The First World War and the New Negro

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. 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. 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

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

Phylon 43, no.

^{1 (1982): 29,} https://www.jstor.org/stable/274597.

American

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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, t 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

federal government could be harnessed to aid the African American cause for positive change. 12

lobbying efforts. Arguably, the wartime expansion of the federal government inadvertently stoked a Black-

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

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

Prior to

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

labour at a crucial inflection point for the United States, when there was a wartime global

¹⁸ Krugler, 1919, The Year of Racial Violence, 37.

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⁻Corry Hall, 26

September 2023).

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 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

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,

dollars in war bonds

 25 An *Inquirer* editorial on

helping the negro in an unparalleled fashion and if he uses wisely the prosperity which has come

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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,

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

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:

and the same social forces that we have faced in the last half-

been loosed and a new situation [the First World War] has arisen. It is the business of the

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Journal of Negro

History 84, no. 3 (1999): 279, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2649006.

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2023, https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/naacp/the-new-negro-

movement.html#:~:text=World%20War%20I%20created%20a,of%20social%20and%20economic%20opportunity.

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Journal of American Ethnic History 30, no. 3 (2011): 65,

https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/jamerethnhist. 30.3.0062.

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United States, 1914-

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

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

These Black soldiers, who relayed these experiences in France to Black writers, inspired a

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Professor Early notably highlights how there must have been a sense of irony that struck Black Americans, who

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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

30	603.	
31		347-348.
32		66.
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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

the poetry, novels, plays, essays, songs, memorials, and photography of the Harlem

36 As a natural consequence of their involvement in the war, their sacrifices, and

community with a more informed international consciousness and this, in turn, helped to make

37

, which provoked many Black veterans, like Harry

Haywood, to further question the meaning of their service and seek new strategies for achieving

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

³⁵ Krugler, 1919, The Year of Racial Violence, 15.

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³⁸ -348.

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⁴⁰ As a natural consequence of

this collective political entity, Black organizations flourished, with the membership numbers increasing exponentially in the postwar period, gaining prominence that rivaled Marcus New Negro, politically conscious

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