

## Apartheid South Africa and the Soweto Rebellion

by April Francis and Vanessa Marchese

The Soweto Rebellion in 1976 and the broader struggle to end apartheid in South Africa illustrate major historical and social studies principles. They show the power of non-violent civil disobedience to achieve fundamental human rights; the role children, students and other ordinary people can play as historical actors; and the ephemeral nature of what can appear as unchanging institutions in intransigent societies. The Black South African challenge to apartheid is a textbook example of how oppressed people can overcome their oppressors.

The European colonization of South Africa by Dutch (Afrikaner) and English settlers began in the 17th century. Great Britain secured control over the area as a result of the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902), but Afrikaner nationalists took over the government in 1948. During the 1940s and 1950s, White South Africans instituted a policy of apartheid, or separation, designed to guarantee their continued domination over the country and its resources. Under the leadership of Hendrik Verwoerd, Minister of Native Affairs and later prime minister, the rights of Black South Africans were systematically stripped away, they were denied citizenship and forced to live in either isolated, impoverished, rural communities or shanty towns surrounding major cities. The Southwest Township, popularly known as Soweto, was a Black African community outside of Johannesburg. By the mid-1970s its population was about 1 million people.

The leading organization in the struggle to defeat apartheid and win majority rule for Black South Africans was the African National Congress, founded in 1912. In the 1950s it was headed by Albert Luthuli, who won a Nobel Peace Prize. In 1961, Luthuli was succeeded by Nelson Mandela, who was imprisoned by the government for twenty-seven years. Other anti-apartheid groups included the Pan Africanist Congress, which led demonstrations in Sharpeville against the passbook system in 1960 where police opened fire and killed 67 people and the Black Consciousness Movement, headed by Steven Biko, which focused on developing Black Pride.

The Soweto Uprising of 1976 is one of the best known events in the struggle against apartheid. Many students, influenced by Steven Biko, would no longer accommodate to the injustices of the South African educational system. Under the Bantu Education Act (1953), the curriculum in Black schools was designed to reinforce the social and economic class structure of apartheid. Students were prepared to be laborers under the direction of White bosses or acquired skills needed in separate Black "Bantustans." The Soweto Uprising was precipitated by the requirement that Black students be taught Afrikaans, the language of their oppressors. This portion of the Bantu Education Act had never been carried out before.

On June 16, 1976, an estimated twenty thousand students marched in protest of apartheid and instruction in the Afrikaner language. When police arrived, shots were fired and students fled. During rioting over the next three days, government buildings were attacked and stores were looted. According to government sources, the official death toll was 176. Of these people, all but two were Black.

The struggle against apartheid in South Africa eventually won international support. When F. W. de Klerk became president of South Africa in 1989, he released Nelson Mandela from prison and began negotiations with the African National Congress for a post-apartheid South Africa. Democratic elections were held and in 1994 Nelson Mandela was elected president of South Africa.

Excellent resources for the study of the Soweto Uprising and the struggle against apartheid include three movies. *Cry Freedom* (1987) tells the story of Steve Biko and the Black Consciousness Movement. *Sarafina* (1992) focuses on the student movement and events in Soweto. *A Dry White Season* (1989) is about a White school teacher who ends up investigating the Soweto massacre. It includes powerful scenes depicting the student demonstrations and the deadly attack by the police.

Recommended internet sites include:

<http://www.cnn.com/2001/WORLD/africa/06/15/inside.africa/>;

<http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/specialprojects/june16/#>;

<http://www.anc.org.za/people/mandela.html>;

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/mandela/>;

<http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/specialprojects/june16/>;

<http://www-cs-students.stanford.edu/~cale/cs201/apartheid.hist.html>.

## 1. A Timeline of South African History

Sources: <http://news.bbc.co.uk> and <http://www.un.org/cyberschoolbus/>

Examine this timeline of South African history. Using the timeline as your “notes,” write a brief narrative of the history of South Africa. What would you identify as the key events in the history of apartheid and the struggle to end it? Explain.

1651. Dutch (Afrikaner) settlers arrive in South Africa.
1756. Dutch establish European dominance in the region. Import slaves from West Africa, Malaysia, and India.
1806. Great Britain seizes control over the Cape of Good Hope on the southern tip of Africa.
1867. Diamond mining begins in South Africa.
1886. Discovery of gold in South Africa.
- 1899-1902. British secure control over the entire region in the Anglo-Boer War.
1910. Great Britain creates the Union of South Africa.
1912. African National Congress is formed to organize Africans in the struggle for civil rights.
1913. The Native Lands Act gives 7.3% of the country’s land to Africans, who make up 80% of the population.
1948. Afrikaner nationalists win control over the government of the Union of South Africa and begin a policy of apartheid, or separation of the races.
1951. The Bantu Homelands Act. Lands reserved for Black Africans are declared independent nations. Millions of Blacks are stripped of South African citizenship. They need passports to enter white-controlled areas.
1952. Abolition of Passes and Coordination of Documents Act. Black Africans required to carry ID cards.
1953. The Preservation of Separate Amenities Act establishes separate public facilities.
1953. Bantu Education Act. The White controlled government supervises the education of all Blacks.
1960. Blacks in the town of Sharpeville refuse to carry passes. Government declares a state of emergency. 69 Black south Africans are killed and 187 people are wounded. The African National Congress is banned.
1961. The Republic of South Africa withdraws from the British Commonwealth of Nations.
1963. Nelson Mandela, head of the African National Congress, is imprisoned.



1966. Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd is assassinated.

1970s. South African Students Organization under the leadership of Steven Biko launches Black Consciousness movement. More than 3 million people forcibly resettled in Black 'homelands.'

1976. Students in Soweto demonstrate against discrimination and required instruction in Afrikaans, the language of Whites descended from the Dutch. 575 people are killed and thousands are injured and arrested by the police. Steven Biko is beaten and dies in jail from his injuries.

1980s. International boycott of South Africa apartheid rule. Black civil disobedience increases.

1990. Nelson Mandela released from prison after 27 years.

1991. South African President F. W. de Klerk repeals apartheid laws and calls for a new constitution.

1994. Multi-party, multi-racial elections are held. Nelson Mandela is elected President of South Africa.

## 2. Apartheid South Africa

A. "Racism in South Africa, *The New York Times*, May 10, 1950, 29. "The policy of "apartheid" or racial separation in South Africa is now close to becoming a law. . . the government can set aside any area as a group area, in which members of a particular racial group can live or own property. . . the 8,000,000 Negroes are already held down by many restrictions, including a law that permits them to elect only three European members to Parliament, while 2,000,000 Europeans elect 150...the world saw as much racism as it wanted under the Nazis. . . clearly no outside pressure is going to stop South Africa, but the union cannot applaud the use of such means to achieve what it calls 'racial harmony'."

### B. Comparing Conditions for Black and White South Africans

Year - 1978	Blacks	Whites
Population	19 million	4.5 million
Land Allocation	13%	87%
Ratio of average earnings	1	14
Share of National Income	20%	75%
Doctors per population	1 to 44,000 people	1 to 400 people
Infant mortality	20 to 40%	3%
Annual expenditure on education	\$45	\$696
Teacher - Pupil ration	1 to 60	1 to 22

Source: <http://www-cs-students.stanford.edu/~cale/cs201/apartheid.hist.html>

### C. Segregated City Grows to 500,000

Source: *The New York Times*, May 11, 1964

"Thousands of black families live in the model township of Soweto and the South African government is eager to show that they have found a new life. . . Soweto is the fourth largest city in South Africa and the biggest urban concentration of black people in the country, nearly half a million people live in Soweto. . . on the boundary of the model township is the slum of Pimville. . . one room shacks house as many as 10 persons; a communal tap serves hundreds of people, the streets are muddy and undrained."



<http://www.damer.com/pictures/travels/southafrica>

**D. Black South African student:** "My awareness was limited because of my education, all the things that we were told at school, you know, about how life is. One of the things they wanted us to believe is that nobody can change the system as it is, in fact, that it is God's wish that we live this type of life. So that was limiting my awareness, because whenever I would see people having problems and sufferings, I would say this is God's will, you know. But because of the challenge that was presented to the system by the students, I began to realize that, no, these things are man-made and it is possible to change things."

#### Questions:

1. Why is *The New York Times* concerned about the South African policy of apartheid?
2. How does the apartheid system guarantee White rule?
3. According to the chart comparing conditions for Black and White South Africans, how has apartheid contributed to an unjust society?

4. The South African government claims Soweto is a model community. What evidence suggests this is an incomplete picture?

5. Why is the Black student unhappy about his education under the apartheid system?

6. Why does the Black student believe that change is possible?

**3. The Soweto Uprising and Massacre.** 1. Examine the documents on the Soweto uprising and massacre. Using these documents as primary sources, write a brief narrative of the uprising and massacre. Conclude with a discussion of whether the police response to the demonstrators was justified. 2. Read the African National Congress's response to the uprising and massacre. Based on your understanding of these events and the ANC statement, would you consider the Soweto Uprising a major event in world history? Explain.



A. "They opened fire. They did not give any warning. They simply opened fire. Just like that. Just like that. And small children, small defenseless children, dropped down to the ground like swatted flies. This is murder, cold-blooded murder." - Mark Mathabane

B. "I saw huge numbers of schoolchildren coming towards me. I got out of the car and started taking pictures. And I could see hands that (were gesturing) no pictures. I went over and said to them, 'Why do you say I can't take pictures?' They said, 'Because the police might be able to identify some of us.' And I said to them, 'a struggle without documentation is no struggle. . . Soweto was on fire. . . The children were angry. Ten-year-olds were in the streets picking up stones and throwing. Where there was anything burning, you would find these 10-year-olds, 9-year-olds, saying Power, Power. You realized that the political mood had changed.'" - Peter Magubane, a young photographer who lived in Soweto during the uprising.

**C. 6 Die in South Africa Riot After Black Student Protest. Source: *The New York Times*, June 17, 1976**

"At least six people died today when a demonstration by 10,000 black students against instruction in Afrikaans language turned into a riot. Two of the dead were students struck by a volley of police gunfire. . . black leader, the very Rev. Desmond Tutu said that black leaders "have been warning the government about something like this happening for a long time." More than 70 people were injured, 19 with bullet wounds, when the riot erupted in the black township of Soweto, 10 miles from Johannesburg. . . It continued from midmorning until after dusk. . . This area was sealed off from whites. . . It was the worst riot between the races in South Africa since the Sharpeville massacre on March 21, 1960 when police fired on a crowd of more than 5,000 demonstrating black Africans, killing 72 and wounding more than 170. . . The trouble began when the students gathered to protest a government regulation requiring the use of Afrikaans as the language of instruction for some subjects in the township schools. . The students complained that the regulation required them to cope with a third language, in addition to English and the African language most of them speak as a mother tongue. But the strikes had broader political overtones since Afrikaans is the language of South Africa's ruling Nationalist Party (white south Africans)."

#### ***D. June 16, 1976. Soweto Uprising, Day One – A Timeline of Events***

**Source:** <http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/specialprojects/june16/>

7:00 AM: Not all the children who were to participate in the march knew about it on the morning of June 16th. For many it was an ordinary school day. The march planned by the Action Committee of the Soweto Students Representative Council (SSRC) was well organized and was to be conducted in a peaceful way. The leaders of the original march, mainly came from two high schools, Naledi High in Naledi and Morris Isaacson in Mofolo. The plan was that students from Naledi High were to march from their direction and pick up students from other schools on their way. The Morris Isaacson students were to march from their school doing the same until they met at a central point where they would proceed peacefully together to the Orlando Stadium.

7:30 AM. The first students gathered at Naledi High. At assembly the principal gave support to the children and wished them good luck. The first chairperson of the Action Committee, Tepello Motopanyane, addressed them and informed them that discipline and a peaceful march were to be the order of the day.

9:00 AM. 11 columns of students marched toward Orlando Stadium. Estimates of the number of students involved range from 1,000 to 10,000. The march was halted and Tietsi Mashinini climb up onto a tractor to address the crowd. He is reported to have said: “Brothers and Sisters, I appeal to you - keep calm and cool. We have just received a report that the police are coming. Don’t taunt them, don’t do anything to them. Be cool and calm. We are not fighting.”

9:30 AM. The students continued on marching until they got to what is now Hector Petersen Square, close to Orlando High School, where the march came to a halt again. According to one report, “a white policeman lobbed a tear gas canister into the front of the crowd. People ran out of the smoke dazed and coughing. The crowd retreated slightly but remained facing the police, waving placards and singing. A white policeman drew his revolver. A single shot ran out. There was a split seconds silence and pandemonium broke out. Children screamed. More shots were fired. At least four students fell and others ran screaming in all directions.” Students fled in different directions. Anger at the senseless killings inspired retaliatory action. Administrative vehicles and buildings were set on fire, a white official was pulled out of his car and beaten to death, and stores were burned and looted. As students were stopped by the police in one area they moved their protest action to others.

12:00 Noon. Schools were closed early at about 12:00. As more students were let out of school they joined the protesters.

9:00 PM. Armored police cars, later known as Hippos, started moving into Soweto. Official figures were that 23 people had been killed, but some reports estimated that it was at least 200.

**E. “UNITE! MOBILISE! FIGHT ON!”** Nelson Mandela and the African National Congress Reply to the Soweto Uprising and Massacre. Source:

<http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/mandela/64-90/anvil.html>

The gun has played an important part in our history. The resistance of the black man to white colonial intrusion was crushed by the gun. Our struggle to liberate ourselves from white domination is held in check by force of arms. From conquest to the present the story is the same. Successive white regimes have repeatedly massacred unarmed defenseless blacks. And wherever and whenever they have pulled out their guns the ferocity of their fire has been trained on the African people. Apartheid is the embodiment of the racialism, repression and inhumanity of all previous white supremacist regimes. To see the real face of apartheid we must look beneath the veil of constitutional formulas, deceptive phrases and playing with words. The rattle of gunfire and the rumbling of Hippo armored vehicles since June 1976 have once again torn aside that veil. Spread across the face of our country, in black townships, the racist army and police have been pouring a hail of bullets killing and maiming

hundreds of black men, women and children. The toll of the dead and injured already surpasses that of all past massacres carried out by this regime. . . .

That verdict is loud and clear: apartheid has failed. Our people remain unequivocal in its rejection. The young and the old, parent and child, all reject it. At the forefront of this 1976/77 wave of unrest were our students and youth. They come from the universities, high schools and even primary schools. They are a generation whose whole education has been under the diabolical design of the racists to poison the minds and brainwash our children into docile subjects of apartheid rule. But after more than twenty years of Bantu Education the circle is closed and nothing demonstrates the utter bankruptcy of apartheid as the revolt of our youth. . . . The revulsion of the world against apartheid is growing and the frontiers of white supremacy are shrinking. Mozambique and Angola are free and the war of liberation gathers force in Namibia and Zimbabwe. The soil of our country is destined to be the scene of the fiercest fight and the sharpest battles to rid our continent of the last vestiges of white minority rule. The world is on our side. The OAU, the UN and the anti-apartheid movement continue to put pressure on the racist rulers of our country. Every effort to isolate South Africa adds strength to our struggle. At all levels of our struggle, within and outside the country, much has been achieved and much remains to be done. But victory is certain!