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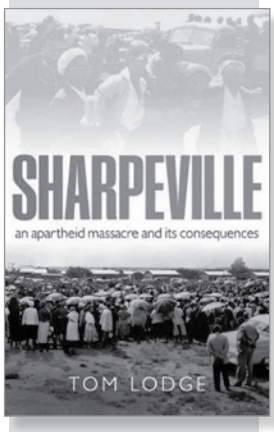
BOOK REVIEW

Sharpeville: An Apartheid Massacre and Its Consequences by Tom Lodge



SHARPEVILLE: AN APARTHEID MASSACRE AND ITS CONSEQUENCES, by Tom Lodge
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What was 'Sharpeville'? Was it a political protest or accidental tragedy, an 'ordinary atrocity', an historical 'turning point', or a symbol of state brutality or moral disgrace?

None of these forms of descriptive shorthand necessarily preclude each other, or even other possible descriptions. But there is a tension in all these ways of conceptualizing the massacre of 21 March 1960, insofar as, in seeking to describe it, we are ultimately at risk of trying to create meaning out of something that was arbitrary and senseless and without purpose.

In the most immediate of ways, Sharpeville was about the death of people at the hands of a security apparatus that lost control of a situation due to its own missteps and overreactions. In seeking historical meaning in these deaths, there is always the danger of losing sight of the dead, of Sharpeville becoming more about other things than about those killed on that day, and the memories of those individual family members and friends who have mourned their loss ever since.

Tom Lodge, a distinguished academic writer and consummate expert on South African politics, begins his meticulous and thorough political history of the Sharpeville massacre and its aftermath with the voices of those who were there that day. He edits their testimonies, not to produce a single, cohesive narrative, but to give us a sense of the confusion that people experienced at the time, the multiple ways in which lives intersected in haphazard and random ways, and the fragmentariness of any individual view of the tragedy as it unfolded. The result is quite remarkable.

The reader is left wondering what they really do know about that day – a day that has since acquired many meanings via mythmaking by those interested in exploiting it for both positive and negative ends during the apartheid period, as well as via memorialization after 1994. Lodge uses this real-time recounting to disorient his reader, remind them of the contingency of that day and to deconstruct certainties so that they might be better able to entertain the questions he wants to ask.

The most important of these questions is whether Sharpeville changed anything. The author's answer is that it did, which is not surprising, given that this book is part of a series on 'key moments' in the history of the modern world. Contesting the idea that Sharpeville and Soweto were, in the words of John Kane-Berman, "turning points where South Africa did not turn," Lodge sets out to demonstrate that 12 March 1960 constituted a 'political crisis' that had deep consequences for the South African state, for black political leadership and for the international anti-apartheid movement.

To show us that Sharpeville did change things, and how, Lodge spends most of the book placing the event within the history of South African politics in the second half of the twentieth century. Some of the points he argues are not without potential controversy, and many readers will no doubt object to some of his resolutions of contentious points of political difference and historical interpretation, but these cannot detract from the soundness of the overall argument.

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Having introduced the voices of witnesses of the massacre in the first chapter, Lodge pulls away from their testimony, and in so doing shifts the argument away from questions of meaning to questions of causality. But according to the author, the historical actors who changed history that day did not witness the same Sharpeville that Lodge writes about in these chapters. The author expresses this paradox very eloquently: "Indeed, for many of the people who lived through the Sharpeville massacre, their daily existence will always be configured by a history that has never turned course". In this sense, there are two histories that Lodge has to contend with – the proximate one of those there on that day, (Sharpeville the physical place and localized event) and a more distant one that unfolded in the arena of black politics as a result of Sharpeville (the delocalized name and detached event). There is a tension here between local meanings and causal explanations that the author is very aware of. He argues that for most of the questions he wants to address, "the perspective of the distance is more useful in seeking answers, in which the foregrounding of eyewitness experience may be an obstruction" (21). Between the first and last chapters, Lodge privileges distance over proximity, and places Sharpeville within the wider context of South African politics, both domestically and internationally.

In the second chapter Lodge provides a very good study of the intellectual and political origins of the Pan-Africanist Congress, the currents that gave rise to Robert Sobukwe's leadership of the movement, and the circumstances that led to the decision to advance a program of 'positive action' that was central to attracting a crowd before the Sharpeville police station on the day of the massacre.

The next chapter chronicles the prelude to and the massacre itself. Using witness testimony, most of it collected after 1994, as well as archival and printed accounts, Lodge describes the political history of Sharpeville and the reasons for the relative success that the PAC enjoyed around Vereeniging, which was only matched by its inroads in Cape Town, the local arrangements for the protest on 12 March and the ensuing chaos of the massacre. Here the narrative of the massacre (the second time the reader encounters the tragedy in sustained detail) has something of the quality of an investigative report, as Lodge contends with conflicting accounts and interpretations. One is reminded, as the author himself notes at several junctures, how fraught a terrain this proximate history is.

Over half a century after 21 March 1960, this is the first book-length study of the events of that day, as well as its prelude and aftermath. How does one explain this bibliographical silence? That the President of South Africa did not attend events to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the Sharpeville massacre, but was instead marking twenty years of Namibian independence, is part of the complicated politics surrounding memories of Sharpeville.

But memorialization is not the same as witnessing, and neither is the same as chronicling, which requires narrative reconstruction out of disparate, fragmentary, and often conflicting, memories, unwieldy archival records, and non-discursive sources of evidence. Despite a great deal of material touching on or starting from the Sharpeville massacre, there is relatively little about the event itself, which, after all, took place over a very short period. Almost from the outset, the South African state worked to create a climate to silence testimony, and later to keep memories buried, at the same time as it worked to reassert control over the township.

In part, this explains why the book shifts somewhat suddenly from Sharpeville to the townships of Cape Town, where the PAC's 'positive action' campaign was better organized, received stronger support and was able to sustain itself much longer. The transition could have been made more fluidly, but the connections are nevertheless obvious. The account of the Cape Town mobilization by the PAC is longer, more intricate and exhaustive than that of the massacre, in no small part because it succeeded in creating a political stalemate via successful strike action and public demonstrations, whereas political activity in Sharpeville ended precipitously. But one also gains the impression that the leadership of Philip Kgosana was an irresistible lure to the author. The story is told compellingly and with considerable verve, even if connections between what unfolded in Cape Town and Sharpeville could have been made more explicit. For example, relatively little attention is paid to the effects of news of the massacre on the Cape Town organizers and marchers.

The next two chapters deal with the author's central argument; namely that the PAC's 'positive action' campaign did succeed in creating a general political crisis. In this sense, Sharpeville becomes subsumed into the narrative of this campaign and loses its specificity as it becomes part of wider discussion of the tensions between the PAC and its ANC rivals and their relative fates after 1960. These chapters also deal with the effect of the widening crisis on the South African state. Lodge's treatment of these matters is always relatively balanced and based on incomparable knowledge of the political history of this period. He makes the case convincingly for the pivotal nature of 1960 for the subsequent trajectories of these three actors; the PAC, ANC and South African state. But by this time Sharpeville itself seems to have receded into the very distant background.

This is however corrected in the final chapter—'Sharpeville and Memory'—which is a sequel to the first—'Voices from a Massacre". Here Lodge masterfully brings the disparate threads of testimony discussed at the start of the book together into an assessment of the legacy of memory on the local community. The question here becomes, what is Sharpeville? The chapter deals sensitively and perceptively with issues of individual and collective trauma, agency versus victimhood, the struggle over the meaning of events between a state wanting to depoliticize the massacre, and Pan-Africanists who see in these efforts an attempt to efface the memory of Robert Sobukwe and themselves from the wider history of the anti-apartheid movement, the cursory and controlling role that the TRC played in dealing with testimony about the massacre and the political aesthetics of memorialization and representation of the past.

This, the final chapter, ends with an acknowledgement that the wider political context in which the book places the events of 1960 will never provide solace or meaning to residents of Sharpeville, whose "homeplace remains a vicinity of restless spirits and tormented ghosts".

Lodge's account would have been a challenge to write at any time, presuming that one could have had access to witnesses in the first decade or two after the events, but to attempt to do so a half-century after the Sharpeville massacre is enormously challenging. In addition to the evidentiary difficulties of working at such remove, there is also the question of shifting testimony, meanings, and contexts, not to mention the challenge of heightened expectations due to such a large narrative void.

Writing a history of the Sharpeville massacre also requires writing about two Sharpevilles – the proximate memories of the local event, and the wider political reverberations. Grappling with conflict and controversy is one thing, but dealing with two such elusive phenomena is a formidable challenge. Lodge wrestles with these seemingly intractable problems with enormous skill and considerable success.

This is an extremely important book in its own right, in that it seeks to understand and break two silences (one about memory and the other about politics). And more than that, it hopefully clears ground for more work on the subject.