

Poster 1

The First World War

The First World War, or Great War, raged from 1914 to 1918. Britain entered the war on 4th August 1914.

On one side were the **Triple Alliance** of Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy. Against them were the **Triple Entente** formed by Britain, France and Russia. These alliances were formed long before 1914 and were supposed to help prevent war. Instead, the distrust each felt for the other contributed to the causes of the First World War. Relationships within the alliances were complicated, and when war was declared in 1914 Italy didn't enter the conflict to support the Triple Alliance. When Italy did enter the war in 1915 it was to support the Triple Entente.

There are many different reasons why the war began and, over 100 years later, historians still can't agree on which the most important were. Some of the possible causes are listed below – do you know what all of the words mean? Can you identify which are long term causes, and which is a short-term cause?

Nationalism

Militarism

Imperialism

Complex alliances

The assassination of Austrian Archduke Ferdinand

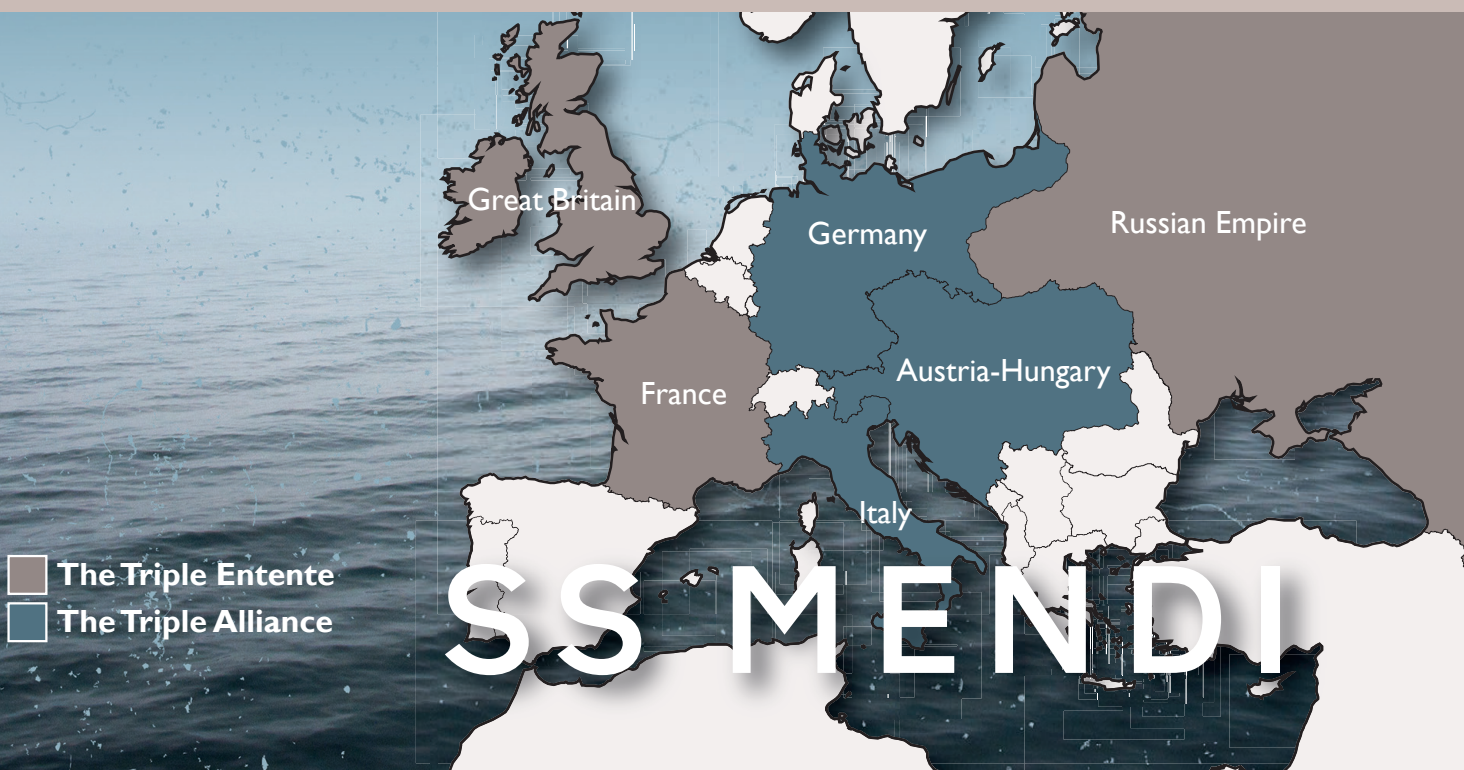
Following the assassination of the Austrian Archduke by a Serbian man in June 1914, Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia. Russia mobilised troops to support Serbia; Germany invaded Belgium and Luxembourg, and started to progress towards France. Before the war, Britain had signed a treaty obliging it to protect Belgium. Britain therefore declared war on Germany. The First World War had begun.

As the conflict deepened, countries from outside of Europe entered the war. Britain was supported by the British Empire and therefore people from across the globe, including Australia, Canada, India, New Zealand, the Caribbean and many parts of Africa became involved.

The Western Front is the name given to the places where the two opposing forces faced each other in France and Belgium. The men on the Front lived, fought and often died in trenches. Conditions were awful. Trench warfare was very difficult and dangerous for the troops.

As well as the Western Front, there was an Eastern Front where huge Russian armies clashed with Germany and its allies. Combat extended to the sea and into the air and battles were fought in Africa, the Middle East and across the globe.

The First World War ended on 11 November 1918. By the end of the conflict over 17 million people were dead.



Poster 2 The South African Native Labour Corps

The Labour Corps were formed in 1917 to support Britain during the First World War. They were a non-combatant force which means that they were not trained to fight. Their job was to support the British Army by building roads, driving, felling trees and moving materials.

Why didn't they fight?

South Africa was a deeply divided society when war broke out in 1914. The white government had oppressed the native population, taken the majority of the farmland for themselves and left the black population with little option but to work in mines and other heavy industries. The government decided that training and arming the black men whose lifestyles they had subjugated and whose land they had taken would be a bad idea. A secret report written in 1915 said:

'...no proposal for training Natives upon a large scale is likely to be acceptable...as the return, after peace, of a large body of trained and disciplined men would create obvious difficulties and might seriously menace the supremacy of whites.'
Bonar Law, Secretary of Colonies, 1915

The South African Native Labour Corps were not trained to fight because the government of South Africa, which was made up of white men, was concerned that the black troops might use military training to rebel against their oppression at home when the war was over.

Despite this, many South African men signed up. They felt that supporting the British Army would demonstrate loyalty and trustworthiness, and hopefully gain them a voice in decisions when they returned from the war.

The men were paid for their work and whilst the wage was slightly more than the money they might earn at home, it was not as much as that paid to the white men serving the British Army.

The South African Native Labour Corps was not the only labour corps. India and China were amongst other nations who formed labour corps to aid the war effort. Despite having broken out amongst European countries, the First World War was truly a global war.

Photograph courtesy of the South African National Museum of Military History




Photograph courtesy of the South African National Museum of Military History

SS MENDI

3.

the Mendi



Extract from the We Die Like Brothers online exhibition

The Darro made no attempt to rescue the men in the water. Later, Henry W. Stump, the Master of the Darro, was found guilty of causing the accident. He was sentenced to having his licence removed for just 12 months. He never explained why he did not try to help.

Radio log of the Brisk

Poster 4 The Aftermath and the Mendi's Legacy

The South African Government was told of the tragedy three days after the event by telegram, and the names of those who were saved and those that were presumed to have died followed on 7 March. The South African Prime Minister, General Botha, officially announced the loss of the Mendi on 9 March, and the same day a telegram was sent to local magistrates. They called meetings to share the news with Chiefs and Headmen and to answer questions about the tragedy. Across South Africa memorial services were held for the dead. Huge numbers attended to show their respect with grief and dignified sorrow.

It had taken over two weeks for those communities who had lost sons, husbands, brothers and friends to receive official confirmation of their deaths. The South African Government also decided that black members of the SANLC would not receive medals

for their service during the war. This was a bitter blow to the surviving men, and to the families of those who served.

In war weary Britain, the ship sank with little notice or recognition. In South Africa though, the story has been remembered, passed from generation to generation by spoken word. During the years of **apartheid** the ship became a symbol of unity, and of the injustice faced by black Africans.

Today the ship, which was rediscovered by divers in 1974, and the men that were lost with it have been recognised and commemorated on memorials in South Africa and in Britain. The latest memorial to the ship and those who died, the We Die Like Brothers exhibition, was opened in summer 2015 at Delville Wood Memorial in France.

Diver on the boilers of the Mendi's steam engine

Underwater photographs courtesy of Martin Davies

SS MENDI

Poster 5

The Mendi 100 years on

In February 2017 people from South Africa and Britain came together to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the sinking of the Mendi. Wreaths were laid at graves and memorials, and the families of the men that died travelled to remember their loved ones with dignitaries from South Africa and Britain. Princess Anne of the British Royal Family remembered the men at a service held at the Hollybrook Memorial in Southampton, and a second service was held in Portsmouth.

The anniversary was also marked by two ships, SAS Amatola of the South African Navy and HMS Dragon of the British Royal Navy, coming together in a show of unity above the site of the wreck which lies 11 miles south west of the Isle of Wight. A service was held on board the SAS Amatola attended by relatives of Mendi victims. Martin Woodward, the diver who first identified the wreck of the SS Mendi in 1974 attended as well. – Wreaths were lowered into the water above the wreck. Royal Navy divers had previously taken a South African flag into the water and laid it on the SS Mendi itself.

These words were spoken on board the SAS Amatola:

'Today we meet together in sorrow and pride to remember these sailors, whom we have lost to the sea, the sea which is forever their grave. How specially they sleep these fathers, husbands, sons, brothers, uncles and friends, these sons of Africa. And we thank Almighty God for all that they were and all that they still are to each one of us. Our hearts mourn their passing, their unfulfilled dreams are ours now. Their unrealised hopes, dreams and wishes, they pass on to us, that we may achieve them in the living of our days. We shall not forget them. Our remembrance of them will be ceaseless as the tides of the sea, constant and unflinching.'

These words were spoken by a relative of one of the members of the SANLC who died when the Mendi sank:

'Let us teach our children about this. Let this not be forgotten.'



Royal Navy diver laying the South African flag on the Mendi



SS MENDI