

The Great War in African American Experience and Culture

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Introduction

Prior to World War I (1914-18), the Great War, African Americans had fought in every American war since the American Revolution. In the Civil War approximately 179,000 African Americans served in the Union Army and engaged in more than 430 battles.¹ The “Buffalo Soldiers” served in the Regular Army in the American West, as well as the Spanish-American War (1898), the Philippine War (1899), and the Mexican Expedition to capture Pancho Villa (1916). In the Mexican Expedition, Gen. John J. Pershing commanded American forces that included two Black units, earning him the sobriquet “Blackjack.” At outbreak of the Great War about 12,500 African Americans served in the Regular Army.²

In January 1917, the U.S. Army ranked 19th in the world by size and lacked any large-scale combat experience since the Civil War.³ America’s Regular Army stood at 127,588 and the National Guard at 181,620, all ill-prepared for warfare in the European trenches. Furthermore, the Army lacked aircraft, tanks, machine guns, munitions, mortars, gas masks, automatic rifles, and modern combat doctrine.⁴ Given America’s unpreparedness, Germany gambled that the US could not transport a large Army to rescue Britain and France before forcing their surrender. In January 1917, Germany instituted unrestricted submarine warfare, sinking hundreds of Allied ships. What forced America’s hand was the March 1 release of German Foreign Secretary Zimmerman’s telegram to Mexico, promising German help in reacquiring the southwestern states if Mexico attacked America.⁵

On April 6, 1917, America declared war on Germany, supporting President Woodrow Wilson’s principle that “the world must be made safe for democracy.”⁶ To defeat Germany, the U.S. urgently needed to raise a large army and safely transport it to France. By April 1917, five million soldiers already were dead, and the Western Front had not moved, despite almost three years of war. In April, the French Army mutinied and refused to attack; in July-November at Passchendaele, the British Army repeated its failed 1916 Somme offensive; in September, the Russian Army collapsed; in October, the Italians retreated from the Isonzo Front at Caporetto;

¹ Krewasky A. Salter, “From Civil War to World War: African American Soldiers and the Roots of the Civil Rights Movement,” in *We Return Fighting: World War I and the Shaping of Modern Black Identity*, ed. Kinshasa Holman Conwill (Washington DC: Smithsonian Books, 2019), 51.

² Chad L. Williams, *Torchbearers of Democracy: African American Soldiers in the World War I Era* (Chapel Hill: University Of North Carolina Press, 2010), 30.

³ Mark Whalan, *The Great War and the Culture of the New Negro* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2008), 1.

⁴ Garrett Peck, *The Great War in America: World War I and Its Aftermath* (New York: Pegasus Books, 2018), 92-93, 98, 134, 143.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 134; Jay Winter, “A Global War” in *We Return Fighting*, 25-26.

⁶ David M. Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 24, 42-44.

and in December, Bolshevik Russia exited the war. By the end of 1917, Germany appeared to have the upper hand.⁷

On May 18, 1917, Congress enacted the Selective Service Act requiring all men between 21 and 31 to register for the draft. The War Department faced two significant and contentious organizational problems: immigrants (33% of the population) and African Americans (10%). Draftees who were foreign-born or of foreign-born parentage spoke 49 different languages, most had less than fifth grade education and often tested within illiterate or “inferior” categories.⁸ Despite questions of immigrant loyalty, the Army supported these White foreign-born troops with remedial language and history instruction and placed some in noncombat roles, some in ethnically segregated units, and others in fully integrated combat units. The Army deemed their performance “splendid.”⁹

African American Service Controversy. Military service of African Americans, by contrast, became contentious among Blacks and Whites alike. In 1914, 90% of the Black population lived under White supremacy in the Jim Crow South. On August 16, 1917, Mississippi Sen. James K. Vardaman spoke for many southern segregationists when he warned the U.S. Senate that Negro soldiers would threaten the southern racial status quo, and their presence “inevitably lead to disaster.” Negro service would “inflate his untutored soul with military airs” and lead “but a short step to the conclusion that his political rights must be respected.”¹⁰ Even southern White progressives who supported Black enlistment were not endorsing racial equality, writes historian Chad L. Williams; they were “reflecting a paternalistic and naïve belief that southerners ‘knew’ their black folks.”¹¹ Spurred by racial abuse, the Houston riot on August 23, 1917, between White police and Black soldiers in the 24th Infantry intensified the debate, with southern congressional leaders opposing the presence of Black soldiers.¹²

In November 1917, risking criminal violation of the Espionage Act, editors A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen of the Black newsmagazine *Messenger* bluntly opposed Black war service. Rather than safeguarding democracy abroad, they asserted, “We should make Georgia safe for

⁷ Winter, “A Global War,” 25-26, 31-32.

⁸ Kennedy, *Over Here*, 157, 188.

⁹ Geoffrey Wawro, “How ‘Hyphenated Americans’ Won World War I” Opinion, *New York Times*, September 12, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/12/opinion/how-hyphenated-americans-won-world-war-i.html>; Kennedy, *Over Here*, 158-60.

¹⁰ Quoted in Williams, *Torchbearers*, 30-32; 53-56.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹² White Houston police officers pistol-whipped two Black soldiers for intervening in their abusive arrest of a Black woman. One soldier escaped arrest and raced to camp tailed by a White mob. This triggered an armed response by over 100 Black soldiers in violation of orders to remain in camp. The ensuing three-hour riot left 15 dead, including four police and two Black soldiers. The Army convened three courts-martial, which found 58 soldiers guilty of mutiny, assault, and murder, and sentenced 13 soldiers to death by hanging without providing them opportunity for appeal or review. Southern congressmen used this riot as evidence of Black indiscipline. The NAACP investigation found: “The cause of the Houston riot was the habitual brutality of the white police officers of Houston in their treatment of colored people.” The 13 soldiers became martyrs for racial justice. *Ibid.*, 32-37.

the Negro.”¹³ On July 18, 1918, W. E. B. Du Bois, editor of the NAACP Journal *Crisis* and a leading African American intellectual, ignited an opposing firestorm with his editorial “Close Ranks.” Du Bois urged Blacks to join Whites in the war for democracy: “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.”¹⁴ In the *Messenger* Randolph and Owen promptly scoffed at Du Bois’ exhortation, and the D.C. branch of the NAACP and the *Cleveland Advocate* followed suit, calling Du Bois’ editorial a “surrender.”¹⁵

Despite this controversy, 2.3 million African Americans registered for the draft, 370,000 joined the Army, and more than 200,000 served overseas in the American Expeditionary Force (AEF). Black soldiers trusted America to reward their patriotic performance, valor, and sacrifice with postwar recognition of full citizenship and equal rights. At the same time, American production of goods and material in the North to support the British and French war effort spurred the Great Migration of African Americans from the South. Several hundred thousand fled North in waves to pursue employment opportunities and escape Jim Crow oppression.¹⁶ Many scholars consider the Great War a seminal event in African American history and “a central and transformative episode in the African American experience.”¹⁷ How such a positive outcome arose from this inauspicious beginning is the subject of this article.

The Prewar Status of African Americans

In 1914, nine million African Americans lived in the South where White supremacists subjected them to voter suppression, segregation, unequal treatment, recurrent violence, and lynchings.¹⁸ This transpired despite the Reconstruction Amendments: the 13th Amendment (1865) abolishing slavery, the 14th Amendment (1868) granting citizenship, and the 15th Amendment (1870) granting voting rights to African Americans. It persisted despite the Civil Rights Act (1875) barring discrimination against Blacks and providing “equal and exact justice to all, of whatever nativity, race, color, or persuasion, religious or political.” Implementing the election Compromise of 1877, President Rutherford B. Hayes ended Reconstruction and removed Federal troops from the South, which unleashed a southern White backlash.¹⁹

During Reconstruction thousands of underground Black churches had emerged throughout the South, like the African Episcopal Church and the AME Zion Church. Their key mission was education because 95% of former slaves were illiterate. Schools soon emerged in church basements and evolved into Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). In the Black

¹³ Ibid., 24-25. The Espionage Act of June 15, 1917, criminalized and fined any interference with the draft or recruitment.

¹⁴ Quoted in Chad L. Williams, *The Wounded World: W. E. B. Du Bois and the First World War* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2023), 72.

¹⁵ Quoted in Ibid., 75-77.

¹⁶ Williams, *Torchbearers*, 20.

¹⁷ e.g., Lonnie G. Bunch III, Introduction to *We Return Fighting*, 9; Williams, *Torchbearers*, 5.

¹⁸ John H. Morrow Jr., “At Home and Abroad: During and after the War” in *We Return Fighting*, 99.

¹⁹ Salter, “From Civil War to World War,” 52-54.

community, church and state became inseparable. The Black Church promoted local, state, and federal Black officeholders, launched magazines, and effectively became “a nation within a nation” and “the single most important institution in the Black community.”²⁰ In *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), Du Bois remarked, “The Negro church of to-day is the social center of Negro life in the United States, and the most characteristic expression of African character.”²¹

Once Reconstruction ended, former Confederates targeted Black churches for burning and Blacks for lynching. Organizations like the Ku Klux Klan (1865) and Knights of the White Camellia (1867) terrorized Blacks. New Black Codes authorized imprisonment on spurious grounds, followed by forced labor and convict leasing. The Supreme Court provided no legal recourse, limiting the 1875 Civil Rights Act to states and excluding private businesses in the *Civil Rights Cases* (1883), and later upholding “separate but equal” segregation in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896). The Court effectively legitimized Jim Crow treatment of Blacks, with disastrous consequences. After Reconstruction through 1895, 53,000 Blacks were killed outright, and between 1882-1909, 3182 Blacks were lynched. This staggering toll triggered formation of the National Association for Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909.²²

White mobs launched race riots in New Orleans, Louisiana (1900), and evicted Black residents and confiscated their property in Forsyth County, Georgia (1912). As Blacks migrated North seeking better conditions, racial tensions followed them. In early July 1917, East St. Louis, Illinois erupted in a violent four-day racial cleansing by Whites who feared losing their jobs to Black migrants. Whites brutally slayed between 40 and 125 Blacks, including women and children, and torched 300 buildings, leaving 6000 homeless.²³ Responding to this pogrom, the NAACP organized a Negro Silent Protest Parade in New York City on July 28, 1917, to protest continued racial prejudice and unpunished lynchings of Blacks. The NAACP leadership led four drummers and row upon row of African American men, women, and children, marching silently in step down New York’s Fifth Avenue before 20,000 supportive onlookers. Some marchers carried placards reading, “Mr. President why not make America safe for democracy?” By mid-1917, one conclusion was obvious, writes Chad Williams, “As in the Civil War, racial progress would require African Americans to place their lives on the line.”²⁴

African Americans in the Great War

Service of Supply. Despite its pressing need for infantry, the Army was reluctant to arm or train African American soldiers for combat, and created only two Black combat divisions, the 92nd and 93rd, totaling about 40,000 troops (20% of Black soldiers). With African American hopes for racial progress resting on the battlefield valor of 370,000 Black troops, the War Department

²⁰ Henry Lewis Gates Jr., *The Black Church: This Is Our Story, This Is Our Song* (New York: Penguin Books, 2022), 78-95 (quoting historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham).

²¹ *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, 3rd ed., vol. 1, eds. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Valerie A. Smith (New York: Norton, 2014), 727.

²² Salter, “From Civil War to World War,” 53-59. Journalist Ida B. Wells documented the lynchings. *Ibid.*, 54.

²³ Morrow, “At Home and Abroad,” 115.

²⁴ Williams, *Torchbearers*, 28. Also, Hasan Kwame Jeffreys, *African American History: from emancipation through Jim Crow*, Course Guidebook, The Great Courses (Chantilly VA, 2022), 56-60.

shunted 330,000 Black soldiers (80%) into the noncombatant Service of Supply (SOS).²⁵ Blacks constituted a disproportionate percentage (almost 55%) of the Army's total 603,000 SOS troops. Heading Army's Operations Branch, Col. E. D. Anderson considered Blacks lacking "the mental stamina and moral sturdiness" for combat and "nothing more than laborers in uniform."²⁶ The Army shipped 160,000 Black SOS troops to France but stationed 170,000 in the South where they received little military training and bore the brunt of institutional racism. Col. Anderson selected White officers and NCOs "who can get work out of colored men," and outfitted his southern Black SOS troops in blue denim overalls rather than Army uniforms. They looked more like a prison farm or chain gang than a military unit and often faced discipline applied with kicks and whips.²⁷

In France, Black SOS troops mostly became stevedores, backbreaking work often lasting 16 hours a day. The Black stevedore became "a wartime racial stereotype," a "stigma of inferiority," and "a caricature in the model of the cheerful antebellum slave."²⁸ They received substandard housing and endured abusive White soldiers and military police, who often terrorized them. The most dangerous SOS assignments were the 13 all-Black "pioneering" infantry units that served immediately behind the front lines, building roads, creating ammo dumps, clearing barbed wire, and removing unexploded shells. Frontline soldiers in every sense, these Pioneer Infantry units faced constant danger usually without proper combat training or even timely instruction in gas mask use. After the Armistice, they constructed America's Argonne Cemetery at Romagne and faced the hideous task of reburial of American war dead.²⁹

The Talented Tenth. Since the Civil War, White officers had commanded Black soldiers, with few exceptions like Col. Charles Young, one of three Black West Point graduates, the only Black officer on active duty, and a war hero. In 1903, W. E. B. Du Bois championed the idea of an educated African American leadership class, the "Talented Tenth." When America entered the war, he sought to establish the Talented Tenth as a Black officer corps.³⁰ Although the War Department considered Blacks lacking the skills for quality officers, Du Bois, Col. Young, the NAACP, the Central Committee of Negro College Men, and the Black press convinced the military otherwise. In July 1917, the Army established an officer candidate school for Blacks in Des Moines, Iowa. In October 1917, the Des Moines school commissioned 639 junior officers from among 1250 Black candidates.³¹

For these newly commissioned Black officers, the war's greatest challenge became the Army's institutional racism. Col. Young was the first casualty, forced into retirement (purportedly for health reasons) because southern White officers refused to serve under a Black officer. First Lieut. Charles Hamilton Houston, a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Williams College, was one of only 33 field artillery officers commissioned at Des Moines and among the few Black officers in

²⁵ Williams, *Torchbearers*, 6, 108, 118-19; Salter, "From Civil War to World War," 71.

²⁶ Williams, *Torchbearers*, 108-09.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 110.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 110-13; Whalan, *The Great War*, 9.

²⁹ Williams, *Torchbearers*, 113-14.

³⁰ Williams, *The Wounded World*, 15-16; Williams, *Torchbearers*, 2, 40.

³¹ Williams, *Torchbearers*, 6, 39-51.

the White field artillery brigades of the 92nd Division. Houston reported that White officers “humiliate us and destroy our prestige as officers in front of the French instructors, the White soldiers and even the German prisoners.” These indignities motivated Houston to pursue a postwar legal career challenging systemic racism: “My battleground was America, not France.” He attended Harvard Law school, became Dean of Howard Law School, and mentored a generation of Black lawyers, including Thurgood Marshall, later Supreme Court Justice.³²

Maj. Gen. Charles C. Ballou, who commanded the 92nd Division, segregated Black from White officers, denied Black officers promotion opportunities, and constantly threatened them with efficiency boards. Ballou recommended reassignment of 43 Black officers on spurious grounds such as lacking “energy and force” or “the mentality necessary” to drill Black soldiers. By the war’s end, Ballou had reduced the 92nd Division’s Black officers from 82% to 58% and instituted court-martial proceedings against five Black officers for cowardice in withdrawing the 368th Infantry Regiment during the Meuse-Argonne Offensive. Four Black officers received death sentences and one a life in prison, sentences later commuted because evidence proved they received orders to withdraw.³³

In the 93rd Division, by contrast, French commanders praised the performance of Blacks for their successful integration with French forces. This alarmed the American Expeditionary Force leadership, who urged Col. Lewis Albert Linard, heading the French Mission to the AEF, to write his infamous August 1918 memorandum to French officers, “Secret Information concerning Black Troops” – a primer on White supremacy racism, later published in *Crisis* (May 1919). “Although a citizen of the United States, the black man is regarded by the white American as an inferior being with whom relations of business or service only are possible,” and with “vices” that pose a “constant menace to the American who has to repress them sternly.” Linard warned against praising Black soldiers and “any pronounced degree of intimacy between French officers and black officers” or “any public expression of intimacy between white women and black men.” The shocked French General Staff promptly withdrew the memo for endorsing American racism.³⁴

Despite favorable French regard, Black junior officers within the 93rd Division faced the pervasive racism of their senior White officers. Col. Glendie B. Young, commanding the 372nd Regiment, was a known “Negro-hater” who opposed commissioning of Blacks. Young’s replacement, Col. Herschel Tupes harbored the same racial animus and enforced a racial hierarchy, enabling White officers to ignore orders from Black officers and to criticize their cordial relations with the French. Tupes ultimately brought 77 of his Black officers before efficiency boards on spurious grounds, which nearly triggered a regimental mutiny. French Gen. Mariano Goybet, who commanded the 93rd Division, despaired of redressing Tupes’ destabilizing racial hierarchy and accepted Tupes’ recommendation to replace every 372nd Black officer.³⁵

³² Salter, “From Civil War to World War,” 93; Morrow, “At Home and Abroad,” 117; Williams, *Torchbearers*, 134.

³³ Williams, *Torchbearers*, 135, 143 & 376 (n.168).

³⁴ Quoted in *ibid.*, 159-60; also, Whalan, *The Great War*, 6.

³⁵ Williams, *Torchbearers*, 131-32

The only Black field grade officer commanding a 93rd Division regiment was Col. Franklin A. Dennison, pride of the 370th Regiment (8th Illinois). The Army removed Dennison, allegedly for health reasons, in what another senior Black officer considered “a flagrant disregard of the regiment’s historical legacy and sense of racial camaraderie.” Dennison’s replacement, White Col. T. A. Roberts, soon demoted and transferred numerous Black officers. Even the famed 369th Regiment (15th New York) endured similar mistreatment and left France with only one of its five original Black officers, Lieut. James Reese Europe.³⁶

The 93rd Infantry Division (Provisional). The 93rd Division consisted of four Infantry Regiments: three National Guard units, the 369th (15th New York), 370th (8th Illinois), and 372nd (DC and five states), plus the 371st a unit of South Carolina draftees. “Provisional” designates lack of standard support units given to the White divisions and the 92nd Division, namely, field artillery regiments, machine gun battalions, and engineering regiments. On December 27, 1917, when the 369th arrived in France, the Army initially considered deploying it in the SOS or Pioneer Infantry, and for two months it was laying tracks, digging ditches, and building docks. In early March 1918, French Gen. Philippe Pétain petitioned Gen. Pershing for desperately needed replacement troops and Pershing obliged by transferring the 369th to the French Army. The French welcomed the 369th and provided them French gear, gas masks, and field training. In April 1918, when the remaining three 93rd Division regiments arrived, the Army also seconded them to the French Army. Initially taking umbrage at their transfer, the three regiments soon appreciated the French equitable treatment and combat training, far better than the 92nd Division received from the AEF.³⁷

In late March 1918, the 369th held the line for a month against German assaults west of the Argonne Forest. Then the entire 93rd Division joined the French in the July Aisne-Marne counteroffensive and numerous other battles, including the final Meuse-Argonne Offensive. The 369th (15th New York, the “Harlem Hellfighters”) stood out for its many regimental successes and heroic individuals. The 369th spent 191 continuous days at the Front (more than any other American regiment), held an unequalled AEF record for losing no ground or soldiers taken prisoner, and gained its Meuse-Argonne objective, despite heavy casualties. The Regiment credited Black NCOs for their impressive military achievements after White officers had fallen in battle. Privates Henry Johnson and Needham Roberts, serving as forward observers at night on May 13, 1918, were attacked by over two dozen Germans. Seriously wounded, Roberts supplied hand grenades to Johnson who hurled them at their attackers. Wounded himself, Johnson engaged in hand-to-hand combat with Germans inside his trench, saved Roberts from being taken prisoner, and forced the German squad to retreat, leaving four dead and another dozen injured.³⁸

Johnson and Roberts became the first African Americans awarded the Croix de Guerre, Johnson’s with gold palm, France’s highest military award. Their exploits became front page news in New York, examples of patriotism and heroism transcending race and undermining

³⁶ Ibid.,129-30.

³⁷ Ibid., 119-20.

³⁸ Williams, *Torchbearers*, 124-26; Salter, “From Civil War to World War,” 80-81; Whalan, *The Great War*, 11.

claims of White superiority in battle. In his first official communiqué back to America, Gen. Pershing named Johnson and Roberts for their “notable instance of bravery and devotion.” France later awarded two more 369th soldiers the Croix de Guerre: Sgt. William Butler for rescuing his lieutenant and other soldiers; and Cpl. Lawrence McVey for bravery during the Meuse-Argonne Offensive. While awarding 127 Medals of Honor during the war, the Army gave none to African Americans until years later and posthumously: Cpl. Freddie Stowers of the 371st in 1991 and Pvt. Henry Johnson of the 369th in 2015. Shamefully, the American Argonne Cemetery names no fallen African Americans of the 93rd Infantry Division, presumably because they served with the French.³⁹ Before the 93rd Division’s embarkation, France awarded the entire Division the Croix de Guerre, along with 170 individual awards for valor.⁴⁰

92nd Infantry Division. Gen. Pershing resisted Marshall Foch’s request to transfer the 92nd Division (the 365th, 366th, 367th, and 368th Regiments) to the French forces during the Meuse-Argonne Offensive. Consequently, the 92nd Division remained subject to AEF racism, mistreatment, and mismanagement. The 92nd Division received insufficient military training, endured stigmas for alleged interracial sex, and suffered decades-long criticism as unfit soldiers and officers for alleged combat failures. The 92nd commanding Gen. Charles C. Ballou humiliated and mistreated his Black officers and restricted his “rapist division” from the local population.⁴¹

Along with 600,000 doughboys, the 92nd Division participated in the 47-day Meuse-Argonne Offensive (September 26-November 11), the largest AEF campaign and the costliest in American military history. The Offensive resulted in over 26,000 combat deaths and over 120,000 total casualties. In his obsolete “open warfare” doctrine, Gen. Pershing considered “the lone infantryman with his rifle... the ultimate instrument of war.” His doctrine constituted a failure to understand the 3-year learning curve of the British and French; it probably caused 10 American lives for every German, as raw and ill-trained troops rose in waves to assault machine gun nests. The “bitter irony,” according to historian David M. Kennedy “was the fact that attrition, not mobile strategy, proved to be Pershing’s greatest contribution to the Western cause.”⁴²

On September 28, 1918, the 368th failed to perform a difficult defensive maneuver, and White divisional officers accused the Regiment of cowardice and incompetence. As the 368th came off patrol duty in another sector, the 92nd Division directed this woefully unprepared Regiment to fill a gap in the Front between the French and American forces. The 368th had limited combat training or experience, no advance guidance about the terrain or the opposition it faced, no critical supplies, and no advance artillery support – an alarming example of orchestrated failure. Entangled in unfamiliar terrain under heavy German machine-gun fire and shelling, the 368th became disorganized and lost communications. White officer Maj. Max Elser compounded the disorder by issuing confusing orders to advance and withdraw. After arbitrarily removing all his

³⁹ Morrow, “At Home and Abroad:” 121, 123-24; “Salter, “From Civil War to World War,” 85, 90-92; Williams, *Torchbearers*, 224-25, 229, 350-51.

⁴⁰ Salter, “From Civil War to World War,” 81-82; Whalan, *The Great War*, 7 Williams, *Torchbearers*, 190-91.

⁴¹ Williams, *Torchbearers*, 136, 140-41; Salter, “From Civil War to World War,” 87; Whalan, *The Great War*, 7-8.

⁴² Kennedy, *Over Here*, 204-05, 195; Peck, *The Great War in America*, 141-43, 183-86.

Black officers before the attack, Elser himself got lost and ordered withdrawal in violation of orders. On October 5, following this chaotic retreat, the Army temporarily removed the entire 92nd Division from the line.⁴³

The 368th Regiment's misfortune was no anomaly in the Meuse-Argonne Offensive. The White 35th Division experienced a similar problem, becoming disorganized in retreat under German artillery fire and suffering enormous resultant casualties. Typically, Maj. J. N. Merrill placed blame for the 368th predicament on Black soldiers and officers, calling them "rank cowards." Gen. Ballou promptly removed 35 Black regimental officers as "untrustworthy" and "cowardly."⁴⁴ The 368th became the Army's whipping boy for decades, branding Black officers as untrustworthy and prompting Gen. Pershing to favor White officers to command Black troops.⁴⁵ Yet, on November 10, two other Black regiments (365th and 366th) went over the top in the face of heavy German fire, successfully attacked their sectors, and revived the 92nd Division reputation. Belying the 92nd Division's ill repute, White senior officers recommended a comparable number of Distinguished Service Crosses for combat valor to soldiers in the 92nd and 93rd Divisions.⁴⁶

Returning Soldiers: Triumph and Tribulation

Homecoming. The Army scheduled the early US return of the 92nd and 93rd Divisions over White officers' concerns for Blacks interacting with the French population. This effectively excluded African Americans from the Allied victory parade in Paris on Bastille Day 1919 and from the 402-foot war mural *Pantheon de la Guerre*. Yet the Army held in France Black SOS soldiers to support the troop embarkations and Black Pioneer soldiers to work on the battlefields, removing barbed wire, trenches, and unexploded ordinance, and to undertake the gruesome work of reburying the dead and building cemeteries for the Graves Registration Service. Stateside, the Army released White SOS troops but delayed discharge of Black SOS troops, who continued serving like indentured laborers rather than citizen-soldiers.⁴⁷ Returning Black soldiers, however, linked their service, sacrifice, and valor to their hopes for racial equality and full citizenship, and the Black press and Black Church publicized this theme.⁴⁸

Homecoming parades of Black soldiers throughout the US manifested the growing civic consciousness, cohesiveness, and vitality among African Americans and their hopes for civic reform. On February 17, 1919, a million New Yorkers cheered the Harlem Hellfighters as they marched up Fifth Avenue from Victory Arch at Madison Square into Harlem. Sgt. Henry Johnson, the war's first American awardee of the French Croix de Guerre, rode in an open car, and Lieut. James Reese Europe led the famous 369th regimental band, which alternated between military marches and syncopated jazz. That same day in Chicago, the 370th Regiment (8th

⁴³ Williams, *Torchbearers*, 138-39; Whalan, *The Great War*, 8-9; Arthur E. Barbeau & Florette Henri, *The Unknown Soldiers, African-American Troops in World War I* (Philadelphia: Da Capo Press, 1996), 150-59.

⁴⁴ Williams, *Torchbearers*, 139-40.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 141-42.

⁴⁶ Morrow, "At Home and Abroad," 124.

⁴⁷ Williams, *Torchbearers*, 193-95, 201-05.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 208-13.

Illinois, the “Old Eighth”) paraded before 400,000 along Michigan Avenue, after which 60,000 Chicagoans, including Mayor Thompson, greeted them in Coliseum Hall.⁴⁹

During the early months of 1919, Black soldiers in uniform marched proudly through American cities, large and small, North and South, before cheering admirers, Black and White. In northern cities, not only Chicago and New York, but also Buffalo, Cleveland, and Pittsburgh, the newly expanded Black populations displayed their racial pride and community spirit. In southern cities, like Dallas, Mobile, Richmond, and Savannah, thousands honored these parading Black troops, including White Americans. The large, enthusiastic, and racially diverse turnouts inspired a cautious optimism among African Americans that their war experience had transformed racial attitudes and enhanced their prospects for racial equality and full democracy.⁵⁰

War at Home. These early celebrations soon deteriorated into racial violence, as lynchings redoubled in the South and riots erupted in over 50 cities nationwide during the “Red Summer” of 1919. Violence centered on Black veterans, especially those in uniform, because they represented manliness, dignity, authority, and citizenship and embodied a visible threat to the southern racial hierarchy. Proud returning veterans and newly self-confident Blacks increasingly questioned their subservient, second-class status, while White supremacists, fearing Black rebellion, aimed aggressively to preserve the racial status quo. December 15, 1918, in Tyler Station, Kentucky, marked the first postwar racial attack on a Black veteran. A White mob of 75 to 100 lynched Charles Lewis, a recently discharged soldier arrested for alleged robbery and resisting arrest. The Lewis lynching unleashed the worst racial violence since Reconstruction, which continued for three years to the 1921 Tulsa riot.⁵¹

White Southerners increasingly felt the economic impact as thousands of Black veterans headed North or declined to work the plantations, favoring city life and seeking better wages and living conditions. The presence of Black veterans also fed Reconstruction era fears among White southerners about their posing a sexual danger to White women. Sen. Vardaman heightened this old racist trope by propagating rumors about 92nd Division Blacks ruining French women. The Tuskegee and Hampton Institutes tried to quell these southern White fears by highlighting the “broader vision and appreciation of American citizenship” among returning Black veterans. But full Black citizenship represented a real threat because it undermined the racial hierarchy.⁵²

For many southern Whites, lynching proved its most effective technique for preserving the social order. In 1919, these extrajudicial killings increased to 76, almost doubling the 1917 total. Lynching of Black veterans occurred widely across the South and “represented the ultimate act of contempt for Black citizenship.”⁵³ On April 5, 1919, Black veteran Daniel Mack in uniform

⁴⁹ Ibid., 214; Steven L. Harris, *Harlem's Hellfighters: The African-American 369th Infantry in World War I* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2003), 261; Morrow Jr., "At Home and Abroad," 124; Whalan, *The Great War*, 12.

⁵⁰ Williams, *Torchbearers*, 219-22.

⁵¹ Morrow Jr., "At Home and Abroad" 125-29; Williams, *Torchbearers*, 224-25. In “Vanishing War Dreams,” *New York Age* (June 7, 1919), James Weldon Johnson reported that “four other colored soldiers have been lynched; some of them wearing their uniforms; one of them because he was wearing his uniform.” Ibid., 237.

⁵² Williams, *Torchbearers*, 227-31.

⁵³ Ibid., 232-237.

got into a fight with a White man who had shoved him off the sidewalk. Mack was arrested and jailed pending his appearance before the justice of the peace in Shingler, Georgia. Pointing to his World War I service, Mack protested his arrest, but the presiding justice ordered him shackled and sentenced to 30 days on a chain gang, with a warning: “this is white man’s country and you don’t want to forget it.”⁵⁴

The North was similarly inhospitable, as major riots exploded in Washington DC, Chicago, and Tulsa, all involving African American servicemen. On July 18, 1919, when reports circulated in DC about Black men attacking a White woman, a mob of mostly White active-duty sailors and marines responded by randomly killing Black civilians. The next day Black veterans of the 372nd (DC’s all-Black National Guard) and 368th Regiments responded by attacking any Whites considered culpable of the killings. The four-day race war ended when Congress ordered federal troops into DC, leaving in their wake several hundred casualties, including six deaths.⁵⁵

Not a week later, racial violence erupted in Chicago, the “promised land” for some 55,000 southern Blacks who had migrated there to work (1916-1920). Blacks often acted as strikebreakers, which exacerbated racial tensions over postwar unemployment. On July 27, 1919, tensions exploded after Whites caused the drowning of Eugene Williams by pelting him with rocks for breaching an imaginary racial barrier in Lake Michigan. His murder triggered Black outrage and interracial combat the next day, leaving 17 dead. The riot raged for two weeks, with the 372nd Infantry Regiment (8th Illinois) defending Black Chicagoans and averting a catastrophe like that in East St. Louis. The riot produced a death toll of 38 (23 Blacks and 15 Whites) and more than 500 casualties.⁵⁶

Racial violence continued into 1920 and took a political turn in Ocoee Park, Florida, where half the population was Black. When Black landowners, Mose Norman and Julius Perry, encouraged Black voter turnout for an election, the local KKK threatened trouble for any Blacks who voted. Polling officials barred Norman and Perry from voting, and assaulted Norman when he returned with a shotgun demanding his right to vote. Then hundreds of local KKK descended on Ocoee, hunting down the two organizers, setting homes and churches afire, and killing more than 50 Ocoee residents. The KKK overcame Perry’s armed defense of his home and took him to jail in Orlando, where the sheriff released him to a killer mob. They deposited Perry’s mutilated body in Ocoee with a sign: “This is what we do to Negroes that vote.”⁵⁷

The three-year racial bloodbath climaxed in Tulsa, Oklahoma, home to a prosperous community of 11,000 African Americans. Called the “Magic City,” the Black Tulsa community centered on Greenwood Avenue, a thriving Black business district labeled “Negro’s Wall Street.” In 1921, Tulsa’s population of almost 100,000 included a local KKK branch of 3200 members, who intimidated Blacks and enforced a Black color line. On May 30, Dick Rowland may have inadvertently stepped on Sara Page’s foot in an elevator, but she claimed he assaulted her, triggering one of America’s worst race riots. The next day police arrested Rowland and that

⁵⁴ Ibid., 239.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 249.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 250-57.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 257-58.

evening a lynch mob of more than 2000 assembled around the courthouse jail. In response, 50 to 75 armed Blacks, mostly veterans, arrived to assist police protecting Rowland. A single shot ignited a gunfire exchange that wounded a dozen and launched a race war. Although greatly outnumbered, African Americans defended Black Tulsa against invading Whites, exchanging gunfire through the night. By morning, Black Tulsa was aflame, Black bodies littered its streets, and Black survivors jailed. Black Tulsa was destroyed, its population displaced, and its dead estimated from 27 up to 300.⁵⁸

African American veteran fought back against domestic racial violence, embracing Du Bois call in his *Crisis* editorial (May 1919) “Returning Soldiers”: “Make way for Democracy! We saved it in France, and by the Great Jehovah, we will save it in the United States, or know the reason why.”⁵⁹ They answered Du Bois’ earlier call to “close ranks” with White troops in the Great War and had “returned fighting” for Black equality – indeed for their very survival – and against disenfranchisement, racial rioting, and lynching. Their fight to make America safe for democracy would not end in Tulsa, as the KKK reminded them in 1925 and 1926, marching over 50,000 strong down Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington DC.⁶⁰

The New Negro Movement and Harlem Renaissance

In 1917, America entered the war as an “Associated Power,” not a formal Ally of Britain and France, because its target was Old Europe itself, a “unique mission as savior to a decrepit old order.”⁶¹ But the Senate rejected the Versailles Treaty, contending its League of Nations provision compromised American sovereignty and Wilson vetoed the joint resolution ending American belligerence. Then, writes historian David Kennedy, postwar America, entered “arguably the most isolationist phase of American history.”⁶² America put the war behind it, built no national monument for its war dead, turned inward, and escaped into the Jazz Age and Roaring 20s.⁶³

By contrast, African Americans became engaged and internationalist. France’s warm reception and egalitarian treatment gave 200,000 African American soldiers in the AEF a new perspective on American racial prejudice. Their contact with French colonial troops heightened interest in African culture and Black America’s position in the African diaspora.⁶⁴ As Addie Hunton and Catherine M. Johnson explained in their 1920 war memoir *Two Coloured Women with the American Expeditionary Forces*, African Americans “developed in France a racial consciousness and racial strength that could not have been gained in a half-century of normal living in America.”⁶⁵

⁵⁸ Ibid., 258-60.

⁵⁹ Quoted in *ibid.*, 207.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 260; Morrow, "At Home and Abroad " 129.

⁶¹ Kennedy, *Over Here*, 24, 42-44.

⁶² Ibid., 362, 388..

⁶³ Edward G. Lengel, "Why Didn't We Listen to Their War Stories?" *Washington Post*, May 25, 2008, <http://www.314th.org/why-didnt-we-listen-to-their-stories-ed-lengel.html>.

⁶⁴ Whalan, *The Great War*, 50-56.

⁶⁵ Quoted in *Ibid.* 53.

In the dominant White narrative of the Great War, idealistic youth enlisted with patriotic fervor and naïve dreams of glory. Instead, they faced unprecedented carnage on the Western Front and returned disillusioned, disheartened, and alienated from a society responsible for the slaughter.⁶⁶ Great American writers like Ernest Hemingway exposed the horrific truth about modern industrialized warfare, and Ezra Pound decried the “botched civilization” responsible for the war.⁶⁷ Hemingway saw “nothing sacred” or glorious in the human “sacrifices,” and F. Scott Fitzgerald despised the pro-war Old Guard who “knew nothing,” abandoned Wilsonian internationalism, and left postwar America with “no more wise men.”⁶⁸ As English professor Frederick J. Hoffman summarized: “the postwar generation felt... victimized by gross and stupid deception. Nothing genuine had come out of the war. The American politicians had refused to accept their responsibility in a world league... and had chosen isolation.”⁶⁹

By contrast, the dominant narrative for African Americans, long familiar with such victimization, was “betrayal.”⁷⁰ Having closed ranks with White America in war, Blacks expected postwar democratic equality but encountered the Red Summer. Two poems dramatize this promise and betrayal. In “A Sonnet to Negro Soldiers” (1918), Joseph Seamon Cotters expresses optimism about the rewards for Black war service: they “Shall rise and their brows cast down the thorn / Of prejudice. E’en though through blood it be, / There breaks this day their dawn of Liberty.”⁷¹ Postwar racial violence dashed Cotters’ hopes, and Claude McKay expressed his rage in “If We Must Die” (1919): “Like men we’ll face the murderous, cowardly pack, / Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!”⁷² In the 1920s, righteous anger like McKay’s evolved into the political, intellectual, and artistic confidence of the New Negro Movement and Harlem Renaissance.

Alain Locke, the first Black Rhodes Scholar, a Harvard PhD, and long-serving Chair of Howard University’s Philosophy Department, championed the Harlem Renaissance and composed the Movement’s central text, *The New Negro* (1925). For Locke, the New Negro had shaken off “unjust stereotypes,” acquired “renewed self-respect and self-dependence,” and entered “a new dynamic phase.” This postwar renewal enlarged Negro experience, enriched “American Art and letters,” and clarified the “common vision of the social task ahead” for African Americans.⁷³ Locke sought a more inclusive American civilization, integrated, and revitalized through the arts. In *Apropos of Africa* (1924), he urged that African Americans, with their uniquely diverse pan-African backgrounds, become “the leader in constructive pan-African thought and endeavor” and

⁶⁶ Charles A. O'Connor III, *The Great War and the Death of God: Cultural Breakdown, Retreat from Reason, and Rise of Neo-Darwinian Materialism in the Aftermath of World War I* (Washington DC: New Academia Publishing, 2014), chs. 3 & 6; Kennedy, *Over Here*, 229 (Kennedy limits disillusionment largely to American high culture).

⁶⁷ Ezra Pound, “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley (“Life and Contacts”)” in *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry*, George Walter ed. (London: Penguin Books, 2006), 248.

⁶⁸ Ernest Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1957), 177-78; F. Scott Fitzgerald, *This Side of Paradise* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 2010), 307.

⁶⁹ Frederick J. Hoffman, *The 20s: American Writing in the Postwar Decade* (New York: Free Press, 1965), 99.

⁷⁰ Whalan, *The Great War*, xii.

⁷¹ Quoted in *ibid.*, 18-19.

⁷² *Norton Anthology*, 1005.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 977-78.

“develop the race mind and race interest on an international scale.”⁷⁴ In short, African Americans were on the move, exhibiting a new “race pride” and pursuing personal, national, and even international objectives.

Unlike the existentially adrift lost generation of White letters, Black writers gave prominence to the returning soldier, rather than the catastrophic war itself. Instead, war became a catalyst for engagement.⁷⁵ In “Sam Smiley” (1932), Sterling A. Brown explained the “striking lessons of the war” about racial leveling and black empowering: For Sam, “a surprising fact had made / Belated impress on his mind: / Shrapnel bursts and poison gas / Were inexplicably colorblind.”⁷⁶ English professor Mark Whalan faults Black cultural histories for focusing primarily on the Great Migration and often overlooking the war’s impact on “the transatlantic, diasporic, and transnational network of New Negro culture.” War inspired “the new artistic techniques of the New Negro movement—the renewed interest in folk forms and in the aesthetics of memory, the rise of the urban folk narrative, a broader discussion of the intersections of race and sexuality, a new sophistication in portrait photography.” This new Black artistry “provided novel frameworks for representing the experience of war for African Americans.”⁷⁷

Among the movement’s artistic achievements, *The New Negro* emphasizes jazz as a thoroughly African American musical form that conveys “fresh joyousness,” provides relief “from the horrors and strains of war,” and “recharge[es] the batteries of civilization with primitive new vigor.”⁷⁸ Jazz revitalized Black artistic expression, became “an emblem of modernity on both sides of the Atlantic,” and energized a more inclusive postwar American culture.⁷⁹ The popularity of postwar jazz owes much to jazz pioneer James Reese Europe who organized and led the 369th regimental band that took France by storm, after arriving with its “jazzed” version of “La Marseillaise.” The band became the U.S. Army’s official representative and returned home to make Americans wild about jazz, “demonstrating the genius of black music and its ability to remake American democracy.”⁸⁰

Jazz and blues also influenced Langston Hughes’s poetry, which “helped define the spirit of the age.”⁸¹ In “Jazzonia” (1923), Hughes describes “shining rivers of the soul” in a Harlem Cabaret where “Six long-headed jazzers play” and “A dancing girl whose eyes are bold / Lifts high a dress of silken gold.” In “The Weary Blues” (1925), Hughes reminisces about a pianist: “Droning a drowsy syncopated tune, / Rocking back and forth to a mellow croon, / I heard a Negro play.... With his ebony hands on each ivory key / He made that poor piano moan with

⁷⁴ Ibid., 969, 973.

⁷⁵ At least six works of African American fiction are situated in no-man’s-land where White and Black soldiers become reconciled upon discovery of their common human bond and sometimes common ancestry, e.g., Jesse Fauset’s *There Is Confusion* (1924). Whalan, *the Great War*, 69-78.

⁷⁶ *Norton Anthology*, 1289.

⁷⁷ Whalan, *The Great War*, 43-44.

⁷⁸ Joel A. Rogers, “Jazz at Home” in *The New Negro*, quoted in *ibid.*, 38.

⁷⁹ J. Peter Burkholder, Donald Jay Grout & Claude V. Palisca, *A History of Western Music*, Ninth Edition (New York: Norton, 2014), 777.

⁸⁰ Williams, *Torchbearers*, 165, 326-27.

⁸¹ Gates and Smith, “Langston Hughes, 1902-1967” in *Norton Anthology*, 1302.

melody. / O Blues!”⁸² Long associated with the Harlem Renaissance, Hughes wrote award-winning poetry that resonated widely, like the music that inspired it. “In jazz nightclubs, literary parlors, playhouses, galleries, and street corners from the South Side of Chicago to Marseille,” writes Chad Williams, “the artists of the New Negro movement afforded America and the world new visions of blackness, freedom, and history.”⁸³

During and after the war, the Black Church followed Black migration northward, providing storefront churches for southern Blacks uncomfortable with northern church formality and desiring personal and musical expression. The 1920s were the early days of phonographs, and preachers began recording sermons with southern gospel music. As Zora Neale Hurston remarked, the finest Negro poetry issued “out of the mouths of preachers” and church music formed “a conscious art expression.”⁸⁴ Gates considers the Great Migration “key to the origins of modern gospel, as southern sounds spread to northern cities.” Blues and jazz artists borrowed from Black Church music, creating a novel interplay of sacred and secular sounds that still resonate in Black music.⁸⁵

While White Fundamentalists inveighed against Darwinian evolution rather than racial injustice, the Pan-Africanist Marcus Garvey challenged the White supremacy leanings of the Christian church itself. Garvey founded the African Orthodox Church in 1921 and inspired the founding of the Nation of Islam in 1930. The Nation of Islam resonated in the urban North but its fight for political and social progress lagged in the South where Jim Crow laws stifled Black voting and White accountability. The freedom songs of gospel music proved critical to the civil rights movement by relieving Black fear and insecurity while facing racist danger. From the 1920s to the 1960s, the Black Church supported the movement, building voting and political strength in the urban North before turning to the Deep South.⁸⁶

The poet, critic, and NAACP organizer, James Weldon Johnson stood at the forefront of African American letters and social activism during the Harlem Renaissance and edited a landmark literary work, *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922, rev. 1931). In his Preface, Johnson extols Blacks as “the creator of the only things artistic that have yet sprung from American soil and been universally acknowledged as distinctive American products.” Here Johnson references the folklore of the Uncle Remus stories and folksong spirituals, cakewalk and ragtime, and dance and poetry among other artistic forms.⁸⁷

One Harlem Renaissance exemplar was the extraordinary writer and early feminist Zora Neale Hurston. She wrote the first African American collection of Black folklore, *Mules and Men* (1935), and incorporated Black vernacular in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), among the best novels of the early 20th century.⁸⁸ Another was Langston Hughes who describes his poems

⁸² Ibid., 1306-07.

⁸³ Williams, *Torchbearers*, 325.

⁸⁴ Quoted in Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Genevieve West, Introduction to Zora Neale Hurston’s *You Don’t Know Us Negroes and Other Essays* (New York: HarperCollins, 2022), 5.

⁸⁵ Gates, *The Black Church*, 120, 125.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 128-30, 135-36, 143; also, O’Connor, *The Great War and the Death of God*, 94-98.

⁸⁷ *Norton Anthology*, 871-93, 872.

⁸⁸ Gates and West, Introduction to Hurston’s *You Don’t Know Us Negroes*, 3, 7.

in "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1926) as "racial in theme and treatment, derived from the life I know." Decrying the restrictive artistic "race towards whiteness," Hughes urged the Black artist to express "his racial individuality, his heritage of rhythm and warmth, and his incongruous humor that so often, as in the Blues, becomes ironic laughter mixed with tears."⁸⁹ Unsurprisingly, these Black artists faced the difficult task of balancing Black cultural exceptionalism with cultural assimilation into mainstream America. For all its great achievements, however, the Black postwar Renaissance carried too heavy a burden to overcome America's endemic racism.⁹⁰

Conclusion

The Great War constituted a transformative African American experience and a catalyst for racial empowerment and cultural expression. While French egalitarian treatment exposed the cravenness of American White supremacy, Black soldiers demonstrated their martial prowess, courage, and patriotism and returned home with new racial pride and sense of empowerment. When racial violence exploded in postwar America, Black veterans and civilians alike stood their ground – there was no turning back. During the 1920s and 1930s, as America retreated into isolationism, African Americans pressed forward. The crucible of war became a driving force behind the pursuit of racial justice and civic equality, the Negro Movement, and the Harlem Renaissance. These endeavors exemplified the newfound, long-lasting, and widespread African American sense of personal, political, and cultural confidence.

⁸⁹ *Norton Anthology*, 1321-23.

⁹⁰ Whalan, *The Great War*, 23.