

W. E. B. Du Bois, Classical Sociology and the Wounds of the First World War

Chad Williams, Brandeis University

W. E. B. Du Bois occupies a singular place in the pantheon of “classical” sociologists who pioneered the field in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The first African American to earn a doctorate from Harvard University, Du Bois was educated and received his training at a time when the various disciplines of the social sciences—history, sociology, anthropology, political sciences, economics—were still in their formative stages.¹ While never restricting himself to one disciplinary box, Du Bois certainly considered himself a sociologist and dedicated himself to interrogating the most pressing “problem” facing Black people and modern world: race and the color-line. With his pioneering book *The Philadelphia Negro* and work at Atlanta University, Du Bois laid the groundwork for American sociology as it is known today.² However, both at the time and for much of the discipline’s twentieth century history, mainstream American sociology marginalized Du Bois and his contributions.³ While this has begun to change and scholars now embrace “Du Boisian sociology” as a distinct methodological approach, Du Bois’s inclusion in the broader framing of classical sociology is still ongoing.⁴ Just as Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, Georg Simmel and others are considered “fathers” of classical

¹ Mia Bay argues this point in her examination of *The Philadelphia Negro*. Bay M (1998) “‘The World Was Thinking Wrong About Race’: *The Philadelphia Negro* and Nineteenth-Century Science.” In: Katz MB and Sugrue TJ (eds) *W.E.B. Du Bois, Race, and the City: The Philadelphia Negro and Its Legacy*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998, 41.

² Morris A (2015) *The Scholar Denied: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Birth of Modern Sociology*. Berkeley: University of California Press; Also see: Wright II E (2016) *The First School of American School of Sociology: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Atlanta Sociological Laboratory*. New York: Routledge.

³ See especially, Morris, *Scholar Denied*

⁴ José Itzigsohn and Karida L. Brown, *The Sociology of W. E. B. Du Bois: Racialized Modernity and the Global Color Line*. (New York: New York University Press, 2020).

sociology in their respective countries, Du Bois must be considered in the same light in the United States.⁵

Like his sociological contemporaries, Du Bois too wrestled with the meaning of the World War and his own personal relationship to it. The First World War represented one of the most significant—and disjunctive—moments in Du Bois’s life. However, Du Bois stands out from his peers. Du Bois developed an original theorization of the war that was informed by his positionality as a Black American scholar and singular understanding of race and the color-line as a global historical and sociological phenomenon. Du Bois lived well into and beyond the postwar era, which meant that he grappled with the ongoing legacies of the war, not only intellectually, but also personally, politically and ethically. And, most significant, Du Bois wrote extensively about the war. For over two decades he attempted to produce the definitive history of the Black experience in the war, a book titled *The Black Man and the Wounded World*. Despite compiling a massive amount of research and drafting a manuscript several hundred pages in length, the book remained unfinished and ultimately unpublished.

Examining Du Bois’s relationship to the First World War and his efforts to write about it sheds light on what made Du Bois unique as a sociologist, how profoundly the war shaped his life, intellectual development, and the distinctive challenges that he faced. Du Bois’s faith in scientific sociological and historical methodology proved insufficient when it came to a subject as personally, politically and existentially catastrophic as the World War. He struggled to make sociological sense of and find redemptive historical meaning in a war defined by irrationality and

⁵ For one of the few explicit placements of Du Bois in conversation with other classical sociologists see, Kemple TM (2009) Weber/Simmel/Du Bois: Musical Thirds of Classical Sociology *Journal of Classical Sociology* 9(2): 187–207.

that, as World War II made abundantly clear, was a failure. The failure that was World War I presaged Du Bois's own failure to complete what would have been one of his most significant scholarly works. Through this we see how the World War proved instrumental to Du Bois's intellectual and political evolution.

Du Bois and the World War

The years preceding World War I marked an important period in Du Bois's life and sense of vocation, as a scholar and an activist. For much of his time as a professor of sociology at Atlanta University, he had committed himself to the social scientific accumulation and presentation of data to objectively refute racist misconceptions about Black people, their humanity and fitness for full citizenship. However, by the turn of the century, shaken by the virulence of American white supremacy, he began to more explicitly fuse his scholarship with moral advocacy and political activism. In 1905, Du Bois helped co-found the Niagara Movement, a civil rights organization that directly challenged the accommodationist agenda of Booker T. Washington, the powerful principal of the Tuskegee Institute. In 1909, Du Bois departed Atlanta for New York City to help establish the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and serve as editor of its journal of news and opinion, *The Crisis*. At the helm of *The Crisis*, with its modest yet devoted readership of educated African Americans and progressive whites, Du Bois established himself as the most passionate voice in addressing what he characterized as "the problem of the twentieth century," the global color-line.⁶

⁶ Du Bois WEB (1903) *The Souls of Black Folk*. For discussion of the period in Du Bois's life see, Lewis DL (1993) *W. E. B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race, 1868-1919*. New York: Henry Holt.

When war erupted in August 1914, Du Bois professed to being stunned at what he described to a longtime London based friend, Frances Hoggan, as a “sudden failure of civilization.”⁷ In his 1940 book *Dusk of Dawn*, Du Bois reflected, “I thought with other philosophers that a general European war was impossible. The economic and cultural strands among the nations had grown too strong to be snapped by war,” adding further, “like most of the world I was thrown into consternation when later with sudden and unawaited violence, world war burst in 1914.”⁸ Du Bois reminiscences reveals a certain naivete, rooted in his belief in European rationality and enlightenment civilization. It also reveals that despite his familiarity with Europe—Du Bois spent two transformational years of graduate study at Friedrich Wilhelm University in Berlin, Germany from 1893 to 1894—he held an outsider perspective when it came to understanding the onset of war. Indeed, other European intellectuals, including his sociology peers like Weber, Durkheim and Scheler, saw a clash between Germany and France as inevitable, necessary, and even welcomed its arrival.⁹

Du Bois’s outsider perspective ultimately served him well, as he quickly moved from shock to piercing analysis of the reasons behind the global catastrophe. In the November 1914 issue of *The Crisis*, he wrote the editorial, “World War and the Color Line,” where he characterized the war as “one of the great disasters due to race and color prejudice” in modern history and “but foreshadows greater disasters in the future.” Du Bois argued that the causes of the war laid in the “wild quest for Imperial expansion” amongst the European belligerents. Coincidentally, Du Bois’s *Crisis* editorial appeared the same month as Karl Kautsky’s article

⁷ W. E. B. Du Bois to Frances Hogan, August 19, 1914, Du Bois Papers, UM-A.

⁸ Du Bois WEB (1940) *Dusk of Dawn*, 724.

⁹ See, Cotesta V (2017) Classical Sociology and the First World War: Weber, Durkheim, Simmel and Scheler in the Trenches. *History* 102(3): 432-449.

“Imperialism in the War,” where the Czech-Austrian theoretician wrote that, “The effort to subdue and hold agrarian regions has given rise to serious conflicts between the great capitalist powers” which “finally resulted in the long-prophesied world-war.”¹⁰ However, Du Bois, unlike Kautsky, argued that at the heart of Europe’s imperial greed lay “a theory of the inferiority of the darker peoples and a contempt for their rights and aspirations. . .”¹¹

Du Bois expanded upon this theory in “The African Roots of War,” published in the May 1915 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*. The landmark article reflected his distinct global historical sociology.¹² “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. The “contemptible and dishonest” partitioning and exploitation of Africa, based on “lying treaties, rivers of rum, murder, assassination, mutilation, rape, and torture,” pitted the European imperial powers against each other. “Thus the world,” Du Bois argued, “began to invest in color prejudice.” Competition to exploit Africa and reap the “spoils of trade-empire” had driven national rivalries to the point where European civil war exploded.¹³ Shifting the “storm-centre” of the war from the Balkans to Africa, Du Bois emphasized how “the ownership of materials and men in the darker world is the real prize that is setting the nations of Europe at each other’s throats to-day.” In the article, Du Bois developed a wholly original historical and sociological theoretical framework for understanding the origins of the war based in his critique of European imperialism in Africa and its inextricable connection with the development of modern capitalism and white supremacy.

¹⁰ Kautsky K (1914) Imperialism and the War. *International Socialist Review* 15(5): 282-286.

¹¹ Du Bois WEB (1914) World War and the Color Line. *The Crisis* 9(1): 28-30.

¹² Winant H (2017) World-Historical Du Bois. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 40(3): 505-508.

¹³ Du Bois WEB (1915) The African Roots of War. *Atlantic Monthly*

As the World War raged throughout 1915 and into 1916, Du Bois had reached new heights in his standing as spokesman for the race. The November 14, 1915, death of Booker T. Washington and the growing influence of the NAACP, due in large part to the success of *The Crisis*, elevated Du Bois's national and global leadership stature. His thoughts and commentary on the war thus carried significant weight amongst his loyal followers. In the aftermath of the May 7, 1915 sinking of the *Lusitania*, he voiced his disgust at the war and the failure of European civilization it represented. "Its failure did not come with this war," he wrote, "but with this war it has been made manifest."¹⁴ As calls for military preparedness increased in 1916, Du Bois highlighted the need for America and President Woodrow Wilson to instead prioritize protecting Black people from domestic racial violence. "Is there any 'preparedness' for Christianity, for human culture, for peace or even for war, that is more pressing than the abolition of lynching in the United States?" he asked in a March 1916 *Crisis* editorial.¹⁵ When discussing the war, Du Bois's focus principally remained on the struggle for African American rights, "that war of colors which we who are black always sense as the principal thing in life," he wrote when recalling this period in his life.¹⁶

In the spring of 1917, "Finally and in a sense inevitably," Du Bois would reflect, "the World War actually touched America."¹⁷ America's formal entry into the war on April 2, 1917, put Du Bois's pacifism to the test. However, President Wilson's call to make the world "safe for democracy" resonated with Du Bois, who had his own deeply held beliefs in the importance of

¹⁴ "Lusitania," *The Crisis* (May 1915), 81.

¹⁵ "Preparedness," *The Crisis* (March 1916), 242-243.

¹⁶ The Amenia Conference, 1925, Du Bois Papers, UM-A.

¹⁷ Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn*, 734.

democracy. Moreover, Du Bois had profound respect for the Black military tradition in American history and, akin to Frederick Douglass before him, believed in the transformative potential of war to expand the boundaries of freedom, citizenship, and democracy for African Americans as well as peoples of African descent more broadly. “I did not believe in war,” Du Bois wrote decades later, “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.”¹⁸ He staked his claim to America, telling his fellow African American citizens that the United States, as “our country,” just as it had in past wars, “rightfully demands our whole-hearted defense.”¹⁹

While Du Bois’s support for the war was deeply personal, he also approached it as a moment of sociological experimentation. In his 1903 book *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois mused on the meaning of being Black and being American, what he characterized as a form of “double consciousness” that defined African American identity. Du Bois’s formulation of double consciousness represents one of his most significant contributions to sociological theory and analysis.²⁰ The war compelled Du Bois to move beyond theory to actual praxis, to test if the two “unreconciled strivings” and “warring ideals” of Blackness and Americanness could be merged in the patriotic melting pot of war.²¹

¹⁸ 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* (New York, 1968), 274

¹⁹ “The World Last Month,” *The Crisis* (May 1917). In comparison to some of his classical sociology contemporaries, Du Bois did not glorify the war to the extent that Weber did. He did not engage in pseudo-scientific judgements of German nature and its “collective mentality” as pathological like Durkheim. See, Cotesta

²⁰ Itzigsohn and Brown, “Sociology and the Theory of Double Consciousness: W. E. B. Du Bois’s Phenomenology of Racialized Subjectivity,” *Du Bois Review* 12:2 (2015): 231-248.

²¹ Importance of *The Souls of Black Folk* and “double consciousness” in sociological theory. Du Bois in this sense mirrored other Progressive Era reformers who viewed the American war effort as a laboratory of “100 percent Americanism” and engine of ethnic European assimilation.

Du Bois threw himself—along with his racial credibility—into the American war effort. He supported a segregated training camp for African American officer cadets, reasoning that the opportunity for Black men to demonstrate their leadership and intelligence on the battlefield superseded the humiliation of Jim Crow. He encouraged African Americans to remain loyal, even in the face of severe tests throughout the summer of 1917, such as the East St. Louis massacre, the execution of thirteen Black soldiers in the wake of a deadly shootout in Houston, Texas, and the unjust retirement of Colonel Charles Young, the highest-ranking Black officer in the Army and one of his dearest friends. Du Bois’s steadfast faith was fueled in no small part by Joel Spingarn, former chairman of the NAACP and Du Bois’s most trusted white comrade, who he characterized as “fired with consuming patriotism.” Spingarn believed that if Jews like himself could eschew their hyphenated identity by demonstrating their unconditional loyalty to the United States in its time of need, so too could African Americans.²² Because of this, Du Bois, as he reflected in *Dusk of Dawn*, “became during the World War nearer to feeling myself a real and full American than ever before or since.”²³

Du Bois’s patriotism, however, nearly ruined his career. At a June 8, 1918, meeting in Washington, DC, Joel Spingarn surprised Du Bois with an offer to join him as a captain in the War Department’s Military Intelligence Bureau. Just a few weeks later in the July 1918 issue of *The Crisis*, Du Bois published the controversial editorial “Close Ranks.” “Let us not hesitate,” he wrote. “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

²² Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn*, 741.

²³ Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn*, 741.

democracy.”²⁴ “The words were hardly out of my mouth,” Du Bois recalled, “when strong criticism was rained upon it.”²⁵ William Monroe Trotter, who co-founded the Niagara Movement with Du Bois, labeled him a “rank quitter in the fight for rights.” Other critics in the Black press and elsewhere openly accused Du Bois of being a traitor to the race. Du Bois dug in his heels, writing in the August *Crisis*, “if this is OUR country, then this is OUR war,” and scolding his detractors the following month with the declaration, “first your Country, then your Rights!”²⁶ The criticism, however, left Du Bois deeply scarred and forced him to question whether his enthusiastic support for the war was worth the costs. As he questioned years later in Rayford Logan’s 1943 edited volume *What the Negro Wants*:

I was fighting to let the Negroes fight; I, who for a generation had been a professional pacifist; I was fighting for a separate training camp for Negro officers; I, who was devoting a career to opposing race segregation; I was seeing the Germany which taught me the human brotherhood of white and black, pitted against America which was for me the essence of Jim Crow; and yet I was “rooting” for America; and I had to, even before my own conscience, so utterly crazy had the whole world become and I with it.²⁷

The History of the War and Du Bois’s Sociological Imagination

²⁴ “Close Ranks,” *The Crisis* (July 1918).

²⁵ Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn*, 740.

²⁶ “A Philosophy in Time of War,” *The Crisis* (August 1918); “Our Special Grievances,” *The Crisis* (September 1918).

²⁷ Du Bois, “My Evolving Program for Negro Freedom,” in Logan, ed., *What the Negro Wants*, 58-59.

At the October 14, 1918 NAACP Board of Directors monthly meeting, an opportunity arose for Du Bois to make sense of the confusion of the war and his place in it. Treasurer and fellow Harvard-trained historian Oswald Garrison Villard proposed that the organization take immediate steps to compile, in a “careful and scientific” manner, all records “concerning the Negro soldier’s work in the present war,” with the goal of “getting out a book” by the end of the fighting. Du Bois, as Director of Publications and Research, would spearhead the effort.²⁸ Du Bois expressed immediate excitement at the prospect of conducting a full-scale study the likes of which he had not embarked on since his landmark work of sociology *The Philadelphia Negro*. In accepting the assignment, Du Bois prophetically recognized the importance of the war to the history of modernity and the future of Black people.

As such, he immediately envisioned a serious scholarly study. In the December 1918 issue of *The Crisis*, he advertised the project as “an authentic, scientific and definitive history of our part in this war.”²⁹ He attempted to partner with Carter G. Woodson, founder of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, and the second African American to receive a doctorate in history from Harvard after Du Bois, and George Edmund Haynes, who earned a PhD in sociology from Columbia University and whose work was deeply influenced by Du Bois.³⁰ He most contentiously sought to collaborate with Emmett J. Scott, the former secretary to Booker T. Washington at the Tuskegee Institute who had held the influential position of special assistant to the Secretary of War on matters related to African Americans. Du Bois did not view Scott as a serious scholar, but still recognized his influence.³¹ Ultimately nothing came of these

²⁸Minutes of the Meeting of the Board of Directors, October 14, 1918, Du Bois Papers, UM-A.

²⁹ “War History,” *The Crisis* (December 1918), 61.

³⁰ Morris describes Haynes as an “intellectual protégé” of Du Bois. Morris, *Scholar Denied*, 70-1.

³¹ DB quote in letter about Emmett Scott

attempts to collaborate and Du Bois determined, as he conveyed to an NAACP colleague, “that my contribution to the history be confined to the French side, and that I make a trip to France to collect this matter, and to do what I can at the Peace Conference for the African Colonies.”³²

On December 1, 1918, Du Bois set sail for France aboard the official press ship *Orizaba* accompanying Woodrow Wilson and his delegation to the Versailles peace conference. In discussions of Du Bois’s time in France, organization of the landmark February 1919 Pan-African Congress receives the most attention. Much less acknowledged is his principal “mission” of conducting fieldwork for his study of Black participation in the war.

Du Bois first spoke with and received assistance from key individuals already in Paris who possessed personal knowledge of the experiences of Black troops in France during the war. They included John Hope, the president of Morehouse College who worked as a YMCA secretary, and Blaise Diagne, the Senegalese deputy to the French National Assembly who was responsible for recruiting some two hundred thousand colonial West African *tirailleurs* into the French Army.³³ Du Bois’s relationship with Diagne proved especially important for the fate of the Pan-African Congress, as well as to how Du Bois imagined both France and the place of African troops in the war. Du Bois became intoxicated by France’s *mission civilisatrice* and performance of colorblindness in juxtaposition to the unabashed racism of the United States.³⁴

³² W. E. B. Du Bois to Villard, Peabody, and Wood, November 16, 1918, *The Black Man and the Wounded World*, Proposed Editorial Board, Du Bois Collection, Fisk, box 14, folder 31.

³³ On Diagne and the role of West African troops in the war see,

³⁴ Du Bois’s unapologetic Francophilia invites a comparison with Durkheim. Both exhibit blindspots—Durkheim on self-determination and Du Bois on racial egalitarianism—when it comes to France and empire. See, Williams, *The Wounded World*; Cotesta.

Although Du Bois envisioned his study as a “history,” the research he conducted in France was deeply sociological in method.³⁵ Proving that he was far from a “car-window sociologist,” Du Bois embarked on ethnographic fieldwork amongst African American troops.³⁶ With John Hope serving as a guide, he visited encamped Black soldiers of the 92nd Division at the town of Maron, staying in the home of a French couple who had lost four sons in the war. While in Maron he talked with Black officers and absorbed their “memories of bitter humiliations” and “determined triumphs.”³⁷ His most important research occurred during the first weeks of January 1919, when he traveled to the A.E.F. embarkation zone in Le Mans. Muzzled by a “Visiting Correspondent’s Agreement” that prohibited him from “all criticism of Allied Forces,” with his sharp sociological eyes and ears Du Bois watched and listened, engaging in participant observation akin to his research for *The Philadelphia Negro*. He witnessed the oppressive treatment of Black soldiers by their white commanding officers and absorbed one anecdote after another confirming the extent of American white supremacy in the Army. He was especially invested in learning more about the plight of the 92nd Division’s Black officers and the “whispering gallery” related to their alleged failure on the battlefield in the Meuse-Argonne offensive, fully aware that charges of cowardice and incompetence would bolster pseudo-scientific racist dogma about the leadership capacities of Black men and rationalize their exclusion from the officer ranks in the future. With “story after story and document after document” pouring into Du Bois’s hands, the doctor, as he recalled, came away from his time in Le Mans “utterly amazed and dumbfounded.”³⁸

³⁵ Rabaka, “Embryonic Intersectionality,”

³⁶ Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 469. Also see Morris, *Scholar Denied*

³⁷ Du Bois WEB (1919) “In France” *The Crisis* 17(5), 216.

³⁸ “Our Success and Failure,” *The Crisis* (July 1919), 128.

While maintaining the stance of a dispassionate historian and sociological investigator, what Du Bois experienced was deeply personal as well.³⁹ Before arriving to Le Mans, U.S. Army military intelligence had been alerted to Du Bois's presence and closely watched him every move.⁴⁰ He later spent several days touring the battlefields of the Western Front, where "the trees, the land, the people were scarred and broken," fully realizing the "breathless horror" of the worst carnage in modern history.⁴¹ The war, previously distant and abstract, was now for Du Bois very real.

Du Bois's sociological field research and firsthand observation, however, elicited a crisis. He faced the challenge of how to reconcile his support for the war with the devastation he witnessed and the disturbing evidence he had accumulated. As he wrote to his NAACP colleagues in a January 4, 1919 letter, Black troops were, "bitter to an extent which even you cannot appreciate."⁴² Du Bois, true to his intellectual instincts, responded by fully committing to the war project. In another letter to the NAACP board of directors, Du Bois asserted, underlining for emphasis, "the greatest and most pressing & most important work for the NAACP is the collection and writing & publication of the history of the Negro troops in France."⁴³

Du Bois returned to the United States on March 31, 1919 emboldened and enraged. He channeled these emotions through his sociological and historical lens and into the May issue of

³⁹ On historians and objectivity during the war see, Novick, *That Noble Dream*.

⁴⁰ United States . Army . American Expeditionary Forces . General Headquarters. Memorandum from A. E. F. Division Headquarters to Regimental Intelligence Officers [copy], 1919, Du Bois Papers, UM-A.

⁴¹ "The Fields of Battle," *The Crisis* (April 1919), 268.

⁴² To the Board of Directors, January 4, 1919, Series 1, box I: C385, folder 2, NAACP Papers, Library of Congress.

⁴³ 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.

The Crisis. Along with sharing some of the explosive documents he had acquired while in France and exhorting African Americans in the rousing editorial “Returning Soldiers” to intensify the battle for their rights, he also laid the groundwork for how he would approach writing the history of the war, which he tentatively titled “The Negro in the Revolution of the Twentieth Century” and forecast to appear in three volumes between 1919 and 1921. Du Bois explained:

Most American Negroes do not realize that the imperative duty of the moment is to fix in history the status of our Negro troops. Already subtle influences are preparing a fatal attack. It is repeated openly among influential persons: “The black laborers did well—the black privates can fight—but the Negro officer is a failure.” This is not true and the facts exist to disprove it, but they must be marshalled with historical vision and scientific accuracy.⁴⁴

Backing up his words, the following month, Du Bois provided a “partial and preliminary” sketch of his book with “An Essay Toward a History of the Black Man in the Great War.” He acknowledged the methodological pitfalls of producing such a recent history—describing it as “written now in heat of strong memories and in the place of skulls”—but nevertheless affirmed that his essay contained “truth which cold delay can never alter or bring back.” With impressive detail, based on his research in France, Du Bois demonstrated the contributions of Black soldiers to the Allied victory in spite of the intense hatred and false racial propaganda they endured at the hands of white American military officials. Once “enlarged and expanded,” Du Bois’s book, as he envisioned it, would honor the role of Black soldiers in “the first great struggle of the modern

⁴⁴ “History,” *The Crisis* (May 1919), 11.

Negro race for liberty.” He hoped to subsequently “lay before historians and sociologists the documents and statistics upon which my final views are based.”⁴⁵

The “Red Summer” of 1919 suddenly shook Du Bois’s social scientific rationality and, along with it, his hopes in the transformative potential of the war. Race riots erupted in Washington, DC, Chicago, and other cities across the country in the months following the armistice and the return of Black troops to their communities. White supremacists in Elaine, Arkansas engaged in a full-scale massacre of African Americans that left hundreds dead. The number of lynching victims skyrocketed, which included several Black veterans, some still in uniform. Du Bois recalled the horrific violence as a time of “extraordinary and unexpected reaction” and “the worst experience of mob law and race hate that the United States had seen since Reconstruction.”⁴⁶ He conveyed the postwar mood in his book *Darkwater*, published in early 1920, where he pondered, “How great a failure and a failure in what does the World War betoken?”⁴⁷ In order to answer this question, Du Bois, steeling his purpose, turned his full attention to writing what he confidently believed would be the definitive history of the Black experience in the conflict.

The Black Man and the Wounded World *and Reckoning with Failure*

Beginning in 1920 and continuing in fits and spurts through 1925, Du Bois devoted considerable time and energy into writing his war history. Like the *Philadelphia Negro* before it,

⁴⁵ Du Bois, “An Essay Toward a History of the Black Man in the Great War,” *The Crisis* (June 1919).

⁴⁶ Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn*, 747, 734.

⁴⁷ W. E. B. Du Bois, *Darkwater: Voices From Within the Veil*. (1920),

Du Bois had no models from which to shape his book. Other self-promoted “histories” hastily written by Black authors, eager to capitalize on a postwar reading market, presented uncritical accounts and lacked serious research.⁴⁸ Historical works produced by white authors made little to no mention of Black troops, and those that did, were racist screeds that slandered African American soldiers and officers as incompetent, cowardly and obsessed with lusting after white French women.⁴⁹ Du Bois therefore embarked on creating a wholly original study of the war rooted in his devotion to history and sociology as means to challenge both popular and scholarly racist misconceptions of Black people and their place in the modern world.

His research and initial writing operated on two conceptual tracks. First, Du Bois believed that by demonstrating the indisputable facts of Black peoples contribution to the war his study would bolster the argument for their rights to full democracy and self-determination, both in the United States and the broader African diaspora. For African Americans—the primary focus of the book—this meant asserting their claims to equal citizenship in relation to an American tradition of military service as civic obligation and patriotic duty. Second, he wanted to both uncover and understand the systemic racial discrimination Black soldiers endured in order to refute claims that Black soldiers, and officers in particular, had failed in the war. This constituted part of Du Bois’s life-long commitment to understanding the color-line and its metastatic nature across place and time.

⁴⁸ See books by Kelly Miller, W. Allison Sweeny and Emmett J. Scott, all published in 1919.

⁴⁹ General Robert Lee Bullard’s 1925 memoir was especially controversial. Robert Lee Bullard, *Personalities and Reminiscences of the War*. (New York: Doubleday, Page, 1925). On African American reaction to it, including Du Bois, see, Williams, *The Wounded World*, 291-98.

When it came to his research, Du Bois adopted a mixed method approach, a hallmark of his sociology.⁵⁰ This was both qualitative and quantitative. Qualitatively, he solicited documents and testimonies from Black veterans, whose personal stories offered a deeply human element to the history Du Bois began to write. He coupled this with quantitative empirical research, putting his training in statistics to use. Du Bois wanted precise data on the number of African American soldiers in the Army. He combed through published records on the draft published by the Provost Marshal and any records from the War Department that he could acquire, through both official and unofficial channels.⁵¹ Du Bois then proceeded to break down his data into various subgroups to understand exactly where Black soldiers served and in what capacities. He soon compiled a dizzying amount of facts and figures which he attempted to meticulously organize by handwriting subject headings on dozens of small paper-thin index cards.

Du Bois also took a visual approach to his research, a hallmark of his sociological imagination.⁵² His personal archive included maps, battlefield scenes, and group photographs of Black soldiers. Du Bois seemed most interested in studio portrait photographs of individual Black soldiers, and officers in particular, dressed and posing in full uniform. Similar to his use of photography in the 1900 Paris Exposition to demonstrate Black progress and respectability in the post-emancipation South, Du Bois likely intended to refute racist stereotypes and false historical

⁵⁰ Bryan R. Ellis, "W.E.B. Du Bois's Sociological Epistemology: A Liberal Arts Approach," *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 40:3, 485-487.

⁵¹ W. E. B. Du Bois to United States Superintendent of Documents, August 14, 1919. W. E. B. Du Bois Papers; Report of the Provost Marshal General to the Secretary of War on the first draft under the selective-service act, 1917, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers

⁵² Whitney Battle-Baptiste and Britt Rusert, eds., *W. E. B. Du Bois's Data Portraits: Visualizing Black America, the Color Line at the Turn of the Twentieth Century*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2018.

narratives of Black soldiers with visual evidence of their dignity, manhood and patriotic service.⁵³

In surveying the experiences of African Americans in the war and the particularly heinous treatment of Black troops, Du Bois had no choice but to acknowledge the intractability of the color-line and hypocrisy of America's professed commitment to democracy. The war demonstrated how for Black people, even patriotic loyalty, civic duty and shedding blood for the nation was insufficient to overcome the forces of white supremacy and race hatred. However, squaring this with his enthusiastic championing of the war presented an intellectual quandary, one that was also deeply personal.

During his period of most focused writing in 1920, Du Bois drafted a chapter aptly titled, "The Challenge." The majority of the chapter is a summary of the state of prewar race relations and key domestic events that African Americans experienced during the war itself. Dispassionate and methodical, it can be read as indicative of Du Bois's adherence to historical objectivity and candid sociological documentation. The final page of the chapter, however, takes a dramatic turn and finds Du Bois in existential turmoil, his own subjectivity coming to the fore, ruminating on what it meant for the race and him personally to support 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," Du Bois wrote. "I saw it and saw it with streaming eyes." He admitted to being "bitter," but tried to find solace in how he, "saw all the hurts, the tears, the pain as in one country and that country was mine." It was a fleeting moment, "but thank God that it came once," he rationalized, believing that, "The war that brought slavery to most men (and indeed in the end to us) thus

⁵³ Shawn Michelle Smith, *Photography on the Color Line: W. E. B. Du Bois, Race and Visual Culture*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2004.

brought to some of us at a time new vision of freedom.” Black people, as seen through his sociological theorization of double consciousness and the self, “were at least free from our bonds,” not psychologically shackled by the color-line and the weight of their Blackness consuming their Americanness. “We could think with the nation and not as a mere group,” Du Bois ruminated, further adding, “The edges of our inner dark world slipped and sought to coalesce with the surrounding half known larger world. Great movements were our movements. Great joys and sorrows ours.” Unable to formulate a rational sociological explanation for his patriotic euphoria and decision to support the war, Du Bois concedes, “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.” Mournfully accepting that the war did little to change the reality of the color-line as an impediment to social recognition, he concluded on a wistful note: “How in the end did all this set with our inner problem? After all it was not a mere bargain—it was a moving wish.”⁵⁴

In the ensuing years, Du Bois continued to confront the ugly legacy of the war. One example after another deepened his disillusionment and eroded his initial belief in the conflict’s transformative potential: continued racial violence; the endurance of European imperialism in spite of his Pan-African Congresses; the death of good friend Charles Young; the fight over a segregated veterans’ hospital in Tuskegee, Alabama. The war, in Du Bois’s historical and sociological imagination, had now become an unmitigated tragedy. In 1923 he gave his book a new evocative title: *The Black Man and the Wounded World*.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ *The Black Man and the Wounded World*, chap. 8, “The Challenge,” Du Bois Collection, Fisk, box 27, folder 5. On social recognition see, Itzigsohn and Brown, 39. Du Bois’s thoughts also reinforce the inadequacy of formulations by sociologist such as George Mead, and how playing the “game”—in this case serving their country as patriotic soldiers—did not result in Black people becoming recognized as full Americans.

⁵⁵ See, Williams, *The Wounded World*, esp. Ch. 8.

In the January 1924 issue of *The Crisis*, Du Bois previewed his book by publishing its introduction, his most analytically sophisticated writing about the war. Like his landmark 1915 *Atlantic Monthly* article “The African Roots of War,” he frames the origins of the conflict in the development of modern imperialism and national rivalries fueled by greed to exploit Africa’s material and human resources. However, what makes the chapter particularly striking is its sociological theorization of power and who bore ultimate responsibility for the maelstrom. Du Bois posits the existence of the “Dominant Wills,” a “small but intelligent and highly specialized minority of men” who sought income (as opposed to wages), thwarted industrial democracy, and controlled public opinion. Through race propaganda and the seductive power of whiteness, the “Dominant Wills” secured the complicity of the European working classes in the imperial project. The costs, however, proved catastrophic. As Du Bois wrote, “in allocating the spoils of the Earth, Europe fell into a jealous quarrel that nearly overthrew Civilization and left it mortally wounded.” “The Great War was a Scourge, an Evil, a retrogression to Barbarism, a waste, a wholesale murder,” Du Bois declared without equivocation, that was “precipitated by the will of men” and specifically “those whose acts and thoughts made up the Dominant Wills and who were willing to increase their incomes at the expense of those who suffer in Europe and out, under the present industrial system.” Du Bois’s diagnosis harkened back to his earliest attempts to clear the “metaphysical cobwebs” of sociology and define it as “assuming the data of physics and studying within these that realm where determinate force is acted on by human wills. . . .”⁵⁶ This meant emphasizing the primacy of human agency and avoiding vague generalizations and “natural” explanations for historical phenomena.⁵⁷ “Systems and Nations are not to blame,” Du

⁵⁶ Du Bois, “Sociological Hesitant,” 43.

⁵⁷ Morris, *Scholar Denied*, 29.

Bois asserted, “individuals are to blame. Individuals caused the Great War, did its devilry and are guilty of its endless Crime.”⁵⁸

Despite the tremendous promise of *The Black Man and the Wounded World*, Du Bois struggled to complete his book. He had difficulty securing funding support, a reflection of how the work of early twentieth century Black social scientists was tied to the largesse of white philanthropy, and, in Du Bois’s case, further complicated by his perceived “radical” approach to both history and sociology.⁵⁹ The personal regret Du Bois harbored for supporting the war posed an even greater obstacle. From the late-1920s, throughout the 1930s, and into the 1940s, Du Bois expressed a striking mix of remorse, shame and confusion for supporting the war that coincided with his struggles to write about it. In the October 1928 issue of *The Crisis*, Du Bois published the article “The Possibility of Democracy in America,” where he felt the need to “apologize” for his belief that “notwithstanding the slaughter and the upheaval that always accompany war we were going to have in the world an extension of democracy as a result of the fighting.” “I was wrong in what I was predicting,” he surprisingly admitted.⁶⁰

Du Bois’s belief in the failure of World War I and his own lack of intellectual confidence reached its apex with the arrival of World War II, not coincidentally the same time that he decided to abandon *The Black Man and the Wounded World*. Despite devoting over two decades to researching, writing and drafting a twenty-one chapter and over eight-hundred-page

⁵⁸ W. E. B. Du Bois, “The Black Man and the Wounded World: A History of the Negro Race in the World War and After,” *The Crisis* (January 1924), 110-14.

⁵⁹ See Eric Anderson and Alfred A. Moss, *Dangerous Donations: Northern Philanthropy and Southern Black Education, 1902-1930* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999); Maribel Morey, “W. E. B. Du Bois’s International Lens on Modern US Philanthropy and His Fleeting Hopes for Reform,” in Aldon Morris et al., *The Oxford Handbook of W. E. B. Du Bois* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

⁶⁰ W. E. B. Du Bois, “The Possibility of Democracy in America,” *The Crisis* (October 1928), 336.

manuscript, Du Bois's magnum opus on the Black experience in the war, remained incomplete and ultimately never published. In *Dusk of Dawn*, published in 1940, Du Bois wrote that he had "difficulty in thinking clearly" when reflecting on the war, a stunning admission for the preeminent Black intellectual of his times.⁶¹ He added further:

"I am less sure now than then of the soundness of this war attitude. I did not realize the full horror of war and its wide impotence as a method of social reform. Perhaps, despite words, I was thinking narrowly of the interest of my group and was willing to let the world go to hell, if the black man went free. Today I do not know; and I doubt if the triumph of Germany in 1918 could have had worse results than the triumphs of the Allies. Possibly passive resistance of my twelve millions to any war activity might have saved the world for black and white. Almost certainly such a proposal on my part would have fallen flat and perhaps slaughtered the American Negro body and soul. I don't know. I am puzzled."⁶²

Even with the tools of social science at his disposal, Du Bois could not make complete sense of the war and, most painfully, his support for it. In his efforts to write *The Black Man and the Wounded World*, Du Bois's inability to fully reconcile the war as a historical moment and sociological phenomenon, with his tortured personal relationship to it ultimately prevented him from mustering the intellectual and moral focus to finish what would have been one of his most significant books.

⁶¹ Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn*, 739.

⁶² Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn*,

World War I affected Du Bois arguably more than any other historical moment that he lived through. The global conflagration transformed him on multiple levels. First, it marked the apex of Du Bois's democratic idealism. While still very much an adherent to the importance of democracy, Du Bois's experience in the war sharpened his critique, as well as his skepticism that it could ever be achieved so long as racism, colonialism, wealth inequality and the threat of war remained global realities.

Second, the war shattered his faith in the reformational power of unequivocal patriotism and narrow nationalism to improve conditions for African Americans and alter the color-line. At the time, Du Bois believed that by demonstrating their loyalty, on and off the battlefield, African Americans would change the racial attitudes of white people and be rewarded with greater rights. This calculation proved tragically wrong, as the color-line proved more intractable than Du Bois imagined. Du Bois's reckoning with the war was thus key to his hardening sociological conceptualization of race during the 1930s and into the 1940s as a structural phenomenon rooted in the material and bodily exploitation of Black people.

Lastly, on a personal and political level, the war and Du Bois's decades long reckoning with it was central to his evolution as an uncompromising peace activist and leftist radicalism. In 1949, Du Bois made his antiwar convictions clear when he headlined a series of international gatherings and helped establish the short-lived Peace Information Center (PIC). These activities, in the view of the federal government in the midst of the Cold War "red scare" made Du Bois a threat. In 1951, the Justice Department indicted Du Bois, eighty-three years old at the time, on charges of being an agent of a foreign principal and threatened him with five years in prison. 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 book 1952, *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.”⁶³

Du Bois, intellectual to his core, attempted to make sense of all of this the best way he knew how: writing a book. *The Black Man and the Wounded World* represented Du Bois’s ambitious attempt to use the tools of social science to understand and explain what he rightfully saw as the most important moment in the twentieth century and development of the modern world. But it ultimately proved to be a subject too vexing, historically and sociologically, and too disillusioning, personally and politically. While other classical sociologists lived through and wrestled with the war, none of their experiences compared to that of Du Bois, whose long and complex relationship to it truly transformed his life.

⁶³ Du Bois, *In Battle for Peace*, 164.

Bibliography