

# Beware of the Klan

When it comes to black and white the USA have a long-standing tradition of wicked injustice and atrocity. From the humiliation of slavery to three waves of Ku-Klux-Klan terror (1870ies, 1920ies and 1960ies) the Afro-Americans were subject to white violence. The White Anglo Saxon Protestants (W.A.S.P) justified their mistreatment and discrimination by Christian doctrine and their perverse theory of white supremacy. At present the Klan is not visibly active, but after its history of a hundred years it must always be reckoned with as a racist American potential and possibility.

*by Lorenz Becher*

The American South of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries – or rather its aristocracy – enjoyed many decades of agricultural and economic prosperity. On the one hand it was built on a very favorable climate often allowing for two crops a year and on the other hand on the low cost labor force from Africa, which made production of any kind much cheaper than up north. This economic disadvantage of the North seems to be the very reason for the Civil War (1861–1865) much rather than the humanistic indignation of some militant abolitionists (people who were against slavery and demanded its end). The North wanted to thwart the Southerners' claim for more political power and independence within the union. A military operation seemed the only way to stop the South from getting too strong. So all they needed in the North was an official cause justifying their action, making them look good morally and providing them with manpower to support them: convinced abolitionists and the black slaves themselves. In a way we can argue that the North abused the blacks in a blatantly hypocritical manner, pretending to be on their side when in reality they just used them to beat their masters. The way the North mistreated the blacks who emigrated north (discrimination, violence, legal double standards and injustice, and ghettos) as well as the way they did not really care about what happened to the Southern blacks after the war is clear enough evidence for this thesis. The most shocking example of northern indifference towards the fate of the Southern blacks is the phenomenon of the Ku-Klux-Klan.

## **The History of the Klan**

In 1865 the Ku-Klux-Klan was founded by six confederate veterans in Tennessee. The six men who had fought on the side of the South and lost created a secret social 'kuklos', which is Greek for circle, to scare and terrorize the blacks (and other non-southern elements such as Jews, Catholics, socialists, communists, foreigners, homosexuals or, in the 1960ies, hippies). With the aim of keeping up the old traditions and values of the South and to make sure that white and protestant supremacy (superiority, i.e. being better racially and culturally) were respected, they scared and threatened their victims at night, burnt down their houses, dragged them off their huts or lynched them on ludicrous charges of rape, theft or whatever, shot them, raped them, castrated them, put them on northbound trains etc. They appeared on horse-back, dressed up and disguised in long cloaks and high, pointed hoods with slits for their eyes so they wouldn't be recognized. They liked to burn crosses and even though they acted masked most people knew who they were. Sheriffs and mayors were often involved, those who did the dirty work, however, were normally fiercely racist poor white trash, i.e. the Southern term for very poor, uneducated and mostly alcoholic white members of society, whose only source of pride and dignity was their possibility to look down on the blacks. The Klan's most preferred victims were blacks successful in business or at farming and carpetbaggers (white abolitionists trying to help and educate the blacks) as well as scalawags (representatives of the North living in the South). There were three waves of Klan violence with their

climaxes in the 1870ies, 1920ies and 1960ies and the American government was always very reluctant to interfere and persecute the Klan. In the case of Warren G. Harding it is now even proven fact that the American president was a sworn in member of the Klan. On the one hand it was very difficult to do work against the Klan because the whites covered each other very well and the most powerful members of the white South were secretly involved and on the other hand the government did not really want to invest time and money for black Americans and they preferred to close their eyes on the crimes committed by their white and protestant fellow Americans in the South.

### **Some Atrocities**

Many a movie has been made on the cruel acts of the Klan. The best one I know is called *Mississippi Burning*, starring Gene Hackman as investigator for the FBI trying to solve a murder case of young black civil rights men. The movie subtly shows the mechanisms of the systematic Southern discrimination against the blacks. Historians have written and rewritten the story of the Klan and its deeds with great precision and proof. But even today America finds it impossible to face its historic guilt against the blacks and continues to keep archives packed with records of Klan atrocities under lock and key. There are hundreds of documents on blacks who were prevented to vote, on blacks who were tortured and punished for voting Republican, for being successful, for having sex with white women, in short, for being black. Let me quote a few examples of how the Klan, as they called it, 'cluxed' people. These examples are disgusting and revolting. But in order to make clear the very essence and dimensions of the Klan, in order for people to learn and understand, and in order for the blacks to be done justice to, they need to be told and they should be reported in all the history books for schools. My quotes here are from W.C. Wade's book *The Fiery Cross. The Ku Klux Klan in America*. New York: 1987.

"Klan attacks on scalawags often involved some kind of sexual abuse. ... For example, Mrs. Skates, a native of York County, South Carolina, hid three blacks who were running from the Klan in her home. After finding these men and beating them, Klansmen took Mrs. Skates outdoors, tore her clothing off, and poured tar into her vagina."

"It appears ... that the desire for group intercourse was sometimes sufficient reason for a den to go out on a raid. In Broomtown, Alabama, the family of Mrs. Reaner Berry was visited by ... Klansmen who broke down her door before she could open it. Inside the cabin were Mrs. Berry's son George, his wife, and a neighbor girl who was staying with them. The Klansmen informed the women that they "wanted to bed with them." When they refused, the Klansmen gave George thirty lashes and raped Mrs. Berry and the neighbor girl. ... "

"Henry Lowther was a 41-year-old freedman from Wilkinson County, Gergia. In addition to being an active Republican, he was a prosperous shopkeeper as well." To top it off he even had sex with a white woman everybody in town considered a "low- down tramp". Lowther was put into jail and one night over one hundred Klansmen took him out of jail. "They took him off to a swamp ... where Henry Lowther was pushed to the ground and castrated. ... Nearly naked and profusely bleeding, Lowther walked two and a quarter miles before coming to the first house." He asked for help and a doctor and was rejected again and again, till he broke down and was finally found unconscious and rescued by his son. "After five weeks of recuperation, Lowther abandoned his home and business and moved to Atlanta."

"In Meridian, a riot broke out during a courthouse trial with results that left congressmen speechless: The judge and seven of eight black witnesses were shot to death right in the courtroom; when the eighth witness was found to be still alive, he was thrown from a second-story window; the mayor of Meridian was then thrust on board a train by an armed band and told not to get off till he reached the North; and State Representative J. Aaron Moore, a black, was hunted through the Mississippi woods like an animal, barely escaping with his life. Unable to find Moore, the outlaws burned down his house."

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# Ku Klux

(by Langston Hughes, great black American poet)

They took me out  
To some lonesome place.  
They said, “do you believe  
In the great white race?”

I said, “Mister,  
to tell you the truth,  
I’d believe in anything  
If you’d just turn me lose.”

The white man said, “Boy,  
can it be  
You’re a-standin’ there  
a-sassin’ me?” (be insolent, disrespectful)

They hit me in the head  
And knocked me down.  
And they kicked me  
On the ground.

A klansman said, “Nigger,  
look me in the face –  
and tell me you believe in  
the great white race.”