

Part II: Apartheid and Its Opposition

Following unification in 1910, the British government passed laws that further subjugated blacks, coloureds, and Asians. Most laws applied to all three groups, but were more extreme for blacks than for Asians and coloureds. One law relegated Africans to the lowest jobs in the mining industry. It also became a criminal offense for blacks to strike. The 1913 Natives' Land Act became the first piece of major legislation creating separate areas for Europeans and Africans. African land ownership was limited to specially designated Natives' Reserves on 8 percent of the countryside.

These laws built upon each other to form a system of racial segregation in which whites and Africans had little contact with each other. Later, the designers of the apartheid system would draw from these laws in their attempt to further limit rights for Africans, coloureds, and Asians.

How did Africans, coloureds, and Asians respond to these laws?

The black, coloured, and Asian populations of South Africa did not readily submit to

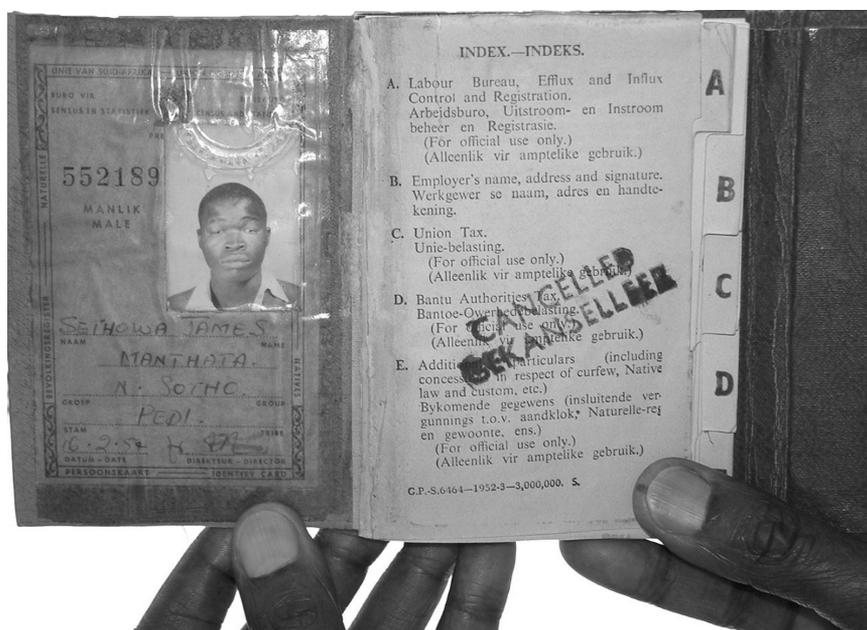
the continued restrictions. Many participated in tax boycotts, refusing to pay taxes that they felt were unjustly imposed by authorities whom they had no role in choosing. These actions did not succeed in repealing the racist laws, and, in fact, thousands of Africans and coloureds died fighting for more rights.

New methods of resistance had to be established to resist these new acts of legislation. In 1912 several hundred conservative African men formed the African National Congress (ANC) to organize Africans and oppose discrimination through petitions and appeals to Great Britain. Recognizing that ethnic rivalries had hampered past attempts at resistance, the ANC declared that "We (the African population) are one people" regardless of ethnic group affiliations.

Having seen the failure of armed resistance in the colonial era, the ANC embraced a policy of passive resistance. While in general the ANC avoided large-scale protests, in 1919 it organized a major nonviolent demonstration against the passbooks that blacks had to carry with them at all times. Mounted police responded by riding over the demonstrators.

Other officers encouraged nearby white civilians to attack the demonstrators. Several of the protesters died in the violence, but the determination to change the laws lived on.

The ANC initially hoped to gain rights for the black elite. It was not as concerned with the general population, and for the most part was ineffective through the 1930s. Trade unions, on the other hand, which became prominent in the 1920s, were more successful in their protests. The Industrial and Commercial Workers



A passbook from 1954.

Union (ICU) was particularly active, organizing strikes throughout the country.

Despite the efforts of these groups, the position of blacks in South Africa continued to worsen. In 1936 the government repealed the limited voting rights some Africans had, and installed three white representatives to speak for all blacks.

Resistance to white domination was not limited to the African population. Mohandas Gandhi, later called the liberator of India, came to South Africa in 1893 to accept a position in an Indian law firm. Gandhi's experiences as an Indian in South Africa informed his idea of what he should try to accomplish while in South Africa.

“The hardship to which I was subjected was superficial, only a symptom of the deep disease of colour prejudice. I should try, if possible, to root out the disease and suffer hardships in the process. Redress for wrongs I should seek only to the extent that it would be necessary for the removal of the colour prejudice.”

—Mohandas Gandhi

Gandhi formed the Natal Indian Congress (later the South African Indian Congress, or SAIC) to organize Indians to demand basic human, political, and economic rights for the South Asian community. The SAIC was based on Gandhi's idea of *satyagraha* (“the struggle for truth”) as the root of a nonviolent form of resistance against white discrimination. His position as a Hindu led him to believe in mutual tolerance for all peoples and in nonviolent resistance. By 1943 the SAIC was actively working to coordinate its efforts with the African and coloured groups that were agitating for more rights.

The Rise of Apartheid

The victory of the National Party in the South African election of 1948 brought conservative Afrikaners to political power. Although Afrikaners accounted for the majority of the

white population, the politics of South Africa had previously been dominated by an alliance of British and moderate Afrikaner politicians. Now with a narrow majority in the South African parliament, the conservative Afrikaners would have the opportunity, as they saw it, to set history right. They wanted to return to what they believed were the values of their early ancestors, the first Dutch settlers in South Africa and the trekboers of the preceding century. These values included a belief that they were the chosen people of God, responsible for directing humanity and committed to segregation as God's plan.

Many Afrikaners were poor and living in cities. They wanted to be distinguished politically and socially from blacks and wanted job protection. The conservative Afrikaners wasted no time in putting their plans into action.

“The more consistently the policy of apartheid [can] be applied, the greater [will] be the security for the purity of our blood and the surer our unadulterated European racial survival.”

—Geoff Cronje, Afrikaner professor, 1945

What new laws did the National Party implement?

Once in power, the National Party built upon the segregationist past by creating laws that responded to a new, urban society. The cornerstones were two laws, one that divided people into different racial categories, and a second that assigned them separate living spaces. The Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act (1949) said whites and members of other racial groups could not marry, and the Population Registration Act (1950) created three official races in South Africa to which all residents would be assigned: white, coloured and African. Asians were placed in the coloured category. Both Africans and coloureds were further categorized in an attempt to “divide and conquer.” Preventing communication among different African groups became a major element of apartheid.

The Group Areas Act (1950) began the process of designating every inch of land in South Africa for one of the three official race groups. Whites held all of the best land and 86 percent of the total land area, despite comprising only about 20 percent of the total population. Blacks were ruled as tribal subjects under chiefs.

Further laws segregated transportation, government buildings, and places of public entertainment. Under the Immorality Acts, whites and other groups could not have sexual relations with each other. In the midst of the Cold War, the Suppression of Communism Act (1950) defined communism so broadly that any resistance to apartheid policies could be equated with communism. People could be banned from speaking publicly or meeting together.

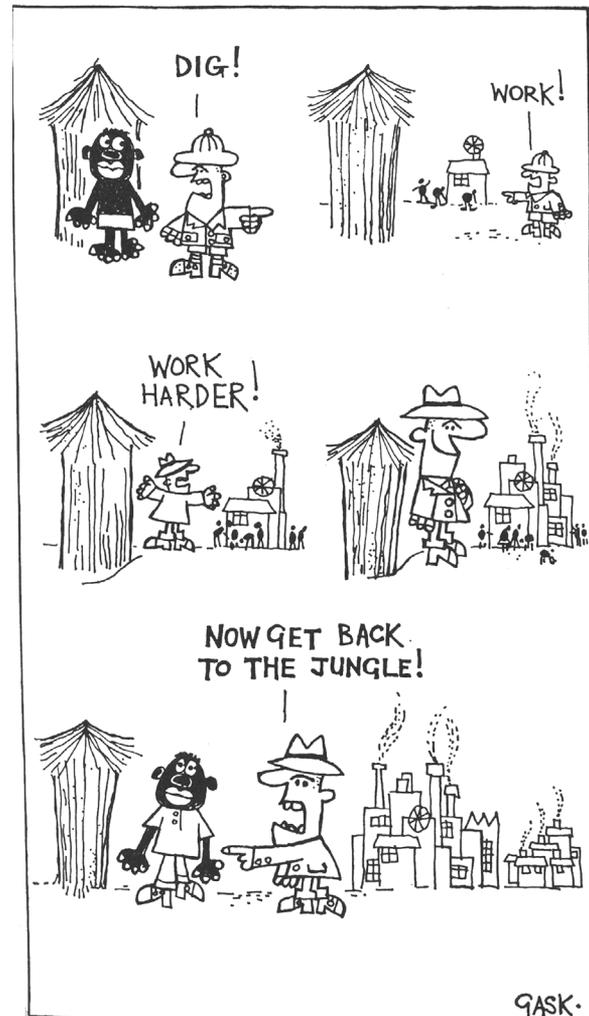
“Communism’...includes...any doctrine or scheme...which aims at bringing about any political, industrial, social, or economic change within the Union by the promotion of disturbance or disorder.”

—The Suppression of Communism Act

Additionally, most schools for blacks came under the control of the government. New rules required that Afrikaans be used in half the classes (English was the language of instruction in the other half) and textbooks focused solely on the white experience in South Africa. Schools for blacks taught only the basics required to work in low-paying, unskilled jobs. Apartheid was, at root, an economic system designed to keep coloureds, Asians, and blacks in particular, in servile roles while whites benefited from the low-cost labor.

“Equality with Europeans is not for them.... What is the use of teaching a Bantu child mathematics when it cannot use it in practice?”

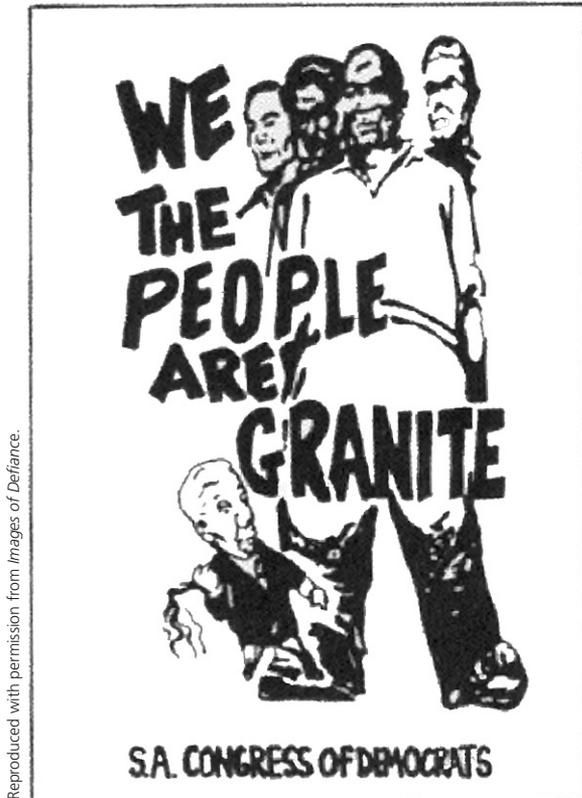
—Hendrick Verwoerd, prime minister



From Africa South, 1961.

How did apartheid control where people lived?

The Group Areas Act forced people who lived in cities and towns to live in areas called townships. Coloured and Asian townships were closer to the cities than black townships. Workers commuted to jobs in white areas as gardeners, domestic servants, and factory workers. In the townships most families lived in homes of two or three rooms, often without electricity, running water, or sewerage service. Land on the reserves was often not suitable for farming and many Africans living in the countryside had to migrate to the cities or mines to find work. At the same time, the government forced urban blacks who were not employed by whites to move to the reserves.



1950s protest poster.

Resistance

Different apartheid opponents advocated for different methods of resistance to these laws. Some Africans hoped to rid the country of all whites. Other radicals wanted more forceful actions but did not propose expelling all whites. These radicals, often young people, were frustrated by their lack of free mobility, the difficulty of finding jobs, and the poor schooling available to blacks. In 1944 young radicals within the African National Congress founded the Congress Youth League to encourage the ANC to adopt a more confrontational stance and to use mass action to achieve their goals.

“We of the Youth League take account of the concrete situation in South Africa, and realize that the different racial groups have come to stay. But we insist that a condition of inter-racial peace and progress is the

abandonment of white domination.”

—ANC Youth League Basic Policy Statement, 1948

The Youth League convinced leaders that mass protests were essential to their goals. The ANC took the official position that all races had a stake in the future of South Africa. Beginning in the late 1940s, the ANC used nonviolent tactics such as boycotts and strikes. After pressure from the Youth League, the ANC collaborated with other anti-apartheid groups like the South African Indian Congress. Before this time, the ANC had been asking for gradual change without specifying a clear goal. The SAIC had more experience with mass action.

What happened once the various anti-apartheid groups of South Africa began cooperating?

The ANC and SAIC’s shift to civil disobedience opened up new forms of protest. Each group wrote letters to the government demanding the repeal of unjust laws. When those letters received no response, the groups planned further action. The ANC and SAIC saw this as a last chance for the government to change its policies before they, along with the Franchise Action Council (a coloured group), launched the Defiance Campaign in 1952. Nelson Mandela, the future president of the ANC, made a name for himself as the national volunteer-in-chief of this campaign.

The specific target of the Defiance Campaign was the deceptively named Natives Abolition of Passes and Coordination of Documents Act (1952). This law increased the amount of information—fingerprints, employment statistics, and the like—required on passbooks. Inspired to a large extent by Gandhi’s philosophy of *satyagraha*, the Defiance Campaign intended to fill the courts and prisons with people arrested for not carrying proper passes, thereby overloading the system. Over the five months of the campaign, eight-thousand offenders were arrested and imprisoned for one to three weeks. The remarkable self-discipline of the peaceful

participants of the Defiance Campaign made it difficult for the government to justify a strong show of force against the protesters. This also drew increasing support toward the cause. The campaign ended after a series of government-provoked riots killed twenty-six Africans and six whites.

While opponents had failed to force a repeal of the pass laws, the campaign did succeed in some ways. Supporters and opponents alike saw the ANC as a mass movement commanding widespread popular support. Perhaps most importantly, the opponents of apartheid had proven that they could be more effective together than they could be working independently. Additional opposition groups, such as those for coloureds, whites, and communists of all races, began to join forces with the ANC. These groups produced newspapers and magazines to communicate effectively and to further their cause.

How did the government try to counter this rising resistance?

The government of South Africa faced a growing resistance intent on ending apartheid. Some commentators noted that ideas of racial tolerance seemed to be growing in the white community. The leaders of the National Party saw that development as a threat. To shore up the power of the apartheid system, two major pieces of legislation were passed in the year following the Defiance Campaign.

The Criminal Law Amendment Act instituted high fines and up to three years in prison or flogging for violation of any law in protest against the government. In other words, even if the normal punishment for a particular violation was fewer than three years, if the intent of the lawbreaker was to protest the existence of the law, then the fines were higher and time in prison could be longer. The government hoped to make the mass noncompliance strategy of the Defiance Campaign so costly for any future violators that they would not want to attempt such actions.

The Public Safety Act provided the framework for the government to declare states of

emergency. It also outlined the process by which the police could assume emergency powers. Just as the Defiance Campaign taught the opponents of apartheid many lessons about how to organize themselves, the government analyzed its own response and attempted to fix any holes in the system. The government had learned that many apartheid practices did not stand up to legal challenges because there were no laws to support certain practices. Rather than ending the practices, the government passed new laws. The cyclical nature of resistance followed by new laws followed by additional resistance consumed both sides.

What was the Freedom Charter?

The Defiance Campaign had begun to raise the awareness of people of all races about the problems created by apartheid. Using this momentum of support, in 1954 the ANC took the lead in forming the Congress Alliance to take the campaign against apartheid a step further. The South African Indian Congress, the South African Coloured Peoples Organization, the South African Congress of Trade Unions, and a white, largely communist group, the Congress of Democrats, all worked alongside ANC leaders to present a united front against the apartheid government.

The first significant action of the Congress Alliance called for the convening of a Congress of the People. The member organizations of the Congress Alliance sent out volunteers to collect ideas from the general population. They planned to create the Freedom Charter, a document that would express how the Congress of the People believed South Africa must move to a nonracial future.

The Congress of the People, attended by 3,000 delegates, including 320 Indians, 230 coloureds and 112 whites, was a two-day long, open-air meeting in Kliptown, a coloured township near Johannesburg. The centerpiece of the Congress was the approval of the Freedom Charter. This document had been drafted by committee after synthesizing the feedback gathered from the people of South Africa. On the second day of the Congress, the police arrived. They took photos of the scene, searched



UWC-Robben Island Museum Mayibuye Archives.

Protesters gather at the Congress of the People in 1955.

delegates, and confiscated documents. Nonetheless, the work of the Congress of the People continued defiantly until the Freedom Charter had been approved article by article.

“It is a revolutionary document precisely because the changes it envisages cannot be won without breaking up the economic and political set-up of present South Africa.”

—Nelson Mandela

How did the government react to this latest challenge?

Soon after the Congress of the People finished its work, police began conducting raids and trying to break up the activities of the members of the Congress Alliance. In December 1956, police arrested 156 people on charges of high treason. Among the arrested were Nelson Mandela, Chief Albert Luthuli (then president of the ANC), and Yusuf Cachalia and Ahmed Kathrada of the SAIC.

The defendants in what came to be known as the Treason Trial included people of all races, including twenty-three whites. Most of the whites were Jewish communists. The entire leadership of the Congress Alliance found itself enmeshed in endless legal proceedings. The government also banned them from speaking publicly to their supporters.

The government claimed that the 156 people arrested were involved in a countrywide conspiracy. It claimed there was a plot to use violence to overthrow the present government and replace it with a communist government. If found guilty, the defendants could face the death penalty.

How did the Treason Trial change the anti-apartheid movement?

The trial would stretch on for over four years. This gave leaders of the various anti-apartheid organizations enormous amounts of time to plan strategies and to develop a strong sense of camaraderie. Many of these leaders had been isolated from each other for years by government banning orders. Now they all benefited from extensive daily contact as they prepared their defense and met during court



From Africa South, 1961.

recesses. The Congress Alliance leadership emerged at the conclusion of the trial with greater political solidarity and sophistication.

While the trial testimony unfolded, events outside the courtroom showed that people would not be intimidated by the Treason Trial proceedings. The Alexandra bus boycott of 1957 demonstrated the power of the people united together against the system. When the bus company proposed a modest increase in bus fares, residents of Alexandra, a township in Johannesburg, refused to ride the buses. Instead many walked or rode bicycles up to twenty miles to their jobs in white-owned businesses. As worker productivity fell and a general strike seemed imminent, the government finally forced businesses to subsidize bus transport and avoid the fare increase. It was not sympathy for the black workers that led to this result, but rather the fact that business profits were at stake. Nevertheless, the people learned an important political lesson: they could win concessions if they united to act in a way that threatened the profitability of the white economy.

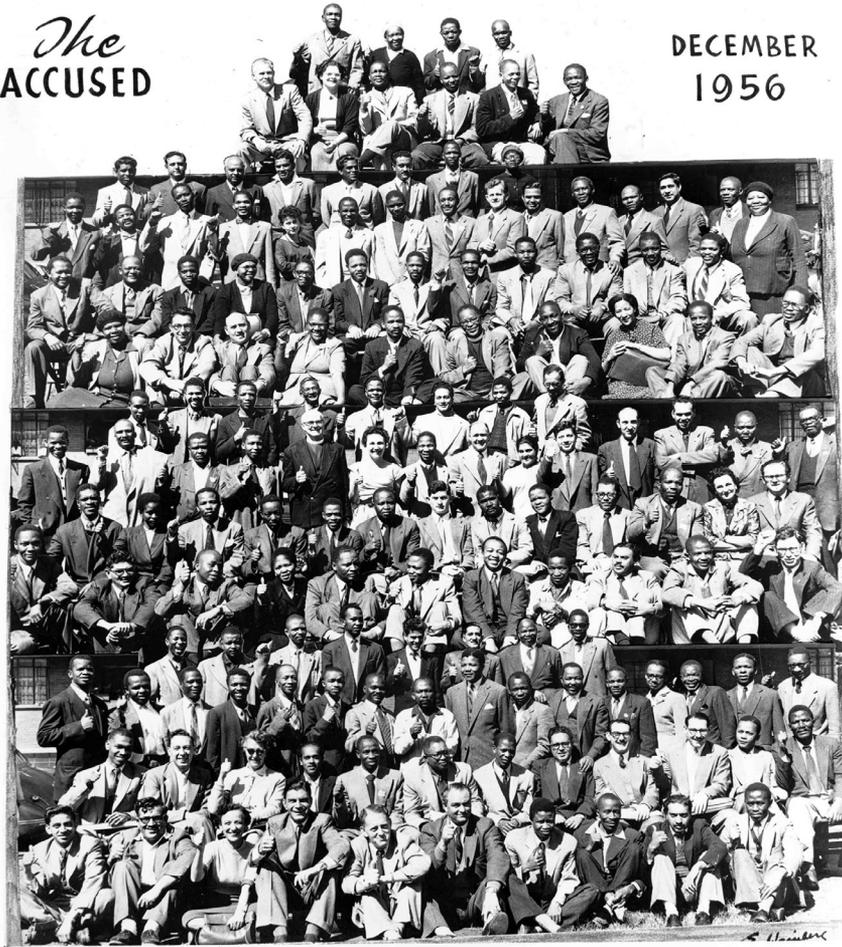
Why did the government establish black homelands?

Unrelated to the peaceful protests that the ANC and other Congress Alliance members organized, spontaneous and sometimes violent protests against the apartheid government developed in various rural areas of South Africa throughout the late 1950s. The government

TREASON TRIAL

The
ACCUSED

DECEMBER
1956



UWC-Robben Island Museum Mayibuye Archives.

sometimes used armored units and airplanes to crush protests in which firearms were used.

In an attempt to slow the building opposition, in June 1959 the government enacted the Promotion of Bantu Self-Government Act. Another deceptively named law, this established eight black homelands, or Bantustans, one for each of these tribal groups: North Sotho, South Sotho, Swazi, Tsanga, Tswana, Venda, Xhosa, and Zulu. All blacks became citizens of one of these homelands. None of the homelands allowed for full democratic participation. This practice of “separate development,” in which the government kept groups physically divided, persisted until the end of apartheid.

Now that the government defined all Africans as belonging to one of these eight

tribal groups, blacks were, in the official view, no longer a majority in South Africa. The government eliminated the three white representatives who had been appointed to speak for Africans' interests in Parliament. In theory, Africans were now represented through their homelands. The national government created puppet regimes for each of the homelands as a way of showing the outside world that white South Africa was actually promoting democracy for Africans. They also wanted to encourage blacks to view their political destiny as residing in the homeland structure, not in South Africa as a whole. Most Africans rejected these homeland governments as agents of collaboration with the National Party.

In the end, the government failed to prove at the Treason Trial that the Freedom Charter was a communist document, or that the Congress Alliance was a communist organization. Although the Defiance Campaign and the Freedom Charter had failed to eliminate apartheid, all the accused were acquitted. They could continue their protests.

Radicalism Grows

Some Africans felt the protests up to this point had failed. They believed the ANC was pandering to whites and losing its focus. Additionally, as many of the ANC leaders had been in jail during the Treason Trial, they felt the ANC had accomplished little for four years. The young radicals split from the ANC to form the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC).

What did the PAC believe?

Led by the charismatic Robert Sobukwe, the PAC distinguished itself through the promotion of an idea of African Nationalism, or "Africanism." This philosophy emphasized the importance of the unity of the various African peoples of South Africa. It rejected the multiracial approach of the ANC. Sobukwe and others argued that whites (particularly communists) and Indians involved in the activities of the Congress Alliance had called too many of the shots. The PAC also believed that the ANC was an elitist organization. It argued

that the ANC did not tap into black dissatisfaction, which the PAC thought would lead to the revolution they wanted.

The PAC saw itself as part of the anti-colonial movement then sweeping Africa. It defined its goal as "government of the Africans, for the Africans, by the Africans."

“The African people of South Africa recognize themselves as part of one African nation, stretching from Cape to Cairo, Madagascar to Morocco, and pledge themselves to strive and work ceaselessly to find organized expression for this nation in a merger of free independent African states into a United States of Africa.”

—PAC founding manifesto

The PAC stated that the Freedom Charter represented the betrayal of the African people by their leaders. It specifically rejected the Charter's statement that "South Africa belongs to all who live in it black and white."

The PAC also suggested that the pacifist activities of the Congress Alliance up to this point had not placed enough pressure on the white government. It called for more aggressive and confrontational actions. For the time being, Sobukwe suggested that the fledgling PAC organization contain itself to nonviolent actions. While the ANC and the Congress Alliance endorsed nonviolence as a basic moral principle, the PAC saw nonviolent action simply as a tool to be used during this particular stage of the struggle. The PAC intended to bring about a "mental revolution" among Africans to help them lose their "slave mentality." They planned to launch a status campaign in which Africans demanded respect from white employers and white shop owners.

“We are not anti-white.... We do not hate the European because he is white! We hate him because he is an oppressor. And it is plain dishonesty to say I hate the sjambok [whip] and not the one who wields it.”

—Robert Sobukwe

While President Sobukwe was careful to distinguish between hatred of whites and hatred of white oppression, many PAC supporters made no such distinctions. A majority of PAC members hoped to expel whites from South Africa entirely.

How did the ANC and the PAC approach protests differently?

The ANC responded to this new organization by labeling the PAC's policies as a form of black racism. ANC leaders suggested that the PAC was more interested in how employers spoke to African workers than in how well they paid them. The ANC equated the Africanism of the PAC with the racist doctrines of the Afrikaners. Nevertheless, the PAC enjoyed great success in recruiting supporters, especially among disillusioned youth who wanted to see immediate changes.

While PAC President Sobukwe's past words had called for dramatic confrontations with the apartheid state, the realist in him recognized that the bulk of the African population was not yet ready for such action. Instead, the PAC settled on a plan for a protest against the passes involving more people than had the Congress Alliance's Defiance Campaign. PAC leaders hoped this would be the first of many actions in the "mental revolution," helping people realize they had the ability to change the future. The PAC was unlike the ANC, which focused on meticulously planned and carefully orchestrated protests involving highly disciplined trained volunteers. The PAC placed greater value on individual spontaneity and the involvement of average citizens.

“All that we [the leaders] are required to do is to show the light and the



UWC-Robben Island Museum Mayibuye Archives

Sharpeville protesters flee the area as police look on. The bodies of people injured or killed by the police lay on the ground.

masses will find the way.”

—Robert Sobukwe

PAC volunteers fanned out across South Africa to recruit volunteers. Those who agreed to participate would present themselves at police stations without their passes and demand to be arrested. It proved easy to find volunteers. Many Africans were frustrated with rising rents, continuing forced relocations, falling standards of living, decreased educational opportunities, rising unemployment, and the humiliations of repeated police raids.

Sobukwe sent a letter to the police commissioner informing him that PAC supporters in large numbers would surrender themselves for arrest on March 21, 1960. He went on to explain that the protesters were under strict orders to avoid the use of violence and, if given adequate time, would respond to any police orders to disperse.

What happened at Sharpeville?

At Sharpeville, a township south of Johannesburg, there was a series of small clashes between police and protesters on the morning of March 21. The protesters were armed, at

most, with stones. In one incident, police fired shots over the heads of protesters outside the municipal buildings, injuring at least half a dozen and killing two. The protesters did not respond violently.

Tensions in Sharpeville mounted as the day went on. A crowd estimated at about five thousand (including large numbers of children) gathered outside the police station. The trouble began when a policeman was pushed

over near the entrance to the police compound. As the curious crowd surged forward against the fence to see what had happened, the police opened fire. No orders were given to disperse and no warning shots were fired. As the crowd turned to flee, police continued firing into the backs of fleeing protesters. By the time the firing ended, 69 Africans lay dead and 186 were wounded. Forty women and eight children were among the wounded.