

Fighting the Apartheid Regime in South Africa: Commemorating Steve Biko at 70

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They had to kill him to prolong the life of apartheid. Nelson Mandela

Commemorating birthdays in the aftermath of a person's death tends to be a false exercise. At best, it reminds us about an era that will have, almost certainly, vanished. This goes for whatever that era entailed – brutality, or peace; tranquillity or chaos. Then comes the issue of historical effectiveness: what would that person have actually achieved had he seen the world he fought change?

The martyr, to that end, bridges the world that needs changing to the change to come. Many would regard Steve Biko as one such martyr in the anti-apartheid cause. But the pathway of the martyr after death tends to be the work of others, they who serve a posthumous name or worship at the altar of a legacy.

Biko's contribution was primarily the notion of Black Consciousness, which he considered "an attitude of the mind and a way of life, the most positive call to emanate from the black world for a long time." Gradually, his activities earned the violent ire of authorities. It began gradually. The ban in February 1973 was meant to neuter his drive to organise, speak and publicise. It did the opposite.

In 1976, the savage bloodiness of the apartheid regime, in its remorseless effort to curb revolt, saw 170 people, many children, slain. It had begun with protests by high school students in the township of Soweto to the southwest of Johannesburg. Their beef with the instructors was simple: why should they be forced to undertake studies in Afrikaans?

Biko's arrest followed on August 27, after which he was held for 101 days. In September 1977, he was again arrested at a police roadblock and subjected to a dedicated, torturous thrashing, then taken, stripped and shackled, 750 miles to Pretoria prison hospital via land rover. He died a few hours on arriving.

The inquest in to his death, publicised in the aftermath as a world historical event, could not repel the element of farce. The police account was that the death was self-inflicted, occasioned by a hunger strike that enfeebled him. This was assisted by the conspicuous absence of witness accounts.

Biko's circle disputed the official version, while the magistrate responsible for steering the 15-day inquest found it impossible to identify a killer despite finding that the "cause or likely cause of Mr. Biko's death was a head injury, followed by extensive brain injury and other complications including renal failure."

Jimmy Kruger, the Justice Minister, preferred a crass analysis, claiming that there were “cases when I think to myself: Christ, I don’t know what to do now, I may as well give myself a bang.”[1] Five members associated with Biko’s death were only identified after the fall of apartheid as part of the workings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

As always, auras of nobility tend to spring up among such figures. There are the ardent supporters in tow, sometimes more star struck than sober; and the keen civil rights supporters eager to point out the terrible flaws in mistreatment. Then come the modern, commercial appropriations of revolutionary ardour: Hollywood with its films; and Google with its commemorative Google Doodle on the occasion of Biko’s 70th birthday.

Former South African newspaper editor David Woods was certainly the main thrust behind Biko’s posthumous veneration, dragging another terrible fate at the hands of a repressive regime into a vast political limelight. As Woods himself conceded, Biko, even at the time of his death, was not that known among the black masses in the townships, though his “black consciousness” notion found truck with activists.

Woods’ account of Biko, given vent through the *Rand Daily Mail* and was subsequently given the celluloid treatment by Richard Attenborough in *Cry Freedom* (1987). Emotional proximity, and the subsequent work to promote Biko’s name led to the Writers’ Association of South Africa (Wasa) passing a resolution accusing Woods of being an “unscrupulous opportunist”.[2] Such are the travails of publicising the fallen among supporters.

Biko’s fate has subsequently spawned a weighty literature focused on his bloody demise rather than his intellectual oeuvre. The “Biko Case” has become a foundational study in medical ethics as how these suffer under an authoritarian government. One academic has even gone so far as to identify a “torture aesthetic” at play in the use of Biko’s case in the publicising of human rights abuses.[3]

Biko was certainly one of the figures who supplied the anti-apartheid movement with oxygen when it risked being asphyxiated by the security apparatus. He had been a serial troublemaker during his years in education, expelled from high school, and active with the National Union of South African Students while attending the University of Natal Medical School.

The vehicle he chose to further his protest agenda was through the South African Students’ Organisation, which he co-founded in 1968. The Black Consciousness Movement soon became more than just the aspirations of a rebellious stripling, though it remained, till after his death, less grandly muscular than assumed.

Having died prematurely in incipient revolutionary harness, Biko did not live to see the demise of the hated ideology he fought for. He did not see the release, rehabilitation and even sanctification of Nelson Mandela, who became leader of the Rainbow Nation.

Nor did he see Mandela’s successor, Thabo Mbeki, take searing jabs against that nation, using his own brand of ideology to deny the ravages of HIV in South Africa, and antiretroviral drugs to sufferers. The current near unaccountable President, Jacob Zuma, is even more demagogic.

Revolutions, just as those who launch and implement them, eventually die. Posterity, however, often supplies a different picture, one where ideas can become canon balls,

making the pen a truly dangerous weapon. That point was not lost on the engineers of apartheid.

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Notes

[1] <http://archive.spectator.co.uk/article/19th-november-1977/7/fighting-over-biko>

[2] <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2001/aug/20/pressandpublishing.guardianobituaries>

[3] <http://connection.ebscohost.com/c/essays/100117831/stephen-biko-torture-aesthetic>

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