How did systemic racism shape the experiences of soldiers and create societal impacts?

Document 1
Allan Wilmot, a Jamaican WWII veteran, shares his story of serving in the British Royal Navy and the RAF. Wilmot was stationed all over Europe and awarded four medals.


“There were some problems – mostly caused by stereotyping. People would say things like ‘Because you’re black you don’t need to wash’ and ‘Where did you learn to speak English, if you live in trees?’ At first I took offence, but after deep consideration I came to the conclusion that it was best for me to try and re-educate my colleagues, which I did. […] My service changed my outlook, though. I was exposed to things that I lonely used to read about, like racism in the USA and other parts of the world. Since then I have taken part in protests as a veteran. I’ve been through the various war museums and libraries and discovered that most of the black countries that participated in the last world war were left out of the history books, as if we didn’t exist.”

1. How were black soldiers treated during WWII, and were they honored and documented post-war?

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2. In what manner (peaceful or violent) did Wilmot react to racism both during and after the war? Why?

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Document 2
In 1944, Corporal Rupert Timmingham, a black soldier, wrote Yank magazine after experiencing racism while traveling through the South on assignment. A restaurant denied Timmingham and eight other black soldiers seating and a meal, yet simultaneously served meals to two dozen German prisoners of war and two white American guards.


“Here is a question that each Negro soldier is asking,” he began. “What is the Negro soldier fighting for? On whose team are we playing?” […] “I could not help but ask myself why they are treated better than we are? Why are we pushed around like cattle? If we are fighting for the same thing, if we are to die for our country, then why does the Government allow such things to go on?”

A couple of months later, [Timmingham] wrote again. ‘To date I’ve received 287 letters, and, strange as it may seem, 183 are from white men in the armed service [from the] Deep South. They are all proud that they are from the South but ashamed to learn that there are so many of their own people who are playing Hitler’s game. Nevertheless, it gives me new hope to realize that there are doubtless thousands of whites who are willing to fight [Jim Crow].” Yank noted that it had received thousands of letters from GIs, “almost all of whom were outraged by the treatment given the corporal.”

1. Explain why Timmingham’s participation in the war supported his argument that he and other black soldiers deserved better treatment.

2. Why did experience fighting abroad in WWII cause white soldiers to reevaluate their own country’s racism?
Colin Powell, the first ever African-American U.S. Secretary of State, was a four-star general during WWII and reflects on his experiences abroad.


From the beginning, black soldiers felt the absurdity of being asked to fight for freedom while being denied it in their own army. [...] African-American soldiers who were stationed in Germany after the war experienced a situation that was completely new to them. They were served in restaurants, they could have relationships with white women, and for the first time in their lives they discovered what it was like to be respected. For these soldiers, it was a defining experience. As a young lieutenant in the army, General Powell was stationed in Germany in 1959 when he experienced what he called in his autobiography a “breath of freedom.” He remarks [...] how despite the gains being made in the U.S. at the time, black soldiers “were in many ways better off when we were stationed in Germany.”

1. What was essentially positive about many black soldiers’ experiences in the war?

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2. How would the stories and ideas of respect and freedom impact their return to the U.S.?

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Document 4
In January 1942, James Thompson wrote this letter to the African American newspaper “The Pittsburgh Courier” in which he voiced the dilemma he and other black people faced when considering their role in WWII. (Note: Winston Churchill’s “V for Victory” sign was a ubiquitous symbol during WWII for countries fighting for democracy.)


| Should I sacrifice my life to live half American? Will things be better for the next generation in the peace to follow? Would it be demanding too much to demand full citizenship rights in exchange for the sacrificing of my life? Is the kind of America I know worth defending? Will America be a true and pure democracy after the war? Will Colored Americans suffer still the indignities that have been heaped upon them in the past? These and other questions need answering; I want to know, and I believe every colored American, who is thinking, wants to know...

The V for victory sign is being displayed prominently in all so-called democratic countries which are fighting for victory over aggression, slavery, and tyranny. If this V sign means that to those now engaged in this great conflict, then let we colored Americans adopt the double V V for a double victory. The first V for victory over our enemies from without, the second V for victory over our enemies from within. For surely those who perpetrate these ugly prejudices here are seeking to destroy our democratic form of government just as surely as the Axis forces. |

1. Who, specifically, are the two enemies that Thompson argues must be defeated?

2. Why did WWII ignite outrage and unrest among African Americans?
The “Double V” campaign, meant to represent double victory for people of color living in the United States, was introduced in the “Pittsburgh Courier” (the largest black newspaper of WWII) as a response to Thompson’s published letter (see Document 4), along with an announcement explaining The Courier’s new war slogan.


This slogan represents the true battle cry of colored America. ... Americans all, are involved in a gigantic war effort to assure the victory for the cause of freedom—the four freedoms that have been so nobly expressed by President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Churchill....therefore we have adopted the Double "V" war cry—victory over...our enslavers at home and those abroad who would enslave us. WE HAVE A STAKE IN THIS FIGHT....WE ARE AMERICANS TOO!

1. Why was it strategic to use a pre-existing symbol of nationalism for civil rights purposes?

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2. What effects would the Double V slogan have had among black communities during the war?

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