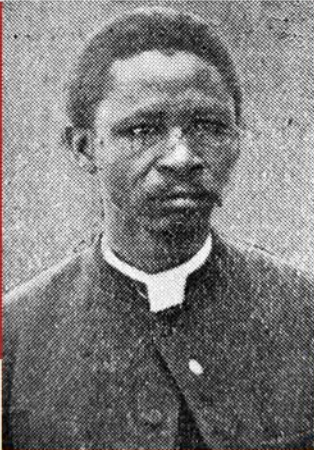


Sinking of the 'Mendi'

the death drill



Wits Historical Papers, University of the Witwatersrand

Oral Accounts as Historical Sources

In this lesson plan, learners will study two transcripts of oral sources and will be encouraged to appreciate the insights and feelings that these sources offer us. They will also study a 'Minute' from Louis Botha, the Prime Minister at the time of the disaster and resolutions passed by a Christian African community about how they planned to carry the fight for the Empire forward.



Sinking of the Mendi (February 1917)

The First World War broke out in 1914. Two years into the war, in late 1916, recruitment for the South African Native Labour Contingent began. Over 25 000 black South Africans volunteered for service in the war. Since the authorities feared arming black troops, they were employed in non-combatant positions. They worked at loading and unloading stores and ammunition at French ports, building roads, railways and quarrying.

On the 21st of February 1917, the SS Mendi, which was carrying troops of the Native Labour Contingent to France, was struck by the SS Darro in the English Channel. Of the 895 troops on board, 647 men died. 607 of them were Africans. The Reverend Wauchope addressed the African soldiers, keeping them calm as the ship sank, by exhorting them to remember that they had come prepared to die as 'warriors'. Apparently the men sang and stamped together as the Mendi went down.

In early 1918, the Native Labour Contingent was dissolved for 'purely military reasons', according to the Prime Minister. But many suspected, even though Louis Botha himself praised 'the natives' for their 'tact and loyalty', that the real reason was right wing antagonism to black soldiers going overseas.

An investigation into the accident in August 1917 found that it had been caused by the master of the SS Darro who had not followed regulations to prevent collisions in fog. He also failed to send boats to assist the Mendi's passengers after the collision.

Background on Isaac Wauchope

Isaac Williams Wauchope was born in 1852 into a prominent mission-educated family near Uitenhage. He studied at Lovedale College and was ordained in 1892. He was a member of the movement that successfully campaigned to establish Fort Hare as an institution of higher learning for Africans. In 1910, he was jailed briefly for fraud although the evidence was unclear. In jail, he wrote letters and poems published in the Xhosa language newspaper, *Imvo*, the only prison literature of its kind.



Members of the South African Native Labour Corps at work in France during World War 1 SA Museum of Military History

Source A: Twenty three years later and I remember...

The memory of that cold foggy morning is still keen in my mind, though twenty-three years have now passed.

I hear the crash as the other big ship ran into us in the darkness. I see the officer in charge of the Bantu, who thought only of his men and their safety, go running round all the sleeping places, shouting "All on deck."

I see hundreds of them coming up quickly and quietly from below, and each man finding his own appointed place on the deck, notwithstanding the blackness of the night. There is no fear or panic; they put on their clothes and lifebelts as they fall into position...

I hear the warning hoots of our steamer, and standing on the deck, I see two boats being lowered into the sea alongside...

I hear the shout, "All overboard! She's sinking!" and every man who can do so jumps.

I remember the jump into the bitter cold sea, the sinking beneath the surface, the coming up again, the swimming to the boat that had been let down from our ship... I hear myself say "Goodbye, my strength is gone," and then I feel the strong hands of a Native gripping my wrists and holding me up. Then several others catch me round the chest and shoulders and drag me, nearly dead, into the boat, and so I am saved...

Nearly two hundred others were also saved, and all of us who are still alive, remember with you today the Bantu and Europeans who went bravely to meet their death on that black day of the last War.' Ngiyababingela, ngyiakonza kanye nonke.

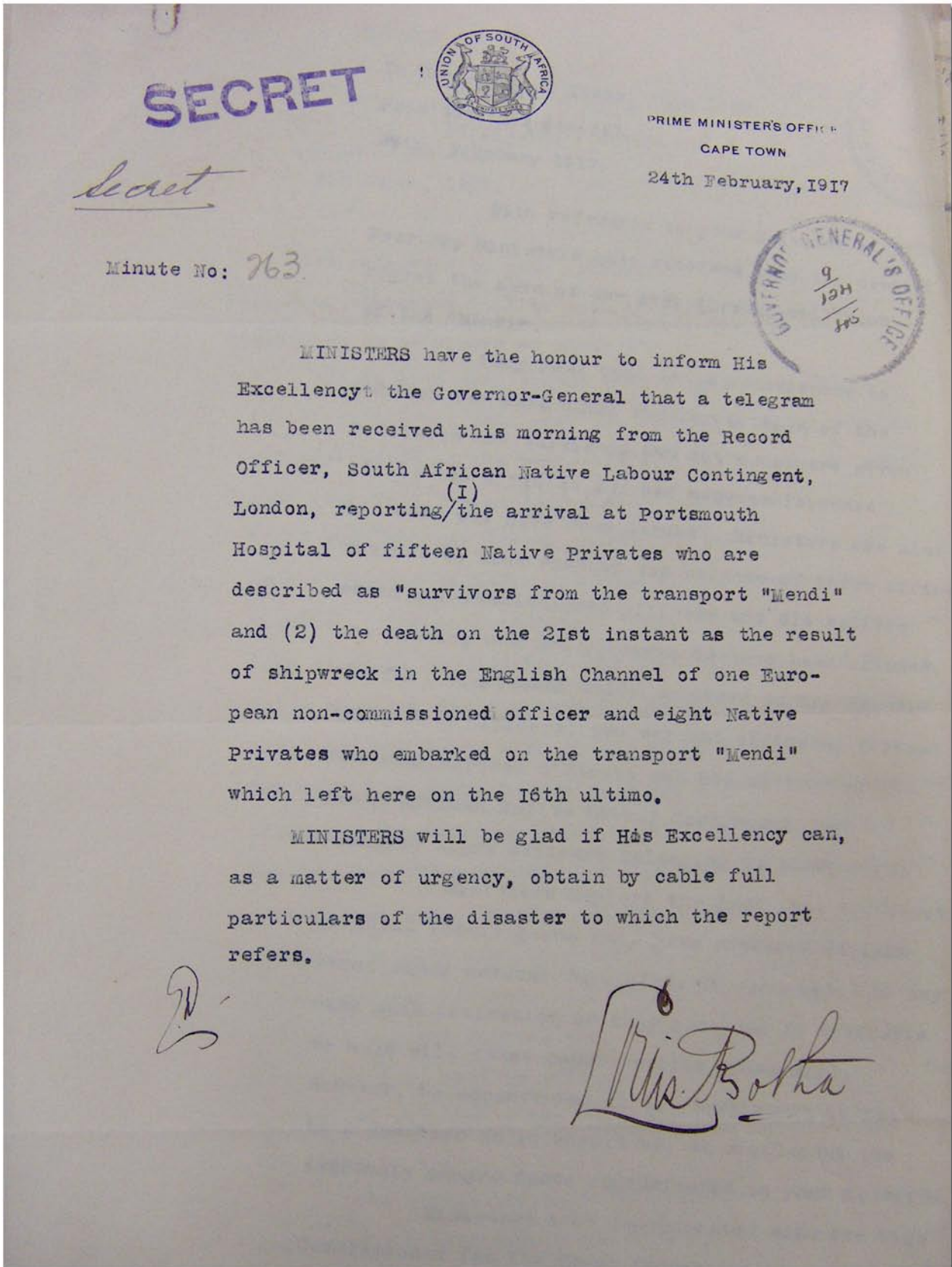
Message from Dr LE Hertslet, 23rd Anniversary Service, 23rd February 1940 in Souvenir of the Mendi Disaster, African Ex-Servicemen's League, publication undated

Source B: Reverend Wauchope comforts the men

"Be quiet and calm my countrymen, for what is taking place now is what you came here to do. We are all going to die, and that is what we came for. Brothers, we are drilling the death drill. I, a Zulu, say here and now that you are all my brothers ... Xhosas, Swazis, Pondos, Basotho and all others, let us die like warriors. We are the sons of Africa. Raise your war cries my brothers, for though they made us leave our assegais back in the kraals, our voices are left with our bodies..."

The SS Mendi - historical background, [http://www.navy.mil.za/newnavy/mendi history/mendi hist.htm](http://www.navy.mil.za/newnavy/mendi%20history/mendi%20hist.htm), see this web-site for the full text of Wauchope's final prayer

Source C: The Prime Minister asks for a report



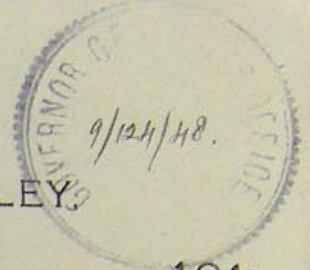
Enclosure No. 1 in South Africa, Despatch

WESLEYAN METHODIST CHURCH OF SOUTH AFRICA. ²¹⁴ ^{3/3/17}

ooo

HALL STREET.

KIMBERLEY.



21st March, 1917

FROM
REV. WILLIAM PESCOD.

To
His Excellency
The Governor General,
Capetown.

5

Sir,

At a Memorial Service held in the Centenary Native Church, Kimberley, on Sunday evening, March 18th, in honour of the men who perished in the transport "Mendi" the enclosed resolutions were passed.

It was also resolved that copies of the resolutions be sent to your Excellency, and to the Premier of the Union.

I am

Your obedient Servant,

William Pescod

Superintendent Minister.

Copy sent to *Minister*

For *information*

Minute No. *9/134/115*

Date *31 March 17*

NOTES of a Meeting between the SECRETARY for NATIVE AFFAIRS and the Chief MANGALA of Western Pondoland on Wednesday, 27th June, 1917.

PRESENT: Mr. E. E. Dower, Secretary for Native Affairs.
Chief Mangala.
Councillors Mbizweni, Ngidle and Nongauza.
Native Chaplain, Rev. Xaba, acted as Interpreter.

MR. DOWER explained to the deputation that notwithstanding the fact that he was far from being well, General Botha was very busily engaged in Parliament and was therefore unable to meet them that afternoon. The Session was very shortly to close and every minute of his time was occupied and as soon as the session of Parliament ended he was due elsewhere. It was understood from the Chief Magistrate that the purpose of their visit was to convey to the Government a resolution of the Pondom.

CR. NONGAUZA: Their petition to General Botha was in writing, and they had brought it with them. It was written in English and they would like it read and translated to them. They had come to General Botha to lay before him their resolution of sympathy in connection with the Mendi disaster. (Nongauza handed in the attached statement which Mr. Dower read and Rev. Xaba translated for the benefit of the deputation.)

MR. DOWER: Does Mangala wish to say anything in presenting this?

NONGAUZA: Yes, the Chief would like to add a few words. The Chiefs.....

Resolution of Sympathy: Wesleyan Methodist Church, Kimberley

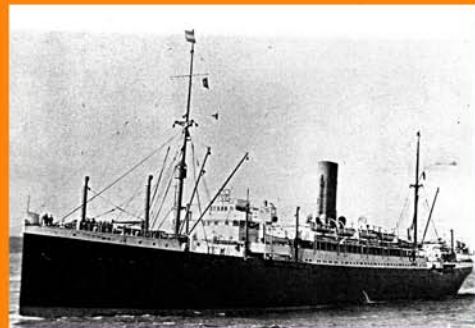
Learner Activities

- Source A is an oral source based on one man's memory. What do we get from this source that we do not get from reports of the accident? Why does Dr Hertslet talk about the 'last' war?
- Source B is a message to the men from Reverend Wauchope. Given that there were no recording mechanisms on board, how do you think we know what he said? How did the Reverend make the men feel as if they were soldiers even though they were not allowed to carry weapons?
- The accident happened on the 21st of February. By the 24th, as we see in Source C, the Prime Minister still did not know what had happened. Why not? Do you think the Prime Minister cared about what the fate of the men on board the Mendi was?
- After reading Source D, say what these African people (and many others) thought of.

The British Empire; the King; the Union Jack (flag) and the World War. What do their resolutions tell us about their aspirations for African people in South Africa?

Other Ideas

The luxury liner, Titanic, had an accident only five years before this one. Both were caused by a combination of human error and natural events and both led to great loss of human life. See what other comparisons you can make between the two shipwrecks.



The SS Darro, which collided with SS Mendi in the early hours of February 21 1917. The Darro took no steps to lower lifeboats or to rescue the survivors SA Museum of Military History



Prince of Wales reviewing veterans of the Native Labour Corps SA Museum of Military History

Criteria for Assessment

- Learners will express understanding of the value of oral sources and oral tradition.
- Learners will demonstrate understanding of how members of the African Christian communities in the early 20th century looked to the British Empire to improve their situation.

Curriculum Link – Grades 10 & 11

LO 1, AS 3
LO2, AS 1
LO 4, AS 3
Grade 11 Content Link - what was the link between imperialism and World War 1?