

The Nation

The Reconstruction-Era Violence Lurking in the Southern Air

Richard Kreitner and Back Issues on June 18, 2015 - 2:18 PM ET

It is now just over two months since the National Parks Service hosted an event at Appomattox Court House marking 150 years since the end of the Civil War, and white-supremacist terrorism has arrived right on time. Doing his best impression of the irredentist Confederates who rampaged through the South during Reconstruction, wantonly murdering blacks and pillaging their communities, 21-year-old Dylann Storm Roof killed nine worshippers at a historically black church in Charleston, South Carolina, last night, telling his victims he had to do it, because “you are taking over our country.”

Such a sentiment would have been terrifyingly familiar to the abolitionists who brought *The Nation* into being 150 years ago next month as a journal that would continue the fight for equality in the age of emancipation.

An editorial in the first issue of the magazine noted widespread reports of the “very nearly chaotic” situation in the postwar South, “with proscription, death, or disfranchisement ever present to the people’s imagination, violence lurking in the air...”

From every subjugated State...there comes very general testimony that the abolition of slavery, which was the consummation of the war, is to be resisted and thwarted by the whites in every possible way. Enraged that the object for which they courted poverty, famine, exile, and death, has been for ever removed from their ambitious machinations, they seem determined that the new order of things shall not be made pleasant.

If the South could not actually restore slavery, that is, whites were intent on making things unpleasant for the formerly enslaved. That reads now as an egregious understatement, considering not only what happened in the late 1860s and beyond—the rise of the Ku Klux Klan and, eventually, the utter political subjugation of blacks by whites— but what continues to happen today.

“In the interior of North Carolina,” the editors observed, “the condition of the freedmen is scarcely better than that of slaves. Many are in fact still held under the lash, as is true to a great extent in South Carolina.”[150 years ago.v]

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