The First World War and the New Negro

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The New Negro Movement defines a period in early 20th century African American history in which there was a spirit of regeneration among Black Americans, as expressed through visual art, literature, poetry, theatre, music, Black organizations, political protests, demonstrations, and more.[1] As a movement and political identity, the New Negro characterized itself through being modern, progress-oriented, and vocal in race pride, particularly through the very use of the term negro, which had for so long been weaponized against African Americans to be derogatory and which was now being reclaimed as a proud assertion of race, just one generation removed from slavery.[2] The New Negro Movement was outspoken in its agitation for dignity and refusal to acquiesce to the racial discrimination of Jim Crow, which was even more glaringly bigoted in the wake of the First World War, which had espoused values of democracy.

Historiography may differ widely on which factors were most impactful in influencing the New Negro Movement and subsequent Harlem Renaissance, but across historiographical traditions, there is consistently one theme that garners the focus of historians, largely due to its transformative effect in bringing about a watershed moment in American history. This paper will argue that the most significant factor accounting for the rise of the New Negro was the First World War. Not only did the 'war to end all wars' promise "dramatic social transformation and political change," it also championed values like democracy, liberty, and equality, all of which sounded increasingly hollow to the ears of Black war veterans who returned to the United States to find their social and political conditions unchanged.[3] In the words of Harry Haywood, an

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[1] Gregory Holmes Singleton. "Birth, Rebirth, and the 'New Negro' of the 1920s," *Phylon* 43, no. 1 (1982): 29, https://www.jstor.org/stable/274597.
[2] Laila Haidarali, "The New Negro & The Harlem Renaissance" (lecture, Queen's University, Mackintosh-Corry Hall, 3 October 2023).
[3] Gerald Early. "The New Negro and the Great African American Transformation," *American Studies* 49, no. 1/2 (2008): 9, https://www.jstor.org/stable/40644195.

African American war veteran "The war and the riots of the 'Red Summer' of 1919 left me bitter and frustrated. I felt that I could never again adjust to the situation of Black inequality."[4]

However, despite the disappointment in the immediate aftermath of the First World War, the conflict did provide African Americans with three distinct avenues for improving their social, economic, and political condition, all of which paved the way for the rise of the New Negro.[5] As Professor Gerald Early has researched and contended, the federal government's wartime consolidation of immense power in the economy, judiciary, and legislature allowed African Americans to more effectively agitate for their full civil rights by applying pressure to a federal government that now had a greater ability to act in their interests "simply because it had more wide ranging authority."[6] Moreover, the war instigated an economic boom within the United States, which created exponentially more jobs and increased wages, resulting in greater African American migration, visibility, and urbanism. Finally, the most important aspect of the war was its mobilizing effect in stimulating within African American servicepeople a new conception of themselves as a "truly modern national community with a more informed international consciousness […which,] in turn, helped to make the New Negro Movement possible."[7] The war inspired a new militant urgency to fight back against poor conditions and reimagine a brighter future for African Americans nationwide.

The First World War dramatically changed the American government's division of powers. Prior to the war, the federal government was so haphazard with its national presence that

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[4] Chad L. Williams. "Vanguards of the New Negro: African American Veterans and Post-World War I Racial Militancy," *Journal of African American History* 92, no. 3 (2007): 347, https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/abs/10.1086/JAAHv92n3p347?journalCode=jaah.
[5] Early, "The New Negro," 9.
[6] Early, "The New Negro," 9.
[7] Early, "The New Negro," 10.

"it was for most citizens [a] remote and unimportant" faraway entity.[8] However, with its entry into the global theatre of war in 1917, the American wartime government expanded "enormously in size, scope, and power. It virtually nationalized the ocean shipping industry [which was immensely profitable during wartime due to the European shortage of goods, resources, and materials]. It did nationalize the railroad, telephone, domestic telegraph, and international telegraphic cable industries."[9] The need to coordinate a national war effort on the home front necessitated further government intervention in sectors that were once either privatized or more localized, with the federal government assuming greater authority to arbitrate relations between labour and management, engage more deeply in agricultural production, commerce, marketing, media, resource extraction, and manufacturing, and also transform the newly created Federal Reserve System "into a powerful engine of monetary inflation to help satisfy the government's voracious appetite for money and credit."[10] The federal government consolidated so much power, that contemporaries described the 1918 American government as war socialist.[11]

Most relevant to the rise of the New Negro and its progress orientation, is the fact that African Americans could now direct their dissatisfaction to a larger, unified, more interventionist national entity. Many prominent African Americans, including Emmett J. Scott and W.E.B. Du Bois, recognized the potential to create change by appealing their case for civil rights to a government with more wide-ranging authority, and despite the pervasive, virulent racism of President Woodrow Wilson's administration, this was a sentiment shared by many prominent Black writers, leaders, and activists who also believed that the immense war powers of the

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[8] Robert Higgs, "How War Amplified Federal Power in the Twentieth Century," Independent Institute, N.d., 1 July, 1999, https://www.independent.org/publications/article.asp?id=113.
[9] Higgs, "How War Amplified Federal Power."
[10] Higgs, "How War Amplified Federal Power."
[11] Higgs, "How War Amplified Federal Power."

federal government could be harnessed to aid the African American cause for positive change.[12] A limited, ineffective, piecemeal federal government would not have been as worthy of garnering the attention of Black leaders, who now "demanded that white Americans and the federal government recognize and grant equality."[13]

The October 1917 appointment of Scott to special assistant to the secretary of war,[14] was significant to the progress of African Americans in employment and government sectors, and was described by the American businessman and philanthropist, Julius Rosenwald, as the "most significant appointment that has yet come to the colored race."[15] The rapid expansion of the wartime federal government also created "tens of thousands of jobs in Washington, D.C., and though the hiring policies of the Wilson administration limited black employment opportunities," the incremental inclusion was significant enough that "whites resented the boost to black prosperity that the war brought."[16]

Finally, in direct observation of their capability to affect change, and leveraging their government-recognized influence, Black writers, editors, and papers began to present the federal government with specific demands beyond employment, "including one for a federal antilynching law […] in 1918. The president, breaking with his customary antipathy toward civil rights issues, denounced lynching in a statement the next month."[17] Therefore, as evidenced, the First World War consolidated so much power in the federal government that it became a prime target with which Black organizations and the Black press could direct their dissatisfaction and

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[12] Early, "The New Negro," 12.
[13] Krugler, *1919, The Year of Racial Violence,* 17.
[14] Rosenberg, "For Democracy," 618.
[15] Early, "The New Negro," 12.
[16] David F. Krugler, *1919, The Year of Racial Violence: How African Americans Fought Back* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 37.
[17] Krugler, *1919, The Year of Racial Violence,* 41.

lobbying efforts. Arguably, the wartime expansion of the federal government inadvertently stoked a Black-led campaign to "promote racial uplift, unite communities within the African diaspora, and undermine the ideological and structural props of white supremacy. The wartime fashioning of this New Negro identity armed and readied, figuratively and literally, African Americans for [their resistance to the Red Summer of] 1919's antiblack collective violence."[18]

The war also brought about an economic boom within the United States, which affected Black Americans and the rise of the New Negro by creating new jobs, increasing wages and incomes, and resulting in greater African American economic success, visibility, urbanism, and modernism. Crucial to understanding the wartime economic effect on Black Americans and the New Negro Movement, is a recognition of the fact that the First World War was a significant factor driving the First Great Migration, which made African Americans an increasingly urban population, an integral aspect of the New Negro identity. As argued by Professor Early, the New Negro Movement was inherently a product of an age in which African Americans were transformed from a rural to an urban people "with a distinct urban culture."[19]

Prior to the outbreak of the war, approximately 90% of the country's African American population lived in the rural South.[20] But, by the 1930s, over 1 million African Americans had migrated to the urban South, North, and Mid-West, largely in response to the wartime demand for labour.[21] The First World War had severely disrupted America's need for cheap immigrant labour at a crucial inflection point for the United States, when there was a wartime global

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[18] Krugler, *1919, The Year of Racial Violence,* 37.
[19] Early, "The New Negro," 14.
[20] Laila Haidarali, "Great Migration" (lecture, Queen's University, Mackintosh-Corry Hall, 26 September 2023).
[21] Haidarali, "Great Migration."

demand for the nation's manufactured goods.[22] According to historian John H. Morrow Jr, "The war created opportunities for African Americans in the North, in war industries, in metal working industries, [and] in shipbuilding industries," which drove migration, with the North and Mid-West, having industrialised the century prior, also offering African Americans relatively lucrative jobs in steel, oil, auto production, manufacturing plants, and factories.[23] As a product of war, migration, and urbanization, the New Negro Movement was able to flourish, creating the "first modern and modernist black elites, that is, professional cadres of trained black people in artistic, bureaucratic, commercial, and academic circles. As black people became more modern, they became more professionalized […] possessing credentials and having institutional connections."[24]

As argued by Morrow, many African Americans who felt compelled to migrate, to fill the northern demand for labour, subsequently increased their incomes and socioeconomic standing, making "substantial contributions on the home front. They [… would] raise some 250 million dollars in war bonds […] a huge contribution in terms of their wealth."[25] An *Inquirer* editorial on the growing African American wartime economic prosperity proudly stated that "this war is helping the negro in an unparalleled fashion and if he uses wisely the prosperity which has come

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[22] "Unit 9 World War I and the Great Migration, 1915-1920," New Jersey State Library, accessed 15 November 2023, https://www.njstatelib.org/research_library/new_jersey_resources/highlights/african_american_history_curriculum/unit_9_world_war_i/.

[23] N.d., *How WWI Changed America: African Americans in WWI*, U.S. World War One Centennial Commission, Doughboy Foundation, The National WWI Museum and Memorial, 5 August 2020, video, 7:03, https://www.theworldwar.org/learn/about-wwi/how-wwi-changed-america-african-americans-wwi#:~:text=African%20Americans%20made%20substantial%20contributions,political%20landscape%20of%20the%20U.S.

[24] Early, "The New Negro," 16.

[25] *How WWI Changed America,* The National WWI Museum and Memorial.

to him he will…get his proper rights."[26] Therefore, as a result of the First World War, which drove the First Great Migration, African American urbanism, the subsequent economic prosperity of many Black Americans, and the spread of the New Negro identity, "thousands moved from the rural South to the industrial urban North, pursuing a new vision of social and economic opportunity."[27]

Finally, the most important provision of the war to the rise of the New Negro, was its role in mobilizing the African American community and inspiring a new militant urgency in fighting back against discrimination and systemic inequality. Many African Americans had voluntarily entered the First World despite decades of "unfulfilled promises, strict segregation, illegal disenfranchisement, and frequent violence."[28] Many more African Americans, including leaders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), believed that the war would prove useful in the struggle for civil rights and against racial oppression.[29] *The Crisis*, a prominent widely read Black magazine, really pushed the narrative that because of this war, African Americans were on the precipice of change:

> "We are facing a new world. Never again are we going to cope with the same conditions and the same social forces that we have faced in the last half-century…[N]ew forces have been loosed and a new situation [the First World War] has arisen. It is the business of the

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[26] James Mennell. "African-Americans and the Selective Service Act of 1917," *Journal of Negro History* 84, no. 3 (1999): 279, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2649006.
[27] "NAACP: A Century in the Fight for Freedom," Library of Congress, accessed 15 November 2023, https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/naacp/the-new-negro-movement.html#:~:text=World%20War%20I%20created%20a,of%20social%20and%20economic%20opportunity.
[28] Nancy Gentile Ford. "Review: Ethnicity, Race, and the Great War: Exploring an Underexplored Topic," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 30, no. 3 (2011): 65, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/jamerethnhist.30.3.0062.
[29] Jonathan Rosenberg. "For Democracy, Not Hypocrisy: World War and Race Relations in the United States, 1914-1919," The International History Review 21, no. 3 (1999): 601, https://www.jstor.org/stable/40109078.

> American Negro not to sit idly by and see this rearrangement of the world, hoping that something will come out of it of good for him. It is rather his business actually to put himself into the turmoil and work effectively for a new democracy that shall know no color."[30]

When the approximately 380,000 African American servicepeople arrived on the Western Front,[31] many Black Americans who fought alongside French soldiers found themselves pleasantly surprised by a "hospitable environment and […] comparative absence of racism."[32] These Black soldiers, who relayed these experiences in France to Black writers, inspired a celebration of colourblindness in France "as a beacon of true equality and democracy […] In this way, French egalitarianism would serve to highlight America's appalling race relations, shame its political leaders, and pressure the nation to reform."[33]

Professor Early notably highlights how there must have been a sense of irony that struck Black Americans, who were answering President Wilson's call to fight for the "ultimate peace of the world and for the liberation of its peoples" and to make the world "safe for democracy,"[34] while not seeing that realized at home. African Americans were laying down their lives in the name of democracy while being systemically discriminated against and legally oppressed by their own nominally democratic state. It was African American experiences in the First World War that would crucially transform the prewar New Negro movement into "a potent force to

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[30] Rosenberg, "For Democracy," 603.
[31] Williams. "Vanguards of the New Negro ," 347-348.
[32] Ford, "Review: Ethnicity, Race, and the Great War," 66.
[33] Ford, "Review: Ethnicity, Race, and the Great War," 67.
[34] Rosenberg, "For Democracy," 600.

confront the structure and practices of white supremacy," in the postwar period of racial persecution.[35]

As argued by Professor Mark Whalan, because of the Great War, its antecedents, and its ramifications, there was a watershed moment in the United States in which racism, patriotism, nationalism, and imperialism intersected with the wartime experiences and memories of African Americans, and reverberated through communities across the nation. These ideological forces "sometimes diametrically opposed, led to the flourishing of a new black modernity reflected in the poetry, novels, plays, essays, songs, memorials, and photography of the Harlem Renaissance."[36] As a natural consequence of their involvement in the war, their sacrifices, and their experiences overseas, Black Americans came to see themselves as a "truly national community with a more informed international consciousness and this, in turn, helped to make the New Negro Movement possible." [37]

Beyond the immediate effects of the war's aftermath, there was also the toxicity of race relations during the 'Red Summer' of 1919, which provoked many Black veterans, like Harry Haywood, to further "question the meaning of their service and seek new strategies for achieving racial justice."[38] These Black veterans, as newly "self conscious historical actors," with a heightened racial, social, political, gendered, and diasporic consciousness, would thus forth commit themselves to dismantling the systems of oppression and racial inequality that had persisted in the postwar period.[39] They had experienced what it felt like, during the war, to be a collective, unified entity; a veritable imagined community "of aspirations and expectations and

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[35] Krugler, *1919, The Year of Racial Violence,* 15.
[36] Ford, "Review: Ethnicity, Race, and the Great War," 65.
[37] Early, "The New Negro," 10.
[38] Williams. "Vanguards of the New Negro ," 347-348.
[39] Williams. "Vanguards of the New Negro ," 349.

not simply a people limited only to reacting to their condition."[40] As a natural consequence of this collective political entity, Black organizations flourished, with the NAACP's membership numbers increasing exponentially in the postwar period, gaining prominence that rivaled Marcus Garvey's New Negro, politically conscious Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA).[41]

In conclusion, the First World War provided African Americans with three distinct avenues for improving their social, economic, and political condition, all of which paved the way for the rise of the New Negro. The federal government's consolidation of power gave African Americans a target with which to direct their lobbying efforts and dissatisfaction. Moreover, the war provided economic opportunity for many African Americans and initiated the First Great Migration, which made Black Americans an increasingly urban, modern, and prosperous community, central elements of the New Negro progress-oriented, race-proud identity. Finally, the war was most impactful in stimulating within African American servicepeople a new conception of themselves as a progressive, prideful, modern national community with an informed international, political, and diasporic consciousness, all of which helped to make the New Negro Movement possible. African Americans' transformative wartime experience fundamentally influenced the emergence of the New Negro identity and provided an ideology and purpose for black resistance during the violent postwar period.

[40] Early, "The New Negro," 12.
[41] Early, "The New Negro," 12.

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