

# THE WAR TO TEACH ALL WARS

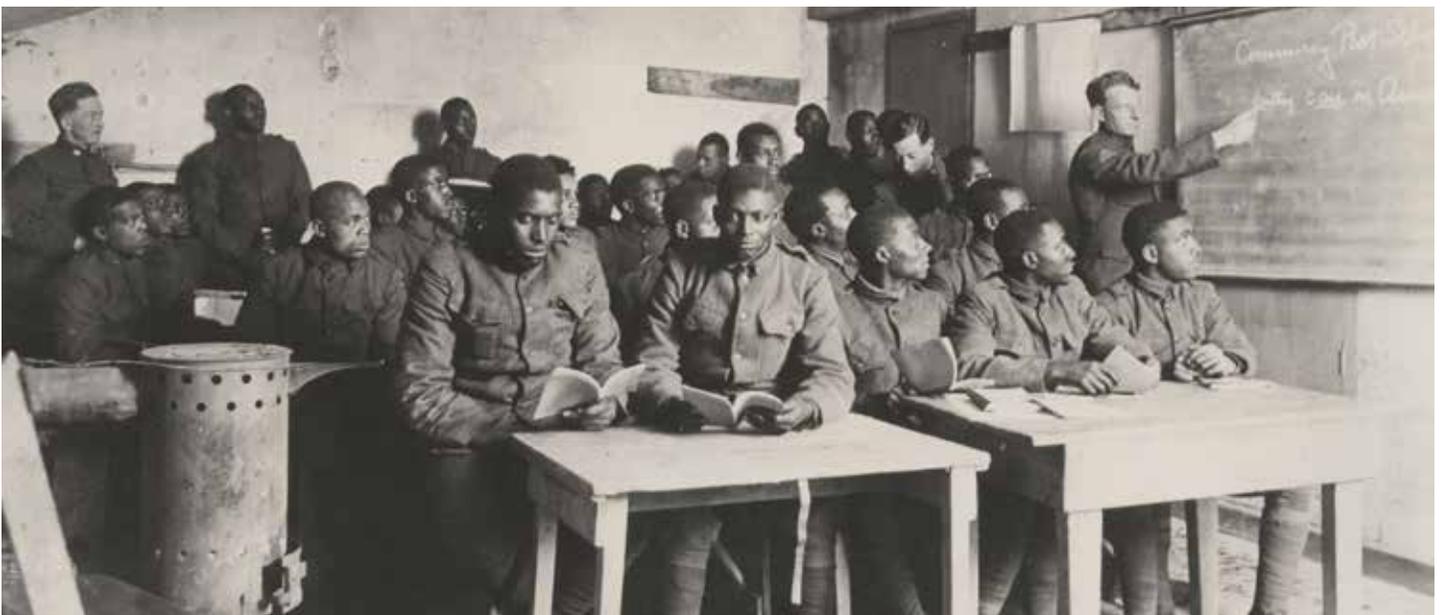
Jeffrey G. Hawks, Education Director, Army Heritage Center Foundation

Change is the essence of history. Wars have a significant place in history classrooms because they tend to bring about rapid social change, in everything from politics to the technology of everyday life. Students benefit from studying warfare because wars are critical to the story of humanity, and also because conflicts provide excellent opportunities to teach about the process of history.

War is a microcosm of human interaction. In battle, the intricate web of society is simplified, sometimes to the bare necessities, and focused on a single task. War provides a window through which one can study the

mechanisms of history in an environment that clarifies basic cause and effect. This is not to say that war is simple—just more transparent in ways that are useful for students and teachers. Military history delivers valuable lessons about the historical process even when available time and student ability allow for only macro-level investigation.

World War I is a case in point. Its origins are buried in a legacy of militarism, imperialism, nationalism, and balance of power politics that a student could spend a lifetime investigating. At the same time, however, the start of the war provides a perfect



African-American soldiers attend a class in a Post School in Meuse, France. (Image courtesy of the National World War I Museum)



Cartoon from the *Brooklyn Eagle*, published in July 1914, illustrating the chain of alliances in Europe. (Image courtesy of the BBC)

window into the chain of cause and effect that drives history forward.

The intricate history of the European alliance systems in 1914 is challenging for students to fully comprehend. Teachers need to help them understand how the complex alliance system was triggered by the assassination of the Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife, the Empress Sophie.

Analysis of the subtle thrusts and parries involved in military strategy may be beyond the grasp of many high school students, but the grand stalemate of trench warfare and the power of the machine gun in the defense are easy to convey in the classroom.

Likewise, the convoluted intrigues of international politics might be opaque to many, but the impact of unrestricted submarine warfare and the intercepted Zimmermann telegram (a coded proposal from the German Empire, inviting Mexico to join the Central Powers) on the U.S. decision to enter the war are clear.

World War I also provides students with fantastic opportunities for deeper investigation of a variety of topics, from technical innovations to the advancement of women and minorities. Here again we see the great

strength of military history: the capacity to support the study of almost any subject.

Students interested in medicine and psychology can study how the concept and treatment of shell shock evolved. Those with an interest in chemistry can learn about the effects of gas warfare and how soldiers protected themselves from the various chemical agents. Want to learn about the history of women and minorities? Study the 93<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division (see photo below), or learn about the fate of the nearly 10,000 members of the Army Nurse Corps who deployed overseas. Mechanically minded students can dig into the history of the machine gun to find out how it came to dominate the battlefield, or study the role of airplanes and motor vehicles in an era when armies still relied on horsepower to move equipment.

Whereas a macro level examination of the war provides clarity, the micro level provides endless questions for the curious student: Why was trench warfare so brutal



The segregated 369th Infantry Regiment of the 93rd Division, known as the “Harlem Hellfighters” or “Rattlers,” was the first African-American unit to serve in the American Expeditionary Forces. General Pershing refused requests to break up American units and send them to reinforce French and British units, but this did not extend to the all-black units of the 93rd Division. The 369<sup>th</sup>, which fought with distinction, was the first American unit to reach the Rhine. Shown here are members of the 369<sup>th</sup> in the trenches near Maffrecount, Marne, France, May 4, 1918. (Image courtesy of the U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center)

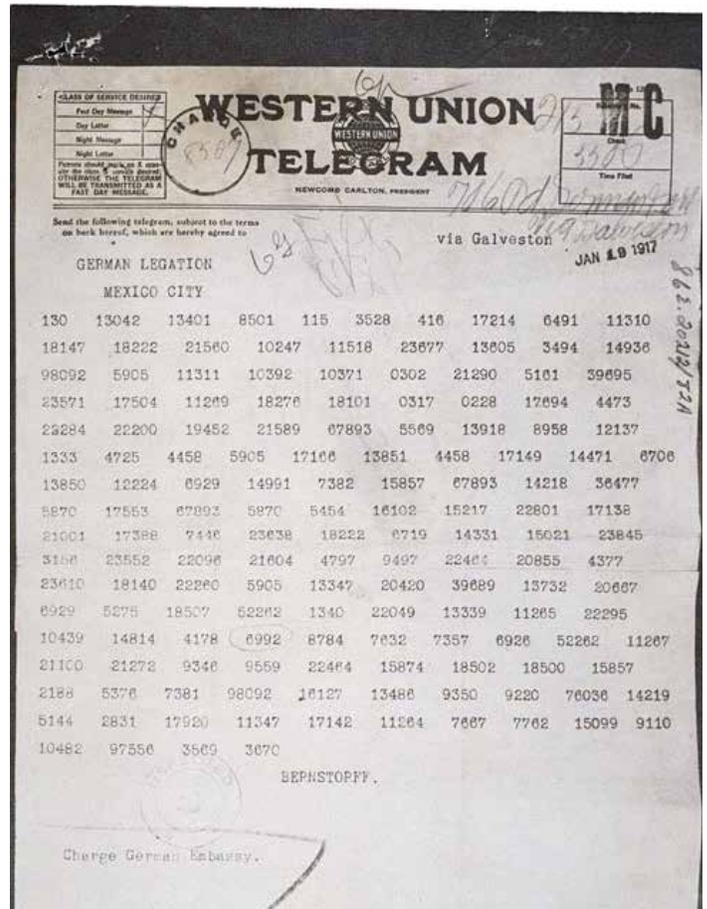
and so intractable? How did propaganda play a role? How did soldiers cope with the horror and brutality? What did they think about the war at the time and in the years to come?

The answers to these questions can be found in the innumerable primary sources produced by participants and witnesses. Memoirs and letters, poems and songs, photographs and paintings from the famous to the obscure provide teachers opportunities to approach introducing their classrooms to World War I from virtually any angle.

Thanks to the Internet, where teachers once struggled to find quality primary sources for their students, today the challenge often lies in choosing which outstanding resources to introduce in the limited time available.

One solution is to let students select a topic to study in depth while the class as a whole examines the war at the macro level. For individual students, their chosen topics provides the “hook” that captures their interest and inspires them to learn more about the larger historical picture. Potential micro-level topics include:

- Daily life in the trenches
- Tactics of trench warfare/trench construction
- Gas warfare
- The development and use of the machine gun
- The development and use of the tank
- The impact of the U.S. entry into the war
- The impact of the Russian withdrawal from the war
- The use of aircraft
- The role of women
- African-American soldiers
- World War I medicine
- Communications: radio, runners, telegraph, and pigeons



Zimmermann telegram as received by the German ambassador to Mexico, January 19, 1917.

- War dogs/Military animals
- Leadership/Leaders: Pershing, Foch, Petain, etc.
- U-boats
- “The Lost Battalion”
- Sergeant York

This approach, allowing students to choose a micro-level topic for in-depth study, is of course entirely compatible with participation in the National History Day program, another means of motivating and inspiring students to excellence. But while there are many topics that lend themselves to the NHD program, few areas of study offer the combination of a broad variety of micro topics and macro-level clarity that one finds in military history.