

# 26 Black Migration After World War I

For 50 years after the Civil War, more than 90 percent of all African Americans lived in southern states. Fewer than 10,000 blacks left the South each year. After 1914, however, this trickle became a flood. In that year, world events gave southern blacks a new path to the North. This time it was an economic escape route. Historians call this exodus the Great Migration.

## THE SOUTHERN PUSH

As with other major shifts in population, both push and pull factors led to the change. In the South, poverty and racial discrimination made conditions for blacks difficult and at times dangerous. Jim Crow laws put in place after Reconstruction segregated blacks and whites on public transportation and in public schools. Blacks were denied access to public places, such as restaurants, and were denied voting rights. Lack of education and job training kept many in the lowest-skilled, lowest-paying jobs.

At around the time of World War I, large parts of Mississippi and Alabama experienced both floods and a severe boll weevil infestation. Cotton fields tended by sharecroppers and small farmers were devastated. A desperate search began for other ways to support families.

In 1917, black educator and scholar W.E.B. DuBois interviewed southern blacks about the black exodus from the South. One Georgia man said he left the South because of his "desire to escape harsh and unfair treatment, to secure a larger degree of personal liberty, better advantages for children and a living wage." Religious leaders of Birmingham, Alabama's black community offered this summary of the reasons: "Prejudice, [loss of voting rights], Jim Crow laws, lynching, bad treatment on the farms, the boll weevil, the floods of 1916."

Most of the reasons African Americans cited for leaving their rural homes had existed for more than forty years. Despite this,

few chose to move, having little information about jobs outside the South.

## THE NORTHERN PULL

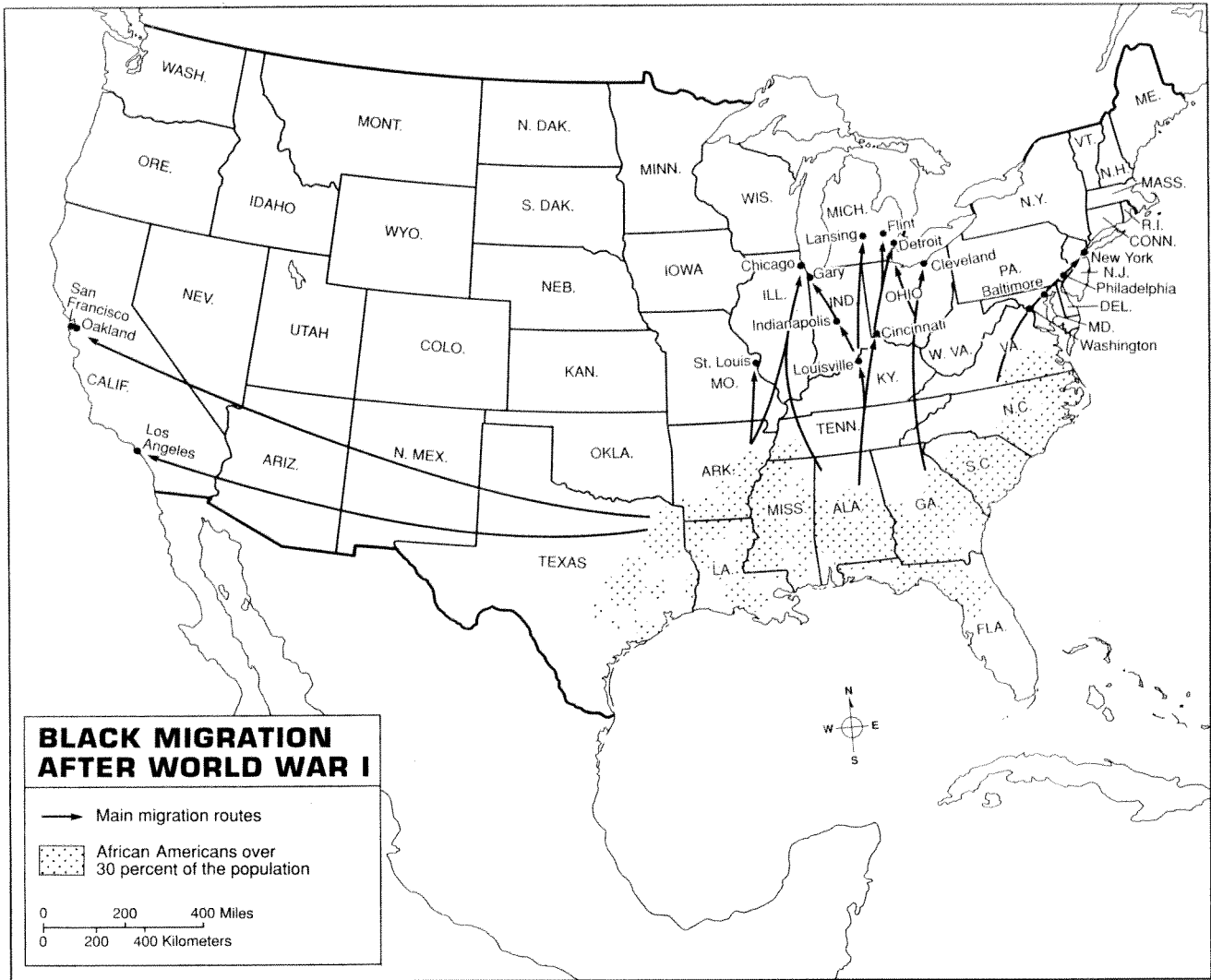
World War I was the pull that drew African Americans north. Before the war many jobs, especially low-skilled ones, had been done by immigrants newly arrived from Europe. When the war began in 1914, European immigration stopped. Northern factories no longer had cheap immigrant labor at a time when orders for war goods fueled demand for workers. Wartime labor shortages made some northern employers more willing to hire blacks. Auto plants in Lansing and Flint, Michigan, and steel mills in Ohio and Illinois opened their doors to black workers.

## FROM COUNTRY TO CITY

Almost all African Americans leaving the South left rural communities and headed for cities. Choosing a place to settle depended on where jobs were and on the type of transportation that was available.

Black migrants often traveled north on major railroad lines. Blacks from Virginia, South Carolina, and Georgia ended up in east coast cities like New York and Philadelphia. Fewer North Carolina blacks left home because they found jobs within the state in textile mills and other industries. Blacks from Alabama and the middle South went to Ohio and Michigan. Those from Mississippi and Louisiana headed due north, often boarding the Illinois Central railroad line from New Orleans to Chicago. Other migrants got off the train at the first large non-southern city they came to, such as St. Louis and Louisville.

After World War I, European nations reduced demand for American goods. Production rates in American factories slowed and the number of jobs declined. Black workers had to compete with white war veterans for industrial jobs. Blacks in the North soon learned that moving from one region to another did not necessarily mean an end to racism or discrimination.



Using the essay and the map, answer the following questions on a separate sheet of paper.

### A. FOCUS ON GEOGRAPHY

- Location** (a) What cities in the West attracted African Americans from the South? (b) Name three cities on the border of the southern states that attracted blacks.
- Place** What attracted blacks to cities like Flint and Lansing, Michigan?
- Interaction** Name two factors that influenced where African Americans chose to settle in the North.
- Movement** (a) How did World War I affect black migration? (b) What attracted migrants to such cities as Louisville?
- Region** (a) Why did blacks leave the South? (b) What drew migrants to the North?

### B. CRITICAL THINKING

- Relating Cause and Effect** Since the 1970s, the migration of African Americans from the South to the North has slowed. What might account for this?
- Comparing** How were the reasons for black migration north and European immigration to America similar?