

## The Sharpeville Massacre\*

The Sharpeville Massacre in the 1960s was a turning point in South African history. For the resistance movements it marked the change from non-violent to violent protest. The peaceful protest at Sharpeville against the pass laws was organised by the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) and met by shooting by the police. It is not clear what really happened on 21 March 1960; there were different versions of and perspectives on the events in Sharpeville. In the following text Humphrey Tyler, assistant editor of *Drum Magazine* at that time, reports how he experienced that day in his function as a journalist. – [www.sahistory.org.za/pages/governance-projects/sharpeville/03\\_eyewitnesses.htm](http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/governance-projects/sharpeville/03_eyewitnesses.htm).



69 people were killed by the police during the Sharpeville Massacre

1 We went into Sharpeville the back way, behind a grey  
 2 police car and three Saracens. As we drove through the  
 3 fringes of the township many people shouted the Pan-  
 4 Africanist slogan "Izwe Lethu", which means "Our  
 5 Land", or gave the thumbs-up "freedom" salute and  
 6 shouted "Afrika!". They were grinning, cheerful, and  
 7 nobody seemed to be afraid...There were crowds in the  
 8 streets as we approached the police station. There were  
 9 plenty of police, too, wearing more guns and ammunition  
 10 than uniforms...An African approached...and said he  
 11 was the local Pan-Africanist leader. He told [us] his  
 12 organisation was against violence and that the crowd  
 13 was there for a peaceful demonstration...The crowd  
 14 seemed perfectly amiable. It certainly never crossed our  
 15 minds that they would attack us or anybody...

16 There were sudden shrill cries of "Izwe Lethu" -  
 17 women's voices it sounded – from near the police, and  
 18 I could see a small section of the crowd swirl around the  
 19 Saracens and hands went up in the Africanist salute.  
 20 Then the shooting started. We heard the chatter of a

machine gun, then another, then  
 another. There were hundreds  
 of women, some of them  
 laughing. They must have  
 thought the police were firing  
 blanks. One woman was hit  
 about ten yards from our car.  
 Her companion, a young man,  
 went back when she fell. He  
 thought she had stumbled. Then  
 he turned her over and saw that  
 her chest had been shot away.  
 He looked at the blood on his  
 hand and said: "My God, she's  
 gone!" Hundreds of kids were  
 running, too.

One little boy had on an old  
 blanket coat, which he held up  
 behind his head, thinking,  
 perhaps, that it might save him  
 from the bullets. Some of the  
 children, hardly as tall as the  
 grass, were leaping like rabbits.

Some were shot, too. Still the shooting went on. One of  
 the policemen was standing on top of a Saracen, and it  
 looked as though he was firing his gun into the crowd.  
 He was swinging it around in a wide arc from his hip as  
 though he were panning a movie camera. Two other  
 officers were with him, and it looked as if they were  
 firing pistols. Most of the bodies were strewn on the  
 road running through the field in which we were. One  
 man, who had been lying still, dazedly got to his feet,  
 staggered a few yards, then fell in a heap. A woman sat  
 with her head cupped in her hands.

One by one the guns stopped.

Before the shooting, I heard no warning to the crowd  
 to disperse. There was no warning volley. When the  
 shooting started it did not stop until there was no living  
 thing in the huge compound in front of the police station.  
 The police have claimed they were in desperate danger  
 because the crowd was stoning them. Yet only three  
 policemen were reported to have been hit by stones – and  
 more than 200 Africans were shot down. The police also

65 have said that the crowd was armed with "ferocious weapons", which littered the compound after they fled.

I saw no weapons, although I looked very carefully, and afterwards studied the photographs of the death scene. 70 While I was there I saw only shoes, hats and a few bicycles left among the bodies. The crowd gave me no reason to feel scared, though I moved among them without any distinguishing mark 75 to protect me, quite obvious with my white skin. I think the police were scared though, and I think the crowd knew it.



*The police used saracens to suppress riots*

## Vocabulary

**3 fringe** (n.): the part of s.th. that is farthest from the centre - **14 amiable** (adj.): friendly and likable - **18 to swirl** (v): to turn around quickly in a twisting circular movement or make s.th. do this - **26 blank** (n.): a cartridge that contains an explosive but not a bullet - **48 to pan** (v.): if a film or television camera pans in a particular direction, it moves and follows the thing that is being filmed - **52 dazed** (adj.): unable to think clearly, esp. because of a shock, accident etc - **57 to disperse** (v.): if a group of people disperses or is dispersed, they separate and go away in different directions - **57 volley** (n.): a large number of shots fired from a gun at the same time - **65 ferocious** (adj.): violent, dangerous, and frightening

## Explanations

**Introduction: pass laws:** see p. 20 - **Introduction: PAC:** Pan Africanist Congress of Azania; it was a resistance movement established in 1959 and the major rival of the ANC (see p. 17). The PAC proclaimed Africanism and opposed multi-racialism; their key slogan in the past was "Africa for the Africans" - **Introduction: Drum magazine:** see p. 57 - **2 saracens:** armoured cars that were often used to suppress riots in the townships (see p. 28)

### AWARENESS

- 1 What is meant by a turning point in history?
- 2 Can you find such turning points in German history?

### COMPREHENSION

- 3 What was the atmosphere in the crowd like at the beginning of the demonstration?
- 4 Why did the situation change?

### ANALYSIS

- 5 Compare the eye-witness account of Humphrey Tyler with an article in the British newspaper *The Guardian* (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/1960/mar/22/southafrica.fromthearchive>). The differences are significant. Try to find reasons for this. Can you find any similarities in the two accounts?

### OPINION

- 6 What do you believe happened in Sharpeville in March 1960? Give reasons for your opinion.
- 7 To what extent can reporting on certain events be objective or neutral? What are the implications for journalists and the readers of such reports?

### PROJECT

- 8 In groups of 4-5 students write an article about a recent event, but from different perspectives. Compare your articles. To what extent do they differ from each other? How could they be used to manipulate public opinion?