



Sharp-nosed at Sharpeville

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Sharpeville: An apartheid massacre and its consequences

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Author:

Tom Lodge

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Review Title:

Sharp-nosed at Sharpeville

Reviewer:

Bill Nasson¹

Affiliation:

¹Department of History, Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch, South Africa

Email:

bnasson@sun.ac.za

Postal address:

Private Bag X1, Matieland 7602, South Africa

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Vereeniging, a drab and sooty industrial spot south of Johannesburg, was the spot where the British and the Boers signed the peace treaty of May 1902 which ended the South African War and paved the way to the first New South Africa. It was also there that, 94 years later, Nelson Mandela signed the final draft of his country's new post-apartheid constitution into law, sealing the arrival of the second New South Africa. Symbolically, it was a telling choice of place, and in more ways than one. Because that adoption ritual took place in Vereeniging's African township of Sharpeville, the location where in March 1960 South African police opened fire with live ammunition on Pan Africanist Congress (PAC)-led African demonstrators who had assembled to protest against the detested pass laws of the apartheid regime.

That notorious episode, bequeathed to history as the Sharpeville massacre, is the subject of Tom Lodge's compelling account of what happened in the early 1960s and what the convulsive consequences were for South African politics. As the author (by a long chalk the most informed, astute and discriminating scholar of South Africa's Black resistance politics) observes, the full historical significance of the killings at Vereeniging has never been considered in depth. After all, like the 1976 Soweto rebellion, the Sharpeville massacre has long been invested with symbolic importance as a transitional or epochal moment in the history of apartheid, even though, in the short term, March 1960 may appear as little more as a discomfiting burp for the Nationalist government as it continued to digest the bumper harvest of an orderly and prosperous 1960s.

Yet, while studies abound of June 1976 and the role of that uprising in the eventual unravelling of the apartheid order, there has been surprisingly little research into, and writing on, the Sharpeville crisis. Tom Lodge pays generous tribute to the existing skinny body of writings, in so doing reminding us that the only complete study of this bloody incident has been that by the then Anglican Archbishop of Johannesburg, Ambrose Reeves, in his condemnatory 1961 *Shooting at Sharpeville*. In this sense, even though there may be few major surprises about the basic series of events triggered in March 1960, this is a pioneering book, the first really hefty scholarly analysis of Sharpeville and a wide-ranging assessment of its overall meaning for apartheid society and South Africa's subsequent relationship with the rest of the world.

This detailed illumination of the Sharpeville explosion interprets it not as some inevitably brutal reflex on the part of a booted apartheid system, but as a tremulous political drama, providing readers with a worm's eye view of the complicated local political and social context within which the crisis erupted. While *Sharpeville* is a long book, it is well sustained by its strengths. One strength is its sober, quietly discriminating tone. Professor Lodge pursues a strongly people-centred approach and is deft in balancing rigorous critical analysis of actions with a judicious understanding of why people on both sides may have acted in the way that they did. Another of this book's strengths lies in its imaginative choice of anecdotal detail, at times often moving or grimly amusing. Thus, we learn that more elderly antipass demonstrators brought along fold-up chairs in expectation of a few relaxed hours on a sunny March day. Or, that earlier that morning African police in the township had been goaded by women who lifted their skirts at them in an expression of sexual derision, deriding their manhood.

A third and very large part of the power of this study comes from its exhaustive range of sources. Ambrose Reeves's early popular account of the crisis rested squarely on the record generated by the 1961 official Commission of Inquiry. Philip Frankel's more recent 2001 monograph, *An ordinary atrocity*, which focused upon the police and local officialdom, plumbed the Department of Justice records. For what is likely to become the definitive Sharpeville history, Tom Lodge has been able to trawl a sea of new archival and other sources. This material includes interviews with ordinary survivors and eyewitnesses and influential Pan-Africanist political activists, and the array of evidence submitted as testimony to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 1996. *Sharpeville* makes ample use of its fresh evidence, frequently in strikingly emotive ways, such as in the searing reflection by Sekwati Sekoana, one-time 1956 Treason Trial defendant and



present curator of the local museum. In a piece of folklore oral testimony quoted on the last page of this story, he recalls that following the killings, it started to rain. Contaminated by the blood of the victims, the rainwater drained away into a dam at the eastern edge of the township, filling it. Since then, it has remained full. Before the massacre, the dam used to be a recreational attraction, with its water also being used for washing and drinking. But since March 1960 the lake has remained deserted, 'nobody has used the water since', declares Sekoana, '...not for fifty years. Nobody goes there. Never.' As the author concludes of his lengthy account, it is hardly surprising that for so many of the township's inhabitants, 'their home place remains a vicinity of restless spirits, tormented ghosts' (p. 347).

A fourth reason why *Sharpeville* is such a rattling good read is its meticulous telling of a sprawling story, as it provides not merely a gripping reconstruction of the fiery motive forces which led to the massacre and its politically repressive consequences, but goes on to tackle much wider vistas. These include historiographical matters, such as the influence of radical Marxist interpretations of South Africa's political economy after the crisis, in which the rapid growth of the 1960s came to be seen as proof that apartheid and industrial capitalism were natural bedfellows. As the book notes, with economic growth faltering by the end of the decade, that simple proposition had become simplistic. And the scope of the volume's story also includes stories, as Lodge probes the White South African world through its politically revealing fiction, drawing on novels such as Nadine Gordimer's *The conservatorist* and Etienne le Roux's *Seven days at the Silbersteins*.

Part of this wider context is, of course, the incendiary atmosphere of those early 1960 days. So, revisiting his own 1970s doctoral research on the PAC, Lodge highlights the significance of the simultaneous antipass march in Cape Town by PAC-inspired migrant workers, and its own weight in helping to prolong the post-Sharpeville political crisis. What counted there was not just the merciful outcome of the police holding their fire. At the time, it was more that the police backed down, permitting marchers to retain the streets. As Lodge observes, for the PAC it was 'an important victory. They had succeeded in compelling the police to negotiate and offer concessions'. And 'in the short term', the stand-off between Pan-Africanist leaders and the Cape Town

police bolstered the authority of their movement, helping 'to strengthen the PAC's hold on the townships' (p. 143).

No less – probably more – important for the claim to Sharpeville as an epoch-making historical event are the underlying, almost gravitational, consequences which Tom Lodge depicts in a set of broadly swept chapters. With this, the aftermath of the massacre becomes a tale of two halves. In the comfortable opening half, the White state was able to draw on the frightening spectre of Black violence to entrench its standing amongst Whites and to legitimise its repressive actions to contain extra-parliamentary political resistance. The second half was, however, rather more nervy and unpredictable as most of it was played overseas. Sharpeville's most substantial impact was, as this book argues convincingly, more international than domestic.

Although the then prime minister, Hendrik Verwoerd, shrugged it off, the repercussions of Sharpeville led to apartheid South Africa's first real diplomatic setback, its enforced exit from the Commonwealth in 1961. Beyond this, Sharpeville became a midwife to the global anti-apartheid movement which emerged in the 1960s, its memory part of the glue which fixed together that coalition, and also a factor in the strategic reconstruction of anti-apartheid political struggles by an exiled diaspora of ANC and PAC political leadership. Today, 50 years after that tragic event, Tom Lodge's story provides an insistent reminder of how the embedded memory of 1960 continues to cast a haunting shadow. Within it lies, as Lodge reveals in typically acute passing observations, the classic mix of historical change alongside continuity. Today, as elsewhere across the Vaal region, the township's local government electoral wards return ANC candidates, as the moribund 'Pan-Africanists receive short shrift in the voting booths' (p. 346). At the same time, older Sharpeville political traditions still retain some of their pulse. Sam Kolisang was chairman of the township Advisory Board 60 years ago – he was an official civic leader who remained at its head for years after the shootings. One of the board's present councillors is his son.

As Lodge concludes, leaving aside such recent acquisitions as its Human Rights Precinct, in appearance Sharpeville would be easily recognisable to anyone returning after an absence of half a century. It is a stark view of its destiny that should be acknowledged and understood, as with the human lives explored so empathetically in this insightful depiction of the first crucial event in which apartheid ran out of luck.