

FROM EXECUTIVE PRODUCER ROBIN ROBERTS

A HISTORY® CHANNEL ORIGINAL

THE
**GREAT
WAR**



EDUCATION GUIDE



ABOUT THE SHOW

The HISTORY® Channel's four-hour documentary series *The Great War*, executive produced by "Good Morning America" co-anchor **Robin Roberts**, and RadicalMedia, takes place across the critical years of 1917 and 1918. The documentary weaves together first-person stories of three different groups during those pivotal years of battle to tell one larger, more complex story of how an isolationist America reluctantly entered World War I and emerged a global power.

"The Great War" covers America's involvement in World War I through the eyes of General John J. Pershing, leader of the American Expeditionary Forces, who is charged with training and deploying an army almost from scratch; Michael B. Ellis, a young man fighting with the Army's soon to be legendary Big Red One; and a courageous group of brave African American soldiers including Henry Johnson and Horace Pippin whose regiment will come to be known as the Harlem Hellfighters, earning France's highest battlefield award even as they faced shocking racism at home. The documentary series is told through dramatic narrative sequences, insightful interviews and contemporary scholarship, and dynamic archival footage.

CURRICULUM LINKS

The Great War is useful for students in History, American History, Military History, Social Studies, and Political Science courses. The content is appropriate for high school and college students.

FOR THE EDUCATOR

The Great War tells the story of America's entry into World War I and the challenges faced by both America's military leadership and ordinary soldiers throughout the war. It provides opportunities for students to explore the military strategy, technological advances, social forces, and geopolitics that impacted the war and to see the war through the eyes of individual soldiers like Henry Johnson, Horace Pippin, and Michael B. Ellis. We encourage educators to use this guide as a resource and to develop their own lesson plans and activities to best suit their students and their specific educational needs and benchmarks.



TERMS TO DEFINE:

Students can define some or all of these terms during or after watching The Great War to enhance their understanding of the documentary and the time period it covers.

- Mobilization
- Doughboys
- Lusitania
- Zimmerman Telegram
- Western Front
- Jim Crow
- 369th Infantry Regiment / Harlem Hellfighters
- 1st Infantry Division / Big Red One
- Trench Warfare
- Casualty
- Artillery
- Tank
- Croix de Guerre
- Offensive
- League of Nations
- Congressional Medal of Honor
- Treaty of Versailles
- Red Summer
- Linard Memo

PEOPLE TO KNOW:

Students can write short descriptions of these individuals and their roles during World War I.

- Woodrow Wilson
- John J. Pershing
- Horace Pippin
- Henry Johnson
- Needham Roberts
- Michael B. Ellis
- Ferdinand Foch
- George C. Marshall
- George S. Patton
- Erich Ludendorff





DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Ask students to explore these questions in group conversation. These questions can also be used as essay prompts about World War I.

1. What were some of the factors that led the United States to enter World War I?
2. What were some of the challenges facing the American army as it prepared to enter the war?
3. What do you think Winston Churchill meant when he said “You haven’t been to war until you’ve fought the Germans”?
4. What are some of the ways in which World War I was different from previous wars?
5. What was the 369th Infantry Regiment and how would you describe their experience during World War I? What additional challenges did they face? How were they treated by the French? What issues did they face when they returned home? How would you describe their legacy?
6. Why was it important to General Pershing that the Americans fight together as one unit? Why do you think he was willing to allow the 369th Infantry Regiment fight with the French?
7. Who were Henry Johnson and Needham Roberts? Why do you think their story is important?
8. What happened during the Saint-Mihiel Offensive, and why was it important for the United States?
9. What are some of the reasons that President Wilson pushed for the creation of the League of Nations?
10. How did the American army change over the course of World War I?
11. What are some of the ways that World War I changed Europe? What are some of the problems that remained after the war?
12. What words would you use to describe World War I? What do you think the war was like for the soldiers fighting it?

PRIMARY SOURCE #1

Horace Pippin's Art



Study for "Barracks," 1945, by Horace Pippin, Philadelphia Museum of Art
[DOWNLOAD](#)



Dogfight Over the Trenches, 1935, by Horace Pippin, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution
[DOWNLOAD](#)



The Ending of the War, Starting Home, 1930-33, by Horace Pippin, Philadelphia Museum of Art
[DOWNLOAD](#)

As shown in *The Great War*, Horace Pippin sustained a near-fatal injury in September 1918 during the Meuse-Argonne Offensive. A bullet shattered his right shoulder and caused him to lose full use of his dominant right arm. When Pippin returned to the U.S., he faced not only the racism and employment and housing discrimination widely encountered by returning African American veterans, but an additional burden: widespread bias against people living with disabilities. During his time as a soldier, Pippin wrote [a journal of his wartime experience](#), which included hand-drawn illustrations of scenes from the war. After returning home, he again turned to art, this time as part of his physical therapy. He began selling painted cigar boxes to make extra money and also experimented with burning images into wood panels before turning to oil painting. His first solo art exhibition was in 1937, and within a year several of his paintings were included in a Museum of Modern Art exhibition. Despite having no formal art training, Pippin became a widely exhibited folk artist, whose work was sought after by museums and collectors. His subject matter varied, but a number of his paintings depict scenes from World War I.

Primary Source Analysis

For each image, consider:

1. Who do you think is depicted in this painting?
2. Who is not shown in this painting?
3. What do you think is happening in this painting? Where is it set?
4. What type of mood does the painting portray? What details from the painting support your answer?
5. What emotions are being depicted? What details from the painting give you that impression?
6. In what ways are the paintings similar? How are they different?
7. How would you describe Pippin's art?

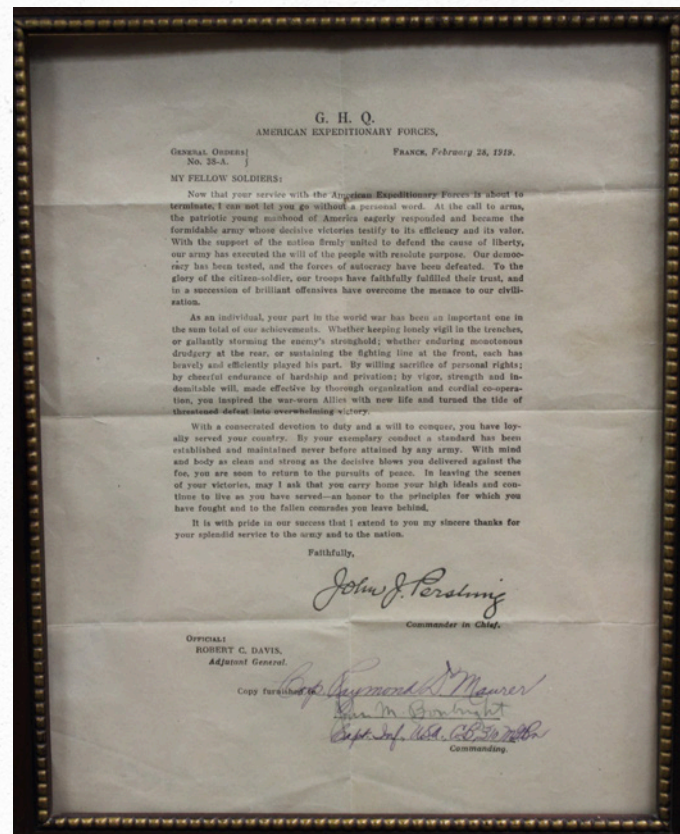
Related Activity

Ask students to read all or part of Horace Pippin's memoir, which is available online [here](#), courtesy of the Archives of American Art, and examine the sketches he created. (A transcription by the Smithsonian Transcription Center is also available [here](#).) Then ask students to choose a section of his memoir to illustrate with a simple drawing or painting. Students can then present these images to the class, with an explanation of the section they chose, what they chose to draw, and why they feel their drawing evokes the events and feelings portrayed in the passage. Students may choose their own materials and style or attempt to mimic Pippin's style. Alternatively, students could choose to create images based on articles they find that describe current-day conflicts.

PRIMARY SOURCE #2

Gen. John J. Pershing's "My Fellow Soldiers" letter Source: Digital Library at Villanova University

At the end of World War I, General John J. Pershing wrote this letter, which began, "My Fellow Soldiers:" to the soldiers who served under him during the war. Each member of the American Expeditionary Force received a copy of Pershing's letter. Pershing, a native of Missouri, attended the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, and served in U.S. Army campaigns against Native Americans; in the Spanish-American War; and in an unsuccessful campaign to apprehend the Mexican revolutionary Pancho Villa, before being chosen by President Woodrow Wilson as commander of the American Expeditionary Force after the American entry into World War I. In addition to his trials as a military leader, Pershing endured a harrowing personal tragedy in the summer of 1915 when his wife and three daughters were killed in a house fire while he was on an Army assignment in Texas. Only his five-year-old son survived.



[DOWNLOAD](#)

Discussion Questions

1. After reading this letter, how do you think Pershing felt about the people who served under him? Why do you think he chose to write this letter? Why do you think he began the letter with the salutation "My Fellow Soldiers"?
2. What role do you think Pershing hopes World War I veterans will play in society once they return to the United States? What are some of the challenges soldiers might face when returning home?
3. How do you think soldiers might have felt upon receiving this letter? Consider the perspectives of some of the soldiers profiled in The Great War, including Henry Johnson, Horace Pippin, and Michael B. Ellis.

Related Activity

Open this activity with five minutes of "free association" writing related to the prompt, "What is a leader?" Students can write down words, phrases, names, etc. without any regard for spelling, punctuation, or grammar. Then, in small groups or as a class, discuss their responses around questions like the following: What traits make a good leader? What does a good leader do or not do? Which people portrayed in The Great War were good leaders? As a follow-up assignment, students can create a leadership "report card" for all or some of the people portrayed in The Great War, assessing each on the elements of leadership that were brought forward during the class discussion. Assessments can be made on a 1-5 or never/sometimes/often/always scale and should include a short paragraph explaining each assessment.

PRIMARY SOURCE #3

Photographs: Life in the Trenches

World War I was largely conducted in and alongside trenches—long ditches dug into the earth to protect troops from machine gun and artillery attacks. Life in the trenches could be difficult—crowded, dirty, wet, and unsanitary—and soldiers occupied them for days and sometimes weeks at a time. Students can find out more about life in the extensive networks of trenches dug by both the Allied and Central Powers here:

[Trench Warfare](#), The National WWI Museum and Memorial

[Life in the Trenches of World War I](#), History.com

[Life in the Trenches of the First World War](#), Imperial War Museum



Troops in a trench, 1917-18, New York Public Library
[DOWNLOAD](#)



Soldiers manning a portable trench phone, 1917-18, New York Public Library
[DOWNLOAD](#)



Interior of a trench with hurdles and barriers,
The National WWI Museum and Memorial



British soldiers standing in water in a trench,
The National WWI Museum and Memorial
[DOWNLOAD](#)

Primary Source Analysis

For each image, consider:

1. What was the first thing you noticed in the photograph?
2. Where was this photograph made?
3. Who, if anyone, is in this photograph? Who is not included in this photograph?
4. What do you think is happening in this photograph?
5. Why do you think this photograph was made? Who do you think was its intended audience?
6. What does each of these photographs tell you about trench warfare?
7. Based on these photographs, what do you think it was like for soldiers to live and fight in the trenches?
8. What other information or sources would be helpful for you to come to a more complete understanding of life in the trenches and trench warfare?

Related Activity

Thanks to the trenches, World War I soldiers often lived in close proximity to each other, giving rise to a unique camaraderie. Within these close quarters, a variety of new slang terms were born, some of which are still in use today. Ask students to research the meaning of these slang terms, and for those still in use, compare and contrast their original and current meanings:

- Over the top
- No man's land
- In the trenches
- Cooties
- Cushy
- Blimp
- Strafe
- Basket case
- Booby trap
- Kiwi



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Video: [Bet You Didn't Know: World War I](#)

Video: [World War I: One Word](#)

Article: [How Harlem Hellfighter Henry Johnson Earned His Medal of Honor](#), by Sarah Pruitt

Article: [A Harlem Hellfighter's Searing Tales from the World War I Trenches](#), by Missy Sullivan and Volker Janssen

Video: [Legacy of World War I](#)

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[Interactive Timeline](#), The National World War I Museum and Memorial

[Teaching Resources](#), The National World War I Museum and Memorial

[WWI Topics](#), Library of Congress

[WWI Resources](#), National Archives

Primary Source Set: [America Heads to War](#), Digital Public Library of America

[World War I Exhibit](#), National Museum of American History

Teaching Resources: [WWI in a Global Context](#), Ohio State University

Primary Source: [The Linard Memo](#), UMass Amherst Library