

Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe

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AN incident lasting barely a minute on Monday, March 21, 1960, focussed world attention on Sharpeville and Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe. South African police fired into a crowd of Africans demonstrating against the pass laws, killing 67 men, women and children and wounding another 185. On that same morning, police had arrested Sobukwe, the President of the Pan-Africanist Congress which had organised the demonstration.

The police claimed they were surrounded by "a frenzied mob of 20,000 natives." Dr. Ambrose Reeves, then Bishop of Johannesburg, produced evidence to show that there were nearer 5,000 Africans in a good-humoured mood. Sobukwe had earlier written to the police. He told them of the demonstration and promised co-operation. In the leaflet widely issued before the day he emphasised: "Our people must be taught now and continuously that in this campaign we are going to observe absolute non-violence . . . the only people who will benefit from violence are the Government and the police".

But Sobukwe was brought to trial and made a scapegoat. In court he refuses to plead saying, "the law under which we are charged is a law made exclusively for the White man, and the officers administering the law are White men. We do not see how justice can be done in the circumstances." Twenty-two stood accused with Sobukwe. Four were found not guilty and were discharged. Fourteen were sentenced to 18 months. Four got two years. Sobukwe was sentenced to three years' imprisonment.

Mangaliso Sobukwe was born in 1924, the youngest of the six sons of a Christian preacher. They were educated in Mission Schools and one of his brothers went on to become an Anglican priest. A scholarship to the University of Fort Hare led Mangaliso along a different path. He graduated with a Teacher's Diploma which enabled him to take a teaching appointment in the Transvaal.

During his student days however, he had become interested in politics. He joined the African National Congress Youth League and became a militant member.



In 1952 he joined in the Congress Defiance Campaign and this cost him his job. In the following year he was appointed Languages Assistant in the Department of Bantu Studies at the University of Witwatersrand. Here was an opportunity to lead a comfortable life and to enjoy the privileges of his new status. But Sobukwe stayed with his people. He and his wife, a trained nurse, chose to live in a standard municipal African dwelling, travelling the 18 miles to work by train with his fellows. In 1955 he associated himself with the Africanist wing of the African National Congress and became the editor of *The Africanist*, its mouthpiece. In 1958 Sobukwe left the ANC and in the following year was elected the National President of the new Pan-Africanist Congress. According to its manifesto, the PAC aims at a society "original in conception, Africanist in creation, socialistic in content, democratic in form and creative in purpose." PAC advocated African initiative and criticised the ANC for its multi-racial approach within the Congress Alliance, which, Sobukwe said, retarded their resistance. He claimed that resistance to *apartheid* must be on the basis of African nationalism alone. "We shall think of co-operation with other races when we have come into our own".

On March 16, 1960, Sobukwe announced that the PAC would launch the anti-pass law campaign the following Monday. The slogan of the campaign was "no bail, no defence, no fine". In addition to Sharpeville the campaign met with great success in Cape Town where a young PAC leader, Philip Kgosane, led a march of 30,000 Africans demanding the abolition of the pass laws. Like Sobukwe, Kgosane was arrested; but he escaped the country before his trial.

The PAC is now banned and is organising further opposition to *apartheid* underground. Sobukwe is now serving his sentence. His appeal against the severity of his sentence was dismissed. His case is one which has been championed by the Appeal for Amnesty 1961 campaign. Here is a man who has been made the scapegoat for Sharpeville.

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