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Sharpeville

On 21 March 1960, white police in the town of Sharpeville, South Africa, opened fire on a large crowd of peaceful black protesters, killing perhaps a hundred of them and injuring many more. This massacre dramatically publicized the protesters' cause internationally.¹ This case starkly illustrates how violent attacks on peaceful protesters can be counter-productive. I tell the Sharpeville story with special attention to tactics that might increase or decrease the scale of backfire. In the conclusion, I note how these tactics relate to the five main methods of inhibiting or expressing outrage.

In 1960, whites ruled South Africa. In the system called apartheid, blacks, who composed most of the population, could not vote and were given only the worst jobs at low pay, so their standard of living was far below that of whites. Blacks had separate, inferior education. Their movement was restricted: to travel, male blacks had to possess a "pass," analogous to an internal passport. By 1960, pass documents were held in a "reference book" that contained

the holder's name, his tax receipt, his permit to be in an urban area and to seek work there, permits from the Labour

Bureau, the signature of his employer each month, and other particulars ... the reference book must be shown on demand to any policeman or any of the fifteen different classes of officials who require to see it. Failure to produce it on demand constitutes an offence.²

Pass offences often led to fines or imprisonment, with a thousand people charged every day. For the black population, the pass laws were a potent symbol of their oppression. The rally in Sharpeville was a protest against these laws.

Sharpeville was set up by the South African government as a model community, with row upon row of housing for blacks who would travel to work in nearby cities. Residents of the nearby black town of Topville — seen by the government as too close to white suburbs — were encouraged to relocate to Sharpeville. Filled with many recently arrived families seeking a better life, Sharpeville did not have a strong local economy or traditions. There were about 35,000 residents, of whom some 20,000 were children. It was like a large anonymous suburb, stable and without a militant reputation.

Nevertheless, Sharpeville residents were affected by the unrest sweeping the country. For many decades, white rule in South Africa had been met by resistance, including mass opposition to pass laws from the early decades of the twentieth century. The African National Congress was the primary vehicle for black opposition to apartheid. Through the 1950s, the ANC was totally committed to nonvio-

1. Philip Frankel, *An Ordinary Atrocity: Sharpeville and its Massacre* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001) is the definitive treatment of the Sharpeville massacre. The account here, except for material about the international reaction, is drawn largely from this source. For the purposes of a backfire analysis, heavy reliance on Frankel's book is not problematic because Frankel did not structure his study using a backfire framework.

2. Ambrose Reeves, *Shooting at Sharpeville: The Agony of South Africa* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1960), 51.

lence. For example, in 1959 the ANC called for a one-month boycott of potatoes, which were a suitable boycott target for both economic and symbolic reasons. Thousands of blacks, jailed for pass law violations, were put under the supervision of farmers and made to pick potatoes with their bare hands. Though potatoes were a diet staple, the boycott was taken up eagerly and continued for three months before the ANC called it to a close.³

In the late 1950s, the ANC was increasingly challenged by the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), which took a more militant stance. In March 1960, the PAC organized protests against the pass laws, with 21 March set as the date for rallies around the country.

Being an anti-apartheid organizer was a risky business. The South African Police were well in control, with paid informers providing information about activities of both the ANC and PAC. Through their informers, police were aware major protests were being planned around the country, but were misled about the date. PAC activists discovered the police agents and fed them false information.⁴

In terms of black protest, Sharpeville was quiescent compared to other areas. Nevertheless, PAC activists were able to mobilize support from a large proportion of the town population. Over the weekend prior to the rally, PAC activists went door to door telling residents about the protest scheduled for Monday. During the nights that weekend, there were numerous spontaneous demonstrations and clashes with police. Protesters chanted and came armed with sticks; the police attacked with whips and batons. In one incident, numerous objects were thrown at police, who attacked with batons. But the crowd did not retreat or disperse and the police fired 42 rounds, killing at least two residents. Someone in a nearby house fired two shots, missing police.

Despite the police's greater arsenal and killing power, and the fact that no police were

seriously harmed over the weekend, the clashes and shots made them apprehensive, fearing an impending bloodbath.⁵ Of course, residents subject to police assaults might well have been even more apprehensive. But it is important to be aware of the state of mind of the police in order to understand what was to come.

On Monday morning, 21 March, only a few residents left Sharpeville to go to work. Instead, most of the town's population gradually joined the rally outside the police station. The crowd eventually numbered 18,000 to 25,000, including many children.

The organizers of the rally had no well-developed plan of action, nor any system for crowd control. A few crowd members had weapons, mainly sticks and knobkerries, club-like weapons made from saplings with roots on their ends. There was some antagonism toward the police, but at the same time there were elements of a carnival, "happy-go-lucky" atmosphere. There was no plan to attack the police station. The few weapons carried in the crowd served to boost morale rather than to aid an attack.⁶

In the Sharpeville police station, facing the crowd, were some 400 police, half with firearms, plus Saracen tanks with machine guns. This was ample firepower to quell any disturbance. Nevertheless, the police perceived a threat from the large crowd as it pressed against a thin wire barrier in front of the station.

The police were poorly informed and seriously stressed. The white police lived outside Sharpeville, had few personal links with the residents and had no sense of what animated them. The police believed the crowd "lusted for white blood," seeing "cultural weapons" such as knobkerries as tools for attack. This was a serious misreading of the situation.⁷

The police, as well as being misinformed and stressed from the weekend's events, were

3. Albert Luthuli, *Let My People Go* (London: Collins, 1962), 217–19.

4. Frankel, *An Ordinary Atrocity*, 64.

5. *Ibid.*, 78–82, 86.

6. *Ibid.*, 100.

7. *Ibid.*, 100, 99.

not well commanded. Police leaders were unaware of the full weaponry held by the police. (There were both white and black police present, but only white police had firearms.)

Poor organization and poor information on both sides set the stage for disaster. On the police side, there was poor coordination of forces and a false belief that the crowd was intent on attack. As hours went by and the protest continued, the tired and stressed police remained on duty. Meanwhile, most participants in the rally were treating the event much more lightly. At one point, an aircraft buzzed the crowd, for unknown reasons. Far from being intimidated, crowd members treated this as part of the festivities.

At 1.30pm, a drunk in the crowd named Geelbooi produced a small caliber pistol. A friend tried to stop him and two shots were fired into the air. At the same time, a key police official named Spengler stumbled. Some in the crowd leaned forward. A constable helped Spengler to his feet. A few pebbles were thrown from the crowd and one hit the constable. The constable heard “shot” or “short” and fired. Spengler deflected the constable’s shot, but it was too late: the constable’s shot triggered the police to fire 4000 rounds into the crowd, killing dozens of people and wounding many more.

There are many views about these events, with police claiming they were defending against the threatening crowd and PAC supporters believing the police intended mass killing. My account here follows the detailed historical reconstruction by Philip Frankel in his authoritative book on the Sharpeville massacre titled *An Ordinary Atrocity*. According to Frankel, the massacre was not premeditated. It was a mistake but, once firing started, it continued, having unleashed deep-seated anxieties among the police.⁸

The official figure for the number of people killed by the police was 69. Frankel notes that this is certainly too low, as there were 24 or so victims removed by the police, plus others

who were injured, removed by family or friends and who later died. It seems reasonable to say perhaps a hundred died.⁹ Many more were injured.

Just as important as the number of deaths was the manner by which they occurred. Most of the victims were shot in the back as they fled from the police. The firing continued long enough for some police to reload their weapons and continue. Some police used soft-nosed bullets that cause horrific exit wounds. These antipersonnel bullets, commonly called dumdums, had been banned by the 1899 Hague Declaration; any force that used them would look very bad in world opinion.¹⁰

In 1960, South Africa was a respected member of the international community. It had a long established, well functioning system of representative government, though crucially limited to whites. It had a prosperous economy — again mainly benefiting whites — and was seen as a valuable trading partner. It had many supporters internationally. At the same time, there was considerable opposition to the apartheid system, most obviously among the black South Africans but also among segments of the white population (especially the English-speaking segment) and in many other countries. Among opponents, apartheid was seen as a system of racist oppression.

But only some perceived apartheid as abominable. It had a fairly bland exterior. Apartheid was a system of oppression and exploitation but not one of brutal violence conspicuous to outsiders. To be sure, the South African police and military were essential to implementation of government policies such as the pass laws, but they mostly appeared as agents of an administrative, routine law-enforcing process, not as outrageous jack-booted thugs.

To many people worldwide, apartheid was abhorrent in itself as a system of racial oppression, irrespective of the legalities by which

8. Ibid., 116–18.

9. Ibid., 150–52.

10. Eric Prokosch, *The Technology of Killing A Military and Political History of Antipersonnel Weapons* (London: Zed, 1995).

this was achieved. But in 1960 this view was shared by only a minority of western governments. Colonialism was alive and well. Some countries had gained independence from their colonial rulers, such as India and Pakistan in 1947 and, in Africa, Ghana in 1957, but many others remained colonies, including most of black Africa. In Algeria, nationalists were fighting a bloody war for independence from France. In Vietnam, a liberation struggle was under way against a regime propped up by the U.S. military. Overshadowing the numerous wars around the world was the cold war confrontation between the two superpowers, the Soviet Union and the United States, with nuclear arsenals poised to launch devastating strikes. In the late 1950s, a powerful peace movement had sprung into existence to oppose atmospheric nuclear testing and the nuclear arms race.

In this context, South Africa seemed a pillar of stability in Africa, where independence movements were agitating for liberation from colonial shackles. The shootings in Sharpeville threatened to undermine international support for South Africa, by providing a stimulus for action by those already opposed to apartheid and by weakening the moral position of the South African government's traditional allies.

The shootings, because they were readily interpreted as a brutal attack by white police against the black population, certainly had the potential to be counterproductive for the South African government, for the South African Police as an organizational entity, and for the individual police involved.

After the shooting, the immediate reaction of the police was to protect themselves from repercussions from their actions. Some of them threw stones into the police station in order to give the impression that the threat from the crowd was greater than it had been: the larger the threat, the more easily the shootings could be justified.

The police immediately cordoned off the town and took control of communication. Journalists were kept out of the area, being told the situation was too dangerous.¹¹ These

actions were taken before medical help was sought. If news of the shootings had been contained entirely or had only leaked out by word of mouth in dribs and drabs, without an authoritative account, this would have reduced the adverse consequences for the attackers. But the police efforts to control information were too little and too late. Not only were there numerous witnesses among Sharpeville residents, but some journalists had come to Sharpeville for the protest and took photographs before, during, and after the massacre.¹² This sort of photojournalism was much less common in 1960 than it is today:

It so happened that a reporter, using the resourcefulness which is the stock-in-trade of the journalist's profession, was able to get — and to get away with — some photographs of the Sharpeville affray. The chance availability of this dramatic record may have persuaded editors here and there to give the accompanying news story a prominent place on their front pages, and these pictures were seen by millions.¹³

Although the police could not contain news about the massacre, their efforts at "information management" are revealing. Crowd members wanted to help the wounded but were kept away by police, to reduce people's knowledge of what had happened, to prevent new protests developing, and to reduce adverse publicity.¹⁴

One goal of the police was to eliminate information about the use of dum-dums. They removed the dead bodies of a couple of dozen victims of these bullets. Some had survived and been taken to hospital. Doctors reported that most of the wounds were mid-body and from the rear. Police went to the hospital and

11. Frankel, *An Ordinary Atrocity*, 134–35.

12. Reeves' book reproduces 30 photographs.

13. Peter Calvocoressi, *South Africa and World Opinion* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), 2.

14. Frankel, *An Ordinary Atrocity*, 140–41.

took away some of the wounded, especially those with injuries indicating use of dumdds. (This was justified on the grounds that these individuals were security threats.) The police conveniently “lost” evidence about use of dumdds, “misplaced” evidence on the ammunition rounds issued, used and not used. Later, at the inquiry into the events, no experts on dumdds were called. All in all, cover-up of the use of dumdds was quite effective.¹⁵

From the point of view of most of the world, the Sharpeville events involved massive use of force against an unarmed and nonthreatening crowd. The police’s heavy use of firearms was seen as totally unjustified. That some in the crowd had sticks and knobkerries, and that some of them threw stones, did little to challenge the perception that the police had used massive lethal force inappropriately. Albert Luthuli, leader of the ANC, commented that

The guns of Sharpeville echoed across the world, and nowhere except among totalitarians was there any doubt about the true nature of what had occurred. The Government had placed beyond question the implacable, wanton brutality of their régime.¹⁶

From the police point of view, though, the real threat came from the black population, especially from the organizers of the rally. This perception persisted after the shootings. Police went through Sharpeville making many arrests, including the supposed leaders of the “disturbances” as well as many others. The police beat many of those arrested as well as others who were not arrested. According to Frankel,

In the initial hours after the massacre most of the police simply combed the streets and vented their anger on often hapless people who were treated ‘as if they [the police] were the victims,’

15. Ibid., 147–48, 154–56.

16. Luthuli, *Let My People Go*, 222.

according to Saul Moise, an unfortunate who fell foul of the patrols, was beaten senseless for no apparent reason, thrown into prison and then released three weeks later without charges.¹⁷

Adding to the repression, armed groups of white citizens ran patrols in black areas. The police did not try to monitor these extra-legal initiatives.

The international reaction to the massacre was powerful and extensive. Peter Calvocoressi, in his book *South Africa and World Opinion*, said that, “First emotions were everywhere much the same — horror, indignation, disgust.”¹⁸ Governments condemned the massacre. Anti-apartheid activists were galvanized, obtaining much more support than previously. Supporters of the regime were put on the defensive. For example:

In Norway flags were flown at half-mast on public buildings on the day of the funeral of the Sharpeville victims. ... the Brazilian government banned a football match in Rio de Janeiro against a South African team; it also recalled its ambassador from Pretoria. At a conference in New Zealand the Prime Minister, Mr. Walter Nash, asked his audience to stand in silent memory of the dead and the Indian House of Representatives also paid this tribute ...¹⁹

By comparison, the reaction inside South Africa was muted. In the face of a government clampdown on activists and all dissent, the black population was demoralized rather than

17. Frankel, *An Ordinary Atrocity*, 156–57. Frankel’s original quotation includes the bracketed clarifier “[the SAP]” which I have changed to “[the police].”

18. Calvocoressi, *South Africa and World Opinion*, 34.

19. Ibid., 3–4.

energized by the events. Within Sharpeville itself, apathy was more typical than outrage.²⁰

The difference between international outrage and the subdued response within South Africa can be explained by several factors. Black South Africans were already aware of the iron fist of the apartheid state, through day-to-day encounters with violence and humiliation. For many, the massacre only confirmed what they already knew and so did not cause an explosion of resentment and further action.

Some critics of apartheid saw the massacre as an expression of the true nature of the South African state and immediately assumed the Sharpeville events had been consciously orchestrated by the police as an exercise of premeditated killing for the purposes of intimidation and brutality. Frankel, whose views I have followed here, rejects both this interpretation and the opposite one, promoted by the police and government, that put the blame on the demonstrators.

Unlike South African blacks, few international observers were aware of the day-to-day brutality of apartheid, given the carefully managed image of legality and order conveyed by the South African government and the willingness of foreign governments and corporations to ignore evidence that might disturb their political and trading relationships with South Africa. The Sharpeville killings broke through this conventional image, nurtured by ignorance and convenience, with a picture of unmistakable and unconscionable violence. “Sharpeville,” a word which became synonymous with the massacre, served as an icon of everything wrong with apartheid.

A second factor distinguishing South African and foreign responses to the massacre was racism. Within white South Africa, blacks were commonly considered inherently inferior. Apartheid was a system of institutionalized oppression — with political, economic, legal, social, and psychological dimensions — that both reflected and enhanced perceptions of white racial superiority and justified privilege. The black population was so devalued that the

killings did not generate widespread abhorrence. The victims were perceived as unworthy. Consequently, South African whites “were staggered by the unanimity of the world’s reaction to Sharpeville,” reacting with “dazed incomprehension or truculent self-justification.”²¹

In contrast, in many foreign countries white racism was neither so virulent nor so widespread. To be sure, white racism was potent internationally, but it had to confront an increasingly powerful worldwide movement for racial equality, which was supported by ringing endorsements from the United Nations and other bodies. The extermination policies of Nazi Germany had discredited white racism in the eyes of many, making it much harder to overtly endorse racist policies, though much overt and de facto racism persisted. Speaking generally, many more people outside South Africa saw the Sharpeville victims as equal members of the human community, in other words as victims worthy of respect and empathy.

A third factor affecting the South African and foreign responses was the potential for intimidation. Within South Africa, police arrested activists as the government strengthened its capacity for repression, declaring a state of emergency. This seems to have discouraged a larger mobilization of resistance. Had the ANC and PAC and other opponents of apartheid been better organized, the massacre might have triggered an expansion of resistance, but, as noted, demoralization was more common. Outside the country, on the other hand, the South African police and state had virtually no capacity for threatening or repressing dissent. The risks of opposing apartheid were far less, making possible a rapid and very public expansion of opposition.

Peer pressure also played a role. Among white South Africans, open support for black equality was not easy. L. F. Beyers Naudé, a South African minister and supporter of white

20. Frankel, *An Ordinary Atrocity*, 160–61.

21. Colin Legum and Margaret Legum, *South Africa: Crisis for the West* (London: Pall Mall Press, 1964), 75.

supremacy, began to reconsider his views after the Sharpeville killings. In 1963 he resigned from the ministry “to become a director of a multi-racial Christian Institute.” As a result of this challenge to apartheid, he and his family suffered “the fate of every dissenter of prominence in the Church: social ostracism, reinforced by public attack.”²² Ambrose Reeves, Bishop of Johannesburg, who wrote a powerful book about the massacre, was deported from the country.

In summary, there were three factors that helped the massacre trigger a much larger reaction outside South Africa than inside: less familiarity outside the country with the brutality of apartheid; a lower level of institutionalized racism; and less vulnerability to reprisals from the South African state.

Immediately after the massacre, the South African government decided to hold an inquiry into the events. Internally, the government wanted to show the white population it was in control of the situation. Externally, it wanted to demonstrate that South Africa was not an authoritarian state, to prevent damage to the country’s reputation in diplomatic and trading circles. So the Wessels Commission was set up.

In setting up this commission, there was a dilemma for the government. If the commission was too independent, it might come up with strong conclusions damning the police and government, thus adding to the bad publicity from the massacre. On the other hand, if the commission was too subservient to the government — if, for example, it completely exonerated the police and put all the blame on the protesters — then it would have reduced its own credibility and done nothing to placate international opinion. According to Frankel, the government’s preference for the commission was towards the subservient end of the spectrum:

A pliant (or partially pliant) commission which confirmed the vicious intent of the Sharpeville mob and presented police

responses as a natural, if over-reactive, case of self defence could connect very positively with the prevailing persecution mentality among white South Africans in the aftermath of the massacre — including many who would not, other than in these exceptional circumstances, lend their support to the Nationalist government ... Ultimately, a sympathetic commission — indeed any commission — was essential to smoothing the panic and fears of a vast array of international interests with stakes in a post-Sharpeville South Africa.²³

The Wessels Commission did pretty much as the government had hoped: it whitewashed the massacre. It did not go into the details of police’s shooting or use of ammunition; the issue of dumdums was hardly pursued.

Potential black witnesses to the commission came under strong pressures. Because of police intimidation, few of them were willing to testify, for fear of reprisals. They also came under pressure from the PAC to follow a “party line” that blamed the police for premeditated murder and did not acknowledge the role of fear and poor leadership among the police. Finally, police simply lied to the commission, having no fear of any punishment. Police also destroyed, hid, and fabricated evidence.

According to Frankel, the government wanted the commission to move quickly, both to reassure the international community about the government’s concern and to catch the victims while they were still in a state of shock and therefore less able to testify effectively. The commission seems to have lived up to most of the government’s expectations, at least in relation to its marginalization of the victims’ voices. Concerning the commission’s report, Frankel comments that:

its overall findings, read four decades later, are so densely unintelligible, so ridden with double-talk, qualifications,

22. Ibid., 31.

23. Frankel, *An Ordinary Atrocity*, 188.

and refutable logic as to defy both legal reasoning and ordinary comprehension.²⁴

The commission's report was both obscure and relatively favorable to the police.

Sometimes it seems events are so obvious that they "speak for themselves." The Sharpeville massacre became such a symbol of the brutal reality of apartheid that it is easy to assume its meaning was transparent to all but the most prejudiced of observers. Yet a closer look reveals complexities. What "actually happened" was quickly obscured by the divergent agendas of black activists and the police, each of whom adopted simplistic, self-serving accounts. It is fair to say there was a struggle over the interpretation of events. Of course, more nuanced treatments such as Frankel's are not faultless; history is always open to rewriting on the basis of new evidence and ways of thinking. But in the aftermath of the massacre, the struggle over interpretation was a matter of dire urgency for both supporters and opponents of apartheid, with caricatures serving as tools in a struggle for allegiance.

But the struggle was more than a matter of interpretation of an event. Also involved were cover-ups and attempted cover-ups. A totally effective cover-up makes an event invisible to outsiders and makes interpretation irrelevant to them (though still relevant to those in the know); a partially effective cover-up, such as concerning the use of dumdums, slants the basis for making interpretations. Devaluation of the victims profoundly affects the meaning of the events. Similarly, an official investigation such as the Wessels Commission transforms meanings by giving the stamp of approval to a particular interpretation.²⁵

24. Ibid., 192.

25. Austin T. Turk, *Political Criminality: The Defiance and Defense of Authority* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1982), 146, says "The Republic of South Africa may well have the world's most elaborate legal structure for the repression of political resistance of all kinds." This is compatible with the role played by the

Finally, intimidation transforms both the willingness of participants to contribute to a struggle over meaning, as well as intervening on one side in the struggle.

My account here mentions only a small part of the copious detail provided in Frankel's book *An Ordinary Atrocity*. I've given special attention to material relevant to backfire. One thing is clear: the massacre did indeed backfire on the South African government in the international arena, energizing apartheid's opponents and putting its supporters on the back foot. Had the government and the police anticipated events in Sharpeville, there is little doubt they would have done everything possible to avoid the unprovoked and uncontrolled shooting at an unarmed crowd that appeared unconscionable to most neutral observers, and turned "Sharpeville" into a symbol of the brutality of apartheid.

Conclusion

The Sharpeville massacre was a disaster for the South African government, particularly because it damaged its international reputation. The shooting of protesters, though intimidating to them, had the wider long-term effect of weakening the position of the white police and government in ruling a majority black population. So it is reasonable to say the shooting backfired: it was worse for the government than if it had not happened.

The police and government took a range of steps to reduce outrage from the shooting. These can be readily classified into the five categories presented in chapter 1, as follows.

Cover-up. South African police cordoned Sharpeville and tried to control communication out of the town. This effort largely failed, with information and photographs about the massacre made available to the world.

The police removed evidence of the use of dumdum bullets. Dead bodies with evidence of dumdums were removed from the protest site, surviving victims of dumdums were taken

Wessels Commission. I thank Jeff Ross for this reference.

from the hospital, and evidence of the issue and firing of dum dum rounds was removed or destroyed. This cover-up was fairly successful: the issue of dum dums did not play a significant role in the outrage over the massacre.

Devaluation. South African blacks were devalued in the eyes of most South African whites due to overt and institutionalized racism. International observers, though, were much less likely to have such a low opinion of South African blacks. Indeed, the fact that the massacre was carried out by white police against black protesters made it a potent symbol of racist brutality. White South African racism thus muted outrage within the country, whereas international anti-racism magnified it.

Reinterpretation. The police perceived the Sharpeville crowd as physically menacing and the product of a deeper anti-white threat. Thus it was easy for the authorities to endorse the view that the primary responsibility for the events was held by the crowd and its organizers, dubbed "agitators."

The Sharpeville protest was part of the wider mobilization organized by PAC activists. Again, this was perceived as a serious threat to law-abiding citizens. However, this picture of the crowd as the aggressor and the police as victims who inadvertently used too much firepower did not sell well in other countries. On the other hand, PAC activists and other black sympathizers portrayed the Sharpeville events as premeditated murder. This interpretation resonated with those inclined to believe the worst about apartheid.

Official channels. After the massacre, the government quickly established the Wessels Commission to serve as a symbol of the government's commitment to justice, due process, and the search for truth. In order to reduce outrage without disturbing the status quo, the commission had to be seen to be fair and independent yet in reality produce a whitewash. This seems to be pretty much what happened, though it is unclear how much effect the commission had on opinion inside and outside the country.

Intimidation. Immediately after the massacre, the police went through Sharpeville

beating and arresting residents. The government soon declared a state of emergency, giving legal backing for the increased repression that was already occurring. Arrests and threats also reduced the ability and willingness to report on the use of dum dums. However, intimidation had little effect on international opinion.

Intimidation was effective in limiting testimony to the Wessels Commission, helping turn its report into a whitewash. Likewise, cover-up reduced the commission's access to information.

Although the police and government used all five methods of inhibiting outrage, in the end they were mostly unsuccessful: the massacre turned out to be counterproductive for them. Shooting protesters in cold blood was widely perceived as a gross injustice; once information and images about the shooting were communicated internationally, the efforts of the government to blame the protesters and give a semblance of justice through the Wessels Commission were too little and too late to undo the damage.

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