

**African-American Strength during WWI: “‘We return,’ ‘We return from fighting,’ and  
‘We return fighting’”**

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## **Introduction**

African Americans bravely fought both sides of the war, whether it was bearing the unfair treatment of their white peers or fighting off enemy forces in battle. WWI (The Great World War) was an international war fought throughout 1914-1918, fueled by the conflicts between two growing alliances on the European continent. Before and during the time of the world war, African Americans were subjected to racism, violence, hostility, and discrimination in America. Most folks from the minority group participated in the battle to reverse their treatment in America and make something of themselves. The pre-Civil War was a rough period for African Americans, mainly because the economy was dependent on the need for and mass labor of enslaved Africans at the time, establishing the status and treatment of black people. The Reconstruction era was a period in time when the United States was tasked with the challenge of determining the legal and social status of freed African Americans from enslavement, which took place right after the Civil War, lasting from 1865 to 1900. These eras are key contributors to how African Americans were treated both before and throughout WWI. However, how African Americans had an impact despite these limitations and challenges faced by both sides of WWI determines a necessary re-understanding of history.

### **Section 1: Before WWI**

Pre-Civil War, around the time of the early 1800s, enslaved Africans were a significant contributor to the development of the pre-Civil War U.S. economy through the production of sugar, tobacco, rice, and cotton despite being subject to slavery. Over seventy-five percent of all enslaved Africans, which was over 10 million, were imported into the western hemisphere between 1451 and 1810 in places like the Caribbean. However, the colonies that eventually

became the United States accounted for about 7 percent of the seventy-five percent or more enslaved Africans (Conrad). Many of these enslaved Africans who were imported into the United States gained some skill and knowledge through the labor they were forced to work in plantations and places overseas. About two-thirds of the enslaved Africans in the North American colonies were used in the cultivation of tobacco, rice, and indigo (Conrad). Africans imported into Virginia and Maryland were central to the production of tobacco.

In contrast, the efficiency of tobacco production was enhanced due to the use of the gang labor system, which is a system that involves strict supervision of masters or owners on their enslaved workers. Many Africans who were imported into South Carolina knew rice-growing techniques. Because of this, the rice production technology, paired with the skills and knowledge of the newly arrived Africans, benefitted the production of rice cultivation. The invention of the cotton gin in 1793 led to a wholesale restructuring of the Southern economy (Conrad). This cotton gin lowered the cost of cotton production, which caused landowners to shift production away from tobacco, rice, and indigo. The cotton gin enabled planters to expand their cotton production, but they demanded more enslaved Africans to increase it. However, due to the abolishment of the Atlantic slave trade, the importation of slaves was limited.

From 1810 to 1860, the South's demand for slaves increased, and by 1860, the population of enslaved Africans in the South capped off at four million. Due to the massive exploration of black labor, cotton production increased drastically: 300,000 bales in 1820, 700,000 in 1830, 2.0 million in 1850, and 4.5 million in 1860. Planters used a combination of violence, such as whipping and beating, and incentives to extract high levels of work effort. On top of that, enslaved Africans were forced to work longer hours than their average paid worker (Conrad). Enslaved Africans at the time were nothing but “work animals” who were forced to do specific

tasks, and if they did not do those certain tasks, those enslaved Africans would face brutal whippings or possibly lynchings. The fear of falling victim to this violence is what kept most slaves in line, especially when it came to increasing the work levels that led to a rise in income in the South. Per capita income of the South grew at an annual rate of 1.7 percent between 1840 and 1860. Enslaved Africans who were imported into North America at the time contributed to the economic success of the pre-Civil War U.S. economy that established the foundations for the expansion of a U.S. economy that depended on slave labor and prospered until the onset of the Civil War. Life for many African Americans pre-Civil War was devastating, especially with the possibility of being sold back into slavery at any given moment (Conrad).

Within the following years, about twenty years before the war, 1820-1840, white Southerners developed a system paired with many laws that helped maintain the African American population and status while also contributing to the institute of slavery. Southern states directly enslaved many African Americans under systems and laws designed to suppress the African American population while under the belief that the presence of free African Americans threatened the institute of slavery. For example, many states established enslavement as an acceptable way to punish African Americans by ordering police officials to sell those African American prisoners, who were innocent and had not committed a crime, into slavery to generate revenue for the jail and the state (Noneman). Most of the time African Americans were arrested for standing idle, being poor, or for no reason at all, which meant that prisons and jails and the state would profit off of the wrongful imprisonment of African Americans. Southern law enforcers had many priorities when it came to gaining from the institution of slavery. One of those was to ensure that prisons had a steady stock of African American prisoners. In order to do this, states like Mississippi and Florida allowed their men to carry out wrongful actions.

Mississippi allowed authorities to enslave many African Americans who could not prove their freedom, which they could not do due to racial disadvantages in the courtroom. Florida authorities enslaved African Americans for being “idle” (Noneman). White Southerners believed that all free African Americans were not a part of their society and saw that filing charges against those wrongfully imprisoned African Americans would be unimportant. Selling those imprisoned African Americans into slavery, then using the money generated from the sales to invest in jails and the states they were placed in. Certain laws were created to allow these wrongful imprisonments. For example, *The Negro Seamen Act* allowed authorities to arrest all black sailors onboard ships that were entering a Southern State’s port. The official would go on to arrest all African American sailors on the ship, and if the captain of the ship did not pay their imprisonment expenses, they would be arrested. Most of the time, captains would instead leave the African American sailors behind than pay their expenses, which led to thousands of African Americans being sold back into slavery (Noneman). This was only the start, and things worsened during the Reconstruction.

The Reconstruction era, after the Civil War, contributed to the way African Americans were treated both before and throughout WWI. During Reconstruction, Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation (proposed as a war aim) pointed the United States toward abolishing slavery. Later, Congress would then have passed an Amendment that would legally solidify the abolishment of slavery and granted Congress the power to enforce this article through legislation on January 31, 1865, forever freeing up to four million people from slavery. Southerners were not a fan of this change, so now came the task of maintaining African Americans in their society (“Politics of Reconstruction”). “Black Codes” were then passed to regulate black behavior and grasp social and economic control. Since the slaves were now free like an average U.S. citizen at the time,

powers in the South took action to subject African Americans (by law) to restricted rights, opportunities, protections, and privileges to maintain their "slave" status in the country. These laws granted some rights to African Americans, like the right to own property, marry, or make contracts, but they also denied fundamental rights. However, these black codes were mainly created to maintain the low status of African Americans. For example, Labor Contracts were for black workers who agreed to work for white employers; contracts had to be presented and approved by a judge. Black workers were permitted to remain on the employer's property, work quietly and orderly from sunrise to sunset except on Sundays, and never leave the premises or have visitors without the employer's permission. Disciplinary actions like whipping were allowed for workers under 18 who refused to do a task. If workers missed work due to illness, wages would be cut, and if a worker tried to quit during an active contract, they could be arrested and forced to return to work with no wages ("The Southern 'Black Codes' of 1865-66"). The Amendment was passed to solidify the freedom of slaves was the 13th Amendment. Another example consists of state legislatures beginning to pass laws limiting the freedom of the formerly enslaved people, and these laws placed severe restrictions on both slaves and emancipated blacks. Neither of these groups could vote, serve on juries, travel freely, or work in occupations of their choice. Even their marriages were outside the law ("The Southern 'Black Codes' of 1865-66"). Black codes played a significant role in the contribution to the way African Americans were treated because it shows how far power in the South and throughout the country would go to keep African Americans down. Laws like this only further contribute to the challenges faced by African Americans at the time. During the reconstruction era, racial and political violence was out of control due to Riots against political authority, Interpersonal fights, and Organized vigilante groups.

The racial violence during the time of reconstruction was vicious towards both black and white people. The violence was played out in the form of riots against political authority, brutal brawls, and organized vigilante groups. Notable riots occurred in places like Memphis and New Orleans (1866), Laurens, South Carolina (1870), Colfax, Louisiana in (1873), New Orleans in (1874), Yazoo City, Mississippi in (1875), and Hamburg South Carolina (1876), due to white conservatives in the south frowning upon the migration of black resident. They wanted to maintain biracial politics, which caused these conservatives to organize violence toward the Republican Party and blacks. White men would beat or shoot black men over minor conflicts, labor disputes, longstanding grudges, and some crimes. These incidents were reported to the law, but most of the time, they went unprosecuted. Organized groups like the Nightriders and Ku Klux Klan were most of the vigilantes behind these acts of violence. Nightriders, or Bushwackers, harassed and killed black candidates and officeholders and frightened many voters away from the polls. They tasked themselves with limiting black economic mobility by terrorizing the now-freed black citizens who tried to purchase land and become independent from the white masters they were owned by ("Politics of Reconstruction").

White Line, Knights of the White Camellia, and the White Brotherhood were all such groups that were part of a web of terror that spread throughout the South during the Reconstruction, and the web belongs to the Ku Klux Klan. The Klan gained popularity for its violence and crimes, and with that popularity came influence and supporters who also believed in white power and superiority ("Politics of Reconstruction"). The Klan targeted white politicians who supported freed people's civil rights, and dozens of Republican politicians were killed either while in office or while campaigning. At the same time, also thousands of individual citizens, men, and women, white and black, had their homes raided and were whipped, raped, or

murdered. The Klan attacked African American men and women who tried to buy land or be rude or arrogant to white Southerners. ("Politics of Reconstruction"). The racial violence during the Reconstruction era mainly affected black people and limited their access to voting and positions of power. These acts of violence contributed a portion to the way African Americans were treated, which, as time went on caused African Americans to migrate towards the north. Gaining specific knowledge of the treatment of African Americans before WWI sets the foundation for better understanding the continued unjust treatment of an entire race despite their vast contributions to protecting their country.

## **Section 2: During WWI**

Around the time of WWI, America remained segregated, and racism and discrimination were still very active at the time, which made it difficult for minorities to join the war. Despite challenges caused by being racially segregated and discriminated against, African Americans were still willing to fight in the upcoming war. Still, they kept getting turned down by the Department of War, but when war was declared, the army was short on men (126,000), so Congress passed a "Selective Service Act" (May 1917). This Act required all men ages 21 through 31 to register for the draft, which gave African Americans an opportunity to join the war (Bryan). This opportunity would allow the minority group to show loyalty, patriotism, and worthiness in exchange for equal treatment from their white counterparts. African Americans desired equal treatment, freedoms, rights, and opportunities because they were tired of having to work, live, and remain at the bare minimum as citizens. African Americans were seen as less than, and to reverse this vision and belief, they entered the war to prove that they could be just as loyal and worthy as their white counterparts, who were the majority of participants in the war.



Around the time of the war, America remained segregated, and racism and discrimination were still very active at the time. Still, due to the passing of a new act, African soldiers could enlist through the draft. The act of preventing African Americans from entering the war due to race by the Department of War demonstrated how racism decreased the chances of African Americans enlisting in the war. African Americans would later make it into the war but remained separate from their white counterparts.

Though African Americans were now able to join the war, they were segregated into different Regiments and Infantry to keep them separate from white soldiers. The U.S. organized two divisions of segregated men, the 92nd Division and the 93rd Division. The 92nd would carry the name "Buffalo Soldiers" as their nickname, and the 93rd would be known as the "Blue Helmets" (Young). The 92nd Division was regulated to support and labor behind the front lines, though parts of the division would see combat action in France. The 93rd Division would mainly go on to fight and see combat while in France. Upon arriving in France, alongside the French army, African Americans who were a part of New York's 15th Infantry Regiment expected to participate in combat training but ended up doing labor. About 380,000 African Americans served in the army during the war, and about 200,000 of them were sent to Europe.

During the first months of the colored soldier's arrival in France, they were ordered by their national guard to unload supply ships at the docks, working long hours. They participated in other labors, like preparing railroad lines and building roads, bridges, and trenches to support the front-line battles (Goldenberg). The African American regiment was seen as a quick and easy source of labor. Since they were black, white army generals would not have to worry about what would happen or what to do with them because, at the time, nobody had plans for them. New York's 15th Infantry Regiment was subject to labor rather than battling on the front lines as

hoped due to their status in their home country, America. The challenge of forced labor was brought upon these soldiers, which created a barrier that prevented them from fighting in battle. All hope was not lost since African Americans would soon go on to fight and impact the war.

While faced with the hardships and difficulties of the war, these African American regiments could put aside themselves to make an impact on the battles they were fighting during the war. The 369th regiment, better known as the "Harlem Hellfighters," which initially was the 15th New York, was ordered to train and fight alongside the French in a battle against the Germans in April of 1918. The regiment would then spend 191 days fighting the Chateau-Thierry and Belleau Wood battles, developing a fearsome reputation among the enemy for their combat skills and courage. Throughout these battles, the 369th regiment suffered more than 1,400 casualties. Around May 15, 1918, Pvt. Henry Johnson and Prv. Needham Roberts of the 369th was attacked while on sentry duty. The two men fought off as many as two dozen Germans in brutal hand-to-hand combat . The 370th regiment was a regiment that was commanded entirely by black commanders who served alongside the First Army during WW1. Originally known as the 8th Illinois Regiment, this division consisted of nearly 3,000 strong men who had trained for the Illinois Guard unit ("Harlem Hellfighters").

The 370th regiment fought with distinction along with the French 34th, 36th, and 59th Infantry Divisions and Belgium. The Soldiers fought so hard that the Germans who fought them gave them the nickname of Schwarze Teufel, "Black Devils," for their ferocity in combat ("The Story of the Only Regiment"). The 371st regiment consisted of southern African American draftees commanded by white officers. After training at Camp Jackson, the regiment arrived on the Western Front in April of 1918 and was placed under the command of the French Army due to their desperate need for new troops. After further training with new French equipment and

tactics, the regiment went into the trenches on the front lines as part of the veteran 157th "Red Hand" division for over three months, holding first the Avocourt and later the Verrières subsectors northwest of Verdun ("The African-American 371st Infantry Regiment"). The regiment would then be taken off the front line and sent into the Meuse–Argonne offensive, where The Allied powers launched their final major offensive of World War I. During this push, the regiment went on to capture many Germans, 47 machine guns, eight trench engines, 3 77mm field pieces, a munitions depot, railroad cars, and resources like lumber, hay, and other supplies ("The African-American 371st Infantry Regiment"). Losses, mostly in the first three days, were 1,065 out of 2,384 engaged, and this regiment was one of the most forward units of the attacking in this great battle. The 372nd regiment consisted of National Guard units from Connecticut, Maryland, Massachusetts, Ohio, Tennessee and the District of Columbia. This regiment would undergo French training and preparation like the other regiments and be placed alongside the French 157th "Red Hand" Infantry Division. The 372nd regiment took part in the Meuse-Argonne, Lorraine and Alsace campaigns, and members of the regiment had a record of never surrendering or retreating during battle. During the Meuse-Argonne advance, members of the 372nd were credited with taking nearly 600 prisoners, while securing large quantities of engineering supplies and artillery ammunition (Gonzalez). These brave men from regiments 369th, 370th, 371st, and 372nd served in National Guard units from the States of New York, Illinois, Connecticut, Maryland, Massachusetts, Ohio, Tennessee, the District of Columbia, South Carolina, and other southern states. They fought bravely and fiercely throughout every battle, gaining nicknames from enemy forces, capturing the enemy, pushing enemy forces back, and going hand-to-hand on duty while outnumbered. While serving with the French, racism and segregation were not the main issue anymore. The new challenge in front of the men was to

survive on the front line of battle, which was not so hard since they had done enough of that in their own country. Upon return from WWI, one of the African American regiments would be celebrated in their hometown.

### **Section 3: After WWI**

The 369th regiment, better known as the “Harlem Hellfighters,” was the most celebrated colored regiment after WWI upon returning from the hardships of war. In February 1919, the parade covered more than seven miles, attracting many crowds (“The Harlem Hellfighters Return Home”). Soldiers marched through Harlem, New York, while wounded soldiers would ride cars and trucks along the parade route. This parade consisted of many decorations that would be spotted on street posts, hanging over roads, and throughout the environment. Music was played, and the remnants of the New York National Guard from the war were recognized for their bravery and courage throughout the war. New York first threw a parade for its returning New York National Guard soldiers before they left for Europe in 1917. However, the 369th regiment was denied permission to participate because they were majority Black. Despite that, the regiment earned fame due to the extraordinary courage shown on the battlefield during those 191 days of straight combat. The regiment was now recognized and acknowledged by many who had heard about their wonderful combat skills and technique that pushed back German attackers. The 369th would receive awards from both the U.S. and the French government. The U.S. government recognized regiment members by giving them military awards and a Distinguished Service Cross. The French government awarded 171 men with the Croix de Guerre medal and a Croix de Guerre citation to the unit (“Remembering the Harlem Hellfighters”). The 369th regiment was celebrated alongside the New York National Guard and was awarded and

recognized for their bravery and courage throughout the war by the U.S. and France. Though African Americans bravely served their country throughout WWI, the way they were treated never changed, even after the war.

African Americans, even after the war, remained faced with racism, violence, and discrimination despite making an impact on the front lines in battle and handling many labors behind the scenes. Black veterans faced continued racism and discrimination, even violence, despite and because of their service in the war. Despite these obstacles, African Americans were determined to change the status quo rather than accept the restrictions of Jim Crow (“African American Experiences”). Returning from the war, African American soldiers wanted an end to lynching, an end to the disfranchisement of citizens and ignorance, to stop stealing from them, and to stop insulting them (DuBois). These soldiers saw lynching as “barbarism of a degree of contemptible nastiness unparalleled in human history” that disfranchises (a deliberated theft and robbery of the only protection against whites) its citizens, in which America lies and calls itself a democracy. This causes “ignorance” because they want servants, dogs, whores, and monkeys. America “steals” from us African Americans by limiting us, taking our education, land, labor, profit, and savings, reducing our wages, raising rent, and keeping us poor. Lynching, like the death of Charles Lewis, was one of the first warnings that nothing had changed. Lewis was one of 380,000 black soldiers who had served in the war, and on the night of Dec 15, a police officer stormed into his shack, accusing him of a crime he did not commit (Williams). Lewis, at this time, was wearing his uniform, claiming his rights as a soldier while resisting arrest and fleeing the scene. When caught, Lewis was jailed, but the white authorities felt that a lesson needed to be taught for crossing the line of resisting arrest, so local whites were determined to teach Lewis and his fellow black counterparts a lesson. Around the time of midnight, a mob of about 100

masked men rushed to the jail, pulled Lewis out of his cell, tied a rope around his neck, and hung him from a nearby tree. The following day, crowds gathered to view Lewis' lynched body.

Black soldiers returned to their homes eager to resume their lives but also possessing a deeper appreciation of their social and political rights. Many white Americans, both North and South, worried what this would mean for a tenuous racial status regulation that was based on black people remaining low in status. Throughout the summer of 1919, race riots began to rise across the country within the South mainly, and in some places in the North, due to the efforts of African Americans to protest for better wages (Williams). This enraged local whites, which left up to 200 African Americans dead and increased the number of lynchings to 76 by the end of the year, with several former black veterans falling victim to the violent crimes. The continuing racial violence, including lynching and racial massacres that targeted Southern Black people, as well as the return of the Ku Klux Klan (a white supremacist terrorist organization that first appeared shortly after the Civil War) from the end of the war up to 1920, caused the migration of hundreds of thousands of African Americans from the South to the Northeast, Midwest, and West (*The Great Migration*). Despite being a part of WWI, African Americans never encountered a change in treatment ("The Great Migration (1910-1970)").

## **Conclusion**

How did African Americans leave an impact despite the limitations and challenges faced by both sides of WW1? The limitations and challenges faced by African Americans at the start, throughout, and during the war originated from slavery. Slavery established the "low status" and "less than" like treatment that affected African Americans as a whole for many years leading up to the war and many years after the war. Some aspects like racial violence, discrimination, and

many laws like Black Codes are barriers that have held African Americans down. The pre-Civil War U.S. economy and the Reconstruction Era were big contributors to this treatment because racial violence, discrimination, and Black Codes were in high affect during this time. At the start of the war, African Americans were not allowed to serve due to their status. However, since the army was low on men, the War Department implemented a drafting system, which gave African Americans a chance to serve in the war. African Americans were segregated into two divisions, the 92nd Division and the 93rd Division. At first, African Americans were forced into labor upon arriving in France, which set their expectations back because they thought they would be able to fight in the war.

Eventually, African Americans could serve with the French army in battle for 191 days, which was seen as an impact by many. While alongside their white peers, African Americans were not able to do anything but labor, but when they were ordered to work with the French, they were given the opportunity of their lives. The French did not believe in racism and trained the African American soldiers as if they were one of them. These soldiers mainly consisted of the 369th regiment, the Harlem Hellfighters. The 370th and 371st regiments also saw combat, but in different battles in which the regiments regiment went on to capture man Germans, 47 machine guns, eight trench engines, three 77mm field pieces, a munitions depot, railroad cars, and resources like lumber, hay, and other supplies. After the war, the 369th regiment was the most celebrated and recognized African American regiment, though this did not change the way African-Americans were treated after the war. Many black veterans faced continued racism and discrimination, even violence, despite their service in the war.

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