



Sebastian Jobs

WELCOME HOME, BOYS!

Military Victory Parades in New York City 1899–1946

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been rounded up into one regiment to be sent to basic training.² There, it was renamed the 369th Infantry Regiment of the 93rd Division of the U.S. Army and, after a short period of training, its black soldiers went to Europe and fought longer than any other American unit.³

How different this picture was roughly one and a half years later, when the 369th Regiment returned from overseas. On February 17, 1919, the soldiers marched in a victory parade up the same Fifth Avenue from which they had formerly been banned. Led by the unit's commanding officer Colonel William Hayward, the men were the first troops to return to New York from the victorious World War and be welcomed with a parade. The servicemen offered New Yorkers a chance to get a glimpse of American soldiers coming directly from the trenches in Europe. Newspaper reports excitedly described how spectators cheered on the men clad in their khaki uniforms and carrying their original war equipment, consisting of helmets, backpacks and rifles. They marched in concert from 23rd Street in Midtown Manhattan all the way up to 145th Street in Harlem, spearheaded by the unit's flag and the Star-Spangled Banner. Everything had a "touch of realism," as the *New York Herald* pointedly noted. The support for the troops seemed overwhelming. More than two million people welcomed the returning soldiers in mainly white Midtown Manhattan, as well as in the black neighborhood of Harlem, where the pageant ended after a seven-mile march. The parade of an African American regiment in Manhattan was considered such a great success that one newspaper even emphatically commented that, on that day, New York "drew no color line."⁴

The difference between these two parades is striking: the 3,000 members of the "Old Fifteenth" turned from banned servicemen to celebrated citizen-soldiers; what had started with a shameful backdoor send-off came to an end with a first-class victory parade. "The place of precedence was for the negro, it was his by right,"⁵ the *Evening Post* stated rather soberly that same day. But how did this 'sea change' come about? What had changed in between? Or, better, how had the soldiers changed? Moreover,

2 In this chapter and throughout the entire book, I use the attribute 'black' not as an essential physical or cultural quality, but in reference to its contemporary contexts: as a way of identifying and constructing a group of people. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*; Scott, "Fantasy Echo."

3 Stephen L. Harris, *Harlem's Hell Fighters—the African-American 369th Regiment in World War I* (Washington, DC: Brasey's Inc., 2003), 114.

4 "New York Gives Ovation to Its Black Fighters," *New York Herald*, 18 Feb. 1919, 1 & 4.

5 "Hell Fighters' from France Tramp Avenue," *The Evening Post*, 17 Feb. 1919, 1 & 2.

what changed during the victory parade in February 1919? And, finally, what happened to these transformations after the last lockstep had been taken? In order to understand the impact and power of the 369th Regiment's parade, one has to consider the social context of contemporary race-relations and political ideas that provided the background for the parade.

“You're in the Army now, you're not behind the plow”

Until the late 19th century, African Americans could play only a marginal role within the various armies, so they did not meet a crucial criterion for full American citizenship for a long time. In the ‘Western’⁶ legal tradition, being a soldier and fighting for one's country is particularly important, because there has always been a nexus between military service and citizenship rights. Especially with the rise of the ‘Western’ democracies in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the “citizen-soldier” or the drafted soldier had become a conceptual cornerstone of the nation-state.⁷ In this logic, citizens received their civil rights in exchange for the military service they fulfilled for their country. In the United States, this line of thought can be found in numerous legal documents. For instance, the New York State constitution of 1824 abolished the practice of granting voting rights on the basis of property in order to widen the electoral base and extend suffrage to all males with a minimum age of 21 who paid taxes, worked on the road, or had served in a militia.⁸ This was extremely relevant to African Americans because they continued for a long time thereafter not to meet the property criteria, nor were they allowed to serve in the army. This systematically

6 I use ‘Western’ as a concept that describes a certain tradition of thought rather than a geographical description of a certain space. Cf. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

7 R. Claire Snyder, *Citizen-Soldiers and Manly Warriors: Military Service and Gender in the Civic Republic Tradition* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999); Lesley Gill, “Creating Citizens, Making Men: the Military and Masculinity in Bolivia,” *Cultural Anthropology* 12, no. 4 (1997), 527–550; Nancy C.M. Hartssock, “Masculinity, Citizenship, and the Making of War,” *PS* 17, no. 2 (1984), 198–202; Francine D’Amico, “Citizen-Soldier? Class, Race, Gender, Sexuality and the US Military.” In *States in Conflict: Gender, Violence and Resistance*, ed. Susie Jacobs, Ruth Jacobson and Jen Marchbank (New York: Zen Books, 2000).

8 Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace, *Gotham: a History of New York City to 1898* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 513.

excluded them from the body of citizens—in New York and elsewhere in the U.S.

Even when they fought in the army, African Americans were denied public recognition for their services. Before World War I, “a place in the parade” was far from being natural for African Americans.⁹ African American soldiers had fought as early as in the American Revolution and also in the Civil War—notably on both sides. In their eyes, such service brought them a step closer to civil equality. Civil rights activist and abolitionist Frederick Douglass, for example, echoed the connection between soldiering and citizenship in a speech in Philadelphia in 1863:

“Once let the black man get upon his person the brass letters US, let him get an eagle on his button, and a musket on his shoulder, and bullets in his pocket, and there is no power on earth or under the earth which can deny that he has earned the right of citizenship in the United States.”¹⁰

The performative aspect of Douglass’s statement is striking. As soon as black men were allowed to wear the uniform of the U.S. Army, once they fought as soldiers of the United States, no one would be able to strip them of their civil rights, he hoped. But his hopes remained unfulfilled. Too great was the fear, especially among white Americans in the South, that African American soldiers could turn violent or, probably even more frightening, would follow Douglass’s rationale and insist on their civil rights. So contemporaries were very eager to put an end to these plans. The “colored soldier,” warned one Memphis newspaper editor very sharply during the Civil War,

“must not permit himself to be betrayed into the assumption that he has changed or benefited his social condition by wearing a blue coat and carrying a gun. If he

9 Using the case of the Illinois National Guard, Eleanor L. Hannah has shown how much the fight for the right to serve was intertwined with issues of black manhood and equal civil rights for the 19th-century African American community. Eleanor L. Hannah, “A Place in the Parade: Citizenship, Manhood, and African American Men in the Illinois National Guard, 1870–1917,” *Journal of Illinois History* 5, no. 2 (2002), 82–108. In her dissertation Sherri Ann Charleston has analyzed the same connection especially during the Spanish-American War of 1898. Sherri Ann Charleston, “The Fruits of Citizenship: African Americans, Military Service, and the Cause of Cuba Libre, 1868–1920” (PhD Diss., University of Michigan, 2009).

10 Frederick Douglass, “Should the Negro Enlist in the Union Army?” *Douglass’ Monthly*, August 1863.

forgets himself, he will soon be reminded of his delinquency in a convincing manner.”¹¹

Black soldiers did not receive any kind of public recognition for their service, neither during the war nor afterwards. The victory parade after the Civil War in May 1865 featured no African American servicemen.¹² In his 1863 poem, “The Black Regiment” about an African American army unit during the Civil War, poet George Henry Boker captured this situation of unfulfilled hopes in rhyme:

“Though death and hell betide/Let the whole nation see/If we are fit to be/Free in this land; or bound/Down, like the whining hound,-/Bound with red stripes of pain/In our old chains again!/Oh, what a shout there went/From the black regiment!”¹³

On the day the 369th Regiment marched through Manhattan, the *New York Herald* reprinted this poem, as if the 1919 parade could put an end to a history of black suppression.

By 1899, the situation of African American soldiers had not changed very much since the Civil War (1861–65). Although four regiments of African American soldiers had participated in America’s war against Spain, they did not figure very prominently. Military units remained segregated to enforce the “separate but equal” practice of racially segregated spheres as legally sanctioned by the justices of the Supreme Court in the 1896 case of *Plessy v. Ferguson*. However, while white and black soldiers were separate, the latter were far from equal to the rest of their comrades, as they were, for the most part, excluded from any activity regarded as essential both to being a citizen and being a man. Furthermore, they had been stationed in army camps at the remote western frontier prior to the war, and afterwards they did not receive public recognition for their service—such as a parade.¹⁴ Instead, they continued to be subjected to violence on the part of people who resented the idea of blacks carrying weapons and wearing the uniform of the U.S. Army.

11 Quoted in Piero Gleijeses, “African-Americans and the War Against Spain,” in *A Question of Manhood: a Reader in U.S. Black Men’s History and Masculinity*, ed. Earnestine Jenkins and Darlene Clark Hine (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), 329.

12 Stuart McConnell, *Glorious Contentment: the Grand Army of the Republic, 1865–1900* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 8.

13 “The Black Regiment,” *New York Herald*, 18 Feb. 1919, 8.

14 Gleijeses, “African-Americans and the War against Spain,” 328–330.

Therefore, from an African American perspective the moral obligation to go to war for their country, as Teddy Roosevelt laid it out in his 1917 motivational speech, wasn't simply a matter of choice but of a right—a civil right to fight.¹⁵ The striving for military service, thus, was one arena of the more general struggle for equal rights and desegregation. It was against this background that NAACP activist W.E.B. Du Bois in 1914 felt compelled to make a case for African American involvement in the World War. In the African American weekly *Chicago Defender*, he tried to woo the black populace to support the war. For him the “great catastrophe” of the war was not the mere nationalistic rivalry between European superpowers, but the underlying “theory of inferiority of the darker peoples” living outside of Europe. As these peoples had been suppressed and exploited by Western colonizers, he saw the main reason for the fighting in “the wild quest for Imperial expansion among colored races” between the European powers.¹⁶

Du Bois, in an almost paradoxical position, denounced the war, but, at the same time, he did not hesitate to link this anti-colonial turn to racism and racial discrimination at home. He explained that, in the war, “civilized nations are fighting like mad dogs over the right to own and exploit [...] darker peoples,” including those in the U.S. Nevertheless, Du Bois thought that this war was worth fighting, and he tried to rally support among his fellow citizens: “[l]et us give then our sympathies to those nations whose triumph will most tend to postpone if not to make it unnecessary to fight a world war of races.” In Du Bois's words, the fight in the European trenches would help the battle for black equal rights in the American war theater as well.¹⁷

After the call to arms had come in 1917, with the Selective Service Act that initiated a system of conscription, roughly 404,000 African American soldiers were drafted into the army during the course of the war. However, discrimination did not stop with the deployment of black soldiers during World War I. Not only were most of the commanding officers in these units white soldiers,¹⁸ but most African Americans serving in the army

15 Hannah, “A Place in the Parade.”

16 W.E.B. Du Bois, “World War and the Color Line,” *The Crisis*, Nov. 1914, 28–30.

17 W.E.B. Du Bois, “World War and the Color Line,” *The Crisis*, Nov. 1914, 28–30.

18 Christopher Paul Moore, *Fighting for America: Black Soldiers—the Unsung Heroes of World War II* (New York: One World Book, 2005), 12–13. In the case of the 369th Regiment, its only African American officer was Cpt. James Europe, the regiment's bandleader.