

Chapter 2

"I Heard There Was a Riot in Soweto...:" A Narrative of June 16, 1976

Conclusion

This chapter has presented the events of June 16, 1976, in Soweto and elsewhere around South Africa from the perspective of witnesses and participants defined in the broadest way so as to include a spectrum of people, including policemen and other government officials; those who, regardless of their color or political convictions, had few sympathies with the students; and others who found themselves protesting the government policies and opposing the police and government. In presenting a multiplicity of voices and sources, this chapter lays the groundwork for the discussion and analysis of these sources, of the many contradictory points of view, of the paradoxical evidence and language, of the targets the students chose to attack, and of the ways the stories of these events were constructed. Faced with a situation completely out of its control, the state simultaneously sent police into the townships to restore order and set to work to explain what had happened and to reassure the white population:

The police tried everything to get the rioters under control, and eventually were forced to fire warning shots over their heads. Police are trying to force the students out of the residential area into an open area and to bring the situation under control.¹¹⁷

160

Functionaries of the state quickly realized that they faced a serious challenge from the African population and that the government needed physically to suppress the protests as quickly as possible and to reestablish ideological order by explaining to itself and to others what had happened. In the process, the government and its various spokesmen created explanatory mechanisms and meanings that have shaped not only its own discourses but those of history. The next chapter will describe and analyze these discursive processes, which are closely linked to the actual physical suppression of the unrest, as well as those of the African National Congress, the most prominent, if banned, liberation movement that spoke on behalf of the African population.

The importance of who was responsible for the first violence cannot be underestimated, both in terms of culpability or justification and for the condemnation or respect of memory. The *Cillie Commission* Report emphasized that in the evidence there had been "great differences" on the connection between the shooting and the stone throwing: "The two extreme opposites may be stated as follows: The crowd threw stones because the police fired, or the police fired because the crowd threw stones." How important the causal connection was becomes clearer when one realizes that the Commission concluded that, however justified police action may have been in the face of real or imagined danger, "the

police action and the consequent fury and frustration [of the students] were the immediate cause of the acts of violence."¹¹⁸ It is all the more disturbing—because of the reassurance that clarity might provide—that the exact sequence of events that followed remains unclear.

Justice Cillié distinguished between Soweto and the rest of the "West Rand,"¹¹⁹ including the "Black residential areas" or townships of Kagiso, to which news of the uprising in Soweto had spread by the late afternoon of June 16. In Alexandra, young people began putting up barriers in the streets during the afternoon of June 17, and violent confrontations began the morning of June 18. The West Rand also included such white residential areas as Johannesburg, Yeoville, Benrose, Florida, Culembeeck, Roodepoort, and Krugersdorp. In the streets of Johannesburg on June 17, a new group of participants entered the conflict. Two hundred students from the predominantly white University of the Witwatersrand marched through the streets of central Johannesburg to demonstrate "about the fate of Soweto."¹²⁰ Although there was some immediate if haphazard support from the Coloured communities (Lenasia and Noordgesicht near Johannesburg), which gathered momentum in the Coloured communities in the Cape, there would be only one other show of white solidarity across the South African color line. On Friday morning, June 18, in an apparent gesture of solidarity, Black Power slogans were written on the blackboards of classrooms at the Nassau High School in the white residential area of Mowbray,¹²¹ and students of the predominantly white University of Cape Town demonstrated, carrying placards that read "Soweto Bleeds" and "Solidarity with Soweto."

Notes:

Note 117: James Kruger, minister of justice and police, statement before Parliament, 16 June 1976, *The World*, 17 June 1976.

Note 118: *Cillié Report*, 1:113 and 119.

Note 119: This covered the entire administrative area of the West Rand Bantu Administration excluding Soweto.

Note 120: *Cillié Report*, 1:152.

Note 121: In his report, Cillié notes that "signs of breaking and entering and of arson were noticed" (*Cillié Report*, 1:261), leaving open the possibility that the slogans might not have been written by white students.