

Primary Source:

W. E. B. Du Bois on the First World War



Introduction

W. E. B. Du Bois was a Black American intellectual, sociologist, historian, social commentator, and civil rights activist. Born in Massachusetts in 1868, in 1895 he became the first African American to earn his PhD from Harvard University. He studied and wrote about African American life and history and in 1903 he published a collection of essays titled *The Souls of Black Folk*, which inspired many young black activists in the United States in resistance to racial oppression. He also co-founded the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909 and served as editor of its publication, *The Crisis*, though he parted ways with the organization in the 1930s. Throughout his career, Du Bois spoke out against racial injustice in the United States, as well as global racism and imperialism.

Although the United States did not enter the First World War until 1917, Du Bois wrote and commented on the conflict frequently. His writings often focused on the roles of Africa and the African diaspora in the war, and his perspective on it shifted several times—both as it unfolded, and in the years after.

Below are two articles authored by Du Bois. The first, published in 1915, provides his critical assessment of the causes of the conflict and the place of Africa in it. The second, from 1918, conveys the shift in his views following the U.S. entry into the war in 1917. As you are reading, think about what you believe may have caused Du Bois' change in views, and what he may have hoped the outcome of the war might be. Consider also how you think Du Bois might respond to the realities of the war's outcomes.

Primary Sources

Introduction

The African Roots of War, 1915

Close Ranks, 1918

Primary Source 1:

W. E. B. Du Bois, "The African Roots of War," *The Atlantic Monthly*, 1915

Throughout his career, Du Bois spoke out against racial injustice in the United States, as well as global racism and imperialism, a perspective that informed his interpretation of the so-called "Great War" when it first broke out in 1914. At that time, Du Bois was deeply critical of the conflict, expressing his analysis of it in a series of articles including the one provided here. As you are reading, consider what Du Bois' interpretation of the war seems to be, as well as how this view might relate to other explanations or narratives of the war's outbreak. Please note that the text below contains strong pejorative language.

Source: W. E. B. Du Bois, "The African Roots of War," *The Atlantic Monthly*, 115 no. 5, May 1915, 707-14.

"In a very real sense Africa is a prime cause of this terrible overturning of civilization which we have lived to see."

I

'*Semper novi quid ex Africa*,'¹ cried the Roman proconsul; and he voiced the verdict of forty centuries. Yet there are those who would write world-history and leave out this most marvelous of continents. Particularly today most men assume that Africa lies far afield from the centres of our burning social problems, and especially from our present problem of World War.



Railway opening in Africa, 1899

Yet in a very real sense Africa is a prime cause of this terrible overturning of civilization which we have lived to see.... the Berlin Conference to apportion the rising riches of Africa among the white peoples met on the fifteenth day of November, 1884.... before the Berlin Conference had finished its deliberations they had annexed to Germany as an area over half as large again as the whole German Empire ... Great Britain and France got four million square miles each, Portugal three quarters of a million, and Italy and Spain smaller but substantial areas.

The methods by which this continent has been stolen have been contemptible and dishonest beyond expression. Lying treaties, rivers of rum, murder, assassination, mutilation, rape, and torture have marked the progress of Englishman, German, Frenchman, and Belgian on the dark continent. The only way in which the world has been able to endure the horrible tale is by deliberately stopping its ears and changing the subject of conversation while the devilry went on ... Leopold of Belgium was first on his feet, and the result was the Congo Free State... with all its magniloquent heralding of Peace, Christianity, and Commerce, degenerating

into murder, mutilation and downright robbery, differed only in degree and concentration from the tale of all Africa in this rape of a continent already furiously mangled by the slave trade. That sinister traffic, on which the British Empire and the American Republic were largely built, cost black Africa no less than 100,000,000 souls, the wreckage of its political and social life, and left the continent in precisely that state of helplessness which invites aggression and exploitation.... the exploration of the valley of the Congo was the occasion of the scramble for Africa, the cause lay deeper. The Franco-Prussian War turned the eyes of those who sought power and dominion away from Europe.



Colonial claimants to Africa, 1913

Already England was in Africa, cleaning away the debris of the slave trade and half consciously groping toward the new Imperialism. France, humiliated and impoverished, looked toward a new northern African empire sweeping from the Atlantic to the Red Sea. More slowly Germany began to see the dawning of a new day, and, shut out from America by the Monroe Doctrine, looked to Asia and Africa for colonies. Portugal sought anew to make good her claim to her ancient African realm; and thus a continent where Europe claimed but a tenth of the land in 1875, was in twenty-five more years practically absorbed.

II

Why was this? What was the new call for dominion?.... The answer to this riddle we shall find in the economic changes in Europe. Remember what the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have meant to organized industry in European civilization. Slowly the divine right of the few to determine economic income and distribute the goods and services of the world has been questioned and curtailed. We called the process Revolution in the eighteenth century, advancing Democracy in the nineteenth, and Socialization of Wealth in the twentieth....

With the waning of the possibility of the Big Fortune, gathered by starvation wage and boundless exploitation of one's weaker and poorer fellows at home, arose more magnificently the dream of exploitation abroad. Always, of course, the individual merchant had at his own risk and in his own way tapped the riches of foreign lands. Later, special trading monopolies had entered the field and founded empires overseas. Soon, however, the mass of merchants at home demanded a share in this golden stream; and finally, in the twentieth century, the laborer at home is demanding and beginning to receive a part of his share.... It is this paradox which allows in America the most rapid advance of democracy to go hand in hand in its very centres with increased aristocracy and hatred toward darker races, and which excuses and defends an inhumanity that does not shrink from the public burning of human beings.

Yet the paradox is easily explained: the white workingman has been asked to share the spoil of exploiting 'chinks and niggers.' It is no longer simply the merchant prince, or the aristocratic monopoly, or even the employing class, that is exploiting the world: it is the nation; a new democratic nation composed of united capital and labor. The laborers are not yet getting, to be sure, as large a share as they want or will get, and there are still at the bottom large and restless excluded classes. But the laborer's equity is recognized, and his just share is a matter of time, intelligence, and skillful negotiation.



German weapons demonstration in front of Ngoni warriors, 1897

Such nations it is that rule the modern world. Their national bond is no mere sentimental patriotism, loyalty, or ancestor-worship. It is increased wealth, power, and luxury for all classes on a scale the world never saw before. Never before was the average citizen of England, France, and Germany so rich, with such splendid prospects of greater riches.

Whence comes this new wealth on what does its accumulation depend? It comes primarily from the darker nations of the world—Asia and Africa, South and Central America, the West Indies and the islands of the South Seas... Chinese, East Indians, Negroes, and South American Indians are by common consent for governance by white folk and economic subjection to them....

One thing, however, is certain: Africa is prostrate. There at least are few signs of self-consciousness that need at present be heeded. To be sure, Abyssinia² must be wheedled, and in America and the West Indies Negroes have attempted futile steps toward freedom; but such steps have been pretty effectually stopped... although the ten million Negroes in the United States need, to many men's minds, careful watching and ruthless repression.

III

...We speak of the Balkans as the storm-centre of Europe and the cause of war, but this is mere habit. The Balkans are convenient for occasions, but the ownership of materials and men in the darker world is the real prize that is setting the nations of Europe at each other's throats today.

The present world war is, then, the result of jealousies engendered by the recent rise of armed national associations of labor and capital whose aim is the exploitation of the wealth of the world mainly outside the European circle of nations. These associations ... look for expansion, not in Europe but in Asia, and particularly in Africa....

The resultant jealousies and bitter hatreds tend continually to fester along the color line. We must fight the Chinese, the laborer argues, or the Chinese will take our bread and butter. We must keep Negroes in their places, or Negroes will take our jobs. All over the world there leaps to articulate speech and ready action that singular assumption that if white men do not throttle colored men, then China, India, and Africa will do to Europe what Europe has done and seeks to do to them.



Senegalese troops march to Verdun, 1916

On the other hand, in the minds of yellow, brown, and black men the brutal truth is clearing: a white man is privileged to go to any land where advantage beckons and behave as he pleases; the black or colored man is being more and more confined to those parts of the world where life for climatic, historical, economic, and political reasons is most difficult to live and most easily dominated by Europe for Europe's gain.

IV

What, then, are we to do, who desire peace and the civilization of all men? Hitherto the peace movement has confined itself chiefly to figures about the cost of war and platitudes on humanity. What do nations care about the cost of war, if by spending a few hundred millions in steel and gunpowder they can gain a thousand millions in diamonds and cocoa? How can love of humanity appeal as a motive to nations whose love of luxury is built on the inhuman exploitation of human beings, and who, especially in recent years, have been taught to regard these human beings as inhuman?...

We, then, who want peace, must remove the real causes of war. We have extended gradually our conception of democracy beyond our social class to all social classes in our nation; we have gone further and extended our democratic ideals not simply to all classes of our nation, but to those of other nations of our blood and lineage—to what we call 'European' civilization. If we want real peace and lasting culture, however, we must go further. We must extend the democratic ideal to the yellow, brown, and black peoples...

What the primitive peoples of Africa and the world need and must have if war is to be abolished is perfectly clear: —



Tea plantation in Nyasaland

First: land. Today Africa is being enslaved by the theft of her land and natural resources. A century ago black men owned all but a morsel of South Africa. The Dutch and English came, and today 1,250,000 whites own 264,000,000 acres, leaving only 21,000,000 acres for 4,500,000 natives. Finally, to make assurance doubly sure, the Union of South Africa has refused natives even the right to buy land. This is a deliberate attempt to force the Negroes to work on farms and in mines and kitchens for low wages. All over Africa has gone this shameless monopolizing of land and natural resources to force poverty on the masses and reduce them to the 'dumb-driven-cattle' stage of labor activity.



Du Bois, 1918

Secondly: we must train native races in modern civilization. This can be done. Modern methods of educating children, honestly and effectively applied, would make modern, civilized nations out of the vast majority of human beings on earth today....

Lastly, the principle of home rule must extend to groups, nations, and races. The ruling of one people for another people's whim or gain must stop. This kind of despotism has been in latter days more and more skillfully disguised. But the brute fact remains: the white man is ruling black Africa for the white man's gain, and just as far as possible he is doing the same to colored races elsewhere. Can such a situation bring peace? Will any amount of European concord or disarmament settle this injustice?...

In this great work who can help us? In the Orient, the awakened Japanese and the awakening leaders of New China; in India and Egypt, the young men trained in Europe and European ideals, who now form the stuff that Revolution is born of.



March Du Bois helped organize promoting civil rights in New York, 1917

of. But in Africa? Who better than the twenty-five million grandchildren of the European slave trade, spread through the Americas and now writhing desperately for freedom and a place in the world? And of these millions first of all the ten million black folk of the United States, now a problem, then a world-salvation.

Primary Source 2:

W. E. B. Du Bois, "Close Ranks," *The Crisis*, 1918

Though Du Bois had been critical of war in its early years, his views appeared to change when the United States entered the conflict in 1917. In July 1918, he published the following editorial in *The Crisis*, the official publication of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. The article, titled "Close Ranks" urged African Americans to participate in the war effort in Europe, a shift in his tone that surprised many observers. While critical of racial policies and discrimination in the United States, Du Bois' 1918 position was informed by his concern about what a German victory in the war may mean for Black people world-wide, the inspirational language of democracy that characterized Allied rhetoric, and his hopes that the war might result in the overthrow of European colonies and the liberation of people of color around the world, and greater racial justice in the United States. Encouraged by the co-chairman of the NAACP, Joel Spingarn, he took an officer's commission in the Army, though southern officers protested and his commission was withdrawn.

Despite his call to "Close Ranks," throughout the war Du Bois continued to report on anti-African American riots and violence, as well as poor treatment of African American soldiers. When the war ended, Du Bois traveled to Europe in 1919 to attend the first Pan-African Congress and to interview African American soldiers about their experiences in World War I. Thereafter, he continued to fight both for civil rights in the United States, and for decolonization worldwide.

Source: W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Crisis*, vol. 16, no. 3, July 1918, 111.

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.

July 1918 edition of *The Crisis*, in which Du Bois editorial "Close Ranks" was published

Image Citations

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Map of colonial claimants to Africa in 1913, Public Domain, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:ColonialAfrica.svg>

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