

Valuable insight into South Africa's violent past

Robert Edgar, *Because they Chose the Plan of God: The Story of the Bulhoek Massacre of 24 May 1921*

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It has become increasingly evident in recent years that knowing about past injustices can help in teaching important lessons for the future as well as

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1. See for example Gerald l'Ange's book, *Urgent Imperial Service: South African Forces in German South West Africa 1914–1915* (Ashanti Publishing, Rivonia, 1991), which has several excellent situation maps.

healing the wounded South African nation. This little book comprising eight chapters, along with numerous illustrations, provides a narrative of the Bulhoek Massacre of 1921. Various historians have written about the origins of, the casualties in and the reactions to this massacre. Flowing from his PhD thesis on the Bulhoek Massacre, completed in 1977, Robert Edgar here provides a summation of that material as well as some updated information on the topic (this book is essentially a reprint of the 1986 Ravan Press edition). In order to explain how and why this massacre happened, the book describes the life history of Enoch Mgijima, an African prophet, and the activities and beliefs of his followers, the “Israelites.”

In the first chapter, Edgar provides an introduction to the causes of the massacre, which took place on 24 May 1921 when a force of 800 white policemen and soldiers marched to a place called Bulhoek, about 25 kilometres southwest of Queenstown in the present Eastern Cape Province. These policemen and soldiers had been instructed by the government to confront Mgijima and his followers who were accused of squatting illegally on the land they were using for praying. Failure between the Israelites and the law enforcement agencies to settle their differences amicably led to the massacre of 200 people. I expected that the author would provide more information on the causes of the massacre rather than merely highlighting one aspect of the incident.

Chapter two briefly discusses who Mgijima was and how he grew up. It was during this period that many Africans were converted into Christianity and European missionaries had a great influence over the Africans among whom they laboured. The chapter laments that the Africans were dispossessed of their land which led in turn to poverty in most of the villages. Mgijima grew up under such conditions. However, the author does not explicitly elaborate on how these conditions turned him into the kind of the leader he later became.

Chapter three discusses how Mgijima’s Christian conversion changed his life. According to Mgijima, the spirit of God touched him and he experienced a vision in which an angel revealed many things to him. Interestingly, in this vision, an angel snatched him up and took him into the heavens where he grew wings and flew. As a prophet, Mgijima started telling others about his visions. For example, when Halley’s Comet appeared in April 1910, he believed that that the “blazing ball in the sky” was a sign that God was angry with human beings and that they should return to their Old Testament beliefs. Edgar does not, however, elaborate on how the independent churches such as the Shembe influenced Mgijima spiritually.

Chapter four begins with Mgijima’s 1919 prophecy about the Hlubi, Xhosa and other African groups who were summoned to his village of Ntabelanga to await the Lord’s coming. Here the Israelites are presented as political heroes who took a stand against an oppressive system when they were requested by the government officials to vacate the site which the authorities claimed was illegally occupied by the Israelites

Chapter five highlights the attempts to arrest Mjigima and remove him from his supporters. The authorities later realised that such a move could cause violent reactions. Despite this, Edgar argues that attempts were made to destabilise the activities of the Israelites in the area. This chapter also discusses some of the religious beliefs and practices which Mjigima and his people followed. For example, there was a story that when the police tried to shoot the Israelites, their bullets had turned into water. Edgar, however, fails to provide any further explanation as to what triggered this myth or what its origins might be.

Chapter six explains the intransigence of the Israelites against the government officials. Their militancy grew. This was evident in 1921 when they prevented all white people from coming near Ntabelanga. Tax collectors were not allowed to enter the village. This led to the use of force by the police against the Israelites, which is narrated in chapter seven. The police weighed several options about the type and level of force they would use. One was to send aircraft overhead in a display of power to measure its effect on the Israelites. Another was to drop some bombs around the Israelite village. They decided against the second tactic. The chapter includes sketches showing how attacks were launched by both sides. The battle between the two groups apparently lasted for about twenty minutes.

Nearly 200 Israelites were killed and almost 100 were wounded. Only one policeman suffered a stab wound. After the battle, 141 Israelites were arrested and their trial took place in Queenstown in November 1921. A total of 129 of their followers were sentenced to between 12 and 18 months' hard labour. The rest were given suspended sentences.

In the final chapter the author discusses the aftermath of the massacre. It was because of this unfortunate incident that the Israelites received tremendous support from black political and trade union groups, and their story became part of the history of resistance to white oppression in South Africa.

The Bulhoek Massacre as narrated in this book remains a standard feature in accounts of South African history. This brief publication – essentially aimed at senior school learners and undergraduates – provides a synopsis of the confrontation and tries to address the various distortions that have arisen about this incident. As such, it is recommended to all South Africans for a greater understanding of South Africa's violent past and the role of African resistance in the making of modern South Africa.

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