

REVIEW ARTICLE

African Americans, World War I, and the Awakening of a “Colored” Manifest Destiny

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ADAM P. WILSON, *African American Army Officers of World War I: A Vanguard of Equality in War and Beyond*. Jefferson, NC: MacFarland & Company, 2015, 236 pages, ISBN: 9780786495122. \$39.95.

ADRIANA LENTZ-SMITH, *Freedom Struggles: African Americans and World War I*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011, 336 pages, ISBN: 980674062054. \$30.00.

CHAD WILLIAMS, *Torchbearers of Democracy: African American Soldiers in the World War I Era*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2010, 472 pages, ISBN: 9781469609850. \$45.00.

ARTHUR E. BARBEAU AND FLORETTE HENRI, *The Unknown Soldiers: African-American Troops in World War I*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1974, 320 pages, ISBN: 0877220638. \$17.99.

KINSHASHA HOLMAN CONWILL (Ed.), *We Return Fighting: World War I and the Shaping of Modern Black Identity*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 2019, 144 pages, ISBN: 9781588346728. \$19.95.

DIALLO BAKARY AND LAMINE SENGHOR, *White War, Black Soldiers: Two African Accounts of World War I*. Edited by GEORGE ROBB. Translated by NANCY ERBER and WILLIAM PENISTON. Cambridge, MA: Hackett, 2021, 189 pages, ISBN: 9781624669514. \$17.00.

Abstract

Different aspects of the African American experience during World War One have been covered since the release in 1974 of Florette Henri’s and Arthur E. Barbeau’s *The Unknown Soldiers: African American Troops in World War I*. All these studies concur in their assumptions that World War One opened up a new quest for full citizenships and galvanized soldiers and officers alike. A new era started right in the middle of the conflict fueling African American units with hope of change. World War One turned into the matrix for a new form of militancy. However, perhaps World War One did not only trigger a new form of militancy among African Americans. Something else might have snapped in African American (and perhaps African) leaders of the time. What if World War One had nurtured the awakening of a “colored manifest destiny”?

Keywords: World War I; Interracial Encounters; Black Soldiers; Resistance; Identity; France; Humanitarianism

World War I belongs to the national collective memory of European peoples and is taught in secondary schools as a cataclysm that altered the course of the history of Europe. Over time, European integration has repositioned the teaching of and research on World War

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I. From rival and nationalist historiographies, historians have been pulled toward a more visionary sense of European belonging and an inner willingness to forge a common identity. Thus, a more inclusive Europeanized narrative has emerged over the last twenty years. History curriculum in France, for instance, insists on the common experience of all soldiers fighting in the trenches of the Somme, regardless of their nationality, and requires that pupils be able to atomize geographic boundaries to formulate overarching arguments about the human living conditions of all combatants waiting, fighting, and sleeping in the mud of the Somme.

However, although imperial armies included ethnic minorities from Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, until relatively recently, European historians mainly analyzed the experiences of Caucasian European combatants. Indeed, the European imperial powers dragged millions of non-White inhabitants into World War I. In Africa, for instance, Hutu tribes from Belgian-controlled Congo were subject to constant raids from the Tutsi in German-held Rwanda, evidence that imperial rivalries spilled over into imperial possessions and forced colonized communities to mobilize (Abbenhuis and Tames, 2021). When imperial possessions were bombed and targeted by enemy forces, this reinforced the conviction that imperial subjects were as much at war as was the metropolis. Moving away from a Eurocentric vision of World War I, research is now extending to the wartime experiences of colonial soldiers (Fogarty 2012).

Perhaps because the war was geographically distant from U.S. soil, World War I (less than World War II) has remained for long at the outskirts of American historical consciousness. Since the release of David Kennedy's *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* in 1980, a new generation of American historians have tasked themselves with connecting American history to the history of World War I. As the first war that forced the United States to repudiate its long-established tradition of nonintervention in European affairs, World War I had a tremendous impact on American society.

In August 1914, American society could not be said to be a homogenous community. By the time World War I broke out, the United States faced challenges, among them the question of how, through participation in the war, American women might achieve suffrage—the right to vote—and African Americans might advance their cause for full citizenship and equality. Building on Kennedy's (1980) statement that American women “hoped that the war would prove the forcing house in which long-standing feminine aspirations for the vote and economic equality would finally mature” (p. 395), it has been brought to light that American women's contribution during World War I ranged from working in ammunition factories to serving as telephone operators on the Western Front (Cobbs 2019). Even if most women deployed in France filled traditional nursing and caregiving roles allotted to women, such as helping to care for the wounded, displaced civilians, and orphans, they nonetheless greatly alleviated the burden that had fallen on France's authorities (Dumenil 2017; Gavin 2006; Jensen 2008; Zeigler 1999).

When it comes to African Americans in the First World War, it is telling to notice that the first monograph focused on their participation in the war was published in 1970, ten years before Kennedy's influential research (Henri 1970). Several years later, in 1974, Arthur E. Barbeau and Florette Henri co-authored a book in which they detailed the wartime experiences of African American troops fighting in France. In soliciting military records and personal papers, along with daily newspapers of the time, the purpose of *The Unknown Soldiers: African American Troops in World War I* was to make “the history of [the African American soldier] known” (Barbeau and Henri, 1974, p. xv). Deftly scrutinizing how political institutions maintained segregationist social patterns within the military, they underscored the practices of discrediting African American units and exposing them to outrageous treatment. In suggesting that African Americans manifested unwavering morale to overcome constant psychological and racial debasement, Barbeau and Henri opened up new directions for future research on morale and resilience within African

Americans units—research opportunities that, unfortunately, have not gained traction in the academic community since. To this day, the topic of resilience among African American troops is still understudied.

When Chad Williams (2010) published his first book, *Torchbearers of Democracy: African American Soldiers in the World War I Era*, he rendered an important service to African American history by delving into private papers of infantrymen to determine how these units navigated within French society and how racial tensions plagued the U.S. army in France. Even though African Americans (and U.S. army units as a whole) did not spend a lot of time abroad, African American units successfully integrated and mixed with White French civilians and came to realize that an alternative model to a racially divided society could exist. One year after Williams' authoritative monograph, Adriana Lentz-Smith (2011) situated World War I “within the larger history of the black freedom struggle” that ultimately culminated in the 1964 Civil Rights Act (Lentz-Smith 2011, p. 9). She argued that World War I furthered the cause of African Americans and can thus be regarded as a “transformative moment” (Lentz-Smith 2011, p. 4). Both Williams and Lentz-Smith agree on the importance of the global war in shaping new identities and new representations of African American identity, though their methods differ slightly. Williams limits his analysis to African Americans in the fighting forces, while Lentz-Smith includes non-fighting units stationed in labor camps in France and in the United States, demonstrating the extent to which “American camps functioned as Southern outposts on French soil” (2011, p. 110). In picturing the multifaceted journeys of African Americans in France, Lentz-Smith drew a clear line between combatants' experiences (such as the 93rd Division) and stevedores (what German prisoners often termed “labor slaves”) employed by the U.S. military.

Five years later, Adam P. Wilson (2015) published *African American Army Officers of World War I: A Vanguard of Equality in War and Beyond*, in which he tracked returning African American officers in their journey back home. In narrowing the focus of his research to the wartime experiences of African American officers, Wilson demonstrated that returning officers participated in a variety of actions to overturn segregation. From militancy to writing, from the courts of justice to the streets, they battled for equality, voting rights, and civil rights. Though the Civil Rights Movement is generally associated with the second half of the twentieth century, Wilson (2015) shows that the aftermath of World War I was the first stage of the movement leading to the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

In 2019, a companion to the exhibition *We Return Fighting: The African American Experience in World War I* was published by Smithsonian Books in association with the National Museum of African American History and Culture. Edited by Kinshasha Holman Conwill and with a foreword by Philippe Étienne, then France's ambassador to the United States, the publication, beautifully illustrated with original photographs, maps, and timelines, placed the First World War within a larger span of struggle for equality and dignity that started with the 1863 Emancipation Proclamation and ended with the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Similar to Williams, Lentz-Smith, and Wilson, Conwill presents World War I not as a rupture but as a “transformative event” for leaders such as W. E. B. Du Bois (Conwill 2019, p. 40).

In his introduction to *White War, Black Soldiers: Two African Accounts of World War I* (2021), George Robb compares the wartime experiences of African Americans to those of Black soldiers from Africa and how the global cataclysm nurtured expectations for change. African Americans returned to the United States seeking to dismantle the racial barriers in American society; colonial officers returning home hoped for self-determination. A gulf widened between how African Americans viewed the war and how colonial troops regarded their forced participation. As Robb notes, colonial soldiers from the French Empire diverged in their appreciation of France's “civilizing mission” (2021, p. 1). Some

Senegalese, such as Bakary Diallo, backed France's colonial expansion while other Senegalese veterans, such as Lamine Senghor, dreamed of a "rebellion against French colonial rule in Africa" (Robb 2021, p. 1). Given the scarcity of firsthand accounts from African soldiers and the recurrent struggle to include colonial troops in the Eurocentric narrative, Robb's decision to publish the first English translation of Diallo's *Strength and Goodness* (1926) and Senghor's *The Rape of a Country* (1927) has paved the way for future studies dealing with conflicting identities among racial groups fighting in predominantly White armies.

Although each of the scholars discussed above addresses different aspects of the African American experience during World War I, they concur that the war galvanized soldiers and officers alike in a quest for civil rights. Indeed, the experience of World War I could be said to have nurtured in African American and colonial soldiers and officers the awakening of what I would term a colored manifest destiny.

World War I, Moral Duty, and the Mobilization of African Americans

Although many immigrant groups faced discrimination in the U.S. for periods of time, African Americans remained at the margins of American collective identity and waited at the threshold of citizenships (Burkholder 2011; Jacobson 1998). Though technically liberated by the 1865 Thirteenth Amendment, African Americans rapidly faced a new constitutional plight to suppress their rights. Jim Crow laws enforced racial segregation in Southern states and wiped out all political and economic gains granted to African Americans during the Reconstruction Era. They thwarted African Americans' ability to realize their potential to excel and attain the full rights of citizenship (Anderson 1988; Fairclough 2007). These restrictions, in part, triggered the First Great Migration (1910–1940), during which more than two million African Americans migrated to the Midwest and Northeast of the country to secure better living conditions and socioeconomic opportunities (Harrison 1991; Gregory 2005; Grossman 1989).

Arguably, in a segregated society, the military "reflected and reinforced segregation against African Americans" (Wilson 2015, p. 6). African Americans' contribution in past conflicts had not altered the U.S. army's segregated structure. Even though African Americans had fought during the Civil War, the "Indian Wars," and the Spanish-American War, their loyalty had not quieted racially motivated objections to their joining the army and, above all, to their holding positions of command (Barbeau and Henri, 1974). Approximately 179,000 African Americans served in the Union Army during the Civil War (Conwill 2019). Federal authorities deployed "Negro" soldiers to defeat another undesired people on American soil: Native Americans (the "Indians"). "Buffalo Soldiers" served as an ironclad against enemy operations and consolidated America's vision of "Manifest Destiny" (Swain 2008; Wilson 2015). African Americans pacified the land and participated in the civilizing mission (envisioned by the White man) to domesticate Native Americans. In doing so, they paradoxically "perpetuated the very racial ideologies they sought to escape" (Lentz-Smith 2011, p. 57). Similarly, Robb (2021) draws similarities between the participation of African Americans in suppressing ethnic groups (such as the Native Americans) and the involvement of colonial subjects in quelling dissent movements in Africa. Bakary Diallo, a Senegalese shepherd, joined the French Army in 1911 and intervened in Morocco to suppress a revolt against France's imperial rule. Diallo's journey did not differ much from "the long tradition of colonized people joining the armies of their European rulers" (Robb 2021, p. 5).

Despite the guarantees of the Thirteenth (1865, emancipation), Fourteenth (1868, due process) and Fifteenth (1869, the right to vote for Black males) Amendments to the U.S.

Constitution, racial violence did not fade away. Even worse, in 1896, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that it was constitutionally acceptable to separate White and Black citizens (*Plessy v. Ferguson*, “separate but equal accommodations for the white and colored races”). Lynching and mob violence soared.

Lentz-Smith’s account of ethnic relations and politics in the late nineteenth century sheds greater light on the impact of the Southern Democrats and imperial conquests on African Americans. Lentz-Smith’s account includes harrowing instances of heightened racial tensions prior to the outbreak of World War I. As she recounts, by the turn of the century, Southern Democrats sought to win the White vote by insisting that White identity “should override economic concerns or social critique” (Lentz-Smith 2011, p. 17). In parallel, U.S. foreign policy reinforced the idea that non-White populations ought to be domesticated. In 1898, the United States took control of foreign territories such as Cuba, Guam, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines. Lentz-Smith (2011) argues that the expansion of the American empire gave credence to the notion of White supremacy. By 1905, demobilization of regular army units paralleled disenfranchisement in the South. As the South became more segregated, massive departures to the North unsettled the social structure of entire cities. The riots that broke out in Atlanta, Georgia (1906) and Springfield, Illinois (1908) were attempts to drive African Americans from White districts. A few years later, Woodrow Wilson’s accession to power reinforced the conviction among African Americans that they would not be regarded as full citizens. Wilson’s administration “deliberately and systematically segregated blacks in civil service jobs; permitted the introduction of discriminatory bills into Congress” (Barbeau and Henri, 1974, p. 5). A Southern Democrat, Wilson “did not preach white supremacy; he practiced it” (Lentz-Smith 2011, p. 31).

When war broke out in Europe in August 1914, “[ninety] percent of the African American population of nearly ten million people lived in the segregated Jim Crow South” (Conwill 2019, p. 99). To meet the demand for industrial labor and supply enough equipment to the warring European nations, the North and the Midwest needed to address the shortage of manpower (a shortage that only increased when the United States entered the war in April 1917). It triggered an even larger “flood of African American migration from the South” (Conwill 2019, p. 109). Between 1915 and 1919, more than half a million African Americans departed from the South (Conwill 2019). Neutrality momentarily shielded Americans from European catastrophe, but geopolitical concerns rapidly dragged the United States into the war. Economically speaking, the United States suffered from food shortages, rises in prices, and increasing lack of raw material. American society began to feel the direct economic after-effects of the war, the rules of which they had no say in (Abbenhuis and Tames, 2021). By the end of 1916, American public opinion had definitely sided with the Allies (Neiberg 2016; Tooze 2015).

Before U.S. intervention, prominent African American newspapers heralded the courage, strength, and humanity of France’s colonial combatants. Newspapers such as the *Richmond Planet*, *Chicago Defender*, and *New York Herald* displayed photographs of French imperial troops fighting, using sophisticated artillery, and being fully integrated within French military. France had long shaped the collective imagination of African Americans, and although activists such as W. E. B. Du Bois never shied away from overtly condemning French imperialism, they consistently dissociated both American and French cultures and racial streams (Williams 2010). African American magazines carried the narrative of racial and cultural encounters between colonial and metropolitan troops in France. The September 1916 issue of *The Crisis* described colonial troops “mixing with white troops from the finest regiments” during the Battle of Verdun (Du Bois 1916b). At a time when the incorporation of African Americans into the military sparked bitter racial hostility, the cables from Europe announcing White and Black troops engaging in common battle galvanized African American leaders.

When Woodrow Wilson declared war on Germany in April 1917, the African American community was understandably “torn between national duty and the unfulfilled promises of equality from their previous loyalty to the nation in combat” (Wilson 2015, p. 35). Wilson’s speech to Congress on April 2, 1917, in which he called on Americans to make the world safe for democracy, clashed with the bitterly frustrating experience of ten million African Americans excluded from the very same principles of democracy Wilson hoped to secure worldwide. Arguably, an ideological gap opened between Wilson’s call to fight against autocracy abroad and Americans’ lack of interest in the plight of African Americans. By 1917, for any African American, democracy was nothing other than “a powerful ideal and an elusive reality” (Williams 2010, p. 4). However, many activists rapidly realized that the war would be a test of loyalty, humanity, and dignity for African Americans.

In the June 1917 editorial of *The Crisis*, Du Bois unambiguously proclaimed, “Despite the unfortunate record of England, of Belgium, and of our own land in dealing with colored peoples, we earnestly believe that the greatest hope for ultimate democracy, with no adventitious barriers of race and color, lies on the side of the Allies” (Du Bois 1917c, p. 59). Following the sinking of the *Lusitania* in May 1915, Du Bois called World War I “the lie unveiled.” He found it unacceptable to listen to all the outraged national and diplomatic reactions, and he condemned the inconsistency of White people’s selective grief:

[W]hen Negroes were enslaved, or the natives of Congo raped and mutilated, or the Indians of the Amazon robbed, or the natives of the South Seas murdered, or 2,732 American citizens lynched—when all this happened in the past and men knew it was happening and women fatted and plumed themselves on the ill-gotten gains, and London and Berlin and Paris and New York flamed with orgies of extravagance which the theft of the worlds made possible, when all this happened, we civilized folk turned deaf ears” (Du Bois 1915, p. 81).

Du Bois observed that the torpedoing of a ship carrying White civilians could rock all the chancelleries in Europe, but African Americans could be lynched without stirring up the slightest emotion worldwide. Du Bois knew, however, that the participation in the war would test the assumption that African Americans could not be full participants in U.S. society.

Similarly, Mary White Ovington regarded World War I as the opportunity to advance the cause of her community. As co-founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Ovington backed the sacrifice of African Americans while denouncing the lack of consistency from the United States. In the July 1917 issue of *The Crisis*, she deplored that “this champion of democracy” did not consider “a part of the population as full citizens (Ovington 1917, pp. 114, 116). Ovington called out the same dilemma that consumed many African Americans. Why fight and die under the flag of a nation that “treat[ed] a part of the population as not entitled to advancement...fail[ed] to provide it with an education...den[ied] it the right to vote or to have representation in Parliament or Congress...set [it] apart in a ghetto, there to be herded and neglected...prevent[ed] it entrance into the higher branches of government service...den[ied] it the right of trial, visiting upon its members torture and death?” (Ovington 1917, p. 114).

However, though they did not shy away from criticizing American society, Du Bois and Ovington hoped that the war might “serve the advancement of their race” (Kennedy 1980, p. 392). Wilson’s address had indirectly “created an opening for black people to appropriate the ideological impulses driving America’s involvement in the war and apply them toward the cause of racial equality and justice” (Williams 2010, p. 23). According to Du Bois, in enlisting, “black people would be rewarded with greater rights and recognition of their identity as Americans” (Conwill 2019, p. 41). Most importantly, African Americans could

not idly wait while White men were battling in Europe for the freedom of oppressed nations.

Even though African Americans regarded their enlistment as a national and moral duty, within African American organizations, however, some activists rapidly distanced themselves from the NAACP. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen, both editors of *The Messenger* and members of the American Socialist Party, considered that the war “pitted poor, working-class black, white and immigrant communities against each other” (Conwill 2019, p. 45). This is the reason that they categorically objected to the war effort. With the passing of the Espionage Act and the Sedition Act in 1917, Randolph and Owen would later be arrested and charged with treason (Conwill 2019, p. 47). Hubert Harrison, editor of *The Voice*, is another example. Harrison vehemently disapproved of African Americans’ fighting (Wilson 2015, p. 39). According to him, nothing indicated that African Americans should enlist and fight in the army of a country that had mistreated them for so long. Though these voices constituted a minority, they nonetheless mirrored the divergences within the African American community.

As soon as Woodrow Wilson declared war on Germany in April 1917, the U.S. army began to increase its manpower. Unlike the European nations that could tap into an inexhaustible reservoir of soldiers from colonies around the world,¹ the United States was limited to conscripting only its own citizens (Robb 2021; Strachan 2004). In May 1917, Congress passed the Selective Service Act, which required men ages twenty-one to thirty-one to register. Of the 4.8 million Americans who served in World War I, some two million were draftees (National Archive Foundation n.d.). Along with other foreign-born nationals (Ford 2001), 400,000 African Americans served, and of these 200,000 served in Europe (Henri 1970; Das 2014). As in previous wars, African Americans (and foreign-born nationals) envisioned the war as a springboard to better integration, a means to democracy and the full rights of citizenship. Through military service, African Americans could secure economic and social upward mobility and further racial progress (Krebs 2006).

Discussing the recruiting process, Barbeau and Henri (1974) brought to light important consequences of racial discrimination during the process of enlistment. Nearly ten percent of African Americans deserted (3.9 percent of White Americans deserted). Barbeau and Henri argue that racial attitudes and White opposition to African Americans’ being drafted explain this gap. Deserters were fined \$50, and this amount was to be given to the person who apprehended the deserter. In some cases, Southern officials would “deliberately prevent delivery of a registrant’s notice of induction and later turn in [the African American draftee] and collect the reward” (Barbeau and Henri, 1974, p. 37). Additionally, this was done to prevent African American laborers from enlisting lest there be a shortage of manpower in the South. Even more outrageous was the “uncommon policy for draft boards to take blacks who owned their own land while exempting those who worked for whites as sharecroppers or tenants” (Barbeau and Henri, 1974, p. 37).

Although African American men had served in previous wars, in 1917, the dilemma of whether or not to mobilize African Americans “represented a perplexing question in need of answering” (Williams 2010, p. 103). Thanks to the determination of African American activists, such as Du Bois, the incorporation of African Americans led to the creation of an African American officer training camp. After long and heated debates, in the summer 1917, the first officer training camp for African Americans was established at Fort Des Moines, Iowa (Conwill 2019). Whether or not to establish a segregated camp for commissioned officers, however, sparked another divide among African Americans. How could they accept being separated from White American soldiers while still denied equality and full citizenship? Though Fort Des Moines heralded African Americans’ quest for military recognition, it polarized even more the racial divide between White and Black officers. In the past, with rare exceptions, only White officers had been permitted to lead troops to

battle. Thus, the camp for African American officers at Fort Des Moines spoke for a relatively progressive (though pragmatic) direction in American politics. As summarized by Du Bois in April 1917, African Americans had to “choose between the insult of a separate camp and the irreparable injury of strengthening the present custom of putting no black men in positions of authority. Our choice is as clear as noonday. Give us the camp” (Du Bois 1917b). Du Bois knew that the only way to thwart White segregationists’ fears that any political change might confiscate governing positions and exclude White officers from decision-making process was to separate all African American officers. Indeed, as Wilson has shown, the opening of Fort Des Moines was a “defining moment” for African American men when soldiers were given the opportunity to be the first commissioned officers in a predominantly White army (Wilson 2015, p. 5).

Yet the training of African American officers paralleled a surge of racial violence against African Americans across the United States (Barbeau and Henri, 1974). Lynching did not stop; racial equality did not advance; and White segregationists worried about the possibility of Black officers commanding White soldiers (Lentz-Smith 2011; Williams 2010). The “race riot” in Houston, Texas, on August 23, 1917, known as the Camp Logan Mutiny, reminded African Americans that they could be abused with impunity, but any vengeful action from people of color would be severely dealt with. Barbeau and Henri (1974) were the first to draw a correlation between African Americans’ “[being] drafted into the military” and the hysterical hatred that broke out across the United States during the summer 1917. Among the incidents, African Americans were immolated, two-year-old boys were shot, and women were beaten up by several White girls. The police usually refrained from intervening (and in some cases they supported the actions, even lynchings). Lentz-Smith (2011) argues that the unit of soldiers that stormed Houston’s police station to avenge the lynching of a fellow soldier momentarily positioned itself outside the racial patterns of segregation by refusing to stand still. In a chapter provocatively titled “Fighting the Southern Huns,” she explains that in avenging one of their own, the men of the 24th Infantry stationed at Camp Logan, made a stand against racial injustice, announcing that they would refuse to be confined to second-class citizenship. As soldiers fighting under the same flag as White men, they could not look down when their brothers endured racial violence. As such, the Camp Logan Mutiny helped to “forge new identities, new nationalisms, and new pictures of themselves as men” (Lentz-Smith 2011, p. 79).

France, Interracial Encounters, and the Matrix of Black Activism

By the time the United States entered the war, four regiments of Regulars, National Guard units of various states, and ordinary civilians could be assembled to alleviate the shortage of manpower. As noted, some 400,000 African Americans served in the United States Army, of whom 200,000 were sent abroad to serve in the American Expeditionary Force, with 42,000 experiencing combat (Lentz-Smith 2011). The majority of the African American soldiers were deployed as a labor force (Conwill 2019).

Chief of staff Tasker Bliss categorically rejected the idea of training all African American soldiers for combat. At best, they ought to assist the military and wield picks and shovels. Consequently, “80 percent of the black troops overseas were assigned to labor duties, and only 20 percent ever saw combat” (Barbeau and Henri, 1974, p. 43). Racial attitudes, overt concerns from White officers, myths of physical weakness and degeneration, all served to “put the black draft into labor units rather than combat units” (Barbeau and Henri, 1974, p. 55). As such, racial attitudes turned possible combatants into a reservoir of laborers.

All units of the U.S. military experienced cultural, social, and political encounters with civilians in France. Cultural encounters between African Americans and French civilians naturally developed in places where troops were stationed, and the experience altered

African Americans' vision of the world. When interacting with White civilians, African Americans realized how inclusive France could be. Comradeships with French soldiers and interracial relationships with women reshaped African Americans' vision of what their own country could aspire to become one day. They began to regard themselves as citizens of a foreign land that gratefully welcomed them regardless of the color of their skin. Overnight, "interaction with French civilians had a deep impact on their racial consciousness and appreciation of democracy" (Williams 2010, p. 166). Similarly, through such encounters, colonial soldiers from the French Empire, like Diallo, experienced the citizens of France far away from the colonial system regulating West Africa. Diallo and his comrades were puzzled at how friendly French people were. Africans played with French children, were invited inside civilians' homes, and shared moments of intimacy. Several years after the war, and in lyrical and patriotic overtones, Diallo wrote that the Senegalese embarked for France like "lovers coming to the rescue of a damsel in distress" (Diallo and Senghor, 2021, p. 107). Both African American and African troops shared the conviction that France should be rescued and that France was a welcoming country for people of color.

Once the regiments of the American 93rd Division crossed the Atlantic Ocean and set foot in France, they served alongside French divisions for the entire duration of the war. General Pershing, commander of the American Expeditionary Forces on the Western Front, initially "intended to use the black combat regiments in the S.O.S. for a time," but he changed his mind and turned over the four regiments to the French (Barbeau and Henri, 1974, p. 111). In two comprehensive chapters, Barbeau and Henri retrace the everyday environment of the 92nd and 93rd Divisions in France. From the battle baptism in Argonne of the 369th Infantry to the relatively less-known military performances of the 371st Infantry, all four regiments of the 93rd Division were awarded numerous *croix de guerre* (Barbeau and Henri, 1974). African Americans were integrated within French army units and momentarily escaped discrimination from their American counterparts (Wilson 2015). This liberated them from the psychological shackles of Jim Crow. When not in combat, social integration continued through army bands and jazz music (Barbeau and Henri, 1974). African American musicians brought cultural "otherness" to France, which helped them bridge the differences between the two nations (Shack 2001).

The experience opened up an ocean of hope: "France became an inspiration and a rallying cry for how life could eventually be back home" (Wilson 2015, p. 87). Black soldiers saw how republican universalism could intertwine with colonial and racial imperial ideology (Fogarty 2012). But on their return home, they faced the rabid resurgence of racially enforced laws in the U.S. military.

U.S. Army Command disapproved of African Americans fraternizing with France's civilians, especially women. They feared that interracial interactions with civilians might erode the segregationist structures of the United States. Additionally, any sexual intercourse posed a threat for the established racial American system and "could pollute the American citizenry by mixing indiscriminately with soldiers of all races" (Lentz-Smith 2011, p. 98). As White American soldiers believed it to be their duty to protect White women worldwide, they constantly tried to debase African American battalions. U.S. Army Command constantly reminded African Americans that they were subject to U.S. military law. Even in a foreign land, "military officials attempted to replicate the practices, customs, and hierarchies of white supremacy as closely as possible in the army" (Williams 2010, p. 6). The April 1918 issue of *The Crisis* quoted from a letter by a Black American soldier from the 15th New York Infantry, then in France, to his mother: "I would never have dreamt," lamented the soldier, "that the American white man would ever at this time, when each and every man of the dear old U.S.A. is sacrificing his all and all for his country regardless of his creed or color, use prejudice and try his utmost to poison another nation against the American Negro soldier" (Du Bois 1918a). Even the shedding of blood did not soften racial

divisions. In France, African Americans' heroism and sacrifice were regularly minimized, if not tarnished. Men of the 92nd Division, for example, constantly experienced verbal abuse and calumny (Barbeau and Henri, 1974). African Americans "endured these indignities resigned to the belief that they and the brothers and sisters of their race would be rewarded for loyalty with equality" (Wilson 2015, p. 182).

Pershing's attempt to force French military authorities to compel their troops not to interfere with African American battalions ultimately failed. And even though White American officers hoped to restrict social contacts between African American troops and French women, often by reducing soldiers' leaves, strong relationships developed between African Americans and civilians (Wilson 2015). White troops tried to frighten White French women with racial stereotypes of African American men, but the civilians' experiences disproved the stereotypes. Indeed, the appalling behavior of White American soldiers such as aggressive belittling toward colonial soldiers, civilians, and women tarnished the all-positive image of the United States. When a White soldier brutally insulted a woman quietly enjoying a meal with an African American *petit ami*, the result was a fight in the café in which African American soldiers combated Jim Crow in a foreign land with the benediction of the local population (Lentz-Smith 2011).

Whereas Williams (2010) and Wilson (2015) analyze the interaction of combat troops with French civilians, Barbeau and Henri (1974) and Lentz-Smith (2011) examine the everyday experience of the African American units deployed in France. Even before departing for France, labor battalions experienced exploitation, humiliation, insults, and physical violence. In U.S. camps, African American troops were inadequately fed, housed, barred from any form of recreation, and at the mercy of racist White officers. Black soldiers were regularly hired out to work for civilians, "often to the financial gain of the officers" (Barbeau and Henri, 1974, p. 100). This turned Black soldiers into "men you could ridicule or take advantage of and get away with it" (Barbeau and Henri, 1974, p. 109). Barbeau and Henri describe the home front and the appalling conditions of Black laborers, while Lentz-Smith recounted the ways in which the troops were mistreated in France.

Whereas African American combat troops came in direct contact with the French and enjoyed relative freedom, Jim Crow laws were violently enforced in labor camps such as St. Nazaire, where African American soldiers were stationed with the Services of Supply (Conwill 2019). They assisted the colonial troops from French-controlled African territories who "transported weapons, food, and supplies over thousands of miles of inhospitable terrain" (Robb 2021, p. 13). African American stevedores labored in exhausting conditions, to the point of being mocked by German prisoners, and were cruelly disciplined by their White officers in command. African American women who worked with the Young Men's Christian Association at St. Nazaire and "served hot chocolate and cookies... and provided books and a classroom where black soldiers could learn to read and write," (Conwill 2019, p. 60) bore witness to the appalling treatment of African American stevedores.

Williams (2010), who examines the encounters between African Americans and colonial soldiers in France, portrays a positive picture of those relations, suggesting that a feeling of brotherhood developed between the African American and colonial soldiers. Lentz-Smith, however, noticed that negative encounters with Senegalese troops rattled African Americans' hope for an international brotherhood among colored people (Lentz-Smith 2011).

By 1917 only 120,000 Africans were serving in the French army (Wilson 2015). Algerian, Tunisian, Moroccan, and Senegalese infantrymen were shipped to Africa to combat and protect France's empire (Fogarty 2012). Additionally, 135,000 Africans from France's Empire were sent to the metropolis as laborers (Andrew and Kanya-Forstner, 1978). As the only imperial power transferring colonial troops to the Western Front (Levine 1998), France became a laboratory for interracial encounters and cultural

exchanges, where racial stereotypes were constantly challenged, tested, and debunked. It also gave birth to the emergence of a postwar transnational Blackness and Black internationalism that contested European empires and hoped to transcend the delimited borders of colonial empires (Stephens 2005). Williams (2010) points to the difficulty that African American troops had in communicating with colonial units, but he states that as imperial soldiers interacted with African American combatants, they discussed the condition of Black peoples worldwide. Williams does not elaborate further (understandable given the scarcity of firsthand accounts) but offers an area for research on how cultural encounters during World War I schooled a generation of Black soldiers to rethink their human condition.

Compared to Williams (2010), Lentz-Smith (2011) argues that cross-cultural encounters rattled African Americans' confidence, self-esteem, and self-perception. For example, encounters with colonial soldiers, Chinese laborers, and civilians in France forced African Americans to rethink their identity. Years of segregation, lynching, and racial exclusion had conditioned African Americans to believe that they were Black individuals before American citizens. But French colonial troops viewed them as Americans. The *tirailleurs* (colonial infantry) asserted their Frenchness regardless of skin color. African Americans struggled to establish "solidarity through racial internationalism" (Lentz-Smith 2011, p. 154). Although misconduct among White American troops helped reinforce the perception of French civilians that African American troops were more civilized and respectful, in the minds of French colonial troops, African Americans were Americans, and that was not a positive: "Just as African Americans constructed their France as America's utopian other, French people of color painted the United States as France's dystopian possibility" (Lentz-Smith 2011, p. 153).

Barbeau and Henri close their book with an account of the terrible conditions that plagued African American units stationed in France, a topic that is absent from other research. The Armistice reminded African American troops of their inferiority in the eyes of the U.S. military: although Black troops of both France and England were permitted to march in the great Allied victory parade in Paris, African Americans were not allowed to attend (Barbeau and Henri, 1974). African American troops of the 369th Infantry were subsequently excluded "from the special holiday rations issued to all other American soldiers on Thanksgiving and Christmas" (Barbeau and Henri, 1974, p. 167). White officers even held up the pay of their units in order to restrict their financial autonomy in postwar France.

Enforcement of Jim Crow law hardened on French soil after November 1918. Even more indicative of the racial climate were the illegal executions carried out against Black soldiers. In June 1919, for example, a hanging took place in Gièvres. Bodies of African Americans who had been randomly executed by White American soldiers were hurriedly buried as though they had been killed in combat. In summarizing the discriminatory actions taken against African American officers (at least, those known at the time they wrote their book, some fifty years ago), Barbeau and Henri reveal how the anticipated return of confident, skilled, and determined African American troops was already crystallizing racial tensions. Although "France served the African American freedom movement by allowing black soldiers to conceive a life unfettered by segregation" (Lentz-Smith 2011, p. 108), the policies of U.S. Army Command and the actions of individual White officers and fellow soldiers countered that mental liberation (Barbeau and Henri, 1974).

They Returned Fighting: New Negroes, Militancy, and Black Internationalism

African American troops "returned home transformed. It was a transformation that connected them to a real and imagined global community that extended past the

geographically and ideologically restrictive boundaries of the United States” (Williams 2010, p. 146). In the aftermath of the war, returning African American servicemen embarked on a crusade to right the nation’s wrongs: “These men served as the vanguard of civil rights, fighting first as soldiers for democracy in Europe and returning as leaders determined to defeat segregation and injustice” (Wilson 2015, p. 1).

Returning African American troops had to reconcile their service and sacrifice in a war for democracy with their status as second-class citizens in a society that prided itself as herald for the ideals of humanity and justice. Discharged officers took action against the political and social structures that limited them and denied them rights.

Williams (2010) focuses on an important socioeconomic aftereffect of African Americans’ participation in World War I. In the Deep South, discharged African Americans refused to return to their prewar work on the plantations, sharecropping, and labor. As they categorically rejected the segregationist economic system and demanded better wages, working conditions, and social status, White Southern planters and industrialists faced a shortage in manpower. Discharged African Americans were unsettling the socioeconomic foundations of Jim Crow in the South (Williams 2010).

Williams (2010) maintains that the racial violence that erupted from December 1918 and culminated in the 1921 Tulsa Riot sought to “curtail the spread of true democracy to African Americans” (p. 260). Opening his chapter “The War at Home” with an account of the hanging of a discharged soldier under arrest in Tyler Station, Kentucky, Williams analyzes how the “lynching of Lewis challenged the meaning of [African Americans] sacrifice” (2010, p. 224). Williams mapped all the major “race riots” from December 1918 to 1921. In 1919 alone, twenty-five “race riots” took place in the South. Across the United States, accounts of demobilized African Americans being lynched hit the pages of national newspapers. In Pensacola, Florida, for instance, former serviceman Bud Johnson, accused of attacking a White woman, was burned to death by a mob. Woolsey, Georgia; Bogalusa, Louisiana; Star City, Arkansas; and Franklinton, North Carolina were all sites of racial violence leading to the death of discharged African Americans. Indeed, discharged African Americans “unwittingly found themselves fighting for their lives” after having survived the war (Williams 2010, p. 225).

In many instances, it was their participation in the war that significantly exposed them to racial violence (Barbeau and Henri, 1974). As African American veterans paraded in the streets, the uniform of the U.S. army asserted their American citizenship—and with it, by extension, the equal right to participate in democracy and advance economically. Angry White mobs swooped down on demobilized African American soldiers and demanded that they take their uniforms off, as if to tell them that in spite of their service in France they would never be fully part of America (Wilson 2015). In postwar America, “the mere sight of an African American veteran in uniform sometimes proved sufficient to spark violence” (Williams 2010, p. 238). Stories of interracial encounters between White women and African Americans in France further heightened racial tensions (Williams 2010). Barbeau and Henri (1974) tracked a radical increase of sadism in the violence perpetrated against returning African American soldiers, including burning them alive. In identifying the trajectory of racial violence, Barbeau and Henri open a path for future research. Were there seeds of what could have become a nationwide ethnic cleansing? Did the resistance of African Americans as they stood up to mob violence ward off micro-ethnic cleansings across the nation?

In meticulously recounting the trial of Sergeant Edgar Caldwell, Lentz-Smith analyzes how racial tensions were heightened by the “specter of Negro domination” (Lentz-Smith 2011, p. 176) and discharged African Americans joined together to resist and protect themselves and each other. It is tempting to read into Lentz-Smith’s account an underlying argument that grassroots resistance to oppression proved more transformative than

idealized and romanticized visions of Pan-Africanism or “Black Empire.” At a time when leaders such as Du Bois organized the Pan-African Congress in Paris, African American citizens were battling to save the life of Caldwell, the 24th Infantry sergeant, who had killed a streetcar operator in self-defense. Anniston, Alabama, the site of the racially motivated attack on Caldwell in December 1918 and his subsequent trial, sentence, and execution, became a space for battling for full citizenship, dignity, and self-esteem. The NAACP began its campaign against “legal lynching” (Mikkelsen 2009). In several instances, discharged African Americans acted as an ironclad to protect their community. In Chicago, Illinois; Knoxville, Tennessee; and Omaha, Nebraska, former soldiers constituted a line of defense during “race riots,” momentarily shielding others from violent mobs. In May 1921, during the Tulsa Race Riot (also called the Tulsa Race Massacre), for example, African American veterans contained the mob before eventually being outnumbered (Williams 2010). Postwar racial violence was clearly “a head-on clash between a new black self-respect, conceived in battle and inured to violence, and the old, now threatened, white insistence on respect for white superiority” (Barbeau and Henri, 1974, p. 185).

Some former African American servicemen were determined to erode the segregationist structures of American society. In tracking the journey of discharged officers, Wilson (2015) meticulously details the different paths taken by discharged officers to overcome segregation. For example, former officers from the 92nd and 93rd Divisions battled for racial equality at different levels. Charles Hamilton Houston, for example, entered Harvard University Law School and then became the NAACP’s litigation director in 1935. Charles P. Howard returned from France and earned a law degree from Drake University. As an attorney, Howard tirelessly fought for the civil rights of African Americans. First Lieutenant Clayborne George participated in politics in Cleveland, Ohio, after earning a law degree in 1920. Second Lieutenant Gurney E. Nelson battled discriminatory practices in education and paved the way for the integration of future generations of African American students in the nation’s universities (Wilson 2015). For the former officers of these two divisions, postwar activism ranged from joining civil rights associations to suing private individuals, writing in the press, and mobilizing against the rigid segregationist structures of American society.

Complementing Wilson’s focus on demobilized officers of the 92nd and 93rd Divisions and their fight for civil rights through law and education, Williams (2010) offers a wider picture of the diverging postwar paths of demobilizations of African American soldiers and officers. Discharged African Americans “developed a strong racial consciousness and heightened appreciation for the potential of both individual acts of resistance and collective organization to challenge white supremacy” (Williams 2010, p. 298). As Williams shows, radical militancy developed. Embittered by racial violence while serving in the U.S. army in France and profoundly disappointed with the way they were treated by their country, discharged African Americans joined radical organizations.

Williams (2010) discusses the radical organizations that garnered support from African American veterans. The African Blood Brotherhood, founded by Cyril Briggs in 1919 in New York City, numbered in discharged African Americans. Similarly, many joined the League for Democracy when it was created in March 1919 in Harlem. As a paramilitary organization created by former officers of the 92nd Division and for discharged African Americans, it represented a unique organization that sought to “combat institutionalized racism within the military and protect the legacy of black soldiers’ historical contribution” (Williams 2010, p. 273). The organization’s first action was to launch a legal battle to have Colonel Allen Greer charged with treason for his denigration of African American troops during the war. Both the African Blood Brotherhood and the League for Democracy sought “to combat institutionalized racism and inspire militant political resistance among African Americans more broadly” (Williams 2010, p. 279). The Universal Negro

Improvement Association, founded by Marcus Garvey in 1914, also welcomed numerous discharged African Americans from 1919 onward. Garvey fused notions of diasporic Black empire, militarism, racial leadership, and aggressive resistance to racial violence and thus promoted Black supremacy (Williams 2010). In 1919, through the support of discharged African Americans, the Universal African Legions officially became the paramilitary wing of the Universal Negro Improvement Association's radical activity.

World War I was a catalyst for a new form of Black activism. Pan-Africanism and awakening of Black internationalist movements sprang from the global war that had shaken European and colonial societies (Manela 2007). During the December 1918 National Race Congress in Washington DC, hopes for radical change and progressive ideals nurtured definitions of international activism, leading to competing visions of how African Americans should then envision the battle for full citizenship. As African Americans? New Negroes? Black citizens of a wounded world? An array of alternatives arose to counter the "the stunned self-determination that [Woodrow] Wilson meant only for parts of Europe" (Lentz-Smith 2011, p. 142). Be it George Vashon's "Black empire," the short-lived International League for Darker People, Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association, or the National Equal Rights League, "internationalism offered analytical and emotional space for black people" (Lentz-Smith 2011, p. 167). In February of 1919, Du Bois organized a Pan-African Congress in Paris to rival the League of Nations and promote the rights of African peoples worldwide. Du Bois had traveled to France to cover the diplomatic meetings of the Allied powers as they began reshaping the world in the aftermath of the war. He hoped to undo the racial and colonial patterns of Western societies and contribute to the reshaping of a better-connected world. Among the proposals of the Pan-African Congress was the demand for African self-rule, which was unanimously opposed by the Allied powers at the Paris Peace Conference.

Not all African Americans stayed home to fight Jim Crow. A generation of African Americans converged in "Paris Noir" and remained there (Conwill 2019). While African Americans rejoiced at being able to permanently settle in France, within the French colonies, two irreconcilable visions rapidly developed: one advocating complete independence for Africans, and the other ready to accommodate French imperialism provided it guaranteed equal status and citizenship to all colonial subjects. Bakary Diallo backed French colonialism while advocating more equality between African citizens and citizens from the metropolis. On the contrary, Lamine Senghor hoped for a revolution against French imperialism and loathed "loyal slaves with ebony-colored skin" who had persuaded their brothers to fight or who had enforced conscription by force during the global war (Diallo and Senghor, 2021, p. 183). Here, a wide gap existed between returning colonial subjects who had "secured desirable positions in the colonial administration" and could naturally navigate between their double identities and revolutionaries who demanded nothing other than the complete severance of their nation's ties from the French Empire (Robb 2021).

Contesting "White" Humanitarian Intervention: Louis Wright, W. E. B. Du Bois, and the Awakening of a Black Manifest Destiny

In the postwar context, anticolonial nationalism, transnationalism, and Black internationalism are often seen as ideologies shaped by World War I. National concerns for full civil rights for African Americans might have occluded another form of activism: humanitarian action. Scholars argue that World War I was a turning point in the history of African Americans that led to upward mobility and, eventually, full civil rights. But it also led to forms of Black militancy that crossed geographic borders, reaching out to all "colored peoples" in the world.

Before the U.S. entry into the war, humanitarian organizations in the United States and abroad solicited Americans to aid foreign populations or even sponsor foreign children. Through the American Red Cross, for example, millions of Americans provided food and clothing to aid European civilians even before the United States declared war on Germany (Irwin 2013). World War I spearheaded a new form of humanitarianism based on the “adoption” (financial sponsorship) of French orphans. Through the Fatherless Children of France Society (FCFS), founded in 1915, approximately 300,000 French boys and girls received money from American benefactors between 1915 and 1921 (Destenay 2023). When Woodrow Wilson delivered his speech to Congress in April 1917, he hoped to mobilize American children and speed up the Americanization process of foreigners living on U.S. soil (Capozzola 2008; Gerstle 1997). Federal authorities planned the assimilation of foreign-born immigrants, along with first- and second-generation citizens (Goodman 2022), but children were the target of the Wilson administration to inculcate them to American values. In October 1916, several months before the creation of the Junior Red Cross (Irwin 2013), the Junior Committee of the FCFS had already been established. Its mission: to match American children as sponsors for orphaned children in France (Destenay 2023). The Junior Committee of the FCFS invited American children to humanitarian action and engaged them in foreign aid. Even though the primary goal was to ensure that children would pressure their parents to sponsor children in need, it capitalized on children’s emotions and innocence to win the hearts and minds of adults.

At a time when White Americans subscribed to liberty bonds, provided financial support for France’s orphans, and donated to the American Red Cross, the suffering of African Americans at home did not seem to matter. African Americans newspapers thus relayed calls for help for their own community. *The Crisis* regularly called for African Americans to sponsor the building of an orphanage, the reconstruction of a school, or the sponsorship of African American children. In August 1915, the *Tulsa Star* prompted African Americans to donate for an orphanage in Oklahoma City that would protect “children of our race, with no one to care for them” (*Tulsa Star* 1915). To a certain extent, Du Bois and other African American activists envisioned World War I as a global war, as a fight for humanity and moral justice, but they also knew that African Americans needed to look after their own. Caucasian people living in the United States transferred significant amounts of money to Europe, the Middle East, and other regions of the world. It was time that African Americans mobilized for foreign “Colored” nations outside the United States.

In 1917, the first African American organization dedicated to assisting “Colored” peoples opened in Atlanta, founded to help “Negro” combatants, their wives, and children from the French Empire. By the time African Americans were training and getting ready to land in France, the Colored American Society for the Relief of French War Orphans was relaying calls across the United States to assist “Colored children” of “Negro” soldiers. Its president, Louis T. Wright (1891–1952), a graduate of Harvard Medical School, teamed up with other men of the medical profession to found the organization, and it operated with the patronage and cooperation of France’s Consulate General in Atlanta. Wright gradually came to see World War I as a cataclysm that could give birth to a “Negro” humanitarianism. African Americans were called upon to look beyond their own plight and aid “the other Negro” across the Atlantic Ocean. Transnational “Colored” internationalism would parallel the “White” humanitarian actions directed to populations in Europe.

Wright capitalized on the desire for recognition in launching a rallying cry for the “Colored children of France” (“An Appeal on Behalf of the Little Black Orphans of France”). The goal was “to raise a fund of one million dollars for the relief of widows and orphans of the brave and gallant black soldiers of France” (Du Bois 1917a,f). As vice-president of the Colored American Society for the Relief of French War Orphans, Du Bois published calls to sponsor “Colored French children” in the pages of *The Crisis*. Churches,

for instance, raised as much as they could. In June 1917, Bishop John Hurst of the African Methodist Episcopal Church deposited \$300 for the organization (Du Bois 1917e). By November 1917, over \$1,400 had been raised (Du Bois 1917g). At the same time that Wright founded his organization, Emilie Bigelow Hapgood, a White theatrical producer in New York City founded the Circle for Negro War Relief. Its mission was “to help the colored soldier before he went to the front, to help colored soldiers at the front, and to help the family which the colored soldier left behind” (Du Bois 1917f). Working closely with the American Red Cross, Hapgood hoped to raise sufficient amounts of money to provide for soldiers, families, and children in need while their fathers were fighting on the Western Front.

Wright and others paved the way for a new form of Black activism that looked beyond national frontiers, languages, and citizenships and envisioned “Colored” people as belonging to a same oppressed humanity. Just as White Americans were convinced that they had a moral duty to perform in the world, Wright and Du Bois offered a vision that African Americans ought to liberate, rescue, and assist every “Colored” combatant from any “Colored” nation fighting the war. As such, Asians, Africans, Arabs, and indigenous peoples would fall under the definition of “Colored” people (see, for example, Du Bois 1918b). Though Du Bois supported France *and* Britain in their struggle, the organization’s mission never included any financial support for “Colored children” of the British Empire. Given the scarcity of archival material, it is not possible to determine why Wright sought to rescue only those “Colored children” in the French Empire. It could tentatively be argued, however, that France represented for Americans the country of Lafayette, the Republic Sister.

The mission of the Colored American Society for the Relief of French War Orphans intersected African Americans’ “Christian and racial duty” (Colored American Society 1917–1919). Religious belief, particularly Christianity, had long sustained African Americans. In joining Christianity and ethnicity, Wright and Du Bois drew a clear line between Whites and Blacks. In a country where skin color could subject someone to injustice and even violence, Wright and Du Bois distanced themselves from traditionally White humanitarian organizations, and worked for the awakening of an international “Colored” humanitarianism. Consequently, in all the issues of *The Crisis* between 1915 and 1920, rare were the calls for participating in the Fatherless Children of France Society’s campaign. Du Bois urged the racial solidarity of African Americans to rescue “Negro” brothers fighting for France and support for the “Colored” civilians in the French Empire.

The willingness to shape an international “Colored” community mirrored Du Bois’s position when he had advocated the establishment of a segregated officer training camp at Fort Des Moines (Wilson 2015). As inclusive as he tried to be, Du Bois found it vital to redress the wrongs that White humanitarianism caused for non-White peoples by ignoring their sufferings and intervening in predominantly White corners of the planet. Du Bois had backed the establishment of a segregated camp for “Negro” officers, arguing that this was the only way to bypass racial division and advance the cause of his people (Du Bois 1917d). In this case, Du Bois accepted the separation based on ethnicity as a necessity.

Actors such as Wright and Du Bois thus saw World War I as a means to foster an international brotherhood among “Colored peoples” and to school African Americans to act as agents of change worldwide. In the June 1918 issue of *The Crisis* Du Bois launched a call to all African Americans to protect and support “the nearly 100,000 men of Negro descent who are today called to arms for the United States [and] the million dark men of Africa and India who have served in the armies of Great Britain, and to the equal, if not larger, number who are fighting for France and the other allies” (Du Bois 1918b). Whereas Caucasian Americans financed the war and supported Allied nations such as Great Britain and France, the Colored American Society for the Relief of French War Orphans hoped

African Americans would help colonized nations whose soldiers were engaged in the global war. Explaining that African Americans had a duty to fight against the forces of oppression in Europe, they reminded their readers that “Every white race that is now engaged in actual warfare has given millions of dollars to help the suffering women and children of their own race. Shall we not perform our Christian and racial duty by coming to the rescue of these black war-sufferers?” (Colored American Society 1917–1919). Wright and Du Bois promoted an international brotherhood between African Americans and “Colored” soldiers of other nations to garner financial support for wounded “Colored” soldiers and their families. In short, the Colored American Society for the Relief of French War Orphans centered on strengthening ties between African Americans and colonized peoples through financial support.

While U.S. army troops served in France, several units sponsored White French orphans through the Fatherless Children of France Society (*Honolulu Star Bulletin* 1917). In December 1918, African American troops stationed in France donated 300,000 francs to a war-orphan’s fund (*Stars and Stripes* 1918). It would be worth investigating whether African American troops stationed in France (say the 92nd and 93rd Divisions) sponsored White French children. This question will remain, for now, unanswered but it is crucial to determine whether African American troops went a step further in adopting White orphans or if they limited their experience to interracial relations with White women and cultural encounters with White troops. Possibly, African Americans felt they were being treated as human beings in France and while their leaders (Du Bois, Wright) enjoined the Black community to adopt “Colored children” only, maybe African American troops crossed that racial divide and by doing so weakened Wright’s new Black humanitarian mission. A future generation of scholars will have to reveal if the practice of adopting French children as “mascots” existed among Black U.S. army units.

African Americans subscribed to Liberty Bonds. In 1917 alone, during the Liberty Bonds drives, African American troops at base subscribed \$800,000 (Barbeau and Henri, 1974). However, African Americans could not afford to raise millions of dollars to assist needy populations abroad. African Americans’ wealth was vastly disproportionate to that of White Americans. In Georgia, for example, the per capita valuation of White property was \$118,440 and that of Black property \$656 (Barbeau and Henri, 1974). Whereas the Fatherless Children of France Society requested \$36.50 a year to “adopt” (that is, sponsor) a French orphan, the Colored American Society for the Relief of French War Orphans requested no such fixed amount. Thus, donors gave what they could, and given the economic straits of many African Americans, it was often \$1 a month or less. For the month of March 1917, twenty-one African Americans donated a total of \$18.50, some able to contribute only fifty cents (Wright 1917). Also, as evidenced by the machinery of the Fatherless Children of France Society and its extensive network of volunteers, raising money takes effort and resources. That said, surprisingly, even in the pages of *The Crisis*, calls for the Colored American Society for the Relief of French War Orphans appeared sporadically. Neither the October 1917 nor 1918 issues of *The Crisis*, traditionally the annual “children’s issue,” included any mention of the sponsorship of “Colored” children abroad (Du Bois 1916a).

The scholars discussed above have importantly revealed how “America’s entry into World War I offered a crucial disruption of Jim Crow’s ascendant power” (Lentz-Smith 2011, p. 34). The literature has coalesced into “a countermemory of black participation in the war” (Williams 2010, p. 344). Through the experiences of World War I, “the New Negro had lost his innocence and his illusions” (Barbeau and Henri, 1974, p. 188) and returned fighting. The subsequent surge of racial violence on U.S. soil precipitated new forms of activism. African Americans began to organize in more intentional ways. For some, the vision for true equality was not limited to the United States but extended

internationally as firsthand experience of the world through service in the war made them aware of others' quest for self-rule and self-determination. Efforts such as the Colored American Society for the Relief of French War Orphans is an example of internationalism, the intention to expand the sense of the connection of all "Colored" nations. It is time that scholars considered writing a chapter of African American history that takes into account the goals and experience of humanitarianism at home and abroad.

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Note

¹ Santanu Das (2014) tallies the numbers:

In addition to the 90,000 troupes indigènes already under arms when the war started, France recruited between 1914 and 1918 nearly 500,000 colonial troops, including 166,000 West Africans, 46,000 Madagascans, 50,000 Indochinese, 140,000 Algerians, 47,000 Tunisians and 24,300 Moroccans. Most of these French colonial troops served in Europe. However, the majority of the Africans served as labourers or carriers in Africa.... [O]ver 2 million Africans were involved in the conflict as soldiers or labourers; 10 percent of them died, and among the labourers serving in Africa, the death rates may have been as high as 20 percent. Additionally, nearly 140,000 Chinese contract labourers were hired by the British and French governments, forming a substantial part of the immigrant labour force working in France during the war.

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