AJA Review: Black Soldiers and The Memphis Race Riot Of 1866

Students name

Institutional affiliation

Course

Date

Kevin Hardwick's article is primarily concerned with the perception of violence and actual violence. He focuses on the 1866 Memphis race riot in South Memphis, which was sparked by Irish police officers and firefighters, as well as white miners and small business owners, who rioted in the south, targeting black citizens residing in the slum settlement around Fort Pickering, a union military base on the town's periphery. Hardwick’s main thesis dispels the notion put forth by contemporary observers that the violence in Memphis was attributed to the long-standing hostility between the Irish and blacks who contested for labor in the plantations. The article provides a background to the riots, details how the race riots happened and the consequences, and the outcome of the violence.

One historical viewpoint that Hardwick challenges are the fact that that the Memphis riots were a result of racial hatred. It was widely believed that the violence resulted from the disruptive behavior of black soldiers in Memphis who caused trouble. However, according to him, the rioters were diverse, whose occupational and ethnic background did not support such socio-economic explanation. The Irish were the dominant group in Memphis city's police department and the fire companies, but they only represented around 50 percent of the identified rioters. More than 40 percent of the crowd that rioted were born in America. Hardwick also, in this article, further dispels the historical notion that the riots were an impulsive eruption of ethnic hatred by arguing that racism cannot in itself elucidate the violence because the contempt that most of the whites maintained for blacks had been perversive both before and after the riot.

In a historical context, primary sources help to relate past events and promote a deeper understanding of how things unfolded. They are clues from the past that give insights into how things were experienced. Hardwick uses primary sources in this article to explain the events that happened in the Memphis riots. For instance, he quotes The Memphis *Daily Avalanche* to explain how modern-day observers credited the violence to unruly conduct (Page 109). Throughout the article, he quotes personal accounts of people involved or affected by the riots to create a clear viewpoint and perspective of the riots. He quotes Colonel John Foley, the five women who were raped, union officers, the Philadelphia Press, special Order No. 50, and the Memphis Daily Appeal.

According to the article, the violence of the riots in Memphis and the social tensions was partly because of the relocation of thousands of men and women. The huge influx of former slaves in Memphis was put to work in constructing fortifications around Memphis. The region was a favorite stopping place for black men and women. The connections and interactions between the blacks and soldiers became more and more complex due to the increased number of slaves. The riot was a clear indication of the struggle by blacks. The rioters postulated dominance over the black community, which was a stark display of white power and authority.

I like how the author explicitly narrates the ordeal with first-hand accounts from those involved or affected by the riots. It creates a vivid picture of how things happened. This article is suitable for anyone interested in understanding the history of the Americas and for students keen to disseminate the myths and rumors of the 19th century. Finally, Hardwick’s article contributes to understanding the history of the United States by showing how the black community in Memphis was brutally considered inferior and how they struggled for equality.

Reference

Hardwick, K. R. (1993). “Your Old Father Abe Lincoln Is Dead and Damned”: Black Soldiers and the Memphis Race Riot of 1866. *Journal of Social History*, *27*(1), 109–128. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3789131?origin=JSTOR-pdf>