



March 2021

The Organization of American Historians is deeply saddened and angered by the attacks in Atlanta last week in which eight individuals, six of whom were Asian women, were killed. These murders are a most recent example of what have been increasingly physical, violent, and deadly anti-Asian incidents. The Atlanta murders highlight the ways in which racism and misogyny together fuel discrimination and violence against Asian American women. This is rooted in the U.S.'s long history of empire in Asia, as well as the pervasive racism and sexism that historically and today impact all women of color. We recognize the long history of anti-Asian racism in the United States and condemn this racism and the racist acts that continue to threaten members of our communities and divide our nation.

[A recent study by the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism](#) at the California State University, San Bernardino, found that even though overall hate crimes in the United States dropped 7 percent in 2020, anti-Asian hate crimes increased nearly 150 percent, with large jumps in urban areas, especially New York City, Boston, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. Yet, as our colleagues remind us, there is nothing new in this anti-Asian hate in the United States, which is often meant to advance economic and political agendas. As [Adrian De Leon has written](#), almost from the moment significant numbers of Asians entered the United States in the 19th century, they were viewed as a threat to the nation and a “yellow peril” that was unclean and unfit for citizenship in America. In 1854, the California Supreme Court case *People v. Hall* ruled that an Asian person could not testify against a white person in a criminal proceeding, which, as [analyzed by Beth Lew-Williams](#), practically meant that there would be no legal repercussions perpetrated against Chinese individuals. With increasing numbers of Chinese immigrants arriving in mining towns and railroad camps in the American West during the gold rush period, perceptions that Chinese immigrants were the source of diseases ranging from small pox to malaria grew, fears that these immigrants were taking away jobs from white workers intensified, and anti-Chinese violence surged. Commonplace discrimination and individual acts of violence against these immigrants were punctuated by mass attacks. A “Chinese massacre” in Los Angeles ended with 17 people killed in 1871; in 1885, a white mob killed 28 Chinese coal miners in Rock Springs, Wyoming, as the terrorists burnt down the city’s Chinatown.

These fears of disease, economic competition, and widespread violence led the U.S. Congress to target Chinese immigrants with the first comprehensive immigration restriction laws in U.S. history. Congress passed the 1875 Page Act, barring immigration of Chinese women, assumed broadly to be prostitutes migrating for illicit and “immoral purposes.” Focusing especially on male workers, the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act prohibited immigration of all Chinese laborers. The anti-Chinese sentiment and characterizations that underpinned these laws quickly spread to other Asian groups, fed by U.S. imperialism in the Philippines and other Pacific islands, and increasing numbers of Japanese immigrants living especially on the West Coast. The “forever foreign” trope that was earlier used against Chinese immigrants in the United States would quickly be transferred to this growing Japanese population. [As examined by Erika Lee](#), in California this anti-Japanese sentiment underpinned legislation and violence, including a San Francisco School Board ban of Japanese students in 1906, mob attacks on Japanese homes, businesses and restaurants in 1907, the 1913 Alien Land Law which barred Asian immigrants from leasing land for more than three years or ever purchasing land, and a 1920 racist senatorial campaign by candidate James D. Phelan centered around the slogan “Keep California White.” Following the 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor and U.S. entrance into World War II, this racial othering culminated in property forfeiture and the forced relocation and of some 120,000 Japanese Americans to wartime detention camps.

More recently, similar themes of economic competition, “forever foreignness,” and public health paranoia have continued to dominate anti-Asian violence, even as the Asian American population of the United States has come to encompass over thirty different ethnic and national groups. In 1982, two white Detroit-area auto workers beat to death 27-year-old Vincent Chin, a Chinese American, with a baseball bat, mistaking him as Japanese and blaming

Japan for the loss of their auto jobs. In the 1990s, paranoia around Asian American scientists resulted in discrimination against and harassment of Taiwanese American nuclear scientist Wen Ho Lee, and Islamophobic attacks perpetrated in the wake of 9/11 led to a targeting of South Asians, including Sikh Americans, for violent reprisals. Since the start of the COVID pandemic, politicians have stoked anti-Asian sentiment by freely referring to coronavirus as the “China virus” and “kung flu,” with Asian Americans throughout the country reporting having property vandalized and being coughed on, spat at, harassed, verbally and physically attacked, and blamed for the spread of the virus.

The Organization of American Historians calls on all its members to deepen our commitments and redouble our efforts to preserve, interpret, and teach history that helps us all understand and confront the ongoing centrality of white supremacy and racism in the United States. As historians, we are uniquely positioned to bring our historical understanding to bear on contemporary issues, contribute to the national civic discourse on race and justice, and include our voices in the work of organizations like [Stop AAPI Hate](#). The OAH remains committed to our mission of pursuing excellence in the scholarship, teaching and presentation of American history, and do so in order to equip students, colleagues, and public audiences with the tools and knowledge needed to understand how we came to our present moment, and thereby ground our work toward a more just society.

On behalf of the OAH Executive Committee,



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