The Leo Frank trial indicates historical context in four key ways. It reveals lingering postbellum divisions, class tensions, anti-Semitism, and the nuances of racism in the capital of the New South at the turn of the 20th century. Frank was denied due process and eventually lynched as a result of how these prejudices and conflicts interacted and played out.

The Civil War ended almost fifty years prior to the Leo Frank trial, but tensions between North and South were still apparent in Atlanta. In a cinematographic turn of events, Mary Phagan’s murder happened during Confederate Memorial Day celebrations.[[1]](#footnote-1) Frank’s Yankee status was central to prejudiced attacks against his character.[[2]](#footnote-2) Atlanta was also outraged by interference in the trial and its aftermath from other Northerners, such as William Burns and Adolph Ochs. Southerners were protective of “Georgia’s unique brand of justice.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Lingering postbellum tension also explains Atlanta’s general acceptance of Jim Conley: despite pervasive racism, this black Southerner was regarded as a “hometown hero.”[[4]](#footnote-4) The specter of the Civil War thus predisposed Atlanta against Frank.

Economic disparities and class tensions resulting from demographic shifts also explain anti-Frank sentiment. During the decades after the Civil War, Atlanta swelled as backcountry farmers moved into the city looking for work. Lack of well-paying jobs, poor health conditions, and few labor regulations contributed to class tensions as the city grew and industrialized.[[5]](#footnote-5) Atlantans were aware that their youngsters—the city’s child laborers—were among the worst exploited.[[6]](#footnote-6) Women also bore the brunt of mistreatment in this system, as economic conditions led to types of vice and violence that more negatively impacted women,[[7]](#footnote-7) even as traditional mores naively dictated the importance of female honor and chastity within this newly industrialized, paternalistic atmosphere.[[8]](#footnote-8) Frank, however, came from wealth and was a factory manager, an intellectual and an industrialist. He afforded two of the best attorneys. These factors provided reason for the working class to dislike and distrust Frank and, ultimately, to pin their anger over the rape and murder of Mary Phagan on him.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Leo Frank’s Judaism permeated the trial and helped ensure his demise. In earlier decades German Jews had moved into Georgia, where they practiced moderate Judaism and found general economic success and tolerance. Newer Jewish immigrants around the turn of the century tended to be poorer, and they retained more conservative aspects of Judaism, conspicuously distancing themselves from the Protestant population in ways that the older Jewish population did not.[[10]](#footnote-10) This left Atlanta’s Jews in a precarious position. Furthermore, emerging complaints over economic disparities were linked throughout the South to anti-Semitism.[[11]](#footnote-11) This is the environment into which Leo Frank was thrust, and this is the environment which lost no opportunity to connect Frank’s Judaism with his status as a wealthy, morally bankrupt Yankee who probably defiled and killed Mary Phagan. Anti-Semitic comments abounded in the media surrounding the case, ranging from the comparatively innocuous “Yankee industrial Jew”[[12]](#footnote-12) to outlandish character attacks about Frank “engaging in sexual acts with his nose.”[[13]](#footnote-13) This is the environment that the widely popular Rabbi David Marx left behind in the wake of the verdict, which in his eyes “could be explained only by a sentiment that he’d heretofore maintained barely existed in Georgia: anti-Semitism.”[[14]](#footnote-14) This is the environment that lynched Frank.

Defense and prosecution alike relied on different types of racist thought during this trial. Jim Crow was alive and well, and race riots wracked Atlanta seven years before the trial. To have Jim Conley, a black man, star as the sole witness against Frank would have been almost unthinkable without other factors.[[15]](#footnote-15) During the trial, Frank’s defense team discredited Conley using the worst racist terms.[[16]](#footnote-16) This only encouraged black Atlantans to support Conley, regardless of the veracity of his claims.[[17]](#footnote-17) When Frank’s high-paid, white lawyers could not break Conley during examination, Atlantans began to wonder if perhaps Conley was telling the truth. The state also used Conley’s race to explain his significantly differing statements to police, indicating that blacks sometimes tried a few versions of events before correctly recalling what happened.[[18]](#footnote-18) Overall, race played a unique, nuanced role in convicting Frank.

In the end Leo Frank’s position as a wealthy, Jewish, industrial Yankee worked against him by creating an atmosphere within which a fair trial was unlikely in this time and place, an atmosphere precipitated by a hellacious media. Underlined by racism and compounded by Mary Phagan’s identity—the justice-hungry public in Atlanta perceived that the young, pure Phagan was not just taken advantage of sexually at the time of death, but she was also taken advantage of through poor labor conditions during life—it is no surprise that this maelstrom gave rise to the second incarnation of the Ku Klux Klan.[[19]](#footnote-19) The Frank case stands as an uneasy testament to a transitional period within Atlanta’s history.

1. Jack Ford, “Famous Trials in American History, Video Lecture Week 4” (lecture, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Brendan J. Buttimer, “Leo Frank and the Legacy of Southern Lawlessness: A Murder and a Lynching,” in *Famous American Crimes and Trials: 1913-1959*, ed. Frankie Y. Bailey (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004), 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid., 14-15. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ford, “Famous Trials in American History, Video Lecture Week 4.” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Steve Oney, *And the Dead Shall Rise* (New York: Pantheon, 2003), 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Buttimer, “Leo Frank and the Legacy of Southern Lawlessness: A Murder and a Lynching,” 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Nancy MacLean, “The Leo Frank Case Reconsidered: Gender and Sexual Politics in the Making of Reactionary Populism,” *The Journal of American History* 78, no. 3 (1991): 929-930. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ford, “Famous Trials in American History, Video Lecture Week 4.” [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Oney, *And the Dead Shall Rise*, 11-13. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid., 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Peter Rhodes, *The People vs. Leo Frank*, online media (2011; Public Broadcasting Service, 2015.), film. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. MacLean, “The Leo Frank Case Reconsidered: Gender and Sexual Politics in the Making of Reactionary Populism,” 932 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Oney, *And the Dead Shall Rise*, 345. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ford, “Famous Trials in American History, Video Lecture Week 4.” [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Oney, *And the Dead Shall Rise*, 324. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. MacLean, “The Leo Frank Case Reconsidered: Gender and Sexual Politics in the Making of Reactionary Populism,” 924-925. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ford, “Famous Trials in American History, Video Lecture Week 4.” [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Rhodes, *The People vs. Leo Frank*. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)