

### THREE: WWI. Recruitment of Blacks for Military Service

About 74,000 South African blacks served in the military service in German South West Africa (SWA), German East Africa (EA) and France. The recruitment was achieved through the Government Native Labour Bureau (NLB) which as part of the Native Affairs Department (NAD) recruited for the Defence Department. More specifically:

1. They relied on black elite such as SANNC to recruit. Whenever government officials approached the elite, they took it as a good gesture and recognition of their existence as leaders. But SANNC or Congress did have problems convincing its people as Dube found out in his native Natal. People objected because they thought that they were going to be used in the forefront to explode the mines as blacks.
2. The government also used local magistrates and commissioners, and the chiefs and headmen to recruit black servicemen. In many cases such as in Natal and Transkei, magistrates threatened headmen with arrest and fines if they failed to recruit a specified number of Africans, which in turn created friction between the headmen and their people
3. Well regarded whites among the black people, traders, private individuals and even churches were used to recruit for military service
4. As the largest employer, government also sought the help of the Chamber of mines to provide surplus Africans for military service. The Chamber of Mines that was the umbrella for the various mining houses recruited African workers from throughout Southern African region. Thus, Mozambiquan workers (as part of their contract) worked in railway construction in SWA for the first three months. About 35,000 blacks served in SWA, and about 18,000 served in East African campaign. And once Portugal abandoned neutrality in 1916, as part of the Chamber of mines the Witwatersrand Native Labour Association (WNLA) officials in Mozambique helped in the recruitment.

#### \*\*Recruitment for France

Recruitment of blacks for service was more complicated because of discrimination conditions that we have already addressed. For example, the creation of the South African Native Labour Contingent (SANLC) exclusively for blacks angered them. Also, the Chamber of Mines refused to provide its surplus labor because this would have meant the extension of the workers' annual contracts and thus loss of money. For the Africans, the demand for their labor was already burdensome because they were already oppressed and exploited, had served in SWA and EA, and now to serve whites in Europe. To help in this recruitment, SANNC demanded that the government abandon the "closed compounds" in France and increase the number of black commissioned officers in vain. Nonetheless, SANNC officials including Dube in Natal, Plaatje in

Kimberley, and F.Z.S. Peregrino in Cape province called upon blacks to show loyalty by enlisting. SANNC also painted the war abroad as a joint venture between whites and blacks, and reminded African how important a role they had played in SWA and EA.

For its part, the government told Africans that they were lucky to be under UK and they should reciprocate, portrayed German as cruel and evil, offered food, uniform and a slightly higher monthly wage than in the mines, showed positive letters of Africans already in France, and even invited back a few Africans from France to convince their communities. The government also appointed Solomon, King Dinizulu's son as chief of Usuthu to appease the Zulu for its imprisonment of Dinizulu in 1908-10. It further promised to abolish poll tax, pass laws and to give Africans land and cattle after their service in France. By and large, all these desperate strategies failed. Out of the required 40,000 there were only 21,000 blacks sent to France.

Black people resisted recruitment by:

1. Staying away and avoiding recruiters, fleeing to seek work elsewhere such as in the mines like J. Sipika did, or deserting recruitment
2. Some chiefs and headmen undermined recruitment by using delaying tactics, to avoid losing legitimacy among their people
3. Some Africans such as in Transkei and Natal resisted by threatening violence against the recruiters. Chief Sekhukhune II of Pedi was confronted by his people for collaborating with the government in the recruitment with Mpsamaleka telling the chief, "You must tell whites that our people want to tell the truth. We are not going to war" p.39.

There was also general black apathy in joining the war because:

1. It was a distant war that had no immediate relevance, such as translating into their freedom
2. The structure of the South African society of racial discrimination was to be replicated in the service such being disarmed and kept in closed compounds
3. The general black mistrust of whites, especially the use of NAD which symbolized oppression to blacks
4. The government land policy based on the 1913 Natives' Land Act and the ongoing 1917 Native Administrative Bill that raised the fears of further land dispossession
5. Dissatisfaction with general service conditions such as wages, lack of promotions for blacks
6. The sinking of the *Mendi* on February 21, 1917 killing 615 mainly blacks intensified black fears. This British ship was carrying 823 men of the 5th Battalion was on its way to France when it was hit by another ship causing it to sink.

\*\*\*For those who enlisted for service, there were varied motivations ranging from earning a livelihood, considering war as an educational experience as Congress elite did, escaping prosecution from crimes committed, or personal and individual reasons. For example, Jason Jingoos was depressed after the failure of his romantic life with Jemina and he joined the war to die in France. Luckily he returned home alive (you can read his autobiography).

#### FOUR: WWI-The Nature of Military Service for Blacks

The focus here is the black experience in the war. In SWA they served in non-combatant jobs such as drivers, unloading supplies, and railway construction. Those that were captured by Germans were harshly treated including castration. In East Africa, black South Africans were exposed to malaria that killed thousands. Their white counterparts were better protected. Blacks were subjected to harsh discipline in both SWA and EA by the white “gang-bosses” who inflicted unnecessary corporal punishment in violation of the set regulations. Black servicemen protested to the authorities in vain. In one case, 365 of them went on strike in SWA forcing the authorities to return them to South Africa.

#### Black experience in France

The worst experience was the sinking of the *Mendi*. The delay to reveal details of the investigation of this incident created many suspicions, as rumors surfaced about white complicity. In the end, the government adopted a motion expressing sympathy to the families and a compensation of 50 pounds sterling for each. Yet, for most blacks their memories of the *Mendi* disaster would be an important ingredient in their political consciousness. Those who made it to France contributed immensely to the war effort. Among others, they worked in railway and road repair, cut timber for construction, and loaded and unloaded supplies. Also, a few worked as interpreters, clerks and messengers in the SANLC hospitals.

The SANLC was commanded by Col. Stanley Markham Pritchard. He had served as a police officer in Lesotho, a Native Labor Inspector in the Transvaal, and in Ovamboland in SWA as officer in charge of Native Affairs Department from 1915 onward. So, his real qualification was his working experience with the Africans. The SANLC was kept away from the forefront and denied semi-skilled and skilled jobs to stem their economic and political aspirations once they returned home. They worked in harsh climatic conditions. To avoid the repetition of the EA campaign deaths, the government instructed that their health be regularly monitored. Thus, only 331 died in France.

In conformity with the South African society of racial discrimination, the SANLC was socially controlled in the following:

1. SANLC was supervised by South African white officials to ensure they worked all day, who prevented them from interacting with British, French and Canadians so they do not get a wrong impression. This separation aimed at preventing black consciousness through exposure to socialist ideas.
2. Blacks were issued with poor quality brown uniform as opposed to the standard khaki uniform issued to white soldiers. As some blacks reacted to the uniform, “ This is only fit for convicts!; Why do we have to wear this?”. P. 54
3. SANLC had to be accompanied by white staff, especially those who understood “ the mentality and customs” of blacks, and a “ combined knowledge of the Native, military procedure and labour.” They needed to have an experience supervising blacks and be the type who would not allow blacks to come close to white women. Appointments of these white officers were personally made by Prime Minister Louis Botha.
4. Even when it came to the selection of chaplains, the 12 black chaplains that were part of SANLC were denied the rank given to the white chaplains. In fact, the white staff had not the barest respect for black chaplains and they seemed to hate their clerical dress. Yet, these black chaplains’ duty was to enforce South African policy of separation by preventing blacks from interacting with whites abroad. For their effort, four black chaplains and one white were given a carefully prescribed tour of London. Here, John H. Harris of the Aborigines Protection Society (APS) praised the black chaplains and impressed on them the values and benefits of British civilization.
5. The various companies into which SANLC was divided had to be housed in the “closed compounds” modelled on the Kimberley and later Witwatersrand mines where systematic racial discrimination had been refined. In fact, the treatment of Germany war captives was better than SANLC’s housing conditions. A black member going out of the compound had to be accompanied by a white officer.

\*\*\*Thus, there were tensions and near unrest which the authorities tried to ease by organizing sporting events for SANLC that included cricket, running, and traditional dances to entertain whites. However, the majority of the members rejected these events. The one thing that became popular were the evening classes for SANLC, conducted by black chaplains and teachers in reading, writing, arithmetic, translation and geography.

How did SANLC respond to this environment and social control?

1. There were occasional but short-lived strikes against their conditions. Some of the black companies successfully pressed for which tasks to perform and for how many hours a day
2. Some members resisted and threatened their superiors with violence at workplaces, in the compounds, and even on the voyage. For example, on their return journey to South Africa in late 1917, some members confronted their

officers leading to the shooting dead of Aaron Monliba and the confinement of others

3. They often complained about the poor food rations and in some cases demanded the same food rations as whites
4. Regardless of the compound system, some members managed to abscond and drink, meet women and experience life. There were several cases of correspondence between members and white women
5. There was a near riot in July 1917, when members tried to support one of their own by opening the compound and confronting white officers. Four members were shot dead in this incident. Blacks continued to resist the compound system as a form of discrimination and this led to several confrontational incidents. SANLC had witnessed that blacks from other parts of Africa moved freely in France.

\*\* By the end of 1917, a South African senior officer Lt. Col. Godley was calling for the abandonment of the compounds. The government responded by disbanding the SANLC in Jan. 1918, because the compound system could no longer be sustained in France without risking major disturbances.