Nationalism and the First World War Centenary: Post 26

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Steve Marti of the University of Delaware brings H-Nationalism another monthly update on nationalism and the commemoration of the First World War. Please feel free to respond to this post. Interested in contributing to this series? Drop Steve a line at steve.marti.25@gmail.com.

February 21st marked the centenary of the sinking of the SS Mendi, a transport ship carrying members of the 5th Battalion, South African Native Labour Corps. 646 soldiers and sailors died when the Mendi sank after colliding with another ship in heavy fog off the Isle of Wight. South African president Jacob Zuma spoke at a national commemorative service for the SS Mendi in Durban, praising the service of the drowned soldiers who enlisted to “fight fascism.” The ceremonies in Durban coincided with larger military displays as part of South Africa’s Armed Forces Day, which included a demonstration of South Africa’s special forces storming ashore on Durban’s beaches. Local African National Congress ward councilors in the Metropolitan Municipality of Nelson Mandela Bay protested against Mayor Athol Trollip’s attendance at local services commemorating the Mendi. Trollip, a member of the opposing Democratic Alliance, claims that political rivalries led to the last-minute cancellation of the services. Descendants of the soldiers who drowned with the Mendi continue to petition for the repatriation of bodies buried in France. Andile Mngxitama, leader of Black First Land First, argued against framing heroic narratives around the deaths of men who died in the service of British Colonialism.

The director general of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission spoke at a commemorative service in Southampton, where the names of the SANLC dead are recorded alongside 1,900 other imperial military personnel with no known grave. Historic England marked the anniversary by publishing We Die Like Brothers, a book based on an exhibit mounted by Historic England at the Museum of the South African Forces at Delville Wood, in France.

The World War I Centennial Commission announced its plans to hold a national ceremony marking the United States’ entry into the First World War at the National World War I Museum and Memorial in Kansas City. In preparation for the ceremony, the National World War I Museum began replacing the 9,000 silk poppies in the museum’s entrance. The World War I Centennial Commission launched its WW1 Poppy Program to sell poppy seeds as a fundraiser for local commemoration ceremonies. The World War I Centennial Commission also partnered with Brooke USA for the Horse Heroes project, to raise money for equine welfare in memory of those horses who perished during the First World War.

The observance of Black History Month in February reflected the growing interest in First World War commemorations in the United States. PBS released its first clip of its upcoming
documentary series *The Great War*, choosing an excerpt detailing the formation of the 369th Infantry Regiment in Harlem. African-American veterans Sidney Malone and Joe Mattox began working with the National World War I Museum to correct the Museum's shortage of documentation relating to African-American soldiers. Paul LaRue, a retired social sciences teacher in Ohio, organized a project to encourage local students to identify the gravesites of African-Americans interred in unmarked graves.

The coincidence of the French presidential election with a series of First World War commemorations raises a knot of complications for François Hollande and candidates on the ballot. French newspaper *L’Opinion* speculated on the political fallout if Hollande decides to use the centenary to extend a *posthumous pardon* to French soldiers executed for participating in the 1917 Mutinies. *Le Monde* elaborated on the broader complications of commemorations, placing the question of the 1917 Mutinies alongside the commemorations of France’s war in Algeria on 19 March, a day of remembrance instituted by Hollande in 2012.

The New Zealand Defence Force announced that this year’s *Anzac Day commemorations will focus on events in France and Belgium*, rather than Gallipoli, to reflect the location of upcoming centenaries such as the Battle of Messines and the Battle of Passchendaele. The South Australian state government offered a financial bailout to *subsidize the annual Anzac Day services*, while the South Australian Returned Services League works to resolve its current financial difficulties. The Turkish government will soon begin construction of the *Canakkale 1915 bridge* between Lapseki and Gelibolu. Planners expect the project will be completed in 2023 to coincide with the centenary of the Republic of Turkey.

Preparations continue for the centenary of the Battle of Vimy Ridge. Thirty high school students from Winnipeg participated a *rudimentary military training day* with the local Army Reserve in preparation for their trip to Vimy for the centenary next month. The Canadian Armed Forces also partnered with local planners to prepare a *series of commemorative events in Edmonton* to mark the centenary of the battle. Members of the public can attend commemorative services, stand vigil at the local cenotaph, and tour a mock-up camp of First World War reenactors. The villagers of Givenchy, near the Canadian monument at Vimy, continue to *prepare for the arrival of an estimated 19,000 Canadian visitors*. The municipality offered free English language courses for residents intent on hosting Canadians and works of art ranging from a *22-meter long mural* to LEGO projects will be on display throughout the village.