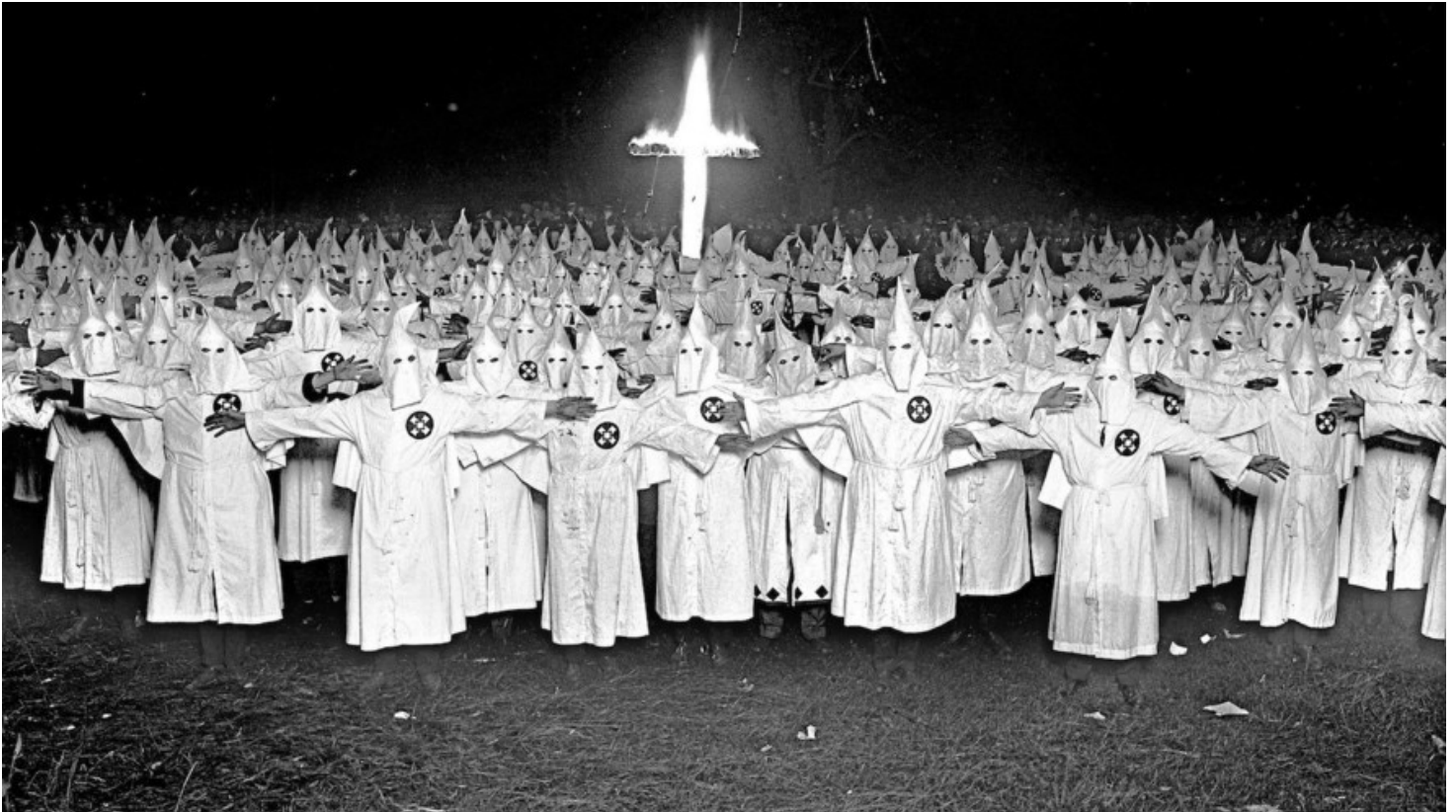


Racial and Religious Hatred: A History of the Ku Klux Klan

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More than 12,000 members of the Ku Klux Klan gathered in August 1921 at a farm near Lake Zurich, Illinois, owned by Charles Weeghman. In a ceremony there, 2,000 people joined the KKK. Weeghman had once owned the Chicago Cubs and sponsored the rally, which began in Chicago, Illinois, and marched to his farm. Chicago Tribune historical photo

The Ku Klux Klan (KKK) was founded in 1866, after the Civil War. By 1870, it was in almost every Southern state. It started as a group of white Southerners who were against the policies of the Republican Party in the South after the Civil War. This time was called Reconstruction. The government was rebuilding the South, but it also made Southerners accept laws they didn't like, including rights for blacks. The Republican Party was working to give blacks more rights in the South.

The members of the KKK waged an underground war of intimidation and violence directed at whites and blacks fighting for change in the South. In the 1870s, they helped elect anti-black leaders in statehouses across the South. Republican lawmakers were voted out of office and the Democrats came to control the South.

The KKK then declined for a number of years until it was revived in the early 1900s. The new KKK opposed not just blacks, but also immigrants, Catholics and Jews.

Half a century later, the civil rights movement of the 1960s was met by another surge of KKK activity. The group terrorized black communities and political activists during this period. They were trying to stop them from fighting for civil rights in the South.

Founded by Confederate veterans

The first branch of the Ku Klux Klan was formed as a social club in Pulaski, Tennessee, in 1866. Many of the first members were veterans who fought for the South in the Civil War. In 1867, local branches of the Klan met and established what they called an “Invisible Empire of the South.” General Nathan Bedford Forrest was chosen as the first leader, or “grand wizard,” of the Klan. Other KKK leaders had titles like “grand dragon” and “grand cyclops.”

The group formed during the second phase of Reconstruction after the Civil War. The Republican Party in Congress had recently passed the Reconstruction Act, dividing the South into five military districts. It also required each state to approve the 14th Amendment, which granted “equal protection” of the Constitution to former slaves and gave black men the right to vote. These changes were not viewed kindly by some Southern whites.

Widespread attacks

Starting in 1867, African-Americans began participating in public life in the South. Blacks won election to Southern state governments and even to the U.S. Congress.

The KKK dedicated itself to an underground campaign of violence to try to stop such changes. They went after Republican leaders and voters (both black and white).

Attacks became widespread. At least 10 percent of the black lawmakers elected during the 1867-1868 state constitutional conventions were attacked. Seven were killed, and black schools and churches were targeted and bombed.

By 1870, the KKK had branches in nearly every Southern state and often carried out their attacks at night.

State governments ask Congress for help

Members of the KKK included farmers, laborers, lawyers, merchants, doctors and ministers. In many regions, local law enforcement officials either belonged to the group or chose not to fight it. Those who did arrest KKK members found it difficult to find witnesses willing to testify against them.

The KKK was so powerful that, after 1870, Republican state governments in the South turned to Congress for help. Congress passed new laws, including the Ku Klux Klan Act of 1871. This made some KKK tactics, such as trying to keep blacks from running for office, against national law. It also gave special powers to the president to arrest Klansmen, and to send troops to the South to stop Klan violence.

The KKK survived, though, and from the early 1870s onward, Democrats rallied white Southerners and won back control of state governments. The fight for the rights of African-Americans stalled,

just as the KKK hoped for.

The Klan's rebirth

In 1915, white Protestants organized a rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan near Atlanta, Georgia. They were inspired, in part, by Thomas Dixon's 1905 book "The Clansman" and D.W. Griffith's racist 1915 film "Birth of a Nation."

This second generation of the Klan was not only against blacks, but also Roman Catholics, Jews and foreigners. It was fueled by growing hostility to the surge in immigration in the early 1900s. As the country was changing, the KKK was determined to keep power in the hands of white Protestants. At its peak in the 1920s, there were more than 4 million members of the KKK across the country.

The Great Depression of the 1930s led to many people losing jobs and money, and also led to a drop in the Klan's membership. The KKK was temporarily shut down in 1944.

Later, the civil rights movement of the 1960s led to a surge of local Klan activity across the South. The Klan carried out bombings, beatings, and shootings of black and white activists. Their goal was to scare people from supporting the movement for civil rights.

These actions outraged the nation. They ultimately helped win support for the civil rights cause. In 1965, President Lyndon Johnson delivered a speech condemning the Klan and announcing the arrest of four Klansmen.

Cases of Klan-related violence became rarer in the decades after. In the early 1990s, the Klan was estimated to have between 6,000 and 10,000 active members, mostly in the Deep South.