

The Narrative: Cillié Commission

Warning 1: From the *Cillié Report*, it is clear that warning signs were everywhere: 1

2.4.11 During the days that followed, pupils refused to write examinations, and pupils from other schools who wanted to go back to school were assaulted. Pamphlets relating to a meeting that was to be held at the DOCC Hall near the Orlando police station were also distributed by SASM members. This meeting was attended by 300 to 400 scholars. It was decided to stage a mass march of pupils from all schools on 16 June, the day on which high schools were to commence examinations. The demonstration was to be planned, organised and controlled by an action committee. The action committee was subsequently renamed the SSRC. During the next few days, all the necessary arrangements were made with schools in connection with the staging of this march, the making of placards, resistance to the police, and other matters in connection with the demonstration. Numerous meetings were held, mainly at schools. There were also discussions between the leaders of the scholars and a group of adults...

2.6 Impotence of the officials.

2.6.1 For the reasons set out in the preceding paragraphs, and because they were not in contact with the rebellious schoolchildren, their parents and their resistance, the officials did not see the threatening danger, never gave their own Department a timely warning of the danger, and did not take any steps themselves to avert an eruption.

2.6.2 Even without such contact, there were sufficient warning signs to have put them on their guard. Time and again there was trouble with school boards who disregarded the policy. From as early as February, pupils had been causing trouble in their schools about Afrikaans as a medium of instruction. There were boycotts of classes at a number of schools. At one stage, 1 600 scholars refused to go to school. On another occasion the figure was put at 2 000. Homeland leaders visited Soweto in connection with the problems in education. In and outside Parliament, questions were put to the Minister about exemptions and boycotts. The officials were asked for particulars, but they informed the Secretary that the troubles were still at a very low level; according to them, it was not yet necessary to call in the Secretary's help—and riots were already upon them. Early in May, the Chief Director of WRAB wrote to the Secretary that there were danger signs, and that his Board could not assume responsibility for damage that might result from the scholars' activities. And lastly, there were three important meetings. As far back as April, the African Teachers' Association of South Africa had had an interview with the Secretary on the question of the medium of instruction and had handed a memorandum to him on the matter. On 7 and 8 June the two meetings referred to

above took place. Well-informed persons expressed their concern about the situation. The officials right next to the danger in Soweto failed to warn their Department... It would seem that the police did not institute further or sufficient investigations. That is why it was possible for a group of young people to make intensive preparations for at least three days for a demonstration by 15,000 or more pupils at schools throughout Soweto. The police received their first, incomplete reports of two separate marches the evening before the demonstration was due to take place. At that stage, so far as manpower, equipment and mental attitude were concerned, the police were completely unprepared for such a mass demonstration. The Commission considers that the police themselves were largely to blame for their lack of knowledge of what was being planned and for their own unpreparedness. [Cillie Commission on Causes] ¹

Morning: The *Cillie Commission* concluded that "[n]either in their demonstration 5 nor in their acts of violence were the participants acting spontaneously." It expressed puzzlement that police had remained ignorant and therefore unprepared to contain "an illegal march on such a scale":

It is difficult to understand how a group of young people could spend three days preparing for a demonstration by 15 000 or more scholars at schools all over Soweto and the police receive the first, incomplete reports only on the evening before the demonstration was to take place. Information that an illegal march on such a scale was being organized would have made anyone who knew the circumstances realise that danger was threatening and would have prompted him to take the necessary measures if it was his duty to do so. ²

Participation: There were reports of "intimidation" or that schoolchildren were urged to join the march by those who had initiated it. Much was made of this both in police statements and later in the report of the *Cillie Commission* in an effort to malign both the method and the tenor of the children's march:

Onderweg na Orlando-Wes het ons by lt.-kol. Kleingeld en 'n aantal uniform lede aangesluit. Hul voertuie het op 'n kruin gestaan vanwaar hulle die Xhosa-oos skoolraad se skool besigtig het... Met aankoms by vermelde skool het 'n groot aantal kinders by die skool saamgedrom. Ek het lt.-kol. Kleingeld en kapt. Loubser vergesel en met een van die onderwysers onderhandel. *Laasgenoemde het aan ons 'n rapport gemaak dat daar onbekende persone is wat die kinders molesteer sodra hulle in hul klaskamers gaan.* Kaptein

On the way to Orlando West we joined Lieutenant-Colonel Kleingeld and a number of uniformed officers. Their vehicles stood up on a hill from where they were observing the school of the Xhosa-East school board... With the arrival at the above-mentioned school a large number of children began to crowd together. I accompanied Lieutenant-Colonel Kleingeld and Captain Loubser and negotiated with one of the teachers. *Last named reported to us that there were unknown persons that were molesting the children as soon as they went*

<p>Loubser het die onderwyser aangesê om al die kinders huistoe te stuur—wat hy toe ook gedoen het. [Emphasis added.] (KJD Matthee police statement)</p>	<p><i>into their classrooms.</i> Captain Loubser told the teacher to send all the children home—which he then also did. [Emphasis added.]³</p>
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Leaders: Anyone who was considered an eyewitness to these events of the first day was asked the same questions before the Cillié Commission.

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Yutar: At the head of the children did you see anyone in particular?

Witness: Not at all. I could not even make good observations of these children, because everything was muddled up.

Yutar: Were there any adults there that you may have noticed?

Witness: Yes, there were a few adults but the school children were in the majority.

Yutar: How many of these adults were there?

Witness: Approximately 3 or 4.

Yutar: What were they doing? Were they male adults or female or both?

Witness: Men that I saw.

Yutar: What were they doing?

Witness: Each time when they noticed that the children were being terrified, they called them back.

Yutar: Urged them on?

Witness: Yes.

Yutar: And did the children obey their commands?

Witness: Yes, they obeyed their commands.⁴ [Anonymous Witness 2 Cillié Testimony, September 1976; (Justice Mamiane police statement)]

Confrontation: From the Cillié Report, chapter 28, "Police Action":

28.1 The Commission found that the inability of the police to foresee the imminent riots in Soweto before 16 June and to take counter-measures was a concurrent circumstance that gave rise to the riots. This means that the police

must bear joint responsibility for this particular incident. However, theirs was not the greatest responsibility; the Force was unprepared to prevent or deal with a contravention of the law. The direct cause still remains the organisation of an unlawful procession.

28.2 Except for what has been said in the preceding paragraph, there was no acceptable evidence that police action was responsible for the outbreak of the disturbances or for any incident of rioting.

28.3 There were cases where the steps taken by the police to abate the rioting resulted in their becoming more violent and spreading. This does not mean that the police should not have done their duty in the first place in connection with an offence. In this regard the Commission found that, if police action in connection with the quelling of rioting caused violence to intensify or to continue, then the rioters' disregard of lawful authority largely contributed to such intensification or continuation. Where the steps taken by the police in such a case constituted a discharge of their duties, the actions of the rioters amounted to an offence.

28.4 There were witnesses who contended that, if the police had not acted in Soweto, there would not have been any riots and that the police action was consequently the cause of the riots. The Commission does not wish to speculate about this, nor about what riots there might have been if the police had not done their duty. Witnesses said that the police upset scholars merely by appearing on the scene; if disturbances followed their appearance, the police were to blame. Such an argument does not hold water. The police are responsible for maintaining order and if appearing on the scene to do so, made the youths start rioting, the fault lay with the youths' state of mind. ⁵ 15

Warning 2: The police did not have adequate equipment to warn the crowd, and the *Cillié Commission* commented that Kleingeld "had no loud hailer to make his voice heard above the noise of the crowd" and that the police were irresponsibly unprepared "as regards manpower, equipment and frame of mind":

... Col. Kleingeld, neither there [in Khumalo Street] nor in Vilakazi Street in front of OWHS, gave the riotous crowd an audible and effective order to disperse and depart from the place...

[T]he police themselves were largely responsible for their ignorance of what was being planned, and therefore also for their own unpreparedness." ⁶

Tear Gas: The *Cillié Commission* hypothesized that "the fault may have lain with the quality or the age of the grenades or the skill of the throwers." In a curious inversion of its own reasoning, the Commission, considering whether an unidentified policeman threw one or two stones at the crowd, rejected evidence for it as "incorrect; it was probably a policeman throwing a 'dead' grenade,"

thereby allowing for the possibility that students felt provoked, whether they thought they were being bombarded with tear gas or with stones.

Whether and when exactly police threw tear-gas grenades or shot canisters of tear gas is unclear, although the Cillie Commission reported that at this early stage in the confrontation the police did not have a "device for throwing the grenades at the crowd" and that "the grenades could not be thrown further by hand than a young man can throw a stone... The use of tear-gas grenades therefore entailed danger for the thrower." ⁷

Shooting: From the Cillie Commission Report:

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10h00: When the police arrived at the Tshabalala Garage, they were pelted with stones by about 600 scholars and their vehicle was damaged. Tear-gas had no effect on the rioters. A further 600 youths fell in with the first group here. The police were withdrawn because there were too few of them to take further action.

10h30: Several thousand scholars congregated round a stone-topped knoll near the Orlando West High School. Witnesses testified that the crowd was between 5 000 and 6 000 strong. From the evidence it seems that pupils from, inter alia, the following schools took part in the rally: the Naledi High School, Morris Isaacson High School, Orlando West High School, Orlando North Junior Secondary School, Empangeni Higher Primary School, Themba Sizwe Higher Primary School and the Thesele Junior Secondary School. Col. Kleingeld's party was attacked with stones, making it impossible for him to address the crowd. The Patrol consisted of approximately four police motor vehicles, three heavy-duty vehicles and two patrol vans carrying dogs. Four Black men were inciting the scholars. Those present included adults and other youths not in school uniform. The tear-gas to disperse the crowd was not effective. Only one tear-gas grenade went off. A baton charge was also unsuccessful. The police were attacked on their flanks and could be surrounded. Some of them were struck by stones. Col. Kleingeld fired five pistol shots over the crowd without effect. After that he fired 20 shots with an automatic rifle in front of and over the crowd. Other members of the police also fired shots with their revolvers and pistols, although Col. Kleingeld had not given the order to fire. A Black boy, H. Ndlovu, who was inciting the crowd, was killed (see Annexure F, p. 54). Two police dogs were killed and mutilated by the crowd. One of the dogs was doused with petrol and set on fire. Police vehicles were damaged by stones. Hector Pieterse, a Black boy, was fatally wounded by the Police (see Annexure F, p. 59). A woman reporter took his body to the Phomolong Clinic. Maj. Viljoen and Col. Van Niekerk joined Col. Kleingeld. They proceeded to Moema Street. Sgt. Hattingh's vehicle broke down and was stormed by the bystanders. Tear-gas was subsequently used to free him. Col. Kleingeld again fired shots with his automatic rifle. Col. Gerber, with three other vehicles, attempted to join the group, but their way was barred by the people at the rear of

the crowd. They were immediately pelted with stones but managed to drive through the crowd at speed...⁸

Tsotsis: The violence did not surprise one of the most highly placed officials of Bantu Administration, F. B. du Randt. In a hastily put together memorandum for the *Cillié Commission* shortly after the beginning of the uprising, he wrote that the "*opmars van die kinders*" (children's march), which in turn was followed by the "*opstande en strooptogte en vandalisme*" (revolt, marauding raids, vandalism) and fuelled by the "*tsotsi*" element, was a tragic example of how a "*betrekklike klein insidentjie*" (comparatively small incident)⁹ and was "*net die lont ... vir 'n geweldige ontploffing*" (just the spark for a massive explosion). He did not, however, underestimate the frustration that drove the children to these extremes.

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Ek moet verwys na die openbare reaksie op die toepassing van die beheermaatreëls. Ek het al telkens vangwaens gesien met groepe gearresterdes daarin en dan was die haat wat uit hul gesigte straal vir my so kenmerklik. 'n Mens vind dan dat ander swart omstanders vir hulle toesing—gewoonlik nasionaalgesinde liedere soos "*Sikelele Afrika*." [sic] As 'n mens eenmaal so 'n groep swart mense gesien het met die haat wat hulle in hul saamdra kan jy verstaan waarom hulle so onlogies en vandalisties optree soos hulle wel gedoen het.

I have to refer to the public reaction to the application of control measures. Whenever I have seen a police van with groups of arrested people in it, and then the hate that shone out of their faces was so striking to me. A person then finds that other black bystanders sing to them—usually nationalistically inclined songs such as "*Sikelele Afrika*." If a person has once seen such a group of black people with the hate that they carry with them, then you can understand why they acted in such an illogical and vandalistic way as they indeed did.¹¹

(F. B. du Randt Documents, September 1976; SA National Council on Alcoholism, October 1976)

Notes:

Note 1: Excerpts from South Africa, *Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Riots at Soweto and Elsewhere from the 16th of June 1976 to the 28th of February 1977* [hereafter cited as *Cillié Report*] (Pretoria: Government Printer, 1980), 1:560–569.

Note 2: *Cillié Report*, 1:128 and 130.

Note 3: Kasparus Johannes Daniel Matthee (officer, South African Police), statement, 25 June 1976, SAB K345, vol. 86, part 6.

Note 4: Anonymous witness 2, testimony, 14 September 1976, SAB K345, vol.

139, file 2/3, part 1, Commission Testimony vol. 5.

Note 5: *Cillié Report*, 1:627-28.

Note 6: *Cillié Report*, 1:128, 130, and 115.

Note 7: *Cillié Report*, 1:116.

Note 8: *Cillié Report*, annexure D (Pretoria: Government Printer, 1980), 2:6.

Note 9: *Insidentjie*, the diminutive form of *insident* (incident), further, and I think deliberately, diminishes the significance of the initial moment of protest.

Note 10: F. B. du Randt (Commissioner of Bantu Affairs, Department of Bantu Affairs, Witwatersrand), SAB K345, file 3:2/2/1/2-1, cover letter to the Commission, presenting the confidential report of a meeting of the West Rand Bantu Administration Board Coordinating Committee on 8 June 1976.

Note 11: F. B. du Randt (Commissioner of Bantu Affairs, Department of Bantu Affairs, Witwatersrand), report to the Commission, 23 September 1976, SAB K345, file 3:2/2/1/2-1. In his introduction du Randt cautions the Commission that his report was done in a short time, without sufficient input from his colleagues, and that it may be tainted by an "*afwesigheid van 'n wetenskaplike gefundeerde norm*" (absence of scientifically grounded norms), "*algemene indrukke*" (vague impressions), and "*clichés*." "*Moontlik sal daar ook 'n element van vooroordeel in my gedagtes bespeur word maar my motiewe is desondanks eerbaar*" (Possibly an element of prejudice will be detected in my thoughts, but my motives are nevertheless honorable).