




2015

Learning the Fighting Game: Black Americans and the First World War

S. Marianne Johnson
Gettysburg College
Class of 2015

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/ghj>

 Part of the [African American Studies Commons](#), [Cultural History Commons](#), [European History Commons](#), [Military History Commons](#), [Social History Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.

Johnson, S. Marianne (2015) "Learning the Fighting Game: Black Americans and the First World War," *The Gettysburg Historical Journal*: Vol. 14, Article 4.

Available at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/ghj/vol14/iss1/4>

This open access article is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact cupola@gettysburg.edu.

Learning the Fighting Game: Black Americans and the First World War

Abstract

The experience of African American veterans of the First World War is most often cast through the bloody lens of the Red Summer of 1919, when racial violence and lynchings reached record highs across the nation as black veterans returned from the global conflict to find Jim Crow justice firmly entrenched in a white supremacist nation. This narrative casts black veterans in a deeply ironic light, a lost generation even more cruelly mistreated than the larger mythological Lost Generation of the Great War. This narrative, however, badly abuses hindsight and clouds larger issues of black activism and organization during and immediately after the war. This study explores early NAACP activism, the Garveyite movement, and the early foundations of the Civil Rights Movement.

Keywords

Veterans, Great War, Black History, World War I, WWI, African American, Second Class Citizen

Learning the Fighting Game: Black Americans and the First World War

By: S. Marianne Johnson

Not unlike the larger legacy of the First World War, the legacy of the African American experience in the war is fraught with ambiguity and ambivalence. Added to the reductive and yet popular narrative of a futile war is an element of racial hopes dashed against the rocks of white supremacy. Wartime achievements of black soldiers and hopes for the end of Jim Crow washed away in a river of blood during the Red Summer of 1919 when lynching and race violence rose to an unparalleled level.⁴⁶ The intensity of the violence, however, masks the unprecedented black militancy, assertion of civil rights, and the right to fight, both politically and physically against injustice during the war and in its immediate aftermath. Without denying the impact of the sufferings inflicted on the African American community during the Red Summer, this study seeks to explore ways in which African Americans sought agency and laid the foundation for later decades more readily associated with the Civil Rights Movement. Rather than entering the First World War with naïve illusions of equality and empty idealism, African Americans carefully and shrewdly used the war as an opportunity to broadcast America's racial hypocrisy internationally and, by doing so, begin raising conscious awareness of the Pan-African diaspora.

Early on in 1917, black activists such as W.E.B. DuBois recognized the war as opportunity for the black American. Through his magazine *The Crisis*, DuBois was able to

⁴⁶ There are several standard texts for the African American experience in the First World War which put forth this argument to one degree or another. Richard Slotkin, *Lost Battalions: The Great War and the Crisis of American Nationality* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2005), 488; Nina Mjagkij, *Loyalty in Time of Trial: The African American Experience During World War I* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2011), 143; Arthur Barbeau and Florette Henri, *The Unknown Soldiers: Black American Troops in World War I* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1974), 175-176. Chad Williams acknowledges the increased violence and disappointments suffered by African Americans in the years after the war, but also credits black militancy and the newfound ability to fight back against white supremacy as laying the foundation for later Civil Rights reform. Chad Williams, *Torchbearers of Democracy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 253-255, 349.

convey his attitudes about race to black America. Started in 1910, *The Crisis* enjoyed a readership of ten thousand in its first year alone and became renowned for having the most militant black voice in America.⁴⁷ In May of 1917, *The Crisis* urged its readers to treat the war as an opportunity. Already, the magazine noted, the Russians had used the war to overthrow cruel czarism and British suffragettes had gained the vote through the war. Dubois, watching the international developments coming out of the war, encouraged black American men to enlist and win their rights on the field of battle.⁴⁸

For one seeking to understand the mind of the average black American during the beginning of the twentieth century, it becomes very difficult to understand how a man who had been subjugated by Jim Crow and treated as a citizen could then enlist in a Jim Crow segregated army claiming to be fighting for the safety of democracy. In addition to the Dubois interpretation of winning rights by fighting, one other prevalent argument in the historiography of the black experience of the First World War claims many blacks were apathetic about or outright opposed world war because they recognized the transparency of Wilson's "Safe for Democracy" motto.⁴⁹ These African Americans noted that the Germans had never done anything to them personally, and fighting for democracy in a Jim Crow army was simply too ironic to bear.⁵⁰ According to this argument, many who did support the war did so less out of a conscious political choice and more out of dedication to a loved one in the service or were drafted without understanding the causes for war.⁵¹ Certainly, there were individuals opposed to the war, notably the young A. Philip Randolph. In addition, some uneducated sharecroppers may not have understood the global conflict and instead supported the war effort because of loved ones overseas. However, to leave the question of motivation at uneducated, blind support of family

⁴⁷ Theodore Kornweibel, Jr., *"Investigate Everything": Federal Efforts to Compel Black Loyalty during World War I* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2002), 118.

⁴⁸ *The Crisis*, May 1917, 8. Accessed via GoogleBooks.

⁴⁹ President Wilson rationalized the American entry into the war as a moral obligation to "make the world safe for democracy." The irony hit home to African Americans who had not experienced America as the supposed beacon of Democracy.

⁵⁰ Williams, *Torchbearers*, 24.

⁵¹ Williams, *Torchbearers*, 60; Mjagkij, *Loyalty in Time of Trial*, 122.

members does a serious injustice to the political thinking of African Americans at the turn of the century.⁵²

Rather than misunderstanding the political scene or struggling to choose between loyalty to race or loyalty to nation, the black press provided interesting insight into ideas of what it meant to be an American. What quickly became apparent from numerous newspaper editorials and opinion sections was just how willing many black Americans were to serve. Drawing on a long history of service, from the Revolution to the turn of the century, from Crispus Attucks to the 54th Massachusetts to Col. Charles Young, black America recalled its history of patriotism with pride. Indeed, as the black press gloried in their proud heritage, it could not help from jabbing at the uncomfortable heritage of the white South as former rebels to the Union.⁵³ “We have a record to defend,” Col. Young, writing in *The Crisis*, declared, “but no treason, thank God, to atone or explain.”⁵⁴ Others displayed similar sentiments, writing, “The Negro is far more loyal to his country and its ideals than the white Southern American. He has never been a disloyal rebel. He never fought for slavery in a land of liberty.”⁵⁵ It was argued the black soldier’s stellar service record and heritage of true patriotism in the face of enslavement and mistreatment made him more American than white Southerners and served as a potent threat to white supremacy.⁵⁶ Interpreting the drums of war as the death knell of the white supremacists of the former Confederacy, *The Crisis* also declared, “The slave-thinking South is beset by fear of losing these [African American] peons...”⁵⁷

The powerful implications of this rhetoric were not missed by the white South. Many white Southerners did not want blacks to serve in the military. Senator James K. Vardaman of Mississippi, speaking out against a universal draft, stated, “Universal military service means that millions of Negroes who will come under this measure will be armed. I know of no greater

⁵² Margaret Black’s Corner, “Doing Your Bit,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, April 26, 1918; Black, “Women’s Department,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, November 3, 1917.

⁵³ The term “white South” is problematic because it reduces an entire population without acknowledging nuances, but for the purpose of this study, “white South” refers to the widespread white support of segregation and Jim Crow in the South.

⁵⁴ *The Crisis*, May 1917, 22.

⁵⁵ *The Crisis*, May 1917, 8.

⁵⁶ “Colored Citizens Show Patriotism,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, April 28, 1917.

⁵⁷ *The Crisis*, May 1917, 8.

menace to the South than this.”⁵⁸ The Ku Klux Klan, reestablished in 1915, stepped up violence and lynching increased steadily throughout the war years.⁵⁹ When whites proved unable to block African American military service, southern white civic leaders took to reporting on so-called seditious black newspapers and accusing them of disseminating German anti-American propaganda. White informants reported to the FBI that black publications such as *The Crisis*, *Baltimore Afro-American*, and *The Chicago Defender* were outside agitators inciting race violence in the South and serving as agents of German sabotage to destroy the American home front.⁶⁰

There was nothing unusual or uncharacteristic about the white South invoking images of an outside agitator. From abolitionists and newspaper reporters, to the later Freedom Riders and activists of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement, the white South systematically refused to recognize discontent in southern blacks and refused to take responsibility for their own actions, scapegoating the ever-elusive “outside agitator.” What was unusual, however, was the black response. Boldly and candidly in June of 1917, *The Crisis* pointed out that without black mobilization, America would not have enough manpower to win the war. In an editorial directed toward the white South, the article closed with an ultimatum:

So there you are, gentlemen, and take your choice,-- We'll fight or work. We'll fight and work. If we fight we'll learn the fighting game and cease to be so “aisily lynched.” If we don't fight we'll learn the more lucrative trades and cease to be so easily robbed and exploited. Take your choice, gentlemen. “We [white southerners] should worry.”⁶¹

Boldness in response like this was something not seen since Radical Reconstruction. Recognizing and using the ability to harness economic power through work and physical power through military training in order to gain civil rights offered a new level of confidence that had not been seen before from black America. In the same article, *The Crisis* published a detailed list of demands to be gained in return for fighting that to the well-read historian of the black freedom struggle will seem somewhat reminiscent of the famous World War II Double V

⁵⁸ Senator James Vardaman, quoted in *The Crisis*, May 1917, 23.

⁵⁹ Mjagkij, *Loyalty in Time of Trial*, 143.

⁶⁰ Kornweibel, “*Investigate Everything*”, 119-122.

⁶¹ *The Crisis*, June 1917, 62.

campaign.⁶² The First World War version of Double V called for black officers, universal suffrage, an end to lynching, the abolition of segregated railcars, the repeal of segregation ordinances, and equal rights in all public institutions.⁶³ By July 1917, the black community experienced two blows that had the potential to derail the whole campaign. Race riots broke out in East St. Louis. Militiamen and police stood and watched while white rioters set fire to buildings, mowed down blacks trying to escape the flames, and beat or lynched any black man, woman, or child in sight. One black woman was drug from a street car by two white teenage girls and beat senseless with her own shoes. In Memphis, a sixteen year old black girl was found raped and beheaded with an ax.⁶⁴ With this devastating news in hand, *The Crisis* called on men to “ENLIST! With Memphis and East St. Louis fresh in our memoires, we know that the fight for humanity and democracy abroad is not more important than the fight for humanity and democracy at home.”⁶⁵ These demands and the willingness to fight for them demonstrate a new level of commitment to gain rights.

What caused this newfound confidence and willingness to be more vocal about injustices? This time, the world was watching. Often the practice of using media to broadcast American race hypocrisy internationally is seen as a Cold War tactic. Yet, a casual glance through the black press in 1917-1918 severely rebuffs that notion.⁶⁶ The German invasion of Belgium and the atrocities committed by invading German soldiers provided the Allies with effective propaganda to frame the war as a crusade against the barbarous Hun. Horror stories of raped women and bayoneted babies circulated among the Allies and justified the war in moral

⁶² The Double V, a term coined by the *Pittsburg Courier*, was a campaign during the Second World War aimed at victory of fascism abroad and white supremacy at home. For a more detailed understanding of Double V, see Beth Bates, “Double V for Victory Mobilizes Black Detroit, 1941-1946,” in *Freedom North: Civil Rights Struggles Outside the South, 1940 – 1980*, ed. Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard (New York: Palgrave, 2003): 17-40.

⁶³ *The Crisis*, June 1917, 60.

⁶⁴ *The Crisis*, August 1917, 176-178, 185.

⁶⁵ *The Crisis*, August 1917, 1.

⁶⁶ See Mary L. Dudziak, “*Brown* as a Cold War Case,” *Journal of American History* 91 (June 2004): 32-42. Dudziak argues that *Brown v. Board* was less the product of racial progressivism and more the product of a desire to stop the Soviet propoganda ridiculing the United States for being a country that supposedly supports freedom and equality while it keeps its own black citizens in second-class inferior status.

terms.⁶⁷ For America, however, the condemnation of German activity in Belgium served as double-edged sword when the all too easy parallel to Southern lynch mobs became standard. Photographs and descriptions of graphically lynched men and women accompanied by headlines such as “NOT BELGIUM-AMERICA” and the aforementioned riots described as “worse than anything the Germans did in Belgium” became part and parcel of black newspapers and magazines.⁶⁸ By exposing the shockingly brutal realities of lynching in the South and race riots in the North, black Americans hoped to gain the attention of the world and pressure Wilson into supporting his high idealism with practical reform.

Drawing international attention to America’s double standard worked. An editorial appeared in *The Crisis* signed “An Asiatic Gentleman” ridiculed Americans for allowing black women and girls to be dragged into the streets and beaten while their menfolk served overseas.⁶⁹ Before this international attention could firmly enact change, the frantic federal government began actively investigating and silencing black newspapers deemed seditious. Under the Espionage Act, publications could be banned and post offices could refuse to distribute them. The Military Intelligence Bureau (MIB) sent black investigator Major Walter Loving to suppress the *Chicago Defender*, a publication that had criticized Wilson for his support of segregation and his passivity towards lynching. The MIB adopted a no tolerance policy for anyone disagreeing with or even constructively criticizing American institutions.

Direct threats were received by the *Defender* and the NAACP board to reign in their editors. White civic leaders in the south became so afraid of the power of these condemnations they actually called for the execution of leading black editors.⁷⁰ The federal government came down heavily on these criticisms beginning as early as mid-1917 and had effectively quieted *The Defender* by 1918, when more patriotic articles began to appear. *The Crisis*, however, largely due to the protection afforded by the whites in NAACP leadership positions and Major Loving’s

⁶⁷ Alan Kramer, *Dynamic of Destruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 10-15, 67, 136, 145, 150, 246; See also Chapter Two in Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, *14-18: Understanding the Great War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002).

⁶⁸ Some examples include *The Crisis*, August 1917, 177-178; *The Crisis*, April 1918, 270, 282; Kornweibel, “*Investigate Everything*”, 120.

⁶⁹ *The Crisis* August 1917, 163-164.

⁷⁰ David Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 76-77; Kornweibel, “*Investigate Everything*,” 122-124, 141-142, 149; Mjagkij, *Loyalty in Time of Trial*, 124.

reluctance to suppress black newspapers, remained relatively insulated and continued to publish graphic lynching stories and point out the all too obvious contradictions in Wilson's ideology.⁷¹

Merely silencing black newspaper editors, however, was not enough. The damage had been done and Wilson and the white press were forced to cope with it. In 1918, Wilson gave a public statement strongly condemning lynching.⁷² *The New York Times* called for an end to lynching, not because it was morally wrong, but because it was "Hunlike."⁷³ "The United States," the *Times* wrote, "can never properly appear as the exemplar of justice to the world as long as the negro, because he is a negro, is denied justice in certain sections of the country."⁷⁴ Admonishments and actions against lynching were enacted not because of human compassion for the rights of others, but because it was in the best interest of United States foreign policy to save face by condemning injustice within her own borders.

Abroad, it became clear that the world war was anything but a white man's war. Colonial soldiers from Africa and the West Indies, laborers from Asia, and entire fronts of battle in the Middle East and Eastern Europe meant that world war truly was a global experience. For the first time, the African diaspora met on the fields of France. Watching the way the great powers of the world mustered and exploited minority labor, black Americans increasingly saw the war as a vital moment which would impact the future of the nonwhite races of the world.⁷⁵ More and more, black publications began to refer to the war as a race war. Interpreting the aggression of Imperial Germany and its desire to colonize in Africa as a serious threat to fate of nonwhites, publications such as *The Crisis* increasingly implored American blacks that German victory equaled black doom.⁷⁶

Although the coming together of the diaspora in France was quite difficult due to language and cultural barriers, it was the first time that anything like this had happened. Black Americans saw that racism was a global issue, not just an American one, and colonial soldiers proved themselves to be surprisingly aware of the political and social situation in America and

⁷¹ Kornweibel, *Investigate Everything*, 124, 133.

⁷² Slotkin, *Lost Battalions*, 451.

⁷³ "Hughes Condemns Lynching of Negro," *New York Times*, May 6, 1919.

⁷⁴ "Hughes," *New York Times*.

⁷⁵ Williams, *Torchbearers*, 146, 149; Slotkin, *Lost Battalions*, 515.

⁷⁶ *The Crisis*, November 1917, 20, May 1918, 13, 21, June 1918, 59-60, 72; July 1918, 111.

began to question their own colonial subjugation.⁷⁷ Black newspapers took a specific interest in African soldiers and frequently published photos of African units in full uniform and drill, demonstrating a shared race pride. *The Crisis* tallied up the number of blacks serving in Allied armies and arrived at a total number of over 50 million members of the African diaspora serving in fighting units, on ships, as laborers, etc.⁷⁸ On the Western Front, of all places, is where the first true steps towards pan-African unity were made. Although communication was difficult due the language barrier, men, especially officers, were able to communicate through rudimentary French, broken English, and interpreters. One humorous anecdote involved a conversation between a black major and a French colonel with a sign around his neck that read “English spoken here.”⁷⁹ The soldier, Arthur Little, would go on to describe other incidents with the men “swanking” with the French and “chattering in the most atrocious and wholly ununderstandable French.”⁸⁰ By the end of their time together, French officers had picked up on some American slang and the many of the Hellfighters, especially the officers, had learned enough French to engage in basic conversation.⁸¹

Interpreting German desire to colonize Africa for its resources and gold as a new kind of slavery, *The Crisis* succinctly and proudly proclaimed, “The children of the slaves are marching on to Germany, singing in a tone of doom the songs that prophesy freedom to those whom the Kaiser has enslaved.”⁸² Included in the standard calls for an end to Jim Crow were now added demands that rights that colonial revenues go to the benefit and well-being of the colonies. Accompanied by one such call was a political cartoon titled “WAR: THE GRIM EMANCIPATOR.”⁸³ The cartoon shows a young, strong Negro Wage Worker chained to the bulwark of Economic Slavery. From behind, Aries, the God of War, armed with a sword named War Work breaks the chain, freeing the young man, who is stepping forward and upward.

⁷⁷ Williams, *Torchbearers*, 176-180.

⁷⁸ *The Crisis*, May 1918, 21.

⁷⁹ Arthur Little, *From Harlem to the Rhine: The Story of New York's Colored Volunteers* (New York: Convici Friede Publishers, 1936), 146.

⁸⁰ Little, *From Harlem*, 145.

⁸¹ Little, *From Harlem*, 218.

⁸² *The Crisis*, May 1918, 22. This statement conveniently ignored the fact that the French and British were also using forced labor in their respective colonies as well.

⁸³ *The Crisis*, June 1918, 72.

Participation in the war through service or support work was viewed as a legitimate avenue to attain freedoms.

As the war ended and the thousands of black veterans began home, uncertainties about the future of the race and the meaning of the war were already in question. A newspaper article appeared in the black newspaper *The Washington Bee* reassuring whites of the loyalty of the black soldier and attempting to quell their fears of thousands of armed and demobilized black men while simultaneously admonishing black soldiers not to instigate fights when they returned.⁸⁴

Initially, large welcome home parades took place across the country, where crowds both black and white in both North and South cheered returning black units. One of the best examples of these parades is the return of the famed 369th Regiment, better known as the Harlem Hellfighters. The Hellfighters parade in early February of 1919 drew a crowd of both white and black citizens hoping to catch a glimpse of the renowned unit. Many white spectators had come out to be entertained by stereotyped jazz as the soldiers marched. Instead, the 369th marched proudly in French phalanx formation to only French marches. The 369th, cast off by its own country and lent almost as an afterthought to the French, served proudly and returned proudly, choosing not to stoop to the Sambo minstrel jazz show the white spectators were expecting. They marched with a steady and determined step in the style of the country who had respected them, France. On the same day, Chicago welcomed back its own 8th Illinois black regiment, who also honored the French by wearing French-style uniforms. One jubilant man recalled that on these parade days, no one acknowledged the color line.⁸⁵ Little wrote that the biracial crowd cheering them on welcomed them back not because they were a famous colored regiment or in spite of being a famous colored regiment. Instead, he specifically stated that the crowd cheered, "...because ours was a regiment of men, who had done the work of men."⁸⁶ Parades like this gave black veterans opportunities to demonstrate and display pride in the masculinity denied them by Jim Crow.

⁸⁴ "The Negro and the South After the War," *The Savannah Tribune*, January 25, 1919; "Don't Start It," *The Washington Bee*, August 2, 1919.

⁸⁵ "Welcome Eighth!" *Chicago Defender*, February 22, 1919; *The Crisis*, December 1918, 73; Williams, *Torchbearers*, 214-220; Barbeau, *The Unknown Soldiers*, 171. Little, *From Harlem*, 361.

⁸⁶ Little, *From Harlem*, 361. Williams, *Torchbearers*, 214. Italics added for emphasis.

And yet, the color line was firmly reestablished in the days following the welcoming parades. The narrative of the Red Summer is a familiar story, twenty six race riots in one year, seventy-seven lynchings, eleven of whom were veterans still in uniform, and the pushing back of African American activism into obscurity until the 1940s.⁸⁷ The disillusioned black veteran, who fought for the country that afterwards forced him back into Jim Crow subjugation became a hugely popular literary trope. And yet, this trope plays on the larger problem of reducing the First World War to a series of stunted, futile failures. Lynching is not what makes the post war years unique. What is unique is that for the first time since the Colfax massacre of 1873, blacks began arming themselves and fighting back on a mass scale.⁸⁸ Harkening back to the warning from *The Crisis* in early 1917, black veterans had learned the fighting game and many were willing to play it. Across the country, north and south, race riots broke out in unprecedented numbers. But this time, race riots did not always mean a mob of whites beating and killing unarmed, helpless blacks. This time, blacks believed, “race wars are going to be race wars.”⁸⁹

Chicago in July of 1919 demonstrates the ways black defense had changed. After black teenager Eugene Williams was purposely drowned for crossing the invisible color line in a swimming area, black Chicago readied itself against the same crowds who had just welcomed the black 8th Infantry home. Armed veterans were used to enforce the peace and quell rioters. They also set up defensive positions they had used on the Western Front: sniper nests, guards posted on top of buildings, and in one case, even the utilization of a machine gun on rioters added a dimension of serious black militancy that had not been seen since Reconstruction.⁹⁰ Merely focusing on black victims of lynching without looking at the other side of black defense and even offense severely limits the understanding of the immediate post-war period.

Because of the prevalence of the myth of the Lost Generation and the acceptance of the Red Summer as a fully debilitating event, little attention has been given to black activism after the war. Although many attempts did end in disappointment, many developments in civil rights activism in the latter parts of the twentieth century can be directly linked to the immediate post-

⁸⁷ Williams, *Torchbearers*, 340; Kornweibel, “*Investigate Everything*”, 276; Slotkin, *Lost Battalions*, 488; Mjagkij, *Loyalty in Time of Trial*, 143-144.

⁸⁸ Williams, *Torchbearers*, 298, 339. At Colfax, Louisiana, black Civil War Veterans and civilians were slaughtered while trying to defend themselves from belligerent ex-Confederates.

⁸⁹ Slotkin, *Lost Battalions*, 436.

⁹⁰ *Pittsburg Courier*, January 18, 1919; *Cleveland Advocate*, December 21, 1918; Williams, *Torchbearers*, 253-255.

war years. Just months after the Armistice, W.E.B. Dubois and Senegalese politician Blaise Diagne coordinated a conference in France that was made up of fifty-seven delegates from Africa, America, and the West Indies to discuss the future of the race. Although the conference digressed into disagreement and squabble between Dubois and Diagne, for the first time black political organization opened a door for networking and the beginnings of the Pan-African movement that had not been available before.⁹¹

At home, black veteran activism proved adaptable to the circumstances. The American Legion, the association for veterans of the war, was unsure of how to handle race. 350,000 black men had served in the American Expeditionary Force, almost half of the entire AEF. Officially, the Legion did not order segregated posts. However, white Southerners were outraged and refused to adhere. The result was mixed and confusing. In the North, some posts were integrated, and some were segregated. In the South, there were several segregated black posts, the largest being in Louisville, Kentucky comprising 110 members.⁹² Recognizing the political power an organization such as the Legion would have, *The Crisis* urged its veteran readers in January of 1920 to do whatever it took to integrate the Legion. By 1920, three fourths of the states allowed black membership but South Carolina, Virginia, and Alabama remained adamant hold-outs. *The Crisis* told veterans, “We must not give up. We cannot give up...Fight harder. Agitate, protest—join the American Legion and never give it one hour’s peace until every black soldier is a member.”⁹³

And yet, there was no mass protest by black veterans to join the Legion. Many did not express interest in joining what they perceived as yet another Jim Crow organization. Instead, many joined Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association, UNIA. Garvey welcomed the militant black veteran and the energy he brought. “The new Negro,” Garvey wrote, “is no coward. He is a man, and if he can die in France or Flanders for white men, he can die anywhere else, even behind prison bars, fighting for the cause of the race that needs

⁹¹ Williams, *Torchbearers*, 182.

⁹² William Pencak, *For God & Country: The American Legion, 1919-1941* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1989), 66-69; “The American Legion and the Negro,” *Savannah Tribune*, December 6, 1919.

⁹³ *The Crisis*, January 1920, 108.

assistance.”⁹⁴ Large numbers of black veterans participated in UNIA marches with a truly international and Pan-African focus.

Although the lynching and race riots of the Red Summer make it seem that all war-time achievements ended in disillusioned disappointment, it is important to see past the mythologized literary trope of the lynched veteran and look at the practical legacy of the war. Thirty years later, when another world war threatened, specific lessons learned from the First World War impacted the way black activists handled the second. A. Philip Randolph recognized fighting alone had not won rights in the First World War and coupled fighting with economic pressure and the March on Washington Movement to push President Roosevelt into making reforms. The rhetoric of Double V itself comes directly from successes and failures of the First World War movement. A key difference, however, lies in the way the campaigns were conducted. During the First World War, black activists encouraged enlistment first in hopes that out of war service would flow civil rights. Seeing how that vision had not come to pass, the Second World War civil rights Double V campaign hinged war support as being contingent upon reforms paid up front. The March on Washington movement was different because it threatened to remove war support unless reform was achieved, whereas during the First World War blacks continued to support and serve hoping the ironies and inconsistencies would become too much for the Wilson administration to sustain while saving face.⁹⁵ The international focus begun in the First World War laid the foundations for a thriving Pan-African movement several decades later and the militancy adopted by many veterans had similar rhetoric used later in the Black Power movement.⁹⁶

Black activism in the First World War is overlooked because of the violence of white resistance during the Red Summer of 1919 and the lack of concrete reforms. Hindsight hinders scholars in that it is all too easy to write off black veterans and activists of the First World War as naïve men and women who believed merely serving in the armed forces would gain respect and rights. Lastly, the image of the lynched black veteran still in his uniform is absolutely debilitating to the possibility that any important change took place. And yet, that narrative is reductive and inaccurate. Black activists saw winning the war as a vital step towards freeing the

⁹⁴ “Editorial Letter by Marcus Garvey,” June 10, 1919. Cited in Williams, *Torchbearers*, 290.

⁹⁵ *The Crisis*, May 1918, 7; Bates, *Double V*, 17-18.

⁹⁶ Mjagkij, *Loyalty*, 146-147; Williams, *Torchbearers*, 349; Slotkin, *Lost Battalions*, 546.

colonized races of the world from colonial rule. Black veterans serving on the front lines began the unification of the African diaspora. They started conversations that no level of violence has been able to end ever since. They learned the fighting game and brought it home with them, defending themselves in Chicago, becoming Garveyites and using the lessons they learned to re-strategize with the Double V campaign of the Second World War. Black First World War veterans were not a Lost Generation doomed to naïveté. Rather, they were a Strong Generation.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

The Baltimore Afro-American
The Crisis
The Chicago Defender
The New York Times
The Pittsburg Courier
The Savannah Tribune
The Washington Bee

Little, Arthur. *From Harlem to the Rhine: The Story of New York's Colored Volunteers*. New York: Convici Friede Publishers, 1936.

Secondary Sources

Audoin-Rouzeau, Stéphane and Annette Becker, *14-18: Understanding the Great War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002).

Bates, Beth. "Double V for Victory Mobilizes Black Detroit, 1941-1946." In *Freedom North: Civil Rights Struggles Outside the South, 1940 – 1980*. ed. Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard (New York: Palgrave, 2003): 17-40.

Barbeau, Arthur and Florette Henri. *The Unknown Soldiers: Black American Troops in World War I*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1974.

Dudziak, Mary L. "Brown as a Cold War Case," *Journal of American History* 91 (June 2004): 32-42.

Kennedy, David. *Over Here: The First World War and American Society*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Kornweibel, Jr., Theodore. "*Investigate Everything*": *Federal Efforts to Compel Black Loyalty during World War I*. Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2002.

Kramer, Alan. *Dynamic of Destruction*. New York: Oxford University Press. 2007.

Mjagkij, Nina. *Loyalty in Time of Trial: The African American Experience During World War I*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2011.

Pencak, William. *For God & Country: The American Legion, 1919-1941*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1989.

Slotkin, Richard. *Lost Battalions: The Great War and the Crisis of American Nationality*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2005.

Williams, Chad. *Torchbearers of Democracy*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010.

Appendix



WAR. THE GRIM EMANCIPATOR

The Crisis. June 1918, 72. Accessed via GoogleBooks.