

Podcasting the Past
European and world history
Part G: USA, 1918-1968

This document is part of a series that summarises recent research published on the key issues outlined in Section G of the [Higher History Course Specification](#). Although the summaries are wide-ranging, they do not cover all the literature ever published on the key issues. Instead, the summaries highlight some new research findings and directions, and illustrate how new historical research informs old historical debates, broadening our understanding of the past. This document is intended to supplement, not replace, pre-existing guidance on this topic.

5. An evaluation of the reasons for the development of the Civil Rights campaign, after 1945

A) Prejudice and discrimination

- The consensus in recent literature is that racism was endemic in the United States in the twentieth century. The U.S. was particularly regressive because racism was enshrined in law. **Webb (2017)** notes that, in the 1950s, U.S. law was so regressive that even countries like Britain – with their own long histories of racism – were regarded ‘an inspirational model’ to many African Americans on issues like interracial relationships. Similarly, **Camarillo (2013)** explains that, for many African, Asian and Hispanic Americans, ‘passing’ the ‘colour line’ was the only way to bypass racial segregation and improve their material circumstances. In some states, to buy houses in affluent neighbourhoods, dine in upmarket restaurants, or visit cinemas, non-white Americans often had to pretend to be white – a tactic the writer and activist Langston Hughes referred to as ‘fooling our white folk.’
- School segregation continued to be a source of racial tension after 1941. According to **Weathersby (2015)** as the black population of St. Louis grew and ‘encroached’ upon white residential areas, it became necessary to provide additional school facilities for black students. On several occasions, school officials reluctantly resorted to the conversion of school buildings from white to black use. School conversions were prompted by civil protests and demands by the black community. The conversion (from white to black) of a school building’s use, in some instances, ‘tended to elicit the ire of the affected white parents.’
- Beyond segregation, racism also affected many of the supposedly apolitical decisions made by the federal government. **Light (2011)**, for example, shows that national standards for mortgage underwriting at the U.S. Federal Housing Administration were highly discriminatory:

'risk-rating, by favouring single-family homes over multifamily apartments, native-born white Americans over immigrants and non-whites, and residential areas on urban fringes over city centres, helped certain neighbourhoods to thrive while, elsewhere, speeding disinvestment and decline.'

- Scholars have recently turned to the role of white elites in the defence of segregation (e.g., **Brown, 2011**). **Curtis (2017)**, for example, has examined the role of Senator John Stennis (D-MS) in defending segregation, and how his record was misrepresented when he died in the interests of defending the 'colour-blind consensus of the present.'

B) Experience of black servicemen in the Second World War

- Historians disagree on the importance of the civil war in reactivating civil rights activism. The orthodox view is that the Second World War was a pivotal moment in the freedom struggle. **Wynn (2010)** argues that the War was 'crucial in the development of the emerging Civil Rights movement through the economic and social impact of the war, as well as the military service itself.' In the wider context of the New Deal and the Cold War, he concludes that the War years were 'neither simply a continuation of earlier developments nor a prelude to later change. Rather, this period was characterised by an intense transformation of black hopes and expectations, encouraged by real socio-economic shifts and departures in federal policy. Black self-consciousness at a national level found powerful expression in new movements, from the demand for equality in military service to changes in the shop floor to the 'Double V' campaign that linked the fight for democracy at home for the fight for democracy abroad.'
- Similarly, **Lawson (2014)** contends that the 'World War II era furnished the staging ground for the black revolution. It revitalised black solidarity, tested innovative protest tactics, and moved the federal government closer to the side of racial equality.' This conclusion represents the orthodox view in the literature on this topic.
- Other historians have posited a revisionist interpretation of the importance of the War. Recent research has established that a 'greater sense of tolerance' after the War mainly applied to white America. **Bruscino (2010)** notes that 'the growing broad-mindedness produced by the war had limits: it did not extend to African Americans.' **Rolland-Diamond (2013)** concurs with this view: despite important steps forward, such as Executive Order 8802, the War did not 'mark a major breakthrough' as 'discrimination and disfranchisement' persisted for decades thereafter. **Philips (2012)** explains that, even although

President Truman issued an executive order in 1948 that mandated equality of treatment and opportunity in the armed forces, America's constant need for military service, unequal access to employment opportunities, and discriminatory draft policies 'forced black men into the military at disproportionate rates' and did very little to improve the position of black Americans in general.

- A recent collection of essays edited by **Kruse and Tuck (2012)** summarises the state of revisionist opinion: 'It would be all too easy to assume that the War was a key steppingstone to the modern civil rights movement. [...] in reality the momentum for civil rights was not as clear cut as that, with activists facing setbacks as well as successes and their opponents finding ways to establish more rigid defences for segregation. While the War set the scene for a mass movement, it also narrowed some of the options for black activists.'
- **Alkebulan (2014)** examines the role of the influential black press before and during the Second World War. As well as covering domestic issues, like equal pay disputes and discrimination in the criminal justice system, the black press also covered the War itself in great depth: the territorial ambitions of imperial Japan, the behaviour of American soldiers stationed overseas, and the heroism of black soldiers in particular were all covered in the pages of the, far from homogenous, black press.

C) Role of black civil rights organisations

- Recent literature has given a better understanding of the role that young people played in the struggle for racial equality. **Bynum (2013)**, for example, carefully examines the activism of young people affiliated with the NAACP from the mid-1930s onwards and refutes the perception of the NAACP as working strictly through the courts.

D) Role of Martin Luther King

- See section six

E) Emergence of effective black leaders

- Recent literature addresses the role of black leaders and opinion-shapers in the campaign to desegregate the military. **Knauer (2014)** argues that military desegregation was 'highly contested among African Americans.' While all agreed on the need for desegregation, they could not agree on a strategy. Indeed, leaders such as A. Phillip Randolph, Grant Reynolds, Adam Clayton Powell, and Roy Wilkins argued for a conception of black manhood that resisted the draft. For

them, draft resistance was 'a proper marker of blackness and self-respect.' According to them, by fighting and dying for a segregated army, an African American male was not 'a man.' Those who stood up and objected to the offensive nature of Jim Crow were 'men' in the eyes of these activists.

- A much different perspective was widely espoused by Truman K. Gibson, a former African American aide to the Secretary of War, Henry L. Stimson; New York Amsterdam News editor C. B. Powell; columnist Gordon B. Hancock; and scores of presidents from historically black colleges and universities. These men argued that 'civil disobedience was a sign of a lack of patriotism, Americanness, and manhood.' Only by fighting and through shared sacrifice could African American men demonstrate their inherent equality to the nation (**Knauer, 2014**)