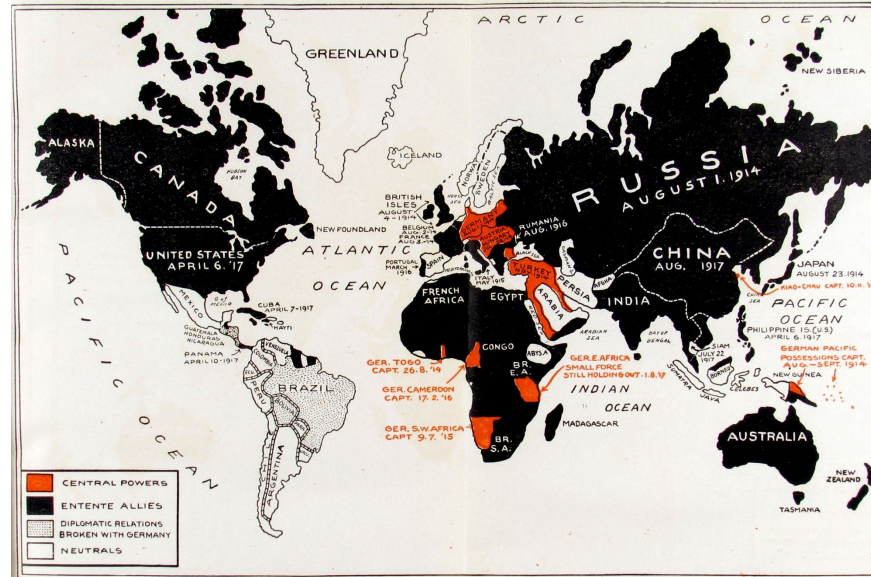


# Introduction: What Makes the First World War a World War?



## Introduction

We begin this module with an account by Solomon T. Plaatje, from his 1916 book, *Native Life in South Africa: Before and Since the European War and the Boer Rebellion*:

*"The writer was in London at the end of July 1914, when there were many disquieting reports about the activities of suffragettes, and when there were still more serious reports about the unlawful mobilization of volunteer armies in Ireland. It was in this exciting period that attention was at once transferred to the Continent of Europe. There it seemed that every moment was ticking to drive us towards the greatest war that the world ever saw. And though matters grew hourly more serious, it did not then occur to the writer, a stranger then of only six weeks in London, that after seeing the capital of the Empire under conditions of peace, he was soon to see it under a war cloud filled with all the horrors of the approaching war storm and all the signs of patriotic enthusiasm."*

Plaatje wrote this account of his time in London in 1914, using the third person to refer to himself. He was a Black South African man educated at a German mission station in southern Africa; his father had worked for a white Afrikaans-speaking settler

## WHAT MAKES THE FIRST WORLD WAR A WORLD WAR

INTRODUCTION

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Plaatje became a noted intellectual, musician, translator, and journalist. He had established the first Setswana-English weekly newspaper, and his facility with English, Afrikaans, German, Setswana and several other African languages served him well in his work as a court translator in the British-ruled South African town of Kimberley. Solomon Plaatje was one of the founding members in 1912 of the South African Native National Congress (SANNC). The SANNC later became known as the African National Congress (ANC), which is now the ruling party in South Africa.

In 1913, South Africa's government had passed a Native Land Act that codified white settler control over the vast majority of the land in South Africa. Plaatje was in London, together with other leaders of the SANNC, to appeal to the British people, Crown, and Parliament about the devastating impact that the Land Act would have on the Black people of his homeland. Plaatje wrote a book about it, which he had published in England during his stay there, in hopes that its narrative would aid in the cause. In this excerpt from the book, we see him describing the atmosphere in London at the time that the First World War broke out.



**Members of the South African Native National Congress who traveled to England to protest the Land Act; Plaatje seated front right, June 1914.**

## Key Terms:

Solomon T. Plaatje

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First World War

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Nationalism

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Empire

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Colonies

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Africans and  
African Diaspora

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The Berlin  
Conference

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French Senegal

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East Africa

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The United States

## The Outbreak of War

The war's outbreak was a shock for Plaatje, just as it was for many people around the world. His account reminds us that the First World War was in fact a *world* war that was both observed by and effected people not only in places like London, but Africa, Asia, the Americas and beyond. His reasons for being in London also remind us that people in these regions saw, experienced, and understood the war through their own historical contexts. However, tellings of the First World War do not always foreground these perspectives..

What follows is a brief, familiar account of the "march to war" and a very basic overview of how the European powers came to be at war at the beginning of August 1914 - a conflict that became a world war not only in name but in fact, directly involving the peoples of Europe, Asia, Africa, and North America in particular. As you are reading this familiar account, consider what places, people, and actors are mentioned and when, as well as what you think may be being left out..

Ever since the war's outbreak in 1914, scholars have been debating which of the Great Powers was to blame for the war's beginning. However, a key concept that had been the catalyst behind many changes in Europe preceding the outbreak of the war was *nationalism*. Whether nationalism was a divisive or a unifying force depended on the situation. For example, Germany had only just formed in 1871 as a German-speaking nation-state, after a series of small wars made possible the unification of many of Europe's German speakers.

But what if there is an empire, in which there are many different languages, cultures, and religions? If nationalistic ideals take hold in such a place, it could inspire an ethnic minority to begin to imagine itself as its own separate nation-state. This is the dynamic that was at play in the Dual Monarchy of Austria-Hungary. Look at the map of Europe in 1914. In the south-east corner, you will see the small nation of Serbia. To its east is the enormous Russian empire. To Serbia's direct west you see the southern tip of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Austria-Hungary's southernmost section of Bosnia was only recently annexed in 1908. Bosnia's capital was Sarajevo; many Serbian speakers lived in this part of the Austro-Hungarian empire.

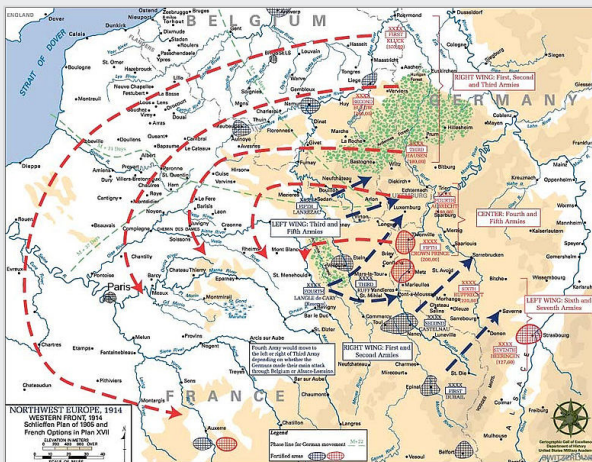
Ethno-linguistic interests made for a complicated situation. Serbian is a Slavic language, in the same language family as Russian. The Austro-Hungarian Emperor, Franz Josef, was from the German-speaking Habsburg royal family based in Vienna. The Austrians were closely allied with the German Empire to their north. The Serbians under Austrian rule in the province of Bosnia felt affinity with the Serbs across the border in Serbia. The Russians felt protective of their fellow Slavic nation Serbia, which they sometimes in popular discourse conceived of as a little "sibling."



**Map of Europe in 1914**

In June 1914, the Austrian heir to the throne, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, paid an official state visit to the recently annexed territory of Bosnia. He hoped to calm Serbian nationalist agitators and find a way to make Bosnia feel part of the Austro-Hungarian empire. As he rode around with his wife, Sophie, in an open car through the streets of Sarajevo on June 28, a Serbian nationalist shot and killed them both. Many questions ensued: was the Serbian government behind the assassination? What would Austria-Hungary do in response? If they attacked Serbia, would Russia rush to Serbia's defense? Would Germany support Austria-Hungary? Would Britain and France keep out of it?

In the meantime, the French government had chosen to invest heavily in Russia's economic development over the past several decades. Russia was later to industrialization than the states of western Europe. Both France and Russia were uncomfortable with the presence of a recently unified, very militarily strong German Empire in the center of Europe. These are two reasons that the Third French Republic and the Russian Empire (ruled by a divine-right emperor called a Tsar) came to be allies. Britain tried in general to stay aloof from mainland Europe's woes and tried to avoid getting involved in the interwoven cluster of alliances and rivalries on the continent of Europe. Their main aim was to protect the interests of Britain's far-flung imperial interests in India and Africa, and to keep goods flowing freely through the Suez Canal. But even Britain agreed that Germany's recent and boisterous appearance on the international scene was something to watch.

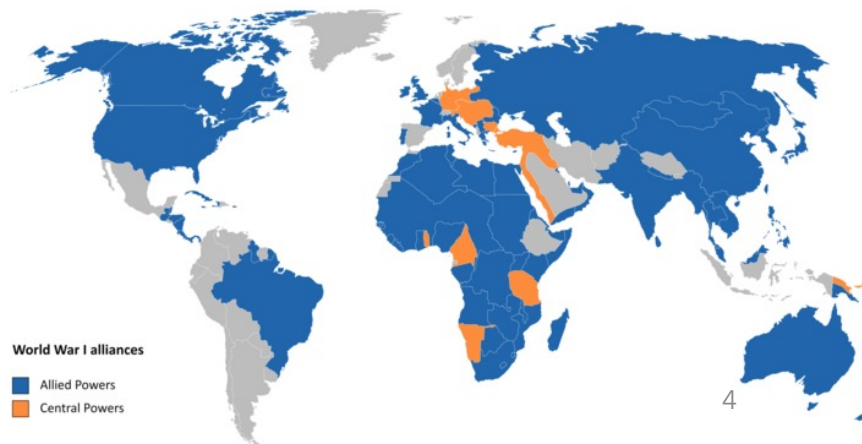


**Map of the German "Schlieffen Plan" to attack France through Belgium**

In the end, the Austrian government issued an *ultimatum*: an impossible list of demands to the Serbian government, with Germany's strong urging and support. Serbia declined to meet all of the demands. Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia on July 28, 1914. Russia declared war on Austria-Hungary. France, as Russia's ally, was now also in the war. Germany was surrounded by two hostile warring nations and had to undertake a two-front war. The German solution to this was to attack France by passing rapidly through the neutral nation of Belgium, entering northern France and making a push to take Paris.

This violation of international law became the catalyst for Britain to enter the war in support of the French and Russians. By August 7, 1914, the Triple Entente powers (Russia, France, Great Britain) were at war with the Central Powers: Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy. The Ottoman Empire ultimately joined the war on the side of the Central Powers. Britain's affiliated nations of Canada, India, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand joined the war immediately as well.

Though far away, the Chinese and Japanese governments also both were alert to the global impact of the conflict and found ways to get involved. The United States was originally determined to keep out of it, and did not join the war on the Allied side until 1917 - three years later. Meanwhile, the people in France and Britain's colonies in Africa and Asia wondered if and how the war might involve them...





## Beyond Europe: Empire and World War I

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*Map of the World, 1914*

It is significant that so much of what we in the United States know about World War One centers mostly on Europe. In U.S.-based classrooms, one hears almost nothing about the war in Eastern Europe - which is its own rich, important, and fascinating story. Except for perhaps dramatic tales of the British and Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC) losses at Gallipoli, there is also scant treatment of the war in the Ottoman Empire. The story instead usually continues with focus on the Western Front, with gripping accounts of the devastations of trench warfare as experienced by French, German, and British soldiers. And then the attention turns to the United States' entrance into the war in 1917, and the so-called doughboys whose participation in the final push with the Entente powers on the Western Front in the fall of 1918 led to Armistice in November of 1918.

There are thousands of books about the history of the First World War; its military history -- its innovations in weaponry, accounts of brilliant and botched battle strategies, and books about the failed and successful revolutions spawned by the war. There are studies of women who served as nurses, or as spies, who cut off their hair and enlisted as men, who as socialist-feminists spoke against the war, who taunted men who appeared to be slackers, who hoped their demonstrated loyalty to the war cause would lead to the reward of women's suffrage. There are hundreds of war memoirs by the great generals and statesmen involved in leading the war and setting the peace terms afterwards. The war's end led to peace settlements that hardly prepared the way for peace in eastern Europe or the lands formerly under the rule of the former Ottoman Empire. The war's impact on the arts is a rich field of scholarship. And there is an ever-growing literature on war memorials and bereavement, and on masculinity and shell shock.

***Australian troops at Port  
Mudros, Greece, April 1915***



**Indian lancers near Vraignes on  
the Western Front, 1917**



But in recent years, more studies have also been published on how the combatting states' global interests and colonies figured centrally in their ability to fight. One million Indians fought for the British on the western front, in East Africa, and in the Ottoman Empire. Also little known is the fact that people from those places far from Western Europe found themselves *also* on the Western Front, as soldiers, trench diggers, and dock workers. Indians and Chinese rendered vital labor in western Europe for the British. Both the Chinese and Japanese states threw in their support for the British side, hoping that following an Allied/Entente victory, their loyalty and support might yield rewards from the peace settlement. Indochinese subjects of French colonial rule supported the French war effort, with similar hopes for post-war gains, such as accelerated steps towards independence. Thus, the war drew upon, and had a tremendous impact on, much of the rest of the world, including Asia and the territories under Ottoman rule, especially Palestine and the Arabian Peninsula.



**Askari at camp in German East Africa, c. 1914-1918**

The transnational character of Plaatje's narrative cited at the beginning of this essay is one indication of how "Africa" was not separate from the world, and certainly not separate from the war. The First World War was a global war. It was a Chinese war. It was a Russian War. It was a Turkish war. It was an Indian War. It was a Canadian War. And, it was an African war. Given that most of the African continent was under European colonial rule at the time of the war, considering Africans' experience of this war started by European powers means a complex engagement with colonialism. Africans all over the continent found themselves wondering, like people all over the world did: If we serve in this war and we are on the winning side, will we be rewarded afterward?

These connection points between the European combatting powers and the rest of the world require us to consider the vital element of *empire*. All of the main combatant states were, in their various ways, empires. In familiar telling of the war's chief causes, alongside nationalism, "imperialism" is in the forefront. The Central Powers consisted of the German empire under Kaiser Wilhelm the 2nd, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and the Ottoman Empire. Lined up against the Central powers were the Russian empire under the Tsar, France, and England. The name of the French state at that time was the French Third Republic (*La Troisième République*.) The word "republic" in the title makes it sound like it wasn't an empire. But in fact, France had enormous colonial holdings around the world, including vast stretches of the African continent as well as Madagascar and what is today known as Vietnam (at that time, Indochina.) Britain had significant geopolitical interests in western Asia, including Persia and the Arabian Peninsula; and of course it exercised colonial rule over the Indian subcontinent, and had colonies all over Africa.

## World War I from an African and African Diasporic Perspective

For purposes of this learning segment, Africa and the African diaspora will be the focus for our endeavor of seeing the First World War in a global context. The main historical actors of interest are the people from Africa who were combatants in the First World War, both in Europe and in Africa, and those Africans who were otherwise affected by the war. One lesson will also focus on the experiences of African diaspora in the United States as well.



**Map of Africa, 1909**

In 1915, African American intellectual and activist W. E. B. Du Bois remarked in a piece titled “The African Roots of the War” for the *Atlantic Monthly*, that while it might have seemed that Africa was peripheral to the world war raging in Europe, in fact it was in Africa that one would find the roots of the conflict. Predating Lenin’s famous text, *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* by two years, Du Bois’ essay laid out the parade of African flashpoints for European conflict that had occurred since the 1885 Berlin agreement. He argued that there was an inextricable link between capitalism’s acceleration in the race for colonies (and attendant need for resources and forced colonial labor) - especially in Africa - and the eruption of the Great War in Europe, writing:

*“The present world war is, then, the result of jealousies engendered by the recent rise of armed national associations of labor and capital whose aim is the exploitation of the wealth of the world mainly outside the European circle of nations. These associations, grown jealous and suspicious at the division of the spoils of trade-empire, are fighting to enlarge their respective shares; they look for expansion, not in Europe but in Asia, and particularly in Africa. ‘We want no inch of French territory,’ said Germany to England, but Germany was ‘unable to give’ similar assurances as to France in Africa.”*



The conquest of the majority of the land in the continent of Africa was in fact a relatively recent phenomenon. The Berlin Conference of 1884-85 brought together the heads of European states to set out rules of engagement for claiming territory in Africa. No Africans were invited to sit at that table. It was purely an exercise in how to manage colonial conquest in Africa in such a way that a European war would not ensue. One of the terms of the Berlin agreement was that should there one day be a war in Europe, the African colonies would remain neutral. This is why many European settlers and colonial officials based in Africa, at the time of the war’s outbreak, did not immediately expect the war to affect the colonies.

**German East African Askari,  
c. 1914-1918**



**Cameroonian troops, c. 1914-1916**

The war began in Europe in August of 1914; right away there was a devastating loss of life. Early predictions that the war would be short and yield few casualties were quickly discredited. European powers responded in different ways to the massive number of deaths on the western front. France decided to bring in combatants from the colonies. As we will explore in future lessons, in addition to men from Indochina and Madagascar, thousands of African men from what is today Senegal, Niger, Mali, Guinea, Morocco, and Algeria fought on the Western Front for the French. By contrast, the British were not keen on putting guns into the hands of their African colonial subjects for use in battle in Europe, though the British benefited greatly from the presence of white and aboriginal Canadian and ANZAC forces in Europe. The Germans could not access their African colonies readily due to the British naval blockade in the North Sea, keeping German ships' range limited. The Germans pioneered submarine warfare during the First World War, as an attempt to counter the blockade, and were successful at sinking British and French warships throughout the war. Widespread German hunger during the war was directly related to Germany's inability to access its colonial holdings in Africa. On the African continent itself, war broke out wherever there were German colonies, as neighboring colonial powers, especially France and Britain, moved to claim German-controlled African territories.

The war in Africa itself was fought on both sides by a relative handful of white officers, African and Indian fighters, and enormous numbers of African carriers, or porters. The German colony of Togo in West Africa was quickly overrun by French and British forces. The struggle over the German colony of Kamerun took much longer. The longest-lasting campaign during the war in Africa was the East Africa Campaign, which dragged on for four years, only ending two weeks *after* the armistice in Europe, until November 25, 1918.

Following the United States' entry into the conflict in 1917, the war also involved African Americans as well. Amid a backdrop of segregation and discrimination in the U.S., over 380,000 African Americans either enlisted or were drafted and around 200,000 were deployed to Europe. There, they largely served in labor battalions or on the Western Front in France.

**Black members of the US Engineers at Menil-LaTour, France, March 1918**





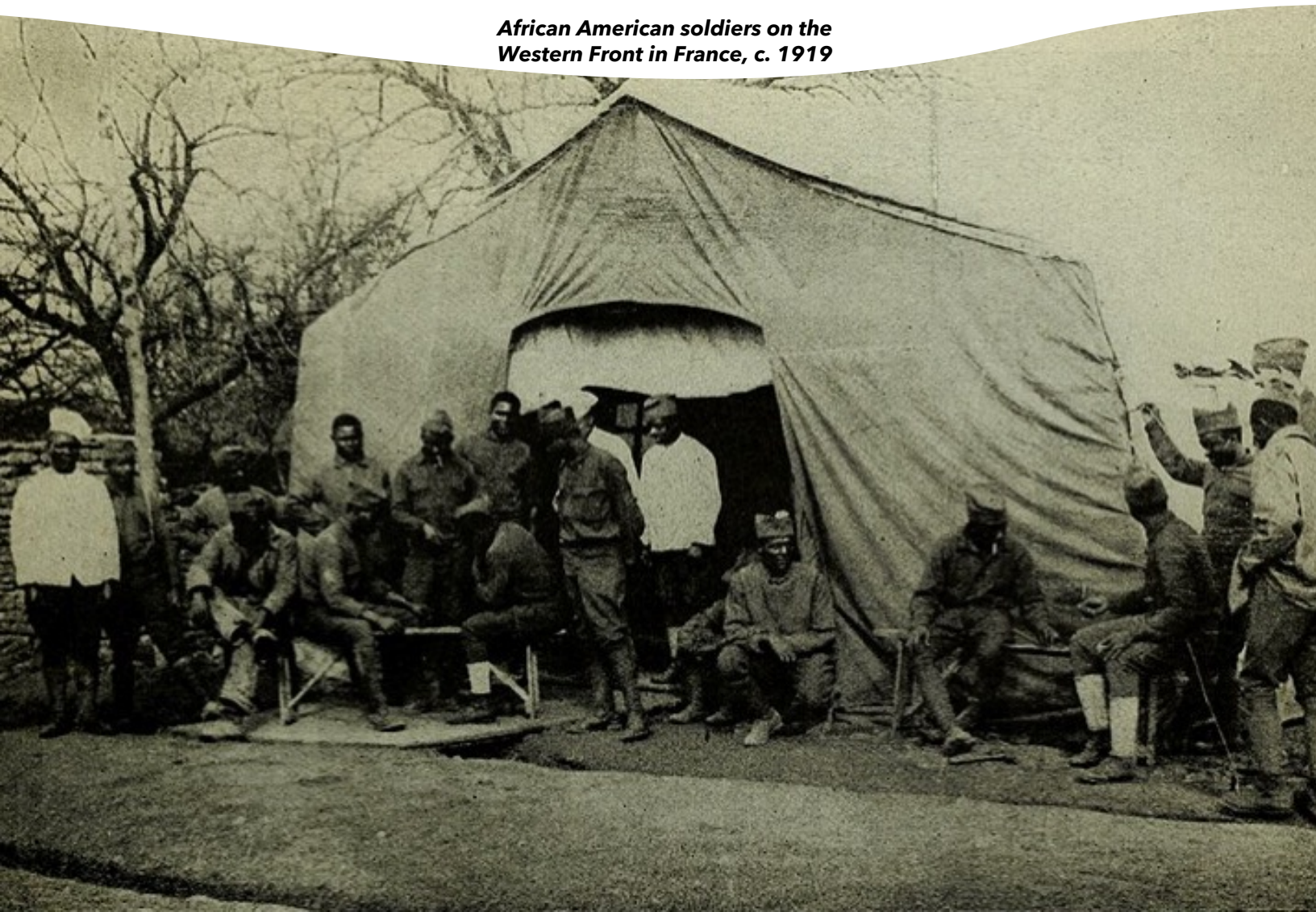
## Conclusion

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What was the First World War like from the vantage point of these soldiers? When and why did it start, and what did its outbreak look like to them? What might they have hoped the outcome of the war would be? For those who fought in it, voluntarily or involuntarily, where did they go, and what did their service look like and what did it mean to them? How was the war understood on their home fronts, and how did they make meaning of it at its conclusion?

In the rest of this module, we will explore how people in Africa and the African diaspora experienced the First World War: how people were recruited, the roles they played, and the experiences of war both in Europe and in Africa. While Lesson 2 will focus on the experience of Africans from colonized French West Africa, Lesson 3 takes us to the East Africa campaign with particular focus on the carriers and African men who fought. Lesson 4 turns to the United States and features the changing understandings of the war experienced by W. E. B. Du Bois, whose 1915 critique of the war's imperial origins has become a widely read text even to this day. 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. Lesson 5 concludes the module with a consideration of the war's end, and the impacts of the 1919 Paris Peace Settlement on African colonies and their inhabitants, as well as the responses of African and African diasporic leaders at the Pan-African Congress to the war's outcome.

***African American soldiers on the  
Western Front in France, c. 1919***



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The South African Native National Congress delegation to England, June 1914, including left to right: Thomas Mapike, Rev Walter Rubusana, Rev John Dube, Saul Msane, Sol Plaatje, Public Domain, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:ANC1914.jpg>

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