

Native Americans in WWI

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CONTEXT

When World War I commenced, Americans of every color and creed answered the call. Among these, Native Americans served in large numbers, with an estimated 12,000 serving in the United States Army. Many Native American soldiers joined the 36th Division, where they were tasked with sending encrypted messages between Allied Forces, which the Central Powers were never able to decode. Despite the fact that many aided the U.S. war effort, not all of them were recognized as citizens and it took until 1924 for all Native Americans to receive citizenship rights in the United States.

PRIMARY SOURCES

An Act Granting Citizenship to Certain Indians, November 6, 1919

Library of Congress

<https://www.loc.gov/law/help/statutes-at-large/66th-congress/session-1/c66s1ch95.pdf>

Indian Citizenship Act of 1924

National Archives and Records Administration

<https://www.archives.gov/global-pages/larger-image.html?i=/historical-docs/doc-content/images/indian-citizenship-act-1924-l.jpg&c=/historical-docs/doc-content/images/indian-citizenship-act-1924.caption.html>

SECONDARY SOURCES

"American Indians in World War I"

U.S. World War I Centennial Commission

<https://www.worldwaricentennial.org/index.php/american-indians-in-wwi-centennial-home.html>

"Citizenship for Native American Veterans"

Nebraska Studies

<http://nebraskastudies.org/1900-1924/native-american-citizenship/citizenship-for-native-veterans/>

"Homefront"

U.S. World War I Centennial Commission

<https://www.worldwaricentennial.org/index.php/american-indians-in-wwi-homefront.html>

Jesse Greenspan, "World War I's Native American Code Talkers"

HISTORY®

<https://www.history.com/news/world-war-is-native-american-code-talkers>

OBJECTIVES

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

- Place Native Americans' entry into World War I into historical context;
- Explain the ways in which Native Americans contributed to the American war effort in Europe; and
- Evaluate the impact of the war on Native Americans' status as citizens.

Teacher Instructions

- Make one copy of the Native Americans: Over There and Back Home Handout for each student.
- Provide links or make copies of the assigned readings to make them accessible to students.
- Instruct students to work through the Native Americans: Over There and Back Home Handout. Students can work independently or in small groups, at teacher discretion. Circulate and provide assistance as needed.

***Teacher Tip:** Teachers who want to include more information on the impact of Native Americans on the homefront can add the additional "Homefront" resource linked in the secondary sources.

- Review student responses as a class.
- Lead a class discussion based off the final question. Direct students to differentiate between the short- and long-term results. While Native Americans did gain their citizenship, it was not an instantaneous process and even after the law there were many hurdles to jump. Remind students that Native Americans' fight for rights was far from over in 1924.

Native Americans in WWI

Over There and Back Here

World War I, covering multiple continents and involving scores of nations and millions of people, is such a big event that usually something gets left out of the narrative. Today, we will focus on one lesser-known element of the story: the contribution of Native Americans to the conflict. Your mission is to use primary and secondary sources to figure out what Native Americans' role was in World War I and the impact of their service after the war.

STEP ONE: HISTORICAL CONTEXT

To find out about Native Americans' situation in the years leading up to World War I, read the article, "American Indians in World War I." <https://www.worldwaricentennial.org/index.php/american-indians-in-wwi-centennial-home.html>

In two strong sentences, summarize which aspects of Native American life worried some Americans.

STEP TWO: CONFLICT

Now read the article, "World War I's Native American Code Talkers." <https://www.history.com/news/world-war-is-native-american-code-talkers>

Using this article, answer the following questions:

How did Native Americans respond to American entry into World War I?

In three strong sentences, explain what unique problem the Choctaw soldiers solved and how they solved it.

Native Americans in WWI

Over There and Back Here (cont.)

STEP THREE: CITIZENSHIP

Next, you will read two primary sources, the Act Granting Citizenship to Certain Indians (1919) and the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924.

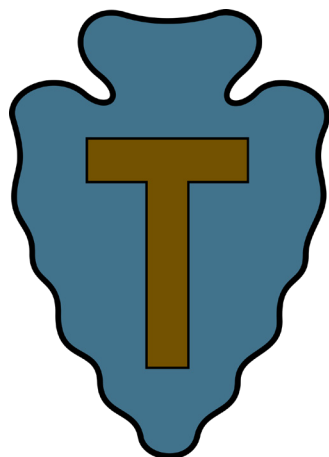
In what ways are these two acts similar?

In what ways are they different?

How did World War I impact the granting of citizenship to Native Americans?

Finally, read the article "Citizenship for Native American Veterans." According to the article, what did the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924 mean overall? What hurdles remained for Native Americans?

BONUS



This was the unit patch of the 36th Division. Based on your reading, why might the patch have been designed this way?

Image credit: Wikimedia Commons

Native Americans in WWI

Over There and Back Here Answer Key

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STEP ONE: HISTORICAL CONTEXT

To find out about Native Americans' situation in the years leading up to World War I, read the article, "American Indians in World War I." <https://www.worldwaricentennial.org/index.php/american-indians-in-wwi-centennial-home.html>

In two strong sentences, summarize which aspects of Native American life worried some Americans.

Potential student answers may include:

- Different concept of land ownership (communist)
- Resistance to the Dawes Act
- Tribes had close ties to Mexico
- Not all Native Americans were citizens

STEP TWO: CONFLICT

Now read the article, "World War I's Native American Code Talkers." <https://www.history.com/news/world-war-is-native-american-code-talkers>

Using this article, answer the following questions:

How did Native Americans respond to American entry into World War I?

Potential student answers may include:

- Many enlisted (33,000 eligible, up to 12,000 enlisted)
- Nearly 1,000 served in the 36th Division
- Some tribes declared support
- Some tribes declared war in tandem with the United States

In three strong sentences, explain what unique problem the Choctaw soldiers solved and how they solved it.

Potential response (answers will vary).

Germans continually intercepted U.S. communications because their codes were based on European languages or math that the Germans could decipher. Choctaw troops spoke their own language, which no Germans could understand. Additionally, they spoke in a coded language within their own language, making the code more ironclad.

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Over There and Back Here Answer Key

STEP THREE: CITIZENSHIP

Next, you will read two primary sources, the Act Granting Citizenship to Certain Indians (1919) and the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924.

In what ways are these two acts similar?

Response: both are acts of law which extend citizenship to Native Americans.

In what ways are they different?

Response: The Act of 1919 extends citizenship to Native Americans who were World War I veterans. The 1924 act extends citizenship to all Native Americans.

How did World War I impact the granting of citizenship to Native Americans?

Potential student answers may include:

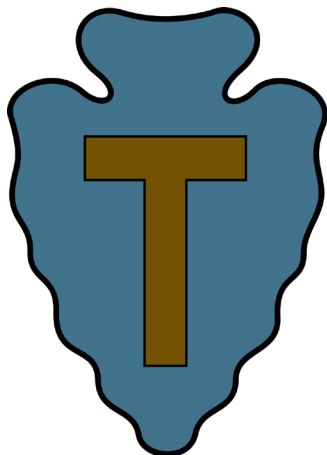
- Native Americans enlisted in large numbers and fought bravely
- Native American's use of language provided a unique element to help in winning the war
- Wartime service prompted the federal government to extend citizenship

Finally, read the article "Citizenship for Native American Veterans." According to the article, what did the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924 mean overall? What hurdles remained for Native Americans?

Potential responses could include:

- Not all Native Americans wanted to get more involved with a government that had treated them poorly in the past.
- Some states still found ways to deny people voting rights.
- 2/3 of Native Americans were citizens before World War I, so there was no major change for them.

BONUS



This was the unit patch of the 36th Division. Based on your reading, why might the patch have been designed this way?

Response: The patch shows a letter T sitting on an arrowhead. It symbolizes the fact that most of the division came from Texas (the "T") and from Oklahoma, which until recently was "Indian Territory."

Image credit: Wikimedia Commons