Red Ball Express:
The Legacy of U.S. Liberation Troops in WWII France

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Abstract:

We study how contact with African American soldiers during the liberation of France in late 1944 shaped racial attitudes among the civilian population in subsequent decades. Our identification strategy relies on the Red Ball Express (RBE), a system of logistical truck convoys created by the U.S. army to convey military supplies from Normandy to the rapidly advancing eastern frontline. Because of segregation policies inside the U.S. army, these convoys were predominantly operated by Black soldiers. We first compare outcomes alongside RBE routes with routes operated by the British and Canadian armies, in which segregation policies were not in place. We then use the east-west angle at which existing roads crossed municipalities as an instrument for a municipality's likelihood to be positioned on the RBE path. We hypothesize that U.S. military policies affected the type of contact experienced by civilian populations. As documented by Roberts (2014), the U.S. Army was disproportionately likely to prosecute crimes of sexual violence perpetrated by African American soldiers; a fraction of these cases resulted in public executions. We use local vote shares of extreme right parties in recent presidential elections (1995-2022) as a proxy for contemporary racial attitudes. Our preliminary results suggest that municipalities alongside RBE routes experienced an increase in extreme-right voting in the long run. These effects are driven by locations where episodes of sexual violence allegedly occurred and were publicly prosecuted by U.S. military authorities.