

Chapter 5

Afrikaans

"We Are Fed the Crumbs of Ignorance with Afrikaans as a Poisonous Spoon"—Historical Context and Precipitating Factors

Afrikaans: Precipitating Factor?

At first everyone focused on the Afrikaans issue.

The Urban Bantu Council, UBC

On June 19, 1976, in an effort to halt the violence and prevent renewed disorder and tragedy, a delegation of eleven black leaders met with a seven-man team of government Bantu Administration and Bantu Education officials who were headed by M. C. Botha, the minister of Bantu Administration and Development. Several of the Soweto leaders carefully expressed their criticism of not having been heard earlier when they had appealed to government officials to bring to the minister's notice the seriousness of the situation regarding the language issue in Soweto.²⁴ Most of

the members of the Urban Bantu Council came to the meeting, in the words of Urban Bantu councilor L. Mlonzi, "with their caps in hand, pleading for mercy and the good judgment of the Minister." Declaring that they too were "extremely shocked by the "vandalism" in Soweto, that this was "purely the action of children," they assured the minister that "it was not a question of not wanting to have Afrikaans taught as a subject in the schools" but that "the *children were finding it difficult* to do certain difficult subjects in Afrikaans" (emphasis added)²⁵ Councilor L. Mosala agreed, and he "pleaded" with the minister not to view the request for the suspension of Afrikaans as "animosity of the Blacks towards Afrikaans" but rather as a consequence of the "*inability of teachers*" to teach difficult subjects in Afrikaans. "The children and the teachers were happy to have Afrikaans as a subject," he said (emphasis added).²⁶ R. J. Maponya also assured the minister that "Afrikaans was not hated," and, without assigning responsibility, he expressed the opinion that "irreparable [sic] damage" had been done to race relations in South Africa.²⁷ Only M. T. Moerane, a member of the Association for the Educational and Cultural Advancement of the African People (ASSECA),²⁸ went so far as to say that "Black leaders were satisfied that the indiscriminate action of the South African Police officers started the problems on 16 June." Many issues needed attention, he declared, "but those are not as important as the language question." The delegation appealed to the government to issue a directive



"The Honkies are provoking the Black Society 1. Mnr. Conrck 2. Spyker de Wet 3. Geldenhuys 4. Visser All we want is the release of all detainees. U.B.C's are the extation [extension] of this corupt government." [sic]

suspending the use of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction.²⁹

The State

The minister, "moved by the earnestness of the statements by the members" of the delegation, explained the policy in regard to Bantu education:

(1) There is no such thing as compulsion by the Department for the use of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction, ... The basic truth is that the Department gives the principals the opportunity to apply for exemption where difficulty is experienced with the medium of instruction.

(2) English can be used as a medium of instruction for all subjects, provided extra time is allocated to the other language.

(3) Afrikaans can be used for all subjects, and again, extra time must be allowed for English as a subject.³⁰

He expressed his regret at what had happened in Soweto, assuring the "scholars," through the delegation, of his "sympathy for the loss of life and damage to property." The discussion with the council members had "satisfied" him that the violence and destruction of property "was due to a misunderstanding, but to err is human." He told the deputation of black representatives that "the population of the Republic cannot live with the gun and the assegai."³¹ In a curious mixture of prevarication and condescension, a joint statement issued after this meeting said that "the tragedies in Soweto were caused by misunderstanding and confusion over the application of the 50-50 principle and that schools could apply to deviate from the principle."³²

Finally, in response to increasing pressure, the minister in early July issued a **30** statement that effectively withdrew the offending policy:

Although ideally both official languages should be used as media of instruction, it is still necessary to approve deviations on the grounds of prevailing circumstances.

Taking due cognizance of the fundamental principles involved, of practical circumstances, of the course that the medium question has followed over the past twenty years and of recent submissions by various bodies, it is the Department's intention to effect certain changes in procedure.

At each secondary school and higher primary school with Std. 5, the following options are open with regard to the medium of instruction:—

—English as medium (with additional attention to Afrikaans as a subject) and with the mother tongue as the medium in subjects where practicable.

—Afrikaans as medium (with additional attention to English as a subject) and with the mother tongue as the medium in subjects where practicable.

—Afrikaans and English as media in various subjects with the mother tongue as the medium in subjects where practicable.³³

That night, on government-controlled South African Television, still new to most South Africans at the time, M. C. Botha, in an apparent bid to save face, said that there had always been a choice in the medium of instruction and that it had simply been confusion over the interpretation and implementation of policy that had caused the problem. H. H. Dlamane, secretary-general of the African Teachers' Association of South Africa (ATASA), was outraged at this continued equivocation. He issued a statement that there had been no "confusion," that the issue had been forced, and that in Department of Bantu Education circulars it had been stated quite categorically that social studies and mathematics must be taught through the medium of Afrikaans.³⁴ Protests and confrontations continued in the townships, as did consultations between government officials and those whom they recognized as representatives of the people, such as teachers, school principals, and members of the Urban Bantu Councilors. Some urban African leaders became more outspoken. In a handwritten note appended to a document titled "Memorandum on the Medium of Instruction in African Schools under Bantu Education" and issued by the African Teachers' Association of South Africa (ATASA) on June 25, 1976, there was reference to a "disastrous confusion of officials of the Education Department." In the note, W. C. Ackerman, regional director of Bantu Education of the Southern Transvaal, and de Beer, Circuit Inspector, were accused of "wrongfully enforcing Afrikaans ... in the teeth of opposition by the African people," actions that had caused the "current disastrous situation."³⁵

Botha's handling of the Afrikaans question was reflected in all of the official accounts. Ironically it was one of the official voices, though, that introduced the first note of doubt that Afrikaans alone was to blame for the uprising. The minister of police, Jimmy Kruger, said before Parliament on Thursday, June 17, 1976:

The alleged cause of the riots in Soweto was the fact that the students did not want to accept tuition in Afrikaans for certain subjects. The question arises whether they did not merely use the *language as a convenient excuse* for starting the riots. The principle of secondary education in both Afrikaans and English on a 50-50 basis has existed ever since 1955, and we have never had any difficulty with it. The true position in regard to the tuition in senior secondary education in Soweto is that 95% of the tuition is given through the medium of English, with less than 5% in Afrikaans. It is strange that this should now be a cause of riots of this nature. It is a fact, and I want to state it as a fact, that of the seven schools that participated in the protest march and initiated the arson, six received tuition only in English and Afrikaans is not even used. If one considers those facts, one is entitled to ask: Why did the schools receiving tuition only in English, begin to march. (my emphasis)³⁶

Kruger's words reflected a simplistic understanding of the organizational tactics of the students, a crude disregard for their abilities (even Judge Cillie had grudgingly voiced his respect for them)³⁷ or, more cynically, a deliberate ignorance of the mood of resistance and political consciousness-raising that had gathered momentum in schools and the community.³⁸ This statement also introduced the idea that there was more at stake here than the question of Afrikaans as the medium of instruction in African schools. Following official logic, Kruger quickly blamed the "riots" on outside agitators, hypothesizing that "surely this is the sign of the Communist Party."³⁹

The Opposition in Parliament

Colin Eglin, liberal member of the opposition in Parliament, understood the power of this issue. "In this highly emotional, politically explosive area [race discrimination], symbolism is also important," he said, and expressed his outrage at the "insensitivity and arrogance" of the minister and the deputy minister of education, whom he accused of being "so enthralled with their own ideology," "so hopelessly out of touch with the mood of the people in a place like Soweto," that they had allowed the issue of Afrikaans to "slide" and the inevitable confrontation to "develop before their very eyes."⁴⁰ In addition they had exhibited "unbelievable cynicism" when they commented in *Die Burger*, an Afrikaans-language newspaper, on the morning after the beginning of the uprising:

In die Blankegebied van Suid-Afrika, waar die Regering betaal, is dit sekerlik ons reg om die taalbedeling te bepaal...Hoekom word leerlinge na skole gestuur as die taalbedeling hulle nie aanstaan nie?

In the white areas of South Africa, where the government pays, it is surely our right to determine the language dispensation...Why are students sent to school if the language dispensation does not please them?⁴¹

The ANC

On the other side of the political spectrum, the ANC, through its secretary-general, Alfred Nzo, writing with a delay of three months and from the distance of ANC exile headquarters in Dar es Salaam, also placed the uprising in a larger context of resistance and causes by referring to the fact that the uprising had not remained contained to Soweto, which was most directly affected by the new language policy. It had drawn expressions and actions of support all over the country, most remarkably from Colored youth in the Cape Province, who spoke Afrikaans as a first language and therefore viewed its imposition in schools as the language of instruction as not necessarily politically relevant:⁴²

The current struggle has already taken various forms testifying to the deep political content of the revolt which, at the beginning, our enemies of all hues had sought to conveniently shrug off as mere angry protests by the students against the imposition of the Afrikaans

language as a medium of instruction in African schools.

[...]

What augurs well for the future development of our revolutionary struggle for seizure of political power has been the growing militant solidarity between the various Black sections of our population. It was impossible even for the enemy press and the various spokesmen and apologists of the racist regime to ignore the united actions of the African and Coloured youth in Cape Town whose mighty step down the streets of that city caused the racist white minority [to] scurry from the scene like frightened rats into their holes.⁴³

With decidedly more rhetorical force, Oliver Tambo, pointed out that "*for months* before 16 June the African student youth of South Africa had protested not only against the enforced use of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction *but also against the whole system of Bantu education*" (emphasis added). He accused the "fascist tyranny in our country" of a by-now common and typical dismissal of the voices and grievances "of the students and the people as a whole," compounded in the government's response to this protest with the cold-blooded use of "tear gas bombs and gun bullets."⁴⁴

A more immediate response came from Winnie Mandela, although, as we have seen, her position between the ANC and Black Consciousness was ambiguous. The *Rand Daily Mail* reported on June 17 that Winnie Mandela, whom they identified as "wife of Robben Island prisoner Nelson Mandela," thus firmly establishing her identification with the ANC, had said that the issue at the heart of the uprising had "very little to do with Afrikaans. [...] The language issue is merely the spark that lit the resentment that is building up among Black people. Every car that looked like a White man's car was burned. That had nothing to do with Afrikaans."⁴⁵

It was not surprising that everyone had something to say about the causes of the uprising, each particular version heavily determined not simply by a need to contain or understand the protests or prevent further outbreaks but also by the political intent of its proponent. The suddenness and scale of the protests and violence had taken everyone—not just the South African police in Soweto—by surprise, and, without a doubt, the debates reflected both the need to impose order and control over these events and the need to understand and make sense of what had happened. That it had happened in a larger historical and geographic context was probably easier to see for those like ANC historian, Francis Meli, who wrote with the distance provided by time and geography:

Within South Africa, the revolutionary fervour unleashed by these examples of black liberation [independence of Mozambique and Angola] exploded in the Soweto uprising of 1976. What triggered it off was the instruction by the Minister of Bantu Education that half the subjects in

schools at Standards 5 and 6 be taught in Afrikaans—the language of oppression.⁴⁶

The Press

The brewing anger over Afrikaans, as well as some of the protest actions taken by students at the affected schools, was not secret or hidden behind the boundaries that usually separated whites and blacks. The dissatisfaction was reported in an extra edition of the *Rand Daily Mail*. Under the heading "Peta Suggests School Boycott," the newspaper reported that the businessman and school-board member had said, "We have to be militant to be understood. We have been docile for too long. If the Department says no to our demands, our children must stay away from schools next year."⁴⁷

At the May meeting of SASM (South African Students Movement) at Wilgespruit 40 in Roodepoort, there was discussion of the ongoing protests in some schools over the Afrikaans issue. This meeting was reported by the *Rand Daily Mail*,⁴⁸ which, in a long article published as early as April, also reported that Afrikaans was a "burden on too few teachers."⁴⁹ On June 6, 1976, Martin Mahlaba reported that strikes were spreading throughout Soweto and that "students at the Senaoane Junior Secondary School left classes yesterday morning when they were told they were required to study history and mathematics in Afrikaans."⁵⁰

On the day that the uprising began, *The World* editorialized that there was a "Need for Cool Heads over Language Row," as its headline read. The editorial began with a warning, attributed to Urban Bantu councilor Leonard Mosala, that was to be prophetic:

[A]nother "Sharpeville" type incident could develop in Soweto over the controversial Afrikaans medium of instruction... .

What should have particularly disturbed parents is their apparent lack of control over their children. We agree entirely with Mr Mosala's analysis that many kids have lost respect for their elders. They see us as people whose dignity and pride has been hurt and who have seemingly lost the will to resist injustice.

Our children's stand suggests that these kids are giving warning that they do not intend to suffer the same indignities. It should prompt a lot of soul searching among our people.

[...]

As for the Department of Bantu Education, an awful lot rests on their shoulders to act responsibly in the language controversy. They must realise that forcing Afrikaans down the throats of our people can only breed resentment.⁵¹

Even the Afrikaans-language newspaper, *Die Beeld*, understood the gravity of the

department's plans and published a series of articles. A headline for one of the opinion pieces in the *Die Beeld* in May 1976 read "*Moenie Afrikaans aan Swart skole opdwing nie*" (Don't impose Afrikaans on Black schools). Another article described efforts to mediate the mounting tension: "*Afvaardiging dalk na Minister—Afrikaans beveg in Soweto*" (Delegation possible [to see] minister—Afrikaans fought in Soweto). And it included the official response: "*Kinders sal geskors word*" (Children will be suspended).

"Not the True Cause...:" Analysis of the Literature

In addition to official responses in Parliament and news accounts, a variety of academic and intellectual accounts have addressed the Soweto uprising in what can be considered a set of tertiary discourses, removed from the actual events by time and experience but also by the nature of their academic, historical, or political analysis and the political background of their authors⁵². There have been five major analyses or accounts of these events since 1976: Kane-Berman (1978), Hirson (1979), Brooks and Brickhill (1980), Brewer (1986),⁵³ and the Cillie Report (1980).

Afrikaans seemed to me more important than this literature has allowed. Kane-Berman argued that

[a]ny attempt at an answer [to what caused the uprising] must assign overwhelming weight to the shooting itself. It instantly transformed a protest *which might otherwise have been confined* to the Afrikaans issue and to Soweto.⁵⁴

The uprising was as much a "spontaneous explosion of anger at the shootings," **45** he insisted, as a "violent protest against powerlessness, the consequence of months of frustration at the failure of the authorities to respond positively to repeated demands for the suspension of the Afrikaans decree."⁵⁵

But the students were no longer prepared to put up with that powerlessness. *Black Consciousness* had given them a sense of themselves. While there were still debates about what action to take, even about whether to take any action at all, tensions had been rising.⁵⁶ Black students were in revolt, therefore, not only against such specific aspects of policy as the Afrikaans decree but also against "apartheid in all its manifestations, and therefore the country's political system itself." The issue of Afrikaans and the shooting were, Kane-Berman argued, merely two of many straws that broke the camel's back.⁵⁷

Hirson called compulsory teaching in Afrikaans the "final straw."⁵⁸ Kane-Berman assigned Afrikaans lesser weight through a particular turn of phrase—"protest which might otherwise have been confined to the Afrikaans issue." In fact he gave *more* weight to the shooting, using the same metaphor as Hirson, when he

characterized *it* as the "last straw" of "countless other straws laid upon the camel's back."⁵⁹ Even Brooks and Brickhill, choosing a grammatical construction and idiom that took everything out of the hands and minds of student activists, ultimately called Afrikaans a "spark" that was "dropped" into the "powder keg of organised discontent" by the Department of Bantu Education.⁶⁰

Taking his cue from the theory of collective behavior, Brewer (1986) discounted the Afrikaans issue even more, giving preeminence to the "provocative action" of the police as the initial trigger and the "major" precipitating factor. Afrikaans, he concluded, was "insufficient on its own...*Something entirely different could have ignited the spark.*" Brewer rightly criticized other authors—those who attributed the uprising to communist agitators (Hitchcock)⁶¹ or who found the primary cause to have been intimidation by agitators (Cillié)—as "half suggesting that Africans themselves are incapable of initiating rational resistance" [my emphasis].⁶² However, he diminished the importance of student consciousness and capability by dismissing the Afrikaans issue in this way. He did, however, concede that serious clashes occurred "*when precipitating factors were sufficiently emotive ... and when the police responded with aggressive action*" [my emphasis].⁶³

Baruch Hirson, an exiled South African radical, called this issue "the language bombshell" when the minister of Bantu Education announced that the proposed changes in the language of instruction would be implemented in 1976:

In South Africa, the interconnection between what was happening in the schools, and in society, was transparently obvious to black students. The poverty and racism that permeated society, stalked them in the schools...the students understood only too well that what was happening in their schools, was happening in the country.⁶⁴

Hirson conceded the farsightedness of the students and their opposition and wrote about parent and student reaction as well as the meaning of the new policy, yet the term Afrikaans was not even listed in his index. Hirson described the factors that led to the "revolt" as interconnected, identifying Afrikaans as the final component that set the stage "for a massive confrontation."⁶⁵ The young leaders of SASO and the BPC, he wrote, were "inexperienced," they "seemed to respond *with the heart rather than with the mind.* They were able to *reflect* the black anger of the townships-but were unable to offer a viable political strategy" (emphasis added).⁶⁶ Although Hirson celebrated the "ingenuity" of students and their leaders, citing their "courageous" willingness to fight "on as best they could" surpassing "all expectations," in the end he attributed to them the violent emotion of "black anger" rather than thoughtful or planned "organisation, ideology or strategy." Quite aside from the fact that Hirson contradicted himself by describing the "will and determination" of the youth "to end the apartheid system,"⁶⁷ giving

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numerous and eloquent examples of the capacity of students to organize boycotts, articulate grievances, and rally support, at an analytical and conceptual level this approach amounted to a refusal "to acknowledge the insurgent as the subject of his own history,"⁶⁸ a refusal to acknowledge the students as thoughtful actors in their own history. In his rejection of the importance of the "philosophy of black consciousness," which, he argued, turned the students "away from an analysis of the South African state,"⁶⁹ he was in effect

abdicating the responsibility he has of exploring and describing the consciousness specific to that rebellion ... [which means] ... denying a will to the mass of rebels themselves and representing them merely as instruments of some other will.⁷⁰

In this particular case, however, Hirson wrote, somewhat patronizingly, "the fault was not theirs. A programme should have been formulated by the older leaders—and that they had failed to do."⁷¹ These assertions, based as they were in assumptions about age and competence, were, I argue, an even deeper slight to the abilities of the students and their leadership. Worse than simply "abdicating responsibility" to explore consciousness, he developed a systematic critique of the students' consciousness because it was Black Consciousness. He attributed to it an essentially negative historical importance—if it had any influence at all—in the way it lacked a resistance strategy and tended to immobilize and confuse a group that might otherwise have provided capable and mature leadership during the uprising.⁷² Some of the reasons for his position may have to be sought with Hirson's own ideological bias in favor of working-class militancy and with a narrow focus on organizational structures and institutions, a focus whereby he tended to judge the influence of ideas in terms of their potential to take shape in and guide formal organizational structures and affiliations.

Among these tertiary analyses written in the first years after the uprising, only those of Brooks and Brickhill considered "the Bantu Education system and its latest innovation, the enforcement of teaching in Afrikaans" as a "major root of the crisis, directly and peculiarly affecting a whole generation." Like Hirson and Kane-Berman, the authors devoted considerable space to a discussion of Bantu education and the school system. In the end, their analysis focused more on the "structural transformations" that were a result of the "wider political and economic imperatives" of the 1960s and early 1970s than on the understanding students might have had of the implications both of an education system deliberately geared "to the continued exploitation of a subject people" and of the profound meaning they would consequently have attributed to the "manifold shortcomings" and "intolerable conditions ... on the surface of their lives."⁷³ By attending to such structural implications, none of which, I would argue, were in the least unimportant, they nevertheless failed to fully appreciate the electrifying powers of the Afrikaans issue for the people who stood at the center of the uprising.

Discussion of the causes—contributing or precipitating—of the Soweto uprising was distinctly shaped by the agenda of its analysts, most of whom were white. These accounts might have divergent stories and competing discourses, but they were equally marked by their authoritative status, most clearly visible in the fact that they made it into print. It is astonishing (but perhaps not surprising, given the legacy of *Bantu Education* and almost 15 years of school boycotts and a severely disrupted education system) that, 30 years after the uprising, there is still no comprehensive academic or historical account written by a participant- or witness-historian.⁷⁴ None of these works have attempted such paths of inquiry as (1) a close social analysis of community support and interaction with the students, (2) an analysis of the specific nature of the uprising in rural and homeland settings, or (3) a more careful analysis of the relationship, or gap, between how events were reported and their social analysis and understanding. But they have more than that in common. Despite varying degrees of sympathy with the uprising (Kane-Berman, 1978; Hirson, 1979; Brewer, 1986; Brooks and Brickhill, 1980) or condemnation of it (Cillié Report, 1980), the five book-length nonfiction analyses of the Soweto uprising all, with the possible partial exception of Brooks and Brickhill,⁷⁵ failed to allow the participants to be subjects in their own history.

These radical, revolutionary, and antiapartheid discourses therefore remained trapped in the same paradigms as the "ideologically contrary" and because proapartheid—discourse of the Cillié Commission. They were all characterized, for different reasons, by an unwillingness to recognize the young rebel as the subject of his own history.⁷⁶ As we have seen, the students certainly did not speak with one voice. Their experiences were not all the same, and their actions and thoughts did not always conform to or suit the goals and practices of specific political organizations or leaders who were older or more established. Unable or unwilling to consider the students' consciousness, and certainly disinclined, mostly for political reasons, to acknowledge Black Consciousness, these writers, when considering the ambiguities and contradictions of student-resistance politics at this time, unanimously applauded their heroism but at the same time rationalized them as unorganized or out of control, as runaway violence, reaction rather than action, or a movement (or movements) without articulate goals or leadership.

Other factors that influenced this writing were the political sympathies or **55** ideological assumptions of the author, the distance in years from the historical events at the time of writing, and the point of view from the outside, especially in the case of exiled writers like Hirson and, to a much lesser extent, Brooks and Brickhill. The account by Kane-Berman, a white liberal journalist, was marked both by his proximity in time and place to the events he described (i.e., no historical distance) and by his obvious sympathy for the student movement. Those circumstances may also account for his outrage at the ruthlessness and violence with which the state reestablished its authority in the townships. Devastated by

the violence of the state, and moved by disappointment, Kane-Berman dismissed the impact of the uprising and the role of Afrikaans. He placed the blame squarely on the state. Despite that

[t]ime and again in their statements and their actions [the students] reveal an intelligence, a clear-sightedness, a reasonableness, an awareness of responsibility to the community, a morality, and an integrity that are little short of astonishing in view of the social, educational, and economic deprivations under which black South Africans live⁷⁷

Despite his careful analysis of the Black Consciousness movement and the SSRC, to him Soweto was, like Sharpeville, a "turning point at which South Africa did not turn." His concept of change was limited to "major change"—immediate, visible, and concrete—and to "the granting of new rights," not a point of view easily or happily served by such small "adjustments" and limited concession as the lifting of the Afrikaans decree early in July 1976.⁷⁸ Kane-Berman defined apartheid as "a comprehensive and technologically sophisticated system seeking continuing political and economic mastery of one race and class by another."⁷⁹ He described both its mechanisms and practices, such as banning, detention without trial, interrogation in secret, use of police power, influx control through Bantu Administration, and its ideas about mastery, control, regulation, surveillance, and secrecy. Kane-Berman included a few student voices, and yet, in the end, what he considered flaws of the movement convinced him that it was inadequate.⁸⁰ He took an outsider's point of view and judged by his own idealized categories: It should have been "planned insurrection with a country-wide organizational network, funds, and a series of strategies and fall-back positions worked out in advance," he wrote. He dismissed as ultimately "spontaneous" and "furious reaction" the "bravery, militancy, and *even the resourcefulness*" of the student movement (emphasis added).⁸¹ Rather than listen to or integrate the incongruities, contradictions, and inconsistencies in student action, planning and vision, he lumped the students' actions back in with the inchoate violence of a mass movement.

"Docile for Too Long:" The Cillié Report as a Record of Mounting Dissatisfaction over the Afrikaans Issue
Cillié Commission

The official discourses characterized Afrikaans as a precipitating factor in the uprising. The *Cillié* Report was, by virtue of its mandate from the state president to investigate (in the language of the Report's title) "Riots at Soweto and Elsewhere," the "official" co-opted version of events in Soweto and consequently sympathetic to and apologetic for state policy and police action. It commented on the "exceptional tension" that existed in Soweto in the weeks leading up to June 16 and spoke of "real fear" among township residents and "others concerned with their welfare" that there would be open opposition of students to Afrikaans and

that it could lead to "general disturbances and violence." It tracked in meticulous detail the "protests, school boycotts, stone-throwing, arson and protective police patrols" that had given students a "foretaste" of what was to come and that should have alerted education officials, police, and others to the "seriousness of the situation." But "clear signs of brewing unrest ... were ignored."⁸²

There were gatherings where the impending danger was discussed and people who knew the situation expressed real fear; there were incidents of violent resistance that testified to mounting tension; there were public warnings of coming disturbances by speakers and writers.⁸³

Cillié did not consider the Afrikaans issue in isolation. In his Report he acknowledged not only the organizational ability of the students but also their farsightedness and their recognition of the relationship of this particular issue to hopes for liberation among black people in general.⁸⁴

Despite its legion other failings, the Cillié Report's description of developments before June 16 made the importance of the Afrikaans issue clear: Repeated petitions against the imposition of the new language policy were dismissed by the government, repeated clashes between students and police at a growing number of striking schools were ignored. It is thus an important source to look to for evidence, a record that government officials were aware that the events surrounding the Afrikaans issue were important.

In a 40-page section entitled "Prelude to the Riots," Cillié gave pride of place to the Afrikaans issue: **60**

[T]he policy on the medium of instruction in Black secondary school and the application of that policy, the organized resistance to its application, the official handling of that resistance, and the failure of officials and policemen to foresee the imminent eruption in Soweto ...⁸⁵

have "been largely and directly responsible for the disorders," he wrote. It was a text that, through its meticulous descriptive detail (its greatest value, as the Report's conclusions stood in blatant contradiction to much of the information it had amassed), provided a remarkably thorough description both of the policy and implementation of Afrikaans as a teaching medium and of the subsequent, gathering confrontation.

With its takeover of the education and training of Black students in the 1950s, the national government established a new rule (frequently called the "50-50 rule") by which Afrikaans was to be the medium of instruction on a par with English in all content subjects in secondary schools. It provided, in light of the "backlog of Afrikaans," for the possibility of exemption, but only for structural reasons such as the lack of qualified teachers⁸⁶ or the shortage of textbooks in

the language specified for a particular subject. The department's cynicism and disregard for the objects of this education was evident in its injunction that a qualified teacher was to teach the subject in Afrikaans "irrespective of the pupils' knowledge of this language,"⁸⁷ a phrase that was underlined in the Afrikaans version of this circular. The potential for the erosion of "goodwill towards the language, the school, the system of education or the authorities" was evident even to someone as sympathetic to the government as Cillie.⁸⁸

Despite warnings beginning in 1960 that "exemption from the use of Afrikaans as medium will not be granted so readily,"⁸⁹ it was only in 1974-76⁹⁰ that the government moved to restore Afrikaans to what it considered its "*rightful* position as medium of instruction" (emphasis added).⁹¹ Hirson described what this meant:

One half of all subjects were to be taught in Afrikaans, the other in English, in standard 5 [seventh grade] and Form One [eighth grade—first year of high school, which had five forms]. It was also stipulated that arithmetic and mathematics (the subjects with the highest failure rate) together with social studies (history and geography) would in future be taught in Afrikaans.⁹²

Simultaneously, a new structure for African schools was to be phased in. The educational structure for African pupils extended over 13 years: eight classes (i.e., two substandards and six standards—first to eighth grades) in primary schools and five forms in secondary schools. In 1972 it was decided that, in three years' time, there would be a changeover to a 12-year structure in which each of the two sections was to have six classes. The primary school was then to consist of two substandards, or grades, and only four standards; Standard 6 was to disappear, while Standard 5 was to become the first class in secondary education (or high school). The secondary school was to retain its five forms. Practical considerations—e.g., a lack of classrooms—made it necessary for the Standard 5 class to remain physically with the primary school:

With this, the application of the fifty-fifty rule was effectively extended downward to Standard V. What this meant, in effect, was that the number of students and schools affected by the Afrikaans ruling would expand dramatically.⁹³

Mandatory language, omissions, misunderstandings, and inconsistencies in a series of regional and departmental circulars issued by the Department of Bantu Education in the period between 1974-75 caused much confusion and dissatisfaction, resulting in a deterioration in the relations between officials and parents and between officials and the school board.⁹⁴ 65

That the rule concerning equal use of Afrikaans in Soweto schools met with opposition became clear in school-board meetings as early as December of 1974,

when 91 delegates from school boards in Soweto, Pretoria, the East Rand, the Western Transvaal, and the Vaal Triangle met at the Mpebatu Hotel in Atteridgeville. A memorandum to request that Afrikaans no longer be used in secondary school was drawn up and presented to the Department of Bantu Education, which refused the request. Cillié's meticulous description on the Afrikaans issue and the changes in policy before June 16 revealed a flurry of sometimes contradictory and often confusing and misleading departmental and regional circulars; mounting dissatisfaction and worried meetings⁹⁵ on the part of school boards as early as December 1974, especially in the Southern Transvaal; the compilation and presentation of memoranda and requests to the department, which were refused; and major resistance on the part of several school boards that claimed the authority for themselves to decide on the medium of instruction in the schools under their jurisdiction.⁹⁶ Resistance, resentment, and discontent seem to have been widespread. The chairman of one school board was dismissed, three principals in another. In response, students demonstrated for their reappointment and boycotted classes. Cillié pointed out that there was "even some stone-throwing" on this occasion.⁹⁷

It is important to realize, without further privileging official or adult accounts, that the value of this discourse goes beyond the Commission of Inquiry's preoccupation with questions of spontaneity and police ignorance or unpreparedness (and, by inference, of police culpability). This discourse lends substance to the argument that Afrikaans was a key issue in this uprising. While mindful of any temptation to impose further analysis on the students, those considering the uprising should appreciate the importance of investigating whether the students themselves were conscious of these issues, whether their consciousness changed, and, if it did, how the influence of such devastating forces might affected it.

Notes:

Note 24: West Rand Administration Board, minutes of a meeting between M. C. Botha, minister of Bantu Administration and Development, officials of the Department of Bantu Administration and Development, chairman and officials of the West Rand Administration Board, and a delegation from the Soweto Urban Bantu Council (UBC) and other Soweto leaders, Pretoria, 19 June 1976, SAB WLD 6857/77, *WRAB v. Santam*, NN8. T. J. Makaya described the various appeals made by the UBC on 13 June 1976 and later. For the comprehensive list of grievances presented by the councilors, see .

Note 25: L. Mlonzi, UBC, West Rand Administration Board, minutes of a meeting between officials of the Department of Bantu Administration and Development and a delegation from the Soweto Urban Bantu Council, Pretoria, 19 June 1976, SAB WLD 6857/77, *WRAB v. Santam*, NN8.

Note 26: L. Mosala, UBC, West Rand Administration Board, minutes of a meeting between officials of the Department of Bantu Administration and Development and a delegation from the Soweto Urban Bantu Council, Pretoria, 19 June 1976. SAB WLD 6857/77, *WRAB v. Santam*, NN8.

Note 27: R. J. Maponya, UBC, West Rand Administration Board, minutes of a meeting between officials of the Department of Bantu Administration and Development and a delegation from the Soweto Urban Bantu Council, Pretoria, 19 June 1976, SAB WLD 6857/77, *WRAB v. Santam*, NN8.

Note 28: ASSECA (Association for the Educational and Cultural Advancement of the African People) was headed by M. T. Moerane, also the editor of *The World*. ASSECA was opposed to Bantu education but confined itself to organizing scholarships and soliciting school-improvement projects. Moerane was no radical and, while ASSECA at first was involved in BPC (Black Peoples Convention), it withdrew when that organization became more overtly political. See also Thomas Karis and Gail M. Gerhart, *From Protest to Challenge: A Documentary History of African Politics in South Africa, 1882-1990, Volume 5: Nadir and Resurgence, 1964-1979* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 5: 121.

Note 29: M. T. Moerane, ASSECA, West Rand Administration Board, minutes of a meeting between officials of the Department of Bantu Administration and Development and a delegation from the Soweto Urban Bantu Council, Pretoria, 19 June 1976, SAB WLD 6857/77, NN8.

Note 30: West Rand Administration Board, Minutes of a Meeting between Officials of the Department of Bantu Administration and Development, and a Delegation from the Soweto Urban Bantu Council, Pretoria, June 19, 1976; SAB WLD 6857/77, NN8.

Note 31: M. C. Botha. West Rand Administration Board, Minutes of a Meeting between Officials of the Department of Bantu Administration and Development, and a Delegation from the Soweto Urban Bantu Council, Pretoria, June 19, 1976; SAB WLD 6857/77, NN8.

Note 32: SAIRR, Survey 1976, 60.

Note 33: M. C. Botha, M. P. , Minister of Bantu Administration and Development and of Bantu Education, statement and letter to the leaders of the Bantu deputation from Soweto, Pretoria, 5 July 1976, SAB WLD 6857/77, *WRAB v. Santam*.

Note 34: SAIRR, Survey 1976, 61.

Note 35: Submitted to the ministers of Bantu Administration and Development and Bantu Education during a meeting held between officials of the Department of Bantu Education (G. J. Rousseau and A. B. Fourie), of the West Rand Bantu Affairs Administration Board (WRAB, H. P. P. Mulder, J. C. de Villiers, M. P. Wilsnach, and S. S. Helberg) and representatives of the Urban Bantu Council, school board, and teachers of Soweto, Johannesburg, June 25, 1976. SAB WLD 6857/77, *WRAB v. Santam*, NN13. Ackerman and de Beer's positions were reviewed and de Beer was later transferred to Kimberley, although officials denied that the transfer had anything to do with the demands of Soweto school principals. SAIRR, Survey 1976, 62 and 64.

Note 36: James Kruger, minister of police, speech before Parliament, Hansard vol. 20 (17 June 1976), columns 9640-41.

Note 37: 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* [hereafter cited as *Cillié Report*] (Pretoria: Government Printer, 1980), 1: 128: "It is difficult to understand how a group of young people could spend three days preparing for a demonstration by 15 000 or more scholars at schools all over Soweto and the police receive the first, incomplete Reports only on the evening before the demonstration was to take place. " And page 105: "The plans were kept remarkably secret ... within a stone's throw of a police station. " Also page 102: "While all these arrangements were being made far and wide [my

emphasis], the police had no knowledge of the proposed large-scale protest march. ... This was the position on the eve of the riots. "

Note 38: In page after page of *in camera* testimony, the representatives of the Bureau of State Security (BOSS), South Africa's security police, laid out how extensive their knowledge and understanding was of the various resistance organizations, individual leaders, and tactics.

Note 39: James Kruger, minister of police, House of Assembly, Hansard vol. 20 (17 June 1976), 9640-42.

Note 40: Colin W. Eglin, "Disturbances in Soweto," Hansard vol. 20 (17 June 1976), 9636.

Note 41: Quoted by Eglin, from *Die Burger*, 17 June 1976, before Parliament, Hansard vol. 20 (17 June 1976), 9637.

Note 42: It should be noted that the policy change and the round of circulars sent out in 1974-75 were specific to the Transvaal. Evidence from flyers and statements, SAB K345, vol. 190/91.

Note 43: Alfred Nzo, secretary-general of the ANC, message of the National Executive Committee, Dar es Salaam, 14 September 1976, in "1976 Riots in Soweto Pamphlets and Publications," Historical Papers Collection, University of the Witwatersrand, A 2176/12.

Note 44: Oliver Tambo, "Support Our People Until Power Is Restored to Them," statement by at the Plenary Meeting of the United Nations General Assembly, New York, 26 October 1976. Printed in full in *Sechaba* 11, no. 2 (1977).

Note 45: Winnie Mandela, quoted in article "Only the Tip of the Iceberg, Say Black Leaders," *Rand Daily Mail* (Johannesburg), 17 June 1976.

Note 46: Francis Meli, *South Africa Belongs to Us*, 185-86.

Note 47: Mr. M. Peta, businessman and member of the Atteridgeville school board, quoted in the *Rand Daily Mail*, December 1974.

Note 48: *Rand Daily Mail*, "4 New Names on SASM's Executive," 2 June 1976.

Note 49: *Rand Daily Mail*, 21 April 1976.

Note 50: *Rand Daily Mail*, "Senaoane Kids Join Soweto's Language Strike," 2 June 1976.

Note 51: *The World*, 16 June 1976.

Note 52: "Note the true cause," the quote in the title of this section, is from *Bantu* (September 1976), 32. This was an official government publication.

Note 53: In addition, the Soweto uprising as a turning point in South Africa's contemporary history of struggle has been part of many other broader analyses. See Nozipho J. Diseko, "The Origins and Development of the South African Student's Movement SASM: 1968-1976," *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 18/1 (1991): 40-62; Karis and Gerhart, *From Protest to Challenge, Vol. 5*; Clive Glaser, *Bo-Tsotsi: The Youth Gangs of Soweto, 1935-1976* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2000); Tom Lodge, *Black Politics in South Africa Since 1945* (London: Longman, 1983); Dan O'Meara, *Forty Lost Years: The apartheid state and the politics of the National Party, 1948-1994* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1996); Jeremy Seekings, *Heroes or Villains? Youth Politics in the 1980s* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1994); John S. Saul and Stephen Gelb, *The Crisis in South*

Africa: Class Defense, Class Revolution (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1981).

Note 54: Kane-Berman, *Black Revolt, White Reaction*, 48.

Note 55: Ibid, 47.

Note 56: Karis and Gerhart, *From Protest to Challenge*, 5:161-63: "Intense debate and disagreement increasingly marred the relationship between older and younger activists as some who were impatient to join the exile armies took issue with others, usually older, who argued that guerrilla warfare would be fruitless until a stronger political foundation for revolution had been laid inside South Africa. [. . .] In SASM, would be-fighters outnumbered talkers, and counsels of caution from older activists often provoked resentment. 'When we asked questions concerning the future programs of the people,' Daniel Montsitsi, a militant SASM leader at Sekano Ntoane high school in Soweto, later recalled, '[. . .] Unfortunately we were not in the mood to bargain or negotiate; we were impatient and militant, and rebellious of the black consciousness leadership. With puffed lips and closed eyes straight from [being beaten up by the police] . . . we did not feel like talking; we wanted to fight but did not know how. We made jokes about the leadership when our spirit was high, that they encourage us to conscientize the masses, until they reach a stage where they'll explode."

Note 57: Kane-Berman, *Black Revolt, White Reaction*, 47.

Note 58: Hirson, *Year of Fire, Year of Ash*, 286.

Note 59: Kane-Berman, *Black Revolt, White Reaction*, 48 and 52.

Note 60: Brooks and Brickhill, *Whirlwind Before the Storm*, 89.

Note 61: See Steve Biko, "Our Strategy for Liberation" (1977), in *I Write What I Like*, 147: "We are by no means communist. Neither do I believe for a moment that the unrest is due to communist agitation. I do know for a fact that there has been participation, it would appear anyway from signs, by a lot of people in the unrest. But the primary reason behind the unrest is simple lack of patience by the young fold with a government which his refusing to change, refusing the change in the educational sphere, which is where they [the students] are directing themselves, and also refusing to change in a broader political situation."

Note 62: John Brewer, *After Soweto: An Unfinished Journey* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 74-75.

Note 63: Ibid, 84.

Note 64: Hirson, *Year of Fire, Year of Ash*, 99 and 100.

Note 65: Ibid, 5 and 8.

Note 66: Ibid, 5 and 8.

Note 67: Ibid, 8-10.

Note 68: Guha, "The Prose of Counter-insurgency," 38-39.

Note 69: Hirson, *Year of Fire, Year of Ash*, 8-10.

Note 70: Guha, "The Prose of Counter-insurgency," 38.

Note 71: Hirson, *Year of Fire, Year of Ash*, 8-10.

Note 72: Ibid, 281 ff.

Note 73: Alan Brooks and Jeremy Brickhill, *Whirlwind Before the Storm: The Origins and Development of the Uprising in Soweto and the Rest of South Africa from June to December 1976* (London: International Defence and Aid Fund for Southern Africa, 1980), 2 and 35. The title is reference to Prime Minister John Vorster's New Year Speech, 31 December 1976: "The storm has not struck yet. We are only experiencing the whirlwinds that go before it."

Note 74: With the possible exceptions of Diseko, who has published one article and has written a dissertation on the subject, and Sifiso Mxolisi Ndlovu, who has published a small volume, *Counter-memories*, which includes some insightful insider analysis. On the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the uprising Sibongile Mkhabela published a personal account: *Open Earth and Black Roses: Remembering 16 June 1976* (Braamfontein: Skotaville Press, 2001); Elsabé Brink, and Gandhi Malungane, Steve Lebelo, Dumisani Ntshangase, Sue Krige also published a series of oral histories in *Soweto 16 June 1976: It All Started With a Dog...* (Cape Town: Kwela Books, 2001); and Pat Hopkins and Helen Grange, who wrote *The Rocky Rioter Teargas Show: The Inside Story of the 1976 Soweto Uprising* (Cape Town: Zebra, 2001) on the same occasion, also claim to present the inside story of the uprising, but the absence of cited historical sources and evidence and their unwillingness to engage with the earlier historical literature on Soweto makes it difficult to fully track some of their arguments. See also Chapter 1, Introduction: "".

Note 75: Brooks and Brickhill set themselves the task to at least attempt to answer some of the following questions: "Who were these youths? What factors shaped their thinking? How did they organise themselves in different parts of the country? What were their attitudes to their parents, to the regime, to the wider liberation movement? What were their tactics and methods of struggle, and what did they achieve?" *Whirlwind Before the Storm*, 2.

Note 76: Guha, "The Prose of Counter-Insurgency," 38-39.

Note 77: Kane-Berman, *Black Revolt, White Reaction*, 132.

Note 78: Ibid, 232.

Note 79: Ibid.

Note 80: Ibid, 218.

Note 81: Ibid.

Note 82: *Cillié Report*, 1:103.

Note 83: *Cillié Report*, 1:127.

Note 84: Ibid, 131.

Note 85: Ibid, 41.

Note 86: Departmental circular no. 31 of 1959, titled "The Inability of Certain Bantu Teachers to Use This Language as Medium."

Note 87: All quotes from Departmental of Bantu Education, circular no. 31 of 1959.

Note 88: *Cillié Report*, 44.

Note 89: Department of Bantu Education, circular no. 31 of 1959.

Note 90: Department of Bantu Education, circular no. 6 of 1974.

Note 91: Department of Bantu Education, circular No. 31 of 1959.

Note 92: Hirson, *Year of Fire, Year of Ash*, 99.

Note 93: According to the *Cillié Report*, 1:47, "the extensive application of the policy on the medium of instruction would mean the following: Whereas only 63 secondary schools originally had to apply this policy, a further 288 higher primary schools would have to do so in their Std V classes after the changeover. In Soweto alone, the number of schools that would have to apply this policy would grow from 39 to 160" [my emphasis]. Hirson points out that there was some indication that BOSS was well aware of the potential for chaos and resistance that the new policies and the link between them would cause. Hirson, *Year of Fire, Year of Ash*, 98.

Note 94: Departmental circular no. 2 of 1973, on "medium of instruction in secondary schools (and Std V classes) in White areas," sent by the secretary of Bantu Education on 24 January 1973 to regional directors, circuit inspectors, school boards, committee boards, and principals of secondary and high schools but not to principals of higher primary schools; Departmental circular no. 6 of 1974, issued by the minister of Bantu Education, 19 April 1974, sent only to regional directors and circuit inspectors, not to principals (who were to be informed by inspectors) or to school boards; Regional circular no. 2 of 1974 (Southern Transvaal), 29 August 1974, titled "Uniform Approach in Schools" and sent by the regional director of the South to all principals under his jurisdiction; and *Cillié Report*, 1:52.

Note 95: A meeting after the refusal of the Atteridgeville request planned at Sebokeng was banned by the circuit inspector of Vereeniging.

Note 96: Among the school boards were those of Batswana, Ba-Lebowa, Alexandra, Meadowlands, Orlando-Diepkloof, and Dube-Mofolo-Jabavu. *Cillié Report*, 1:58. Schools in their jurisdictions later played a central part in the uprising.

Note 97: *Cillié Report*, 1:63.