

African Americans in World War I

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CONTEXT

Almost 400,000 African Americans served in the U.S. military during World War I. Millions more registered for the draft. 200,000 African Americans served overseas with the American Expeditionary Forces. President Woodrow Wilson deemed it a war to make the world “safe for democracy,” but what did he mean by democracy and who had access to that vision? At the same time that African Americans fought for freedom, millions more lived under Jim Crow segregation back home in the United States. How did Wilson’s claim and the subsequent wartime military service of African Americans lay the groundwork for civil rights activism? Teachers and students can also consider how that experience may have been similar or different to the experience of black troops who served in the British or French militaries.

PRIMARY SOURCES

NAACP, Memorandum for N. A. A. C. P. Branches, July 9, 1917

Library of Congress (Manuscript Division, 084.00.00)

<https://www.loc.gov/exhibitions/world-war-i-american-experiences/about-this-exhibition/over-here/a-changing-america/silent-protest/>

“Riot a National Disgrace.” *St. Louis Argus*, July 6, 1917

https://archive.org/details/St.LouisArgusJuly61917_309

Woodrow Wilson, Declaration of War Message to Congress, April 2, 1917 (excerpt)

National Archives and Records Administration (Record Group 46)

<https://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=true&doc=61>

OBJECTIVES

At the end of this activity, students will be able to:

- Analyze President Wilson’s war goals and compare them to the status of civil rights for African Americans domestically; and
- Discuss the impact the war (and African Americans’ contributions to the war effort) had on civil rights activism.

***Teacher Tip:** This activity is meant to be used when students have a general understanding of institutionalized racism of the late 1800s and early 1900s, the Great Migration, and the beginning of World War I. Students will also need background knowledge of the East St. Louis Massacre of July 1-3, 1917 and the Silent Protest Parade held in New York, New York on July 28, 1917. Teachers seeking information on these topics can access the sources in the Background Knowledge section of this activity.

Teacher Instructions

- Distribute the excerpt from President Wilson’s Declaration of War Message and instruct students to answer the questions either alone or in small groups. Debrief with the class.
- Provide context/background on the East St. Louis Massacre as direct instruction or using a resource listed in this packet.
***Teacher Tip:** For more primary sources and additional background, use the September 1917 issue of *The Crisis*. Project or distribute copies of the front page of the July 6, 1917 *St. Louis Argus* and ask students to answer the questions on the handout.
- Provide context/background on what the Silent Protest Parade was. Project or distribute copies of the Silent Protest Parade mottoes from the NAACP and ask students to complete the sign-making activity. At teacher discretion, students could either create the motto or create full-size signs.
- Wrap the activity by asking students, *How did President Wilson’s statement, “The world must be made safe for democracy” apply to different groups of Americans in 1917?* Students can respond verbally or in writing as per teacher discretion.

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Background Knowledge

AFRICAN AMERICANS IN WORLD WAR I:

- “Black soldiers in World War One,” BBC News,
<https://www.bbc.com/news/av/uk-england-london-46153642/black-soldiers-in-world-war-one>
- Anne Bostanci, “How black soldiers in First World War shaped civil rights.” *Voices Magazine*, October 1, 2014,
<https://www.britishcouncil.org/voices-magazine/how-black-soldiers-in-first-world-war-shaped-civil-rights>
- Stephen Bourne, Black Poppies: Britain’s black community and the Great War. The National Archives of Great Britain podcast audio, January 22, 2015,
<https://media.nationalarchives.gov.uk/index.php/black-poppies-britains-black-community-great-war/>

EAST ST. LOUIS MASSACRE

- W. E. B. Du Bois, editor. *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races*, NAACP, September 1917,
<https://library.brown.edu/pdfs/1292426769648500.pdf>
- “East St. Louis Massacre,” TeachingHistory.org,
<https://teachinghistory.org/history-content/ask-a-historian/24297>
- Danny Wicentowski, “First-Hand Accounts Show the Horror of East St. Louis’ 1917 Race Riot,” *Riverfront Times*, June 28, 2017,
<https://www.riverfronttimes.com/newsblog/2017/06/28/first-hand-accounts-show-the-horror-of-east-louis-1917-race-riot>

NEW YORK CITY SILENT PROTEST PARADE

- Alexis Newman, “New York City NAACP Silent Protest Parade (1917),” BlackPast,
<https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/naacp-silent-protest-parade-new-york-city-1917/>
- “The Negro Silent Protest Parade,” National Humanities Center,
<https://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai2/forward/text4/silentprotest.pdf>

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Reading and Discussion

WOODROW WILSON, DECLARATION OF WAR MESSAGE TO CONGRESS, APRIL 2, 1917 (EXCERPT)

National Archives and Records Administration (Record Group 46)

<https://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=true&doc=61>

Our object now, as then, is to vindicate the principles of peace and justice in the life of the world as against selfish and autocratic power and to set up amongst the really free and selfgoverned [*sic*] peoples of the world such a concert of purpose and of action as will henceforth insure the observance of those principles...We are glad, now that we see the facts with no veil of false pretense about them to fight thus for the ultimate peace of the world and for the liberation of its peoples, the German peoples included: for the rights of nations great and small and the privilege of men everywhere to choose their way of life and of obedience. The world must be made safe for democracy.

It is a fearful thing to lead this great peaceful people into war, into the most terrible and disastrous of all wars, civilization itself seeming to be in the balance.

But the right is more precious than peace, and we shall fight for the things which we have always carried nearest our hearts,-for democracy, for the right of those who submit to authority to have a voice in their own Governments, for the rights and liberties of small nations, for a universal dominion of right by such a concert of free peoples as shall bring peace and safety to all nations and make the world itself at last free. To such a task we can dedicate our Eves and our fortunes, every thing that we are and everything that we have, with the pride of those who know that the day has come when America is privileged to spend her blood and her might for the principles that gave her birth and happiness and the peace which she has treasured. God helping her, she can do no other.

DISCUSSION PROMPTS:

1. According to President Wilson, what is the American objective in World War I?
2. Why must the United States take up this cause, even though it required entering “the most terrible and disastrous of all wars”?
3. When President Wilson stated “we shall fight for...the right of those who submit to authority to have a voice in their own Governments,” does he state who he means should have a voice? Why or why not?

“RIOT A NATIONAL DISGRACE.” ST. LOUIS ARGUS, JULY 6, 1917

https://archive.org/details/St.LouisArgusJuly61917_309

DISCUSSION PROMPTS:

1. Look at the headlines and list the words that stand out the most to you.
2. How do you think the editors chose which phrases to make largest?
3. Why do you think the War Department would be asked to take a hand in the investigation of the riots?

https://archive.org/details/St.LouisArgusJuly61917_309

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NAACP, MEMORANDUM FOR N. A. A. C. P. BRANCHES, JULY 9, 1917

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<https://www.loc.gov/exhibitions/world-war-i-american-experiences/about-this-exhibition/over-here/a-changing-america/silent-protest/>

1. Read the list of mottoes the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) used on the banners at the Silent Protest Parade. Choose four of them to further analyze in the chart.

MOTTO	ANALYSIS What is the significance of the motto and why would it be effective in the Silent Protest Parade? Consider historical context, references, and connections.

2. Many of the Silent Protest Parade mottoes made a connection between past and present. Think of an issue you care about today. Like the NAACP did in 1917, create a motto to draw attention to that issue that connects to a historical event or trend and design your own banner or sign.