Sharpeville Massacre

On 21 March, a group of between 5,000 and 7,000 people converged on the local police station in the township of Sharpeville, offering themselves up for arrest for not carrying their pass books. The Sharpeville police were not caught totally by surprise for the demonstration, as they had already been forced to drive smaller gangs of more militant activists away from their station the previous night.

Many of the civilians present attended to support the protest, but there is evidence that the PAC also used intimidating means to draw the crowd there, including the cutting of telephone lines into Sharpeville, the distribution of pamphlets telling people not to go to work on the day, and coercion of bus drivers and commuters.

By 10:00 am, a large crowd had gathered, and the atmosphere was initially peaceful and festive. Fewer than 20 police officers were present in the station at the start of the protest. Later the crowd grew to about 19,000, and the mood began turning unexpectedly hostile. The increasingly agitated mob now adopted a common attitude which was later described as "insulting, menacing, and provocative", prompting about 130 police reinforcements, supported by four Saracen armoured cars to be rushed in. The police were armed with firearms, including Sten sub-machine guns. There was no evidence that anyone in the gathering was armed with anything other than rocks.

Sabre jets and Harvard Trainers approached to within a hundred feet of the ground, flying low over the crowd in an attempt to scatter it. The protestors responded by hurling a few stones (striking three people) and making repeated attempts to charge the police barricades. Tear gas proved ineffective, and policemen were forced to repel these advances with their batons. At about 1:00 pm the police tried to arrest an alleged ringleader. There was a scuffle, and the throng surged forward. At least two officers present on the scene warned their men to load firearms but stressed they were only to be used in cases of dire emergency. Protestors began screaming as they succeeded in reaching the fence and tearing the gates from their hinges. One police commander was thrown to the ground; others were possibly pelted with makeshift projectiles.

The shooting began shortly thereafter.
Why?

Reasons for firing

- Police reports in 1960 claimed that young and inexperienced police officers panicked and opened fire spontaneously, setting off a chain reaction that lasted about forty seconds. It is likely that the police were nervous as two months before the massacre nine constables had been murdered under similar circumstances at Cato Manor.

- In addition, nearly all policemen present had received no previous training regarding the control of mob disturbances. Most of them had already been coping with the situation for over twenty-four hours without respite. Lieutenant Colonel Pienaar, the commanding officer of the police reinforcements at Sharpeville, said in his statement that "the native mentality does not allow them to gather for a peaceful demonstration. For them to gather means violence." He also denied giving any order to fire and stated that he would not have done so.

Death and injury toll

- The official figure is that 69 people were killed, including 8 women and 10 children, and 180 injured, including 31 women and 19 children. Many were shot in the back as they turned to flee.

Aftermath

Response

- The uproar among South Africa's black population was immediate, and the following week saw demonstrations, protest marches, strikes, and riots around the country. On 30 March 1960, the government declared a state of emergency, detaining more than 18,000 people, including prominent anti-apartheid activists who were known as members of the Congress Alliance.

- A storm of international protest followed the Sharpeville shootings, including sympathetic demonstrations in many countries and condemnation by the United Nations.

- On 1 April 1960, the United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 134. Sharpeville marked a turning point in South Africa's history; the country found itself increasingly isolated in the international community. The event also played a role in South Africa's departure from the Commonwealth of Nations in 1961.

- The Sharpeville massacre led to the banning of the PAC and ANC. The massacre was one of the catalysts for a shift from passive resistance to armed resistance by these organisations. The foundation of Pogo, the military wing of the PAC, and Umkhonto we Sizwe, the military wing of the ANC, followed shortly afterwards.
SOURCE A: (from the Freedom Charter of the ANC, published in 1955)

We, the people of South Africa, declare for all our country and the world to know ... that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white, and that no government can justly claim authority unless it is based on the will of the people ... that only a democratic state based on the will of the people, can secure to all their birthright without distinction of colour, race, sex or belief ... we the people of South Africa, black and white, together equals, countrymen and brothers, adopt this freedom charter.

SOURCE B: (about the preparations for the Pass Law campaign, written by an unnamed ANC member from a school textbook, *Apartheid*, by Ian Phillips, published by Collins Educational, 1992)

It was our intention not to launch the new campaign until our people were thoroughly ready to participate. But the PAC had also in mind a programme of action against the passes. Their method was to go to the police stations, leaving their passes at home and asked to be arrested. Taking the country as a whole they were organised only in a few centers. Robert Sobukwe called an all Africans to follow him in leaving their passes at home. His call cut across ANC plans for an orderly, carefully mounted campaign with a deliberately timed climax.

SOURCE C: Crowds gathering in Sharpeville on the morning of March 21 1960

SOURCE D: (A report of what happened at Sharpeville, 21 March 1960 from Drum Magazine, a magazine for Black readers.)

Then the shooting started. We heard the chatter of a machine-gun, then another, then another ... 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. He looked at the blood on his hands and said: ‘My God she’s gone!’ ... Hundreds of children were running too. Before the shooting I heard no warning to the crowd to disperse. There was no warning volley.

The police have claimed they were in desperate danger because the crowd was stoning them. The police have also said that the crowd was armed with ‘ferocious weapons’ which littered the area after they fled. I saw no weapons, although I looked carefully and afterwards studied the photographs of the death scene.

SOURCE E: (from Ambrose Reeves, Bishop of Johannesburg, describing the events leading up to the shootings)

Gradually the news spread through the township that a statement concerning passes was to be made by some important person during the day at the police station and from about 8 am Africans started to gather around it. They waited patiently for the expected announcement and gradually the crowd grew.

Various estimates have been made of the crowd, and it would seem that, although there must have been a gathering of some thousands of Africans, press reports and the South African police certainly over-estimated the numbers. The Prime Minister read the official report on Sharpeville to the House of Assembly ... In this report, the allegation was made that there were 20,000 people around the police station. Photographs show that it is unlikely that there were more than 5,000 people at any one time.

SOURCE F: (from a statement by the South African High Commissioner in London, 1960)

According to information now available, the disturbances at Sharpeville on Monday resulted from a planned demonstration of about 20,000 natives in which demonstrators attacked the police with assorted weapons including firearms. The demonstrators shot first, and the police were forced to fire in self-defence and avoid even more tragic results. The allegation of the United Nations, that the demonstrators were unarmed and peaceful, is completely untrue.

SOURCE G: (from a summary of the findings of the Judicial Inquiry into the Sharpeville Massacre)

1. The size of the crowd was disputed; police evidence claimed that the crowd was around 20,000. Other witnesses claimed it was no more than 5,000.
2. The police evidence claimed that the crowd was in a violent and hostile mood.
3. Charles Channor (a press photographer) claimed the crowd was in a holiday mood, singing and laughing but noisy.
4. (Police) Captain Pienaar claimed that he could only force a way through the hostile crowd with great difficulty in armoured cars.
5. Another police officer claimed to have no difficulty and said that many people were just sitting on the side of the road.