

16 JUNE 1976: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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16 June 1976: A historical perspective

I would like to talk about the Soweto uprising and Afrikaans, the historical dynamics at play. I will try to highlight a few points of view that will hopefully put the matter into perspective without necessarily distorting it unduly or relativising it.

At 10:30 on 16 June hundreds of pupils in the suburb of Orlando West in Soweto began congregating against the planned and compulsory phasing-in of Afrikaans as a language of instruction in certain subjects in certain standards. The numbers grew and the pupils began marching, with posters with slogans like “Away with Afrikaans” and “If we have to speak Afrikaans, Vorster [who was the prime minister] has to speak Zulu”. The police had not been expecting the procession, they could not exercise effective control and the situation deteriorated when they fired live ammunition and at least 15 young people were killed and large numbers of others were wounded. Then, according to one newspaper, things exploded. Buildings were set on fire, stones were thrown at cars and chaos reigned. The uprising also began to spread throughout the country. There is no denying that the insistence on Afrikaans in Soweto was exceptionally short-sighted and insensitive, particularly since the type of skills such a policy required were largely unavailable in Soweto. Unknowingly the action by the state contributed in part to Afrikaans being associated with an explicit racial connotation in the future, and that would contribute to the stigmatisation of the language. Soweto Day, and to an extent later Youth Day, would carry the negative dimensions of Afrikaans as a birthmark.

It seems to me that the question of Afrikaans in Soweto undeniably links the two, but – and this is the question I want to ask today: Was that the only reason that the uprising broke out? If one reads more recent research on the subject, it would appear that Afrikaans was the straw that broke the camel’s back, but there were deeper-lying structural factors that created the circumstances for a protest uprising to develop. To understand this youth rebellion properly, it is necessary to look at the broader social and economic changes in Soweto in the previous 15 years. I therefore ask you please to look with me at how we can sketch the bigger picture.

The first aspect that we need to look at is the policy shift of the 1960s towards grand apartheid. Grand apartheid is related to the development of the black homelands. In the period between 1954 and 1960, interestingly enough, more than 50 000 houses were built

in Soweto for black people. But in the early sixties, these numbers fell and in 1965 no new houses were built. This does not mean that the demand stopped growing; on the contrary, the children of Soweto and the residents married and started their families and by the middle of the 1970s there was a serious housing shortage in the area. Why did the state change this policy? It was for political reasons. After the banning of the ANC and the PAC in 1960, Prime Minister Verwoerd, and his government with him, saw urban blacks as a greater threat than before. Up to 1960 the idea of black people who worked in towns and lived there permanently had been perfectly acceptable to whites. Even the migrant workers were given leave, granted a right of residence, provided they had worked for the same employer for longer than ten years. But now, with the development of homelands, greater pressure was placed on urban blacks – because financial resources were sent away from the towns or diverted from the towns to the homelands. Black people were now supposed to earn a living in ethnic homelands, like the Ciskei and the Transkei and Bophuthatswana, and to exercise their political rights in those areas. Towns were no longer seen as growth points as had of necessity been the case previously. The policy change was in itself a turning point and one that would be linked to the 1976 uprising. The link lay in the fact that a new generation in Soweto came under increasing social pressure. The pot was slowly starting to bubble.

Ironically enough, economic changes also contributed to this. During the 1960s South Africa experienced unequalled economic growth. In that decade it was about 6%, and only Japan and California in the USA grew faster than that. This was partly related to relatively cheap labour, but the economy also needed semi-skilled labour. And the places where people acquired those skills were mainly in towns. People from Soweto also benefited, because they developed those skills and were paid slightly higher wages. But despite their higher wages, they were not really able to improve their circumstances materially. This contributed to a feeling of resentment and frustration. It was a classic case of the crisis of rising expectations. Relative prosperity can create more expectations and if these are thwarted the level of frustration often becomes far higher.

A further source of annoyance and frustration was the pass laws. Pass laws were applied more strictly. People could not easily go to the towns or easily leave the homelands like before, and the number of arrests rose from 380 000 in 1962 to almost 700 000 in 1967. Women were particularly hard hit by these laws, for example a woman who was born in a homeland and might have married a man from a town would have a problem staying in a town on a permanent basis. At the same time administration in Soweto declined and some

of the income from the beer halls was used to try to deliver services, and once again financial sources were moved elsewhere. Complaints from residents on the state of the services were simply ignored. It sounds rather predictable. Overpopulation in Soweto, poor services and heartless officials contributed to the potentially explosive situation. These beer halls would also become a target in the 1976 uprising, because as a financial resource they were financing poor service-delivery.

The next point I want to make is the link between structural change and political action. Now, ideology and dogma cannot continually ignore material and economic realities. For as long as the industrial world was doing well and expanding, the demand for skills increased. There were not large enough numbers of whites to meet the need. This placed greater pressure on the state to train more black people. In the cabinet a so-called liberal section realised that it would be short-sighted to wish economic realities away, and as a result they began to build up arguments as to why it was necessary to build more schools in Soweto. This faction got the upper hand in the cabinet and between 1972 and 1976 forty new high schools were built, and the number of high school pupils rose from about 12 000 in 1972 to 35 000 in 1976. So, there was a dramatically fast increase in learners. The increase in the number of learners and the mutual interaction between them contributed to ideas being able to be transferred faster than before. This was obviously still the era before Mxit and Twitter and cellphones, and people spoke to one another like I am speaking to you now. It was also a platform, as they regularly mixed at a certain schoolground to pass on ideas more quickly. A breeding ground for a new collective identity was created. It wasn't all related to politics. It was also related to gang violence in Soweto, where the learners took a stand against the *skollies*, as they called them, who attacked girls. There was thus also a public-social dimension in their attacking the *skollies* and that also contributed to a collective identity. At the same time, a breeding ground for great political awareness was also created here. First you get a collective identity, then it can spill over into a wider political identity. The youth also began to become more self-assertive. In contrast to their parents, who were inclined to accept the burden of apartheid with greater equanimity, simply because it appeared that there wasn't really anything you could do about the system. Here was a new generation who actually looked down on their parents a bit because of the passivity that they exhibited.

One of the factors that contributed to this was the black consciousness movement of Steve Biko from 1969. Among the organisations that became involved in the black consciousness movement was the South African Students Movement (SASM), and a core of their ideology

was that you had to find your own identity, independent of a white identity or a broad Western identity, independent of any other external influences. This organisation had nine branches in Soweto in 1973. Their thinking started to gain more traction with the withdrawal of the Portuguese from Mozambique in 1974 and the independence of the former colony. This served as proof for these black consciousness people that blacks could manage to shake off the colonial yoke themselves and rule themselves. One wouldn't say that the SASM – the black consciousness movement – was crucial in the political consciousness. But it is none the less of importance in plotting the underlying circumstances that preceded the uprising in 1976.

At the end of all this, you would be justified in asking: What has this got to do with Afrikaans. I think the context is important here. What we as historians do is to try to provide a context and to allocate the relevant weightings to the different dimensions involved. If one can oversimplify it a little, if Afrikaans had not become an issue as a result of the government's obtuseness, in all probability – given the potentially explosive circumstances – other focal points would have come to the fore that could have led to an uprising. Pass laws or poor service-delivery could just as easily have brought things to a head. The fact that it was Afrikaans was not a foregone conclusion and in a certain sense can even be seen as pure coincidence. But it had long-lasting consequences that to a certain extent still cast a pall today.

What were the further repercussions of this? Although the state tried to slam the uprising as the work of agitators, there were certain Afrikaans opinion-makers who handled the matter more sensitively. In *Rapport*, for example, the question was asked: What Afrikaner wants to get involved in a fight with blacks because they don't want to use his language? The *Burger* reported that there were mixed feelings about the matter. Although Afrikaans was an official language, it was felt that it should not be forced down people's throats, and people pointed back to the period after the Anglo-Boer War when the Milner regime alienated many Afrikaners with its deliberate campaign of anglicisation. Those types of historical connections were made at the time the historical associations were pointed out to warn the public to regard this uprising in a rather more sensitive light. The reality, however, was that the damage had already been done. Afrikaans, which as the language of the oppressor had already aroused bad feelings in many urban blacks, became even more contentious in 1976. Although Afrikaans was in the firing line, it would be futile to argue that all speakers of the language were contaminated by these events. As mentioned, shortly after the Soweto

uprisings, unrest also spread to other parts of the country, among others the Western Cape. What is of importance here is that at the University of the Western Cape at least part of the protest in fact took place in Afrikaans, as Afrikaans-speaking brown students resisted apartheid measures. These developments are captured very well in a book by Cornelius Thomas with the title *Wakker, wakker en aan die brand* (Awake, awake and burning), which was published in 1997 and which gives a very good picture of the nature of the protests at UWC. In this way Afrikaans acquired an additional dimension – not so much as a language to be fought against, but as a language that could also be harnessed to expose the injustices of apartheid in a distinctive way. Jakes Gerwel had the following to say about this book, and I quote: “dat dit waarskynlik baie mense sal verras met watter insig die stryd van Soweto in 1976 hier op die Kaapse Vlakte in Afrikaans gevoer is (that it will probably surprise many people to learn with what insight the Soweto struggle in 1976 was played out here on the Cape Flats in Afrikaans). He then goes on to say: “Nogmaals herinner dit ons aan die geskakeerdheid van ons geskiedenis van stryd. (Once again it reminds us of the variegation of our history of struggle. It was a far more nuanced situation. In addition, another commentator, Prof. Roy du Preez, gave an enlightening evaluation of this broad dynamic. He did it in English and I quote: “More than I doubted the historical value of the book, is the exciting potential that its literary value might far exceed the author’s original intentions. There is also a growing movement amongst Afrikaans speakers, Afrikaans-speaking South Africans, to take back the language from white Afrikaners. Students of the Afrikaans language and literature will delight in the provocative and emotional language as spoken by UWC students. The Afrikaans of UWC in 1976 bears little resemblance to that taught and spoken in the hallowed walls of the Universities of Stellenbosch and Potchefstroom.” According to Du Preez, the way in which the language was used was “... how its original creators intended it to be, vibrant and expressive, dynamic and innovative, full of joy, descriptive and intense with nostalgia.” One must of course beware of over-romanticising and idealising such an interpretation and then on top of that trying to use it to try to excuse the shadow side of Afrikaans and apartheid. UWC has in any case moreover become almost completely anglicised over time since 1976, but it’s none the less important to highlight that the history of Soweto in Afrikaans is more complex than often depicted. As history moves on and we acquire new points of departure, new insights come to the fore. Where – given the general situation in the country – the uprisings at UWC in 1976 would have been of less overall significance, now, with the passing of time, they come more sharply into focus, especially if one looks at Afrikaans’s path of development and the interaction between the

language and the community that gives birth in that language. One can now read more into this situation than was done previously.

To summarise: In this presentation an effort has been made to highlight the complexities of Afrikaans and the Soweto uprising in 1976, I have tried to put the negativity that surrounds this issue in a broader perspective, without completely relativising it. It is the task of a historian to make things more complicated than they seem at first glance. Afrikaans was the trigger for the uprising, but today it is regarded as the only reason, without these other structural factors that I have outlined being taken into account. One can argue that the language is a convenient target as it is a subject that can be easily understood and propagated. More complicated explanations for the uprising do not easily lend themselves to a public consensus.

Thank you.

