of the KKK as racist.

The initial way historians interpreted the Ku Klux Klan serves as the starkest contrast with today's negative understanding of the KKK's role in Reconstruction. This body of interpretations is united by its tendency to legitimize the Klan as a political organization with a justifiable response to Radical Republican policies. Historians who advanced this body of interpretation did not all agree on the morality or the success of the KKK, but they all entertain these questions in a manner that validates the Klan's politicism and focuses on its economic motivations.

In his 1906 essay, "The Ku Klux Klan," Wood argues that the KKK should be lauded for its heroic work aimed at liberating the white Confederates from the control of the freedmen. First, Wood asserts that the Reconstruction unjustly stripped the white man of power and gave unwarranted authority to the freedman. Wood characterizes the North as radical and inflammatory in its approach to Reconstruction because of its stance in favor of suffrage for the freedman. Wood describes the Klan as facilitating Southern liberation from Northern oppression through justified and warranted aggression. Even within the context of the primary interpretations, the

stance Wood takes is unique because it goes beyond the tendency of the first set of interpretations to present the KKK as a participant in a political movement and takes a distinctly positive stance by praising and glorifying the actions of the KKK. Wood's interpretation of the Klan differs from other interpretations within the first body because it explicitly describes the Klan as victims of injustice inflicted by the North in retaliation for the alleged Southern involvement with the assassination of Lincoln.

Francis Simkins's "The Ku Klux Klan in South Carolina" (1927) falls within the first body of interpretation. His interpretation of the Klan is centered around Wood's understanding of the KKK as a political organization. Simkins argues that the KKK was not the racist powerhouse of Reconstruction violence that it had been portrayed to be in the North. Instead, Simkins posits that much of the violence in the South occurred outside of the Klan. Like other historians in this interpretation, he claims that the KKK was a primarily economic and political organization and that any violence committed in its name was not representative of its values. Simkins takes the positive stance lauding the KKK for its protection of women and Southern chivalry. By explicitly excluding the KKK from the racial violence rampant in the South and emphasizing the economic concerns of the Ku Klux Klan, Simkins's analysis is consistent with the tendency of the original interpretations to legitimize the KKK by presenting an agenda for the Klan that falls within the scope of politics. Within the context of this body of interpretations, Simkins's evaluation of the KKK is moderate because it does not take Wood's overtly positive stance that the Klan was successful at accomplishing its political goal nor does it take an overtly negative stance by condemning Klan violence.

In his 1924 interpretation "Opposition to the Reconstruction," A. A. Taylor argues that the KKK emerged as a political opposition to Radical Republicans. Taylor presents the Recon-

struction as a time of Negro Rule, and asserts that the Klan emerged to reverse the freedmen's unearned and unqualified presence in politics. He claims that much of the violence that poor whites committed against freedmen was not racially motivated, but was a result of economic and political competition between freedmen and poor white Southerners. Taylor does not suggest that the KKK particularly targeted black Southerners; instead, he asserts that Radical Republicans, who were both black and white, were targeted. This interpretation moves closer toward the latter understandings of the KKK because it takes a step that Wood and Simkins do not by characterizing the KKK as violent. Though this stance may be radical within the context of the first body of interpretations, it remains bound by the early mentality that, though violent, the Klan was motivated by economic and political views instead of racist ones. Taylor's interpretation begins the criticism of the KKK's violence which serves to transition into the next set of interpretations of the Klan.

The middle set of interpretations of the Ku Klux Klan incorporates qualities from both the initial body of interpretation and the contemporary body of interpretation and occupies the latter half of the twentieth century. It is marked by the continuation of the tendency not to classify the KKK as racist and distinguished by a new tendency to condemn the violence of the Klan. This set of interpretations drops the practice of the first set of interpretations of classifying the KKK as lawful, but does not go as far as examining the nature of their unlawful behavior.

In 1971, Richard Schaefer published "The Ku Klux Klan: Continuity and Change" in which he argues that the KKK was a primarily political organization that emerged to prevent the freedman from obtaining the power that white Confederates previously monopolized. Schaefer deems the KKK to have been successful in meeting this goal through its voter intimidation and the implementation of segregation. Schaefer acknowledges racism in the KKK, but does not

claim that racism is intrinsic to the Klan. He asserts that at its conception the Klan's membership was refined, organized, and political, but it was the later denigration of the membership caused by the inclusion of poorer southerners that led to much of the violence and racism, not the nature of the KKK itself. Schaefer's interpretation is consistent with the middle body because it manages to condemn the violence of the KKK without going as far as condemning the KKK itself. Schaefer is progressive within this body for acknowledging that racism was a part of the KKK, but he does not argue that the racism was intrinsic to the KKK as an organization. Schaefer's interpretation distinguishes itself from other interpretations within this body because, though it criticizes the illegal means through which the KKK achieved its politically deemed agenda, it validates the actions of the Klan by regarding them as successful.

Historian J.C. Stagg follows Schaefer chronologically with his 1974 essay "The Problem of Klan Violence: The South Carolina Up-Country, 1868-1871." Stag asserts that while the KKK was violent and did target freedmen, its violence was not tied to race. Stagg draws this conclusion based on his findings that the racial proportions of cities did not correlate to their proportions of violence. He argues that instead of racism, class struggle and competition were the motivating factors of Klan violence. Stagg concedes that there was a minimal level of political motivation behind the Klan's action, but he rejects the implications of his contemporaries which presented politics as a major factor. Stagg argues instead that local issues, specifically the struggle for land, had the biggest impact in motivating violence. Stagg's interpretation is consistent with the middle grouping because like Schaefer, Stagg recognizes the violence of the KKK without condemning the KKK as inherently racist. However, the rejection of previous interpretations' characterization of the KKK as a political group is unique to Stagg's interpretation.

The third and most contemporary grouping of interpretations appeared in the early twenty-first century, and it builds on the growing criticism that begins to develop in the middle grouping. This body is distinct for its outright condemnation of the Ku Klux Klan as a racially motivated terrorist group. It identifies racism as intrinsic to the KKK and the Reconstruction Era South and characterizes the Klan as an unlawful and terrorist organization tied to the Democratic Party's racist agenda.

Though written in 1964, Herbert Shapiro's "The Ku Klux Klan During Reconstruction: The South Carolina Episode," is consistent with the contemporary interpretations of the KKK. It specifically rejects Simkins's argument that the KKK was insignificant and not rooted in racism by arguing that the Klan was tied to the Democratic Party and intentionally organized to successfully bring racial violence and political oppression. Shapiro grounds this argument in the success of the KKK's voter intimidation. He also brings attention to the correlation between largely Democratic geographical areas and areas with great violence and lynching. Shapiro characterizes the KKK as a powerful symbol for white supremacy and racist sentiment with a measurable and significant impact on voter suppression. This interpretation anticipates our contemporary understanding of the KKK through its unprecedented characterization of the Klan as tied to the politically powerful Democratic Party, racially motivated, and carefully organized perpetrators of violence. Though Shapiro's interpretation differs from others within this grouping because it does not use the language of "terrorism," it remains crucial to the modern understanding of the Klan because it introduces racism as both the motivating factor within the KKK and the source of larger political oppression outside of it.

In her 2011 article "Klan Skepticism and Denial in Reconstruction Era Public Discourse," historian Elaine Parsons argues that much of the controversy surrounding the existence

of the Ku Klux Klan was a result of the organization's secrecy and the Democratic Party's attempt to mask its own involvement within the Klan. Parsons makes this argument by first drawing attention to that fact that the existence of the KKK was never wholly accepted as mainstream truth by much of the South. Parsons identifies the two ways the Klan was categorized by its contemporary Republicans and Democrats respectively: as a highly structured and threatening organization and as an exaggerated work of Republican imagination. Parsons argues that the Republican view is most in line with her evaluation of the Klan as violent and terrorist and dismisses the Democratic understanding of the Klan as racist propaganda. Though Parsons does suggest the Klan had political ties, her implication is that the KKK was part of a larger racist conspiracy among Southern Democrats, which is in opposition to the earlier interpretation of the KKK's politicism as a sort of grassroots movement. Shapiro's view of the KKK is consistent with the third interpretation which characterizes the KKK as terrorist, intentionally structured, and working closely with the Southern Democrats.

Written by Michael Pfeiffer in 2009, "The Origins of Postbellum Lynching: Collective Violence in Reconstruction Louisiana," argues that the terrorism of the KKK was racially based and part of the Southern legacy of racial violence. Pfeiffer describes the Ku Klux Klan as a terrorist organization and clarifies that its goal, white supremacy, was racially motivated. Pfeiffer explicitly dismisses Wood's argument that the violence of the KKK was defensive and argues that the Klan was the center of racial violence and aggression in the South. Through his commentary on the role of the KKK within the context of a racially strained Southern legacy, Pfeiffer notes that much of the media representation concurrent with the violence of the KKK was a criticism of the Republican Party's advocacy for freedmen and an attempt to further the oppressive agenda of the Democratic Party. Because of this, Pfeiffer argues that the media's Democratic

loyalties led it to portray the KKK as a response to Radical Republican wrongdoings. Therefore, he argues this media portrayal is inaccurate and built on the racial biases of the time. Pfeiffer's stance here is consistent with the third body of interpretation which classifies the KKK as a racially motivated terrorist group with Democratic ties. Pfeiffer's interpretation is unique within this body because it offers the media bias as a means of understanding the disparity among interpretations. Pfeiffer's position additionally distinguishes itself as in opposition with early interpretations of the landscape of Reconstruction by explicitly reversing Wood's narrative of the white Southerner as victim by deeming the Klan the primary aggressor of Reconstruction violence. Like Parsons and Shapiro, Pfeiffer highlights the prevalence of racism within the KKK by drawing attention to the larger legacy of racism in the South and within the Democratic Party.

Ultimately, the final body of interpretation serves as the only reliable lens for understanding the impact of the Reconstruction Era Ku Klux Klan because it most effectively shakes the racial biases of earlier historian and condemns racially motivated violence committed against the freedmen and their allies by the Klan as terrorism. Earlier groups of interpretations are as unreliable because they operate under a different understanding of what behaviors were racist and what behaviors were not. Interpretations from historians chronologically closest to the Reconstruction contain the most racist undertones because they were written closest to the time of slavery and operated within a society where there was more legalized racial oppression. Within the first interpretations, Wood's interpretation is the most radically opposed to contemporary understanding of the KKK as negative. It is useful as a starting point in the historiography because it manifests the racist attitudes held in the South that led to the often-startling level of tolerance for the behavior of the Klan, but it is not useful in actually understanding the presence and impact of white supremacy within the KKK or the Reconstruction South. Simkins's interpretation, although not

as blatantly racist as Wood's, dismisses both the violence against freedmen as central to the KKK and the intentionality of the freedmen as primary victims of Klan violence. This inattention given to the victimization of the freedmen suggests a racial prejudice similar to Wood's. Like Wood's and Simkins's, Taylor's interpretation operates under a flawed understanding of racism. Taylor suggests that violence against the Radical Republicans, with the goal of limiting the rights of freedmen, was not inherently racist. This disconnect between early and modern understandings of racism suggests that Taylor's understanding of the KKK does not shake the racial bias of its contemporaries. The middle body of interpretation proves more accurate than the first body of interpretation because it recognizes that the Klan was violent and acting outside the law, but it falls short at providing a truly just interpretation by only condemning the violence of the Klan and not condemning or acknowledging the role racist sentiments played in motivating the violence. This body is useful in illuminating the shape that the path of change took from the most flawed body of initial interpretations of the KKK toward the most accurate contemporary interpretations, but does not provide a clear understanding of the impact of racist ideology within the Klan and the South. Schaefer recognizes that the Klan, through its violence, sought to enforce segregation and suppress the freedman vote, but insists anyway that these goals were not inherently racist which indicates a disconnect with the current understanding of what constitutes racial oppression. Like Schaefer's, Stagg's evaluation shows racial bias through its inconsistency in characterizing the KKK's intentions; though Stagg identifies the freedmen as targets of the KKK, he insists anyway the motivations of the KKK were not racist.

Where the first two bodies of interpretation are flawed because they do not regard violence with the agenda of oppressing freedmen as inherently racist, the third body of interpretation distinguishes itself as superior by acknowledging that the violation of freedmen's rights and

the violence committed against them and their political allies can only be understood when viewed through a lens attentive to racism. Instead of dismissing Klan violence as insignificant, this body recognizes it as tied to racism within the South and the Democratic Party. We must rely on this interpretation rather than the first and middle groups of interpretation where oppression and injustice we would now condemn are largely unchallenged and accepted. When we incorporate early understandings of racism into our study of the KKK, we legitimize their oppressions. It is pivotal for historians to rely on the contemporary body's understanding of the KKK's white supremacy, which underscores racially motivated hate crimes as multifaceted attacks against both the physical safety and political and economic rights of black Americans, because this is the only understanding of racism that reflects an intolerance for all forms of oppression. Adopting the lens established within the final body of interpretation provides us with the critical insight necessary to identify and combat the rise of white supremacy today at all its fronts.

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