

# Lesson Two

Decade Two: 1910-1920

## African Americans in World War I

Rhonda Williams, Ed.D., University of Colorado at Colorado Springs

### Summary of Topic

During the period prior to and during World War I, the social and political climate of the United States in 1917 was anything but restful. Racial prejudice ran rampant, Jim Crow laws were still in place, and distrust of African Americans was high. (Johnson, 1999). Racism seeped into the war efforts as well. There was such a fear of African-Americans being subversive about the war efforts that there was a section within the War Department whose chief job was to spy on black Americans. "...blacks were not only forced to fight for a proper place along side white troops, but they were also compelled to convince the nation that they would not subvert the war effort" (Johnson, 1999, p. 28).

It was realized by the leaders of the African American community that if African Americans wanted further equality on American soil, they would need to prove their loyalty to work, fight and die for their country (Johnson, 1999). As the United States entered World War I, a prominent leader of the African American community, W.E. B. Dubois, was quoted as saying, "while the war lasts, [we should] forget our special grievances and close our ranks shoulder to shoulder with our white fellow citizens and allied nations that are fighting for democracy" (U.S. National Archives, 2005).

Once the decision to employ African-American men into the war was made, the draft legislation quickly contributed to institutional racism through the handling of black draftees. Documentation (Murray, 1971), verifies the level of racism; including one state's Exemption Board which was ultimately dismissed, when an investigation of the board identified that they had given deferments to 526 of 618 whites, while only 6 of 212 blacks received exemptions.

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) became very active in attempting to prevent mistreatment of African Americans in the military. Although the Army was eventually comprised of black and white men, the troops were completely segregated. (U.S. National Archives, 2005).

African-American soldiers were housed in inadequate quarters (in which some Black soldiers actually froze to death), issued worn out uniforms and poorly trained, often not even being issued weapons to be trained with for fear they would use the weapons against whites (Buckley, 2001). Historically, African-American soldiers were assigned to manual labor and cooking. However, over three-quarters of a million African-Americans ultimately served in World War I in a variety of capacities including infantry. Concurrent with these racist conditions in the military, African Americans experienced a different world when they arrived in France. The French people welcomed them as American soldiers and liberators. These soldiers were invited into homes and churches as well as places of entertainment while in France. This treatment of African Americans in a foreign land ran contrary to how they were treated in America given the institution of Jim Crow laws. (Buckley, 2001).

Even some high ranking officials participated and promoted racist ideas. General John J. Pershing (1918) wrote an order to the French commanders called "Secret Information concerning the Black American Troops." This order demanded that the French officers in command of the Black American troops understand how to treat these black soldiers. "Although a citizen of the United States, the black man is regarded by the white American as an inferior being with whom relations of business or service only are possible. The black is constantly being censured for his want of intelligence and discretion, his lack of civic and professional conscience, and for his tendency toward undue familiarity. The vices of the Negro are a constant menace to the American who has to repress them sternly... (Buckley, 2001, p. 163)." The General then continued in this directive to outline the Jim Crow laws as established in the United States, demanding that the French officers honor those laws.

The combat abilities of the African-American soldier under a white American commander were viewed as inadequate and lacking preparation for combat. Yet African-American units, who served under French officers, were some of the most heroic, legendary units of the war. Black soldiers repeatedly distinguished themselves in battle. New York's 369th National Guard Regiment was the most decorated American unit of the war and claimed the longest time on the front line of any American unit --191 days. The Germans would later refer to them as the "Hell Fighters" (Buckley, 2001).

Despite their bravery and heroics, African-Americans were virtually ignored by the American military in terms of recognition. Officers and soldiers who had been awarded high honors by the French, including the Croix de Guerre and Legion of Honor, were often given no military honor by the Americans. The compulsion to keep Blacks subordinate was so strong that, in some cases, they were even stripped of their French-bestowed honors. Perhaps the most striking repudiation of the accomplishments of African-Americans in World War I came during the victory parade in Paris, where the most decorated unit in the war, New York's 369th, was denied permission to march (Buckley, 2001).

The effect of thousands of African Americans experiencing equality and admiration in France could not be minimized even though their war efforts did not elicit new civil liberties legislation in America. African Americans had experienced a sense of freedom and pride during the war and this new spirit would return with them to America. The "New Negro (sic) who had fought to help change Europe ...was willing to fight to change America " (Buckley 2001, p. 221). Thus in many ways, the roots of social reform, the Civil Rights Movement and Black Pride all sprang to life in the trenches of Europe.

**Grade Level:** High School

**Subject(s):** Social Studies

**Topic** Decade Two

## 1910-1920, African Americans in World War I

### Standards:

#### USA-Nat. Council for Social Studies: Nat. Standards for Social Studies Teachers

**A1: Thematic Standard: Culture and Cultural Diversity** Social Studies teachers should possess the knowledge, capabilities, and dispositions to organize and provide instruction at the appropriate school level for the study of Culture and Cultural Diversity.

*Teacher Expectations* should provide developmentally appropriate experiences as they guide learners in the study of culture and cultural diversity. They should enable learners to analyze and explain the ways groups, societies, and cultures address human needs and concerns;

*Expectation:* guide learners as they predict how data and experiences may be interpreted by people from diverse cultural perspectives and frames of reference;

*Expectation:* assist learners to apply an understanding of culture as an integrated whole that explains the functions and interactions of language, literature, the arts, traditions, beliefs and values, and behavior patterns;

*Expectation:* encourage learners to compare and analyze societal patterns for preserving and transmitting culture while adapting to environmental or social change;

*Expectation:* enable learners to give examples and describe the importance of cultural unity and diversity within and across groups;

*Expectation:* have learners interpret patterns of behavior reflecting values and attitudes that contribute or pose obstacles to cross-cultural understanding;

*Expectation:* guide learners as they construct reasoned judgments about specific cultural responses to persistent human issues;

**A2: Thematic Standard: Time, Continuity, and Change** Social studies teachers should possess the knowledge, capabilities, and dispositions to organize and provide instruction at the appropriate school level for the study of Time, Continuity and Change.

*Teacher Expectations:* Teachers of social studies at all school levels should provide developmentally appropriate experiences as they guide learners in the study of time, continuity and change;

*Expectations:* help learners apply key concepts such as time, chronology, causality, change, conflict, and complexity to explain, analyze, and show connections among patterns of historical change and continuity;

*Expectations:* provide learners with opportunities to investigate, interpret, and analyze multiple historical and contemporary viewpoints within and across cultures related to important events, recurring dilemmas, and persistent issues, while employing empathy, skepticism, and critical judgment.

**A5: Thematic Standard: Individuals, Groups, and Institutions**

Social studies teachers should possess the knowledge, capabilities, and dispositions to organize and provide instruction at the appropriate school level for the study of interactions among Individuals, Groups, and Institutions.

*Expectations:* help learners analyze group and institutional influences on people, events, and elements of culture in both historical and contemporary settings;

*Expectations:* explain to learners the various forms institutions take, and explain how they develop and change over time;

*Expectations:* assist learners in identifying and analyzing examples of tensions between expressions of individuality and efforts used to promote social conformity by groups and institutions;

*Expectations:* enable learners to describe and examine belief systems basic to specific traditions and laws in contemporary and historical movements;

*Expectations:* challenge learners to evaluate the role of institutions in furthering both continuity and change guide learner analysis of the extent to which groups and institutions meet individual needs and promote the common good in contemporary and historical settings.

**USA-Nat. Council for Social Studies: Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies**

*Strand I: Culture:* Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of culture and cultural diversity.

*Strand II: Time, Continuity, and Change:* Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of the ways human beings view themselves in and over time.

*Strand III: People, Places, and Environments:* Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of people, places, and environments.

*Strand IV: Individual Development and Identity:* Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of individual development and identity.

*Strand V: Individuals, Groups, & Institutions:* Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of interactions among individuals, groups, and institutions.

*Strand VI: Power, Authority, & Governance:* Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of how people create and change structures of power, authority, and governance.

*Strand VIII: Global Connections:* Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of global connections and interdependence.

*Strand X: Civic Ideals and Practices:* Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of the ideals, principles, and practices of citizenship in a democratic republic.

**Objectives:**

- To develop an understanding of the social issues that were prevalent in deciding if African Americans could fight in World War I.
- To create a sensitivity to the issues African Americans that participated in World War I had to face.
- To identify the social and cultural barriers for those African Americans who fought in World War I.

**Essential Questions:**

- What were the events prior to 1910-1920 that caused many to fear allowing African-Americans to participate in this war?
- What were the political, social and socio-economic issue of this time period?
- What predictions could be made about this decade?

**Culturally Responsive Resources**

[http://www.njstatelib.org/NJ\\_Information/Digital\\_Collections/AAHCG/unit9.html](http://www.njstatelib.org/NJ_Information/Digital_Collections/AAHCG/unit9.html)

**Lesson Plan Activity****a. Summary of Activity**

The decision to allow African Americans to fight in World War I was a very heated political issue. Many didn't want African Americans to be allowed to enlist in the war and many did not support the idea of African American soldiers being a higher rank than white soldiers. The activity outlined in this lesson plan allows students to research the issues and be involved in a simulated political process. This activity will address the more current issue of allowing Muslim Americans to enlist in the Armed Services in the current political climate of 2005.

**b. Procedure****i. Materials Needed:**

Military recruitment information

**ii. Time:**

2-3 class sessions

- A team of students 3-4 will be identified (or self select) for each side of the debate. The sides will consist of those who argue that Muslim Americans should be allowed to enlist in the war and the opposing side that Muslim Americans should not be allowed to enlist in the war.
- The remainder of the class will be the legislators making the final decision on whether to allow Muslim Americans to enlist in the service in the war.
- Each side will be allowed a 5 minute introduction and the following respondents will be allowed 3 minutes to make their rebuttals.
- After all sides have completed their debate the remainder of the class will be allowed to ask questions of each side.
- The class will then be allowed to vote as legislators on the issue of allowing Muslim Americans into the war.

*Questions for the debate might include:*

- Will Muslim women also be allowed to enlist in the service?
- Will Muslim soldiers be allowed to attain higher ranks?
- How will conflicts between individuals be resolved?
- What efforts will the services make to integrate these soldiers and assure everyone will be treated fairly?

**c. Differentiated Instruction Ideas (engaging students with significant disabilities):**

- Assign different roles - a timekeeper; counting/tallying the votes
- Prepare pre-selected questions to ask the students with disabilities
- Graphing the number of votes
- Ask the students questions that pertain to social skills (e.g., how will conflicts between individuals be resolved? What could the soldiers do to get along with each other?)

**d. Debriefing:**

- What was the African-American experience in France compared to their experience in the United States?
- What are some of the feelings that came up when trying to debate this issue?
- How has the military changed as a result of the experiences of World War I?
- What are some of the issues in the current war that didn't exist in World War I?
- Have we made progress in how individuals are treated in the Armed Services?

**Assessment:**

- Students will be able to identify 3 characteristics of discrimination that occurred in World War I.
- Students will be able to identify 3 similarities and differences between the enlistment of soldiers in World War I and in the War on Terror.

**Essential Questions:**

- Were your predictions accurate?
- What was different than you expected?
- Given the social, political and socio-economic divisions that existed during this time period what do you predict will happen in the next decade?

**Acknowledgements:**

UCCS Students: Scott Kniep, Emily McRae, Eric Nissen, Beth Rodgers, and Carrie Omdal

**Resources:**

Unit 9 World War I and the Great Migration, 1915-1920.

**Music of the Era;**

Scorsese, M. (2003). *The blues: A musical journey*. Universal Musical Enterprise.

**References:**

Buckley, G., (2001). *American Patriots*. New York: Random House.

Chandler, S. K. (1995). That biting, stinging thing which ever shadows us: African-American social workers in France during World War I. *Social Service Review* September, pp. 498-514.

Darden, J. T., (1988). The effect of World War I on black occupational and residential segregation: The case of Pittsburgh. *Journal of Black Studies*, 18(3), 297-312. Sage.

Johnson, W. R., (1999). Black American radicalism and the First World War: The secret files of the military intelligence division. *Armed Forces & Society*, 26(1), fall 27-54.

Keene J. D. (2001). W.E.B. Du Bois and the wounded world: Seeking meaning in the first World War for African-Americans. *Consortium on Peace and Research, Education and Development, Peace and Change*, 26(2), April 2001

Murray, P. T. (Sept, 1971). Blacks and the draft; A history of institutional racism. *Journal of Black Studies*, 2(1), 57-76.