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South African Troops in Europe and the Middle East (Union of South Africa)

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Like other dominions of the British Empire, the Union of South Africa's participation in war was varied. South African volunteers served in various geographical campaigns, ranging from the Western Front (1916-1918), Egypt (1916), and Palestine (1917-1918), amongst others. Furthermore, the South African war experience also differed due to the contrasting roles tasked to separate army units, functions that were largely prescribed on the basis of race. The South African Native Labour Contingent and Cape Corps Labour Battalion were restricted to auxiliary roles, whilst the 1st South African Infantry Brigade and Cape Corps Infantry Battalion adopted armed functions.

Table of Contents

- [1 Introduction](#)
- [2 1st South African Infantry Brigade \(1SAI\)](#)
 - [2.1 Recruitment](#)
 - [2.2 Military Service in Europe and Egypt](#)
- [3 South African Native Labour Contingent \(SANLC\)](#)
 - [3.1 Recruitment](#)
 - [3.2 Labour Service in France](#)
- [4 Cape Corps Labour Battalion \(CCLB\)](#)
- [5 Cape Corps Infantry Battalions](#)
- [6 Conclusion](#)
- [Notes](#)
- [Selected Bibliography](#)

Introduction

In August 1914, like other [dominions](#) of the British Empire, the [Union of South Africa](#) entered what was then considered a “European War” as a subordinate part, not an ally, of the British Empire, committed by the British war declaration. In absence of the right of [neutrality](#), the [Union government](#) was only competent to decide on the extent of South Africa’s participation.^[1] This decision led to a divided parliament and nation, which initially only led to the South African campaign in [German South West Africa](#) (GSWA) from 1914 to 1915. In July 1916, despite the limits set by the Defence Act (13 of 1912) prohibiting the sending of troops beyond “South Africa” and for the immediate defence of the Union, a further contribution was made to the Allied war effort.^[2] This legal obstacle was overcome by recruiting volunteers into the South African Overseas Expeditionary Force (SAOEF), allowing recruits to fight in foreign campaigns such as Europe and the [Middle East](#). The other limitation to South African participation was that the act entrenched racial differentiation in the military sphere.^[3] However, albeit against policy, it did provide for special enlistment of black,^[4] coloured and Indian troops.^[5]

The aim of this paper is to provide a regional focus on the two campaigns in Europe and the Middle East that included South African participation. Specific reference will be made to the recruitment of those South African units that fought abroad, namely the 1st South African Infantry Brigade (1SAI); the South African Native Labour Corps Contingent (SANLC); and the Cape Corps Infantry and Military Labour Battalion.

1st South African Infantry Brigade (1SAI)

The main component of South Africa’s contribution to the [Western Front](#) between 1916 and 1918 was that of the 1SAI. The Cape Corps Labour Battalion and the SANLC also served there as components of the South African Expeditionary Force (SAOEF). Despite their South African identity, the various units neither directly associated nor jointly operated in the field. All South African units sent to Europe served as part of a British division and therefore fell under imperial command.^[6]

Recruitment

In September 1914, due to the absence of a South African unit, many South Africans joined the British army. This situation continued until May 1915, when the Union government decided to form the SAOEF in response to [Britain’s](#) request for an [infantry](#) contingent bound for [France](#).^[7] Yet by June 1916, it became apparent that the Union government was unable to pay for a contingent alone, even if it was prepared to raise it. Discussion on these financial matters rambled on past the opening

of recruitment campaigns and gave rise to dissatisfaction amongst army ranks.^[8] By late 1916, the decision was made that not only the Infantry Brigade, but also the [Cape coloured and native units](#) were to be financed by the Imperial government.^[9] As a result, the SAOEF was in certain respects a mercenary force, since the [British government](#) assumed liability for pay. Despite the procurement of finances to pay those soldiers, British army pay was lower than that of both the Union Defence Force (UDF) and that of other Dominions.^[10] Furthermore, the Union rate of pay varied between white and non-white units as well as between campaigns.^[11]

Some volunteers were considered to be skilled soldiers, having seen action during the earlier Second Anglo-[Boer War](#) of 1899-1902.^[12] Furthermore, many of those men returning from GSWA re-enlisted as recruitment drives opened on 21 July 1915.^[13] Apart from official government attempts to procure volunteers, civilian Recruiting Committees also organized recruiting drives, tours, marches and meetings.^[14] By 10 August 1915, it became apparent that only one brigade, along with some other units, was to be raised for the Western Front.^[15] This was partially due to the simultaneous recruitment drive to muster troops for [East Africa](#), a more lucrative campaign since it offered better pay and was carried out on closer and more familiar terrain. Loyal Afrikaners were more willing to serve as commandos on horseback in East Africa than in the foreign landscape of Europe.^[16] The 1SAI consisted of four battalions, each designed to represent the main political divisions of the Union.^[17] The military culture of this unit was a troubled compromise as it was a rough amalgamation of local British colonial and Boer republican military traditions and systems.^[18] The brigade only represented around 10 to 15 percent Afrikaners, a proportion that increased over the following three years to roughly 25 percent. Despite the dominance of English recruits within the unit, some of the more nationalist-minded Afrikaners were irritated with the imposition of an increasingly Anglicised command culture and soldiering code.^[19] Furthermore, with pressure to fill the drafts destined for the Western Front, and perhaps unconsciously, some recruitment centres relaxed their race attestation policy, with the result that in 1917, albeit unknowingly, the first mixed combat units were formed.^[20]

Military Service in Europe and Egypt

The volunteers of the 1SAI were the first to embark for overseas service after some training in Potchefstroom.^[21] The first batch arrived in the United Kingdom in September 1915 for training at Bordon in Hampshire in preparation for service in France. Yet, in December 1915 it was decided to divert the brigade to [Egypt](#) to fight alongside British troops against the Sennusi. The aim of this campaign was to safeguard Egypt and the strategically positioned Suez Canal that ensured Allied trading interests in the Mediterranean basin as well as vital oil supplies from the [Middle East](#).^[22] After finally retaking former British-claimed Sollum on 14 March 1916, the brigade was moved to the Western Front as part of the 9th (Scottish) Division.^[23]

Most of the brigade landed at Marseille on 20 April 1916 and was mobilised to Abbeville, apart from the 4th battalion, which was placed under a two-week quarantine owing to a case of contagious disease, presumably spinal meningitis, on board the *Oriana*.^[24] The 1SAI was sent north of the Somme River on 14 June 1916 to be mobilised as the reserve brigade and to consolidate the XII Corps, which were to serve as the right flank of the 4th Army. Even in this limited capacity, the brigade suffered approximately 500 casualties after the [Somme Offensive](#) commenced on 1 July 1916. On 13 July, the 1SAI was gathered at Talus to serve as the reserve force for the 9th Division, ready for the division's surprise offensive on the village, Longueval and Delville Wood, east of this village, the following day. Military command decided to mobilise the reserve force, including 1SAI, to attack Delville Wood on 15 July due to [heavy casualties](#) sustained by the 9th Division. The battle of Delville Wood reached its climax on 17 July, as the German [artillery](#) continued heavy bombardment for seven hours on the wooded enclave.^[25] Reinforcements were only sent on 20 July, at which time the South Africans suffered the loss of two-thirds of its strength: emerging with 3,155 men, having lost 750 and with over 1,500 wounded, captured or missing.^[26] Beginning on 18 July 1917, when the first Delville Wood Day was commemorated, this date served to memorialize South Africa's special part in the Somme Offensive and has obtained a prominent role in [South African military history](#).^[27]

Due to the high [casualty figures](#), the brigade had to be augmented with reinforcements, training and re-organisation. The 1SAI were only battle ready again on 23 August and were deployed in the Vimy-region in early October. The second most intensive South African experience of the Somme Campaign in terms of loss of men was Butte de Warlingcourt between 9 and 19 October 1916, where a further 1,150 casualties were sustained by the infantry brigade.^[28] During the war, the brigade fought in France and Flanders, participating in some notable battles in addition to the Somme Offensive. In 1917, the brigade sustained 549 men wounded and missing and 145 killed in action in April at Arras. Further casualties sustained included the 995 wounded and missing and 263 men killed in action at the Battle of Menin Road Ridge, which formed part of the [Third Ypres Offensive](#), or more commonly known as the Battle of Passchendaele, in September of that year. Another 550 men were wounded and missing and 89 killed at the Battle of the Lys (Messines Ridge) in April 1918 and another 1,086 wounded and missing and 190 killed during the Le Cateau operations in October. A further 900 casualties were also sustained at Cambrai in March 1918.^[29]

South African Native Labour Contingent (SANLC)

Many in South Africa were opposed to the incorporation of mixed-race men into the armed forces. For some, such sentiments were based on prejudice, doubting in the men's ability, whilst for others it was a matter of principle, dangerous to the Union's existing ideological order.^[30] In contrast to such covert sentiments, the South African and British governments issued a statement appealing to the non-white peoples of South Africa to show their support in order to avoid disquiet and risings from this disenfranchised group.^[31] Large-scale military offensives in France throughout 1916, especially South African Troops in Europe and the Middle East (Union of South Africa) - 1914-1918-Online

after the Battle of the Somme, led to the urgent need for manpower to maintain infrastructure.^[32] All major European armies developed wartime labour battalions; the British and French in particular made use of Asian and African labourers, including Indo-Chinese and African American labourers.^[33] Consequently, the British War Office pressured the Colonial Office and the Union government to make use of African labour in Europe since it required an estimated 60,900 labourers.^[34] The Union government's approval of the scheme was based on the condition that the labour contingent was to be under its control in order to protect South Africa's racial interests. Furthermore, SANLC units were to be segregated from other military formations as well as from the French civilian population. Such measures included a closed compound system reminiscent of that used for African labourers working in the mines in the Witwatersrand. In addition, the scheme was viewed as an experiment for testing certain segregatory devices of social control that could be implemented domestically at a later stage.^[35] However, in practice, segregated living and working conditions implemented in France could not meet the standards of the South African authorities. This was largely due to arising difficulties in its practical application in a foreign wartime environment, the infallibility of the network of control and African resistance to these segregationist devices.^[36]

Recruitment

The Department of Native Affairs took control of procuring labour recruits for the war effort after the Department of Defence experienced difficulties during the GSWA campaign.^[37] Despite the admittance of this group into military units, recruitment was limited, since Africans were not issued with firearms. Such racial segregation within the military was delineated in the 1912 Defence Act and could only be omitted through special parliamentary authorisation. This measure was introduced because the government feared a black mutiny against white authority, as well as the erosion of the colour bar, since it indirectly condoned equality in relations between white and black when both could bear arms and share military duties. There was also the threat of a potential claim of citizenship rights by black combat veterans, since these veterans could return home and potentially argue for enhanced civil rights due to services rendered to the Union.^[38]

Recruitment campaigns adopted the usual patriotic vernacular and the promise of adventure.^[39] Beyond these attempts, in 1916, leading members of the South African Native National Congress (SANNC), such as Sol Plaatje (1876-1932) and John Langalibalele Dube (1871-1946), as well as recognized editors, such as Francis Zacheus Santiago Peregrino (1851-1919), were reined into recruitment ventures by the Union government.^[40] Political figures, like Prime Minister Louis Botha (1862-1919) and Governor-General Sydney Charles Buxton (1853-1934), as well as clergymen and missionaries, also assisted. Financial benefits were also advertised. Another recruitment tactic involved covert promises of future prospects or the intimidation of African chiefs and headmen by government officials, who threatened to depose them and suspend their subsidies if they failed to enlist men. As a result, some men were rather unofficially conscripted into the contingent.^[41]

Despite the variety of methods employed to meet the imperial authorities' requested 10,000 labourers in September 1916 and 40,000 in 1917, only 25,000 recruits were secured, of whom only 21,000 were deemed healthy enough for service or did not desert after being attested.^[42] By 1917, it is estimated that the SANLC constituted between 20 and 25 percent of the British labour force.^[43] Casualties sustained by the SANLC were relatively low, estimated at 1,107 men, especially considering that almost half of the casualties sustained by this unit resulted from the tragic sinking of the SS *Mendi* transport ship.^[44] Oceanic transport of large numbers of soldiers and labourers during the war years was not only dangerous, but also unprecedented. On 21 February, the SS *Mendi*, carrying 882 members of the SANLC to France, collided with the SS *Darrow* off the Isle of Wight. Only 267 men survived; the other 615, together with the *Mendi*, perished at sea. In the immediate aftermath of this disaster, the South African Parliament adopted a motion of sympathy and all parliamentary members rose to pay their respects. Grief over the tragedy enveloped South Africa and appeared in newspapers. Such a reaction, considering the political context of the time, was an unusual gesture. According to legend, the men still on board the ship performed a final dance on deck before it disappeared under the waters of the English Channel. Much as the focus of First World War commemoration for white South Africa concentrated on Delville Wood, the sinking of the *Mendi* has been commemorated with pride and sorrow in post-Apartheid South Africa.^[45] The centenary of this oceanic tragedy was noticeably commemorated, not only domestically, but also internationally. One of several memorial services was held at Newtimber on the Sussex coast, where, a hundred years earlier, bodies of the SANLC had washed up on shore and were buried. Such commemorative events highlights the continuing transnational aspect of the Great War.^[46]

Labour Service in France

On 8 October 1916, a depot for the attestation, equipping, vaccinating, inoculation, and military training for the SANLC was opened at Rosebank Show Ground in Cape Town.^[47] The SANLC, under the command of Colonel Stanley Archibald Markham Pritchard (1874-?), former Director of the Native Labour Bureau, was divided into five battalions, and each into a further four companies. All officers were white, selected on the premise that they supposedly had some expertise in "native affairs".^[48] The first two battalions arrived in Plymouth at the end of 1916 and sailed for France from there. In December 1916, a Director of Labour was formed by the British army to see to the coordination and administration of all labour units, resulting in the fragmentation of the battalions into smaller, more mobile units. These units were scattered along French channel ports and in forward army areas close to the front lines until April 1917. Thereafter, they were withdrawn behind the front lines to specially segregated camps at Le Havre, Abencourt, Abbeville, Rouen, Dieppe, Rouxesnil, Saigneville, Dannes and Picardy.^[49] SANLC headquarters were based in Rouen, the records office and a segregated hospital with native orderlies in Dieppe and another hospital at Boulogne. The SANLC was primarily tasked with the offloading of ships, loading of trains and lorries, building, quarrying, tree-felling and hay-shifting.^[50]

In November 1917, the cessation of recruiting came under discussion, primarily due to shipping shortages for the repatriation of labourers at the end of their one-year contracts. Recruiting was finally discontinued after the last contingent of forty-two men arrived in France on 5 January 1918.^[51] Sources debate whether this was for purely military reasons, or due to untenable unrest from labourers related to the compound system. By September 1918, all men of the SANLC were repatriated to the Union.^[52]

Cape Corps Labour Battalion (CCLB)

There was no blanket African support for the war. Many did not volunteer primarily because it did not concern them, or because they did not trust the white authorities. The desire to fight, or at least to fight for the right to fight, was to a certain degree restricted to black educated elite, coloured and Indian opinion. Their views were arguably influenced by the fact that Africans or “other coloured races” from British and French colonial empires, including Māori from [New Zealand](#), could participate in the war effort. Perhaps more significantly, they had hoped that participation would grant them some bargaining power in altering their inferior socio-political position. However, having the majority of Africans serve abroad in a “European war” amounted to another means by white authorities to dominate and control their lives. This mass African opinion could be the reason for the failure of recruiting committees to raise sufficient troops for the SANLC.^[53] This stood in contrast with coloured and Indian communities.^[54] A large body of Cape coloured men participated in the GSWA Campaign in 1915 as artillery and transport drivers, motor drivers and mechanics, as officers’ servants and in other non-combatant capacities.^[55] The name, Cape Corps, had already been introduced around 1817, and despite amalgamations of the title, it has remained as a designation for coloured soldiers or a coloured regiment.^[56]

With the simultaneous organisation of the 1st Infantry Battalion of the Cape Corp, a further two coloured battalions were raised to adopt non-combatant roles in logistical units. The Cape Corps Labour Battalion was established in June 1916, primarily consisting of recruits drawn from Cape dock and transport workers, and the Cape Auxiliary Horse Transport Company (CAHTC).^[57] These two units comprised 4,482 men.^[58] The CCLB was raised at a time when recruitment for the SANLC had stagnated and thereby offered a convenient alternative to securing labour.^[59] As with the SANLC, the raising of its personnel fell under the control of the Department of Native Affairs.^[60] The CCLB was an imperial unit like the SANLC, staffed by primarily white South African officers and NCOs.^[61]

The first overseas labour contingent to sail for the Western Front was the South African CCLB in August 1916, consisting of men who were technically civilians, but contracted under military law to work in France for a year. This force eventually grew to over 20,000 men.^[62] By May 1917, the CCLB, composed of approximately 2,000 men, was tasked to the British Army Service Corps to

work at the French ports of Boulogne, Rouen, Dunkirk and Le Havre, thus completing similar duties to other labour battalions.^[63] Despite these men serving on the European front, they were regarded as of a lower status than the armed Cape Corps due to their non-combatant role.^[64] The CCLB was one of the last units to leave France and only did so in July 1919 at Botha's insistence.^[65] The majority of men had served nearly three years in France, and the fact that they were one of the last units to be repatriated might indicate their valuable role in alleviating the load on the Allies' logistical organization.^[66]

Cape Corps Infantry Battalions

In light of the desperate need for manpower in Europe and East Africa, and persistent representations made by leaders of the Cape coloured community, the opportunity for operational, rather than ancillary service arose in July 1915. The deployment of black, coloured and Indian troops in non-combatant roles did not give rise to any real controversy; it was only with the combatant role tasked to the Cape Corps Infantry Battalions that such strife arose.^[67] In September 1915, the Imperial Army Council accepted the offer of the Union Government to enrol and mobilise Cape coloured men into a distinct Infantry Battalion.^[68] Nationalists, government backbenchers and some Unionists voiced their hostility towards Botha with his decision to raise and deploy black and coloured troops. Botha's initial decision to recruit armed mixed-race soldiers in 1915 resulted from the limited success in recruiting whites for the East Africa campaign. In addition, Botha believed that the recruitment of coloured volunteers for East Africa would "save" the lives of white troops, who were deemed to be ineffective in tropical climates. However, in time, this belief proved false, as coloured men suffered the same extreme casualty figures due to tropical illnesses and diseases as white soldiers.^[69]

Subsequently, a Cape Corps Recruiting Committee was formed, initially chaired by Sir Walter Ernest Mortimer Stanford (1850-1933), and later succeeded by the mayor of Cape Town, Sir Harry Hands (1860-1948).^[70] The first batch of recruits were from Carnarvon and were sent to the mobilisation Depot at Noah's Ark Camp in Simon's Town. The battalion was placed under the command of Major George Abbot Morris (1878/9-1957), an officer of the Natal Carbineers.^[71] Unlike the SANLC, which was restricted to labour duty and therefore seen as inferior, the Cape Coloured Infantry Corps held a superior position since they served in a combatant capacity and were thus treated and seen as soldiers. As a result, Cape Corps men were more respected and not restricted to segregated compounds.^[72]

By 12 December 1915, recruiting ceased, since the desired amount, more than 1,000 men, had enlisted.^[73] After a brief two months of training, on 2 March 1916, the 1st Cape Corps Battalion were considered to be ready for operational duty in East Africa.^[74] Intermittent recruiting continued during the war years due to dwindling unit strengths; a total of 8,000 men were recruited.^[75] The battalion

was withdrawn to the Union in December 1917.^[76]

Largely due to the success of the 1st Battalion, a 2nd Cape Corps Infantry Battalion was officially formed in Cape Town in June 1917, to be first transferred to Portuguese and then [German East Africa](#).^[77] Between February and March 1918, after their role in this campaign slackened, the 2nd Battalion was disbanded, and some of its members were thereby transferred to the 1st Battalion.^[78] Those members fit enough for further duty were returned to the recently moved regimental depot at Kimberley, together with the Reserve Half Battalion, for re-organisation, re-equipment and training in preparation for service in Palestine.^[79]

In April 1918, the 1,000-strong 1st Cape Corps Battalion left South Africa to become part of the [Egyptian Expeditionary Force \(EEF\)](#).^[80] The 1st Cape Corps Battalion arrived in Egypt in late April, where they received specialised desert training until June.^[81] In mid-July 1918, the battalion was moved to the Palestinian front as part of General [Edmund Allenby's \(1861-1936\)](#) army at Rham Alla.^[82] They became part of what could be considered the final mopping-up operations against the Turks in Palestine. There they fought the Turkish Eighth Army, capturing Dhib Hill on 20 September and Square Hill the following day.^[83]

Thereafter they returned to Egypt, staying at Alexandria from 1 November until after the cessation of hostilities. Between 12 March and 31 May 1919, the Battalion assisted in the quelling of the Egyptian Rebellion. It was finally [demobilised](#) at the Dispersal Camp at Maitland on the outskirts of Cape Town between 5 and 8 September 1919.^[84]

Conclusion

At the outbreak of the First World War, the recently founded Union of South Africa had already exhibited the early signs of racial segregation. Such racial attitudes had been in development for several decades and were eventually translated into institutionalised racial policies after 1910. This could be seen in the 1912 Defence Act, which constituted the UDF as an all-white force. Thus, not all volunteers were granted the same military status, since race was a determinant. Beyond the fact that troops served in different geographical regions, race further led to a varied war experience. Some men were categorised into combatant roles, such as the soldiers of European descent who fought in Europe as part of the 1SAI, whilst others were enlisted in auxiliary roles, such as the CCLB and the SANLC, which served in France.^[85] However, such institutionalised policies could be overturned or circumvented, since the Defence Act left space for emergencies or special circumstances. This allowed for the enlistment of coloured men in combatant roles as members of the Cape Coloured Infantry Battalions. Despite these units' military success in both East Africa and Palestine, they have only received significant public and academic attention within the last two decades. Therefore, the admittedly slanted focus of South Africa's participation in the Great War fell

on the 1SAI, primarily because its contribution were until recently the most visible.^[86]

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Notes

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3. ↑ Gleeson, Ian: The Unknown Force. Black, Indian and Coloured Soldiers Through Two World Wars, Johannesburg 1994, p. ix.
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