

1934 RACE RIOTS IN KALGOORLIE

Had a young Australian miner named George Edward Jordan not been born with an unusually thin skull, it is possible that the worst race riots in Western Australian history may never have taken place.

But, as the inquest would later be told by an expert medical witness, Jordan's skull was so fragile that it fractured far easier than most when his head crashed on to the pavement outside a Kalgoorlie bar on Sunday night, 28 January 1934.

The man who had sent the popular young volunteer fireman and football player sprawling during a brawl was the barman, Claudio Mataboni — who happened to be an Italian.

Because of this, Jordan's death in hospital early the following day was the signal for the start of a vicious and bloody riot against all 'foreigners' in the

mining towns of Kalgoorlie and Boulder.

The widespread arson and looting on the Monday saw several policemen injured and taken to hospital. The 'foreigners' included anyone who was not a British subject, but particularly southern Europeans who tended to keep themselves apart and seemed willing to work long hours without complaint.

It was obvious, from the intensity of the rioting and the victimisation of particular ethnic groups, that resentment had been festering for some considerable time.

In fact, one day of arson and plunder was not enough to purge this hate, for, as the *Western Argus* reported:

The demonstrations against foreigners were renewed Tuesday, and last night, culminated in a pitched battle in which jam-tin bombs and firearms were used, resulting in a strong force of foreigners being driven from a position they had taken to defend an area on the [mining] leases known as 'Dingbat Flat'.

The exact nature of the casualties could not be learnt Tuesday night, but it is certain that one Montenegrin, believed to be named 'Christo', but not yet identified, has been killed, and six Britishers wounded...

The riots on Monday night, which lasted for over five hours before they began to abate, far exceeded those of 1919, when a similar outbreak of feeling occurred against foreigners on the goldfields... The damage is estimated at over £65,000...

While the drunken rioters were running wild, the Premier of Western Aus-

tralia, Philip Collier, sought a 'Red' scapegoat. In a statement issued in Perth he said:

I cannot too strongly deplore this outbreak of lawlessness on the goldfields, the wholesale destruction of property and the unfortunate death of a goldfield citizen as the result of a brawl... I am convinced the outbreak of incendiarism and lawlessness... had its genesis in the machinations of a few Communists, who originally came from Perth and were employed upon road work...

On the goldfields the miners, meanwhile, had stopped work to protest at the employment of 500 to 600 foreigners on the mines — although some had lived in Australia for years.

At a mass meeting of over 1000 miners in Kalgoorlie on Tuesday morning, it was decided not to return to work until all the foreigners had been dismissed.

In Boulder later the same day, the Minister of Works, Mr Alex McCallum, and the Minister for Employment, Mr J. J. Kenneally, were heckled to such an extent by the more than 1000 miners that they had no chance to express the Government's view on the crisis.

In fact, making a speech was difficult enough even for the miners' leaders: at one point two of them were involved in a fist fight to decide who would have the floor. Soon the meeting was interrupted by the sound of gelignite explosions at the Ivanhoe dump.

The meeting broke up as miners set off to investigate the explosions. Soon they were joined by a party of miners who had looted a shop of arms and

ammunition.

Together they 'made a concerted rush from the railway cutting and, in a rapid burst of rifle fire, managed to oust the foreigners from the vantage point on the dump...'

A wounded Yugoslav was found and taken to hospital, at another site 'the body of a Montenegrin was discovered, shot through the forehead'. The report continued:

The miners, now reinforced by several hundred men, commenced setting fire to the camps and within a short space of time half a dozen camps had been razed to the ground, creating a flarework that could be seen for miles. The crowd made their way to the foreign quarter of the town and from 9.30 o'clock onwards fired the wood and iron houses and shanties of the foreigners... Through the volumes of smoke could be seen household furniture of every description blazing fiercely between the dwellings on the leases. For a frontage of half a mile the flames leapt into the air, and dense columns of smoke, combined with terrific heat, kept the crowd at a fair distance from the scene...

[At one hotel] a man appeared at the main bar entrance, mounted a box and pasted a white sheet of paper over the licensee's name, L. Laurenti. Expressions of satisfaction immediately arose and a few minutes later a large piece of paper was pasted on the front wall of the hotel, reading 'In future Bill Tryhall will run this place'.

At Dingbat Flat, near Kalgoorlie, rioters discovered jam tins filled with gelignite with which the foreigners had obviously intended to protect themselves. This inflamed drunken tempers even further, although one report noted that the rioters 'displayed consideration in their campaign for, in some instances, when it was known that the residents in these areas, although of foreign parentage, were Australian-born, they were not interfered with'.

Just how 'selective' they really were was told later by a Yugoslav man of forty-nine who had lived in Australia for twenty-six years, had six children born in Australia, and had fought in the I.A.F. throughout the first World War. His house and everything he owned was burnt down in front of his eyes.

Most foreigners fled the goldfields towns during the two days of violence. Some reached Perth, while less fortunate ones took to the bush. Said one news report:

Many of these foreign men, women and children... are destitute, having lost all their possessions. Concern is being felt in all official circles, as the refugees are without food and water and in most cases without protection from the weather. Some families are camped under trees with only the clothes they were wearing when they were evicted. Relief depots were set up in the foreign quarter for those who remained and a good number availed themselves of this opportunity to secure food.

As word of the violence flashed around the world, Mussolini cabled £50 to assist Italian victims.

The Government, meanwhile, had dispatched a special train with over 200 police reinforcements from Perth, but this arrived only on the morning of 1 February, when the rioting had almost completely died down — mainly because there was virtually no foreigners' property left to loot and burn.

Some sixty men and youths appeared in court, charged mainly with illegal possession of sweets, cigarettes, wine, whisky, and cordials. The hearings were postponed for eight days.

The Premier, who had ordered all liquor outlets to be closed, made it clear that he would use whatever force necessary to prevent further outbreaks of violence.

This, at last, seemed to have a sobering effect on the rioters, although a mass meeting of miners reiterated that they would not go back to work with 'unnaturalised British Subjects'.

The mine managements, in turn, refused to agree to demands that the foreign workers be dismissed, although they pledged to give preference to British labour.

On 4 February the mines reopened after managements had agreed to implement strictly a regulation that no one could be employed who did not speak English.

Noted the *Western Argus*: 'The miners as a body has from the first disasso-

ciated themselves from the mob violence and shooting of last week, and yesterday they gave the impression as they were preparing to go on shift that they were anxious to have the unhappy incidents of the past few days forgotten.'

Whether the victims of the riots shared these sentiments was not recorded.