

STATE OF THE ART

In the Shadow of World War

Revisiting W. E. B. Du Bois's Black Reconstruction

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Abstract

Black Reconstruction by W. E. B. Du Bois stands as one of the most groundbreaking books in American history. Scholars have acknowledged how the book, published in 1935, and Du Bois's arguments in it, pioneered the study of the Civil War and Reconstruction eras today. This article explores the genesis and conceptual roots of *Black Reconstruction* by placing them in conversation with Du Bois's connection to World War I. For several years, Du Bois labored on a history of the Black experience in World War I that he imagined as a sequel to *Black Reconstruction*. Du Bois's work on this project, informed by his personal connection to the war, shaped many of the themes and ideas at the heart of *Black Reconstruction*. I argue that the full meaning of *Black Reconstruction* is incomplete without an understanding of the impact of World War I on Du Bois's political evolution, intellectual development, and radical approach to history.

Keywords: W. E. B. Du Bois; *Black Reconstruction*; World War I; Historiography; Race; Democracy

Introduction

Of W. E. B. Du Bois's many published works of history, none are more towering than *Black Reconstruction*. Released in 1935, the book, for its time, constituted a radical reinterpretation of the Civil War and its aftermath by Black America's foremost intellectual-activist. Du Bois challenged the indictment proffered by White historians of Reconstruction as an era of tragic failure that justified the exclusion of African Americans from American political life in the twentieth century. Du Bois, to the contrary, viewed Reconstruction as a bold experiment in multiracial democracy, with Black people the central actors, that came to a tragically premature end.¹ Sixty-seven years old at the time of its publication, *Black Reconstruction* represented for Du Bois the culmination of a lifetime spent committed to the study of the "race question" and the struggle for Black freedom. Ever so humble, as he neared completion of the manuscript Du Bois, in a letter to a friend, referred to the book as "my magnum opus" (Du Bois 1934a).

Scholars across the disciplines today certainly validate Du Bois's assessment. Indeed, *Black Reconstruction* holds a revered status in academia and beyond. The book has served as a touchstone, dating back to John Hope Franklin's *Reconstruction after the Civil War* (1961), for revisionist approaches, to the study of the Civil War and Reconstruction eras. Eric Foner (2013) rightfully indebts his own work to Du Bois, lauding *Black Reconstruction* as "one of the landmarks of U.S. historical scholarship" (p. 409).² For the past three decades,

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the field, owing to the seeds planted by Du Bois, has flourished, exploring the full ramifications of this historical period from multiple vantage points and confirming what Du Bois himself wrote: “Reconstruction was an economic revolution on a mighty scale and with world-wide reverberation” (Du Bois 1995, p. 346).³

One of the most significant—and catastrophic—reverberations Du Bois would point to was the First World War. World War I was a defining moment for the African diaspora, African Americans more specifically, and Du Bois in particular.⁴ In the numerous works analyzing *Black Reconstruction*, the connections between Reconstruction, as Du Bois historicized it, and World War I have remained unexplored. This omission is especially glaring when considering Du Bois’s personal connection to the war and his decades long efforts to write its history. Du Bois, in fact, envisioned *Black Reconstruction* as the first of two consecutive books exploring the history and meaning of democracy for Black people in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The second book was a study of the participation of African Americans and other people of African descent in World War I, titled *The Black Man and the Wounded World*.

Du Bois, after considerable effort, completed *Black Reconstruction*. Its sequel, however, remained unpublished. Just why Du Bois did not finish *The Black Man and the Wounded World*, despite two decades of research and writing, is a longer story that I explore elsewhere.⁵ For the purposes of this article, I am interested in why Du Bois imagined these two projects as connected and what we can learn from his deep investment in the history and memory of World War I about the genealogy, as well as the ideological and thematic impulses, animating *Black Reconstruction*.

While historically groundbreaking, *Black Reconstruction* is a text very much rooted in its present moment. “If the Reconstruction of the Southern states, from slavery to free labor, and from aristocracy to industrial democracy, had been conceived as a major national program of America, whose accomplishment at any price was well worth the effort, we should be living today in a different world,” Du Bois wrote in the moving chapter “Back Toward Slavery” (Du Bois, 1995, p. 708). He approached *Black Reconstruction* as a commentary on the continued problem of the color-line as he saw it in 1935. Employing history as a tool of contemporary reckoning, Du Bois drew a direct connection between the premature demise of Reconstruction and the disaster of World War I in reinforcing White supremacy, economic inequality, and the curtailment of democracy for peoples of African descent. The fact that Du Bois lived through World War I, experienced its trauma, and throughout the 1920s and early 1930s wrestled with its failure—personally and historically—formed his approach to historicizing the Reconstruction Era.

I want to therefore complicate what sociologist Charles Lemert refers to as the “historical time” that shapes and frames the book. Of Du Bois, Lemert writes, “It is hard to say when and where he began to think as he thought in *Black Reconstruction*. It is not difficult at all to conclude that this was his most mature work—the coming out of ideas that were long abrewing... .” (Lemert 2000, p. 226). Du Bois, as David Levering Lewis and other scholars have demonstrated, held a longstanding interest in Reconstruction, dating back to a 1901 article in the *Atlantic Monthly* and up to his 1924 book *The Gift of Black Folk* (Lewis 2000).⁶ But to fully appreciate and engage with the “historical time” of *Black Reconstruction* requires acknowledging the First World War as the generative moment in Du Bois’s intellectual maturity, along with his attempts in its aftermath to understand its political and historical significance. The World War represented a critical source of Du Bois’s historical imagination as he crafted his landmark book.⁷ His ideas on war and Black military service, class and capitalism, global empire and White supremacy, and the broader meaning of democracy matured through the crucible of the World War and its wake. He took this knowledge, filtered it through the past, and applied it to the moment when, as he poignantly wrote, freed Black people “stood a brief moment in the sun” (Du Bois 1995, p. 30). *Black Reconstruction* was the result.

Du Bois and World War I

By 1931, when Du Bois began work on *Black Reconstruction* in earnest, he had already invested years in writing the history of Black people in the Great War. From the start of the war, as he presciently wrote in his first published thoughts, "World War and the Color Line" in November 1914, Du Bois diagnosed its causes in, "the wild quest for Imperial expansion among colored races" between the European belligerents (Du Bois 1914). He went a step further in "The African Roots of War" for the May 1915 issue of *The Atlantic*, declaring, "Yet in a very real sense Africa is a prime cause of this terrible overturning of civilization which we have lived to see" (Du Bois 1915, p. 707). Much more than a fratricidal conflict between feuding European monarchies, Du Bois saw the war as the product of a larger historical and ideological phenomenon of economic competition based in the late nineteenth century belief of Africans and other peoples of color as racially inferior, incapable of self-rule, and thus inherently exploitable.

American entry into the war in April 1917 changed the calculus for Du Bois. He, like so many other Americans, was enraptured by President Woodrow Wilson's vision to make the world "safe for democracy." Du Bois's convictions, however, were grounded in a radical critique of White supremacy and a belief that democracy could indeed be applied to racially oppressed people. "We must extend the democratic ideal to the yellow, brown, and black peoples," he wrote in "The African Roots of War," adding, "Suppose we have to choose between this unspeakably inhuman outrage on decency and intelligence and religion which we call the World War and the attempt to treat black men as human, sentient, responsible beings?" (Du Bois 1915, p. 712). More narrowly, Du Bois's belief in the democratic potential of the war was also based in his view of Black military service, and the Civil War in particular, as a revolutionary moment in the history of African American freedom and citizenship. "As our country it rightly demands our whole-hearted defense as well today as when with Crispus Attucks we fought for independence and with 200,000 black soldiers we helped hammer out our own freedom," he declared at the June 1917 NAACP annual meeting in Washington, DC (Du Bois 1917a, b). While against war in principle, he believed that the World War could have a similar impact, especially if African Americans, as they had in the past, offered their lives as soldiers and officers, this time on the bloody battlefields of France.

Du Bois therefore threw himself into the American war effort. He preached patriotic loyalty, championed a segregated officers' training camp, and encouraged the full mobilization of Black soldiers in combat. He continued to speak out against racial injustice, such as the July 1917 East St. Louis pogrom, but later admitted to being seduced "by the emotional response of America to what seemed to be a great call to duty" (Du Bois 1930a).⁸ Most controversially, he applied for a captaincy in the Army's Military Intelligence Bureau and, in the July 1918 issue of *The Crisis*, wrote "Close Ranks," calling for African Americans to forget their "special grievances" and fight shoulder to shoulder with the Allies and their fellow White citizens (Du Bois 1918a). The surrounding uproar nearly ruined his leadership credibility, with his most vociferous critics branding him a traitor to the race.⁹

To his great surprise, at the October 1918 meeting of the NAACP Board of Directors, Du Bois received an opportunity for redemption. The Board approved a motion for Du Bois to spearhead production of a book on the role of Black soldiers in the war (Du Bois 1918b). In December 1918, he traveled to France to conduct research for the project, as well as organize a Pan-African Congress. For several weeks during his time overseas, Du Bois toured the battlefields and visited troop encampments. Under the watchful eye of military intelligence, he met and spoke with Black soldiers and officers who revealed in vivid detail the systemic racial discrimination and abuse they had endured in the American Army (Schoonmaker 1919). Du Bois was both shocked and galvanized. As he informed

confidants in New York in a January 19, 1919 note, underlining for emphasis, “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” (Du Bois 1919a).

Beginning immediately after his return to the United States in March 1919 and continuing for the next several years, Du Bois devoted considerable time to compiling records for and writing his book. With Black veterans serving as proxy research assistants, he amassed an unrivaled personal archive of diaries, letters, official Army directives, memoirs, and photographs. He promised eager *Crisis* readers that his “scientific and exhaustive history of the black man in the Great War” would be authoritative and dispel the malicious claims of White military officials that Black soldiers and officers were cowards and failures in combat (Du Bois 1919b). Du Bois’s work with the NAACP, additional pan-African congresses in 1921 and 1923, and other books such as *Darkwater* and *The Gift of Black Folk* diluted his focus. He did, however, publish the introductory chapter, “Interpretations,” in the January 1924 issue of *The Crisis* and followed this with part of the second chapter, “The Story of the War,” in the March issue. By this time, in the wake of the Red Summer of 1919, the entrenchment of European imperialism, and the continued marginalization of Black people from American civic life, the democratic hopes for the war Du Bois once believed in had faded into disillusionment and deep regret (Du Bois 1924a, b). He gave the book a new evocative title to reflect this personal and historical mood: *The Black Man and the Wounded World*.¹⁰

But even for the incomparable Du Bois, completing *The Black Man and the Wounded World* proved incredibly challenging. Over the next six years he continued to tinker with the book, as well as compile more documents. The size and scope of the project, both physically as well as intellectually, became overwhelming. Du Bois applied to numerous foundations and philanthropies, requesting funding which would afford free time from his responsibilities with the NAACP. He had no luck, as they deemed his manuscript either too sprawling or, as the Rockefeller Foundation explained in its rejection, not in accordance with their principles (Du Bois 1927). They saw little value in a history of Black folk in the World War, especially one that challenged the prevailing view of its origins and the role of Black soldiers and officers in it. By 1930, despite over a decade of effort and a manuscript well over 700 pages in length, the prospects of *The Black Man and the Wounded World* looked bleak.

“...two projects which I have in mind...”

NAACP Executive Secretary and close friend James Weldon Johnson came to Du Bois’s rescue. Johnson encouraged Du Bois to inquire with the Rosenwald Fund, one the nation’s most generous philanthropic organizations in the arena of race relations and African American uplift (Embree 1949). Du Bois also had a good relationship with the Rosenwald Fund and its director Edwin Embree. On December 19, 1930, Du Bois wrote Embree about “assistance from the Rosenwald Fund to two projects which I have in mind” (Du Bois 1930b).

Du Bois’s first priority was “completion of my history of the Negro in the World War.” He briefly informed Embree about its background. With over a decade worth of research compiled and a significant portion of the manuscript already drafted, he hoped that Embree would see the merits of a project that, as he stressed, “I am exceedingly anxious to finish.” The second project Du Bois proposed was the “story of Reconstruction after the Civil War.” As Du Bois explained to Embree, while much had been written on the subject from the perspective of White northerners and southerners, informed by “intense feeling” much more so than scientific historical accuracy, little had been produced “from the point of view of the Negro.” He planned to change that. “I want these two pieces of work to be literature

and not simply mechanical history,” Du Bois wrote, explaining to Embree his approach to studying and communicating the past. “That is,” he continued, “while based upon an unassailable foundation of fact, I want it to be an interpretation of the human soul down in language which is intelligible and beautiful” (Du Bois 1930b). Embree was convinced. Notching a rare victory in his quest for funding, Du Bois received a grant for \$6,000, distributed over a two-year period from 1931 to 1933 (Du Bois 1931a).

Du Bois soon made a decision about which project to prioritize. On September 11, 1931, Du Bois received a letter from his longtime publisher Alfred Harcourt. “My spies tell me the very interesting news that you are at work on a history of the Reconstruction period,” he wrote. With his curiosity piqued, Harcourt hoped that Du Bois would discuss the project with him (Du Bois 1931b). Du Bois, confirming Harcourt’s sleuthing in his September 23 reply, did indeed have a book in mind, with the working title “The Black Man in the Reconstruction of Freedom in America, from 1860-1876.” He boldly contended that “the real hero and center of human interest in this period is the slave who is being emancipated.” He also pitched another book. “I am going to add next year as a second volume “The Black Man and the Wounded World,” describing it as “the part which Negro troops took in the World War and its significance for the world today” (Du Bois 1931c).

“What you say about your history ‘The Black Man in the Reconstruction’ promises a really interesting book,” Harcourt enthused in his reply to Du Bois, also writing, “I should like to hear more about it at your convenience” (Du Bois 1931d). He made no mention of the proposed sequel on the Black experience in the World War. Du Bois, tellingly, did not press the matter. On October 21, 1931, Du Bois provided Harcourt with a detailed four page seven-point outline of his main arguments for the book (Du Bois 1931e). Harcourt quickly read it and wrote back to Du Bois the following day to convey his enthusiasm for the “splendid” proposal. “It’s a book that you probably can do better than anyone else,” he flattered (Du Bois 1931f). They met a few days later at Harcourt’s office to discuss the project further. By the end of the month, Du Bois had a contract and a \$500 advance (Du Bois 1931g).

Du Bois made slow progress on *Black Reconstruction* over the two years of his Rosenwald fellowship. His efforts to advance an economic solution to the plight of African Americans in the Great Depression, as well as growing tensions within the NAACP, proved both consuming and distracting. On June 3, 1933, as his fellowship period concluded, he provided Edwin Embree with an update on his activities, which included amassing “a considerable library on the subject” and enlisting students for research assistance. Progress on *The Black Man and the Wounded World*, however, effectively ground to a halt. “I had, naturally, hoped to do a great deal more than this; one book on Reconstruction and one on the history of the Negro, before, during and since the World War,” he informed Embree, “but historical and social research is endless.” “Although I am in a way disappointed,” he sighed, “perhaps this is as much as I ought to expect” (Du Bois 1933).

Du Bois nevertheless remained committed to completing *Black Reconstruction*. His departure from the NAACP in 1933 and move to Atlanta University as a professor of sociology afforded him the necessary time and atmosphere to finish the book. While not selling widely, *Black Reconstruction* was met with considerable fanfare following its publication in the spring of 1935. Reviews appeared in newspapers, popular magazines, and academic journals across the country. Reception ran the gamut from effusive praise, engaged critique, to dismissal from Dunning School White historians, whom Du Bois took to task in the blistering concluding chapter “The Propaganda of History.” But even skeptics who disagreed with Du Bois’s methodology, conclusions, and unapologetic polemicism, conceded he had performed an impressive feat that would inevitably reshape the study of Reconstruction in the future.¹¹

Even before *Black Reconstruction* went to print, Du Bois continued to think about its companion. On July 19, 1934, just after submitting a revised copy of his *Black Reconstruction* manuscript to Harcourt and Brace, Du Bois contacted Donald Young of the Social Science Research Council to express his interest in applying for a grant. With his Reconstruction book covering the years between 1850 and 1876, he now wanted to follow it, “with a study of the Negro race from 1876 until after the World War.” “I have already collected the material and written drafts of most of the chapters,” he explained to Young and hoped to spend the next year consolidating and rewriting, with the goal of getting the book out in 1936 or 1937. His work, Du Bois modestly stated, was, “valuable and pretty exhaustive. I think it is worth publication” (Du Bois 1934b).

War, Revolution, Empire, and Democracy in *Black Reconstruction*

Du Bois’s sustained engagement with the meanings and legacies of World War I in *The Black Man and the Wounded World* opens a new window into the central themes of *Black Reconstruction*. A synergy exists between these monumental projects that demands attention. In Du Bois’s vision, Reconstruction and the World War constituted the two defining moments in the history of modern American democracy and the struggle for African American freedom and citizenship. Scholars at the time had yet to fully comprehend their significance, due in large part to not acknowledging the central role played by Black folk. Du Bois, rightfully so, saw himself as singularly endowed to tell both stories. In crafting *Black Reconstruction*, Du Bois built upon and sharpened ideas also at the core of *The Black Man and the Wounded World*, revealing in the process just how much the war and its aftermath personally shaped him, both politically and intellectually.

The story of Reconstruction, as Du Bois told it, hinged on the drama of the Civil War and the heroics of African American soldiers. *The Black Man and the Wounded World* offers clues into Du Bois’s conceptualization of war, Black military service, and heroic manhood. Du Bois devoted six chapters and hundreds of pages to the experiences of the 92nd and 93rd Divisions, the two segregated American combat units for Black soldiers. Engaging in a project of historical reclamation and redemption, Du Bois meticulously detailed every aspect of their experience and contributions to the Allied victory. He also, using his voluminous research, evidenced the systemic racism they endured. “The history of the 92nd Division is a history of racial discrimination,” he bluntly asserted in an early chapter draft (Du Bois n.d. a). Black soldiers, in Du Bois’s gendered imagination, were thus central historical actors in the war, as well as powerful symbols of Black manhood and American democratic hypocrisy.

Du Bois performed a similar historical reclamation in *Black Reconstruction* with his discussion of African American soldiers in the Union Army. Du Bois argued that Black people, with Black soldiers as the tip of the spear, made the war a battle over the future of slavery and ultimately secured their own liberation. Whereas Black soldiers in the World War epitomized American White supremacy, Black troops in the Civil War embodied the transformation of the war into a conflict over the destruction of slavery and the hopes of Black people for freedom. In Chapter 5, “The Coming of the Lord,” Du Bois brilliantly examined the material as well as spiritual meaning of emancipation. Black soldiers sit at the core of the chapter. “In the North, the Emancipation Proclamation meant the Negro soldier, and the Negro soldier meant the end of the war,” Du Bois writes, adding, “Here was indeed revolution” (Du Bois 1995, p. 91). His insights were not without shortcomings, as Thavolia Glymph (2013) notes Du Bois’s highly gendered conceptualization of freedom and lack of historical vision when it came to recognizing the resistance of enslaved women.¹² As Reconstruction began to take shape in the final days of the war and Abraham Lincoln pondered the future fate of African Americans, “Nothing else made Negro

citizenship conceivable,” Du Bois stressed, “but the record of the Negro soldier as a fighter” (Du Bois 1995, p. 104).

While Du Bois, as he set out to do in *The Black Man and the Wounded World*, reclaimed the legacy of Black soldiers, exalted their manhood, and glorified their contributions, he did not glorify war itself. Although Du Bois still viewed the Civil War as revolutionary, his view was tempered by the disillusionment of World War I. Indeed, he saw how war can just as easily have reactionary and even counterrevolutionary effects. The horror of the “Red Summer” of 1919, a period he later described as one of “extraordinary and unexpected reaction,” confirmed that the product of war, as he wrote in *Black Reconstruction*, is often “crime and disorder and social upheaval, as we who live in the backwash of World War know too well” (Du Bois 1986, p. 747; Du Bois 1995, p. 670). In the chapter “Looking Backwards,” he vividly detailed how the end of the Civil War ushered in the Black Codes, a failure to advance Black suffrage and land reform, and widespread racial violence. “The cry of the bewildered freeman rose,” he wrote, “but it was drowned by the Rebel yell” (Du Bois 1995, p. 180). Du Bois’s sober clear-eyed portrayal of the war reflected, as David Blight (1994) has argued, his commitment to deromanticizing American history and its national myths.

Arguably the most controversial aspect of *Black Reconstruction* is Du Bois’s Marxist framework and class analysis. Prior to the World War, Du Bois had a guarded relationship with Marxism, viewing it as too theoretically abstract for his tastes and politically inapplicable to the unique conditions of the “race problem” in America (Saman 2020). Historical developments created by the war, most notably the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, the founding of the Communist International in 1919, the mass migration and proletarianization of southern African Americans and West Indians to the urban North, the development of the Communist Party USA, and the role of prominent Black communists like Claude McKay in shaping discussion around the “Negro Question,” forced Du Bois to take Marxism more seriously.¹³ Du Bois’s postwar disillusionment eventually compelled him to visit the Soviet Union in 1926, a watershed experience in his thinking and political orientation. His trip, followed by the upheaval of the Great Depression, sparked Du Bois to become a self-trained student in scientific socialism at Atlanta University, where he condensed years of study into a matter of months and introduced courses on Marx into the sociology curriculum. *Black Reconstruction* is the product of Du Bois’s political and intellectual evolution and his attempt to construct a theory of history to understand the struggle for Black freedom, the global nature of class relations, and the conjoined failures of capitalism and liberal democracy.

We miss an important step in Du Bois’s revolutionary theoretical development by overlooking his unpublished study of the World War and, specifically, its conceptual framing. In the opening chapter of *The Black Man and the Wounded World*, Du Bois begins by asking, “What is the ruling power in any given country?” He then sketches out the evolution of modern capitalism and a world ruled by what he termed the “Dominant Wills.” This narrow class of income seekers consolidated and maintained power over the masses of “wage-earners” through the wielding of wealth, propaganda, manipulation of law, and physical force. Capitalism’s next evolutionary stage, the “New Imperialism,” as Du Bois described it, stemmed from “the policy of conquest, slavery, monopoly and theft in Eastern Europe, Asia, Africa, and Central and South America.” The working class, instead of seeing their common cause with Black and Brown workers, accepted the imperial spoils of the “Dominant Wills” and the seductive ideology of White supremacy. This combination of greed, racism, and democratic subversion led to the World War. “All those modern civilized citizens who submitted voluntarily to the Dominant Wills of those who rule the leading lands in 1914,” Du Bois wrote, “were blood guilty of the murder of the men who fell in the war” (n.d. b).

In *Black Reconstruction*, Du Bois demonstrates that this late nineteenth and early twentieth century global system of capitalist exploitation and attendant race and class stratification had deeper roots. Du Bois, training his focus specifically on the United States, revisits the arguments about the relationship between capital, power, class, and Whiteness he proffered in the opening chapter of *The Black Man and the Wounded World*. The most crucial distinction, however, is that his Marxist framework and “naming of things,” as Cedric Robinson (2020) puts it, is much more explicit and theoretically grounded (p. 199). Reflecting his post 1926 immersion in scientific socialism and Marxist theory, he moves past the generalizing language of “Dominant Wills” and “wage-earners,” to clearly identify the social groups complicit in the demise of Reconstruction: the capitalist “Empire of Industry” in the North that through their wealth and power effectively controlled the state; the northern White proletariat infused with European immigrants that increasingly viewed Black citizenship as a threat to their fragile political and economic standing; the southern “plantocracy” of former slaveholders willing to collude with northern capitalists for control of property and Black labor; the southern White proletariat who, against their economic interests, accepted the psychological wage of Whiteness in lieu of challenging the planter class. The southern Black proletariat of freedpeople bore the ultimate costs. In the end, Du Bois concluded, “Northern capital compromised, and Southern capital accepted race hate and black disfranchisement as a permanent program of exploitation” (Du Bois 1995, pp. 626-7).

This sordid demise to Reconstruction, Du Bois contended, had global ramifications. Du Bois’s Marxian analysis flowed from his internationalism and anti-imperialist commitments (see Rabaka 2021). Amongst *Black Reconstruction*’s many radical contributions, Moon-Ho Jung (2013) identifies Du Bois’s “searing critique of the U.S. empire,” as the book’s “most revolutionary and enduring insight” (p. 465). Du Bois opened *Black Reconstruction* by foregrounding the place of the “Black worker,” the “underlying cause” of the Civil War and central actor in the drama of Reconstruction, as the “founding stone of a new economic system in the nineteenth century and for the modern world” (Du Bois 1995, p. 15). He then connected the Black worker to the “dark and vast sea of human labor” throughout the colonial world. He expounds on this further in the chapter “Counter-Revolution of Property.” With the end of Reconstruction, “The United States,” Du Bois argued, “was turned into a reactionary force. It became the cornerstone of that new imperialism which is subjecting the labor of yellow, brown and black peoples to the dictation of capitalism organized on a world basis” (Du Bois 1995, p. 631). By turning its back on freedpeople, America sent a message to the world that the “darker people” could not be seen as equals, but only as inferiors “to be governed for their own good” and “compelled to work.” “The world wept because within the exploiting group of New World masters,” Du Bois asserted, “greed and jealousy became so fierce that they fought for trade and markets and materials and slaves all over the world until at last in 1914 the world flamed in war” (Du Bois 1995, p. 634).

As this last quote reflects, Du Bois’s trenchant analysis is directly attributable to World War I. *Black Reconstruction* can be read as a prequel of sorts to the landmark 1915 article “The African Roots of War.” Even more directly, *The Black Man and the Wounded World* constitutes a vital bridge in Du Bois’s conception of the history of modern imperialism, linking 1876 to the moment when he publishes *Black Reconstruction*. Even though African American troops constituted his main focus, Du Bois envisioned his book as a global history, revealing the impact of the World War on the full African diaspora. With drafted chapters on colonial troops in the French and English armies opening the manuscript, he demonstrated how the imperial exploitation of Black labor and the expendability of Black life reached its apogee between 1914-1918.¹⁴ He also mused on the implications of the war

for the future of pan-Africanism and the struggle to achieve African self-determination from European colonial rule (see Du Bois *n.d. f*).

Finally, and most urgently, *Black Reconstruction* addressed the question of democracy itself. The book's lengthy subtitle—"A history of the part which Black Folk played in the attempt to reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880"—speaks to Du Bois's ultimate goal. Understanding the nature of democracy and its role in the future of oppressed people is a central thread in Du Bois's life work and scholarship that *Black Reconstruction* most powerfully captured.¹⁵ He began the book with the development of slavery and the question, "What were to be the limits of democratic control in the United States? This question remained pertinent on a world-wide scale, as, he wrote, "the problem of democracy expands and touches all races and nations" (Du Bois 1995, p. 13).

Du Bois, with his support for the Allies in World War I, attempted to put theory into practice. When it came to writing the history of this moment, *The Black Man and the Wounded World* in many ways functioned as Du Bois's case study of America's failed commitment to democracy. In Chapter 8, titled "The Challenge," Du Bois waxed poetically on his—and the race's—decision to support the war in the wish to make democracy a reality for Black folk: "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. It was insanity just the same" (Du Bois *n.d. g*). As the disillusionment of the interwar period continued to unfold, the madness became less divine and more tragic. "For several years after the World War," Du Bois reflected in the October 1928 *Crisis* article "The Possibility of Democracy in America," "I used to talk concerning the results of the War, and to say 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." But now, almost a decade later, he wrote "to apologize and change my thesis." "I was wrong in what I was predicting," he admitted (Du Bois 1928). By 1935, his faith darkened by the Great Depression and the presidency of Herbert Hoover, Du Bois saw American democracy as almost irrevocably broken.

It is tempting to view Du Bois as blithely naïve in his belief of America's and the World War's democratic potential. *Black Reconstruction*, however, provides the historical basis for his optimism. Considered one way, the book is indeed a tragic story, one that Du Bois certainly does not shy away from telling. Race hatred and capitalistic greed not only destroyed the radical potential of Reconstruction, it, "murdered democracy in the United States so completely that the world does not recognize its corpse," Du Bois mourned. But Reconstruction was also the story of Black people, in the face of insurmountable odds, fighting for their freedom and determining to remake the nation and the world. For this reason, Du Bois continued to believe in the "inevitableness of democracy" (Du Bois, 1995, p. 206). "Democracy died save in the hearts of black folk," he proclaimed in *Black Reconstruction* (Du Bois, 1995, p. 30). Du Bois, even as he took his final breathes on Ghanaian soil on August 27, 1963, never lost faith in the capability of black people to restore the heartbeat of democracy for America as well.

Conclusion

Thinking about Du Bois's unfinished book on World War I through the sublime brilliance of *Black Reconstruction* naturally compels us to ask, what if? What if, on the heels of *Black Reconstruction*, he had completed the book? Would it have stood next to *Black Reconstruction* in originality and argumentative power? Would it have been written in language that was equally "intelligible and beautiful"? Would it have served as the touchstone of our contemporary understandings of World War I, and the central role of Black folk in it, similar to the role that *Black Reconstruction* continues to play today? These are tantalizing questions.

These are also, of course, speculative questions that have no definitive answer. We unfortunately do not have a fully complete manuscript of *The Black Man and the Wounded World*, only chapter drafts and fragments. However, we do have *Black Reconstruction*. And what *Black Reconstruction*, viewed through Du Bois's wrestling with the history and meaning of World War I, tells us is that the future of democracy in the United States and beyond depended on the ability to reckon with the relationship between race, war, labor, and empire. Du Bois's idea of *The Black Man and the Wounded World* as a second volume to *Black Reconstruction* made perfect sense. His efforts to write *The Black Man and the Wounded World* did the intellectual work needed to complete *Black Reconstruction*. Together, the two projects revealed how the failure to achieve full democracy for African Americans in the nineteenth century due to White supremacy and economic exploitation created the conditions, domestically and globally, for another even more catastrophic failure to achieve democracy on a world-wide scale in the twentieth century. "War and especially civil strife leave terrible wounds," Du Bois wrote. "It is the duty of humanity to heal them" (Du Bois 1995, p. 713). He sought to do just this with both books.

"The unending tragedy of Reconstruction is the utter inability of the American mind to grasp its real significance, its national and world-wide implications" (Du Bois 1995, p. 708). Du Bois's prophetic words continue to resonate today and attest to the enduring historiographical and political power of *Black Reconstruction*. Du Bois may very well have had similar words for the tragedy of the First World War. The implications of the war for Du Bois, personally and intellectually, were certainly profound. Acknowledging *The Black Man and the Wounded World*, and revisiting *Black Reconstruction* with it in mind, allows us to more fully appreciate Du Bois's genius and the work, published and unpublished, he produced.

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Notes

- ¹ Du Bois was inspired to write *Black Reconstruction* in part as a response to Claude Bowers's book *The Tragic Era*. See, David Levering Lewis, "Introduction," in Du Bois, (1995), viii-ix; Lewis (2000), 359-360; On the Dunning School see, Smith and Lowery (2013).
- ² Foner credits Du Bois for laying the groundwork for his influential 1988 book *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988). Also see, Luke Staszak and colleagues (2015).
- ³ The special Summer 2013 *South Atlantic Quarterly* issue edited by Thavolia Glymph offers an excellent representation of various readings of *Black Reconstruction* and its significance.
- ⁴ Key works on Black participation in World War I include, Barbeau and Henri (1974), Brown (2006), Keene (2001a), Kornweibel (2002), Lentz-Smith (2009), Sammons and Morrow Jr. (2014), Williams (2010). On Du Bois and World War I see, Ellis (1992), Jordan (1995), Lewis (1993), Williams (2018), Smith (2008).
- ⁵ On Du Bois's writing of *The Black Man and the Wounded World* and why it was never published see, Williams (2018), Williams (2023). For additional discussion of the themes of Du Bois's unpublished book also see, Keene (2001b).
- ⁶ Du Bois published "The Freedmen's Bureau" in the March 1901 issue of the *Atlantic Monthly*. The article appeared as Chapter 2, "On the Dawn of Freedom," in *The Souls of Black Folk*, published in 1903. In 1909, Du Bois delivered the paper "Reconstruction and Its Benefits" at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association. His presentation appeared in article form in the *American Historical Review* the following year. Du Bois again revisited the subject of Reconstruction in his 1924 book *The Gift of Black Folk* with the chapter "The Reconstruction of Freedom." The chapter, the longest in the book, anticipated many of the central arguments Du Bois would make in *Black Reconstruction*. See Lewis (2000), pp. 350-360. Also see, Foner and Gates, Jr. (2021); Lewis' Introduction in Du Bois (1995), pp. vii-viii; Parfait (2009).

- ⁷ Thomas Holt (2013), in his otherwise excellent exploration of the sources of Du Bois's historical imagination in *Black Reconstruction*, overlooks World War I.
- ⁸ William Jordan (1995) argues that Du Bois adopted a pragmatic and, when necessary, accommodationist approach to his wartime activities and role as editor of *The Crisis*. For an alternate view on Du Bois's wartime editorship of *The Crisis*, see Smith (2008).
- ⁹ On the "Close Ranks" controversy, see Lewis (1993), pp. 552-560; Ellis (1992, 1995); Jordan (1995).
- ¹⁰ Du Bois initially titled the book "The Black Man in the Revolution of 1914-1918." See Du Bois (1919b). He offered a detailed, albeit preliminary, survey in the June 1919 issue of *The Crisis* (Du Bois 1919c). The first indication of his revised name for the book appeared in early 1923, when he delivered a series of lectures on the Black experience in the World War under the title "The Black Man in the Wounded World."
- ¹¹ On the reception to *Black Reconstruction* see, Lewis' Introduction in Du Bois (1995), pp. xi-xvi; Parfait (2009).
- ¹² For a more explicit Black feminist analysis of *Black Reconstruction* see, Weinbaum (2013).
- ¹³ See Mullen (2016). Writing about the World War in the October 1919 issue of *The Crisis*, Du Bois imagined that the idea at the heart of the Bolshevik Revolution—that "only those who work shall vote and rule"—"may well stand in future years as the one thing that made the slaughter worth while" (Du Bois 1919d).
- ¹⁴ See Du Bois (n.d. c, d). Du Bois also envisioned a chapter on "Other Black Folk," covering the participation of Black soldiers and laborers from other parts of the African diaspora, that remained undrafted. See Du Bois (n.d. e).
- ¹⁵ On Du Bois and democracy see Bromell (2011), Sumpter (2001).

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