

# ***London Recruits***

## **How a story of anti-apartheid activism can serve teachers today**

*Steve Marsling and Chris Smith*

### **Abstract**

This year sees the release of *London Recruits*, a film chronicling the anti-apartheid activism of young men and women volunteers who, from 1967, travelled from the UK to South Africa. The recruits were invaluable to the campaigning work of the African National Congress and the wider international anti-apartheid movement because as white tourists, which is all the South African authorities saw them as, they were free to travel unmonitored in ways impossible for black citizens. To coincide with the release of the film, an education pack, comprising the testimonies of the recruits as well as other source material, has been compiled for use in schools. The pack was funded by the National Education Union and coordinated by Steve Marsling, a former recruit, who writes the opening section of this article. Chris Smith, who writes the rest of the article, was a serving history and politics teacher at the time of writing this article. He helped provide learning activities and exemplar lesson plans so teachers can straightforwardly make use of the pack in their classrooms. Work to create these educational resources started just before the upsurge of Black Lives Matter campaigning in the UK sparked calls for 'decolonising the curriculum'. It is hoped this pack shares and complements that goal. As the story of the recruits makes clear, there have always been those who have needed to resort to direct action to have their voices fairly heard. Institutional racism is an undeniable feature of life in all nations whose pasts are closely entwined with imperialism. It is hoped this pack will form part of the continuing work in our schools to teach a more diverse curriculum, not only in subjects such as history, but also in citizenship, creative arts and even during pastoral time. Teachers are struggling with unprecedented and seemingly endless demands: may this pack help them tell a story that until now had been largely untold.

**Keywords:** anti-apartheid; school resource pack; assessment; teacher agency.

### **Who were the London recruits and what did they do?**

*Steve Marsling*

After the Sharpeville Massacre in 1960, the world became more aware of the terrible consequences of the most brutal totalitarian state that was the South African apartheid system. By the late 1960s, the brutal repression of the African working class was beginning to take its toll. After the Rivonia trial, the leadership of the African National

Congress (ANC) was either imprisoned or in exile or murdered. The apartheid regime was crowing that white supremacy would last for a thousand years.

Oliver Tambo, the ANC leader-in-exile, and fellow-leader Ronnie Kasrils, knew they had to find a way of informing the majority population that they were still alive and kicking. But how? They hit upon the idea of asking young white people opposed to the apartheid regime to carry out activities to prove that the ANC had not gone away. It had to be white people as only they had freedom of movement. The majority of young people that volunteered were members of the Young Communist League. Others were from the Socialist Workers' Party or were politically unaffiliated.

One of the ideas was to set up leaflet-bombs. As you could not hand out leaflets critical of the government (five years' imprisonment awaited anyone who did), a small explosive device left in a public place would blast the leaflets up in the air. The idea was to set these devices off during rush hour so African workers could snatch them up and take them back to the townships, where they could be read and distributed. The leaflet bombs were neither intended nor designed to harm anyone, and indeed they never did.

Some of the recruits were captured, tortured and served long prison sentences. As the ANC began to organise again inside South Africa, the need for white recruits and leaflet-bombs receded. As recruits, we were all sworn to secrecy. None of us knew one another, or if we did we didn't know about each other's adventures.

After the apartheid regime was defeated and democratic elections were held, one of the recruits, Ken Keable, began the task of contacting the rest with the aim of putting their stories in print. In 2012, *London Recruits: the Secret War against Apartheid* was published by Merlin Press. Much media interest followed its publication and newspapers, both here and in South Africa, followed the story. For a left-wing book, sales were very high.<sup>1</sup>

Film companies were very interested in bidding for the film rights, with Barefoot Rascals the company which eventually secured them. In 2021 the film will be completed. It will feature South African locations, and dramatic scenarios in which the recruits were involved. Actors will play the recruits, with recruits themselves also speaking on film.

Sometime in December 2019 I was invited by ACTSA (Action for Southern Africa) to speak about the recruits in a London school. The talk went well and the students seemed keen to know more, but resources to do with the history of the anti-apartheid struggle were few and far between in schools. The Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM) archive, which is located in the Bodleian Library, is a fantastic resource and has been invaluable in helping me with research activities.

I asked my fellow recruits if they would help put together a teacher/pupil resource pack that could be used in schools. A group of recruits began to gather both their individual case studies and relevant histories of the fight against apartheid, what apartheid was, and the final celebrations of the ultimate victory.

We asked Christabel Gurney, the archivist of the AAM if we could use some of its collection of photos, posters and badges to illustrate the material that we had produced. This has been a tremendous help, and our thanks go to Christabel and David Kenvyn for all their support they have given to the project.

We then spoke to Gawain Little, the chair of the international committee of the National Education Union. His enthusiastic support and sound advice have been key to the pack's success. We asked for and were awarded a £2,500 grant to pay for designers to make a PDF resource that schools could use for fourteen-fifteen-year-olds. More importantly, Gawain introduced me to Chris Smith, a young politics teacher in a comprehensive school in Norwich.

Chris's task was to suggest classroom activities to go with the resource pack. The pack contains many suggestions for how the resource material can be delivered. It is hoped that the pack will be ready for the term beginning in September 2021.

## **The London recruits: a resource-pack for teachers**

### *Chris Smith*

My first introduction to the story of the London recruits came when I was asked to look over resources and recommend classroom activities or lesson plans that could help turn this material into classroom-ready packs to be sent to teachers. As a teacher of politics and history for seven years, and before that a graduate of international relations and politics, and always as an active trade unionist and political party member, I had never encountered the story of the London recruits. Reading the first-hand experiences of what went into the struggle against apartheid it was immediately obvious to me that this was a story worth telling and one that, when combined with the professional judgment of classroom teachers, would require relatively little in terms of prescriptive activities or lesson plans. Rather, what was essential was some exposition, to ensure that teachers with even less familiarity with the anti-apartheid struggle than myself would be confident in using the materials and in helping their students appreciate the universality of these stories and the importance of human solidarity which they underscore.

I was asked to help with the project before the explosion of the Black Lives Matter movement in the UK felled statues of slave owners and drew attention to the pressing need to decolonise the curriculum. The call came, however, after the Covid pandemic had cancelled the summer's exam series. This cancellation offered hope that, in the inevitable debate about how education was to 'build back better', it might be possible to highlight the extent to which England's school curriculum had become dependent upon preparation for exams, at the expense of more humanising elements. This project offered the perfect example of a worthy topic with cross-curricular potential.

In previous years, such a topic would have been consigned to a footnote in the sole

history or citizenship lesson assigned to Nelson Mandela. But now it could be given the time it deserved. A resource pack could make its way into the hands of teachers searching for just such a thing with which to engross students and kindle a love of learning, rather than to cram them for tests.

The entirely correct debate around diversifying the curriculum and creating an educational offer inclusive of modern Britain, which Black Lives Matter has ushered in, serves only to reinforce how the story of the London recruits is one for our times. This means the pack isn't simply a collection of primary source material to be used in history lessons, but can be used across subject-domains – for example in English, citizenship, geography, music, art and design – to study not just the people involved but also how they campaigned for change through the written word music, poetry and art.

### **Hooking imagination; empowering agency**

The real value of this project lies in the quality of the personal testimonials on offer, as well as in the vast wealth of visual materials such as posters, badges, photographs and even video recordings, like those of the 'Free Nelson Mandela' concerts. The potential all this offers to hook the imagination of students is huge. Partly this is due to the connection with a figure like Mandela. Quite rightly, the majority of primary and secondary school children will be aware of Mandela, but their awareness is by no means likely to be a fully developed one that could place him in a historical context and then connect that to their own lives. As my own lack of knowledge shows, the same could be true for many teachers. They can feel confident in the value of this project due to Mandela's presence in its narrative, a historical figure as close to being universally admired as it is possible to get. The project also offers the potential for that most joyous of school projects, one by means of which a teacher can learn alongside their students.

In designing the activities and plans that accompany the pack, I was determined never to be prescriptive. Prescription could discourage teachers, who only have limited time in which to address elements of the curriculum. Most importantly, a prescriptive stance would undermine teachers' professional agency. Classroom teachers know best what their students will find appealing, challenging or inspiring, and also how much or how little they will be able to engage with productively and explore in whatever time is available.

### **Liberating assessment**

A further liberating experience came to me as I was compiling ideas. Whilst I was essentially creating a unit of work, as I have done many times, I was doing so without including any formal summative assessment towards which the whole project was geared, as would be the case if I were making something similar for my school, where

the outcomes of all modules of study are measured in 'knowledge test scores' and essay grades. This isn't to say the whole project is devoid of assessment opportunities by which a teacher may gauge what students have taken away from their studies. Far from it. Most tasks I recommended follow a simple pattern which involves students answering open questions to help them connect with key elements of a text.

Responses may be assessed in the classroom as teachers think best, to help them feel confident students have made meaningful progress. Students can then be asked to apply their new knowledge in a creative task, such as designing their own campaigning materials for an issue that motivates them. Assessment here might be via performance or sharing in class, for all students to see and comment on. Such commentary is in its own way assessment.

No mark schemes or model answers have been supplied in the resource pack, and the idea of including such things never occurred to me. The whole purpose of this project is to give students opportunities to think critically about the facts as they see them, not to teach didactically about the historical record in a 'facts, facts, facts' fashion. This pedagogical stance has implications both for historical facts and for modern facts, as history is nothing if we cannot appreciate how the past bears upon and parallels our own times.

Such an approach to a unit of work is a world away from the one common to rest of my classroom teaching career to date, of – in effect – only teaching what advances students towards a test sooner or later. That this is so reveals why Covid has been so destabilising to formal education in England. As soon as exams were cancelled, or even when serious doubt arose about whether or not they might take place, the entire purpose of what went on inside classrooms disappeared. I remember this realisation becoming tangible inside my school: registering with students if not with teachers too. 'What about our exams?' was the first question on the lips of students when the rumours of school closures started to circulate.

Since returning to the classroom there has rightly been debate of what should and shouldn't be included in school curricula. Unfortunately, there is a significant disconnect between the profession itself and education policy-makers. Teachers, on the whole, talk the language of a more inclusive curriculum, one relevant to the modern society their pupils and students are drawn from. But policy-makers prioritise the poorly substantiated imperatives of 'making up for lost time' and 'rapid catch-up' which, unless accompanied by a stark change of orthodoxy, will mean more assessments, measuring an ever-narrower range of topics and skills to 'demonstrate' progress. And to demonstrate it not in a meaningful way, but merely in a way that's easy to account for. Indeed, the Department for Education's recent reiteration of its desire to see baseline assessment undertaken clearly indicates the direction of policy back to the micro-managed orthodoxy and away from any empowering of the teaching profession

to further develop its agency.

With all of this taken into consideration, a further concern in curating these resources for teachers became how to ensure they could make full use of such agency as remains theirs in working with them, so as to best connect with the experiences of their students. A simplistic but representative example of what I mean is to imagine the different responses you might get by asking a class of students from semi-rural Norfolk, where I teach, to select an issue to campaign about in the modern world, as compared to those from a class of students from central London. Studying and engaging with the stories of the London recruits should provide a chance for students in any setting to create their own stories by combining what they learn of the London recruits with the experiences of their own lives. In doing so, it is hoped they can expand their horizons, and have the opportunity for critical self-reflection.

There are no means to assess such things summatively in a standardised fashion, as has been expected hitherto with regard to units of work I create for my students in our exam-dominated system. The more I planned activities for the resource pack, the more a radical notion came home to me. Namely, that teachers working through these resources with their students would be the only people in a position to judge effectively whether students had successfully engaged with, and been engaged by, these materials.

### **A story worth telling**

In a world recovering from a viral pandemic, with education and other vital services at breaking point due to years of deliberate underinvestment, and a prevailing political discourse of divide and rule pitting those with little against those with even less, inspiring stories like those of the London recruits are needed more than ever. Not just for what they tell us about solidarity, internationalism and that basic human decency which exposes the physical and cultural distance between peoples as the irrelevancies they are, but also for the way they teach this by engaging critical thinking, creativity and compassion.

A classroom teacher's power to decide what is addressed in the classroom is both the greatest responsibility and the greatest privilege of the profession. It is something that those driving the extension of academisation, or overseeing the workings of Ofsted and of government policy with regard to the curriculum, have been keen to reduce. The story of the London recruits has emerged at the perfect time. There is again debate about what is being taught and why. Teachers have the opportunity, through the resource pack, to take and teach this material because it is a story worth telling.

### **Note**

1. To obtain copies of the *London Recruits* resource pack, please visit the NEU website: [www.neu.org.uk](http://www.neu.org.uk)

**Steve Marsling** is a 70-year-old ex-teacher now living on the Suffolk Coast. Steve taught in secondary schools in London, Bristol and Oldham. He also worked in local government for the GLC and Lambeth before becoming an art dealer.

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**Chris Smith** taught history and politics in Norwich for the last eight years where he graduated from the University of East Anglia with an MA in International Relations. He was an active member of the NUT in Norfolk representing it on international solidarity delegations to Israel/Palestine, Cuba and Bosnia before the union amalgamated with the ATL to create the NEU. He has recently taken up the role of the NEU's Regional Development Officer covering the East of England.

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