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## **“We Should Have Had a 'Nuernberg' After the Civil War': Black American Holocaust Reckoning and the Evolving Politics of Analogy, 1945-1951**

In the 1920s-1930s, Black Americans responded to the ascendancy of fascist regimes across Europe and fascist movements around the world at once with expressions of moral outrage, efforts at grassroots solidarity-building, and acts of shrewd political strategy—actions threaded together by an anxious concern for their futures and the future of the world. For everyday race-conscious Black Americans engaged in the growing Black public sphere of that era, a keen sensitivity to the grammar of race and imperial domination undergirding fascist politics threaded together these complex and, at times, contradictory and controversial responses. As part of the “Memory Practices and Historical Analogies: Slavery, Jim Crow, and the Holocaust” panel, my contribution will briefly explore this era in order to interrogate what came after. More specifically, I plan to discuss the ways Black public and intellectual engagement with fascism, Nazism, the persecution of European Jews, and how all of this related to Black American life, evolved in response to German surrender and the full revelations of the Nazi concentration camp system through liberation and atrocity photographs and newsreels. I am especially interested in the ways Black analogies to what would come to be called the Holocaust evolved amidst early stirrings of Holocaust memory politics and the beginning of the Cold War.

Many scholars have worked to celebrate, scrutinize, and complicate the legacy of the Civil Rights Congress' 1951 *We Charge Genocide* petition, which argued that the United States should be charged with genocide under the terms of the UN Genocide Convention for its treatment of Black Americans. Although the petition was extensively researched by a team of anti-racist, antifascist, and labor leaders and headed by the lawyer and civil rights activist William Patterson, the document was highly divisive and much maligned in its time, in large part for the Civil Rights Congress' many ties to the Communist Party. Yet the long-term legacy of this document stands as an important Black radical demand for racial justice, one that raised important questions about the meaning and scope of international law, the image of the United States as a benevolent global defender of democracy, the singularity and comparability of the Holocaust, and the possibilities and pitfalls of comparisons at the scale of racial persecution and genocide. My paper puts this familiar document in conversation with earlier debates that unfolded in the Black public sphere across 1945, peaking in response to the Nuremberg trials, which ran from November 1945 to October 1946.

Black press coverage of the Nuremberg trials proved an especially powerful forum for Black Americans to make local meaning of global politics. As the *Chicago Defender* foreign affairs columnist John Pittman argued, the proceedings and their outcome also provided powerful new language and legal precedents for demanding both immediate justice and enduring racial reckoning in the United States. The Nuremberg trials had a significant impact on how Black commentators understood their present and future possibilities, but remarkably, they also provoked discussion over the lost promise of the Reconstruction era. Lamentations that there should have been a “Nuernburg” [sic] after the Civil War” ran in several different Black newspapers, which in turn prompted critical attention to the saturation of Confederate statues throughout the South and the popularity of the Confederate flag among younger generations of white people across the country. In focusing on the years 1945-1951, my paper will explore the nature of Black American reckoning with the Holocaust during an era of profound transition. I use the term “reckoning” rather than memory to designate a memory practice coming into being in this moment with Black Americans as early architects of a Holocaust memory politics, largely forgotten today, that was grounded in antifascist, anti-racist sensibilities.