

INTRODUCTION

The first thing that springs to mind when the Ku Klux Klan is mentioned is the memory of violent acts committed against black Americans and against the civil rights movements. The other facts about the organization that was quite successful are less known. The first Ku Klux Klan commonly also called KKK or simply the Klan emerged over a century before the assassination of Martin Luther King. The riots of the 1960s left indelible scars on the collective imagination and it is hard to believe that those were far from the most brutal acts of violence prepared by the Ku Klux Klan, especially under the consideration that origins of the Klan can be partially traced back to the myth of Southern chivalry and the goal of protecting widows and orphans. And then there is the President Woodrow Wilson (1856-1924) the founder of the League of Nations which publically praised the Ku Klux Klan and claimed that they were acting in the best country's interests.

As rapidly as it had spread, the first Klan faded but after the World War I a brand new version of the Klan appeared and within just a few years brought many parts of the nation under its paralyzing grip of racism and bloodshed. Then again the second Klan receded into the background but this time it did not quite disappear but also it has never again commanded such widespread support. *"Today, it seems incredible that an organization so violent, so opposed to the American principles of justice and equality, could twice in the nation's history have held such power"* (Bullard 6).

This thesis is mainly dedicated to the second Ku Klux Klan. It focuses on explaining of what was the major inspiration of the second Klan and its background. The thesis introduce William Joseph Simmons who was the founder of the second Klan. It also focuses on explaining why and how the second Klan gained so much power and how it lost it in such a short period of time.

The first chapter describes the historical background of the first Ku Klux Klan, its founding and origins. The second chapter is concerned about the second Ku Klux Klan, it is focused on the rise of the so called second wave of Ku Klux Klan which initiator is recognized in the film called *The Birth of a Nation*. This chapter is also concerned about the effect of the second Ku Klux Klan and in its instruments. Last but not least there is described the fall of

the second Ku Klux Klan and its main reason. In the third and final chapter is discussed the Ku Klux Klan today.

1 KU KLUX KLAN HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Following chapter is dedicated to the description of Ku Klux Klan, the oldest and most widespread white supremacist in the United States. In the chapter there are described the origins of the Ku Klux Klan and its founding. It introduces to the beginnings of the Ku Klux Klan as a harmless social club and its later transformation. What was first recognized as an innocent entertainment tool later changed into a racially-based organization represented above all by deep hatred of all blacks and their supporters.

1.1 History of the Ku Klux Klan

The Ku Klux Klan history had begun in the town of Pulaski in Giles County, Tennessee located near the Alabama border. Tennessee was the only border state to fall into the Confederate camp. Its citizens were critically divided over supporting the Confederacy both before and during the Civil War for Southern independence. The population of Pulaski was 3,000 inhabitants and because it was situated in the slave-holding county nearly half of them were blacks. After the war white people became extremely nervous because of freeing so many blacks. Especially after the experience of the Memphis riot of May 1866. The Ku Klux Klan was born during the restless days after the Civil War which had turned the South upside-down. It is recognized as a period of lawless time which only supported the chance to start the organisation such as the Ku Klux Klan (Bullard, Chalmers).

The citizens of Pulaski were very proud of their city and especially of their pure Scottish ancestry which was deeply revered. The situation after the war was unbearable for them. Freedmen's Bureau described the town of Pulaski in its reports as a scene of repeated depredations committed on freedmen and convenient rendezvous point for roughs and rowdies from towns in the neighbourhood. Besides emancipation, sporadic violence, and economic chaos, a severe cyclone tore through the Pulaski in December 1865 and devastated the town. *"It was in these conditions of upheaval, suspicion, and desolation that six young returning soldiers found their home town after the war"* (Wade 32). Among those men were James Crowe, Richard Reed, Calvin Jones, John Lester, Frank McCord, and John Kennedy,

all of them had bravely fought for four years for the Confederate case (Bullard, Gitlin, Wade).

Those six former Confederate officers formed the Ku Klux Klan, originally as a social club. The club did not have any specific goals other than meeting up, echoing the popular concept of fraternise. In their own words it was described as an institution of chivalry, humanity, mercy and patriotism. It was John B. Kennedy's idea to call the club *Kuklos* from the Greek *kuklos* that means *circle*. James Crowe suggested to split the word in half and to replace *-os* with *-ux* with the general idea to embrace the word *lux* which means *light* in Latin. John Lester then pointed out that they were all of Scottish descent and suggested to call themselves clan based on the Walter Scott's novel about the legendary clans that had ruled over Scotland. They all decided to spell a word clan with letter *k* instead of *c* for alliterative effect. The name of later so well-known Ku Klux Klan was born. The Ku Klux Klan was established in December 1865 but its first attacks started in May 1866 (Bullard, Gitlin, Wade).

The basic purpose of founding the secret mysterious club was just an amusement. They met at various secret places where they put on their costumes then they went to the public, most of the time they rode horses and they were spooking local citizens. They were usually galloping around the town after dark. Soon the secret initiation process became the focal point of all their activities. The Ku Klux Klan began to recruit new members who went through an initiation ceremony. New members were pick randomly by horseman during their rides. The chosen one were blindfolded and brought to the meeting point where they initiated (Bullard, Chalmers). *"They soon discovered that their nocturnal appearances had an unexpected effect and they capitalized upon it"* (Chalmers 9). Their rides became legendary and they had decided to make them mandatory for all members of the club. Their distinctive wardrobe consisted of white robes and white tall pointed hats which covered all of their faces except for eyes became well-known. It supposed to represent ghosts of Confederate veterans. The Ku Klux Klan was attracting a lot of attention and therefore it was spreading fast (Bullard, Chalmers).

It is quite obvious that it was not the intention of founders to start club or rather clan with ideology that was later recognized as hatred. The main objective of the Ku Klux Klan was first just the amusement and later when they realized they became so popular the objective was reformulated into a little bit more noble form and it was to advocate racial purity and

white supremacy. The Ku Klux Klan was also focused on protection of white people, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant Americans from any perceived threat (Bullard, Chalmers, Wade).

The first official leader of the Ku Klux Klan so called Grand Wizard had been choose by the election. It was Nathaniel Bedford Forrest. He led the Klan in touch with the Knights of White Camellia which was a racist organisation with same goals as Ku Klux Klan. Therefore they merged and became one group. They started to hunt and attack former slaves and used various methods of torturing such as lynching, castration, shooting, hanging, whipping, ripping open pregnant women, quartering and burning. Attacks of Ku Klux Klan were really brutal and cruel.

Once the Ku Klux Klan became popular in Tennessee, it began spreading to other states. The violent behaviour of the Ku Klux Klan was increasing with one specific purpose which was to discourage social integration of blacks. What first started as a harmless club soon developed into a political force in the South. It had not taken long to the Ku Klux Klan to turn into a vigilante force. They felt they only could restore the order by returning the blacks to the field *just as long as he did not do too well there* and also they were concern about returning the former pre-war leaders to their seats of power. There was no place for those who felt differently and they would have to go. Masked members of the Ku Klux Klan started to riding out across the land and using violence because intimidation was no longer sufficient. They occasionally got hurt but there was no comparison with thousands death Negroes and Republicans. (Bullard, Chalmers, McVeigh).

Violence of the Ku Klux Klan in the South became unbearable and it was necessary to intervene. President Ulysses S. Grant had to use army to stop the Ku Klux Klan, he had signed so called Ku Klux Klan Act of 1871 which officially forbid all of Ku Klux Klan Activities and it also declared martial law (Bullard, Chalmers). *“Changing conditions and martial law finally combined of bring the Invisible Empire to an end by 1871, but the memory of the Ku Klux Klan remained as one of the treasured folk myths of the South”* (Chalmers 2). A number of Ku Klux Klan members end up at the prison and the power of Klan was weakened. Some members which were not in prison continued in violent crimes, murdering and stealing. Just a couple months later the Klan was officially disband.

2 SECOND KU KLUX KLAN

Following chapters are dedicated to the description of the second Ku Klux Klan or *second Klan* as it has been called. It is the oldest and most widespread white supremacist in the United States. A second wave of the Ku Klux Klan activity emerged in 1915 and it lasted into the late 1920s. First chapter deals with the rise of the second Klan and its inspiration. The second chapter deals with effects of the second Ku Klux Klan.

2.1 Rise of the second Ku Klux Klan

2.1.1 The Birth of a Nation

In the twentieth century D. W. Griffith lit a candle to the memory of the Ku Klux Klan with his epic pro-Klan movie entitled *The Birth of a Nation* which was based on the 1905 novel *The Clansman* by Thomas Dixon. Even though it might be hard to believe the revival of the Ku Klux Klan was inspired by the movie which was famous for its controversy and unusual success. The movie is about the Civil War and it portrays the Ku Klux Klan and its members as American heroes who saved the American nation from freed slaves threatening to destroy it. It showed newly freed black slaves, secretly supported by northern carpetbaggers, rampaging and aiming to rape white women. The Klan and its members were portrayed as defenders of white womanhood. The movie reached more than fifty million audience (Atkins, Gordon, Kenneth).

President Woodrow Wilson was a huge fan of this film. He even showed the film at the White House and it was the first film ever shown there. He commented the film with those words: "*It is like writing history with lightning. And my only regret is that it is all so terribly true*" (Gordon 10). One of the biggest fan of the film was William Joseph Simmons. Simmons is the founder of the second Ku Klux Klan which was later recognized as the biggest organization in the United States so far.

In 1920 two publications of Henry Ford contributed. He published the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and ninety-one-article series *The International Jew: The World's Problem*. These publications were based on rant of anti-Semitism (Gordon).

2.1.2 The founder of the second Klan William Joseph Simmons

William Joseph Simmons was born in 1880 in Harpersville, Alabama. His father was a poor doctor. At the age of 18 Simmons became a private in the Alabama Volunteers during Spanish-American War. Later he left military and he became a traveling clergyman for long 12 years. Then in 1912 he was banished from the pulpit by Alabama Conference for *inefficiency and moral impairment*. In next few years Simmons was a salesmen with only a little success (Atkins, Gordon, MacLean).

Simmons joined more than a dozen various Masonic orders. For example he joined the Woodmen of the World where he received the title of colonel. Simmons then combined fraternal membership and career. He found the opportunity to become a fraternal organiser with a financial success (Rucker).

Simmons was recognized as an effective stump speaker and he was also known as very ambitious man. His biggest dream was to invent his own moneymaking fraternity. He was deeply inspired by the film *The Birth of a Nation*. After the film opened in December 1915, Simmons persuaded the theatre owner to allow him view the film repeatedly and moreover free of charge. Simmons was possessed by the idea to revive the Ku Klux Klan, where his father once served as an officer after the Civil War. Simmons therefore officially started the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan with a group of like-minded friends on October 15 in 1915 as a fraternal order. On Thanksgiving night the first act of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan took a place. Outside of Atlanta atop Stone Mountain 35 people, including Simmons, met for a cross-burning ceremony (Atkins, Gordon, Rucker). *"Simmons and his disciples proclaimed the new Knights of the Ku Klux Klan"* (MacLean 5).

In the following years Simmons pretty much struggled to expand the Klan. The first four years of the second Klan existence meant only sporadic success, the organisation had frequent financial difficulties which was caused by lagging recruitment and by the lack of structure. But recruitment for the second Klan lagged only until the United States went into World War I in 1917. In 1919 the second Klan had around 5,000 members with a potential of much higher total. To support the recruitment Simmons hired Edward Young Clarke and Elizabeth Tyler two marketing specialists known for their extraordinary marketing abilities. Their mission was to: *"...find ways to revitalize the dormant Ku Klux Klan in the guise of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan"* (Atkins 6-7). And also to build a working financial

structure. Tyler and Clarke had mastered the art of modern propaganda and therefore within just a few months membership of the Klan by 1920 jumped to an estimated 100,000 members (Finkelman, MacLean). Basically: *“The second Ku Klux Klan developed in an era of fear and upheaval in the years before World War I”* (Finkelman 896).

The Klan had later between 4.5 and 6 million members (Gordon). *“Most important, the 1920s Klan’s program was embraced by millions who were not members, possibly even a majority of Americans”* (Gordon 17). By that time Americans found the second Klan ordinary and respectable to its contemporaries not disreputable or extreme in its ideology. Most of the members of the Klan were Americans from villages and small towns. The highest number of members was in Indiana where reportedly was about 450,000 members and it was closely followed by Texas with approximately 415,000 members. Then California, New York, Oklahoma and Oregon had around 200,000 members each (Atkins, Gordon).

2.1.3 The Woman of the Ku Klux Klan

In the second wave of the Ku Klux Klan was established a women branch. While the ideology of the first Klan was always concerned about the white men supremacy the second wave of the Ku Klux Klan accepted the gender equity. They saw white women as racial victims. Non-white race woman were considered as dishonourable and irresponsible baby breeders (Bacchetta).

The Women of the Ku Klux Klan commonly called WKKK was founded in 1921 and it became official in 1923. The Woman of the Ku Klux Klan was founded shortly after the 19th Amendment which granted suffrage to women and it also allowed women more political power for first time in the country's history. *"The WKKK headquarters were established in Little Rock, Arkansas. Using the platform of 100% American women, those eligible for WKKK membership had to be female, white, Anglo, American-born, gentile citizens who were at least 18 years of age and who had no loyalty to foreign governments or sects"* (Elgersman).

Elizabeth Tyler, the woman who was responsible for media campaign and success of the new wave of the Ku Klux Klan became leader of the Woman of the Ku Klux Klan and she declared the organization independent. The women's organization separated but it remained bound to the parent organization. The Woman of the Ku Klux Klan followed the rules and rituals of the men's Ku Klux Klan, they even wore the same costumes. They were called *poison squad of whispering women* because they spread gossip about Jews, Catholics and Blacks with economic and political results. One of the Grand Dragons said that women have the power to rule the world (Bacchetta , Elgersman).

Even though the Woman of the Ku Klux Klan was separated organization their activities were similar to the original Ku Klux Klan. The Woman of the Ku Klux Klan reached the number of 25,000 by the mid-1920s and later it reached half a million membership in 36 states. It was mostly mothers of young men afraid of theirs son's lives threatened by the World War who joined the Woman of the Ku Klux Klan. Therefore they were focused on African Americans, Jews, Roman Catholics and immigrants. By the late 1920s the membership in the Woman of the Ku Klux Klan seriously declined and the organization was never able to recover again its former membership base (Elgersman).

2.2 Success of the second Ku Klux Klan

The goal of the second Klan was *100 percent Americanism and the supremacy of the Caucasian race*. In other words: “*The Klan proclaimed itself to be the great defender of everything American, such as patriotism, old-time religion, and morality*” (Finkelman 896). The Klan strategy was to use the fears of organized African Americanism, Jews, and the Catholic Church. The Klan also played on the fear of Bolshevism. The members presented themselves as a part of a great movement to secure the birth right of all Anglo-Saxon Protestant Americans. Membership therefore increased rapidly and by 1924 the Klan include as many as 4 million Americans (Atkins, Gordon).

The second Klan did not provide only fraternalism and sisterhood, it provided also prestige for its members and offered them business network opportunities. Many joined the Klan in the hopes for better life. They thought the membership in the Klan may raise their social and economic status or identity. In other words it felt like membership in the Klan offered a route straight to the middle class. The members of the Klan was proud to be part of it (Gordon).

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