



SOUTH AFRICA APARTHEID – SOWETO UPRISING

POSSIBLE ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- Why would students risk their lives to protest a change in the language of instruction at school?

BACKGROUND

The Soweto Uprising was a series of student protests in South Africa. The protests began the morning of June 16, 1976, when thousands of high school students from the African township of Soweto (outside of Johannesburg) gathered at their school to protest against the Bantu Education System. The Bantu Education Department had recently imposed Afrikaans as the main language for all schools.

Up to 10,000 students carried protest signs and sang freedom songs in Soweto on the morning of June 16, 1976, and marched peacefully and unarmed toward Orlando Stadium. Fifty police officers met them on the street; they used tear gas and fired warning shots. Then they began to shoot directly into the crowd. Some students retaliated by pelting stones at the officers. Two students, Hastings Ndlovu and Hector Pieterse died from gunfire.

South African forces and tanks entered Soweto that day. They were instructed to “shoot to kill” for the sake of law and order. By night, eleven more people were killed. The next day, violence spread to West Rand and Johannesburg. At the University of Witwatersrand, police broke up a group of 400 white students marching in solidarity. On June 18th, protesters were jailed, tortured and imprisoned. The shootings at Soweto led to uprisings in urban and rural areas throughout South Africa.

South Africa was a nation that was ruled by the minority white population and Afrikaans was their primary language. The National Party was the political party that represented the white population and dominated the government. The decision to force all students to learn in Afrikaans angered black students and was viewed as another method to oppress the South African black community. Furthermore, black teachers were not necessarily fluent in Afrikaans; as a result, many teachers protested against the language change and were fired. This new policy added to the students’ frustration toward the Apartheid government that came into power in 1948.

The goal of the Apartheid government and the Bantu Education Department was to develop an education system and curriculum that would train black Africans for their role in the evolving apartheid society as laborers, workers, and/or servants.

RESOURCES

Personal Stories

- [Soweto 1976: An Audio History \(NPR\)](#)

Articles

- [Book 5: People, Places and Apartheid - Chapter 2 - The Soweto Uprising of June 1976: A Turning Points Event by Phil Bonner \(South African History Online\)](#)
- [1976: Soweto Protest Turns Violent \(BBC\)](#)
- [South Africa profile - Timeline \(BBC\)](#)
- [1953. Bantu Education Act \(Nelson Mandela\)](#)
- [Bantu Education and the Racist Compartmentalizing of Education \(South African History Online\)](#)
- [1970s: Black Consciousness Movement in South Africa \(South African History Online\)](#)
- [1973 Durban Strikes \(South African History Online\)](#)

Audio

- [Soweto Gospel Choir - Nkosi Sikelel \(South African National Anthem\)](#)

Images

- [Map of Soweto \(BBC\)](#)
- [Hector Pieterse and fellow students \(Michigan State University\)](#)

Video

- [How one high school protest changed South Africa \(NBC News\)](#)
- [MALCOLM X: WAKE UP, CLEAN UP AND STAND UP!](#)

Websites

- [The June 16 Soweto Youth Uprising \(South African History Online\)](#)
- [A History of Apartheid in South Africa \(South African History Online\)](#)
- [Unit 3. The Rise of Apartheid \(Michigan State University\)](#)

