

The Narrative: Press

Warning 1: In her office at *The World* newspaper, reporter Sophie Tema received a call from a "man who spoke in a deep masculine voice" but who would not give his name. He told her that students in Soweto would hold a demonstration the next day. The demonstration "was going to be in sympathy of the students who had gone on strike, who had not been going to classes because they were against the use of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction in certain subjects." She asked the caller which schools would take part in the demonstration and was told it would be Naledi, Morris Isaacson, and Orlando West.¹ (See: Tema Cillié Testimony, September 1976; Truth and Reconciliation Commission Testimony "Soweto" Victim Hearings, 23 July 1996.)

Morning: Sophie Tema, aware of the planned demonstration, "did not think that there was going to be violence. I thought as long as the police could keep out of it, there definitely would not have been violence."² (See: Tema Cillié Testimony, September 1976.) She found Naledi High School deserted when she arrived there at seven o'clock in the morning, accompanied by driver Stanley Mtshali and photographer Dan Tleketle. They returned briefly to their office to make a report to the news editor and were back at the Sizwe Store in Mofolo around 8:30. Another team of reporters from *The World*—Willy Bokala, the photographer Sam Nzima, and reporters Colin Nxumalo and Thami Mazai—were also on the scene.

Around 8:30, Peter Magubane talked to some of the students waiting at the Orlando West Junior High School. They told him they were waiting for the "deep Soweto" schools to join them and, by car, he went in search of these students. At the Sizwe intersection he found four students standing outside the Sizwe Store carrying one big and one smaller placard:

I stopped my car and got out to take photographs. A Police car approached from an easterly direction and drove past my car. Thereafter it stopped. A white policeman got out of the car and the pupils ran away. The policeman gave chase with a revolver in his hand and he fired three shots at the pupil who had been carrying the smaller placard. None of the shots hit the pupil.³

Participation: It seems unlikely that anyone was in a position to assess how many students taking part in the march and the subsequent school boycotts did so of their own volition and how many were intimidated.⁴ Sam Nzima explained that some children "were just leaving their classes and joined them, the march... I do not remember seeing anyone wresting them [the students] from their classrooms." Some things he might not have seen "because I was marching along the main road, but it was just a confusion of running up and down of the students there." His impression was that "some were just leaving their classrooms, running

to the street and joining the others."⁵ (See: Nzima Cillié Testimony, September 1976.)

Leaders: Press photographer Sam Nzima followed students who were marching toward the east to Orlando West High School. He got out of the car and marched on foot with the students.

Hlungwani: But you did not see anybody being invited or forced into the group?

Nzima: No, I did not see that.

Hlungwani: Now, as the group marched, you could see that there were leaders of this march?

Nzima: I saw some students which were marching forward, but I did not take them as leaders. I thought maybe they are just directing that this is their planned route where we are going to turn and whereto.

Hlungwani: As if those walking or marching in front were directing the march.

Nzima: That is correct.

Hlungwani: Which road to follow.

Nzima: That is correct.

Hlungwani: Did it not appear to you that the front students were sort of elder students ranging from 21, 22 or even from 19 onwards?

Nzima: I can believe so because they were bigger than those who were following them behind.

Hlungwani: You know that the wearing of uniform is compulsory in Soweto?

Nzima: Yes.

Hlungwani: Every student going to school must have a uniform every day.

Nzima: Yes.

Hlungwani: Now, amongst the marchers did you see some without uniform?

Nzima: The group who came there, they all had uniform to identify their schools. As far as I remember there was no one without uniform.⁶
(See: Nzima Testimony, September 76.)

Confrontation: Sam Nzima "saw the police were coming from the west towards the students."⁷ They were in "police vehicles, some in private cars, some in ... big vans called *kwela-kwela's* and some in smaller ones" driving up the main road. "They then took a turn in a street above the Orlando West High School to turn down and face the students directly. The students were facing west and the police were now facing east."⁸

(See: Nzima Testimony, September 1976.)

To another black news photographer the march seemed peaceful. His photographs show students with their fists raised, "boys and girls cavorting in the streets," a mixture of excitement, determination, and smiles on their faces.⁹

Warning 2: A reporter from the *Rand Daily Mail* wrote: "I did not hear the police give any order to disperse before they threw teargas canisters into the crowd of singing schoolchildren."¹⁰ One "would have expected" police to use "something like a loudspeaker" to warn students "in a crowd like that."¹¹

(See: Tema Cillié Testimony, September 1976.)

Tear Gas: There was much bewilderment after the tear gas went off, and Sophie Tema said "some of the students now started to get confused and were running helter skelter."¹² They "made a smoke among the students. When that thing dropped on the ground, it has a smoke with it."¹³ (See: Nzima Testimony, September 1976; Tema Cillié Testimony, September 1976.)

Shooting: Sam Nzima and Sophie Tema were questioned very closely a few months later by Judge Cillié, chairman of the Cillié Commission, and by Advocate Yutar:

Cillié: Miss Tema said that the crowd immediately became angry and began throwing rocks and any other objects they could find at the police.

Nzima: No.

Cillié: Is that wrong?

Nzima: Wrong.

Cillié: If I remember correctly, that is what she said here too, was it not?

Yutar: Yes.

Cillié: She said that in evidence a little while ago. You say that is not correct?

Nzima: No, I did not see such thing. There was no stone throwing before the teargas and firing.

Cillié: No, no, you know exactly what I said to you. I have read to you that the teargas was thrown.

Nzima That is right.

Cillié: And the report is that immediately after the teargas was thrown, the demonstrators started throwing stones at the police, and the police thereafter shot.

Nzima: Maybe that is what she had seen. I did not see such action.

Cillié: But you were there, you ...

Nzima: Yes, I was there.

Cillié: Well, then, who is wrong? Whose report is wrong then? She or you?

Nzima: According to what I have seen, I think she is wrong, I am right.¹⁴

Sophie Tema was clear in her description of the sequence of actions:

The police first threw teargas into the midst of the students. Then some of the students in the front line hurled stones at them in retaliation, it was then that this policeman pulled out the revolver, aimed at the students and fired. It was after this policeman had fired and more shots followed, that most of the students attacked the police.¹⁵

Sam Nzima, certain that the police were not in danger and that there was no reason to shoot at that stage, was adamant that "there was no stone throwing before the teargas and firing": **15**

After the shots ... there were so many students, they ran to that side and others ran to that side, they came from that hill, there is a little hill there where they got rocks, then they went for the police... First of all they were running away, but from running away they turned back in retaliation, throwing the stones and the police were shooting that time.¹⁶

(See: Nzima Testimony, September 76; Tema Cillié Testimony, September 1976.)

Tsotsis: On August 4, 1976, students marched to John Vorster Square, police headquarters in Johannesburg. Press photographer Peter Magubane repeatedly described students trying to avoid confrontations with the police and attempting to prevent "non-students" from looting and violence:

I heard a number of students protesting that they did not want their

demonstration to be spoilt by violence and that it was meant to be a peaceful march... The police moved in and shot teargas bombs into the crowd, which ran in all directions. The students reassembled again and started marching towards town. As the crowd proceeded towards Noordgesig shots and teargas were fired at them. One child was shot. Another was struck by a teargas canister on the neck. Both were rushed to hospital.



Each time the hippos [armored vehicles] drove past the crowd would raise their hands and say "peace." When the crowd eventually got to between Noordgesig and Canada Station, they were met by a heavy police contingent. Some decided to leave the road and walk through the veld in order to avoid a confrontation with the police. A lot of teargas was shot and the police eventually managed to turn the crowd back towards Noordgesig. They again reassembled and walked towards Orlando. When they were about to reach the Noordgesig Orlando east robot, they bottle store was broken into and liquor was looted—by non-students.

The students immediately put a stop to the looting and a number of the non-students were beaten up by the students.¹⁷

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Like all witnesses before the Cillié Commission, Sophie Tema was questioned extensively by Percy Yutar about the "tsotsi element," violence, and the use of alcohol:

I would not say it was the students [who were responsible for burning the buildings and looting businesses]. On this particular day bottle stores were broken into, bottle stores were looted and in a situation like that one could expect the tsotsi element to make full use of an opportunity like this and this is exactly what they did... At 3 I was still at Phefeni. I went back later after writing my report, I went back just to view the situation in Phefeni and most of the students were now walking back to their homes. You know, some of them were from as far as Naledi, ... after 3 o'clock the tsotsi element started to take over... [O]n the 16th June, which was the Wednesday, there was not much consuming of liquor, unlike on Thursday, the 17th, when the tsotsis had now really gone full force into the whole issue... On the 17th the tsotsis were now acting on their own, the students were not in it any longer.¹⁸

(See: Tema Cillié Testimony, September 1976.)

Notes:

Note 1: Sophie Tema, testimony, 21 September 1976, SAB K345, vol. 139, file 2/3, part 1, Commission Testimony vols. 9 and 10.

Note 2: Sophie Tema, testimony, 21 September 1976, SAB K345, vol. 139, file

2/3, part 1, Commission Testimony vols. 9 and 10.

Note 3: Peter Magubane, statement, 18 October 1976, Bureau of State Security (BOSS), SAB K345, vol. 13. After his detention on unspecified charges for "activities which endangered or were calculated to endanger the maintenance of public order," Magubane made this statement to his legal representatives. It was intended as a source of reference for submissions to be made on his behalf to the Detention Review Committee. The document, itself was dated 18 October 1976 and was found in the files of the Bureau of State of Security. It had been bound, marked Geheim (secret), and given a separate cover with the following printed on it: "STATEMENT BY PETER MAGUBANE DETAINED IN TERMS OF SECTION 10 (1)(A) BIS OF THE INTERNAL SECURITY ACT. (*Na die buiteland versend vir propagandadoeleindes teen die RSA*)" (translation: Sent abroad for propaganda reasons against the Republic of South Africa).

Note 4: As observed by Ellen Hellman, writing a year after the beginning of the uprising. Ellen Hellman, "Soweto: August 1977" (Johannesburg: unpublished manuscript), 4. See also, Ellen Hellmann, *Soweto: Johannesburg's African City* (Johannesburg: South African Institute of Race Relations, 1971).

Note 5: Sam Nzima (photographer for the newspaper *The World*), testimony, September 1976, SAB K345, vol. 139, file 2/3, part 1, Commission Testimony vol. 10.

Note 6: Sam Nzima (photographer for the newspaper *The World*), testimony, September 1976, SAB K345, vol. 139, file 2/3, part 1, Commission Testimony vol. 10.

Note 7: Sam Nzima (photographer for the newspaper *The World*), testimony, September 1976, SAB K345, vol. 139, file 2/3, part 1, Commission Testimony vol. 10.

Note 8: Sophie Tema, testimony, 21 September 1976, SAB K345, vol. 139, file 2/3, part 1, Commission Testimony vols. 9 and 10. A *kwela-kwela* is a small, usually white, truck the size of a delivery van in which the South African Police transported arrested persons.

Note 9: See photographs in Peter Magubane, *June 16: Fruit of Fear* (Johannesburg: Skotaville, 1986). Peter Magubane, statement, 18 October 1976, Bureau of State Security (BOSS), SAB K345, vol. 13, part 3.

Note 10: *Rand Daily Mail*, Johannesburg, 17 June 1976.

Note 11: Sophie Tema, testimony, 21 September 1976, SAB K345, vol. 139, file 2/3, part 1, Commission Testimony vols. 9 and 10.

Note 12: Sophie Tema, testimony, 21 September 1976, SAB K345, vol. 139, file 2/3, part 1, Commission Testimony vols. 9 and 10.

Note 13: Sam Nzima (photographer for the newspaper *The World*), testimony, September 1976, SAB K345, vol. 139, file 2/3, part 1, Commission Testimony vol. 10.

Note 14: Sam Nzima (photographer for the newspaper *The World*), testimony, September 1976, SAB K345, vol. 139, file 2/3, part 1, Commission Testimony vol. 10.

Note 15: Sophie Tema, testimony, 21 September 1976, SAB K345, vol. 139, file 2/3, part 1, Commission Testimony vols. 9 and 10.

Note 16: Sam Nzima (photographer for the newspaper *The World*), testimony,

September 1976, SAB K345, vol. 139, file 2/3, part 1, Commission Testimony vol. 10.

Note 17: Peter Magubane, statement, 18 October 1976, Bureau of State Security (BOSS), SAB K345, vols. 13, 15.

Note 18: Sophie Tema, testimony, 21 September 1976, SAB K345, vol. 139, file 2/3, part 1, Commission Testimony vols. 9 and 10.