

Essay

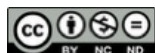
Society for Black Military Studies Keynote: W. E. B. Du Bois, World War I, and Black Military History

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Williams, Chad. "Society for Black Military Studies Keynote: W. E. B. Du Bois, World War I, and Black Military History." *Journal of Black Military Studies* 1, no. 1 (2026). <https://doi.org/10.70793/389>

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Editor's Note

It seems fitting that the keynote for the first conference of the [Society for Black Military Studies](#) is also the *Journal of Black Military Studies*' first publication.

In February 2026, historians gathered on the campus of Florida State University, in Tallahassee, for the [“Africa and the African Diaspora in the World Wars” conference](#), sponsored and organized by the Institute on World War II and the Human Experience, the Society for Black Military Studies, and Auburn University's Department of History.

[Chad Williams](#), the Tomorrow Foundation Chair of American Intellectual History and Professor of African American and Black Diaspora Studies at Boston University, delivered the keynote address. Dr. Williams authored [The Wounded World: W. E. B. Du Bois and the First World](#), which *The Washington Post*, *The New Yorker*, and *The Christian Science Monitor* named a best book of 2023. It was also longlisted for the PEN/Jacqueline Bograd Weld Award for Biography and became a Museum of African American History Stone Book Award finalist. Additionally, he authored the award-winning book, [Torchbearers of Democracy: African American Soldiers in the World War I Era](#), for which he won the 2011 Liberty Legacy Foundation Award from the Organization of American Historians and a 2011 Distinguished Book Award from the Society for Military History. Dr. Williams also co-edited the *Charleston Syllabus: Readings on Race, Racism and Racial Violence* and *Major Problems in African American History, Second Edition*.

This well-received address, reproduced here with light-editing and link insertions, does the work of placing Du Bois as a historian of Black military history while complicating his work and legacy.

— Françoise N. Hamlin
Editor in Chief

Thank you. Truly an honor to be here and participate in this historic gathering, especially taking place here, and taking place now, during Black History Month.

I want to thank all of the conference organizers and everyone who had a hand in hosting and getting me here. Dr. Piehler, for your generosity. Dr. Creswell for the wonderful excursion to Thomasville and the [Hadley African American History Museum](#) earlier today. Justice Ulrich and Ryley Ried, two of the most impressive undergraduates I have met in a long time, for taking care of me yesterday. And [Dr. Donaldson](#). Le'Trice. When she mentioned the possibility of speaking at this conference, I immediately said, "Yes." We should all be proud of the work she has done and proud of this organization and gathering. I know that W. E. B Du Bois would be.

William Edward Burghardt Du Bois. He was born in 1868 in [Great Barrington](#), Massachusetts, and died in 1963 in [Accra](#), Ghana, on the eve of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Arguably the greatest Black scholar activist in American history. Du Bois, as we know, was many things. He shattered disciplinary boundaries. He was a sociologist, a political scientist, a philosopher, a demographer, a novelist, a poet.

At his core, however, Du Bois was a historian. This was not just his because of his Ph.D. from Harvard. History was how he understood the world and the place of Black people in it. History was, in many ways, the foundation from which his multi-disciplinarity, his artistry, and his political commitments flowed.

Much has been said about Du Bois, the historian. But not enough has been said about Du Bois, the military historian. Yes, Du Bois is also foundational to Black military studies: why we are here this evening and for the next two days. His monumental 1935 book, [Black Reconstruction](#), for example, can in part be viewed as a work of military history, as he grounded the transformation of the Civil War into a war for Black freedom and the subsequent radicalism of Reconstruction in the figure of the Black Union soldier. However, I would like to point to Du Bois's 1924 book, [The Gift of Black Folk: The Negroes in the Making of America](#), as perhaps the clearest articulation of his approach to Black military studies. He devoted the third chapter to the history of Black Soldiers. He began by stating, "The day is past when historians glory in war." For Du Bois, the study of war and Black military service had to be devoid of romanticization and adopt a critical approach to the history and very character of America. Then he goes on and, in a remarkable passage, offers a conceptual framing of the Black soldier in America's wars. It's worth reading in full:

Yet in the majority of cases he was not compelled to fight. He used his own judgement and he fought because he believed that by fighting for America he would gain the respect of the land and personal and spiritual freedom. His problem as a soldier was always peculiar: no matter for what America fought and no matter for what her enemies fought, the American Negro always fought for his own freedom and for the self-respect of his race. Whatever the cause of war; therefore, his cause was peculiarly just. He appears, therefore, in American wars always with double motive—the desire to oppose the so-called enemy of his country along with his fellow white citizens, and before that, the motive of deserving well of those citizens and securing justice for his folk.¹

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We hear the echoes of *The Souls of Black Folk* and his classic formulation of double consciousness, the *peculiar* sensation of double consciousness, the struggle of being Black and being American. The Black soldier, in this framing, is the epitome of double consciousness, the archetypal dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

Du Bois then proceeds in the chapter to detail the participation of Black people in America's wars, succinctly covering the Revolutionary War, the War of 1812, the Civil War, the Spanish-American War and the excursions in Mexico. He concluded with the First World War. "Finally we come to the World War," he began, "the history of which is not yet written." Hmmm. A strange disclaimer to make. Granted, it is 1924, less than five years after the end of the war, but why would Du Bois feel the need to say this? Well, the answer is because he had not yet written the history of the World War. But he was certainly trying to.

For two decades, spanning the interwar period, Du Bois was obsessed with writing what he believed would be the definitive history of the Black experience in World War I, a book he titled *The Black Man and the Wounded World*. It would have rivaled *Black Reconstruction* as his most significant work of history. However, it remains unfinished and unpublished. This is the table of contents (figure 1). What happened to this book? Why did Du Bois want to write it? What was it about? How long did he work on it? Why did it remain incomplete, unpublished and for the most part completely unknown? Why is it important?

THE BLACK MAN AND THE WOUNDED WORLD		
		Number of pages
Introduction		3
Chapter		
I	Interpretations	9
II	The Story of the War	18
III	The World of Black Folk	-
IV	Black France	45
V	Black England	69
VI	Other Black Folk	-
VII	Black America	16
VIII	The Challenge	16
IX	The Draft	34
X	The Battalions of Labor	37
XI	The Eighth Illinois	37
XII	The Fifteenth New York	21
XIII	The Ninety-Third Division	16
XIV	The Ninety-Second Division	144
XV	The 365th, 366th, and 367th Regiments	102
XVI	The 368th Regiment (Black Officers ?)	114
XVII	Propaganda and Armistice	45
XVIII	The War Within the War	67
XIX	Behind the Lines	-
XX	The End	-
XXI	The Beginning	-
Appendix - Documents		-

February 22, 1926.

Figure 1. *The Black Man and the Wounded World*, Table of Contents, February 22, 1926. Du Bois prepared this table of contents for a funding request to the Carnegie Endowment for Peace. Credit: Fisk University, John Hope and Aurelia E. Franklin Library, Special Collections, W. E. B. Du Bois Collection, *The Black Man and the Wounded World*.

I tell the story of Du Bois's long forgotten book in my own book, *The Wounded World: W. E. B. Du Bois and the First World War*, and I want to tell the abbreviated version of this story today. I want to tell it thinking about how Du Bois's experience with World War I can potentially inform—and warn—us about the challenges of doing Black military studies, our place in the world and our convictions, and both the potential and pitfalls that come along with this.

Du Bois closely followed the World War from the opening guns of August 1914. He pinpointed the origins of the conflict in the competition amongst the European belligerents for imperial control of Africa and its people. “Yet in a very real sense Africa is a prime cause of this terrible overturning of civilization which we have lived to see,” he wrote in his landmark 1915 *Atlantic Monthly* article, [“The African Roots of War.”](#)² France, England and Belgium all had blood on their hands, but Du Bois saw his beloved Germany, thirsty for global domination, as posing an especially grave threat to the world's darker races. He sided with the Allies.

So when Woodrow Wilson [addressed](#) Congress on April 2, 1917, and declared war on Germany, Du Bois, setting aside his pacifist principles, was not opposed to the United States entering the conflict. He argued that it presented an opportunity for African Americans to stake claim to their citizenship and bring meaning to Wilson's claim that “the world must be made safe for democracy.” Black people had fought in the past, and now they would do so again, with hopes that the two “warring ideals” of being Black and being American—that Du Bois famously articulated in *The Souls of Black Folk*—would at last be reconciled.

Du Bois threw himself into the war effort, encouraging African Americans, as soldiers and civilians, to demonstrate their loyalty on and off the battlefield. White supremacy, however, tested his patriotism. Along with other African Americans, he had to reckon with moments like the unjust [execution](#) of 13 soldiers following a racial shootout in Houston, Texas, and especially the [East St. Louis pogrom](#) of July 1917, which left hundreds of Black people dead. While African Americans certainly pleaded for Woodrow Wilson to make America safe for democracy, they also demanded it, as the [Silent Protest Parade](#) evidenced in response to the East St. Louis massacre, with Du Bois marching in the front—next to [James Weldon Johnson](#).

So when [Joel Spingarn](#), former chairman of the NAACP and one of Du Bois's closest friends, approached him in early June 1918 with an offer to become a captain in the War Department's Military Intelligence Division, he had a momentous, potentially career defining choice to make. Du Bois knew that this appointment would arouse suspicions. Yet, he believed that, as he wrote in a letter to the director of the Military Intelligence Division, his decision to accept the offer reflected, “no inconsistency with or change of attitude from my life long work and opinions.” Indeed, he viewed his attitude as “one of far-reaching patriotism.”³ Just to make sure no lingering reservations existed about his loyalty, Du Bois wrote “Close Ranks” for the [July issue of The Crisis](#).

The Great War represented the “crisis of the world,” Du Bois began. He argued that, however distant the war seemed, Black people had “no ordinary interest in the outcome.” For this reason, African Americans had to make their allegiances clear. “Let us, while this war lasts, forget our

special grievances and close our ranks shoulder to shoulder with our own white fellow citizens and the allied nations that are fighting for democracy,” Du Bois declared. “We make no ordinary sacrifice, but we make it gladly and willingly with our eyes lifted to the hills.”⁴

“Close Ranks” unleashed a firestorm of criticism. The Boston civil rights activist and one-time ally, [William Monroe Trotter](#), labeled Du Bois, among other insults, as “a rank quitter of the fight for rights.”⁵ From coast to coast, many African Americans branded Du Bois as self-serving, at best, and, at worst, a traitor to the race. For a man who had committed his life to the cause of freedom and justice for Black people, no charge could be more hurtful. The captaincy offer ultimately crumbled, but the uproar and damage to his radical credentials left Du Bois deeply wounded.

Du Bois’s attempt to strike a grand bargain with the federal government and American democracy seemed yet more misguided in light of the U.S. military’s treatment of Black servicemen. Approximately 380,000 African American soldiers served in the racially segregated United States Army. The majority of Black troops in France unglamorously labored in the Services of Supply, loading and unloading ships, digging ditches, laying railroad tracks, and burying the dead. The army reluctantly agreed to the creation of two Black combat units, the [92nd Division](#), composed of draftees, and the [93rd Division](#), made up largely of black national guardsmen. While the 93rd Division compiled a stellar combat record, the 92nd Division became, as Du Bois later described it, “the storm center of the Negro troops.”⁶ Racist white commanders and deliberate neglect from the War Department doomed the performance of the division from the start, while its black officers, Du Bois’s shining examples of “Talented Tenth” manhood and racial leadership, endured humiliation after humiliation. African Americans could point to several notable battlefield triumphs and moments of racial pride. For most Black soldiers, however, the war for democracy that Du Bois had so enthusiastically championed devolved into a personal hell.

As the end of the war neared, Du Bois, his credibility tattered, his leadership in question, sat in the most precarious position of his otherwise illustrious career. Then, quite unexpectedly, an opportunity presented itself: one that would profoundly impact Du Bois’s life for the next two decades. At its October 1918 Board of Directors meeting, the NAACP proposed that Du Bois spearhead production of a book on the history of the Black experience in the war. He leapt at the opportunity. The scholar in Du Bois was intrigued, but more important, here was a chance for redemption.

As a way of demonstrating his continued ability to organize and lead, he envisioned the book as a collaborative effort. He had two co-authors in mind: [Carter G. Woodson](#), founder of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, and [Emmett J. Scott](#), the former secretary to [Booker T. Washington](#) who had recently served as a special assistant to the Secretary of War. Yet Du Bois’s influence had its limits. Woodson, arguably the most prominent African American historian in the nation—next to Du Bois—insisted on receiving sole credit for the project. Scott, arguably the most influential African American in the government during the war, had plans to write his own book. At stake was the right to call oneself *the* historian of the Black experience in the war, and the leadership stature that went along with it.

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Undaunted, Du Bois set his sights on France, where, as he would later write, “the destinies of mankind center.”⁷ On December 1, 1918, Du Bois departed from Hoboken, New Jersey, as part of the official press delegation accompanying President Woodrow Wilson to the peace conference at Versailles.

Du Bois spent three months in France. He organized a landmark [Pan-African Congress](#) in February 1919. His principal “mission,” however, was to conduct research for the NAACP war history. He toured the battlefields and saw the trenches where soldiers of the 92nd Division fought in the final hours of November 11 before the armistice went into effect. He visited the encampments and experienced, as he recalled, a touch of war. Most important, he talked with Black soldiers and officers. With military intelligence following his every move, Du Bois absorbed tale after tale of discrimination, slander, and abuse inflicted upon Black servicemen at the hands of the American army. A longtime friend, [Matthew Virgil Boutté](#), was his guide (figure 2). Boutté, a captain in the 92nd Division, had been constantly humiliated by his fellow white officers, court martialed on false charges of inefficiency, seriously injured in combat and placed, despite his officer status, in a segregated hospital ward with regular enlisted men. He entrusted his diary to Du Bois, where, in one emotional entry, he scrawled, “No nation on earth has ever hated a group as the Americans hate Negroes.”⁸



Figure 2. W. E. B. Du Bois with officers of the 370th Infantry Regiment and Matthew Boutté in Le Mans, France, 1919. From left: Colonel Thomas A. Roberts, W. E. B. Du Bois, two unnamed Black officers, Captain Matthew Boutté. Credit: *The Crisis*, June 1919 (public domain).

“Never in my life have I heard such an astounding series of stories,” Du Bois wrote from France in a January 1919 letter to his NAACP colleagues. “You have not the faintest conception of what these men have been through. It is not only astonishing but it will arouse every ounce of sympathetic blood in your veins.” He knew what needed to be done. “I can say solemnly and without hesitation,” he wrote, “the greatest and most pressing & most important work for the NAACP is the collection writing & publication of the history of the Negro troops in France.”⁹

Du Bois returned to the United States enraged, embarrassed and determined. He could not help but question if his decision to encourage Black people to throw body and soul into the war effort had been worthwhile. He channeled his frustrations, along with the anguish of the African American servicemen he encountered in France, into the postwar issues of *The Crisis*. In the [May 1919 issue](#), he informed readers about his “mission” in France, exposed the racism of the U.S. Army and defended the honor of black troops. The highlight, however, was “Returning Soldiers,” as his words would serve as a rallying cry for African Americans in the aftermath of the war: “We return. We return from fighting. We return fighting.”¹⁰

History served as Du Bois’s central battlefield in the struggle over the meaning of the war. “Most American Negroes do not realize that the imperative duty of the moment is to fix in history the status of our Negro troops,” he wrote in an editorial announcing his plans to produce the study of the Black experience in the war. To assist in this cause, he tasked readers of *The Crisis*, and Black soldiers in particular, to “help in the compilation of this history.”¹¹ Letters, diaries, photographs, official military documents, and personal memoirs quickly flooded Du Bois’s office. Du Bois promised that his book, tentatively titled, *The Negro in the Revolution of the Twentieth Century*, would appear by the fall. Black veterans hoped that Du Bois would tell their story. Du Bois intended to serve as their voice.

Generating further excitement, Du Bois published “An Essay Toward a History of the Black Man in the Great War,” a tantalizing [preview](#) of the larger book he planned to write. He declared, “there is not a black soldier but who is glad he went,—glad to fight for France, the only real white Democracy; glad to have a new, clear vision of the real, inner spirit of American prejudice. The day of camouflage is past.”¹²

Du Bois’s certainty would be severely tested throughout the summer of 1919. From Washington, D.C., to Chicago, to Philips County, Arkansas, race riots and full-scale massacres exploded throughout the country. The number of lynchings skyrocketed. Black veterans found themselves, quite literally, fighting for their lives. James Weldon Johnson labeled these bloody months the “Red Summer.” The horror of the summer was seared into Du Bois’s memory, as he would remember 1919 as a year of “extraordinary and unexpected reaction.”¹³

Du Bois used his 1920 book, *Darkwater*, to reflect on the war, its appalling aftermath, and his growing disillusionment. He minced no words. In the chapter, “The Souls of White Folk,” Du Bois wrote, “Let me say this again and emphasize it and leave no room for mistaken meaning: The World War was primarily the jealous and avaricious struggle for the largest share

in exploiting darker races.” Du Bois also asked a remarkable question: “How great a failure and a failure in what does the World War betoken?”¹⁴ On both a personal and intellectual level, it was a question that he had to answer.

Du Bois, therefore, committed himself to the NAACP war project. He devoted significant time throughout much of 1920 and into 1922, often writing late into the night, past his customary bedtime of 10 p.m., to drafting several potential chapters for what he confidently believed would be the definitive history of the Black experience in the war. Still exhilarated from his Pan-African congresses of 1919 and 1921, he wrote chapters on the experiences of Black troops in the French and British armies, as well as a chapter ruminating on the future of the African diaspora in the wake of the war.

Du Bois’s early chapter drafts also reflected an attempt to try and find redemptive value in the global catastrophe and his place in it. This was clear in a chapter titled “The Challenge,” which summarized the difficult choices African Americans—and he, himself—faced in supporting the war. “For a moment—and it was but a moment, it passed, but for a moment the country seemed to rise to its mightiest stature,” he wrote. Addressing his disillusionment, he reflected, “I have been called bitter. I am bitter but here I saw all the hurts, the tears, the pain as in one country and that country was mine.” Du Bois was glad that at least for this one brief, emancipatory moment, he could call himself an American, that he and the race “could think with the nation and not as a mere group. We could rise to mighty selfishness. The nation, our country, the allies as champions of the little hurt folk, democracy.” The only way he could explain his delusion was to plead temporary insanity. “We were mad—that is the only word for it, we were mad and let it not excuse us to say that the madness was divine.” Nevertheless, he still refused to completely admit that he was wrong. “How in the end did all this set with our inner problem?” he pondered. “After all it was not a mere bargain—it was a moving wish.”¹⁵

Du Bois pressed ahead to finish his book. He held out hope that, despite a lack of financial support and numerous other commitments and distractions, it would soon be completed. The worsening conditions facing African Americans and peoples of African descent throughout the diaspora, however, caused him to further struggle with the war’s individual and collective meaning. Then there was personal tragedy.

In January of 1922, Du Bois lost his closest Black friend and the man who best embodied the quest to reconcile race and country, [Colonel Charles Young](#). Young was the highest-ranking Black officer in the army and Black America’s military hero. He had been unjustly retired from active service during the war for dubious health reasons to prevent him from becoming a general. It broke [Young’s] heart. The army reinstated him after the armistice and assigned him to Liberia. He would die in a Nigerian hospital. Over a year after his death, Young’s body was finally returned to the United States and buried with full honors in Arlington National Cemetery. Du Bois could not forgive the government for the “inexcusable crime” of sending Young to Liberia. “For, if Charles Young’s blood pressure was too high for him to go to France,” Du Bois wrote in an editorial, “why was it not too high for him to be sent to the even more arduous duty

in the swamps of West Africa?” “God rest his sickened soul,” Du Bois seethed, “but give our souls no rest if we let the truth concerning him droop, overlaid with lies.”¹⁶

This ugly reminder of the war’s legacy further validated Du Bois’s new title for his book: *The Black Man and the Wounded World*. As the title reflected, Du Bois’s initial hopes of the war as a potentially revolutionary moment in the reconstruction of global race relations had evolved to an interpretation of the conflict as one of the darkest moments in modern world history. The war was a global tragedy that, along with laying the seeds for future war, strengthened white supremacy and furthered the economic exploitation of peoples of African descent. No surprise, then, that he described the war in the opening chapter of his book manuscript as, “a Scourge, an Evil, a retrogression to Barbarism, a waste, a wholesale murder.”¹⁷

Du Bois’s public announcement in 1924 of *The Black Man and the Wounded World* sparked renewed public interest in his book. Encouraged, he began writing again, making use of his mountain of source material to meticulously detail all aspects of the Black military experience in the war. By 1926, he had drafted the bulk of his envisioned chapters. The book, finally, seemed on the verge of completion.

Yet he needed help. He had a massive manuscript that, judged by his high scholarly and artistic standards, still required significant work. Without time and editorial assistance, he felt that he could not complete the project. Seeking support, he sent inquires to nearly every major philanthropic organization—the Rockefeller Foundation, the Russell Sage Foundation, the Slater Fund, the Julius Rosenwald Fund, the Carnegie Endowment. All expressed courtesy interest, but all ultimately offered their regrets.

Beyond the practical obstacle of financial support, Du Bois faced an even bigger and more daunting challenge: himself. If the war he had supported was indeed a failure, as he pondered as early as 1920, then perhaps his book, languishing and in limbo, was destined for a similar fate. Making matters worse, many of the same veterans who had once viewed Du Bois as a savior now grew restless and began asking for the return of the personal letters, photographs, memoirs and other ephemera they had loaned him many years ago. With the exception of one former sergeant who threatened to take Du Bois to court, [Du Bois] selfishly rebuffed all of these requests.

Du Bois’s guilt about his decision to support the war continued to gnaw at him. In 1930 Du Bois participated in a published discussion for the magazine, *The World Tomorrow*, on the war guilt debate—if Germany was solely responsible for the war and if American intervention was justified. In his reply to the editor, he admitted to being “swept off my feet during the world war by the emotional response of America to what seemed to be a great call to duty.” The costs had been immeasurably high. “Instead of a war to end war, or a war to save democracy, we found ourselves during and after the war descending to the meanest and most sordid of selfish actions, and we find ourselves today nearer moral bankruptcy than we were in 1914.” Then, surprisingly, but with a disclaimer, he admitted, “I am ashamed of my own lack of foresight, and yet war is so tremendous and terrible a thing that only those who actually experience it, can know its real

meaning.”¹⁸ Du Bois willingly acknowledged his error in supporting the war, but still sought to rationalize his decision by including himself amongst the war’s countless victims.

Never content to remain unproductive, Du Bois turned to other projects, most notably, *Black Reconstruction*, which he envisioned as a prequel of sorts to *The Black Man and the Wounded World*. After the publication of *Black Reconstruction* in 1935, he immediately renewed efforts to complete its follow up. A glimmer of hope appeared in March of that year when he secured a \$600 grant from the Social Science Research Council. He also began to envision *The Black Man and the Wounded World*, especially in light of Italy’s invasion of Ethiopia and the impotence of the League of Nations, as an explicit lesson about the horrors and ultimate failure of modern warfare. A trip around the world in 1936 brought even greater clarity to the book’s new significance. Du Bois spent seven months abroad, first visiting Hitler’s Germany, then China, and finally, imperial Japan. He returned to the United States in December of 1936, having seen first-hand the seeds of the next world war. The need for his book could not have been more urgent.

In his mind, it was now or never. Hoping to finally put the project—along with the ugly memory of the war itself—behind him, Du Bois reached out to the American Philosophical Society in March 1937. “I began my work in this field as a conventional study of the Negro as a soldier in the World War,” he wrote. Over time, he explained, “the whole theme has been expanding and developing in my mind, more especially since my trip around the world in 1936.” He now conceived the book “on a much broader and more important scale.” If only he could “have leisure and opportunity to finish this work,” Du Bois pleaded, “I think I can do something which will have influence on future knowledge with regard to war and colored people.”¹⁹ \$7,500 would be sufficient. The American Philosophical Society denied his request. He received one final rejection, in March 1940, from the Social Science Research Council, just as Hitler prepared for the German army to invade France. Du Bois, disillusioned, disheartened, with a second world war a tragic reality, abandoned hope that he would finish and publish his book. Despite an investment of more than twenty years, despite a manuscript over 800 pages in length, *The Black Man and the Wounded World*, Du Bois’s epic history of the Black experience in the First World War, would never see the light of day.

So why did Du Bois not finish *The Black Man and the Wounded World*? I would argue that Du Bois suffered from intellectual shellshock when it came to writing about and rationalizing a war defined by its irrationality. In his semi-autobiographical 1940 book, *Dusk of Dawn*, he wrote, “In my effort to reconstruct in memory my thought and the fight of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People during the World War, I have difficulty in thinking clearly.” He would go on to lament that, “The whole history of the American Negro and other black folk in the World War, has never been written.” He recalled his time in France and the “mass of documents” he had collected over the years. “They deserve publication,” he wrote, “not simply as a part of the Negro’s history, but as an unforgettable lesson in the spiritual lesions of race conflict during a critical period of American history.”²⁰

By the 1940s, the “spiritual lesions” caused by the first world war had clearly not healed. World War II confirmed the failure of World War I, as well as Du Bois’s decision at the time to place his moral and political credibility on the line in encouraging Black people to “Close Ranks” and support America and the Allies.

Indeed, Du Bois’s own wounds had not healed as well. In a 1941 letter regarding his alma mater, Fisk University, possibly taking a position on American preparedness to enter World War II, Du Bois wrote, “I have lived through one period of deliberate and prolonged propaganda for war and partially succumbed to it,” adding, “I have lived to know better and my opposition to war under any circumstances has been immeasurably increased.”²¹ Even up to the final years of his life, Du Bois still sought to understand why he had supported the war in the first place. “I felt for a moment as the war progressed that I could be without reservation a patriotic American,” Du Bois, in his 80s, wrote in an autobiography published posthumously in 1968. “I am not sure that I was right but certainly my intentions were. I did not believe in war, but I thought that in a fight with America against militarism and for democracy we would be fighting for the emancipation of the Negro race. With the Armistice came disillusion.”²² That disillusion stayed with Du Bois until his death on August 27, 1963, in Accra, Ghana.

The war consumed Du Bois. It confounded him. He could not make sense of it as both a personal and historical moment. He was unable to muster the intellectual fortitude and, dare I say, the moral strength, necessary to complete his book. His failure embodied the tragedy and failure of the war he struggled to write about. In this sense, the “Black Man and the Wounded World” was Du Bois himself.

This matters to how we think of Du Bois, especially in regard to him as a historian of war and Black military service. The failure of World War I, and ultimately the failure to complete *The Black Man and the Wounded World*, were essential to his political evolution and radicalism. By the late 1940s, he became a staunch peace activist and, in the eyes of the federal government in the midst of the Cold War “red scare,” a threat. In 1951, he was indicted and tried on charges of being an agent of a foreign principal. He won an acquittal, but the ordeal, and subsequent seizure of his passport by the government, were a painful reminder that for a Black person, criticizing America and fighting for peace came with tremendous risk and cost. In his 1952 book, *In Battle for Peace*, Du Bois wrote, “As, then, a citizen of the world as well as of the United States of America, I claim the right to know and think and tell the truth as I see it,” he declared. “I believe in Socialism as well as Democracy.” Above all else, Du Bois wrote, “I hate war.”²³

So what does this ultimately tell us about Black military studies? It tells us that Black military studies is hard. Doing it right is hard work. Black military studies gets at core questions about race, identity, and belonging. Studying, interrogating, wrestling with these questions is hard work. If it was hard for Du Bois, it should be hard for us, too. Du Bois’s struggle with the history and legacy of World War I reminds us that Black military studies does not and should not take place in a vacuum. Du Bois was thinking, researching, seeking funding and writing in the midst of global war, in the midst of white supremacy, in the midst of the distortion of history and its

use as racial propaganda, in the midst of fascism, in the midst of the failures of democracy. This should sound familiar, because we are doing the same. His struggles are our struggles. Just as Du Bois sought to understand and attempt to heal the wounded world in his time, we, through our work and through our convictions, must do the same in ours.

- ¹ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Gift of Black Folk: The Negroes in the Making of America*, (Square One Publishers, 2009), 30.
- ² W. E. B. Du Bois, "The African Roots of War," *Atlantic Monthly*, May 1915.
- ³ W. E. B. Du Bois to Marlborough Churchill, June 24, 1918, *The Black Man and the Wounded World*, General, Fisk University, John Hope and Aurelia E. Franklin Library, Special Collections, W. E. B. Du Bois Collection, (hereafter cited as Du Bois Collection, Fisk), box 14, folder 35.
- ⁴ W. E. B. Du Bois, "Close Ranks," *The Crisis* (July 1918).
- ⁵ *Boston Guardian*, July 20, 1918.
- ⁶ W. E. B. Du Bois, "An Essay Toward a History of the Black Man in the Great War," *The Crisis* (June 1919).
- ⁷ "My Mission," *The Crisis* (May 1919).
- ⁸ Boutté diary, *The Black Man and the Wounded World*, Misc., Unidentified, 1918-1919, Du Bois Collection, Fisk, box 34, folder 38.
- ⁹ W. E. B. Du Bois to NAACP Board of Directors, January 12, 1919, part 1, box I: C385, folder 2, NAACP Papers, Library of Congress.
- ¹⁰ "Returning Soldiers," *The Crisis* (May 1919).
- ¹¹ "History," *The Crisis* (May 1919).
- ¹² W. E. B. Du Bois, "An Essay Toward a History of the Black Man in the Great War," *The Crisis* (June 1919), 87.
- ¹³ W. E. B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept*, in W. E. B. Du Bois, *Writings* (Library of America, 1986), 757.
- ¹⁴ W. E. B. Du Bois, *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* (Oxford University Press, 2007), 20.
- ¹⁵ *The Black Man and the Wounded World*, chap. 8, "The Challenge," Du Bois Collection, Fisk, box 27, folder 5.
- ¹⁶ "Charles Young," *The Crisis* (July 1923).
- ¹⁷ *The Black Man and the Wounded World*, chap. 1, "Interpretations," Du Bois Collection, Fisk, box 26, folder 22.
- ¹⁸ W. E. B. Du Bois to *The World Tomorrow*, June 24, 1930, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries (hereafter cited as Du Bois Papers, UM-A).
- ¹⁹ Du Bois grant submission to the American Philosophical Society, May 25, 1936, *The Black Man and the Wounded World*, General, Du Bois Collection, Fisk, box 14, folder 33.

- ²⁰ W. E. B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept*, in W. E. B. Du Bois, *Writings* (Library of America, 1986), 746.
- ²¹ W. E. B. Du Bois to Andrew J. Allison, February 3, 1941, Du Bois Papers, UM-A.
- ²² W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Autobiography of W. E. B. Du Bois: A Soliloquy on Viewing My Life from the Last Decade of Its First Century*. (International Publishers, 1968), 274.
- ²³ W. E. B. Du Bois, *In Battle for Peace: The Story of My 83rd Birthday*. (Masses & Mainstream, 1952), 164.

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