

This pack compliments the teaching of history and citizenship at Key Stage 3 (England) and Grades 7-9 (South Africa).

It can be used to support a visit to Delville Wood Memorial in France, where the We Die Like Brothers exhibition about the Mendi was opened in summer 2015, or it can be used to explore the First World War in the classroom. This pack was created to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the loss of the Mendi in 2017.

Activities within this pack could also form a stimulus for literacy, art and design.

Equipment:

Cultural Identity information on pages 57-64.

Video and audio of one of the Mendi poems being read – you can view these here.

Audio:

<https://youtu.be/SaX7ub4akGY>

Video:

<https://youtu.be/2y-tNHuCOcU>

Workbooks and writing materials.

We Die Like Brothers

Activity 14

Cultural Identity and the Mendi

Cultural Identity and the Mendi

What does cultural identity mean to you? There are many ways to use the story of the Mendi to explore the importance of cultural identity and the differences between the cultures of the people involved in the story of the ship.

Use the activities outlined below to explore how culture and background has influenced the identity of the men of the Mendi, and of the people commemorating the Mendi today.

What is Cultural Identity?

Cultural identity is the feeling of belonging to a group. A group might share values, religion, language, way of dressing, traditions, history or homeland. A group might have more than one of these things in common.

Learning outcomes

Pupils will explore different cultures through the story of the Mendi.

Pupils will explore themes of citizenship.

Pupils will value cultural identity and recognise it in different forms.

Homework/Extension activities

Look at pictures of people online or in a magazine. What does their appearance tell you about them and their background or beliefs? What are the problems with assuming a knowledge of a person based on their appearance? Can you relate this to the treatment of the black men on board the Mendi?

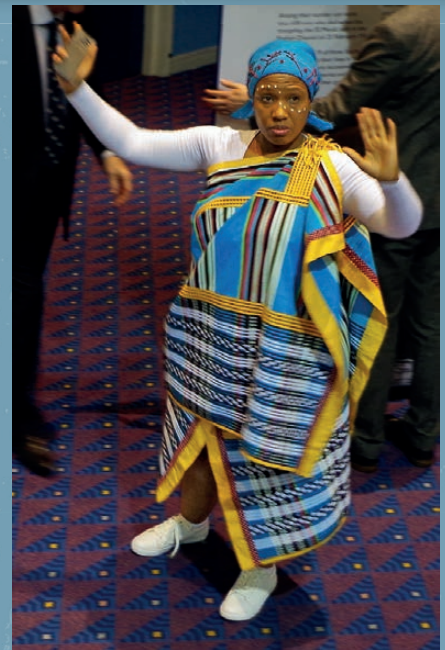
SS MENDI

Look carefully at people and you will notice clues to who they are, and what their background is. At the commemorations to mark the 100 year anniversary of the sinking of the ship, people from different backgrounds with different cultural identities came together to mark the loss of life. Identity is very important in the story of the Mendi. We will explore it in the following activities.

Activity 1:

These people attended the **centenary** commemorations of the sinking of the Mendi in Portsmouth. What can their clothes tell you about who they are? Discuss as a class what each person has chosen to wear and what this may tell you about them. The women in the central picture are the family of Sergeant MacTavish who died when the Mendi sank.

For larger versions of the images below see pages 61-63



Make your notes in the boxes below:

Picture 1

Picture 2

Picture 3

Here is what we thought –



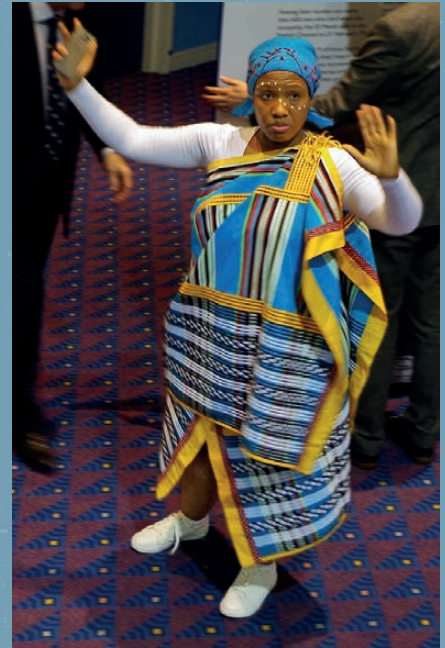
Picture 1

The men in this image are wearing suits. The man on the left has a name badge with the South African flag on it and four stripes on his sleeves, meaning that he is a Captain in the South African Navy. He has medals that he has earned through military service. The other man also has medals though they are heirlooms belonging to a family member, and not ones he has earned. We know this as they are First World War medals and this man is too young to have fought in the war himself, and he wears them on his right breast and not his left. This man wears a poppy – the symbol of remembrance in Britain.



Picture 2

This image shows the family of Colour Sergeant Robert MacTavish at his grave. MacTavish died when the Mendi sank. They wear poppies and a red tartan scarf. The scarf is the tartan of the MacTavish family. They are wearing their family tartan as a mark of respect and to show their connection with Sergeant MacTavish.



Picture 3

The lady in picture 3 wears traditional African dress. She is celebrating the lives of those who died using colour and dance. This is very common in some societies where acts of commemoration are vibrant celebrations. In England commemoration ceremonies are more sombre. Both are good ways of remembering the dead and our culture may determine which one we prefer to do ourselves.

Watch this video to see people from Africa celebrating the brave men of the Mendi in song and dance.
The video can be viewed here:

<https://youtu.be/2y-tNHuCOcU>

You don't have to be a part of a culture in order to appreciate it or to celebrate it yourself. These scarves were given to everyone attending the Mendi centenary event in Portsmouth. They are decorated with the colours of the South African flag. Everyone wore one whether they were from South Africa or not. They did this to show respect for the men of the Mendi and solidarity with the men's South African roots.



Activity 2:

Cultural identity can be expressed in other ways as well.

Listen to this audio clip via this link: <https://youtu.be/SaX7ub4akGY>

These people are reading the same poem first in English and then in the South African language Xhosa. Write down three words that describe how the poem sounds in English and three to describe how it sounds in Xhosa. Listen to the way the audience responds to the reading of the poems. Which do you think the audience enjoyed more? Which reading of the poem did you enjoy more?

*Be consoled, all you orphans!
Be consoled, all you young widows!
Somebody has to die, so that something can be built;
Somebody has to serve, so that others can live;
With these words we say: be consoled,
This is how we build ourselves, as ourselves.
Remember the saying of the old people:
“Nothing comes down, without coming down.”*

*Awu! The finest of Africa was busy dying!
The ship couldn't carry its precious cargo,
It was echoing into the inner circles,
Their brave blood faced the King of Kings.
Their deaths had a purpose for all of us
How I wish I could be with them,
How I wish I could stand with them on resurrection day,
How I wish I could sparkle with them like the morning star.
Let it be so!*

*Thuthuzelekani ngoko, zinkedama!
Thuthuzelekani ngoko, bafazana!
Kuf'omnye kade mini kwakhiw' omnye;
Kukhonza mnye kade' ze kuphil' abanye;
Ngala mazwi sithi, thuthuzelekani,
Ngokwenjenje kwethu sithi, yakhekani.
Lithatheni eli qhalo labadala,
Kuba bathi: “Akuhlanga lungehlanga!*

*Awu! Zaf'int'ezinkulu zeAfrika!
Isindiwe le nqanawa, 'de yazika,
Kw'f'amakhalipha, amafa nankosi,
Agazi lithetha kwiNkosi yeeNkosi.
Ukufa kwawo kunomvuzo nomvuka
Ndinga ndingema nawo ngomhla wovuko,
Ndingqambe njengomnye osebenzileyo,
Ndikhanye njengomso oqaqambileyo.
Makuba njalo!*

Activity 3:

The men of the South African Native Labour Corps who sailed on the Mendi saw great changes to their identity after they signed up for the SANLC. Both of these photographs were taken on board the Mendi. Look at the men's clothes. What changes have occurred between the two photographs?



The first picture shows Nigerian troops on board the Mendi, wearing what looks like traditional Nigerian clothes. The men of the SANLC replaced their traditional clothes with the uniform seen in the second picture. Some of the men were very proud to wear the uniform, and it would certainly have been better suited to winter in France than the traditional African clothes designed for a hot climate.

Some of the men also saw changes to how they identified themselves by name. When they signed up for service in the South African Native Labour Corps a number of the men used, or were given, nicknames. We are not entirely sure about the reasons for this. It might be that the men were illiterate and could not spell their names, or that the officers who took charge of them could not spell or pronounce the African names and so gave some of the men nicknames instead. Studying the names of the men of the Mendi who are commemorated by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission reveals a great many men who allegedly had the western names 'Jim', 'Jack' and 'John', and some men had the unusual names of 'Saucepan', 'Canteen' and 'Parafin'.

Larger versions of these images can be found on page 64









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Equipment:

Blog posts on pages 66-67

Workbooks and writing materials.

Words highlighted in **green** can be found in the glossary at the back of the resource pack.

We Die Like Brothers

Activity 15

No Grave but the Sea

No Grave but The Sea

The black men of the Mendi were not treated equally in life and sadly also in death. Read the forum post below to see different people express opinions about how the men of the Mendi were treated and then answer the questions at the end.

Learning outcomes

Pupils will explore the themes of racism and memorial.

Pupils will be exposed to different opinions and use them to make judgements and come to conclusions.

Pupils will explore the problems of approaching historical events with modern values.

Homework/Extension activities

This activity is based on a real discussion about the treatment of the men of the Mendi that took place online on the Great War Forum in 2012. Read the original forum post [here](#) and see what other views were expressed.

We cannot guarantee the suitability of content on external websites.

SS MENDI

SS MENDI – the men and their memorials

By ArmyGuy1

ArmyGuy1



165 posts

Location: Ipswich

Posted 12/01/17

I've been researching the story of the SS Mendi for many years and recently visited the cemeteries where some of the men were buried. Sergeant MacTavish, a white man who died in the tragedy, has his own grave but as you can see the black men from the wreck share graves with two or more buried in the same plot and sharing the same headstone. These men were serving the King and were enlisted in the British army. Surely they should have had their own plots the same as the white men? I think it is outrageous that the black men were treated so differently.



LestWeForget



1258 posts

Location: Bolton

Posted 12/01/17

I think you are at risk here of applying modern standards to a historical event – any racism in the treatment of the dead was entirely consistent with attitudes of the time. Yes the men may have been buried in shared plots because they were black, but this was 1917 and attitudes to race were very different. You can't change the past.

MarkM1987



489 posts

Location: Crewe

Posted 12/01/17

Racism was endemic throughout the story of the Mendi – the men weren't trained to fight in case they turned their weapons on the white men who had been oppressing them and taking their land on their return home. In fact Bonar Law, the Secretary of Colonies stated that 'no proposal for training Natives upon a large scale is likely to be acceptable to ... the British and Dutch inhabitants of the Union, 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.' It doesn't surprise me in the least that the men had to share plots, it's just another example of the racism inherent in this whole story. No one cared about the blacks of the Mendi, as you can see by how little known the story is in this country.

MrKGun

Posted 13/01/17



1475 posts
Location: UK

I disagree – people care very much about the men of the Mendi, black and white, as you can see from the number of people who recently commemorated the 100th anniversary of the tragedy. It's important to note that although they may have to share grave plots, all of the men, black and white, are commemorated in a number of ways. The wreck itself is a war grave, protected for the memory of all the men who died. Those who have no grave are commemorated on the Hollybrook memorial in Southampton and there are four memorials in South Africa that I can think of. There are also two vessels in the South African Navy named to commemorate the sinking (the SAS Isaac Dhoby and the SAS Mendi), and the South African military's highest award for bravery is named the Mendi Award for bravery. So whilst I agree that there is a clear difference in how the black men were treated in death compared to their white counterparts, a lot of good has been done to honour the men of the ship.

EM_1964

Posted 13/01/17



111 posts
Location: London

Actually I think there might be a purely practical element at work here. Graves cost money, especially when they all had to be hand dug and let's not forget that in 1917 the country's strong young men were all either at war, wounded or dead in the trenches. The families of the whites were presumably quite easy to trace and they would have been able to pay for a single grave. The South Africans on the other hand would have been impossible to contact. It took 2 months for official news of the sinking and lists of the missing presumed dead to reach South Africa and the news was conveyed to the families through the headmen and chiefs of the villages. Even in winter you couldn't have waited months for confirmation that the families would pay for a single plot.

WarResearcher1

Posted 13/01/17



16 posts
Location: Up north

I agree with a previous poster who said that approaches to race were different when these men were buried – I'm not justifying historical racism, but it was a different world back then. Applying modern values to past events is always going to be problematic.

PoppyField_1914

Posted 13/01/17



2554 posts
Location: Luton

There are a great number of soldiers of all races buried in shared plots, or who have no known graves. I think that the best we can hope is that all of the men are named on a memorial, which they have been for the Mendi.

MrSJones

Posted 14/01/17



89 posts
Location: Outside

It was with remarkable foresight that the rules laid down by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission which was established in 1917 state that war dead will be commemorated uniformly and equally, irrespective of military or civil rank, race or creed. Despite what some posters have said about historical racism, it is pleasing to see that the two graves included in the original post have the same appearance – one is not grander than the other – even though the men buried there are of different races.

The posters on this forum are discussing the fact that some of the men who died when the Mendi sank have their own graves, whilst others, the black men, are buried in shared plots and share a headstone.

Answer the following questions:

What reasons are given by the people in the discussion to explain why some of the men share burial plots?

What do you think, from reading these posts and from your research into the Mendi, is the reason why some of the men share plots?

People are free to express any opinion they like online. Were there any views expressed by these posters that you disagree with, or which made you feel uncomfortable?

Attitudes to race were very different in 1917, as two of the posters point out. What are the problems of applying modern attitudes to historical events?

All of the men are named, either on a headstone or on the Hollybrook memorial in Southampton. Do you agree with the poster who says that this is good enough?

What are the problems of using a forum post as a source of historical information?



**We Die Like Brothers
No Grave but the Sea**