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THE SOUTH AFRICAN NATIVE LABOUR CONTINGENT, 1916–1918*

BY B. P. WILLAN

Did they realise that the coloured man, when he donned uniform, said to the white man: 'I am now your equal—the equal of your wives and children?' (J. B. Wessels, South African House of Assembly, March 1917).¹

... we were aware, when we returned, that we were different from the other people at home. Our behaviour, as we showed the South Africans, was something more than they expected from a Native, more like what was expected among them of a white man (Jason Jingoos, on his experiences as a member of the South African Native Labour Contingent).²

BETWEEN September 1916 and January 1918 a total of 25,000 black South Africans enlisted for non-combatant labouring duties with the South African Native Labour Contingent in support of the British forces in France. Of these, 21,000 in fact left South Africa, the first two companies arriving in France on 20 November 1916, the last leaving France on 5 January 1918. While there, they did various kinds of work—loading and unloading in the docks of the French channel ports, building roads, working on railways, quarrying, and other similar activities at varying distances behind the front lines. The value of their work was much appreciated by the British military authorities: the official War Office account commented on the 'splendid reputation for good work under the hardest conditions conceivable' which the Contingent had achieved, while Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, Commander-in-Chief, British Armies in France, expressed his 'warm appreciation of the good work done by them for the British Army during their stay in France'. Forestry work was evidently the most popular kind of work with the Africans of the S.A.N.L.C., but 'in loading and unloading of stores to and from ships and trains', it was officially recorded, 'they did exceptionally good work and frequently put up remarkable records'—as, for example, when a

* I would like to express my appreciation for the research carried out on my behalf by Capt. R. J. Bouch and the staff of the S.A.D.F. Directorate Documentation Service, by Dr John Perry of Rhodes University, and by Ms Barbara Hogan. This paper was, however, written before I was able to make use of this material, and this I intend to do in further work on this subject at a later date. I am also grateful to Mr Randolph Vigne and Dr Shula Marks for their suggestions and comments.

¹ *Cape Times*, 21 March 1917, report of debate in the South African House of Assembly about the South African Native Labour Contingent.

² John and Cassandra Perry (ed.), *A Chief is a Chief by the People* (O.U.P., 1975), 92; henceforth referred to as Jingoos, *Chief*.

S.A.N.L.C. platoon loaded onto a train fourteen tons of boxed ammunition per man in seven hours at the Martainneville Advanced Ammunition Depot.³

Not all of those who set out for France for service in the S.A.N.L.C., however, arrived safely. In the middle of February 1917 the transport s.s. *Mendi* was rammed by the s.s. *Darro* off the Isle of Wight and sank with the loss of over 600 African lives. This led—amongst other things—to the unprecedented spectacle of the entire South African House of Assembly in Cape Town rising in silence as a mark of respect for those who had died in the *Mendi*, and passing a motion resolving to ‘record an expression of its sincere sympathy with the relations of the deceased officers, N.C.O.s and natives in their bereavement’.⁴

Very little information about any aspect of the raising of the S.A.N.L.C., its service in France, or any wider importance that this may have had can be found in the secondary literature. Amongst the appendices to the official history of South Africa’s participation in World War I there is one page on the use of black South African labour in East Africa, German South-West Africa as well as in Europe, but of the S.A.N.L.C. itself there is only the briefest outline.⁵ John Buchan’s official *History of the South African Forces in France* contains not a single reference to the S.A.N.L.C. nor any indication that it even existed.⁶ Sir Harry Johnston’s *The Black Man’s Part in the War*, published in 1917, does not have much to say about the S.A.N.L.C. either—partly because its commanding officer refused to provide Sir Harry with information when he requested it.⁷ Earl Buxton’s *General Botha* contains several reminiscences about recruiting for the Contingent.⁸ Other general histories refer to it only in passing. Rather more is to be found on the S.A.N.L.C., in fact, in one chapter of Jason Jingoes’s *A Chief is a Chief by the People* than in the rest of the published sources put together.⁹ It is a subject, however, of considerable interest and is in many ways a revealing episode in South Africa’s history. It is the purpose of this paper to throw some light upon it, and to explore some of the issues surrounding it.

The S.A.N.L.C. originated in suggestions put to the Imperial War

³ Public Record Office, W.O. 107/37, ‘Report on the Work of Labour with the B.E.F. during the War’, and ‘History of the South African Native Labour Contingent’ (Appendix F), the latter written by Lt. Col. Barnard, an officer of the S.A.N.L.C. I am grateful to Dr Philip Jones for directing me to this reference.

⁴ *Cape Times*, 10 Mar. 1917. The unopposed motion was moved by General Botha.

⁵ *Official History: Union of South Africa and the Great War* (Pretoria, 1924), Appendix X, 218–19.

⁶ John Buchan, *History of the South African Forces in France* (London, 1921).

⁷ Sir Harry Johnston, *The Black Man’s Part in the War* (London, 1917). A later condensation, ‘African Fighters and Labourers in France’, can be found in *The African World Annual 1918–19* (London, 1919).

⁸ Earl Buxton, *General Botha* (London, 1924), 284–9. I am grateful to Mr Peter Warwick for this reference.

⁹ Jingoes, *Chief*, chap. 4. Dr John Perry has kindly made available to me additional unpublished transcripts of Jingoes’s relating to his experiences in France.

Council in June 1916 that African labourers from South Africa and other parts of Africa should be recruited and sent to France in order to relieve the serious labour shortage at the front and in the French ports (where the shortage of shipping necessitated a more rapid turnover) which had been accentuated by the effects of the Somme offensive. Shortly afterwards, agreement was reached with the South African government over the matter. General Botha himself, as both Prime Minister and Minister for Native Affairs, played a key part in the negotiations. From the outset, there was no question of these black South African labourers being engaged in any combatant capacity. This was a point upon which all major sections of white South African society were agreed. It had been one of the most important understandings—in theory at least—upon which hostilities during the Anglo-Boer War had been conducted, although it was frequently deviated from in practice. It was based on the belief that if black and white were acknowledged to be fighting with and against each other on equal terms this was likely to seriously undermine the future maintenance of the existing state of black/white relationships by devaluing the concept of race as an effective means of forestalling the emergence of class as an alternative, overt, basis for the organization of social and political relations. Just a little below the surface—at the time of the Anglo-Boer War as during World War I—was the fear that the experience on the part of Africans in bearing arms and in operating with whites in conditions likely to lead to a breakdown of the social colour bar would have wider implications and would contribute to the removal of one of the chief obstacles to the emergence of a united working class in South Africa. Such beliefs were, in 1912, enshrined in Section 7 of the South African Defence Act. It was to this that the Secretary of Defence referred W. B. Rubusana in 1914 (when he offered to accompany a force of 5,000 ‘able bodied men’ to the German South-West African front), stating that ‘the Government does not desire to avail itself of the services, in a combatant capacity, of citizens not of European descent in the present hostilities. Apart from other considerations’, the Secretary went on, ‘the present war is one which has its origins among the white people of Europe and the Government are anxious to avoid the employment of its native citizens in warfare against whites’.¹⁰ Some of these ‘other considerations’ were expressed rather more clearly some time after this when the *East Rand Express* commented with alarm upon news of the proposal that Great Britain intended to use Indian troops against the Germans:

If the Indians are used against the Germans they will return to India disabused of the respect they should bear for the white race. The empire must uphold the principle that a coloured man must not raise his hand against a white man if there is to be any law or order in either India, Africa, or any part of the Empire

¹⁰ Dept. of Defence to W. B. Rubusana, 6 Nov. 1914, quoted by S. T. Plaatje, *Native Life in South Africa* (London, 1916), 281.

where the white man rules over a large concourse of coloured people. In South Africa it will mean that Natives will secure pictures of whites chased by coloured men, and who knows what harm such pictures may do?¹¹

And how much more harm would be done, was the unspoken question, if black South Africans themselves were doing the chasing?

Such official guidelines and popular (white) opinion did not, however, preclude the use of black South African labour for military purposes in a non-combatant capacity. Some 35,000 Africans were in fact employed in the German South-West African campaign 'not for fighting purposes, but for that class of employment that was exclusively or ordinarily suited to Natives—such as Drivers, Leaders, and general labourers in the supply and other units of the Defence Force'.¹² A further 18,000 subsequently served in similar capacities in the East African campaign.

Service in Europe was, however, almost universally regarded as something qualitatively different, and when the proposals were first announced in South Africa in late 1916 they resulted predictably in some strong opposition. The important new factor was the question of the likely impact of European conditions, and opposition was commonly expressed in terms of 'dangers of contamination' and 'exposure to evil influences'. The eminent Cape liberal, J. X. Merriman, writing to Smuts in East Africa, was amongst those who strongly disapproved of the project:

I wish the thousands of Zulus that are being sent to Europe could be diverted to you. It would be a much less dangerous, and possibly disastrous experiment, than the other. But as it is, we must, I suppose, make the best of it. It is not only the professional mischief maker who views the experiment with disfavour, but some of the wisest and most solid friends, who regard the introduction of our Natives to the social conditions of Europe with the greatest alarm.¹³

Because the cost of the 'experiment' was to be borne by the Imperial government General Botha was able to proceed without reference to the South African parliament, effectively by-passing opposition to the scheme. Recruiting began in September 1916. The initial plan was to raise a contingent of 10,000 strong, consisting of five battalions of 2,000 Africans, each with about sixty white South African officers and N.C.O.s. Contracts were to be for one year, with an option for renewal at the end of this period. Wages were calculated to be roughly ten per cent above the rates for comparable employment in South Africa, and ranged from £3 per month for labourers to £6 per month for chaplains and senior interpreters;

¹¹ Plaatje, *Native Life*, 282–3.

¹² The role that Africans could play in the German South-West African campaign was explained by Colonel S. M. Pritchard, Director of Native Labour, at a meeting with leaders of the South African Native National Congress in Jan. 1915, reported in *Ilanga lase Natal*, 22 Jan. 1915. Figures for those who served in the German South-West African and East African campaigns are taken from the *Official History*, 218.

¹³ K. Hancock and J. Van der Poel (eds.), *Selections from the Smuts Papers* (Cambridge, 1966), Merriman to Smuts, 22 Nov. 1916, vol. 14, no. 118.

intermediate categories were Lance Corporals, Hospital Orderlies, Sergeants, and Clerk Interpreters.¹⁴

Appeals for recruits were widely publicized—via local Native Commissioners, magistrates, African newspapers, at special recruiting meetings, and, later on, from the pulpits of churches.¹⁵ One of the most noticeable aspects of the recruiting campaign was the extent to which members of the educated African elite lent their active support. At one level this class regarded the scheme as an opportunity for Africans to demonstrate their loyalty to King and country in the hope that this would give their leaders a bargaining counter in terms of political rights when hostilities ceased: much was accordingly made of the rhetoric that accompanied statements of war aims from the British side. Related to this was the way in which African leaders themselves saw in the recruitment campaign a more immediate opportunity of stressing their own importance and influence to the authorities. In recruiting labour for the German South-West African campaign the South African authorities had done much to ensure the co-operation of African leaders for both that campaign and subsequently for the S.A.N.L.C. by involving them in discussions, tacitly acknowledging their influence in a way that held out hope that this would continue on a regular basis. After Colonel Pritchard (Director of Native Labour) had discussed the question of recruitment with various African leaders in 1915, *Ilanga lase Natal* responded as follows:

He [Colonel Pritchard] was the one official of the Government who was administering Native Affairs in the right direction—namely, by consulting the Natives in matters in which they are interested and for not hesitating to take them into confidence. . . They as members of the Native Congress would not shrink from assisting the Government.¹⁶

In 1916 the Government again involved the leaders of the South African Native National Congress in similar discussions, although this did not extend to incorporating their suggestions about the way in which the S.A.N.L.C. ought to be organized: 'whatever may be the merits of the suggestions put forward by Congress, they came at too late an hour to admit of adoption', the Native Affairs Department informed J. L. Dube (President of the Congress).¹⁷ He and his colleagues assisted, nevertheless. Solomon Plaatje's good offices were also sought as soon as he arrived back in South Africa in March 1917: he was asked by General Botha, so he (Plaatje) related, 'to use his influence in obtaining recruits, and said this would help the native people better than any propaganda work in which he

¹⁴ Dept. of Native Affairs Circular D7/16, reproduced in *Ilanga*, 13 Oct. 1916. The rank of 'Native Sergeant' was subsequently abolished and replaced by those of 'Induna (First Class)', and 'Induna (Second Class)'.

¹⁵ In July 1917 General Botha arranged for the distribution of his appeal for further recruits amongst 'missionaries and other members [of churches] in close touch with the Natives'; *Ilanga*, 13 July 1917.

¹⁶ *Ilanga*, 22 Jan. 1915.

¹⁷ The full text of the Native Affairs Dept. communication to Dube is reproduced in *Ilanga*, 20 Oct. 1916.

could engage. Recognizing the truth of General Botha's remarks', Plaatje had therefore gone on to do precisely this.¹⁸

Towards the end of 1917 there also appeared a pamphlet by F. Z. S. Peregrino entitled *His Majesty's Black Labourers: a treatise on the Camp Life of the S.A.N.L.C.*, a rambling account of 'camp life' at the Rosebank depot in Cape Town whose main purpose was to attract further recruits but which provided at the same time an opportunity for its author to recommend himself to the authorities.¹⁹

A variety of reasons was presented by both Africans and Europeans involved in the recruiting campaign as to why Africans should join up with the S.A.N.L.C. One correspondent writing to *Ilanga lase Natal* in October 1916 felt that opposition from whites to the raising of the Contingent was in itself 'the best proof that the Contingent is a good thing to the natives', and that it would provide 'the great chance to acquire a just and recognized status as loyal subjects of the crown'.²⁰ Peregrino stressed similar themes, but discoursed also on the spectre of displacement by 'the cute yellow man', the benefits of a free uniform ('valued at a moderate assessment at £12'), and the general opportunity for Africans to prove themselves possessed of all the recognized manly virtues.²¹

Special recruiting meetings took place up and down the country. One of these, addressed by both black and white local dignitaries, took place in Kimberley in June 1917. The predominant theme in nearly all the addresses was the appeal to altruistic motives of loyalty and devotion to King, country, and empire. Lurid images were created of what was likely to happen to both black and white South Africans if the Germans were to be allowed to triumph. The local officer in charge of recruiting was concerned also to point to the more practical advantages of joining up: 'the pay was good, the feeding was good, and the clothing was good'.²² Both Sol Plaatje and his brother-in-law, I. Bud Mbelle (the latter by telegram as he was unable to be present) stressed the educational advantages of service overseas. Bud Mbelle's view, read out by the Mayor of Kimberley, was that 'by going to France our people should realize that they are going

¹⁸ *Diamond Fields Advertiser*, 20 Aug. 1917, 'Native Grievances/A Labour Recruiting Speech'.

¹⁹ F. Z. S. Peregrino, *His Majesty's Black Labourers: a treatise on the Camp Life of the S.A.N.L.C.* (Cape Town, 1917). This pamphlet should be compared with Peregrino's earlier *Life amongst the Native and Coloured Miners in the Transvaal* (1910), which it resembles in purpose and style. An important if idiosyncratic figure in the history of Pan-Africanism, Peregrino claimed descent from a West African king, and lived and worked in England and America before coming to Cape Town at the turn of the century. Well known locally as the editor of the *South African Spectator* during the first decade of the twentieth century, he maintained his reputation for political eccentricity to the last by becoming involved—shortly before his death in 1919—in a journal supporting the Afrikaner Nationalist party.

²⁰ I. Mhlungu, 'The Native Contingent', in *Ilanga*, 3 Nov. 1916.

²¹ Peregrino, *Labourers*, quotations from pp. 4 and 6; see also pp. 7, 15.

²² A detailed account of the speeches made appears in the *Diamond Fields Advertiser*, 28 June 1917.

to a university of experience'. Plaatje, similarly, thought that 'six months in France would teach them more than ten years in Kimberley: it was just like a great educational institution without having to pay the fees'.²³

Both in Kimberley and in most of the rest of South Africa, however, the recruiting campaign met with a poor response after the first two or three months. Patriotism, it soon became apparent, was not going to be enough. In a renewed appeal in July 1917 General Botha expressed his appreciation of the valuable work done by those who had already joined up, but regretted the decline in the numbers of those coming forward. He considered this due to the fact that Africans had not 'fully realized the greatness of the call upon them'.²⁴ The poor response was a matter of concern to both the South African government with its increased commitment to the Imperial war effort, and to those African leaders who hoped to make political capital out of an overwhelming demonstration of 'loyalty', and who risked a somewhat dangerous identification with an unsuccessful government scheme.

Those who did enlist, however, did so for a variety of reasons. Notions of 'loyalty' and 'patriotism', and ideas of self-improvement and education, undoubtedly provided important motives for teachers, interpreters, clerks and other educated Africans who appear to have enlisted in numbers disproportionate to the size of their class in the population as a whole. Amongst the young idealism was perhaps particularly strong: Sol Plaatje's son and young cousin ran away from school to attempt to enlist with the S.A.N.L.C., but were rejected by the doctor; they came away 'convinced in their disappointment that military doctors are not as reasonable as other men'.²⁵ For Jason Jingoos the decision to enlist was less clear cut and was accompanied by much hesitation and mental debate: genuine feelings of loyalty, self respect, and a misunderstanding with his girlfriend eventually triumphed over the attraction of staying in his well paid job with a good employer. ('Why should I go? I'm getting a good salary here; Mr Sacks is a good employer. I'm having an admirable time right here. Over there, people are dying!')²⁶

But for others there was little opportunity for such anguished mental debate. From about the middle of 1917 the South African government seems to have exercised a strong degree of compulsion through the agency of the chiefs. Koos Matli's account, for example, seems to indicate clearly that he had little choice in the matter when he was informed by his chief that the government required recruits for the S.A.N.L.C.²⁷ Certainly this

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ *Ilanga*, 13 July 1917.

²⁵ Related by Plaatje during the course of an address to the Lyndhurst Road School, Kimberley, reported in the *Diamond Fields Advertiser*, 17 Dec. 1917.

²⁶ Jingoos, *Chief*, 73.

²⁷ Jacob Koos Matli's account of his experiences with the S.A.N.L.C., which concentrates on the sinking of the *Mendi*, appears in verbatim form in 'The *Mendi* and After', by M. D. W. Jeffreys, *Africana Notes and News*, Mar. 1963. I am grateful to Mr Randolph Vigne for providing me with this and other references relating to the *Mendi*.

was the case in Basutoland where the Paramount directed his chiefs 'to order the people to prepare to leave for Europe'.²⁸ In the Union itself, it seems that a regular—if unofficial—system of payment to both chiefs and other recruiting agents was instituted when the disappointing response became apparent. One Attesting Officer explained the difficulty:

The Committees that have been formed throughout the district [East London] are all working without reward, and while one would rather these bodies worked for purely patriotic reasons, the fact is undeniable that the average native expects an occasional 'swazi' or 'tip' and, the amount of zeal thrown into the work too often depends on this consideration.²⁹

He recommended, therefore, that a certain sum per head for labourers recruited should be paid. Not everybody, he pointed out, could be expected to emulate the unrewarded feat of Native Detective John Tyobeka in securing 109 recruits, two-thirds of all the labourers recruited for the S.A.N.L.C. in the East London area up to August 1917. By the end of 1917 the government was prepared to consider more extreme measures to increase the supply of recruits—including the proposal to send prisoners from South African gaols to France.

There were many reasons for the poor response to the call for recruits. A major factor was the distinct lack of enthusiasm for the scheme not only from the Chamber of Mines but from many other employers of labour in both rural and urban parts of South Africa. They perceived in the possibility of thousands of Africans disappearing to Europe for long periods acute shortages of labour, higher wages and the host of other evils associated with a situation of labour scarcity. Recruitment for the S.A.N.L.C. posed a direct challenge to their interests and—with some exceptions—they responded accordingly. It was to the strength of such vested interests that General Botha alluded in his appeal for recruits in 1917, when he expressed his belief 'that Europeans in close touch with the Natives have perhaps not realised the importance of the labour aspect, and may not therefore have been as enthusiastic in making recruiting a success as they would otherwise be'.³⁰ F. Z. S. Peregrino referred to this in rather more direct terms: there were still some, he explained, who 'being inspired by selfishness and cursed by narrowmindedness, see in the departure of their people for Europe the withdrawal of a source of revenue for themselves'.³¹

It was not only whites who had a vested interest in discouraging the recruiting campaign. In East London, D. L. Smit (a future Minister for Native Affairs) observed that Africans who received a *per capita* grant from the Chamber of Mines for recruiting mine labour were 'not only energetic in their interest' but that 'there is reason to believe that in order to get

²⁸ Quoted in the *Cape Times*, 3 Apr. 1917.

²⁹ D. L. Smit Papers, Albany Museum, Grahamstown; D. L. Smit to the Magistrate, East London, 26 July 1917.

³⁰ Reproduced in *Ilanga*, 13 July 1917.

³¹ Peregrino, *Labourers*, 1.

recruits [i.e. for the mines] they enlarge upon the danger of going overseas'.³² Nor were these particular recruiting agents above taking more direct action in the defence of their interests: at a meeting in Newlands Location (East London) in August 1917 a resolution was passed 'that any persons sent by the government to recruit for the Contingent should be assaulted'. An important additional stimulus for such action was the fear that compulsion was shortly to be introduced by the Government in order to secure recruits for the S.A.N.L.C.³³

White farmers were also reported to have resorted to measures of intimidation in order to preserve their labour supply. 'How can a Native join the colours', demanded Daniel Hafe, 'if he is aware of the fact that his house might be destroyed after his departure? Yes, I understand that some white men say to Natives that if they go overseas they better clear out of their farms. What a game this is!'³⁴

The recruiting campaign was much affected also by the fact of its direct association with the South African authorities, although technically they were acting on behalf of the Imperial government. Because it was carried out to a large extent through the existing channels of administration (local Native Commissioners, magistrates, etc.), response was inevitably coloured by the deeply felt distrust that was attached to individuals and institutions associated with the South African government. Regretting the lack of response to the recruiting campaign in Natal (only 629 by June 1917), *Ilanga lase Natal* commented:

We are not much surprised at this, knowing as we do the feeling of our people at the present time towards the powers that be. Recent legislation does not deceive even the most unsophisticated amongst us as to our ultimate destination as the result of the Natives Land Act, and worse still the so-called Native Administration Bill.³⁵

Sol Plaatje, similarly, blamed 'the Union's method of administering native affairs' for the poor response.³⁶ Unrest generated by the Natives' Land Act of 1913 was probably also at the heart of suspicions felt by some Africans (and taken by Earl Buxton as a reason for its lack of success) that recruitment was 'an insidious attempt on the part of the Government to entice away men so that land could be seized in their absence'.³⁷

Individuals selected by the government to take charge of recruiting were not always those most likely to inspire confidence in the government's intentions. In Natal, the choice for recruiting officer was Sir George

³² D. L. Smit Papers, the Magistrate, East London, to the Secretary for Native Affairs, 30 July 1917.

³³ Ibid., D. L. Smit to the Magistrate, East London, 27 Aug. 1917.

³⁴ Letter from D. Hafe to the editor, *Ilanga*, 26 Oct. 1917.

³⁵ *Ilanga*, 15 June 1917.

³⁶ *Diamond Fields Advertiser*, 22 Aug. 1917.

³⁷ Buxton, *General Botha*, 288. Buxton himself, it should be added, naturally did not consider that there was any justification for this.

Leuchars, whose brutal handling of the Bambatha rebellion in 1906 was well remembered in that part of the world. 'That fact alone', noted one correspondent to the *Natal Mercury*, 'will contribute to militate against the success in recruiting natives in the Province and Zululand'.³⁸ Undoubtedly it did.

General fears as to what was likely to happen to their family and homes during the absence overseas of potential recruits were supplemented by other fears about what was likely to happen to themselves. The reason for the incredulous welcome given to Jason Jingoos on his return home from France in 1918, so he says, was the 'superstition that no black person could cross the sea and return again . . . Few people believed that we really were soldiers. "No one can return alive from Mkiza", they whispered'.³⁹ Similarly, a contributor to *Ilanga lase Natal* in May 1918 noted that the return to South Africa of some of the early recruits had had the effect of 'giving the lie to the delusion that had taken possession of nearly the whole of the illiterate section of our people, namely that the Natives who went to France were nearly all dead'.⁴⁰ It was, however, a 'delusion' that was partly true. Although the sinking of the transport ship *Mendi* in February 1917, with the loss of 615 Africans of the S.A.N.L.C., inspired a few to heights of patriotic fervour,⁴¹ not surprisingly its overall effect was distinctly detrimental to further recruitment.

At a more individual level, Jason Jingoos's attempts to persuade his friends to join him in enlisting brought forth what was perhaps the typical personal response. It contrasts strongly with the rhetoric of loyalty and patriotism to be found elsewhere:

I went to see these two fellows to try to persuade them to join up with me, telling them at length how it was their duty to go to war. Abnar said he was too young to die. Moeti said he wanted to live long enough to look after his children. Another friend from home, Paulus Marabe, said, 'You're crazy! You want to go to war before you're even married. I couldn't do that! Marry first, and then think about volunteering. If I were to die, I'd like to know I'd left a wife and children behind'.⁴²

The initial quota of 10,000 men requested by the Imperial authorities was, however, recruited—by fair means or foul—by January 1917, and the

³⁸ Letter from J. Mapulumo to the *Natal Mercury*, 8 June 1917; reproduced, with editorial comment, in *Ilanga*, 15 June 1917.

³⁹ Jingoos, *Chief*, 91.

⁴⁰ Letter from 'A Native', *Ilanga*, 10 May 1918.

⁴¹ *Diamond Fields Advertiser*, 28 June 1917. The following formed part of the appeal for recruits:

One of the finest incidents that had happened in connection with the war was in regard to the son of a minister who was preaching in the location. That minister's son responded to the King's call, and was on board the *Mendi*, and was drowned. Did they think that that kept the others back? The deceased's elder brother went to his father and said 'Father, my brother has died doing his duty to King and country. It is now my duty to go, and I am going'. He had gone. (Applause).

⁴² Jingoos, *Chief*, 74.

Fifth Battalion (the final one of the first draft) safely arrived at Le Havre on 19 February 1917. From there it was dispatched to Abancourt, Zeneghom, Dannes, and Audriucq for work at Ammunition and Ordnance Depots.⁴³ The question of the reception of the S.A.N.L.C. in France, and in particular the question of making appropriate arrangements for the working and living conditions of the Battalions as they arrived, was a matter that had received careful attention from the South African authorities.

Colonel Pritchard, the officer appointed to command the S.A.N.L.C., had been sent to France in October 1916 in order to make the necessary arrangements, but in effect also to present to the War Council the conditions upon which the South African government was prepared to cooperate in the scheme. The stipulations that Pritchard made at the conference convened to deal with the matter were that 'Natives should be segregated'; that 'they should be administered in accordance with military law under the Army Act by officers appointed by that [i.e. the South African] Government'; and that 'they should be employed elsewhere than in the fighting zone'. It was further agreed that 'the most suitable employment would be quarrying, road making, forestry, etc.', on account of the fact that 'the difficulties of segregation which would arise in towns would be reduced if the Natives were engaged on such work'.⁴⁴ The decision on the part of the South African government to stipulate conditions of this kind sprang from the belief in the necessity to insulate members of the S.A.N.L.C. as far as possible from 'dangers of contamination' which contact with 'the social conditions of Europe' was widely, and very seriously, held to be otherwise inevitable—and thereby to defuse opposition from white interests to the scheme. There was a further factor involved here. Once the decision had been taken to send the S.A.N.L.C. to Europe a number of missionaries, Native Affairs Department officials and others concerned with 'the native problem' realized fairly quickly that the scheme provided an ideal opportunity for testing—in what would, it was hoped, be carefully controlled conditions—the practicability and effects of the implementation of certain segregatory devices of social control; the lessons and results of this experiment could possibly be utilized in South Africa itself. It was perceived as a test, in other words, of the efficacy of ideas that were coming increasingly to bridge the gap between hitherto rather more distinct liberal and segregationalist positions. It is possible that General Botha's apparent personal enthusiasm for the raising of the S.A.N.L.C. owed something to his perception of the use to which the scheme could be put, and hence also the very frequent use of the terms 'experiment' or 'social experiment' that accompanied nearly every discussion of the subject.⁴⁵

⁴³ W.O. 107/37, 'History', 3.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 1.

⁴⁵ This 'liberal segregationist' school is perhaps most clearly reflected in Lovedale's *Christian Express*, and is expressed, for example, in its preference for the 'closed compounds' on the Kimberley model as against those on the Rand.

From the decision to organize the S.A.N.L.C. 'along South African lines' certain other considerations followed. One was the necessity of ensuring that white South African officers who understood African 'mentality and customs', and who had 'a combined knowledge of the Native, Military procedure, and Labour' should be in charge of each Battalion.⁴⁶ Needless to say, the commanding officer, Colonel S. A. M. Pritchard (C.M.G.), Director of Native Labour (Native Affairs Department) was considered to possess these qualities in ideal form. White South Africans with similar experience and background were accordingly sought and commissioned. A further consideration of central importance was the need to construct compounds. The Directorate of Labour's *Appendix to Notes for Officers of Labour Companies (South African Native Labour)*⁴⁷ laid down how this was to be done: 'compounds', so it stated, 'should be surrounded by an unclimbable fence or wall, in which all openings are guarded'. Enclosure fences were to be six feet high, with barbed wire running along the top—'to prevent the natives climbing over'. Provision was made for the Officer Commanding, S.A.N.L.C., if he considered it necessary, to erect a corrugated iron screen: this was thought to be particularly appropriate in areas of denser population. Africans were not permitted outside the camps except when accompanied by an officer or European N.C.O. They were prohibited from 'entering or being served with wine, beer, or spirits in any estaminet or place where liquor is sold', and prohibited also from entering 'shops or business premises unless under European escort'.

Other instructions contained in the *Appendix* stressed the need to 'take steps to ensure that the Natives are not allowed to enter, or be entertained in the house of Europeans', and explained further:

Under the conditions under which they are living in France, they (the Natives) are not to be trusted with white women, and any Native found wandering about without a pass and not under the escort of a white N.C.O. should be returned to his unit under guard, or failing this, handed over to the Military Police.

Africans leaving the camps were not considered to be the only source of danger—*viz.* *General Remarks, Section 7*:

Care should be taken to prevent unauthorized persons from entering the Camp or conversing with Natives and especially to prevent all familiarity between Europeans and Natives, as this is subversive to discipline and calculated to impair their efficiency as working units.

And subversive also, it might be added, although this was rarely made explicit, to the maintenance of a divided working class in South Africa,

⁴⁶ W.O. 107/73, 'History', 2.

⁴⁷ W.O. 107/37, Appendix G, Directorate of Labour, 'Appendix to Notes for Officers of Labour Companies (South African Native Labour)'.

were such 'familiarity between Europeans and Natives' to make too much of an impression.

In practice, however, it did not prove possible to run the S.A.N.L.C. entirely along the lines envisaged above. One important reason for this was the change in administrative arrangements that took place after the arrival of the first two S.A.N.L.C. Battalions at the end of 1916. A unified Directorate of Labour was formed by the British Army in December 1916 in order to co-ordinate more effectively than hitherto the allocation and administration of all labour units. One of the effects of this was to reduce the degree of control which South African officers exercised over the allocation and distribution of S.A.N.L.C. units. At the same time the larger Battalion formation was abolished as too cumbersome, and smaller, more mobile units took their place. All the previous plans for compound construction accordingly went by the board. It soon became clear that military considerations, and the demands of the Labour Directorate, were coming into violent conflict with the original guidelines presented by Colonel Pritchard at the October conference.

The first two Battalions of the S.A.N.L.C. soon found themselves split up into much smaller units and working not in dockyards in the French channel ports but in forward army areas and close to the front lines. Shortly after Colonel Pritchard had pressed for their withdrawal on the grounds that 'there would be considerable trouble politically if the South African Natives were reported to be near the fighting', one of these forward camps was in fact shelled by German artillery, and several casualties occurred. This fact would indeed have caused 'considerable trouble politically' if it had become known.⁴⁸ German awareness of this was possibly an additional reason for shelling S.A.N.L.C. units where they could: later in 1917 German aircraft attacked one of the camps near Dieppe, dropping bombs and propaganda leaflets addressed especially to Africans: '... in this war I hate black people the most. I do not know what they want in this European war. Where I find them, I will smash them'.⁴⁹

The Labour Directorate was becoming increasingly frustrated at Colonel Pritchard's insistence on the need to retain 'the very special arrangements for their [African] accommodation whereby complete segregation was effected' because this 'rendered them too immobile for the requirements of the [forward] Army Areas'. They could not, however, be moved until special camps had been constructed in the backward areas, with the result that it was not until April 1917 that this withdrawal was completed. But this was by no means the end of the difficulty: to assign these units to the areas south of the Somme would have involved contact with Chinese labour recruited by the French, 'whose administration was in the opinion of the British experts too lax'; but to assign them to the area north of the Somme would have meant working in heavily populated urban areas which posed their own problems. The latter was considered

⁴⁸ W.O. 107/37, 'History', 6.

⁴⁹ Jingoos, *Chief*, 89.

the lesser of two evils, however, and the South African units were accordingly allocated to Le Havre, Rouen, Dieppe, Rouxesnil, Saigneville and Dannes.

Rouen and Le Havre provided the greatest problems in this respect, although the urgency of the situation (and not a little pressure from the Labour Directorate) justified—so the Labour Directorate Report subsequently stated—‘the overcoming of the scruples of the Staff Officer, S.A.N.L.C., [i.e. Pritchard], who loyally co-operated in doing everything possible to reduce the administrative difficulties’ in these two areas. There was an additional problem at Rouen. Stationed nearby was a Battalion of the Cape Coloured Corps whom it was considered ‘imperative’ to remove because while they ‘were treated as soldiers, the former [the S.A.N.L.C. units] were segregated; it would have been impossible to enforce the rules by which the South African natives were restricted to compounds if they had seen the Cape Boys alongside them allowed practically unlimited freedom’.⁵⁰

Both before and after the removal of the S.A.N.L.C. units from the forward areas it was in most cases quite impossible to enforce the kind of segregation initially envisaged by the South African authorities. In the forward areas, the particular problem (in addition to that of constructing compounds) was the practical necessity—from a military point of view—of mixing African with other working parties outside the camps, under the command, in some cases, of officers from other units. The reasons for the avoidance of such mixing were, according to Lt. Col. Barnard, as follows:

- (1) Social.
- (2) Most of the other labour was of a lower medical category doing less work and shorter hours.
- (3) Trade Unionism is not indulged in by the Natives at present.⁵¹

The danger of (2), so the Labour Directorate elaborated elsewhere, was that ‘the native working alongside him [white labour of a lower medical category] has his ideas of the position of the white man disturbed in addition to the natural tendency to slacken to the white man’s pace’.⁵²

The way in which units of the S.A.N.L.C. had—during their working hours—come under the effective command of non-South Africans who lacked ‘the experience in the organization and handling of native and coloured labour’ that he and his officers possessed, was a matter of great concern to Colonel Pritchard. Where his officers ‘had been given considerable latitude in the organization and working of their units’, he stated, ‘a very high standard of efficiency has usually been attained and records have frequently been set up’. Too frequently, however, his officers and

⁵⁰ W.O. 107/37, ‘Report’, 3.

⁵¹ W.O. 107/37, ‘History’, 8. The historical accuracy of ‘(3)’ may be challenged; the intent is clear.

⁵² W.O. 107/37, ‘Report’, 5.

N.C.O.s had been treated as 'glorified gangers' and they had had to struggle frequently against

a system bringing in its train, among other evils, a multiplicity of controls (always bewildering and upsetting to coloured labour), high-handed and un-intelligent interference with natives at work on the part of representatives of employers (who seldom have had any experience of handling native labour) and a total lack of consideration towards the labour personnel which have been destructive of initiative and enthusiasm and have seriously undermined efficiency.

Had different methods been used, Pritchard considered, efficiency would have been higher by over a third, and the 'considerable moral deterioration' resulting from the 'failure to obtain a full day's work from South African natives, who were perfectly well aware of the labour output of which they were capable' would have been avoided.⁵³

Colonel Pritchard had also taken care to try to separate labourers according to their ethnic background, and the Labour Directorate had accordingly undertaken to avoid their mixing at work. In practice, both (particularly the latter) seem to have broken down. Lt. Col. Barnard reported as follows:

Although in South Africa it had been regarded as important to keep the different races separate while at work, in France it became recognised that mixing them up was equally if not more successful. No cases of conflict owing to racial jealousy ever occurred here and it was in some cases beneficial to mix them together because they were easier to handle and friendly competition in the work resulted.⁵⁴

It was not only those in charge of working parties who were unfamiliar with the South African way of doing things. Although the South African government had laid down firmly that it was essential to have South African officers in charge of S.A.N.L.C. units, this was not always maintained in practice. There was a considerable amount of pressure on these officers to transfer to fighting units of the British army after their arrival in France, and quite a number did this.⁵⁵ They were replaced, firstly, by officers from the British Army unfit for front line service and secondly, by further officers sent out from South Africa, many of whom did not—according to one Nationalist M.P.—combine the three qualities ('a combined knowledge of the Native, Military procedure, and labour') initially regarded as necessary. 'Barristers, clerks, and architects had blossomed out with an intimate knowledge of the intricacies of the native mind', he commented.⁵⁶ For Colonel Pritchard, such developments—the former in particular—were to be regretted. For Jason Jingoos, however, the timely departure for front line service from his camp in Dieppe of

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ W.O. 107/37, 'History', 7.

⁵⁵ W.O. 107/37, Appendix IIIA, 'Statistical Return respecting officers of the S.A.N.L.C.'.

⁵⁶ Reported in the *Cape Times*, 1 June 1917.

one Captain Hees (with whom Jingoos had already had a 'disagreement' on the ship taking them to France), and his replacement by a new officer who had been sent, so he said, 'only to convalesce', had saved him, in the opinion of his colleagues at least, from the firing squad, after a dispute over food.⁵⁷

For obvious political reasons, however, it was important that the difficulties involved in effectively running the S.A.N.L.C. 'along South African lines' did not become known inside South Africa. Information which did find its way into the South African press (African and European) about the organization and behaviour of S.A.N.L.C. units in France was almost uniformly favourable—the outcome of several layers of censorship and the need to encourage further recruitment. Many of the accounts that were published came from European officers attached to the S.A.N.L.C., and in these the degree of ideological vested interest in presenting the 'experiment' as a success was often clearly apparent. An account which appeared in *Ilanga lase Natal* in November 1917 (probably written by Dr L. Hertslet whose accounts appeared elsewhere as well) is a good example of this.⁵⁸ Letters from European N.C.O.s and from Africans which appeared in the press did not present a very different picture either. Letters from Africans, it should be added, came by definition from the literate members of the S.A.N.L.C. who in most cases were interpreters, clergymen, corporals, etc., and whose outlook was accordingly not necessarily representative of that of the majority of ordinary labourers.

Virtually all of these accounts painted a glowing picture of life with the units in France. Most, however, mention the extreme cold of the winter of 1916–17, but emphasized how well the members of the Contingent had stood up to it.⁵⁹ In fact, several Africans lost limbs as a result of frostbite, although—according to the official report—no further cases occurred after 'proper anti-frostbite precautions were understood . . . and adopted'.⁶⁰ These 'proper anti-frostbite precautions' were most probably the belated supply of an adequate quantity of warm clothing—for which the British-based Society for the Welfare of Africans in Europe received

⁵⁷ Jingoos, *Chief*, 83–6.

⁵⁸ *Ilanga*, 9 Nov. 1917. Hertslet was a Natal medical missionary. The article concluded as follows:

The disadvantages, involving contamination, to which he [the native] has been exposed have been small, so that if the experiment closes as it has begun, the whole contingent ought to return to South Africa wiser and better men, and more useful to the state in every way.

⁵⁹ For example, letter from Native Sargeant Mareli, reproduced in the *Cape Times*, 22 Mar. 1917:

Our men are a cheerful lot. They have the manliness of enduring great difficulties. Cold and snow are now testing them, and are now playing the part mercilessly. We have a good number of men with chilblains on their feet and hands. They are doing their bit.

⁶⁰ W.O. 107/37, 'History', 9–10.

urgent requests.⁶¹ Mortality rates were claimed to be as low, if not lower than those relating to the African population in South Africa—a claim that perhaps says more about the latter than the former (331 Africans died in France, most, it would appear, from tuberculosis)⁶²; and a glowing picture was painted of a contented life in which food, accommodation and both mental and physical health were of the highest possible standard. 'The boys are perfectly satisfied with their situation, and go to work happy and cheerful', claimed one European sergeant attached to the S.A.N.L.C.⁶³

But the Africans seem to have not been quite as happy and contented as these accounts suggested. Several of them, indeed, contain veiled hints of some of the problems encountered by the authorities. Whilst the compound system had, 'as many of the older men freely admit, proved a valuable protection for the Natives themselves in a country where in the absence of such particular precautions as exist in South Africa there are risks of Natives getting themselves into trouble', it had at the same time 'given rise to a certain amount of discontent'; whilst there had been 'remarkably little serious crime', the more common offences had been 'failing to obey an order' and 'riotous behaviour'; whereas there had apparently been no cases of 'sexual immorality', there were acknowledged to have been some cases of drunkenness.⁶⁴

But there is also some rather more substantial evidence of a good deal of dissatisfaction and discontent on the part of Africans in the S.A.N.L.C. that contrasts sharply with the tenor of contemporary published accounts. A high level of tension was undoubtedly caused by the continued attempts by the officers of the S.A.N.L.C. to enforce segregation even after it had broken down in so many respects. The effects of this must have been particularly felt by those Africans who were with units stationed initially in forward Army Areas, where they worked frequently with whites, amongst them regular soldiers, and who were subsequently withdrawn to backward areas along the lines of communication so that Colonel Pritchard was able to adhere more strictly to the kind of living and working conditions that he and the South African government favoured for the S.A.N.L.C. Few Africans can have been unaffected by the manifest contradictions between the regulations and restrictions which governed their

⁶¹ The Society for the Welfare of Africans in Europe was started and operated under the auspices of the Aborigine's Protection Society; see A.S. and A.P.S. Papers, MSS Brit. Emp. S23 H2/1, H2/6, H2/7, Rhodes House, Oxford, and in particular the report of Sir Herbert Sloley ('Memorandum for Information of the Committee') on his visit to the S.A.N.L.C. camps in France. An article based on this ('The African Native Labour Contingent and the Welfare Committee') appeared in the *Journal of the African Society*, xvii, 1917-18. The attitude of the organizers of the Society towards the S.A.N.L.C. 'experiment' closely parallels that of the South African authorities.

⁶² W.O. 107/37, Appendix 111B, 'Statistical Return respecting Natives of S.A.N.L.C.'.

⁶³ Letter to the *Cape Times*, 1 Feb. 1918, signed 'A Sergeant, Labour Contingent'.

⁶⁴ *Ilanga*, 9 Nov. 1917; see note 58.

lives and those which applied to others around them engaged in the common struggle.

Even before the S.A.N.L.C. units reached their camps in France, many had seen or heard things likely to stimulate both a questioning attitude towards their conditions after arrival and towards those ideological precepts that had given rise to them. Several of the transport ships, for example, stopped at Sierra Leone where at least some African members were allowed to disembark. One of them, Marks Mokwena, was particularly impressed by the fact that 'the people of that territory (Sierra Leone) were pure black negroes of very high educational attainments equal to that of the best Europeans', an observation that he communicated to a large political meeting in South Africa after his return by way of contrast to the existing state of things in his own country.⁶⁵ For Jason Jingoos, one of the things that he remembered about his arrival in England prior to embarkation for France was the reception accorded to his colleagues and himself by white women in Liverpool: 'Although white women had served us with tea in Cape Town, we knew they were only doing it because we were going to war. These girls were different'.⁶⁶ There was no way in which the S.A.N.L.C. could be totally insulated from their surroundings on the trip out to France. For Koos Matli, rescued from the freezing Channel waters by another ship after the sinking of the *Mendi*, it did perhaps not come as too much of a surprise to find himself soon afterwards helping to peel potatoes in the galley: what made more of an impact upon him was the fact that he was doing so alongside a white man, and that shortly afterwards he found himself sleeping alongside one as well.⁶⁷ And one wonders how the silent subjects of the following story (related by Earl Buxton, although not to illustrate this point!) reacted to the reported incident:

A white officer, when a batch of natives landed at Portsmouth on their way to France, took some of them into a shop. The shopman said: "These are Zulus, I suppose". The officer, somewhat hypercritically said, "No, Am-a-Zulu" (Amazulu being the plural for Zulu). "Oh! really, are you?"⁶⁸

Once in France the priority given to military considerations placed Africans in situations that would have been inconceivable in South Africa. In the docks of Dieppe, Jason Jingoos met an Englishman by the name of William Johnstone and soon got to know him well: 'We hit it off at once and we spent our breaks drinking tea and talking about our two countries, until at last we became close friends'. Jingoos had also managed to become friendly with some French people, because when the time came to leave, he related, 'some of us hid in the houses of our French friends' until they were caught by the military police: 'You see', he explained, 'we had

⁶⁵ Police report on meeting at African Catholic Church, New Doornfontein, 24 Aug. 1921, S.A. Dept. of Justice, file 3/127/20 (microfilm).

⁶⁶ Jingoos, *Chief*, 80.

⁶⁷ Jeffreys, 'The *Mendi*', 185-6.

⁶⁸ Buxton, *General Botha*, 289.

liked our stay in France. It was our first experience of living in a society without a colour bar'.⁶⁹

Other incidents also made their impression. Marks Mokwena had admired the educational attainments of Africans in Sierra Leone. Jingoës and his colleagues in Dieppe were similarly impressed by the visit to their camp by a deputation of French dignitaries, including some members of the French Parliament. Amongst the deputation was a black man. 'We assumed', Jingoës related, 'that he was simply there to accompany his white masters'. He was introduced, however, as holding a high position in the government, and when Jingoës and his friends enquired further, they were told that because there was no colour bar in France this man (who must almost certainly have been Blaise Diagne, the deputy from Senegal who was commissioner for recruiting in 1917-18)⁷⁰ had been elected by both black and white to office because of his education and ability. '“Would such a thing ever happen in our country?”', one of them asked. Some replied, "Who knows?". But others said quietly, "It might . . .". This visit seems to have made rather more of an impact on the Africans in Dieppe than another that had preceded it—that of the King of Belgium—a short fellow who seemed very pleasant . . . he encouraged us with a friendly speech'.⁷¹

If the importance of these incidents is to be found mainly in the long-term effects in the minds and subsequent actions of those Africans who witnessed them after their return to South Africa, at the same time they contributed to the growing degree of dissatisfaction with conditions in the compounds in France which in turn reinforced such perceptions. In one of the camps dissatisfaction with the restrictions of the compound system exploded into violence that left thirteen Africans dead—an incident that the South African authorities successfully managed to conceal. An African (whose name is given only as 'Charlie'), having finished working on a night shift, wanted to do his washing outside the compound. The officer in charge, however, ordered him to bring the water into the compound and do his washing there. Refusing to do this, Charlie was put under arrest, but the officer responsible, Captain Barrett, a chaplain, refused to give an explanation to Charlie's colleagues for his action. They then tried to release Charlie by force, and as a result were surrounded by white officers and N.C.O.s and fired upon, thirteen of their number being killed.⁷²

Elsewhere, discontent over food seems to have provided the focal point for the expression of a far wider range of grievances. For whatever reasons,

⁶⁹ Jingoës, *Chief*, 93.

⁷⁰ I. Geiss, *The Pan-African Movement* (London, 1974), 235.

⁷¹ Jingoës, *Chief*, 87.

⁷² This incident was related by Doyle Modiakgotla at a meeting of the South African Native National Congress in Bethlehem, O.F.S., 29 Mar. 1918; see police report to District Commandant, S.A.P., Bethlehem, S.A. Dept. of Justice, file 3/527/17. The incident was confirmed by another witness to it who was also at this meeting, Chief Ramamba. Modiakgotla added that 'they were told that they would work under their own officers, but it was these officers who treated them so badly'.

the authorities seem to have departed radically from the scale of rations that was initially laid down and incorporated into the contracts for service. Trouble developed over this at the training camp at Rosebank in Cape Town, but assumed more serious proportions in France. At Jason Jingo's camp in Dieppe, the usual rations were replaced by meallie meal. What was more, Jingo told his commanding officer, it was 'bad and had weavils in it'. His complaint led to serious charges of insubordination being laid against him, but fortunately—thanks to the arrival of a new officer to take command of the camp—he avoided being court-martialled and the food was improved. The new Commanding Officer was quick to recognize that the food was indeed rotten, and even thanked Jingo for pointing the fact out to him. Jingo not surprisingly felt triumphant, but was left with a particular sense of grievance against white clergymen (which was no doubt felt by others against Captain Barrett) as a result of the leading role played by the white chaplain in reporting and accusing him.⁷³

This particular incident had provided a focus for the expression of other grievances, and it is likely that it was paralleled in other camps. There were other causes for discontent. Night shift working was reported as being very unpopular, as also was work on handling bales of forage. When S.A.N.L.C. camps were shelled by German artillery some of the Companies drew up a petition 'stating that they wished to be removed from the danger zone' on the grounds that their contracts stated that they were to be employed on dock work. When the removals began, however, other Companies strongly objected to this and 'protested that this was a slur on their character and loyalty as soldiers'.⁷⁴ These may or may not have been the same series of events described by Koos Matli in Camp Griffiths:

There we had a hard time, because nearly every evening we were attacked by the enemy planes and we had nothing to defend ourselves with. This camp was twice in flames during enemy attacks.

We formed a committee and after some discussions agreed to send a letter to England. We wrote the letter and explained our condition. We addressed the letter to His Majesty King George V. We gave the letter to one of the soldiers to post for us, since we were not allowed to go out of Camp.⁷⁵

On another occasion, the arrival of Indian labour units at some of the important S.A.N.L.C.-manned base depots 'caused consternation', and, according to the official report, roused fears that 'our fighting troops [would have] to carry on without either ammunition or supplies'.⁷⁶ The exact cause of the 'consternation' is unknown, though it raises echoes of Peregrino's dire warnings about 'the cute yellow men'.

There is indeed strong circumstantial evidence to suggest that it was such problems, from the point of view of the South African authorities,

⁷³ Jingo, *Chief*, 83–6. There was an outbreak of scurvy in the S.A.N.L.C. in March 1918: *Lancet*, 19 Oct. 1918, pp. 513–5.

⁷⁴ W.O. 107/37, 'History', 6.

⁷⁵ Jeffreys, 'The *Mendi*', 187.

⁷⁶ W.O. 107/37, 'Report', 42.

and the evident impossibility of successfully running the S.A.N.L.C. along the lines originally envisaged, that led to the decision of the South African government to bring the 'experiment' to an end in January 1918. According to General Botha, 'reasons of a purely military nature'⁷⁷ were responsible for this decision, but many—Africans particularly—remained unconvinced. The Rev. Z. R. Mahabane gave expression to widespread feelings (which were expressed also in the petition of the South African Native National Congress to King George V in 1919) when he stated that 'this dramatic cancelling of a pact already signed and entered into will give rise to feelings of suspicion that the reasons for this cancellation are more of a political than a military nature'.⁷⁸ He pointed to one possible reason for this—the imminent re-assembling of Parliament which was likely to produce some very awkward questions from Nationalist members, who had all along been strongly opposed to the scheme. In the previous session C. G. Fichardt had asked some awkward questions based upon information he had received from a South African officer that 'the compound system had entirely failed in its objects'. General Botha had not been able to answer in very convincing manner. Worse could be expected in the next session.⁷⁹

It is doubtful if Africans in the S.A.N.L.C. themselves would have been convinced either. One aspect, indeed, of General Botha's concern had already communicated itself to some of the camps. According to Koos Matli, '... we got word that General Botha had stated that he did not want the natives who were in England back in South Africa as they were going about with English women. I do not know whether this was truth or just rumour, but we came back and left many in England'.⁸⁰ Most, however, returned to South Africa. Nor does the official report on the work of the Labour Directorate lend support to General Botha's contention: 'It was hoped', it states, 'that the Corps would develop into several times the proportions which it actually reached and that money spent on labour would thus be retained to the British Empire'. In January 1917 the British military authorities had in fact pressed for the numbers of the S.A.N.L.C. to be increased to 50,000, but this hope 'had come to nothing by reason of difficulties in South Africa'.⁸¹ And when most of the S.A.N.L.C. had been repatriated by May 1918 (or were on their way) the War Office was still complaining of an acute shortage of labour which it hoped to make good by the recruitment of more Chinese. One reason that was subsequently put forward by the South African authorities in order to justify the cessation of further recruitment was the shortage of shipping and the danger of submarine attacks, but this hardly accounts for the anxiety of the South African government to return at the earliest

⁷⁷ *Cape Times*, 18 Jan. 1918.

⁷⁸ Letter from Rev. Z. R. Mahabane to the *Cape Times*, 2 Feb. 1918.

⁷⁹ The debate is reported in the *Cape Times*, 1 June 1917.

⁸⁰ Jeffreys, 'The Mendi', 187.

⁸¹ W.O. 107/37, 'Report', 113.

possible moment those S.A.N.L.C. units already in France. In retrospect, perhaps the decision of the British Army to arm certain labour contingents in March 1918 was also not unrelated.

So ended the 'great social experiment'. Its wider implications and effects are not easy to assess. General Botha, on announcing the end of the scheme, said that he confidently trusted 'that by their work and behaviour in this country the men who have returned from France will set such an example which cannot but result in the inculcation of discipline and sustained industry amongst the natives throughout the Union'.⁸² Dr Lewis Hertslet was another for whom this was an important theme, hoping that Africans who had served with the S.A.N.L.C. would prove 'more useful to the State in every way'.⁸³ Other white officers who had been with the S.A.N.L.C. seemed less certain of the positive benefits that would accrue. After an 'incident' in the Rouen docks in which some French ladies had served Africans with tea before one of the white officers—and then offered it to him in a cup used by an African—he exclaimed 'When you people get back to South Africa, don't start thinking that you are whites, just because this place has spoiled you. You are black, and will stay black . . .'.⁸⁴

Colonel Pritchard was throughout concerned about the possible effects of the 'social experiment' he was in charge of. But shortly before the departure from France of the first S.A.N.L.C. Companies—on the expiry of their contracts—he took an additional measure to try and ensure that his charges returned home in the right frame of mind. This consisted of arranging for the dispatch of four of his African chaplains on a careful guided tour of England and Scotland in order to impress upon them not only the consideration of their officers but also 'the greatness of Britain . . . British life and character, British industry and ingenuity, British cheerfulness and friendliness'. The officer who had been detailed to guide them on the tour was under no illusions as to its purpose, and reported afterwards that 'Colonel Pritchard as O.C., and South Africa as a country, will have no reason to be anything but satisfied with the result of the tour . . . I believe that the scheme has produced nothing but good to the men themselves, and for the future of recruiting in South Africa'.⁸⁵

It is doubtful, however, if the overall impression taken back home by the majority of Africans who had served with the S.A.N.L.C. in France can have been regarded as quite so satisfactory for 'South Africa as a country' by the South African authorities. The 'inculcation of discipline and sustained industry amongst the Natives of the Union' was not a marked feature of industrial relations in South Africa either during or immediately after World War I. Rather, widespread strikes, which wartime inflation and a much increased demand for black labour had done

⁸² *Cape Times*, 18 Jan. 1918.

⁸³ See notes 58 and 64.

⁸⁴ Jingoos, *Chief*, 92–3.

⁸⁵ MSS Brit. Emp. S.23 H2/7, 'Report by the Rev. J. W. W. Owen on the tour of Four Native Chaplains'.

much to inspire, and mass anti-pass campaigns (which have as yet been inadequately documented) took place on an unprecedented scale.

At an individual level, the impact of service overseas varied tremendously according to individual temperament and the differing experiences and conditions of the S.A.N.L.C. units. For Jason Jingoos, the period he spent overseas was perhaps the central and decisive experience of his long life: 'We had learned many things since we left home, and in some ways it was not easy to settle down'.⁸⁶ The next nine years of his life, in which he worked as a teacher and a clerk in various towns in the Orange Free State and Natal, were indeed 'unsettled'. Many others probably had similarly difficult experiences in re-adjusting to the realities of South African life. In Jingoos's case at least there was no direct or immediate correlation between the experience of service with the S.A.N.L.C. and involvement in political or trade union movements: he did become closely involved with the I.C.U., but this was not until after he had met Clements Kadalie in 1927.

Other former members of the S.A.N.L.C. did, however, become active in the I.C.U. at an earlier date. One of these was Doyle Modiakgotla, Secretary of the Griqualand West branch of the I.C.U., who came away from France with a particular sense of grievance, having witnessed the shooting of thirteen of his colleagues by their officers and N.C.O.s. Another was S. M. Bennett Ncwana, also prominent from 1919 onwards in a whole series of African political and trade union organizations, who benefited in a way perhaps not wholly anticipated by the authorities from the evening classes that were laid on in the camps with the prime objective of keeping Africans occupied in body and mind. 'He surprised us', Selby Msimang recalled many years later, 'by the standard of education he had acquired'.⁸⁷ For others, resentment of the government's patently unfair handling of compensation claims and its refusal either to award a war service medal or to allow ex-members of the S.A.N.L.C. to receive the medal that was awarded by King George V to 'native troops' of the British Empire, may have contributed towards similar forms of involvement.

Important also was the wider effect on African political consciousness that the S.A.N.L.C.s contribution to the war effort engendered. This was by no means confined to those who had actually served with it, although it was no doubt particularly felt by them. When the South African Native National Congress deputation of 1919 went to England, their Memorial to the King contained a lengthy reminder of the contribution of black South Africans to the Imperial war effort, and it quoted back to the King the speech that he had made to the S.A.N.L.C. at Abbeville on 10 July 1917, in which he had said, *inter alia*, that 'you also form part of my great Armies which are fighting for the liberty and freedom of my subjects of

⁸⁶ Jingoos, *Chief*, 93.

⁸⁷ H. S. Msimang, unpublished 'Autobiography', S.O.A.S. Archives.

all races and creeds throughout my Empire', and that such loyalty would not be forgotten.⁸⁸ Why then, they asked, should this liberty and freedom that they had been fighting for be denied them after they had demonstrated their loyalty in this way? *Ilanga lase Natal* had in 1916 expressed the view that the acquisition of a 'larger outlook that can be applied to solving some of the difficulties that beset the Bantu' was one outcome that could be expected from service in France with the S.A.N.L.C.⁸⁹ The failure of the deputation of 1919 to achieve its objects was a firm indication that such a 'wider outlook' could only be of value if black South Africans had the necessary political leverage. The contribution of the S.A.N.L.C. to the war effort demonstrated beyond a shadow of doubt—so Congress claimed—the loyalty of black South Africans to King, country, and empire and justified their entitlement to the privileges thereof: but patriotism, it now became clear, was not sufficient qualification.

It should not be thought that the significance of the role of the S.A.N.L.C. was confined to the faultless logic of such respectful petitioners. At the meetings that took place on the Rand as part of the anti-pass campaign at the end of World War I and after, the contrast between the South African government's policies towards Africans and the latter's loyal service in Europe was often drawn—with powerful popular effect. At a meeting of the Bantu Women's League in Johannesburg in January 1918 an African woman from Basutoland (speaking from the floor) was reported as follows:

. . . all their children had joined the forces for France and some of them are being killed but still all of the white men came to their children and tell them to carry a pass while their children have assisted them in every way fighting for their Kingdom shows that the white man has no respect for the native and he does not care where he is. This woman while talking started to cry and she asked the women of Africa to stand on both feet and fight against this pass business . . .⁹⁰

At another meeting—of the Transvaal Native National Congress at Vrededorp on 20 April 1919—essentially the same point was made as by the Congress petitioners in London, but in this case in support of the anti-pass campaign:

King George himself had said that natives should have their freedom just the same as any other nations. Look, we have been assisting the Kingdom in these great wars and many of our children, fathers, and brothers have died in the war

⁸⁸ The full text of the memorial can be found in T. Karis and G. M. Carter (ed.), *From Protest to Challenge* (Stanford, 1972), I, 137–42.

⁸⁹ *Ilanga*, 13 Oct. 1916. The South African Native National Congress, *Ilanga* added with heavy-handed pun, should be 'alive to what may be called the contingent issues of that valuable event'.

⁹⁰ Police report of meeting of Bantu Women's National League at Ebenezer Hall, Johannesburg, 18 Jan. 1918, S.A. Dept. of Justice, file 3/527/18, 165.

or have sunk in the sea. So why can't we have our freedom just the same as any other nation?⁹¹

The memory of the contribution of the S.A.N.L.C. to World War I was perpetuated in a number of ways. A monument was erected to members of the S.A.N.L.C. who died in France at Arque-la-Bataille, near Dieppe.⁹² Smaller memorials appeared in South Africa—one in front of the Town Hall in Umtata has inscribed on it the names of those Africans from the Transkei who died in France. Several associations of African ex-servicemen were formed on the Rand and elsewhere. But most enduring of all has been the memory of the sinking of the *Mendi*, kept alive as a powerful emotional symbol by the formation of a Mendi Memorial Club and through the commemoration of 21 February each year as 'Mendi Day'. It is observed to this day. Over the years it has provided a symbolic rallying point that from its inception has been closely associated with African nationalist sentiment. By the 1950s a corpus of nationalist mythology had developed around the sinking of the *Mendi*, attached in particular to an address allegedly made by the Rev. Isaac Wauchope Dyobha (one of the African chaplains) as the *Mendi* began to sink:

Be quiet and calm, my countrymen, for what is taking place now is exactly what you came to do. You are going to die, but that is what you came to do. Brothers, we are drilling the drill of death. I, a Xhosa, say you are all my brothers, Zulus, Swazis, Pondos, Basutos, we die like brothers. We are the sons of Africa. Raise your cries, brothers, for though they made us leave our weapons at our home, our voices are left with our bodies.⁹³

Thereafter there followed—so the reports ran—a fantastic drill of death which continued as the *Mendi* sank beneath the waves. That such an occurrence actually took place in this form is rather unlikely, and none of the existing survivors' accounts offer any substantiation for it. But that—in terms of the wider significance of one aspect of black South African participation in World War I—is not the point.

SUMMARY

In 1916 the South African government received a request from the Imperial government for the provision of non-combatant African labour for work in France. Despite opposition from white opinion on both political and economic grounds, the South African Native Labour Contingent was formed and recruiting commenced. Although recruiting had the active support of African political

⁹¹ Police report of meeting of Transvaal Native Congress, Vrededorp, 20 Apr. 1919, S.A. Dept. of Justice, file 6/658/18/1.

⁹² A photograph of the monument appears in T. D. Mweliso Skota, *African Yearly Register* (Johannesburg, 1931), 434. The accompanying text makes the most of the contribution of the S.A.N.L.C. in World War I: 'Can it be said, even in a military sense, that the South African native has not played his part in world politics alongside his white countrymen?'

⁹³ Quoted by Jacob Bam, *The New African*, Mar. 1966.

leaders, it was not as successful as had been hoped. Distrust of the government's intentions was one important reason for this. The South African government had agreed to the Imperial government's request for labour only on the condition that S.A.N.L.C. units were to be kept segregated from both other military units and the French civil population, and numerous measures (particularly the construction of compounds) were devised to facilitate this. But in practice this proved impossible to implement properly, and South African officers did not have the degree of control over their units that had originally been envisaged. On the African side, there was a considerable amount of dissatisfaction with conditions, and in one incident thirteen Africans were shot dead by their own officers. When the South African government decided to bring the 'experiment' to an end early in 1918, many Africans suspected that the reasons for this were not purely military as was claimed. Service in the S.A.N.L.C. was of importance both in terms of the individual experiences of those Africans directly involved, but it acquired also a wider political and symbolic importance, attached particularly to the sinking of the transport, s.s. *Mendi*, in February 1917 with the loss of over 600 African members of the S.A.N.L.C.