Lesson | 04

African Americans in the First World War

Introduction

In the first years of World War I, as the conflict unfolded in Europe, Africa, and beyond, the United States had largely stayed out of the fray. Though sympathies among Americans were split, most had no desire to enter the war and supported U.S. President Woodrow Wilson's official policy of neutrality. Over time, reports of atrocities in Europe, combined with the 1915 German U-boat attack on the passenger liner RMS Lusitania, drew antipathy towards the German Empire. Viewed as the aggressor, observers raised concerns about German militarism and expansionism, but the U.S. preference for isolationism persisted.

New York Times, April 3, 1917

"All the News That's Fit to Print."

The New York Times.

THE WEATHER

PRESIDENT CALLS FOR WAR DECLARATION, STRONGER NAVY, NEW ARMY OF 500,000 MEN, FULL CO-OPERATION WITH GERMANY'S FOES

It was not until April 6, 1917 that the United States entered World War I. By that time revolution had broken out in Russia, and it appeared Germany was gaining the upper hand. In January, British officials intercepted a German telegram which attempted to entice Mexico into an alliance and in February German U-boats began unrestricted attacks on U.S. merchant ships in naval war zones in the North Atlantic. After a year-long campaign, Wilson finally convinced America to go to war.

Over the course of U.S. involvement in the conflict, over four million Americans served in the United States Army, with an additional 800,000 in other branches. Among them, over 380,000 African Americans either enlisted or were drafted, with over 200,000 sent to Europe as part of the American Expeditionary Force. The U.S. entry into the war was framed as a battle to make the world "safe for democracy," in President Woodrow Wilson's words. Yet, these soldiers largely served in segregated units amid a backdrop of discrimination, racial violence, segregation, and limited citizenship back home.

369th Infantry regiment during World War I

Key Terms:

United States

U.S. Expeditionary Force

President Woodrow Wilson

W.E.B. Du Bois

The Crisis

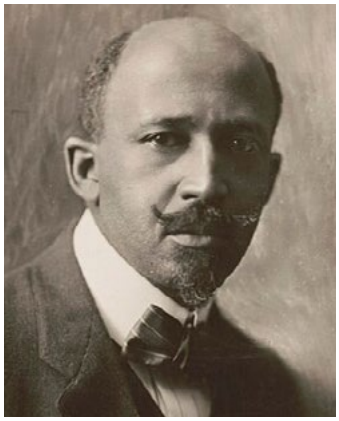
Labor Battalions

92nd and 93rd Infantry Divisions

Croix de Guerre

"Red Summer"

W. E. B. Du Bois and the Meaning of World War I



W. E. B. Du Bois, 1918

As soon as war broke out in 1914, African American leaders wrestled with the war's meaning. It occurred at a height of white supremacy and a time when, though citizens, African Americans' political and economic rights were limited by a system of racist laws and segregation, commonly referred to as "Jim Crow." Racial violence and riots were also used as mechanisms of terror that reinforced social inequalities between whites and Black Americans.

The debate over what had caused the war, democracy, and who the war served was central to the Black experience of World War I. Among the people considering these questions was W. E. B. Du Bois. Du Bois was a Black American sociologist, historian, and civil rights activist. He became the first African American to earn his PhD from Harvard University in 1895. Throughout his career, he spoke out against racial injustice in the United States. In 1909, he co-founded the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and served as editor of its publication, *The Crisis*, which reported on the lives and conditions of Black America. Du Bois established the paper following riots against African Americans in Springfield, Illinois in August of 1908. Like many civil rights leaders of his era, Du Bois saw the condition of African Americans in a broader global framework as well, and was an outspoken critic of global racism and imperialism.

Du Bois and staff, Editorial Offices of The Crisis

Prior to U.S. entry into the war Du Bois wrote about it often in *The Crisis* and other outlets, analyzing its causes and significance for global racial inequalities. He focused in particular on the place of peoples of African descent in it, arguing as early as November 1914 that despite U.S. neutrality, the war's relationship to racial prejudice and imperial expansion was indeed salient to Black Americans. In May 1915, Du Bois published an article titled "The African Roots of War" in the *Atlantic Monthly*, in which he eschewed the notion that the war was caused by failures of diplomacy, or the assassination in Sarajevo. Rather, he argued the war's causes lay in the aggressive competition for colonial holdings in Africa. At the time, this view challenged the dominant narratives of the war, and led Du Bois to hope that perhaps the war might lead to a transformation in exploitative imperial relations.

As the war progressed and intensified, Du Bois' writings on the conflict continued in *The Crisis*, as did his reporting on violence against Black Americans and the campaign for equal rights. Over the course of the conflict, the readership of the paper grew significantly—from 1915 to 1919, its circulation grew from 30,000 to 100,000—making it a leading outlet for Black activism and commentary. Du Bois' editorials in the paper, a highlight of it, drew an increasingly wide readership as well.

The United States Joins the War

African American soldiers at camp in France, guard in front of the barracks, 1918

When the U.S. entered the war in April 1917, Du Bois supported its entry on the Allied side. At the time, President Wilson had expressed that the United States had no colonial aspirations, and framed the war as a fight against German aggression and as a battle to preserve democracy and the ability of peoples to determine their own fates. Du Bois and others, though deeply and continuously critical of racial policies in the U.S. and Allied imperialism, feared what a German victory in the war might mean for Black people world-wide. He found inspiration in the idea of the war as a struggle for democracy and saw the potential for the conflict to serve as a vehicle of historical change. As Du Bois continued to write editorials in *The Crisis*, he pointed to past conflicts, including the American Revolution and the Civil War, and the roles of Black people in them. He argued that the current conflict was just as much a war for their future; it provided an opportunity to prove themselves once again and perhaps make the promises of democracy and equality a reality for Black people.

Historian Chad Williams characterizes this phase in Du Bois' relationship to the war as one filled with hope. Military service in the "Great War for Civilization" would give Black men a chance to prove an honorable manhood, demonstrate their worthiness for full citizenship, and usher in an end to race-based insults.

African American troops in France, receiving machine gun instruction, 1918

Always keeping a global perspective, Du Bois agreed with characterizations of German power as uniquely despotic, and supported a war devoted to the defeat of the Kaiser. Further, Du Bois had noted the French use of their colonial subjects in combat, and expected that African Americans would also prove their courage in battle. He therefore urged Black men to see themselves as engaged in a common Pan-African struggle, and hoped that in doing so some progress might come from the war.

Du Bois actively supported the war effort. In an attempt to work against prejudices, he, together with his NAACP colleague and friend Joel Spingarn, established a training camp in Fort Des Moines, Iowa to help African Americans become officers in the U.S. Armed Forces. In 1918, he also sought a captaincy with the Army, and issued an accompanying article titled "Close Ranks" in the July issue of *The Crisis*, urging African Americans to participate in the war effort in Europe. The article

THE CRISIS

Vol. 16—No. 3 JULY, 1918 Whole No. 93

Editorial

CLOSE RANKS.

THIS is the crisis of the world. For all the long years to come men will point to the year 1918 as the great Day of Decision, the day when the world decided whether it would submit to military despotism and an endless armed peace—if peace it could be called—or whether they would put down the menace of German militarism and inaugurate the United States of the World.

We of the colored race have no ordinary interest in the outcome. That which the German power represents today spells death to the aspirations of Negroes and all darker races for equality, freedom and democracy. Let us not hesitate. Let us, while this war lasts, forget our special grievances and close our ranks shoulder to shoulder with our own white fellow citizens and the allied nations that are fighting for democracy. We make no ordinary sacrifice, but we make it gladly and willingly with our eyes lifted to the hills.

WAR SAVING STAMPS.

A CORRESPONDENT writes us: "Has there been put in operation any effective machinery for bringing our twelve million colored citizens, especially those living in the Southern States, into this great national movement for Thrift and Economy, represented by the War Savings Stamp movement? This movement is to have a profound effect on the character of the American people; millions of prodigal, shiftless Americans are going to learn their first lessons in Thrift and Economy through buying Thrift Stamps and War Savings Stamps. It is obvious that our colored citizens should share to the full the benefits as well as the responsibilities of the movement.

"It is a voluntary effort. Thousands of voluntary committees are working to inculcate the lessons of Thrift and inspire voluntary purchase of stamps."

We are glad to say that such a movement has been begun. Various organizations are taking hold and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People will use its more than 30,000 members in 108 branches to push this splendid movement.

Remember, June twenty-eighth is National War Savings Day!

THE COMMON SCHOOL.

MUCH mist and misunderstanding has been consciously and unconsciously put in the colored public mind by recent discussions of the schools. We colored people must, however, keep one thing clearly before us: the first fours years' of a child's life, no matter what his race or condition, must be devoted by every modern country which wishes to survive and grow to a very simple program of study: (1) The child must learn to read so as to be able easily to understand what men have writ-

"Close Ranks," in the July, 1918 edition of The Crisis

unleashed a storm of controversy. Some activists criticized Du Bois's support for the war, feeling that Blacks should not participate in a white imperialist conflict, and worried that Du Bois had perhaps lost his radicalism. Others argued that, rather than simply "closing ranks," the war should be used as an opportunity to preemptively negotiate fair rewards for service. Du Bois' decision to seek an officer's commission also led to accusations of opportunism. The criticism effected Du Bois deeply, and on top of it, military intelligence officials rejected his application for the Army commission on the objections of white officers.

Du Bois continued to hope that the war and Black participation in it might serve as an engine for change, though their treatment proved disappointing. African Americans made substantial contributions to the war effort on the home front, raising around $250 million in war bonds. Yet women who wished to join the war effort as nurses were prohibited from going abroad. Meanwhile, men were motivated to serve in the belief that demonstrating their loyalty and patriotism was important to be accepted as full citizens. Through both enlistment and the draft, around 380,000 African American soldiers served in racially segregated units within the army, with approximately 200,000 sent to Europe.

The vast majority of these soldiers were relegated to labor as stevedores loading and unloading ships, in the construction of roads or railways, cleaning, digging trenches, and other tasks. Those working in construction and labor were at times put out on the front and exposed to enemy fire, without weapons or training to protect themselves.

African American soldiers doing kitchen police abord the Celtic, after the ship docked in peer, Nov. 1918

The U.S. Army did, albeit reluctantly, agree to the creation of some Black combat units—the 92nd infantry division, composed of draftees, was given distinguished service crosses, despite the fact that white officers insulted and diminished their contributions. They, and segments of the 93rd division (totaling around 12,000 soldiers) served in four regiments with the French Army, which was desperate for soldiers. The Army had agreed to "loan" these units, largely under the presumption that they were the least valuable to the U.S.

The 369th Infantry Regiment, also known as the "Harlem Hellfighters," returning home from France (top); the 369th Infantry Regiment, with the soldier center wearing a captured German helmet (bottom)

The 369th regiment, popularly known as the Harlem Hellfighters, served in French divisions throughout the war and spent the longest period (191 days) at the front. They had the strongest record of any comparable American unit, and 171 of its members earned the prestigious *Croix de Guerre* from the French army. Henry Johnson, who fought off a German raid in May 1918, became among the first American ground combat heroes of World War I and was awarded the *Croix de Guerre* with Palm, the highest level of award given. Johnson passed away in 1929—it would not be until 1996 that he posthumously received his U.S. Purple Heart, followed by the Distinguished Service Cross in 2002 and Medal of Honor in 2015.

Returning Home to Fight

Soldiers who served in the war achieved notable battlefield triumphs and experienced moments of deep pride. But the experiences of war and the discrimination many faced in the U.S. service were also painful and disillusioning. Throughout the war, Du Bois continued to report on anti-African American riots and violence back home, alongside the contributions of African American soldiers.

When the war ended in 1918, Du Bois traveled to France the following year hoping to participate in talks, as well as interview African American soldiers about their experiences in the Great War. He was appalled by what he learned. Writing home about his conversations, Du Bois reported on the experiences of discrimination Black servicemen had faced in the U.S. Armed Forces, and noted that they often expressed their treatment by the French had been better.

Moreover, as the war drew to a close, Black soldiers returned to the U.S. at the war's end expecting their service would result in better treatment. However, despite moments of celebration, they were also met with resentment and hostility. White Americans were willing to use violence to reassert racial hierarchies—1919 saw a wave of riots, dubbed the "Red Summer" in 26 cities around the country.

African American veteran faces off with state militia during Chicago race riots, 1919

Du Bois had continued to hope that the war and Black participation in it might serve as an engine for change. But, as he observed in an editorial published in the May 1919 edition of *The Crisis* titled "Returning Soldiers":

> **We *return*.**
> **We *return from fighting*.**
> **We *return fighting*.**
> **Make way for Democracy! We saved it in France, and by the Great Jehovah, we will save it in the United States of America, or know the reason why.**

March of the 369th Infantry Regiment on Fifth Avenue, New York City during welcome home parade, Feb. 17, 1919 (left); Army Sgt. Henry Johnson waves to well-wishers during the parade (right)

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