

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

#### "The Child Is Also Wondering What Happened to the Father"

##### Context of the 1990s

##### Political Changes

When I started my research in South Africa in 1991, it had been a year since 35  
Nelson Mandela's release, and South Africa was negotiating its way out of apartheid and into a democratic future. It was to be a violent, bitter, ambivalent, and stumbling path—compromised and compromising—ending, in 1994, with the first democratic elections for all South Africans. My research and the writing of this book have been profoundly shaped by the historical context of its invention. The quickening pace of historical change had forced me to consider again and again its genius for changing historical meanings as well as its impact on my work as a historian (both in terms of historical analysis and in terms of research) and as a South African. Change is part of time passing, but, although this is a continuous process, it is not always regular, and occasionally the pace of historical change seems to pick up. Historians always have to account for changing historiographies and new methods, at a minimum by making their own contribution to extend boundaries and analyses that have become conventional, considering all the while that they themselves are embedded in a personal and social historical context that shapes their work. But it is less often that the historical context within which the historian finds herself changes also, and rapidly. In the way that my work negotiated the rich, but fraught, terrain of memory and history, this book has had therefore to grapple with very recent, changing contemporary representations, which have influenced memory, remembering, and analysis as well as my own understanding of the established historiography, the evidence, and my country.

In 1989, when I began my graduate studies in history, it seemed unimaginable to do critical research in South Africa. In the repressive, authoritarian context of apartheid South Africa, official or publicly sanctioned memory and history were shaped around silences and lies. Archivists carefully controlled access to records they preserved in the archives according to strict rules and pro-government biases of which I knew my research agenda would run afoul. Committed to political change in South Africa, I respected the ANC's call for a cultural and academic boycott of South Africa.<sup>28</sup>

But in 1990 Nelson Mandela was released from prison and, in the end, my dissertation on the multiple constructions of historical memories of the Soweto uprising that took place on June 16, 1976, was written and researched in a time of change. After an increasingly violent period of transition, South Africa held its first

democratic universal elections in April of 1994, ending the rule of the Afrikaner government and bringing the African National Congress (ANC) to power. By 1996 the new government had entrusted a powerful, if temporary, institution, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, with the task of investigating the worst crimes against humanity under apartheid.

The early 1990s were still closely linked to the time of apartheid and many of its mechanisms of control were still apparent in the archives. I faced the prospect of closed archival holdings, a somewhat unyielding archival staff, and the secretive nature of government, all of which continually intruded on my research design and hopes. As I focused my topic and placed it in the time of the Soweto uprising of June 16, 1976, I came up against what, at the time, seemed like the intransigent barriers of the South African archival system and the laws that—not unlike those in other countries—prevented insight into documents younger than thirty years. It was clear that the archives were also rooted in a historical context and reflected the conventions and habits of the apartheid past as much as it did the rapid pace of historical change in South Africa during the 1990s.

I spent six months in South Africa in 1993, and I returned again for another year of fieldwork in mid-1994. In the three decades before 1994, South Africa had seen increasing violence. But the years between Mandela's release and the elections were some of the most violent in South African history. Over 16,000 people died—more than in the many years of struggle against apartheid before 1990.<sup>29</sup> This violence did not leave my work untouched. Physical violence and forms of discursive, rhetorical violence had become entrenched in the processes and institutions of the state and acted in collusion with silence to shape what the apartheid government wanted to be remembered into history. The pervasive violence shaped memories over time and the way in which people remembered and spoke. It also led to the destruction of historical records, and the disappearance of people and, with them, their stories. The authoritarian and repressive nature of apartheid, and the bloody shadow it cast over the first half of the decade, produced individual memories formed by the personal experience of violence, and they disrupted or destroyed the ability of the individual to think historically.<sup>30</sup> Considerable damage was done not only to individuals but to society when those who did the physical violence—in this case, agents and institutions of the South African state—erased the histories of their victims and contrived to create histories that denied their culpability.

During the period before the elections, social and political tension in the country was high, marked by such events as the assassination of Chris Hani, increasing violence especially in the African townships, and mounting fears of change among whites. Extremely suspicious of motives and credentials, people were cautious, reluctant, and unwilling to talk, and it took an extraordinary amount of time to win

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their trust sufficiently to begin a conversation. History, especially personal history, was too full of tragedy.

When I returned for the second part of my fieldwork in 1994, after the elections, much of the tension had been replaced by relief and a new willingness to think about the past. Where there had been suspicion and guardedness before, interviews now were tinged with humor and the heady feeling of victory cast them in a new historical light. The tragedies of the past had become the building blocks of a future. Zakes Molotsi, who had spent several years as a political prisoner on Robben Island, could find little bitterness in his heart. Even the issue of Afrikaans, so central to the uprising, had taken on a new meaning:

I mean, we knew, and we understand very well that the whites in this country belong to this country. That's why when talk about settlers we talk about something which is something. But the generation which is here in South Africa, these are South Africans. They built this country with us. I mean we are set together in all this thing to build this country. And we are so proud, because we manage even to produce the language, which are not found anywhere in the world. Because Afrikaans is a pure South African language.<sup>31</sup>

Once again, history was something to reflect on. Within the space of a few months and a new dispensation, many of those who had been "victims" of apartheid were drawn into the multiple efforts to rebuild and rethink, while those who had fought against it for so many years and with so much consequence found themselves taking their place in Parliament and sitting on the multiple committees of transformation. Despite a new readiness to remember, people were overextended in their new tasks and often exhausted from the drawn-out and contested battle over the elections.

### **The Story in the Archive: Cillié Commission of Inquiry into the Riots at Soweto**

During the early days of my research, when I had turned to the Central (State) Archives Depot in Pretoria in search of documents produced by students, an informal list of the holdings relevant to a commission that had been set up to investigate the Soweto uprising fell into my hands. Like other archival holdings from after 1960, the records of the Cillié Commission (or, in full, the Commission of Enquiry into the Riots at Soweto and Elsewhere from the 16th of June 1976 to the 28th of February 1977) were closed to research.<sup>32</sup> Although the hearings were held in public and reported on widely in the media, all the evidence that was gathered was, like the transcripts of the hearings, secured under South Africa's archive laws, which closed such material for thirty years.<sup>33</sup> In the same way that the voices of the participants had been rendered almost completely indistinct, or had been silenced or ignored, the documented sources too had become inaudible and hidden. All that remained in the public realm were copies of the Cillié Commission Report, presented to Parliament in 1980. Access would require

special authorization. I decided to take on the bureaucracy and in late 1993, with the help of senior South African historian Charles van Onselen, I applied for permission to see the evidence and transcripts of the testimony. In the meantime, I waited and sought alternatives.

Four months after my application, permission was granted to use both the evidence collected by and the testimony heard and transcribed before the Cillie Commission of Inquiry. I was allowed to look at all materials except *in camera* testimony but was not permitted to make copies, only to take notes by hand. At the time, my access to this source was unique, as no one had looked at it since 1978, when the Commission ended its proceedings; where historians and others had commented, it was only with reference to the Report that the Commission had submitted in 1980. **45**

By 1994, another year and many pages of hand transcription had passed, but a more profound shift was beginning to take place in the archives. The old *Vierkleur*, or South African flag, in the corner of the reading room had been replaced by the new South African flag, its bold black and gold resonant of the ANC's colors and imbued with a new and proud symbolism. Behind the counter sat the same archive attendants, those dealing with researchers mostly white and Afrikaans-speaking, those fetching and carrying the document cases in their large green steel wheelbarrows mostly black. But above their heads new portraits of Nelson Mandela, F. W. de Klerk, and Thabo Mbeki adorned the wall. Suddenly, without a formal waiting period and in response to an informal application on my part, which was immediately walked "upstairs" by a reading-room assistant and signed by the senior in-house archivist, I was granted permission to photocopy documents. The archivists gradually became less guardians of the archives and more facilitators of research, and slowly they began to actively help rather than hinder my research.

From the transcripts and correspondence of the Cillie Commission I knew that the Commission had received, from the police, many posters and banners that had been confiscated during various student marches in 1976. None of them would have fit into a traditional archive document box and, though mentioned on the list of evidence associated with the Cillie Commission, they were initially not to be found. I continued to request that archivists search the repositories—without success. Until, one day, perhaps exasperated by my persistence or wanting to finally prove to me that there was nothing to be found in the space associated with K345, the archival designator of my Soweto materials, one of the archivists relented and asked me to accompany her into the vaults in order to help her search for these artifacts of the uprising! To be sure, there were no posters to be found in the shelf space that housed the roughly nine hundred boxes of evidence associated with the Cillie Commission. But then, as my disappointed eyes swept the simultaneously ominous and tantalizing interior of the vault, I saw a piece of

board protruding over the topmost edge of the shelf. There, almost 9 feet into the air, in the shadowy space on top of the document shelves, lay a pile of posters and banners.

By the time I completed the research for my dissertation in mid-1995, South Africa was one year into its new democracy. During my last weeks in the archives the archivists had put together a public exhibit of documents representing the time of struggle against apartheid in its hallways. Visitors to the archives were now greeted by a large poster, fashioned out of a piece of cracked blackboard, which proclaimed, "TO HELL WITH AFRIKAANS"!



**"To Hell With Afrikaans" sign, archive exhibit.**

### **Creating a Space for Memory: The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)**

Between 1996 and 1998 the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (TRC) began laying the groundwork for reconciliation by undoing some of the secrecy and repression of the apartheid years, creating a new context for memory and history in South Africa. The TRC signaled a profound shift away from the secrecy and lies of the apartheid years to a new and deliberately revelatory encounter with the past. It created a new space of individual and collective memory and perhaps even a new respect for the past or history. It also partially wrested the past out of the exclusivist hands of academic historians and put it into the hands of those who had suffered this history. The TRC created the institutions and the mechanisms (spaces in which to talk, a new archive) as well as the need for some forms of continuation of this work beyond its own mandate.<sup>34</sup>

The work of the TRC made clear that that memory is not just what is carried by individuals but that it is institutional too and is contained in countless documentary records. This is the purview of the archives. In the course of its preparations for hearings, the TRC inquired into the ongoing destruction of records because it needed to access documents relevant to the human-rights violations it was investigating; documents that were important to the research and investigative work of the Commission and that would have a significant impact on its findings. Institutions such as archives play an important role in preserving the documentary record of historical memory. The TRC's focus on the culpability of archives and of other government institutions in the destruction of records highlighted the importance of such institutions in relation to public memory and history, and it brought into focus that individual experience interacts with the discursive and political power of institutions in the process of articulating, preserving, inventing, silencing, and destroying memory.

The hearings of the TRC created a historical moment in time, when the work of memory accelerated and became both more self-conscious and deliberate.<sup>35</sup> It was in this context that I completed the work on the dissertation on which this book is based.<sup>36</sup> Suddenly, the importance of the shift toward the voices of the participants seemed proven right, as was the relationship between institutions that were charged with preserving the documents of the past and those who had actually experienced that past. (See: Truth and Reconciliation Commission, in the next section of this chapter.)

#### Notes:

**Note 28:** Some of this material on archives overlaps with my essay "In Good Hands: Researching the 1976 Soweto Uprising in the State Archives of South Africa," in *Archive Stories: Evidence, Experience, History*, ed. Antoinette Burton (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

**Note 29:** Rupert Taylor and Mark Shaw, "The Dying Days of Apartheid," in *South Africa in Transition: New Theoretical Perspectives*, ed. David Howarth and Aletta Norval (New York, St. Martin's Press: 1998), 13.

**Note 30:** See Helena Pohlandt-McCormick, "'I Saw a Nightmare...': Violence and the Construction of Memory (Soweto, June 16, 1976)," in "'Not Telling: Secrecy, Lies, and History,'" ed. Gary Minkley and Martin Legassick, special issue, *History and Theory* 39 (December 2000): 23-44.

**Note 31:** Zakes Molotsi, interview by Helena Pohlandt-McCormick, tape recording, Johannesburg, May 1995.

**Note 32:** South Africa, *Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Riots at Soweto and Elsewhere from the 16th of June 1976 to the 28th of February 1977* (Pretoria: Government Printer, 1980).

**Note 33:** John Kane-Berman attended many of its sessions and in his book *Soweto: Black Revolt, White Reaction* comments repeatedly on the Commission's findings and on testimony given before the Commission.

**Note 34:** "The volume of material that passed through our hands will fill many shelves in the National Archives. This material will be of great value to scholars, journalists and others researching our history for generations to come. From a research point of view, this may be the Commission's greatest legacy." Archbishop Desmond Tutu, in chairperson's foreword to Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa [hereafter TRC], *Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report* (New York: Macmillan, 1998), 1:2.

**Note 35:** For discussion of "certain moments" in time, see Patricia Davison, "Museums and the Reshaping of Memory," in *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa*, ed. Sarah Nuttall and Carli Coetzee (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1998), 147.

**Note 36:** Helena Pohlandt-McCormick, "'I Saw a Nightmare ...': Doing Violence to Memory: The Soweto Uprising, June 16, 1976" (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1999).