**Africans and the African Diaspora in the First World War**

0.0 – Module Lesson Plan

This module is part of the History for the 21st Century project (H/21). History for the 21st Century is a collaborative project designed to serve students in introductory college history courses and their instructors. Together we build, assess, and progressively improve free, online, educative, enquiry-based curriculum. You can find out more about H/21 by visiting <https://www.history21.com/>.

**Module Overview**

In this module, students examine the experiences of Africans and those of African descent in World War I. Through two weeks of class meetings, students learn about the diverse range of motivations, roles, and outcomes of the war for Africans in French West Senegal and East Africa, as well as African Americans in the United States. They will consider the dynamics of imperialism that framed the war’s outbreak, and how colonial subjects in French West Senegal and German and British East Africa experienced recruitment and combat both in Europe and on the African continent. In addition, the module considers these experiences and perspectives alongside those of African descent in the United States, their struggles for dignity and fully realized citizenship, and how the war facilitated a greater awareness of global denial of rights and anti-colonial activism.

The module has two aims: 1) examine World War I as a global event in a way that centers the experience of Africans and people of African descent; and 2) build skills in historical thinking and critical analysis of secondary and primary sources. Both of these aims—one content based and the other skill based—work together to support an overarching goal of “decolonizing the curriculum,” helping instructors to foreground non-Western human experience, even and especially in “famous” European events such as World War I. To do this, the module is guided by the following key questions:

* What did the experiences of Africans and the African diaspora in World War I look like?
* How did Africans and members of the African diaspora get involved in the war? What were their motivations? And what did the outcomes of the war look like for them?
* What do we learn about World War I, and how is our understanding of it and its consequences challenged and enriched when we approach it from an African and African diasporic viewpoint?

By the end, students should be able to explain some of the complex experiences that Africans and those of African descent had with World War I and the commonalities and differences between each case-study, as well as how the incorporation of these perspectives further informs our understanding of World War I and challenges more Eurocentric narratives. In addition, by working with a variety of sources—including editorials, oral interviews, images, and official documents and conference resolutions—students should be able to strengthen their skills in historical thought and close reading and analysis of primary materials.

The module consists of five lessons, to be completed over two weeks. Included in each lesson of this module are brief introductory readings, a series of primary sources, suggested discussion topics, guides for leading discussions, slide decks with images, and some suggested assignments to accompany this module. Feel free to adapt the materials to suit your needs. If you want to share an adaptation you found particularly successful, or have a suggestion for a revision or update, feel free to contact the folks at *History for the 21st Century* so they can share it with others.

**Module Map**

## **Lesson 1: Introduction to Africans and the African Diaspora in the First World War**

The first lesson begins by asking students to reflect on what they know about Africa in World War I, as well as the ways that narratives of the war may exclude or marginalize these experiences and perspectives. Students consider the geopolitical relationship between Africa and Europe at the war’s outbreak, and end the lesson by reading an editorial from a Gold Coast newspaper, which begins to shed light on how the war looked from the African continent.

**Lesson 2: French West Africa**

Lesson two focuses on the experiences of Africans from colonized French West Africa. Here, students consider the myriad ways Senegalese soldiers were drawn into the French forces—through recruitment, coercion, and promises of citizenship. Students also learn about the experiences of soldiers on the Western and Eastern European fronts, what time on leave in France was like for Senegalese soldiers, and how some veterans of the war felt about the conflict after it had ended.

## **Lesson 3: The East Africa Campaign**

The next lesson takes students to the East Africa Campaign with particular focus on carriers and the African men who fought on the German and British sides. Here, students consider the role of the East Africa Campaign in the larger war, contrast the motivations of soldiers who enlisted in the German versus British forces, as well as their experiences of combat on the African continent itself. In addition, the lesson examines wartime frustrations and resistance to imperialism in East Africa through the example of the Chilembwe Rising of 1915.

## **Lesson 4: The United States**

Lesson four features W. E. B. Du Bois’ changing understanding of the war. His 1915 critique of the war’s imperial origins is still a widely-read text. Du Bois’ passionate advocacy for African Americans’ rights and their aspirations to be full citizens guided his subsequent responses to the war as it unfolded. Students will trace this trajectory, as well as consider the experiences of Black American soldiers who were sent to Europe following U.S. entry into the war in 1917.

**Lesson 5: Conclusion**

Finally, Lesson five concludes the module with a consideration of the war’s end, and the effects of the 1919 Paris Peace Conference and the Treaty of Versailles on African colonies and their inhabitants. It contrasts these outcomes against the Pan-African Congress, which was held at the same time. Students will also examine a selection of responses to the war and its outcomes, in particular views which contrast the language of democracy and self-determination that characterized the rhetoric of the war, and the realities of postwar settlements.