

# Soweto Uprising



1976 Soweto Uprising

Demonstrators protesting the South African government's plans to impose the Afrikaans language as a medium of instruction in schools for Black students, Soweto, South Africa, June 16, 1976.

**Soweto Uprising**, student-led protest that began on June 16, 1976, in Soweto, South Africa, against the government's plans to impose the Afrikaans language as a medium of instruction in schools for Black students. After a deadly interaction with the police that day, the initial protest escalated into a much larger and often violent challenge to the authority of the South African government—a challenge that was marked over the next days and weeks by protests and rioting in Soweto and other areas of South Africa. The uprising and the ensuing protests created a crisis of legitimacy for South Africa's apartheid government that contributed to its eventual downfall, in 1994.

## Origins of the protest

The uprising occurred against a backdrop of entrenched racial inequality, perpetuated by the South African government's apartheid policies, which had long sanctioned racial segregation and discrimination against nonwhites in the country in all aspects of life. In education, specific schools were designated for Black (classified by the government as Bantu) students and were subject to decisions made by the government's Department of Bantu Education. Some of those decisions concerned language.

Many different languages were spoken in South Africa, and Black students were generally taught in their native language. English and Afrikaans were the languages of the country's white minority, and the Afrikaans language in particular was associated with the apartheid government and its nationalist agenda. For those living in Soweto, a township complex designated for Black South Africans that was adjacent to the city of Johannesburg, Afrikaans was a language they used only when they had to interact with actors for the apartheid state, such as police officers and bureaucrats.

Thus, when in 1974 the regional director for the Department of Bantu Education issued a directive that Afrikaans was to be used as a medium of instruction for mathematics and social science classes for the upcoming year, it was met with resistance by the Black community. Moreover, the imposition of Afrikaans presented a severe educational barrier, as students had not previously been required to learn that language, so being forced to take the classes in Afrikaans would make learning the subject matter very difficult. In addition, though teachers had to be functionally fluent in Afrikaans for their employment, many lacked the skill to teach specialized subjects in that language. Consequently, teachers, students, and parents all objected to the

imposition of Afrikaans-language instruction. Because the new policy did not immediately go into effect, teachers, parents, and school boards used the interval to lodge complaints and file for exemptions, but these actions were to no avail.

When the Afrikaans policy was fully imposed on some schools in 1976, it was greatly resented by Black South Africans, who had no further legal recourse. In Soweto, Black students took matters into their own hands. Some began to act on their objections to the policy beginning in February 1976 by complaining to school officials and sporadically boycotting classes. Students then became more organized in their efforts, and in May 1976 a boycott of classes at one school grew to include students in several other schools, who joined in a show of solidarity. On June 13 some students met and began planning a much larger protest, in the form of a peaceful march, to be held on the 16th.

## June 16 uprising



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A protest sign proclaiming “To Hell with Afrikaans” that was used during the Soweto Uprising on June 16, 1976, in the Hector Pieterse Museum, Soweto, South Africa.



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On the morning of June 16, 1976, students at various schools across Soweto assembled outside class and then marched through the streets of the township, singing and shouting. Some held signs with slogans like “To Hell with Afrikaans” and “Down with Bantu Education.” Participants included students who were acting in solidarity with those at the schools that had been most directly affected by the Afrikaans mandate. Not everyone who ultimately participated in the event had been privy to the protest plans; some learned about it while the demonstrations were already in progress and decided to join.

The students planned to head to Orlando Stadium, making a point of passing Orlando West Junior Secondary School (also known as Phefeni Junior Secondary School), which was the site of the most intense protest actions against the Afrikaans mandate. Some participants later said that, after meeting at the stadium, the students intended to continue on to the Department of Bantu Education’s regional offices, where they planned to hand over a list of their concerns.

By the time the march reached Vilakazi Street, near Orlando West Junior Secondary School, there were approximately 10,000 students in the crowd (some estimates are higher). They were met there by a group of police officers. The exact details and order of the events that occurred next cannot be stated with certainty. Given the size of the gathering, participants later gave many differing accounts of the interactions between the police officers and the students. The police made an attempt to disperse the students and prevented them from continuing on their planned path. They used tear gas on the crowd, to which the students responded by throwing stones at the officers. According to some accounts, the police then released dogs into the crowd, and one of the dogs was killed. The students became more hostile, shouting anti-police slogans and hurling

Soweto youths kneeling in front of the police, holding their hands in the air while showing the peace sign, during the protests against the South African government's plans to impose the Afrikaans language as a medium of instruction in schools for Black students, Soweto, South Africa, June 16, 1976.

more stones at the officers and, by some accounts, throwing bricks. At this point, at least one officer fired live ammunition into the crowd, after which other officers opened fire. Several students were wounded, and two died. The 15-year-old Hastings Ndlovu and the 12-year-old Hector Pieterse are recognized as being the first students to have been killed in the uprising.

Thus, the peaceful march the students had planned had escalated into a violent clash. As word of the police officers' actions spread, the situation in Soweto became increasingly dangerous. Some of the students began looting and torched government buildings and vehicles. Several white South Africans working in the

township were targeted by mobs, though many managed to escape (often with the help of Black South Africans who persuaded the mobs not to act violently). More people were killed or wounded. Additional police officers, as well as paramilitary units, were dispatched into the township, and they shot to kill, both with and without provocation, and they did. Many students and bystanders were wounded and sought medical care, and the government ordered doctors to report to the police anyone who came to the hospital with bullet wounds so that they could be arrested. This directive later created problems with identifying the number of people killed or wounded in the riots, as some doctors falsified records to protect their patients.

In the following days, violence spread to other locations in the country, often triggered by students protesting in solidarity with the Soweto students and being met with similar violent responses from the police. By the time the uprising died down, serious harm had been done to the international legitimacy of the South African government. Photographs published around the world showed Black children running from, injured by, or killed by police officers.

## Aftermath

Later in the year, the South African government appointed a single judge to preside over a commission that was to record and analyze the Soweto Uprising. Despite its limitations, the Cillie Commission (named after the presiding judge, Petrus Malan Cillie) has been considered a key source of information about what happened on June 16. The commission concluded that 575 people had died and 3,907 had been wounded as a result of the protests, but these numbers have been disputed. Since many people's involvement in the riots would have been concealed to avoid arrest, it is generally agreed that the true casualty numbers were higher.

The commission blamed neither the rioters nor the police officers for the violence, though the government prosecuted and otherwise targeted many students in association with the riots. No police officers were charged or punished. There was an attempt sometime after the riots to prosecute the activist Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, who the government alleged had played an organizational role. While contemporary historians agree that Madikizela-Mandela's home, which was merely blocks from the site where the students and the police clashed on June 16, could have been used by some Soweto student action groups, there has never been any evidence to support the government's accusations against her, and the prosecution was eventually dropped.

## Impact

The Soweto Uprising did lasting damage to the apartheid government on multiple levels. It was seen by the Black youth population as a direct attack on it. After the uprising, there was an exodus of young people from South Africa, and many joined the African National Congress (ANC), the chief organization resisting the apartheid government, in exile. Later the ANC even took credit for the uprising, as did some other anti-apartheid organizations, though such claims are generally considered to misrepresent the influence any organization might have had on the students.



Hector Pieterse Museum,  
Soweto, South Africa

Entrance to the Hector Pieterse Museum, two blocks from where Pieterse was shot during the Soweto Uprising in 1976. In the background is Sam Nzima's photograph of Mbuyisa Makhubo carrying the wounded Pieterse, with Pieterse's sister Antoinette crying and running alongside him.

The uprising also caused a crisis of legitimacy for the apartheid government within South Africa. The failure of the police and the paramilitary units to control the violence damaged the government's standing in the eyes of white South Africans, and the attacks on children further alienated non-white South Africans. The government was clearly guilty of both misusing its own powers and failing to ensure the safety of its citizens, whatever their race. The South African government's reputation was damaged on the international stage as well. The uprising has been viewed as important in helping to lead to the legislative dismantling of apartheid in the early 1990s and to the adoption of a new constitution in 1993, which took effect the next year, that enfranchised all racial groups in the country. June 16 is now a public holiday in South Africa: observed as Youth Day, it pays tribute to the role young people had in the struggle for freedom.

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