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Writing Process

The final project in the course ASI 120 was a historiography on American Reconstruction. The purpose of a historiography is to evaluate the ways in which historians' views of a certain topic have changed over time. I chose to evaluate and analyze historians' views of the Ku Klux Klan's reign of terror during American Reconstruction, focusing specifically on interpretations of the Ku Klux Klan's effects, motives, and composition. To complete this assignment, I analyzed eight different sources written by historians throughout the twentieth century. After writing a summary of each source, I was tasked with choosing which source provided the most accurate depiction of the Ku Klux Klan. I wrapped up my historiography by discussing the importance of recording history accurately.

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The Ku Klux Klan's Reign of Terror during Reconstruction: Effects, Composition, and Motives

Jack O'Donnell

The Ku Klux Klan formed in the early years of Reconstruction, and its actions and motives provide an insightful view of the post-Civil War American South. As it impeded the progress of American Reconstruction, the Ku Klux Klan was one of the bloodiest and most effective terrorist organizations in American history. Created in Tennessee by a group of young men, the Ku Klux Klan served the Democratic Party by terrorizing white and black Republicans as its influence spread throughout the South. The Klan accomplished its goals of establishing white supremacy and suppressing blacks using terror tactics, the most popular of which was night riding.

Over time, historians have disagreed upon many aspects of the Ku Klux Klan, including its purpose, its effects, and the composition of its membership. The sources in this essay provide various interpretations. These sources can be divided into three groups: the Klan supporter group, the Klan enabler group, and the Klan protester group. The Klan supporter group viewed the Klan as a group that brought peace and order to the South. The Klan enabler group viewed the Klan as a group of poor whites with minimal impact on Southern elections and not deserving federal intervention. The Klan protester group viewed the Klan as a group that was made up of Southerners from all social classes, had a major impact on Southern elections, and deserved federal intervention. All three groups agreed that the goal of the Ku Klux Klan was to establish white supremacy and to assert the dominance of the Democratic Party. Each of these groups saw the Ku Klux Klan as a crucial piece that deterred America's efforts at Reconstruction, though historians have disagreed about how and why this came to be the case. Otto H.

Olsen's "The Ku Klux Klan: A Study in Reconstruction Politics and Propaganda" evaluates the factors that allowed the Klan to thrive in the American South.¹

The Klan supporter group emerged in the years directly following the American Reconstruction period and retained many pro-slavery views. "The Ku Klux Klan," an essay by W.D. Wood, illustrated the anti-African American attitudes of the Klan supporter group. In it, Wood vehemently defended the actions of the Klan and praised it as a savior of white supremacy. Discussing the roots of the Klan, Wood claimed that the Klan served as defenders against the Northern oppression of the South.² Wood denied any violence that the Klan committed and even claimed it was sympathetic toward blacks, mentioning an episode in which Klansmen, once they realized the psychological damage that they had inflicted, rushed to the aid of a black man they had frightened into a state of hysteria.³ Wood commended Klansmen for being vigilantes who took power away from blacks, whom he deemed "ignorant," and returned this power to the oppressed Southern whites.⁴ Because of his praise of the Klan, Wood fits into the Klan supporter group.

The Klan enabler group chronologically existed between the Klan supporter group and the Klan protester group. This group largely argued that historians had widely exaggerated the role of the Ku Klux Klan in local and state elections. The Klan enabler group also defended the position that the Klan consisted of poor whites with low societal standing. This group agreed that federal intervention in the South, a measure taken by the North to stop the Ku Klux Klan, was not needed and was intrusive of the rights of Southern states.

"Kukluxism in Tennessee," by Thomas B. Alexander, provided an interesting view of the Ku Klux Klan as a powerful Southern organization. Alexander argued that the Klan was the South's reaction to the oppressive nature of the North.⁵ "Kukluxism in Tennessee" evaluated the effect that the federal government's intervention had on the Ku Klux Klan, claiming that the federal government intervened so that they could gather evidence that was needed to begin criminally

¹ Otto H. Olsen, "The Ku Klux Klan: A Study in Reconstruction Politics and Propaganda," *The North Carolina Historical Review* 3, no. 39 (1962), JSTOR.

² W. D. Wood, "The Ku Klux Klan," *The Quarterly of Texas Historical Association* 9, no. 4 (1906), 262, JSTOR.

³ *Ibid.*, 267.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 268.

⁵ Thomas B. Alexander, "Kukluxism in Tennessee," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 8, no. 3 (1949), 195, JSTOR.

charging members of the Klan.⁶ According to Alexander, the media during Reconstruction exaggerated the Ku Klux Klan's violence, which he contended was not as widespread as many have been led to believe.⁷ Alexander believed the Klan played an insignificant role in state and local elections of 1868 and 1870.⁸ Although the absence of black voters during these elections is undeniable, Alexander claims that this can be blamed on the incompetence of Union Leagues and the fact that these elections were held during cotton picking season.⁹ In his study, Alexander downplays the importance of the Klan in political elections, an aspect shared by each essay within the Klan enabler group.

Francis Simkins detailed the Ku Klux Klan's composition, actions, motives, and political influence in South Carolina in his essay "The Ku Klux Klan in South Carolina, 1868-1871." Simkins focused especially on how the Ku Klux Klan intimidated black and Republican voters by frightening them away from the election polls with violence and harassment.¹⁰ He downplayed the effects that the Klan had on elections in South Carolina between 1868 and 1871, which makes his study fit into the Klan enabler group. Simkins also stated that the majority of Klansmen were of lesser societal standing than most respectable whites, noting that these poor whites saw blacks as their economic competition and wanted to force blacks into subordination.¹¹ Like Alexander, Simkins believed that federal intervention in the South was a result of exaggeration by the Radicals and was largely unnecessary.¹² Simkins's perspective differed from that of Alexander on the violence of the Ku Klux Klan. Unlike Alexander, Simkins believed the Ku Klux Klan was, for the most part, nonviolent in its actions, and that the Klan could have been easily repelled if the oppressed fought back.¹³

The Klan protester group came in the years after the Klan supporter group and the Klan enabler group. This group agreed that the Ku Klux Klan was successful in its attempts to swing the results of local and state elections into Democrats'

⁶ Ibid., 217.

⁷ Ibid., 197.

⁸ Ibid., 202.

⁹ Ibid., 213-214.

¹⁰ Francis Simkins, "The Ku Klux Klan in South Carolina, 1868-1871," *The Journal of Negro History* 12, no.4 (1927), 632, JSTOR.

¹¹ Ibid., 633-634.

¹² Ibid., 637-644.

¹³ Ibid., 638.

favor. The Klan protester group did not make any excuses for the Klan's existence, stating that it consisted of whites of all social status. This group also believed that federal intervention was necessary to stop the Ku Klux Klan's reign of terror and that this intervention did not infringe upon states' rights.

Michael W. Fitzgerald's "The Ku Klux Klan: Property Crime and the Plantation System in Reconstruction Alabama" discussed possible motives behind Klan violence in Reconstruction Alabama. The essay focused primarily on the planter class and the ways its attempts to control the labor force and stop petty theft led to Klan violence against black Alabamans. According to Fitzgerald, the planter class forced black workers to steal by not providing for their families, and then the Klan punished those black workers who stole out of necessity.¹⁴ Fitzgerald also examined the composition of the Ku Klux Klan in Alabama.¹⁵ Fitzgerald argued that the Klan consisted of Southerners from all social classes; while a few held high social ranking, most members were farmers who were economically competing with African Americans.¹⁶ Fitzgerald also discussed the structure of the Klan, which he labeled anarchic for its lack of organization.¹⁷

Olsen discussed what made the Ku Klux Klan's reign of terror possible and what its effects were on the political state of the South. He contended that the presence of Klansmen in the political system paved the way for the Ku Klux Klan to carry out its atrocities.¹⁸ He also argued that the judicial system of the South did not offer equal protection for blacks and whites, as it punished blacks more harshly than it punished whites who had committed the same crime.¹⁹ According to Olsen, the Klan used exaggeration and distortion to justify its existence.²⁰ Olsen interpreted the Ku Klux Klan's effect on Southern elections to be huge; it aided in Democrat victories by using fear to deter blacks and Republicans from the polls.²¹ Olsen also debunked myths about the Ku Klux Klan: that the Klan was justified in its actions and that the Klan did not represent the white upper class.

¹⁴ Michael W. Fitzgerald, "The Ku Klux Klan: Property Crime and the Plantation System in Reconstruction Alabama," *Agricultural History* 71, no.2 (1997), 190, JSTOR.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 194.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 195-196.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 195.

¹⁸ Otto H. Olsen, "The Ku Klux Klan: A Study in Reconstruction Politics and Propaganda," *The North Carolina Historical Review* 3, no. 39 (1962), 342, JSTOR.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 343.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 348.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 341-342.

Olsen believed that the Klan consisted of elite whites and poor whites and that the extreme and grotesque violence make the Klan's actions unjustifiable.²² Olsen's essay differed from the rest of the Klan protester group in his discussion and emphasis on the idea that an unjust political system enabled Klan violence.

Herbert Shapiro's "The Ku Klux Klan During Reconstruction: The South Carolina Episode" responded to the writing of Francis Simkins. Both described the central focus of the Ku Klux Klan in South Carolina. Shapiro focused primarily on the Klan's importance in the elections in South Carolina between 1868 and 1871, crediting the Klan with instilling fear in black and Republican voters to ensure Democrat victories. Subsequently, the number of black voters decreased from previous years, and the Democrats reclaimed positions in office.²³ Shapiro also discussed the federal government's role and importance in the goal of ending Klan violence. He deemed federal intervention necessary, as the Klan was taking control of the South with little intervention from the incompetent local government.²⁴ Additionally, Shapiro agreed with the rest of the Klan protester group that the Ku Klux Klan consisted of more than just poor whites, with a portion of its members belonging to the elite class.²⁵

In "The Problem of Klan Violence: The South Carolina Up-Country," J. C. A. Stagg looked at the Klan's effect on politics as well as the structure and motives for the Klan's violence against blacks and Republicans. In agreement with Fitzgerald, Stagg interpreted that Klan violence was driven by economic competition, with the planter class wanting to remove blacks as competitors.²⁶ Stagg argued that the Klan consisted of whites from every social class, not just the lower classes.²⁷ He contended that the federal government was forced to intervene in South Carolina because of the widespread terror caused by the Ku Klux Klan.²⁸ Stagg also discussed the importance of the Klan in Southern elections, saying that the Klan was a primary reason for Democratic success. He claimed that many

²² Ibid., 352-353.

²³ Herbert Shapiro, "The Ku Klux Klan During Reconstruction: The South Carolina Episode," *The Journal of Negro History* 49, no. 1 (1964), 36-38, JSTOR.

²⁴ Ibid., 45.

²⁵ Ibid., 49.

²⁶ J. C. A. Stagg, "The Problem of Klan Violence: the South Carolina Up-Country, 1868-1871," *Journal of American Studies* 8, no. 3 (1974), 312-313, JSTOR.

²⁷ Ibid., 317.

²⁸ Ibid., 315.

Republican politicians feared the Klan so much that they stepped down from office, leaving their seats wide open for Democrats to take.²⁹ Stagg fit into the Klan protester group because of his views on the Klan's structure, its effects in elections, and the need for federal intervention to impede the progress of the Klan. His beliefs about the motives for Klan violence were similar to those of Fitzgerald.

In his book *American Reconstruction, 1862-1877*, William L. Richter examined the beginnings and spread of the Ku Klux Klan. Richter depicted the Klan as more of a social club than a terrorist organization in its origins; however, the ideas of the Klan soon became radical, and widespread violence and terror ensued. Richter wrote that the Klan's purposes were to establish supremacy for whites and the Republican Party and rid the South of Union Leagues. Richter also discussed why the federal government was hesitant to intervene with Klan violence in the South, arguing that the federal government did not want to spark a race war. *American Reconstruction, 1862-1877* differed from the rest of the Klan protester group in its discussion of the Klan's beginnings, but it ultimately fell into this category because of its position on the motives behind Klan violence.³⁰

I believe the most accurate portrayal of the Ku Klux Klan's reign of terror during the Reconstruction was Olsen's. Like the other essays in the Klan protester group, Olsen discussed the Klan's motives, composition, and role in elections. What set Olsen's essay apart from the rest of the group, and what must be focused on if it is to be seen that Olsen truly has the most accurate depiction of the Ku Klux Klan, was his discussion of the factors that enabled the Klan to continue its reign of terror. Olsen identified these contributing factors as the falsities that appeared in Southern newspapers and the Klan's ability to embed itself within the judicial system. One falsity that appeared in the *Greensboro Patriot* newspaper in Greensboro, North Carolina, was that a white boy killed a man out of self-defense and received ten years in prison, while a black boy murdered another boy out of cold blood and faced no penalty. This was swiftly disproven by a judge by the name of Tourgee, but the *Greensboro Patriot* failed to retract its story.³¹ The paramount reason that the Klan went mostly unimpeded in its reign of terror was

²⁹ Ibid., 314.

³⁰ William L. Richter, *American Reconstruction 1862-1877* (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO Inc., 1996), 243-247.

³¹ Otto H. Olsen, "The Ku Klux Klan: A Study in Reconstruction Politics and Propaganda," *The North Carolina Historical Review* 3, no. 39 (1962), 347, JSTOR.

its infestation of the judicial system. According to Olsen, Klansmen went unpunished in their crimes because juries typically contained either Klansmen or Klan supporters.³² Olsen noted that counties with the largest amount of Klan activity were controlled by Conservatives.³³ Additionally, Olsen claimed that any judges who dared side with blacks in court were accused by Conservatives of being corrupt and evil.³⁴ Olsen's essay was the most accurate because it discussed in greater detail the topics addressed by the rest of the Klan protester group and provided accurate and clear reasons the Klan went largely unpunished in its atrocities.

When carefully dissected, the interpretations of the Ku Klux Klan presented the organization in different ways. All three groups—supporters, enablers, and protesters—agreed that the Ku Klux Klan impeded American Reconstruction, but each group disagreed over how and why. This exercise made clear the importance of studying and recording history in an accurate manner to preventing history's mistakes from being repeated. Due to its accuracy, Olsen's "The Ku Klux Klan: A Study in Reconstruction Politics and Propaganda" was unmatched in its importance in the study of the Ku Klux Klan's reign of terror during American Reconstruction.

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³² Ibid., 342.

³³ Ibid., 345.

³⁴ Ibid., 346-348.

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