

**“A tragic turning-point: remembering
Sharpeville fifty years on”**

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This is a talk, not a seminar paper; and it arises not out of original research, but out of the occasion - the 50th anniversary of the Sharpeville massacre. I will say something about the actual event itself, and offer some thoughts on its wider significance and impact.

In December 1959, in his presidential address to the ANC's annual conference, Albert Luthuli proclaimed that 1960 would be "a year of destiny in South Africa". It would certainly turn out to be a watershed year, albeit not one fulfilling Luthuli's expectations, and not one that would place the ANC at the forefront of opposition politics, at least for a while.

First, a brief narrative. Sharpeville - a township located to the west of Vereeniging, built in the early 1940s to accommodate workers, mainly migrants, to service the nearby iron and steel industry. During the 1950s residents experienced more and more the hardships associated with apartheid and labour exploitation - especially the harsh enforcement of the pass laws, growing unemployment, and rising prices. During the 1950s the ANC had a minimal presence in Sharpeville, but at the end of the decade there was some support there for the recently formed PAC. Even so, at the beginning of 1960 there were only about 100 paid-up PAC members in Sharpeville, although PAC activists engaged in some energetic recruiting in the township in the early weeks of the year.

In December 1959 both the ANC and PAC announced that they would run anti-pass campaigns the following year. The ANC's was planned to begin on 31 March. The PAC was keen to pre-empt the ANC and settled on the date of 21 March. Robert Sobukwe, the PAC leader, formally announced on Friday 18 March that the campaign would begin the following Monday, when people would assemble at various points and surrender their passes so as to deliberately court arrest. In Sharpeville PAC activists at once set about mobilising support. ANC leaders in the township spoke out against the PAC campaign, fearing it would get out of hand; and some workers were reluctant to join in, afraid of losing their jobs. There was a tense atmosphere in Sharpeville throughout Saturday night and Sunday night. Small groups of activists, some armed with stones and iron bars, harassed police units who responded with batons and whips. There was not too much violence - the aim of the

activists was to exhaust the police. And indeed by Monday morning the police were tired - and trigger-happy.

By about 7.00 a.m. on the Monday morning a crowd of about 5000 had gathered in the street leading to the Sharpeville police station. It has been suggested that one or two PAC leaders wanted to take the march into white Vereeniging - something that the police feared. During the morning there were a few minor clashes - stone throwing and baton charges. Around mid-day a large crowd was gathering in an open area around the Sharpeville police station - a crowd of perhaps 20,000, including many children. There were about 160 heavily armed white police at the station, together with about 130 black police, armed with assegais and knobkerries. There were another 100 or so police in the vicinity. Fighter planes flew overhead, but failed to intimidate or disperse the crowd. There was thunder in the distance, a highveld storm looming.

Towards 1.30 the crowd were pressing against the perimeter fence which was leaning inwards. One police officer, against the wishes of fellow officers, went towards the gate and opened it, wanting to find a PAC leader to negotiate with. At that moment there was a tragic conjuncture of events. A petty criminal in the crowd fired two shots in the air. The police officer at the gate stumbled and a constable next to him raised his gun and fired a shot in the air. This was a signal to other police to open fire. Soon after 1.30 about 750 rounds were discharged by the police within the space of a minute or less. There had been no order to disperse, no warning shot, no use of teargas, and no order to fire.

There was also, it seems, no remorse and no regret, judging by what followed. The police remained "callously inactive", offering no assistance to the dying. Some of the wounded were taunted by police. In the days after the massacre several hundred people in the area were arrested, including many who had been mere bystanders. Any person carrying an injury was presumed to have been a protester and deemed to be a dangerous subversive. Injured people were hauled out of hospital by the police, against the wishes of doctors, and thrown into jail.

The official casualty figures were 69 killed, of whom eight were women and ten children, and 180 wounded, of whom 50 were women and children. Of the

casualties 70% were shot in the back - in itself a grave indictment of the police action. The official count is now reckoned to be much too low. It includes among the dead only those killed on 21 March, failing to account for the many who died later of their wounds. One woman lived on in extreme pain for another 20 years.

How has this massacre been explained? Not surprisingly there are different versions that vary according to particular ideological perspectives or political agendas. First, there is the narrative presented by apartheid's apologists. According to this version the police were confronted by a violent, threatening mob intent on attacking the police station. Coming from the crowd were shouts of 'Cato Manor' where nine policemen had been killed in an attack a few weeks before in Durban. Thus the police acted in self-defence. It was also alleged that the PAC orchestrated the confrontation, well knowing that a bloody outcome was possible, so as to gain political advantage over the ANC and rise to the leadership of the liberation movement. There is no evidence to support this claim. The protesters were angry, but totally ill-equipped to take violent action. Indeed, it appears that the police fabricated evidence after the event to support their claim. Witnesses saw police putting knives and stones into the hands of dead people. Police were also seen throwing stones into the police station after the shooting.

According to the liberation movement's narrative a crowd were engaged in a peaceful protest against the hated pass laws, and in so doing were asserting their human rights. The protesters were noisy, even festive, with women ululating, but there was no violent intent. This version also suggests premeditation - on the part of the police. The massacre is represented as a calculated act by the apartheid security apparatus who callously mowed down peaceful protesters in order to teach the people a lesson. One retired police commissioner later stated that the police "knew there would be trouble, but wanted the radicals to fully expose themselves" before the net was cast. Again, though, there is insufficient evidence of premeditation for this interpretation to hold. A massacre was hardly in the interests of the apartheid state, as it was sure to have negative political consequences, as indeed it would have.

A third version has been called the “massacre as mistake” theory. Sharpeville was an horrific event that was not supposed to happen, the result of an unfortunate conjuncture of particular events - or as Philip Frankel has put it, “a consequence of terror and error”. Even if one rejects the charge of premeditation, it still seems inappropriate to describe such an horrific event as “a mistake”. Ultimately Sharpeville can only be properly understood in the context of apartheid. The protest was directed against one of the many iniquitous elements of apartheid - the pass laws. The shooting was a merciless expression of racial violence - the police admitted that they would not have fired on a white crowd. They shot at dehumanised ‘others’, almost as hunters would shoot at game. The police officers were steeped in apartheid ideology, with all its racial stereotyping, as were the white rank-and-file police, who were mainly young, ill-trained, inexperienced Afrikaners. In this context the way in which human restraint evaporated and ordinary men became brutal killers is perhaps not so surprising.

Sharpeville was much more than a single tragic event. It had wide ramifications and a significant impact. That impact is best broken down into its short-term, medium-term, and long-term significance. I will argue that the massacre created a major short-term crisis for the apartheid state, a crisis which appeared to have been resolved in the medium term, but clearly was not resolved in the longer term.

The massacre of 21 March (was not an isolated event and) needs to be viewed in the context of what happened in South Africa during the preceding two months, and in the dramatic weeks after the killings. The apartheid state was rocked, giving rise to a real sense of crisis.

The ensuing events are quite well known. Another centre of the PAC anti-pass was Cape Town’s Langa and Nyanga townships. At 6.00 pm on the 21st about 6000 protesters gathered at a meeting in Langa, in full knowledge of what had happened earlier at Sharpeville. The police baton-charged the meeting; protesters responded by throwing stones; the police opened fire, killing two. There followed a night of

upheaval in Langa, with attacks on police, the burning of municipal offices, the looting of black policemen's houses, telephone wires cut.

In Cape Town, too, there was a well-supported, week-long stayaway by black African workers. ANC president, Albert Luthuli, declared 28 March to be a national day of mourning for those killed at Sharpeville and Langa, to be marked by a national stayaway. Support for the stayaway ran to about 90% in Johannesburg, Cape Town, Durban and Port Elizabeth. Ongoing police brutality in Langa led to a massive march into Cape Town on the 30th. About 30,000 people gathered, apparently with minimal pre-planning or organisation, with a view to marching into central Cape Town. It was a quiet, peaceful march, led by Philip Kgosana, a young PAC activist. The plan was to march to the Caledon Square police station to issue a protest against police brutality. During the course of the march Kgosana decided that they should head for the houses of parliament. Once at Caledon Square Kgosana met with the police chief, Colonel Terblanche, who promised him a meeting with the Minister of Justice if he dispersed the marchers. Kgosana accepted the deal, but was, of course, duped. When he turned up for the meeting he was promptly arrested. Who knows what might have happened had the march proceeded to parliament? Many have seen Kgosana's climb-down as a lost opportunity. It is more likely that the marchers would have been confronted with a massive police presence and baton charges.

On 31 March and 1 April there were attempts to organise similar marches into central Durban from Cato Manor. Both were blocked by the police, who were supported by armed white civilians, although about 1000 protesters did manage to reach the central gaol where they demanded the release of detainees. To add to the drama, on 9 April there was an attempt to assassinate Verwoerd, who was shot in the head by a white farmer at an agricultural show. He survived, although critically wounded and put out of action for some weeks.

All this gave rise to an acute sense of crisis, to which preceding events had contributed - the killing of police at Cato Manor in January, and the 'winds of change' speech delivered by the British Prime Minister in the South African parliament in February. Macmillan told bewildered MPs that African nationalism had become an

irresistible force on the continent and that the South African government should abandon apartheid to accommodate this force.

The crisis generated a deep sense of fear in white South Africa. Bernard Sachs wrote that “the Sharpeville tragedy shook both the whole country and the Nationalist Party.” Verwoerd, according to one of his close associates, was “a deeply worried man”. The US State Department advised its ambassador to South Africa to prepare for black rule within 18 months to five years. Tom Hopkinson, former editor of *Drum*, reflected on the crisis some months later: “There was a period during 1960”, he wrote, “from late January to August, when events happened so fast, and were at time so horrifying, that one came to live in constant expectation of renewed disaster.” Gun shops rapidly sold out their stocks as white panic set in.

There were also signs of wavering - even a loss of nerve - in some government quarters. On 25 March the pass laws were suspended, albeit only temporarily, but surely a sign of the government giving in to pressure. An editorial in the NP newspaper, *Die Burger*, called on the government to re-think its policies. While Verwoerd was recovering in hospital after the attempted assassination, the acting Prime Minister, Sauer, expressed the need for fundamental reform, pointing to the pass laws and political rights for urban blacks.

There were grounds for this fear and wavering. The state’s security apparatus was not nearly as strong as it would become in the ensuing decades. During the crisis of late March small towns were denuded of their police who were being sent to the urban centres. The army was called in to guard police stations. Between 30 March and 2 April the entire citizen force and permanent force reserve were placed on standby.

Sharpeville also sparked a major economic crisis for South Africa, which lasted for about eighteen months. For a brief period in late March the economy “juddered almost to a halt”. A mass worker stayaway crippled Cape Town’s docks and industries. Many hundreds of men belonging to citizen force units spent more than six weeks away from their usual occupations. Investor confidence plummeted. In the five months after Sharpeville over £500 million was wiped off share values on the

Johannesburg stock exchange. The country's gold and foreign exchange reserves fell by 55% in fifteen months.

The massacre also brought South Africa into the international spotlight. Before Sharpeville there were already signs of a build-up of pressure. Late in 1959 a campaign was being organised in the UK for an international boycott of South African trade goods. By coincidence March 1960 was to be the boycott month in the UK, and the campaign was launched at a rally in Trafalgar Square on 28 February. Similar calls for a boycott came from labour movements in the US, West Germany and Norway. Two international conferences were held - in New York in June, and London in October - to consider ways of stepping up pressure on South Africa. The US government imposed a selective arms ban.

Just as Sharpeville generated fear in white South Africa, so did it generate both anger and hope among black opposition movements. It gave rise to a strong sense of the state's vulnerability. A particular metaphor came to be commonly used - "a shaky granite wall" - to denote the cracks in apartheid's foundations. Late in 1961 Mandela proclaimed that South Africa was "in a state of perpetual crisis". There was a strong perception of an anti-imperialist tide sweeping through Africa as decolonisation gained momentum - a tide that South Africa would not be able to resist. There had been, too, the recent Cuban revolution.

In the medium term, as we know, these hopes were not realised. In spite of the sense of vulnerability and wavering in some government quarters, the state's repressive apparatus and the will to deploy it were still strong enough to ride out the crisis. A state of emergency was declared on 29 March, leading to the detention of about 1600 people under the emergency regulations. Early in April the ANC and PAC were banned. In the six weeks after Sharpeville about 18,000 people were arrested for various offences. There would be a massive increase in spending on the police and military. Between 1960 and 1964 the defence force budget rose by 600%. The government built a garrison state, with the full approval of the white electorate who gave the National Party an increased majority in the May 1961 election.

As is well known Sharpeville prompted the turn to armed struggle on the part of the ANC and PAC. Their banning had forced them underground, making it virtually

impossible to pursue an above-ground oppositional politics. This was shown most clearly when the three-day stayaway, organised for the end of May 1961 to coincide with South Africa becoming a republic, was called off by Mandela after one day. The next month the decision was taken by the ANC executive to turn to armed struggle. There followed the sabotage campaign, launched in December 1961, the Rivonia arrests and trial.

In the medium term the garrison state held secure, at least for about fifteen years. And from late 1961 the South African economy began a dramatic recovery. The economy grew rapidly throughout the rest of the decade, and the Johannesburg stock exchange boomed. International condemnation of apartheid did not give rise to significant economic pressure in the medium term, as the country's external trade continued to grow. By the late 1960s it was very apparent that white supremacy and white prosperity went hand-in-hand, lending weight to the developing radical argument that apartheid was more about capital accumulation than racial segregation.

In the longer term Sharpeville was deeply significant. It internationalised the struggle against apartheid. More than any other event it brought the international spotlight on South Africa and made it even more a pariah state. Over the next thirty years international pressure on South Africa would steadily escalate - first the sports boycott, then the arms embargo, followed by sanctions and the cultural boycott. The economic pressure in particular weakened the apartheid state and contributed significantly to its eventual downfall.

More important, Sharpeville hardened the political and military battle lines. It undermined the idea that apartheid could be reformed out of existence or eliminated by peaceful means, through passive resistance. Sharpeville had been the bloody outcome of passive resistance. The ANC and PAC turned to armed struggle, and the South African state became ever more violently repressive. Sharpeville set the country on a path of political violence which would last for over three decades. It set in motion a cyclical pattern that would repeat itself twice more in the 1970s and 1980s - each time the cycle playing itself out on a scale larger and more intense. The pattern was one of deep-seated popular anger giving rise to protest and resistance,

followed by heavy state repression. This was the pattern in the uprisings of 1976-77 and 1984-86. In the latter Sharpeville would again feature prominently, as it was there that the township rebellion would begin in September 1984.

Today both the Sharpeville township and the memory of the massacre are sites of contestation. Only last month there were burning tyres in the streets of Sharpeville as its residents engaged in service delivery protests. There was one complaint that the ANC town council only shows interest in Sharpeville on 21 March, while it is neglected for the other 364 days of the year. And PAC leaders claim that the ANC has appropriated the memory of Sharpeville for its own political advantage at the expense of the PAC . Only yesterday Julius Malema gave a speech claiming that the ANC organised and led the 1960 anti-pass campaign at Sharpeville.

So if one looks back on the past fifty years of South African history and some of its key features - the apartheid system with its many iniquitous elements, one of which being the pass laws; passive resistance and protest; brutal state repression; township rebellion; post-apartheid service delivery protests - Sharpeville remains a powerful symbol of all of these.