

Chapter 3

Official Stories

Telling Soweto, June 16, 1976—The Appropriation of the People's Story into Official Histories

Part 4: The Last Official Narrative: The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)

The third official narrative was much removed in time from the official discourses that emerged in the immediate aftermath of the uprising. The *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (TRC) was initially poised to consider the uprising at one of its "Special Hearings," thus highlighting its place in the narrative of resistance and opening the space for a major investigation of the uprising. But it revisited the events and main actors in the story; heard some of those who had suffered harm during the uprising and considered their humble requests for help; and, in the end, placed it as a chapter in a more general overview of the narrative of resistance.

Among the five types of hearings the Truth and Reconciliation Commission conducted, the 1976 Soweto uprising was categorized as an "event" hearing, which was going to focus:

not on the individual experiences of victims, but on specific events in which gross violations of human rights occurred. These hearings explored the context in which a specific event occurred and typically involved testimony not only from victims but also from alleged perpetrators and experts with specific knowledge about the event or issues related to it. These hearings were selected as 'window cases' and aimed to provide detailed insights into particular incidents that were representative of broader patterns of abuse.²⁶⁴

Initially, the Commission distinguished between "Event Hearings"²⁶⁵ and "Special Hearings"²⁶⁶ (Volume 1, Chapter 6). Later those were grouped together into "Theme and event hearings"²⁶⁷ (Volume 1, Chapter 10). In the end, it is telling that—on the official website of the TRC—the Soweto uprising no longer featured among the "Special Hearings Transcripts" but rather under the geographically organized "Victim Hearings." This refocused attention on the individual experience of the uprising but failed adequately to place it in the "context in which a specific event occurred." The TRC avoided "testimony ... from alleged perpetrators and experts with specific knowledge about the event or issues related to it," particularly the police officers stationed in Soweto at the time. It did not explore the interregional connections and national relevance that would have provided "detailed insights" into the way particular incidents were "representative of broader patterns of abuse," and would have allowed "affected communities and their representatives the opportunity to speak about collective experiences of

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abuse" with each other.²⁶⁸

The TRC heard testimony about the uprising July 22-26, 1996, very close to the twenty year anniversary of its beginning. The hearings were held in Soweto proper, in the Regina Mundi Church, place of worship, mourning and gathering for many during the uprising, although it too was violated by police bullets at the time. The venue placed the stories of the uprising literally back where it belonged, into the space and into the hands of the community that had provided its historical context. The TRC deliberately and self-consciously addressed itself to an inclusive audience of all South Africans, regardless of race, political persuasion or history. Present among the commissioners and committee members at the start of these hearings was Tom Manthata, acting member of the Reparation Committee, but also former activist during the uprising. The moment was thus heavy with symbolism and the weight of the moment:



Regina Mundi Church, Soweto.

Today is a very special day for the Truth Commission. For many of us Soweto '76 is a time remembered in our history. We know the evidence that has gone to previous commissions, however, what we want to do today is to get the story behind Soweto. The story of the human beings who lived in Soweto.²⁶⁹

Despite what the TRC calls the "unprecedented significance of the event," and the fact that it convened a special hearing on the uprising, in the TRC *Report* the uprising is described in Volume 3, Chapter 6 under "Regional Profile: Transvaal, 1976-1982." Perhaps the fact that a "relatively small number of submissions [were] received for this period" explains the lesser prominence that is given the uprising in the *Report*.²⁷⁰ This "demotion" raises interesting questions about the role of the Soweto uprising in South Africa's collective memory, and about the possibility of still unresolved doubts about weaknesses of the youth movement, and the lingering—and connected—discomfort of the new government with the absence of the ANC during that time, their failure to adequately recognize and come to the aid of an increasingly embattled generation. This is made more poignant by the fact that, in the end, a relatively small, if significant number of student activists from the uprising were able to parlay their experiences into positions of prominence and power, while many of their comrades, and especially the next generation of youth activists whom they inspired but who suffered dramatically more violent repression, died, went into exile, or continue to struggle in difficult circumstances. Continuing ambivalence about the importance of the *Black Consciousness* movement, as well as the PAC—both only given somewhat cautiously-worded acknowledgment in the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission*

Report—may also be part of the explanation why the Soweto uprising gets a somewhat superficial treatment by the TRC. The TRC reported that:

The PAC *claims* in its submission to be at least partially responsible for the Soweto uprising in 1976. Mr Zephaniah Mothopeng, at the time an "internal leadership member of the banned PAC", was tried with seventeen others in the Bethal 18 'secret trial' for their role in "fermenting revolution" and for "being behind the Soweto uprising". Mothopeng and others were jailed for their alleged involvement. [Emphasis added.]²⁷¹

About the *Black Consciousness* Movement, organized in SASO and the Black People's Convention (BPC), the TRC says: **290**

It was influential in the formulation and propagation of new ideas that critiqued the apartheid government and began to create the organisational and intellectual framework through which it could be substantively challenged. Morobe, who joined South African Students' Movement (SASM) in 1973, gives a unique insight into perceptions of Black Consciousness organisations at this time. Morobe saw Black Consciousness organisations as necessary to fill the political and organisational vacuum left by the exiled liberation movement, rather than as a competing ideological force. The ethos of Black Consciousness was not seen as incompatible with the political philosophy of the ANC or PAC.²⁷²

Reasons for this ambivalence must be sought in the schisms and internal divisions (generational, political) against which the resistance movements in South Africa were not immune and which do not sit well with the heroic story of resistance. Morobe could deliver this unique insight because he came out of the *Black Consciousness* tradition himself, only joining the ANC and the UDF later in the 1980s. As a participant/eyewitness of the uprising and because of his later loyalty to the ANC, he was therefore not only a knowledgeable but safe witness for the TRC. It is striking that, though the TRC undoubtedly carefully and caringly heard the testimony of those who suffered human rights violations as a result of the uprising, it based its finding mostly on the testimony of student leaders and very prominent eyewitnesses to the events. The list of speakers before the TRC reads like the who's who of the uprising.

Ultimately, the TRC Commission has nothing really new to contribute to our understanding of the uprising. The TRC *Report* reiterates the accepted view that:

Students at the Morris Isaacson School in Soweto played a leading role in raising awareness and organising among students. It also produced some of the organisers of the 16 June protest, including Mr *Murphy Morobe* and Mr *Tsietsi Mashinini*.²⁷³

It failed to take account of the *Counter-Memories of June 1976* which, Sifiso Ndlovu has argued, show that we "wrongly assume that the students of Morris **295**

Isaacson High School ... played a crucial role in events leading up to 16 June 1976." Instead, Ndlovu and his former fellow students claimed, they and other students at Phefeni Junior Secondary School "were the actual champions of their own struggles." Unlike the senior high school students, "the Tsietsies²⁷⁴ of those early days" who "simply went on with their studies in March, April, May and early June 1976 without questioning the status quo," it was the junior students—those most likely to be affected by the Afrikaans ruling—who had the determination to organize protests beforehand and to plan for the first march on Wednesday, June 16:

... this move was not achieved through the efforts of the SASM or any liberation movement. *Subsequently* all the secondary and high schools in Soweto became part of the process.[Emphasis added.]²⁷⁵

While thus tentatively acknowledging the role of the PAC and the BCM and the students themselves, the TRC clearly sought to emphasize the role of the ANC and its efforts to connect with and be helpful to the students in their time of need rather than simply acknowledge the students' determination. According to the TRC, Joe Gqabi, a Robben Island veteran and ANC activist "played a central mentoring role in Soweto during the 1970s, both before and after the June 1976 protest" and continued to do so with students turning to him "as violence escalated after 16 June ... for advice about how to handle an increasingly difficult situation."²⁷⁶

The language of this more detailed 30-page account of the uprising seems at odds with the decisiveness of the "National Overview, 1974-1979: The collapse of the buffer and the re-emergence of internal opposition" in an earlier volume of the *TRC Report*:

The liberation movements did not play a military role in the events that began on 16 June 1976. Although a limited number of ANC underground activists attempted to give some direction through the spread of propaganda, the youth involved in these events were influenced by Black Consciousness ideology on the one hand, while responding to genuine grievances on the other. The ANC did, however, benefit from the events of 1976 and 1977, as it was the only liberation movement able to absorb, train, educate and direct the thousands of youth who left South Africa as a direct result of these events. MK established its second battalion from these new recruits, who were sent to Angola for training in the newly established bases there.²⁷⁷

In many ways, and similar to the Cillie Commission, the TRC was overtaken by **300** events that followed, dominated by more recent concerns even if the uprising, like the Sharpeville massacre, formed the starting point or frame of reference for many. Even the hearings dedicated specifically to the uprising (22-26 July 1996) were quickly overshadowed by more pressing issues:

The first two days of this hearing focused on the events of the 1976 student uprising. Many activists and observers of that time made submissions about the activities and repression of the uprising. *The rest of the hearing heard about a wide range of violations, including allegations of murder against Ms Madikizela-Mandela by the Sono and Tshabalala families.*[Emphasis added.]²⁷⁸

Although the TRC tracked the influence of the Soweto uprising (*Report*, Volume 3)—what it called the "ripple effect of the 1976 uprising"²⁷⁹—and many witnesses all over the country framed their testimony in terms of those events, it did not conduct special hearings in those areas (KwaZulu/Natal, Eastern Cape, Orange Free State; because of the intensity of the reaction in the Coloured community of the Western Cape, the *Report* does devote a separate section to the role of the 1976 uprising in this region) that might have helped trace the lines of connection among students and between organizations and regions. Such an analysis would have been of great importance considering the geographic segregation and restrictions on movement that the apartheid government had sought increasingly to impose on black South Africans. The uprising and the speed with which students and youth across the country joined its call, directly, and perhaps for the first time, contradicted these segregationist and divisive tactics of the government on a broad scale.

Nature of the TRC Commission Hearings (as opposed to the Cillié Commission):

The TRC Commission was self-consciously aware of the weight of the institutional setting it created as well of the all-too-readily made comparisons to previous Commissions.

By holding public hearings or granting private interviews, the Commission attempted to diminish the legal, and at times adversarial, nature of its work and to focus on the restorative and therapeutic dimensions of its mandate. Witnesses were not cross-examined by the Commission and, unless there were glaring inconsistencies and falsehoods, their oral testimony was generally accepted. As a result, the interaction of the vast majority of victims with the Commission was a positive and affirming experience. This meant, however, that at times not all relevant information was obtained when the victim testified in public, placing an additional burden on those attempting to corroborate the statement at a later stage. In general, the Commission sought to be both therapeutic in its processes and rigorous in its findings, but some- times the effort to satisfy one objective made it more difficult to attain the other.²⁸⁰

Dr. Russel Ally, one of the commissioners, quickly reassured Sophie Thema's **305** during her testimony at the TRC that—in comparison to her experience with the Cillié Commission—"This is not the Cillier's [sic] Commission. You can stay as long [as you want]...."²⁸¹

Conclusion

These discourses were by no means static but fluid and mutable according to the changing events shaping them. In some cases, such as that of the Cillié Report, the discourse was recorded and published as a text and, at least in that form, was momentarily fixed. The changeful nature of the discourse of the apartheid state would be exemplified by the fate of that report. It had been eagerly awaited, and the many delays in its publication had given rise to many irate questions, especially in Parliament. By the time it was tabled there, though, in 1980, several years had passed and events had literally and figuratively overtaken it. As noted above, the apartheid government now faced the Information Scandal, a new crisis of legitimacy brought about by the misuse and abuse of national funds—white taxpayers' money—for secret propaganda purposes. It was a scandal that reached even into the highest levels of government and eventually led to the resignation of the prime minister, Balthazar John Vorster. How little had changed was to become apparent just a few years later, in the mid-1980s when protesters—again, mostly young students and those whose schooling had been rudely interrupted—took up where the young activists of the uprising had left off to once again challenge the apartheid administration vowing to achieve "liberation before education."

In the ANC's version of this history of the uprising, there was no single narrative but one that has changed, over time and in content, with its identification with struggles internal to the ANC. Histories of the ANC, especially those that address the 1970s, are reflective of the division between exile and home, of internal divisions around the relationship with the PAC, *Black Consciousness*, and the South African Communist Party, and of divisions relating to generation and gender.

While the ANC never actually discounted the young rebels, it also did not illuminate what Guha has called "that consciousness which is called insurgency."²⁸² The ANC used the stories of Soweto as a "datum in the life-story" of resistance and struggle against apartheid. Just as the description of causes, including those relating to local and regional politics, was no more than a structural requirement for providing a continuum of context and perspective into which the uprising and its meaning for the state could be placed (and made into just one more contained episode in the life story of apartheid), so too the stories of the uprising (portrayed as the mobilization of the masses) and the many echoes of and ties to previous struggles and issues served admirably to register the uprising on the trajectory of resistance—to register it as a necessary step on the revolutionary path to liberation. Somewhere along the way, the stories, the perspective, the identities, and the subjective will and consciousness of the historical protagonists of the uprising were lost, subsumed into someone else's master narrative, appropriated to serve someone else's purpose.

In the official narrative of this resistance movement, the youth were largely

celebrated as heroes. In a *Counter-memories of June 1976* (published in 1998), Sifiso Mxolisi Ndlovu cautioned against subsuming "the efforts of young, ordinary students ... under the dominant liberation theory or movement of that particular time in history" and argued that, "if this research [whose aim is to locate student protests within a broader context] is done at the expense of day-to-day student experiences and other influences that existed within the schools and classrooms," it becomes highly problematic.²⁸³

The student participants could do little to counter the representations of the state **310** published in the Cillié Report or as quotes attributed to government officials in the newspapers. But, as will be shown in the next chapter, the students *did* make themselves heard, and they were mindful that the population of Soweto, even as it looked, with what Gail Gerhart has called "an awed respect," to the students for direction, knew little about them or about the movement's leadership.²⁸⁴ They published leaflets and speeches, arranged meetings, and asked for the mediation of the *Black Parents' Association* and other "adult" organizations. From the outset, the SSRC (Soweto Students' Representative Council) actively engaged the instruments of public opinion. When it was claimed in an article in *The World* that the SSRC had requested that UBC buildings be stoned, the SSRC quickly countered.

We categorically reject and denounce the statement which appeared on the World's morning edition... It [the request] was not issued by the council or a council member. The culprit was seen in a green chev[rolet] 4100 in the company of the police. He was identified by other students as a police informer.²⁸⁵

Tsietsi Mashinini realized that the Action Committee, which had organized the march that took place on the morning of June 16, needed simultaneously to broaden its base and expand its leadership (from the dozen who had constituted it originally). Realizing also that the leadership faced a responsibility to continue what they had started, he called a meeting for August 2, 1976, at Morris Isaacson High School. There the Action Committee renamed itself the Soweto Students' Representative Council (SSRC) and agreed that it would be made up of eighty students, two from each of the 40 Soweto schools.

The students knew who their real leaders were. A pamphlet issued by the SSRC on September 7 boldly proclaimed, "We say to all black students, residents and hostel inmates: *You know your true leaders*. Listen to your leaders. Support your leaders. Follow your leaders."²⁸⁶ Among them was *Seth Mazibuko* for example, who was detained in August 1976 and released after 289 days. Almost immediately *Murphy Morobe* replaced him as vice chairman of the SSRC. Although Mazibuko was, as he wrote in a letter in 1977, "still highly wanted by the very same Police who claim to have released me by mistake,"²⁸⁷ he was elected

national vice president of SASM (*South African Students' Movement*) after his release in May 1977. Mazibuko, Morobe, and Dan Montsisi were three of the most important student leaders to be imprisoned on Robben Island in 1979. The importance of their role as student leaders will become clear in Sam Mashaba's story in the next chapter. Their leadership is evidence of the fluid links not only between such student groups such as SASM and the SSRC but also between city and countryside. That they were leaders of intelligence and courage is indisputable, as is the centrality of their standing in the student movement.

Twenty years later *Murphy Morobe* himself, speaking before the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, would point out that sometimes when history "happens" it is "a big blur, it is a lot of activity," especially when it is experienced from within. It was at such times in history that the importance of individual people who transformed themselves into leaders became clear:

[T]he important thing in history is that there are individuals at critical points that play certain important roles in terms of helping the process to move forward.²⁸⁸

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But not all participants were leaders, and an exclusive focus on their stories would be misleading and one-sided. The stories of those whom changing times and political dispensations have not swept into positions of political leadership and prominence—the stories of those who were the foot soldiers, who were more ambivalent or less experienced, or whom circumstances then and later removed from the inner circles of student power—make up the grit, the detail, and the many layers of the experience of Soweto. Sibongile M. Mkhabela, a student at Naledi Senior Secondary School in 1976, was one of the few girls elected to the Action Committee, which planned the march against Afrikaans on June 13, 1976. "Up until you affirm, recognize, and affirm the efforts of ordinary people, you have actually missed the point,"²⁸⁹ she said twenty years later. It is to these extraordinary "ordinary" voices that I turn in the next chapter.

Notes:

Note 264: Truth and Reconciliation Commission, "Methodology and Processes," in *Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report*, Volume 1, Chapter 6 (New York: Macmillan, 1998), 8-9.

Note 265: These were the following: a The 1976 Soweto student uprising; b The 1986 Alexandra six-day war that followed attacks on councilors; c The KwaNdebele/Moutse homeland incorporation conflict; d The killing of farmers in the former Transvaal; e The 1985 Trojan Horse ambush by the security forces in the Western Cape; f The 1986 killing of the 'Gugulethu Seven', following security force infiltration of African National Congress (ANC) structures in the Western Cape; g The 1990 Seven-Days War, resulting from IFP-ANC clashes in the Pietermaritzburg area; h The Caprivi Trainees, who were trained by the South African Defence Force (SADF) and deployed in KwaZulu-Natal as a covert paramilitary force in 1986; i The 1960 Pondoland Rebellion, in response to the imposition of the Bantu Authorities Act which prepared the way for the independent homelands; j The 1992 Bisho Massacre, in response to an ANC

national campaign for free political activity in the homelands. Source: Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report, Volume 1, Chapter 6, 9.

Note 266: These were: a Children and youth; b Women; c Compulsory national service (conscription). Source: *Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report*, Volume 1, Chapter 6, 9.

Note 267: These were: a women as subjects of gross human rights violations; b youth and children; c Caprivi trainees in KwaZulu-Natal; d Moutse/KwaNdebele incorporation conflict; e Soweto 1976; f the killing of the 'Guguletu Seven'; g the 'Bisho massacre'; h the 'Seven Day War' in KwaShange/Imbali in 1990; i the 'Trojan horse' incident (Athlone, Cape Town); j the issue of compulsory military service; k the special hearing on the disappearance of Sipiwe Mthimkulu in the Eastern Cape. Source: *Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report*, Volume 1, Chapter 10, 9.

Note 268: Truth and Reconciliation Commission, "Methodology and Processes," in Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report, Volume 1, Chapter 6, 8-9.

Note 269: Jasmin Sooka, Commissioner, Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 22 July 1996, Soweto Hearings, Day 1. (human rights violations submissions & transcripts, Hearing Transcripts, Johannesburg, Antoinette Sithole [accessed 2 June 2004]).

Note 270: Truth and Reconciliation Commission, "Regional Profile: Transvaal, 1976-1982" in *Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report*, Volume 3, Chapter 6, 556.

Note 271: Truth and Reconciliation Commission, "National Overview: The Development of Insurgency and Counter-Insurgency Strategies 1960-1990," in *Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report*, Volume 2, Chapter 1, 24.

Note 272: Truth and Reconciliation Commission, "Regional Profile: Transvaal, 1976-1982" in *Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report*, Volume 3, Chapter 6, 589-590.

Note 273: Truth and Reconciliation Commission, "Regional Profile: Transvaal, 1976-1982" in *Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report*, Volume 3, Chapter 6, 556. The TRC also reported that "the march was initiated by pupils from Naledi and Thomas Mofolo high schools," 558.

Note 274: Tsietsi Mashinini was a prominent student leader of the Soweto Students' Representative Council (SSRC), formed in August 1976, who was among those who fled the country in the wake of the Soweto uprising.

Note 275: Sifiso Ndlovu, *The Soweto Uprisings: Counter-memories of June 1976* (Randburg: Ravan Press, 1998), 15.

Note 276: Truth and Reconciliation Commission, "Regional Profile: Transvaal, 1976-1982" in *Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report*, Volume 3, Chapter 6, 589.

Note 277: Truth and Reconciliation Commission, "National Overview/The Development of Insurgency and Counter-Insurgency Strategies 1960-1990/1974-1978: The collapse of the buffer and the re-emergence of internal opposition," in *Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report*, Volume 2, Chapter 1, 24.

Note 278: Truth and Reconciliation Commission, "Regional Office Reports, Johannesburg Office, Work of the Commission, Hearings in the Johannesburg Region," in *Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report*, Volume 1, Chapter 12, 442.

Note 279: Truth and Reconciliation Commission, "Regional Profile, Western Cape, 1976-1982, The 1976 Uprising," in *Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report*, Volume 3, Chapter 5, 413.

Note 280: Truth and Reconciliation Commission, "Methodology and Processes," in *Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report*, Volume 1, Chapter 6, 7.

Note 281: "[At the Cillie Commission] ... my experience was that questions were actually being put to me. I was not given the opportunity to express myself like I am doing now. I had to respond to the questions that were being put to me, but I was quite happy because here and there I managed to sort of, you know, add what I felt that people needed to know." Sophie Thema, testimony before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 23 July 1996, Soweto Hearings, Day 2. (human rights violations submissions & transcripts, Hearing Transcripts, Johannesburg, Sophie Thema [accessed 2 June 2004]).

Note 282: Guha, "Prose of Counter-insurgency," 18.

Note 283: See Sifiso Mxolisi Ndlovu, *The Soweto Uprisings: Counter-memories of June 1976* (Randburg: Ravan Press, 1998), 46.

Note 284: Karis and Gerhart, *Nadir and Resurgence, 1964-1979*, vol. 5 of *From Protest to Challenge*, 170.

Note 285: Nina Sabela, notebook, draft of press statement, handwritten, evidence confiscated by the South African Police, SAB WLD 6857 (1977), *WRAB v. Santam*, vol. 436.

Note 286: Soweto Students' Representative Council (SSRC), flyer, "To All Residents of Soweto, Hostel, Reef and Pretoria," 7 September 1976.

Note 287: Seth Mazibuko to Father Kearns, handwritten letter, dated 17 October 1977, confiscated by the South African Police during the raid of the premises of SASM (South African Students' Movement) at 505 Lekton House, Johannesburg, 19 October 1977; SAB WLD 6857 (1977), *WRAB v. Santam*, vol. 413.

Note 288: Murphy Morobe, testimony before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Human Rights Violations, Submissions—Questions and Answers, 23 July 1996, case: Soweto, Johannesburg, day 2. Transcript available at Truth and Reconciliation Commission, (Human Rights Violations, Hearings and Submissions; Hearing Transcripts; Johannesburg; Victim Hearings; Murphy Morobe [accessed 3 September 2004])

Note 289: Sibongile M. Mkhabela in *Two Decades ... Still, June 16*, film produced by Loli Repanis, directed by Khalo Carlo Matabane, for SABCTV, aired 16 June 1996, twenty years after the uprising.