

Jack Johnson: Defender of His Race

By Lynn Burnett

When Jack Johnson became the world's first black heavyweight champion in 1908, he instantly became a hero for people of color everywhere. Images of him dominating white fighters in the ring inspired colonized and racially oppressed people across the world to take up boxing. In the United States, his success was viewed as threatening the myth of white supremacy, and Johnson was forced into exile. Settling in revolutionary Mexico, he befriended the Mexican president and even trained his generals. This is the story of Jack Johnson.

Boxing: The Struggle Against Racial Oppression

In the decades before the rise of Jack Johnson, racial prejudices were growing worse. In the 1880's and 1890's, white Southerners in the United States were working hard to re-establish the dominance they had lost over African Americans after the Civil War. As racist laws were passed and racial violence increased, many African American men sought jobs that allowed them to leave the country. Some became sailors, travelling across the sea from nation to nation. Others roamed the world as travelling performers, or as boxers moving from one prizefight to the next.

During their travels, these men encountered colonized peoples, and realized that racism was used to justify the domination of people not only in the United States, but all across the world. Returning home, they told stories that helped their communities realize that they were not alone... that there were people all around the world who had similar experiences to them, who sympathized with them, and who might even want to work alongside them in their shared struggle against racial oppression.

It was the boxers who communicated this message with the most force. When black boxers fought white opponents overseas, they gained the respect of colonized people, and became symbols of their shared struggle against white supremacy. Boxers did what most racially oppressed people could only dream of – publicly dominate their oppressors.

As the new century of 1900 dawned, the rise of film turned the black boxer into an even more powerful symbol of resistance. Like many new technologies, film was created and controlled by European and American imperial powers, and was used to spread images and stories of their dominance. In the United States, early films portrayed the successful control of the Philippines, and most popularly, the conquest of Native Americans. Because these films were intended to prove the toughness and superiority of white American men, they appealed mostly to white Americans. But there was one form of film that appealed to people of all colors, from all across the world: the interracial fight film.

In the earliest interracial fight films, the fighters could not be seen clearly due to the grainy quality of the film. What could be seen clearly, however, was the image of a lighter man versus a darker man. Because these early films were silent, local entertainers across the world would narrate the fight to the audience, in their own language, allowing audiences to imagine that they were watching *their own people*. In this way, the low visual quality and the silence of the films actually *helped* interracial fight films to become globally popular. White people from all across Europe and the United States could imagine that the lighter figure was one of their own countrymen proving their dominance over people of color, while racially oppressed and colonized people could imagine that the darker figure was one of *their* people fighting back against their oppressors.

One of these films would ignite a global boxing craze, force governments to realize the power of film to undermine their authority, and even contribute to splitting the world into two halves: white people and the so-called “darker races.” This was the film of Jack Johnson, soon to be the most famous black man on the planet, demolishing the white world champion in 1908.

Jack Johnson & a World Split in Two

Although interracial boxing was popular, world championship matches were restricted to white men. Determined to compete on the world stage, Jack Johnson chased the World Heavyweight Champion, Tommy Burns, around the world for two years, relentlessly challenging him and insulting him whenever Burns turned down a fight. Johnson would even purchase ringside tickets to Burns’ boxing matches and hurl insults at him as he fought.

In 1908, Burns finally caved in to Johnson’s relentless pressure while in Australia. The match immediately generated global attention, and was recorded with newer, higher quality film, allowing millions of people across the world to see the expressions on the men’s faces as they fought. White supremacists, at first excited about the films potential to prove white dominance, quickly wished the film had never been made. The black boxer not only demolished the world champion in front of a crowd of 20,000, he smiled as he fought, as if conquering the best white fighter in the world was an effortless feat. Police broke up the fight and forced the cameras to stop rolling. The myth of white supremacy was being threatened.

Johnson’s success was deeply troubling to many white people. Just a few years earlier, in 1905, Japan had defeated Russia in the Russo-Japanese War, becoming the first non-white country to defeat a powerful white nation. Johnson’s effortless victory contributed to a growing fear that people of European ancestry were losing their position of power in the world. A call went out for a “great white hope” to challenge Johnson and prove to the world that “the white race” was indeed superior to all others. However, Johnson defeated all who challenged him – often easily. As the classic American author Jack London wrote, while Johnson fought, he also “rested, smiled and dreamed. This dreaming expression was fascinating. It was

certainly deceptive, for suddenly, the lines on the face would harden, the eyes would glint viciously,” and Johnson would release a downpour of powerful blows.

Johnson’s films became popular all over the world, creating a worldwide passion for boxing amongst racially oppressed and colonized peoples. This concerned colonial rulers, but the more they tried to prevent the showing of the films, the more people of color across the world wanted to see them. The global search for a “great white hope,” and the popularity of Johnson’s films amongst people of color, contributed to a growing division of the world into two halves during the first decade of the twentieth century: white people, and everyone else. In this new century, the color of skin began to identify people more than their culture or national background. It didn’t matter if the “white hope” was American or Italian; German or Russian. In the twentieth century, these diverse groups began to find a common identity in being “white” that they did not have before. Likewise, people from the rest of the world found that they, for the first time, had something in common as well, simply by belonging to the so-called “darker races.” Films encouraged this division by mass marketing, and greatly profiting from, images of racial competition.

Johnson’s Exile & the Mexican Revolution

In 1912, U.S. authorities found an excuse to have Johnson arrested. His crime was engaging in a consensual relationship with a white woman – a crime the authorities called “white slavery.” Johnson fled the country. His fights had made him a wealthy man, and he travelled extensively, lived lavishly, and boxed everywhere he travelled. While living in Spain and Cuba, he fell in love with Spanish culture. After seven years on the run, he decided to settle down in Mexico City, in 1919, during the final years of the Mexican Revolution. He was inspired by the revolutionary atmosphere and quickly befriended – and became the boxing instructor – of many prominent Mexican authorities, including a group of high-ranking generals.

Before long, Johnson had befriended the Mexican President himself: Venustiano Carranza. During his exile and travels around the world, Johnson had met many powerful people and had developed unique insights about racism, imperialism, and global politics. The two men spent long hours speaking in private. Johnson found a protector in Carranza: when the U.S. government pressured Mexico to return Johnson to the United States, the Mexican president refused. Johnson later wrote that Carranza “made every effort to make my stay in the Mexican Republic a pleasant and comfortable one.”

Unlike other exiles in Mexico, Johnson chose to travel through dangerous territory, staging boxing matches wherever he went. He later wrote that President Carranza provided “me with escorts of soldiers when I had occasion to travel in sections of the country infested by bandits or revolutionists.” Johnson described how a train he was on was stopped by a “horde of savage Yaqui Indians... When I told them who I was, they were sufficiently interested to halt their looting.” The leaders of the raiding party apologized, and Johnson, who had learned to speak some of the Yaqui

dialect, spent some time in conversation with them before reboarding the train. Despite using the racist term “savage” to describe the indigenous Mexicans, the fact that Johnson had studied their language and enjoyed speaking with them revealed his respect for the diversity of Mexican culture.

Johnson, however, was not admired everywhere he went. Tens of thousands of white Americans lived in Mexico. Most were from the South and many were the children of Confederate veterans who had fled to Mexico when the South lost the Civil War. Historian Gerald Horne describes how, on one occasion, a white restaurant owner named Walter Sanborn

refused to serve Johnson. Johnson left but returned a few hours later with three or four of Carranza’s generals. They drew their pistols and demanded that Sanborn apologize. Mexico, they informed him, “was not a white man’s country.” Sanborn was forced to shake hands, embrace, and finally serve Johnson.

Stories of Jack Johnson denouncing white supremacy and standing up to racist attitudes in Mexico were extremely popular amongst African Americans in the United States. On one occasion, a member of the New Orleans Chamber of Commerce named D.H. Moore was travelling with his friends in Mexico. When they walked into a restaurant where Johnson was dining, Moore said with disgust that “no nigger could eat with white people” where he came from. Johnson calmly walked over to him and delivered a swift uppercut. Such stories of Johnson as “a tough lone opponent of white supremacy,” to use Gerald Horne’s words, infuriated white Americans and delighted people of color. Historian Theresa Runstedtler explains that black newspapers used such stories to help African Americans realize the “potential for transnational racial solidarity.”

The Mexican Revolution threatened major U.S. business interests in Mexico, leading many Mexicans to fear a U.S. invasion. According to a spy ordered by the U.S. government to monitor Johnson’s activities, in a speech “given before a cheering crowd in front of the Vega Hotel in Nuevo Laredo, Johnson said that when and if the gringos invaded Mexico, American blacks would stand alongside their Mexican brothers.” He even urged African American soldiers to join the Mexican army instead, where they would not be discriminated against.

Johnson encouraged African Americans to abandon the oppressive atmosphere of the United States and to make their home in Mexico. Hoping to encourage black migration to Mexico, he started “Jack Johnson’s Land Company” in Mexico City to sell land to African Americans, placing ads for the company in African American newspapers that read:

Colored People. You who are lynched, tortured, mobbed, persecuted and discriminated against in the boasted ‘Land of Liberty...’ OWN A HOME IN MEXICO where one man is as good as another.

The U.S. government viewed Johnson's statements and activities as a serious threat. During World War I – which was happening at the same time as the Mexican Revolution – there had been concerns that African Americans would not feel loyalty towards the United States, and might side with enemy nations. Germany had even tried to convince Mexico to invade the United States, and some believed that African Americans might join forces with such an invasion.

When President Carranza was assassinated in 1920, Jack Johnson knew his time in Mexico was up. The next government, hoping for a better relationship with their powerful northern neighbor, told Johnson he had thirty days to leave. He was tired of living in exile, and would later write that "I was not satisfied with my lot in life. There was nothing, I felt, that would compensate me for continuing as an exile from my home and friends, so I thought constantly of returning." As Johnson crossed the border and surrendered, he was smiling. On the way to his jail in Chicago, thousands of fans cheered for him at every train stop.

Johnson served one year and one day. Upon release, he headed straight to Harlem, where thousands of fans carried him through the streets on their shoulders. Soon, the African American artistic movement known as the Harlem Renaissance would explode, as would the little-known militant civil rights movement of the 1920's. These artistic and political movements were led by African Americans calling themselves the "New Negroes," black men and women who felt that the older generation of African Americans had been too passive.

The powerful symbol of Jack Johnson had helped pave the way for the more militant black culture of the 1920s. In the words of historian Theresa Runstedtler "The defiant heavyweight had, in many respects, changed how his colored fans saw themselves, laying the groundwork for an increasingly militant and global movement against white domination." Like earlier boxers, Johnson had been at the center of the "developing black counter culture," soon to be embodied the younger Harlem Renaissance artists and jazz musicians. The stories of his international travels "inspired black Americans back home to expand their geographic imaginations and to envision their racial struggles as part of a global problem," and had "played an integral role in the emergence of a popular black global imagination and a more confident race consciousness that touched the lives of ordinary people of color within and beyond the United States."

Bibliography

Horne, Gerald. *Black and Brown: African Americans and the Mexican Revolution, 1910-1920*. New York: New York University Press, 2005.

Runstedtler, Theresa. *Jack Johnson, Rebel Sojourner: Boxing in the Shadow of the Global Color Line*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012.

Questions

Boxing: The Struggle Against Racial Oppression

1. *Thinking About Global Connections:* As an increased amount of black men began traveling across the world, what did they learn? When they returned home, what did they tell their communities?
2. *Thinking About Technology:* How was film used by American and European imperial powers? Why did interracial fight films become globally popular?

Jack Johnson & a World Split in Two

3. *Thinking About Global Context:* Why was Johnson's success in the boxing ring so upsetting to white Americans and Europeans? What else was happening in the world that caused them to be so fearful?
4. *Thinking About Technology:* How did films of interracial boxing contribute to the diverse people of the world beginning to split into two groups: "white" people, and members of the "darker races" (known today as "people of color")?

Johnson's Exile and the Mexican Revolution

5. *Thinking About Movement and Migration:* Why did ten's of thousands of white Americans live in Mexico?
6. *Thinking About Global Connections:* Why did Jack Johnson encourage African Americans to move to Mexico, and even join the Mexican army? Why did Johnson's statements seriously concern the U.S. government?
7. *Thinking About Historical Significance:* According to this text, why might boxing be historically significant? What does the history of boxing teach us about important world events?