

Module 07: Did World War II Advance Minorities, Women, and the Poor?

Introduction

World War II was a cataclysmic event for Americans at home and fighting abroad. The war affected the entire population, yet in many different ways. Millions enlisted or were inducted into the armed forces. Unprecedented numbers of Americans saw combat in places far from home. Hundreds of thousands of soldiers were killed or wounded in combat, while, on the home front, millions more worked in defense industries.

World War II required the unification and mobilization of Americans as never before. In the years preceding the war, significant groups of Americans — African Americans, Japanese Americans, women, the poor — experienced discrimination because of their race, nationality, gender, or economic status. The war, however, presented historically marginalized groups with new opportunities for employment and involvement in civic life.

This module explores how the unprecedented changes brought about by World War II affected such groups within American society. Did women, minorities, and the poor advance because of new opportunities made available to them during the war? What status did previously marginalized groups enjoy in postwar years? The documents and images presented in this module shed light on the nature of their participation in American society during and after the war.