Racial Violence in the South

During the 1960s, the United States was engulfed by the Civil Rights Movement. While the supporters of Martin Luther King, Jr. advocated for civil rights and racial equality through nonviolent resistance, some white Southerners used violent means to fight against them.

In an effort to inflict fear in the African-American population, some whites lynched black citizens. Lynching, the illegal murder of someone by a mob, began in slavery when plantation owners would kill a slave by hanging him. Thus, the lynching served to punish the slave and warned other slaves against aberrant behavior. In the South of the 1950s and 1960s, lynchings were used by extremists to “warn” individuals against inappropriate behavior or advocating for civil rights. In one well-known lynching, 14year-old African-American Emmett Till was attacked and shot by a mob in 1955 for whistling at a white woman. Even though the state of Mississippi arrested two individuals for the murder, they were found “not guilty” when the case went to trial.

Extremists opposing racial equality also used homemade bombs to inflict damage to locations where African-Americans gathered. The most well known bombing occurred on Sunday, September 15, 1963, at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. This church often hosted meetings of civil rights leaders, including Martin Luther King, Jr. and Ralph Abernathy, and served as a key location in the effort to register African-American voters in the city. During Sunday morning services when the church was full of worshippers, a car carrying four white men pulled up to the church and planted a bomb under the front steps. At 10:22 a.m., it detonated, killing four girls between the ages of 11 and 14 while they were attending Sunday School.

This bombing, as well as numerous other acts of violence in the South, can be traced to the Ku Klux Klan, a group that began soon after the Civil War with the goal of maintaining white supremacy in the South. From its inception, Klan members wore white robes and hoods covering their faces while engaging in activities designed to intimidate and frighten African-Americans, as well as immigrant groups. Members of the Klan burned crosses in the yards of African-Americans, defaced homes and property, communicated threats, and attacked individuals, among other activities. They also carried out increasingly violent attacks, including the 1963 church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama.

While some white Southerners used violent means such as lynchings and bombings to incite fear in the African-American population, not everyone agreed with their means or their cause. Throughout the South and the nation, numerous white Americans supported and stood by African-Americans as they fought for racial equality.

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Questions

1. Which of the choices below are examples of racial violence that occurred

in the South in the 1950s and 1960s?

a. threats

b. cross burnings

c. attacking individuals

d. all of the above

2. Summarize the tactics and goals of the Ku Klux Klan.

3. Why did members of the Ku Klux Klan choose to bomb the Sixteenth

Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama?

a. They were not religious and wanted churches to stop preaching.

b. The church regularly hosted civil rights leaders and events.

c. The church regularly hosted picnics and gatherings.