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Centenary (South Africa)

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This article provides an assessment of how society and the state in post-apartheid South Africa responded to the issue of centenary commemoration of the First World War. It suggests that while the general popular reaction was no more than half-hearted, the critical questions of why, what and how the country's wartime involvement ought to be marked generated considerable political division, controversy and contestation over racial representation and what forms of war memory were to be accorded primacy. A striking feature of commemorative impulses was government inertia alongside a spurt of varied cultural and artistic re-imaginings of black sacrifice in wartime.

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Introduction

[Commemoration](#), public remembrance, and the political manipulation of historical memories have long had some connection with the place of the First World War in South African public life, although

the position occupied by the war has never been prominent. Dwarfed by the national significance of the Anglo-Boer War, or South African War, 1899-1902, the advent of the First World War centenary did not usher in a sudden or unexpected golden era of [commemoration](#).

In sharp contrast to the popular enthusiasm for the public commemorative project seen in [Britain](#) as well as in other former British dominion states, for the most part the South African Republic sleepwalked through the duration of the Centenary. But while the forces of memory and recall remained very minor, there were notable differences from earlier periods in what wartime episodes were selected as a primary focus of remembrance and in how and why they were [commemorated](#).

Shaped by a post-apartheid present and the realities of black majority rule, there was an emphasis on inclusivity in war commemoration. This went hand-in-hand with what was to receive precedence in a new nationalist commemorative landscape. This centenary period saw the end of white South Africa's privileged marking of the 1916 Battle of Delville Wood and a subordinated black South Africa's martyrology of the 1917 *SS Mendi* maritime catastrophe. Broadly speaking, the Delville Wood symbolism of an earlier white and European South Africa receded, while a new – and highly varied – focus on acts of *Mendi* remembrance and homage confirmed a twenty-first-century tailoring of First World War commemoration to the needs of the country's present political purpose and its assertion of an African identity.

Official National Commemoration: A Largely Still-Born Project

In October 2013, the South African Ministry of Defence and Military Veterans was invited to a meeting in Paris to discuss the international coordination of centenary commemorative programmes between former [Dominion states of the British Empire](#) – Commonwealth. At this gathering, states were requested to present “their national” programmes” as well as “the nature of their events”. As the South African government had made absolutely no centenary preparations, it found itself caught with its pants down.

Following this discomfiting diplomatic embarrassment, the Pretoria administration scrambled to try to catch up with [Australia](#), [New Zealand](#), and [Canada](#) and hastily initiated a “First World War Centenary Project” under Thabang Makwetla, the Deputy Minister of Defence and Military Veterans. By December 2013, efforts were being made by the government to recruit local historians of the war for research tasks and to undertake public presentation assignments, while several state departments, including Education and Arts and Culture as well as the country's National Heritage Council, were pulled into the planning of a programme of “Centennial Perspectives”.

It was envisaged that the theme of First World War commemoration would form part of President Jacob Zuma's parliamentary state of the nation address at the beginning of 2014. Around a dozen touchstones were identified for a historical commemorative agenda. These included the 1914-15 anti-war [Afrikaner rebellion](#), the [participation of African, Coloured, and Indian people](#) in the conflict, involvement on the [Western Front](#), the war in Africa, the social and political impact of the war years,

and the canonical episodes of sacrifice and loss of the 1916 [Somme Battle](#) of Delville Wood and the 1917 sinking of the *SS Mendi* troopship in the English Channel.

Along with this, there was talk of extending the boundaries of South Africa's commemorative focus to incorporate the wartime role and [experience of black Africans](#) in neighbouring states, including former British protectorate territories like Swaziland. It was also decided that the Department of Defence's commemoration research project should give priority to the holding of a national scholarly conference on the First World War. A major research-based official centenary book was also envisaged. Proposed as a volume to be compiled by professional historians, it was intended to portray the impact of the war on the [Union of South Africa](#) and to explore its legacy.

Inevitably, ruling African National Congress (ANC) party politicians had their say, reading from a script packed not merely with the demands of current local nationalist politics, but with ambitions of encompassing the wider African continent. From this perspective, the national story of the war and its aftermath ought not to concentrate solely on remembrance of the *Mendi* disaster and the previously under-acknowledged loss of black lives. It should also spread itself across a much wider African canvas, specifically illustrating the destructive impact of [colonialism](#), the devastation of European [imperialism](#) in Africa, the relationship of the war to human rights, and "how the war coincided with and impacted the struggle for equal rights and liberation".

In that sense, a proposed pillar of the country's war commemoration was to establish and exhibit a fresh storyline about the meaning of 1914-1918, one in which the conflict would be assimilated into an African nationalist tradition of an oppressed people struggling to be free. In other words, the centenary would be presented as an interplay between the impact of the First World War and a national black liberation narrative, ending in the present of continuing struggle for complete [economic](#) and political [emancipation](#). The war experience was to be promoted as a galvanizing spurt on the long anti-colonial march to freedom.

Still, consideration of war commemoration as a national enterprise was not without some cautious questioning. In the view of a leading figure in planning activity, it would not necessarily be easy for those involved to rouse their fellow citizens to observe remembrance of 1914-1918, as "it may be difficult to explain why South Africa should commemorate the First World War since at the time it was a young country", and riven "with much division". Nonetheless, if tackled with adequate "circumspection", the success of an endeavour in historical memory ought still to be assured.^[1]

The expectant atmosphere was swiftly deflated. Before anything could get underway, the competitive politics of political party imperatives smothered the politics of official war commemoration. With a May 2014 general election looming, work on a government commemoration programme took a distant back seat. Although the ruling ANC was returned to office, with subsequent cabinet and administrative changes in key ministries, the state's belated intent to launch a programme to mark the centenary decade was forgotten. In this major public arena, its brief arousal from lethargy had made virtually no domestic mark. Generally, any notable interpretations – or *re*-interpretations – of

South Africa's war experience would not be found within the torpid torso of governing officialdom.

Other Government Acts of Remembrance and Public Discord

Abroad, a few steps were taken by ruling politicians to internationalise the remembrance of South Africa's war participation. In July 2014, Deputy-President Cyril Ramaphosa visited France to preside at a re-interment in the Delville Wood cemetery of the remains of Beleza Myengwa, a private in the South African Native Labour Contingent (SANLC), retrieved almost a century earlier "from the watery grave of the more than 600 heroes of the *SS Mendi*". Ramaphosa's address was bathed in the standard political balm of "inclusivity", with the commemorative ceremony on the Somme symbolising "an historic day" of "moving forward" as "free South Africans", from "a past founded on racial oppression, humiliation and exploitation".

Much was made of the therapeutic dividend of First World remembrance. The re-interment of Private Myengwa alongside white infantrymen of the South African Infantry Brigade was happening at an especially auspicious emotional moment, "the year that marks both the centenary of the start of the First World War and the twentieth anniversary of the attainment of democracy in South Africa". The purpose of the 2014 ceremony, Ramaphosa emphasised, was to "correct a historical injustice", namely, to "restore the human dignity and affirm the citizenship of the members of the [South African Native Labour Corps](#)" who had endured "discrimination and humiliation...even as they volunteered to serve their colonial oppressors in a war that was not of their making".

With a concluding flourish in which remembrance of the past served to endorse the notion of a continually improving present, South Africa's Deputy-President declared the Delville Wood [museum](#) and cemetery re-interment to have been a "transformative" act of "nation building", for "not only do we bring together black and white comrades-in-arms to rest peacefully in one cemetery, but we also lay to rest the myth of racial superiority that has been the cause of so much suffering".^[2]

There was no slackening of this commemorative theme when President Jacob Zuma visited the Somme two years later to inaugurate a new wall at the [memorial](#) site of the Battle of Delville Wood. Declaring, "we are here to honour in particular black people who fell in this war, who were not accorded the respect and recognition they deserved, and which is equal to that of their white compatriots", his address contained some commonplace historical truths. These included reminders that the Union government had not allowed African volunteers to bear arms, as that might have placed "black South Africans" on an "equal footing with Europeans", which carried the risk "that race relations would be undermined at home", and that members of the Labour Contingent were compelled to "live like prisoners in guarded compounds".

But along with these came the historical falsification and distortion which inevitably accompanies occasions in which politicians – especially those of a nationalist stripe – decide to behave as if they were historians. Thus, the President announced that "when World War 1 broke out, South Africa was still a British colony". There was invention which contradicted Zuma's own message about the

menial labourer status in France of the SANLC. Listeners were informed that “as the war intensified, regulations were relaxed and members of the SANLC were transferred to fight in the trenches”. As a skeptical newspaper columnist noted, while nothing should “detract from the honours they fully deserve...the historical reality is that only white [South African troops](#) fought at Delville Wood”, while “South African black troops were later labouring 200kms away”.^[3]

The framing of the July 2016 Delville Wood commemoration was also intended to convey a message about shared struggle between continents. A common First World War struggle built on service and sacrifice between battling South Africans and French compatriots was assimilated with the political solidarities of the anti-apartheid struggle of the closing decades of the twentieth century. Thus, after thanking French municipal officials and regional dignitaries for “dedicating their quality time to commemorate with us our fallen heroes”, Jacob Zuma conflated commemoration of a far distant war with a triumph over his country’s apartheid order.

In an expansive working of the national imagination, he reminded the centenary gathering that they had assembled, “not only to commemorate the lives of South Africans who perished on foreign soil during the First World War... we also remember those who took part in the liberation struggle of South Africa”. Their ranks included “many activists here in France, who shared our vision of freedom and democracy”.^[4] Elsewhere on the [Western Front](#), well away from the ruling party’s purple prose, a handful of serving reservists of the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) were despatched to Europe to participate in Commonwealth War Graves Commission ceremonies, laying wreaths at Dieppe (burial ground of some of the *Mendi* dead) and at Ypres, where, in July 2016, the country’s post-1994 national anthem, “Nkosi Sikelel iAfrika” (“God Bless Africa”) reportedly “reverberated through the Menin Gate’s vaulted ceilings”.^[5]

Domestically, the cycle of small annual 1914-1918 remembrance ceremonies staged under the umbrella of the South African National Defence Force continued in its usual contemporary manner, in the sense that the human tragedy of the First World War was not necessarily always at the core of commemorative ritual. In regular Armistice Day observance in cities like Cape Town and Johannesburg, attended by officiating soldiers, small groups of older Second World War veterans, a few more recent ex-servicemen from apartheid South Africa’s lengthy Angolan Border War of the 1960s-1980s, and a handful of poppy-wearing white civilians, 1914-1918 was visibly declining as a defining November watershed in commemoration.

While both World Wars were still dutifully marked, in significance they were eclipsed by the reclaiming and marking of apartheid-era conflicts: the Cold War-propelled Border War and the minor guerrilla armed struggle or liberation armed struggle against the South African state from the 1960s. A dominant recurring sentiment was the assertion of a common – if not exactly shared – fighting service between former foes who had now become equal citizens of the same new nation or the New South Africa proclaimed by contemporary discourse. Although anchored in an impulse of post-apartheid healing and reconciliation, it may have “seemed more of a pious hope than a genuine

possibility”, to borrow and adapt a phrase applied to the divided Irish war experience.^[6]

On the official government front, the only other local strand was intermittent commemoration of the loss of the *SS Mendi* ahead of television news bulletins on the public South African Broadcasting Corporation during 2017-2018 and on a February 2019 “Armed Forces Day”. Then, historical memory of the February 1917 maritime disaster was anachronistically recycled into a spectator show of jet fighter flypast displays and processions of mechanised armour in tribute to “those patriots who have paid the ultimate price in service to the country”.^[7]

Yet even the affirmation of a *Mendi* war remembrance ran into troubled political waters in February 2019. The ANC government’s chronic factional squabbles over such matters as economic policy and labour laws even spilled over into the sphere of official war commemoration, as internal political bickering surfaced over what was to be honoured. Thus, on one hand, President Cyril Ramaphosa visited a small 2007 *SS Mendi* memorial site on the campus of the University of Cape Town (on a spot that had originally been a campground which had housed members of the Labour Contingent), where he lamented its failure to adequately “depict the enormity of the tragedy” and called for it be expanded.^[8] In a moving gesture, Hilary Page, the eighty-two-year-old granddaughter of a white officer on the *Mendi* who had also drowned, commended Ramaphosa for having given voice to “unsung history”, and expressed the hope that it would become “part of South African history in our school books”.^[9]

On the other hand, however, and almost simultaneously, the government’s Department of Military Veterans announced that it would not support the annual *Mendi* commemoration “because of its imperial connotations”. According to one of its spokesmen, “those who died in the name of the country” in either of the world wars “should not be commemorated because those wars belong to an imperial and colonial past”.^[10] The Department had also withdrawn support for the 2016-2018 commemoration of the Battle of Delville Wood as it wished to avoid “reopening old wounds” by encouraging remembrance of a time “rooted in the imperial and apartheid past”, according to a senior official Mbulelo Musi.^[11]

In February 2019, a commemoration in Cape Town of the *Mendi* sinking organised by the Western Cape branch of the South African Gunners’ Association was again boycotted by Military Veterans on the grounds that it involved “formations rooted in the imperial and apartheid past, such as the Gunners Association”. In its response, the Gunners Association did not mince words, calling the snub “abominable”, “a disgrace”, and “an insult to the families of the deceased”.^[12] Remembrance ceremonies initiated at the bottom, so to speak, did not find favour in the eyes of those at the top.

This political antipathy was conspicuously at odds with the case of other countries. There, [veterans’ organisations](#) and government-sponsored war veteran departments readily joined hands in the shaping of officially endorsed common commemorative narratives. Relations in South Africa, however, were distinctly prickly at times over the what and the why of commemorative choices.

Such tensions over public centenary commemoration illustrated a further aspect, however marginal to the issue of the First World War, of the country's simmering political and cultural debates over "decolonization" or "decoloniality", ignited by widespread university student protests in 2015, in which numerous imperial-era statues, memorials, and monuments were defaced, starting with the toppling of the University of Cape Town's 1934 statue of the nineteenth century British imperialist [Cecil John Rhodes \(1853-1902\)](#). As the leading South African writer, Christopher Hope, has put it, "old heroes were now the new villains".^[13]

Pressing this point home, the urge to erase the symbolic imprint of a British colonial past turned otherwise barely-noticed memorial sites into political targets, such as the tiny granite slab war cenotaph commemorating students and staff of the University of Cape Town who had perished in the First and Second World Wars. This was vandalised repeatedly from 2015 onwards, either daubed with paint or spray-painted with slogans, such as "Fuck Rhodes" or "Kill Colonialism".^[14]

In that respect, even inert traces of war commemoration could serve to ignite radical anti-imperialist antagonisms. Or, to put it another way, in the cockpit of black student radicalism, the war was commemorated through flamboyant gestures of *anti*-commemoration.

Conferences, Exhibitions, Theatre, Film, and Related Commemorative Events

The list of these activities is of modest length, including some tapping into a commemorative consciousness from a few academic quarters. In 2015, the Great War in Africa Association and the Faculty of Military Science at Stellenbosch University held a small international conference on "The Great War in Africa", concentrating on the sideshow of its African campaigns. Two years later, to coincide with the February 1917 sinking of the *Mendi*, the Centre for African Studies of the University of Cape Town hosted "*Ukutshona kukaMendi: The Mendi Centenary Conference*", held to pay "tribute to the South African Native Labour Contingent, and the men on the *Mendi* who died en route to fight for their dignity and human rights through service to the war effort".

A conference which assembled a patchwork of scholarly papers, [art installations](#), and [film](#) and stage performances, in the [historiographical](#) vision of its organisers, the war itself served to inspire a broad range of narratives of black struggle against white exploitation. Therefore, exploration of the 1914-1918 experience was weighted towards, in the words of the conference prospectus, its role in "the struggle against oppression and dispossession, and particularly against the Natives' Land Act of 1913, as a reason why these men left their homes in rural South Africa to contribute to the war effort", as well as an examination of the part played by "black intellectuals" in [recruitment](#) to the Labour Contingent and "in dealing with the aftermath of the *Mendi* tragedy".^[15]

A more composite, in the sense of a more panoramic, review of the post-1918 legacy of the war for the divergent [societies](#) and cultures of the South African region was undertaken by a November 2018 conference on "The Aftermath of the First World War in Southern Africa" at the University of

South Africa in Pretoria. Not all of these scholarly gatherings were in English. In January 2019, a small Afrikaans-language symposium on “The First World War – a forgotten war and its meaning for South Africa”, was held by the Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns (South African Academy for Science and Art), dealing with, among other themes, the overall impact of the conflict on the Union and the war’s place in the country’s [historiography](#).

Meanwhile, away from commemoration on the academic conference fringe, there was some mostly low-level war-related local art presentation. The war in Europe had magnetised the imagination of the young Johannesburg artist Paul Emmanuel whose [pilgrimage](#) to the Somme resulted in his ghostly outdoor 2014-2016 “Lost Men, France” project. This took the form of a display of bodily images imprinted with soldiers’ names on billowing white banners, erected in the vicinity of the [Thiepval Monument](#) to the Missing. Emmanuel crafted this as an interventionist South African “counter-memorial” on the traditional Somme Circuit of Remembrance. As the imaginative – and imaginary – inscribing of the loss of black South African lives in Western Front battles was an absolute priority for artistic representation, this required taking some liberty with historical authenticity, for the Union’s European expeditionary infantry brigade had enlisted only white combatants.

Accordingly, in an act of extravagantly inventive symbolism, Emmanuel dissolved the historical racial boundaries of the segregated commemoration of white and black [war dead](#). It was, thus, impossible to disentangle his “Lost Men” installation from the imperatives of its post-apartheid context. If anything, its ambition went even beyond that. In an overlapping representation, Emmanuel’s “Lost Men” mixed together the names of white and black South African men alongside those of other Allied soldiers and Germans, thereby fashioning a universal, pluralist act of commemoration over that of separate national possession.^[16]

“The Lost Men, France” project spurred French cultural agencies in South Africa into marking the centenary decade. In Cape Town towards the end of 2014, the French Institute of South Africa and the Alliance Francaise du Cap staged a public film and historical discussion of Emmanuel’s Somme installation as “Return to Thiepval: Imprinting and Erasing Memories of the First World War”. This event, along with others staged in Johannesburg and Durban, formed part of “From the Trenches of the Marne to the Hills of Rwanda: Reflections on 100 Years of War, Genocide and Mass Violence”. Commemorating the interplay between the brutalisation of both world wars and the savagery of mass violence, the largely European orientation of this 2014 memory cycle, based on a repatriation of Emmanuel’s work, was underwritten by the institutions in South Africa that sponsored it – along with French cultural missions, these included the Goethe Institut, the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, and the Johannesburg Holocaust and Genocide Centre.

A number of other themes and topics intersected across this essentially French-engineered national commemorative landscape. Drawing on the July 2016 centenary of the Battle of Delville Wood, in which “the Union of South Africa lost almost two-thirds of the complement of its Overseas Expeditionary Force in less than a week”, an official Paris-certified overseas *Label du Centenaire* project organised a set of events “to commemorate the Union of South Africa’s engagement in the

First World War”.^[17]

Mounted by the Institut français d’ Afrique du Sud, these included screenings of short European animated films on the First World War and a small public roundtable forum on “Commemorating South Africa and World War One: 1914-1918 in national and historical imagination”, which assembled academic historians and a journalist and film-maker to discuss a century of local First World War commemoration. The focus, unsurprisingly, was on its exceptionally selective, fragmented, and partial nature – an enduring reflection of the country’s fractured and complex history.

Perhaps the most noteworthy creation of this small cycle of public activities was the performance of a new play, *Devil’s Wood*, on small stages in Johannesburg, Durban, and Cape Town. Instead of commemorating the known human history of the Battle of Delville Wood, in an innovative departure it made or re-invented a South African memory of that searing 1916 Somme experience.

Starring three young actors, Thabo Rametsi, Thishiwe Ziqubu, and Daniel Geddes – black and white and male and female – the action of *Devil’s Wood* was set in the heart of that horrifying clash. In the words of its writer and director, the Paris-trained South African playwright and actress, Sylvaine Strike, the performance was designed to “poetically convey the experience of young men who volunteered to be sent to the European battlefield, as well as the feelings back home in South Africa, a country geographically remote from the worst horrors of WWI”.

Dispensing with historical actualities by placing its three actors as a mixed trio of combatants, the declared “task” of the play was to “immerse...audiences of South Africa’s younger generations who feel they may have no connection to this war”, and to assist them to “understand the fallen...men lost by the thousands in less than seven days”. Drawing on South African wartime [letters and diaries](#) as well as classic [British Great War literature](#), such as [Wilfred Owen’s \(1893-1918\)](#) poetry, Sylvaine Strike described her *Devil’s Wood* version of Delville Wood as a “departure point”

for the use of poetic license... to tell of the war irrespective of whose side we were on, or the colour of our skin. Our boys were there, English, Afrikaans and later Sotho, Xhosa, Zulu amongst many others, all of them together against unthinkable odds. Our women were there, too, in all capacities, as mothers, wives, sisters waiting at home in Africa, and as nurses and caregivers on the Western front itself.^[18]

In that regard, Strike’s *Devil’s Wood* was a wholesale fabrication or re-imagining of the known picture of Delville Wood in contemporary historical memory. It presented a dramatic experience stripped of any notion of a blood sacrifice by white South African manhood. Instead, as a symbolically political dramatic piece, this centenary play projected the meaning of the country’s 1916 war effort into a creatively inventive, entirely new setting. At the same time, the several small audiences which attended its performances were treated to something of a mixed bag. At one level, the theatre of *Devil’s Wood* completely subverted a long, customary commemorative tradition of Anglo-Afrikaner

First World War nationhood forged in the flame of European battle. At the same time, ironically, it presented a conventionally romantic, mythic portrait of some united multi-racial flowering of national patriotism, an idealised falsification completely at odds with the Union's deeply divided and largely indifferent response to the war.

Other fringe experimental theatre focused commemorative attention on the *Mendi* story in 2017. *Sabamnye no Mendi (I became one with Mendi)* was staged by Mandla Mbothwe, artistic director of the Steve Biko Foundation in Port Elizabeth. A live "multimedia" display presented at the 2017 National Arts Festival in Grahamstown in the Eastern Cape, it sought to honour "the spirits of the dead" through making water the emblem of memorialisation. For Mbothwe, it was both the physical force and the metaphorical power of menacing water that produced the 1917 tragedy of "these men who were swallowed". His *Sabamnye no Mendi* tableau was, as a June 2017 press notice put it, a representation of "Dialogues with the drowned".^[19]

Associating Labour Contingent enlistment with the Middle Passage of the Atlantic slave trade, the production notes struck a strongly allegorical note, declaring that

the water that took these men away is the same water that was used to deliver slaves from point to point, and in that same water we seek healing. These are some of the contradictions of what water carries... Those men disappeared and were never buried by their families. Chiefs and warriors went off to that war they called "the Great War". Clan names and families were discontinued – stopped.

For its creator, *Sabamnye no Mendi* was meant to make a direct, mystically nationalist connection between the *Mendi* victims and a contemporary black African audience. Remembrance was, in effect, viewed as consciousness-raising through a kind of spirit-possession. "Those men that were swallowed, we do not remember their names", declared Mandla Mbothwe, "like it or not, we remember 'Mendi' in the singular. They have become Mendi. So, too, Mendi is becoming us. We are Mendi – we are the commemoration of that memory".^[20]

Three years earlier, Mandla Mbothwe was involved in a less sententious *Mendi* drama. Also held on the theatrical fringe, in 2014 the poetic oral legend of the bare-footed Labour Contingent's shipboard "death dance" of 1917 was recreated in a simple and sombre small stage setting. Written by the celebrated South African playwright Lara Foot and directed by Mbothwe, *Ukotshona ko Mendi (Did We Dance: The Sinking of the Mendi)*, was performed by a highly energetic young company at the cultural Steve Biko Centre in Kingwilliamstown in the Eastern Cape, at Cape Town's Baxter Theatre, and at the Market Theatre in Johannesburg.

A dignified and athletic pageant of movement within a confined and claustrophobic space, *Ukotshona ko Mendi* was favourably reviewed as a "vivid" and "tragic" play commemoration which "recreates the tragic tale of more than 600 men...who lost their lives on that foggy morning of 21 February 1917, just off the Isle of Wight, while on their way to support the British Army in France during World War

Consideration of what might be seen as small-scale revisionist South African centenary commemoration through artistic enactment would not be complete without mention of *Troopship Tragedy*, a dramatic film about the *Mendi* made by the award-winning South African journalist and director, Marion Edmunds. Started in 2012 and completed in 2015, *Troopship Tragedy* combined the use of some fictional dramatization, visual historical records, and contemporary location shooting across far-flung settings – impoverished rural Pondoland in the Eastern Cape from where many men of the Native Labour Contingent had been recruited, coastal graveyards in England and France, and a divers' boat in the English Channel above the spot of the sinking.

In a reflection on the linkage between 1917 and the centenary present, Edmunds spoke of the difficulty from “a story-teller’s point of view” of conveying “the sense of loss” at the wartime heart of “a gripping and yet still relatively unknown story”. Whereas “many stories of the First World War are built around letters soldiers wrote back home, official records, old photographs and medals”, the colonial existence of the “vast majority of the Native Labour Contingent volunteers” was a very different human reality. As “many were illiterate...they didn’t write letters home...they did not receive war medals...there is little that remains that is tangible of their own story”. They had, in a manner of speaking, vanished off the surface of the sea. Indeed, as if to show the discarded local memory site to which the *Mendi* story has become relegated, *Troopship Tragedy* opens with a picture of the shabby, decaying, and litter-strewn site of the Mendi memorial on Mendi Road in the black township of New Brighton in the eastern Cape city of Port Elizabeth. Close to eradication, a memorial plaque proclaims a plaintive promise, “their sacrifice will never be forgotten”.

As a consoling legacy, the Marion Edmunds production attempted to “find and articulate the culture of the men and specifically the sense of loss” felt by their present-day descendants. In the film this was both preserved and enabled by a youthful Xhosa narrator, Zwai Mgijima, who happened to have been the stage manager of the *Ukotshona ka Mendi* play. Observing the faded New Brighton memorial, Mgijima remarks on his sadness “that the memorial has been forgotten and neglected”, and vows to find “a way to keep their memory alive”.

A wishful journey to “bring the ancestors home”, *Troopship Tragedy* provides a striking depiction of how time, place, and war grave burial convention combine to defeat the object of this centenary pilgrimage, while at the same time affirming a form of emotional and spiritual resolution to the film narrator’s search. In one of the production’s most potent, slow-burning images, Zwai Mgijima hews a wooden stick from an old Pondoland peasant homestead and smears it with cow dung from the field of the Xhosa chief, Henry Libode, who had been on the *Mendi*. After carrying it from the Eastern Cape to Britain and France, a nervous and overwrought Mgijima (a non-swimmer) ventures out into the Channel. Eleven nautical miles off the Isle of Wight, he weights his Chief Bokleni stick with stones so that it will sink down to the shipwreck and drops it from the stern of a small boat, declaring in a shaking voice, “I am above the wreck. It is almost too much for me...I think of throwing myself into the water. I fight its pull. I am calling the spirits with this stick”. As if dropping some metaphysical

anchor, he then tosses it into the water. It echoes something of the invoking of water in *Sabamnye no Mendi's* "Dialogues with the drowned".

In the film's closing scene, Mgijima concludes, "I have visited their grave and now I am calling them home. I have used my voice as medicine to heal the wounds from the war. Let the peace that flows from that be my end to this story".^[22] There can surely have been few more singularly unorthodox acts of centenary commemoration. More a mode of personal transfiguration than anything else, Zwai Mgijima's embodiment of a *Troopship Tragedy* persona sees him inhabiting a ritualised world of ancestor-homage in which memory intersects with the visionary and the miraculous.

All but buried beneath the crust of overall public indifference to the significance of the centenary, this peripheral radical cycle of experimental drama and film did little to prick it. Mostly part-tableau, part didactic exhortation staged by young black nationalist activists, its impact was confined to the sphere of amateur community theatre and university campus performances. Funding was severely limited, with some productions backed only by small arts grants from foreign aid missions or other non-governmental organisations. The audiences they found were invariably of small studio size, predominantly a younger black generation with a sprinkling of whites.

Armistice Day 2018

On its 2018 centenary, Armistice Day remained the increasingly shrinking public space that it had become in recent decades. The added significance of it being November 2018 raised few eyebrows. Several of the country's oldest English-speaking private collegiate and leading government high schools, such as St John's College, Johannesburg, and Pretoria Boys' High, held special Armistice Centenary assemblies in the week leading up to Sunday, 11 November. Elsewhere, there were a few minor commemorative gatherings at municipal war memorials in which a few knots of Second World War and Korean War veterans turned out for a brief parade in ceremonies which invoked 1918.

Otherwise, the characteristic clock of a politically selective public memory and historical amnesia simply kept on ticking. The South African Broadcasting Corporation's radio stations and television channels skimmed over the cease-fire anniversary. For national political leadership, too, 11 November 2018 could conveniently be ignored as there would be no loss of credibility in discarding old national traditions.

Above all, it was the press that provided some unusual illustration of centenary remembrance or forgetfulness. This was accompanied by a noteworthy touch of historical irony. Astonishingly, major English-language Sunday newspapers took no commemorative account of the significance of that November day. The sole exception was the *The Sunday Times* which provided an opinion page platform for a standard piece of nationalist rhetoric from Nowisa Mapisa-Nqakula, the Minister of Defence. Yoking together, in an odd coincidence, South Africa "celebrating our own democratic dawn", with a celebration of "the centenary of the end of World War I", she used the occasion to warn

complacent readers of the need for readiness in “answering the call, from the Somme to Africa’s simmering conflicts”. Thus, “if you want peace, prepare for war”.^[23] It was, in its way, an almost textbook Armistice centenary reminder of [A.J.P. Taylor’s \(1906-1990\)](#) memorable 1960s observation that war remains “too serious a matter to be left to statesmen”.^[24]

In the week after Armistice day, a former newspaper editor, Kevin Ritchie, raised a flag for the 1918 battle achievement in Palestine of Coloured infantry of the Cape Corps, urging his readers to remember that the “Cape Corps in WW1 Ensured We’d Enjoy Our Tomorrows”, and to “think long and hard” in the November centenary about the falseness of “the narrative that this was a white man’s war”.^[25]

Paradoxically, it was left to a post-nationalist and post-apartheid Afrikaans-language press to be a forum for a seriously reflective commemoration of the meaning of armistice. Newspapers which in earlier decades had mostly scorned the remembrance rituals of a British imperialist war, now embraced an internationalist perspective. The Cape daily *Die Burger* explored the lessons of the Armistice and Versailles for the present-day world, looking back to the aspirations embodied by [Georges Clemenceau \(1841-1929\)](#), [Woodrow Wilson \(1856-1924\)](#), and [David Lloyd George \(1863-1945\)](#), alongside the Union of South Africa’s war leaders, [Louis Botha \(1862-1919\)](#) and [Jan Smuts \(1870-1950\)](#).^[26] In a special supplement, “One hundred years later”, the national Sunday weekly *Rapport* carried pieces by professional historians on the end of the war and its lingering global aftermath, including the current troubled state of the Middle East.^[27]

Centenary Literature

Books on the war published between 2014 and 2018 occupied a very small corner of a very small history book market. Non-academic volumes published to coincide with the centenary were almost entirely in English, even those by Afrikaans-language authors. An exception was the commemorative book *Hel toe en Terug (To Hell and Back)* by a non-professional historian. A general depiction of the conflict with an emphasis on its universal reach, author Louis Scott omitted the usual wartime themes of earlier Afrikaans historiography – such as the war and Afrikaner political identity and anti-war republican Afrikaner identity.^[28]

Bill Nasson’s *WWI and the People of South Africa* provides a short account of the impact of the war on the [Union’s home front](#) and considers some of its immediate post-1918 legacies.^[29] *The Somme Chronicles* by the general non-fiction Afrikaans writer Chris Schoeman is a chapter and verse tribute to the campaigning achievements and sacrifices of South Africans who served in France.^[30] The centenary also stimulated the country’s leading literary and social historian, the late [Tim Couzens \(1944-2016\)](#), to employ his trademark poetic techniques in *The Great Silence*, which covered the 1914-1916 participation of the Union’s white and black soldiers in its several theatres of war – the home front, Africa, the Middle East, and Europe.^[31]

Lastly, there were cultural and social explorations with a narrower or more detailed focus. The 2017 centenary of the loss of the *Mendi* saw the publication of Brenda Shepherd's *Men of the Mendi*, a poignant imaginative account of the shipboard sacrifice and bravery of the men of the Labour Contingent which also explored the aftermath of the sinking and touches on the fate of rescued survivors in France.^[32] This volume was preceded by another, published in Britain, *We Die Like Brothers*. Edited by Graham Scott and John Gribble, a marine archaeologist, this provided a factual re-telling of the overall story of the SANLC experience much as it has been told before, with some fresh archaeological insights gleaned from the discovery of the wreck in recent years at the bottom of the English Channel.^[33]

In an affecting diplomatic footnote to this ocean-bed reclamation, in September 2018 Britain's prime minister, Theresa May, handed over the salvaged *SS Mendi* ship's bell to President Cyril Ramaphosa. At this small and simple ceremony, it was proposed that an annual *Mendi* bell-ringing ritual be established as a South African First World War tradition to remember soldiers "of all colours" as "blood-brothers".^[34]

Remembrance of the *Mendi* also occasioned *Dancing the Death Drill*, a swirling historical novel by the prominent writer and journalist Fred Khumalo.^[35] Against a sprawling early twentieth-century panorama, this author tells the fictional story of Pitso Motaung, a young black South African "who volunteered to serve with the Allies in the First World War" and through "a tragic twist of fate...found himself on board the *SS Mendi* off the Isle of Wight in February 1917" where he found himself caught up "in a catastrophe that official history largely forgot".

His novel was, as Khumalo revealed in an interview, an attempt to provide a rounded human face to the bare and buried bones of the story, to "lift out a footnote to a chapter on South Africa's involvement in the war" by providing "a vehicle to explore the controversial issue of race at the time".^[36]

The sole conventional academic book study to appear during these centenary years was Albert Grundlingh's compact *War and Society*.^[37] Signalling that "the centenary of the First World War presents historians with an opportunity to reflect anew upon South African participation in that war", this work furnished a finely-researched and richly-detailed examination of the nature of black African and Coloured troop service within a broad political and social perspective.

Revisionist history in more ways than one, *War and Society* was in particular a corrective to the mythological nationalist version of the sinking of the *Mendi*, namely, that its Labour Contingent complement went down – implausibly – in a heroic and disciplined sacrificial drill, or a "dance of death". Mindful of the time of publication, its author concluded that the most "enduring effect of the war" on South Africa was to be found in the "permutations of historical memory".^[38]

Conclusion

In November 2014, Rodney Warwick, a high school history teacher and occasional newspaper columnist, suggested that South Africa's response to the arrival of the centenary of the First World War was likely to be tepid. In something close to a lament, he argued against any raised expectations, for "realistically":

The 1914-18 war remembrance memory in this country is now very distant, except to individuals interested in past family exploits and obligatory November 11 services involving a few schools and small veteran associations, sometimes along with very limited government participation. For the vast majority of the South African population, including white Afrikaners, World War 1 might almost appear to have no significance at all, except to those with an interest in history's value as an intellectual endeavour, or those with an eye for political opportunism...in the centenary of World War 1, the challenge is for South Africans...to give the long dead veterans...black and white... the honour they deserve'.^[39]

Around same time, the leading Anglo-Boer War historian, Fransjohan Pretorius of the University of Pretoria, also explained what he saw as the "limits to remembering the war". The first was, "that it was not fought on our soil and, second, that Afrikaners focused on the rebellion" (the 1914-15 anti-war republican insurrection) and, therefore, "not on being part of 'Britain's war'". The third, Pretorius concluded, was "that black people had only a peripheral role in it".^[40]

Both of these prescient centenary expectations were essentially correct. The years from 2014 to 2018 could not be said to have carried a national tide of war remembrance, sweeping in to rejuvenate First World War remembrance, whether faded, ignored, or simply forgotten. Unlike in other former British dominion states or in Britain itself, this country failed conspicuously to share in a deluge of Great War commemoration. In a way, it could scarcely have been otherwise in a society fed for so long by mutually exclusive views of history and preserved by old historical grievances.

Nonetheless, if almost entirely on the margins of popular public sensibilities, the centenary still did reflect some minor new currents in war commemoration. Predictably, the overlap between the war, race, and nationalism remained present. But there was a potent re-prioritising of symbolic identification – black sacrifice and black heroism became a very self-conscious centrepiece of centenary memorialisation. Along with this, and arguably the most distinctive thing about it, was the way in which small activities which drew small audiences sought to cultivate a transformative consciousness about the meaning of the South African war experience, seeking to harness new "liberation narratives" to educate sensibilities – overwhelmingly youthful – through worm's-eye subcultures which created remembering or novel *re*-remembering through exhibitions, dance, stage drama, fiction, and film.

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Notes

1. ↑ Republic of South Africa, Department of Defence, Project Proposal: Research on the First World War for Centenary of the War, Notes and Aide-Memoire, December 2013.
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6. ↑ Jeffery, Keith: *Ireland and the Great War*, Cambridge 2000, p. 143.
7. ↑ Southern Suburbs Tatler, 14 February 2019.
8. ↑ News 24, 19 February 2019.
9. ↑ Cape Times, 22 February 2019.
10. ↑ Sunday Times, 17 February 2019.
11. ↑ The Star, 20 July 2019.
12. ↑ Daily Times, 18 February 2019.
13. ↑ Hope, Christopher: *The Café de Move-on Blues. In Search of the New South Africa*, London 2018, p. 34.
14. ↑ Biznews, 7 September 2018.
15. ↑ University of Cape Town: *The Mendi Centenary Conference Programme*, 28-30 March 2017.
16. ↑ See www.the-lost-men.net and www.paulemanuel.net (retrieved: 30 September 2020).
17. ↑ *Devil's Wood* Programme Brochure, Johannesburg, June 2016.
18. ↑ *Devil's Wood* programme notes, IFAS, Johannesburg 2016.
19. ↑ Daily Maverick, 25 June 2017.
20. ↑ The Herald, 28 June 2017.
21. ↑ Weekly Mail & Guardian, 19 February 2014.
22. ↑ Weekend Argus, 25 August 2017.
23. ↑ Sunday Times, 11 November 2018.
24. ↑ Taylor, A.J.P.: *The First World War. An Illustrated History*, Harmondsworth 1966, p. 287.
25. ↑ Weekend Argus, 22 November 2018.

26. † Die Burger, 8 November 2018.
27. † Rapport Weekliks, 11 November 2018.
28. † Scott, Louis: Hel Toe en Terug. Die Eerste Wereldoorlog 'n Honderd Jaar Later, Polokwane 2018.
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31. † Couzens, Tim: The Great Silence. From Mushroom Valley to Delville Wood-South African Forces in World War One, Johannesburg 2014.
32. † Shepherd, Brenda: Men of the Mendi. South Africa's Forgotten Heroes of World War 1, Knysna 2017.
33. † Scott, Graham / Gribble, John: We Die Like Brothers. The South African Native Labour Corps and the Sinking of the SS Mendi, Swindon 2016.
34. † Rapport Weekliks, 9 September 2018.
35. † Khumalo, Fred: Dancing the Death Drill, Cape Town 2017.
36. † Weekend Argus, 21 February 2017.
37. † Grundlingh, Albert: War and Society. Participation and Remembrance – South African Black and Coloured Troops in the First World War, Stellenbosch 2014.
38. † Ibid., p. 167.
39. † Weekend Argus, 11 November 2014.
40. † Sunday Times, 3 August 2014.

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