



## INTRODUCTION

The Red Ball Express was established by American troops in August 1944 to transport urgently needed supplies from the beaches of Normandy to the advancing front lines. Between August 25 and November 16, 23,000 soldiers—mostly African American—delivered over 400,000 tons of food, fuel, ammunition, and other crucial supplies. The operation was a lifesaver for the soldiers fighting at the front, but it also had some serious limitations. Historians have used statistics and data—sometimes even the same data—to make very different arguments about the contributions of the Red Ball Express. This is an excellent opportunity for students to evaluate the role of statistics and data in making historical arguments.

## GRADE LEVEL

7–12

## TIME REQUIREMENT

1–2 class periods

## OBJECTIVE

Students will analyze excerpts from two historical interpretations of the Red Ball Express transportation system and evaluate their authors' use of statistics and data to support their conclusions. Students will then situate their findings in a broader discussion about the value and role of statistics and data in making historical arguments.

## MATERIALS

- Copies of excerpts from Max Hastings's *Armageddon* and David P. Colley's *The Road to Victory* (page 64)
- Copies of the **Student Worksheet**

## ONLINE RESOURCES

[ww2classroom.org](http://ww2classroom.org)

 **Liberation of Paris Video**

## STANDARDS

### COMMON CORE STANDARDS

#### [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.6](#)

Identify aspects of a text that reveal an author's point of view or purpose (for example, loaded language, inclusion or avoidance of particular facts).

#### [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.6](#)

Compare the point of view of two or more authors for how they treat the same or similar topics, including which details they include and emphasize in their respective accounts.

#### [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.8](#)

Assess the extent to which the reasoning and evidence in a text support the author's claims.

#### [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.6](#)

Evaluate authors' differing points of view on the same historical event or issue by assessing the authors' claims, reasoning, and evidence.

### NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR HISTORY

#### [HISTORICAL CONTENT ERA 8, STANDARD 3B](#)

The student understands World War II and how the Allies prevailed.

#### [HISTORICAL THINKING STANDARD 2](#)

The student is able to identify the central question(s) the historical narrative addresses and the purpose, perspective, or point of view from which it has been constructed.

The student is able to differentiate between historical facts and historical interpretations but acknowledge that the two are related; that the facts the historian reports are selected and reflect therefore the historian's judgment of what is most significant about the past.

The student is able to read historical narratives imaginatively, taking into account what the narrative reveals of the humanity of the individuals and groups involved—their probable values, outlook, motives, hopes, fears, strengths, and weaknesses.

#### [HISTORICAL THINKING STANDARD 3](#)

The student is able to compare competing historical narratives. The student is able to evaluate major debates among historians concerning alternative interpretations of the past.

## PROCEDURES

1. Start out by introducing students to **The War in Europe by the Numbers** section of the curriculum kit. You may choose to provide students with their own copies of these pages or locate them on **ww2classroom.org** and project them onto a screen. Have students choose one of the statistics that interests them and briefly write down why it interests them and why they think it is important. Use the **Discussion Guide** to help students think through the significance of numbers and data in explaining historical events.

2. Explain to students that they will now have the opportunity to explore firsthand how historians use numbers to make historical arguments—sometimes very different arguments. Use the background information provided in the **Discussion Guide** to introduce students to the Red Ball Express if necessary. You may also want to play the **Liberation of Paris video** available on [ww2classroom.org](http://ww2classroom.org).
3. Divide students into groups and then have each group divide itself into two subgroups. You may choose to make these divisions yourself to save time. Distribute copies of the **Student Worksheet** to all students. Distribute copies of the **Historical Excerpts** to each group, assigning each subgroup to an excerpt.
4. Instruct the students to read their excerpts, circling all of the statistics (numbers, data, totals, percentages) that seem important. Then, have them complete Part I of the **Student Worksheet** individually.
5. Once students have finished Part I of the **Student Worksheet**, instruct the subgroups in each group to discuss their respective excerpts, paying special attention to how each author uses data to support his conclusions about the Red Ball Express. Once both excerpts have been discussed, have students complete Part II of the **Student Worksheet**.
6. Returning to the whole class, ask students (or groups) to share their findings and explain which interpretation they find more convincing. Use the **Discussion Guide** to help link this back to broader questions about the role of numbers and data in making historical arguments.

## ASSESSMENT

Students will demonstrate their ability to evaluate the authors' use of evidence to support their arguments through the responses they provide on the **Student Worksheet** and the points they make during discussion in their groups and with the entire class.

## EXTENSION/ENRICHMENT

- Have students use their textbooks, library books, or other sources to locate other examples of historical arguments based on data and statistics. Have students evaluate these arguments and consider whether other data might be available that would support or refute the author's conclusions. If the book provides a bibliography, footnotes, or endnotes, have students evaluate the sources the author references for the statistics. Do the sources seem reliable? Why or why not?
- Have students choose one of the statistics (for example, the number of Allied soldiers involved in the Normandy invasion, tons of shipping lost during the Battle of the Atlantic, etc.) provided in **The War in Europe by the Numbers** table and try to find two or more sources that confirm that statistic. Instruct students to compare these sources and speculate as to why the exact numbers they provide may be different.
- Have students write their own summary of Red Ball Express activity that uses data from both excerpts and reconciles the two arguments.

## DISCUSSION GUIDE

### ABOUT THE RED BALL EXPRESS

The Red Ball Express was established by American troops in August 1944 to transport urgently needed supplies from the beaches of Normandy to the advancing front lines as they moved eastward across France. Between August 25 and November 16, 23,000 soldiers—mostly African American—delivered over 400,000 tons of food, fuel, ammunition, and other crucial supplies over a route that stretched up to 300 miles inland from the French coastline. Truck delivery of supplies was necessary because much of the French railway network had been destroyed by this time. The term Red Ball Express harkens back to the heyday of rail transportation when trains used for express cargo shipping were marked with red balls.

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSING THE WAR IN EUROPE BY THE NUMBERS SEGMENT

- Which of these statistics do you find most impressive, interesting, or surprising? Why do you think this statistic is important to understanding the story of World War II?  
*Students may respond that the numbers illustrate the enormous number of people and volume of materials involved in the war effort, or that they help emphasize the tragic costs of the war.*
- Where do you think these statistics come from? How do we know they're correct?  
*Student answers will vary; they may suggest they come from government sources, from historical investigation, from official reports, etc. This is a good opportunity to discuss why citations and bibliographies or works-cited lists are so important in providing a "breadcrumb trail" so the reader can be more confident that the author's ideas and conclusions are based on solid research and not just opinions. You can illustrate this by showing students the footnotes in a scholarly book or journal article.*
- Is an author's historical argument automatically stronger just by using numerical data and statistics to back it up?  
*Again, student answers will vary. Some may say yes, the statistics makes the argument stronger. Some students may be more skeptical, arguing that the author could choose to only use statistics that support his or her argument while ignoring statistics that contradicts it. They may also argue that the reader cannot be certain the statistics the author uses are correct.*

### DEBRIEFING QUESTIONS FOR AFTER THE ACTIVITY

- What are the similarities and differences between the two arguments these authors have made about the Red Ball Express, and how do they use data to support them?  
*Students may observe that both authors use data to illustrate the enormous task required of the Red Ball Express, but that the main difference lies in how they describe the effectiveness of the operation. Colley uses data to describe the Red Ball Express as "astonishing" and "unimaginable," while Hastings uses other data to argue that the operation's achievements have been "much exaggerated."*
- Are either of the authors wrong?  
*Students may argue that Colley's interpretation is skewed because he doesn't take into consideration the massive amount of resources used by the Red Ball Express, as Hastings does. They may also decide that neither author is wrong because they are not necessarily trying to make the same argument. Hastings argues the Red Ball Express was a wasteful operation; Colley argues that it was a remarkable act of determination that helped move the Allies forward during a tough moment. If students are unsure whether either argument is wrong, try refocusing the question by asking whether either of the arguments could be strengthened by adding additional information.*
- Having completed this exercise, how would you describe the value of statistics and data in making historical arguments, and what are the limitations?  
*Students may answer that data and statistics help provide concrete evidence to support an author's conclusions, but in light of the examples in this activity it is also clear that different arguments about the same topic can be made depending on which statistics are used.*

EXCERPT FROM DAVID P. COLLEY, *THE ROAD TO VICTORY* (2000)

So desperate were the Americans to catch and destroy the enemy after the breakout from the Normandy bridgehead two months after D-Day that only the most critical supplies—ammunition, rations, medical supplies, and gasoline—were being hauled. The matériel was transported largely by thousands of six-by-six, 2½-ton General Motors trucks, affectionately nicknamed “Jimmies.” The spearheading armored divisions, with their tanks, half-tracks, trucks, and jeeps, couldn’t run without fuel. The infantry needed rations, ammunition, and transport into battle, and the artillery needed shells.

The Red Ball Express lasted eighty-one days, from 25 August through 16 November 1944. By the end of those three months, the Red Ball had established itself firmly in the mythology of World War II. More than six thousand trucks and trailers and some twenty-three thousand men transported 412,193 tons of supplies to the advancing American armies from Normandy to the German frontier. . . .

Even the Germans, who had developed the blitzkrieg in their lightning invasions of Poland, the Low Countries, and France in 1939 and 1940, were astonished by the speed and mobility of the American advance, particularly that led by Gen. George S. Patton, and by the unimaginable number of vehicles and trucks that supplied the American forces.



EXCERPT FROM MAX HASTINGS, *ARMAGEDDON* (2005)

The dash across France and Belgium created a crisis for the supply of the Allied armies. In Patton’s legendary phrase: “My men can eat their belts, but my tanks gotta have gas.” An American heavy armoured division embraced 4,200 vehicles of all kinds, and required a combat load of 300,000 gallons of fuel, equivalent to 300 GMC [General Motors] trucks each carrying 1,000 gallons in five-gallon cans. By early September, American spearheads were operating more than 300 miles from their only source of supply, the beaches and small ports of Brittany and Normandy. . . .

It was a remarkable feat to move some 89,939 tons of supplies by road to the armies between 25 August and 6 September, but the achievements of the “Red Ball Express” trucking columns have been much exaggerated. They consumed 300,000 gallons of gasoline a day on their own account, and reckless abuse of vehicles disabled them at a frightening pace—700 fifty-hundredweight trucks were written off for every week of the Red Ball’s operation. Each “division slice” of the U.S. Army required 650 tons of supply a day—more than three times the German allocation—to keep it eating and fighting, which translated into a total of 18,600 tons of supply a day for the U.S. armies in the first half of October, rising to 20,750 by that month’s end. An armoured division required 25,000 gallons of fuel a day to keep rolling, never mind fighting. Even an infantry division consumed 6,500 gallons.

NAME:

DATE:

## PART I: INTERPRETING THE NUMBERS

**DIRECTIONS:** As you read the excerpt you have been assigned, underline all of the numbers or statistics that seem important. Then, choose three numbers or statistics and complete the table.

NUMBER	HOW DOES THE AUTHOR USE THIS NUMBER TO SUPPORT THE ARGUMENT OF THE PASSAGE?

## PART II: NUMBERS AGAINST NUMBERS

**DIRECTIONS:** After your group has discussed both excerpts and the numbers used by both authors, answer the following questions:

- How do the two authors differ in the arguments they make about the Red Ball Express?
- Compare and contrast how the two authors use data to support their conclusions. Do they use the same data or different data? Why do you think they chose to use these particular combinations of numbers?
- Which argument do you find more convincing, and why?