Memory: South African Native Labour Corps members who died when the SS Mendi sank, have been remembered, and 181 people, most of them from the corps, are buried in the military cemetery in Arques-la-Bataille, France. But the names and stories of other South Africans and those of hundreds of thousands from Uganda, Nigeria, Tanzania, Kenya, Sierra Leone and Malawi have been forgotten. Photo: Horacio Villalobos/Getty Images

*Rem*embrance, a cautionary memory bank for peace

South Africa's part in World War I shows the importance of collective memory in recalling the ignored names of those who died in service

OPINION
Chris Harlen

We continues to dominate headlines as Russia's invasion of Ukraine enters its 20th month in July. The conflict has seen more than 350 000 casualties from both sides, with grave economic and social consequences to human welfare. Set against this context and considering worldwide conflicts of the past, one reporter from The Standard asked the question: if war has brought untold suffering to humankind and its impact keeps on reshaping the modern world, is commemorating war part of the means we have to prevent future ones?

Societies can learn and heal from the past, and this past awareness builds a more inclusive future. With the World Wars being global in scale and effect, the breadth of their entries has played a role in remembering and understanding complex histories — and there is much to be said for paying respectful and visual tributes through memorialisation, which serves as a warning for us all to resist the ends before choosing voluntary destruction.

As we reflect on how history has been preserved for future generations, particularly through educational systems, it becomes evident there is a significant task at hand to define and narrate the complete stories of the brave individuals who gave their lives in military service.

Uncovering the past has revealed inequality and disparity in treatment, and gaps in inclusive commemoration are apparent. As recently as two years ago, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission undertook work to better understand the role and contribution of personnel from countries across Africa and India during World War I (1914-1918) who had been overlooked — from Kenya to Tanzania to India and Egypt.

Today these contexts are being carefully and meticulously recognised and a new memorial in Cape Town is one of the first carefully created architectural responses.

Many people are surprised to discover that thousands of black South Africans were recruited for non-combatant military service in South Africa — travelling by land, foot and sea around the continent. These servicemen were brought into the Great War through labour units that included the Cape Coloured Labour Regiment, Cape Auxiliary Horse Transport, Military Labour Bureau and the South African Military Labour Corps.

But, unlike South Africa's Native Labour Corps, whose connection to the SS Mendi is well known and commemorated, the significant contributions of these units were all too often overlooked and left behind.

As part of this journey, what must be acknowledged is that World War I across Africa was not a wholly European story.

While the fighting forces of the British Empire during the East African campaign alone exceeded 350 000 men, more than one million personnel from countries including present-day Uganda, Nigeria, Tanzania, Kenya, Sierra Leone, Malawi and South Africa served in supporting roles in the same operations. These forces quite literally carried the burden of battle, yet their contribution has been muted in chapters of the world's history books.

Consider that in the early part of the war, 21 000 black South Africans provided labour services to forces in German South West Africa (now Namibia), fulfilling a wide range of ancillary roles including stevedores, wagon drivers, railway builders and repairers.

In German East Africa (now Tanzania), thousands of men worked in any number of jobs, ranging from arms-porters and labourers to co-drivers. People did gruelling work in harsh conditions. They cleared scrub, built roads, and constructed buildings as well as game-changing defensive positions.

These servicemen made an essential contribution to the war effort by feeding and supplying the front lines and keeping armies in the field. Not only did black people serve on the African continent in greater numbers than Europeans, they also died in greater numbers.

Although the official death toll for British Imperial troops fighting in East Africa was more than 8 000, it is widely accepted that no fewer than 100 000 African carriers or labourers died during the same operations.

It would not be too wide off the mark to assume that in this campaign for every one soldier lost on operations, 10 carriers lost their lives.

Sharing the stories of South African servicemen is part of the process of memory and commemoration. It is in understanding our shared history — even when painful — that we can learn not to repeat the mistakes of the past.

Another research can open minds to the possibility of what might have been by evidencing powerful, deeply human experiences enlisted to bear now and employed by the South African railways and harbours departments at The Point in Durban. Dolly Jennifer and Zulu Madlidlwa drowned on 19 January 1915 while working for the South African defence department.

They had been transporting supplies across a flooding Orange River when the craft they were piloting capsized. Dolly never returned to his wife, Molly Jennifer, and Zulu's father, Ngobongwana, received his son's unpaid wages of £3 but never saw his son.

Later this year, the names of South African military personnel such as Dolly and Zulu will be permanently etched on dedicated commemorative markers, along with more than 1 700 of their comrades. Their historical contributions will be shared through the creation of a new memorial.

With construction to commence this year for an unveiling in 2024, the Cape Town Labour Corps Memorial is an initiative to honour more black South Africans who served in the military labour units across Africa during World War I, across the continent between 1 August 1914 and 14 August 1921, with no known grave.

May their stories form part of a new memory bank that motivates for peace. May they reach in remembrance by us all.

Chris Harlen CBE is the director general of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

25 YEARS AGO

It was Cecelia Stewart with a fresh-of-time-trips which witness Vlok appeared before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to explain how he contributed to "law and order" by blowing up office blocks and cinemas.

Vlok, who was minister of law and order from 1980 to 1989, appeared before the commission in support of an amnesty application for three covert bombing operations carried out by police on his instructions.

Apartheid was "unbearable and morally indefensible", he conceded. But ... "We only had the best of intentions for ourselves, for the sake of South Africans and also for our country."

"We did not start the war in South Africa, we just participated in it. The actions of the security forces were in reaction to the attacks launched on the government by the revolutionaries."

Turning to the crimes for which he is applying for amnesty, Vlok said the decisions to blow up Crossroads Hostel and Khotso House, home of the South African Council of Churches, were taken because there was no legal way to deal with the threat they posed. — **Mail & Guardian, 24 to 30 July 1998**

VERBATIM

"There are a number of candidates on the table. I might come back on my [unintelligible] candidate for president. You'll be surprised. Wait and see." — Business Mokwatedi, who was suspended as public prosecutor by President Cyril Ramaphosa in June last year because there was prima facie evidence of misconduct and incompetence on her part.

"The decision by Russia to exit the Black Sea Grain initiative is a slap in the back at global food security prices and disproportionately impacts countries in the Horn of Africa already impacted by drought." — Alyce Ling'Oo, Kenya's principal secretary of Foreign Affairs.

"Every year there is a rotation [of Wagner mercenaries]. They are also here to secure the constitutional referendum." — Central African Republic presidential spokesperson Albert Yaloke. If the constitutional referendum succeeds in abolishing the two-term limit, Faustin-Archange Touadéra could run for a third term in 2025.

"Nadi Sunak dragged the likes of Downton Abbey's Julian Fellowes and The Apprentice's Karren Brady into the Lords last night to win a vote to lock up refugees on planes. It won't stop the [migrant] boats. It will damage children's lives. Cruelty might make good telly, but makes terrible legislation." — Labour MP Stella Creasy, after voting in the House of Lords passed the way for the government's Illegal Migration Bill to become law.

"President Mandela said that the heroes are those who make peace and build. We will continue to follow in his footsteps by calling for political solutions to conflicts." — President Cyril Ramaphosa speaking on Nelson Mandela Day about the peace initiatives South Africa is and has been involved in.