

THE VEREENIGING RIOTS OF 1937

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On a Sunday afternoon in the spring of 1937, in the black township adjacent to Vereeniging in the southern Transvaal, two policemen were killed and one seriously injured by an angry black crowd. As those policemen were white, a wave of indignation swept through the white community, culminating in a boisterous meeting during which revenge on blacks was demanded. Feelings ran so high that an unsuspecting black passerby was indiscriminately set upon and brutally assaulted by the white crowd. The Government responded by appointing a commission of enquiry into the incident in the black township; the South African Institute of Race Relations, a liberal white organisation, sent its own commission to Vereeniging; court cases followed and pressmen flocked to the area to gather information for their newspapers. The events were even mentioned in the overseas media.

In the present era of continuing violence and unrest in South Africa it is illuminating to study the Vereeniging riots, as it was commonly called, as an example of open conflict between, on the one hand, black township dwellers and the police, and on the other hand, white and black, in an era of relatively peaceful intergroup relations in South Africa. Why did the blacks in the township attack the police? Why did the local whites respond aggressively? What did the commissions of enquiry find? It is believed that the answers to these questions will shed some light on the perceptions the African township dwellers had of the statutory restrictions imposed upon them, and on the agency responsible to uphold those restrictions, namely the police. Some light will hopefully also be shed on the perceptions of the white authorities by looking at statements by political leaders and the findings of the governmental commission of inquiry, on the perception of liberal whites by citing the findings of the South African Institute of Race Relations and on white public opinion on black rioting. The historical significance of Vereeniging is illuminated by comparing the events with other instances of clashes between the police and urban blacks. Finally it is hoped that this study will contribute to the discussion on the inherent aggressiveness of humans — in this instance of humans acting as a crowd in racial conflict situation.

The municipal black township at Vereeniging, was generally known simply as "the location". It originally consisted of 188 stands measuring 15 meters square. By 1919 it accommodated 576 of the 1 950 blacks living in the municipal area. As a result of the establishment of a number of large industries from that year onwards, the black population increased considerably, to reach an official total of 9 418 in 1937. The head constable of the police, however, estimated the population at approximately 13 000 blacks. The number of stands in the location reached a total of 807 by 1937, of which 772 were utilised for residential purposes. The dwellings on those stands were almost without exception constructed by the stand owners and varied in quality — some being neat and sturdy and others seemingly dilapidated shacks. The 772 residential stands were in 1937 inhabited by

The following abbreviations are used in the footnotes:

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| CAD | Central Archives Depot, Pretoria |
| RDM | <i>Rand Daily Mail</i> |
| SAIRR | South African Institute of Race Relations |
| UW | University of the Witwatersrand Library, Historical and Literary Papers |

an average of 12 persons per stand — some having up to 20 inhabitants. Even the municipality recognised that gross overpopulation was being experienced.¹

The whole black township was by this time surrounded by white residential areas with the location superintendent, a white municipal official, living on the boundary. The superintendent, his assistant and eight black location policemen were responsible for the maintenance of law and order in the township. The township was, furthermore, divided into blocks and there was a blockman for each block. Those blockmen were members of the township's Native Advisory Board, and assisted the superintendent in exercising control over the township.² The whole township was intersected by narrow streets and there were only a few open spaces or squares, of which the largest was situated towards the middle of the township. The distance from the large square to the superintendent's house was roughly 450 meters.³ The township served as the centre of religious and social activities of all blacks in the Vereeniging area. Most of the blacks not actually living in the township — the Union Steel Corporation, for example, accommodated 637 single blacks in its compound near the town⁴ — flocked to the township over the weekends. Some went to church — there were 14 churches in the township — or to visit friends, but, as was the case in most communities, some were prone to indulge in activities which could be construed as illegal.

Virtually the only field in which contact between the police and black township dwellers in South Africa took place during the 1930s, was that of law enforcement. A number of laws on the statute books were specifically designed for the control of blacks, particularly blacks in urban areas. The attack on the police in Vereeniging in 1937 took place while they were executing a law-enforcing raid in the black township. The laws alluded to were, firstly, the Natives (Urban Areas) Act (1923, as amended in 1930 and 1937). Its main aim was to regulate the presence of blacks in "white" urban areas. It provided, inter alia, for the establishment of an advisory board for every black township, consisting of a white chairman and black members representing the township dwellers. It furthermore stipulated that members of the South African police could apprehend an idle black who would then have to prove that he fulfilled an economic function in the urban area, or face repatriation to his tribal homeland. Black women had to possess certificates permitting them to be present in urban areas, and had to produce the certificates when demanded to do so by members of the South African police. The law even regulated the trade in and possession of liquor. The sale of alcoholic beverage to and the possession of the same by blacks was, generally speaking, prohibited. The provision of liquor to blacks was, from 1928, governed by the Liquor Act.⁵

CAD, TPB box 2051, file TA 16408, Vereeniging Municipality Location Riots Commission 1937: Verslag van die Kommissie van Ondersoek oor die Vereenigingse Lokasie Oproer (1937), pp. 22–25; UW, AD 843 SAIRR Papers, Rheinallt Jones Collection, Ja 2.8 Vereeniging Riots 1937: Court Papers, Preliminary hearings, Evidence of M.P.J. Snyman, p. 2; CAD, NTS box 7672, file 87/332, Vereeniging Native Riots Commission 1937, Minutes of Evidence: Evidence of J.L. Sharpe, 11.10.1937, p. 13.

2 CAD, NTS box 7672, file 87/332, Vereeniging Native Riots Commission 1937, Minutes of Evidence: Evidence of J.L. Sharpe, 11.10.1937, p. 20.

3 UW, AD 843 SAIRR Papers, Rheinallt Jones Collection, Ja 2.8 Vereeniging Riots 1937: Court Papers, Preliminary hearings, Evidence of J.J. Oosthuysen, 6.10.1937.

4 UW, AD 843 SAIRR Papers, Rheinallt Jones Collection, Ja 2.8 Vereeniging Riots 1937: Court Papers, Preliminary hearings, Evidence of J.M. Simpson, 14.10.1937.

5 *Statutes of the Union of South Africa*, 1923 (Cape Town, 1923), pp. 140–178; *Statutes of the Union of South Africa*, 1937 (Cape Town, 1937), pp. 674–720; *Statutes of the Union of South Africa, 1927–1928, Vol II* (Cape Town, 1928), pp. 541–569.

The enforcement of the Natives (Urban Areas) Act and the Liquor Act often led to incidents between the police and blacks. The same can be said about the other statutory measures. The Native Taxation and Development Act (1925) stipulated that the police could demand that any black produce his tax receipt — as proof that his taxes had been paid — or alternatively his exemption certificate.⁶ In addition the blacks were required to carry a whole range of passes permitting them to live and work in urban areas, and to produce those passes when demanded to do so by a member of the police. The latter often raided urban black townships to arrest transgressors of the tax and pass laws.

The outstanding illegal activity widely practised by blacks, and which played a direct role in the events of September 1937, was trespassing of the liquor laws. Alcohol consumption forms an important leisure time activity in many communities. Sorghum beer made from *sorghum caffrorum* used to be the only alcoholic beverage consumed by South African blacks. The blacks, especially those who lived in townships close to whites, slowly took to drinking wines and spirits as well. Drunkenness among black labourers in the Transvaal mining towns of the late nineteenth century led to general prohibitions on the sale of any kind of alcoholic beverage to blacks in the South African Republic. By the early 1920s that prohibition applied across the whole Union of South Africa, but it had an effect in direct contrast to its intention: it led to a wide-ranging contraband trade through the system of so-called *shebeens*.⁷ A large (but unknown) number of women in the black township at Vereeniging were shebeen owners, which meant that they made a living out of the brewing and selling of beer.⁸ The police regularly executed raids on the black township in order to arrest transgressors of the prohibition laws. [Table 1 sets out the number of raids, warnings issued and arrests made in this respect during the year preceding September 1937.] The statistics about such arrests in Table 1 seem to indicate that, despite the regularity of the raids and the high number of arrests, the trade in alcohol in the Vereeniging black township continued unabatedly.

TABLE 1: POLICE ENFORCEMENT OF THE LIQUOR LAWS IN VEREENIGING, OCTOBER 1936 — AUGUST 1937¹

MONTH	RAIDS	MEN WARNED	MEN ARRESTED	WOMEN WARNED	WOMEN ARRESTED	TOTAL
1936						
October	2			9	21	30
November	2			8	7	15
December	4		7	17	27	51
1937						
January	5			4	7	11
February	3		24	9	21	54
March	1					
April	3		26	6	11	43
May	1		2	4	9	15
June	5	4	1	5	2	12
July	7	2	9	9	56	76
August	6	1	4	11	38	54

6. *Statutes of the Union of South Africa, 1925* (Cape Town, 1925), pp. 720—722.

7. J.E.H. Grobler: "The Developing Patterns of Leisure Time Activities in South Africa's Black Cities Since ca. 1930", *World Leisure & Recreation*, XXVII:2, April 1985, p. 38.

8. CAD, TPB box 2051, file TA 16408, Vereeniging Municipality Location Riots Commission 1937, *op. cit.*, pp. 25—26.

Head Constable M.P.J. Snyman of the South African Police took charge of the police station in Vereeniging on September 11, 1937. During the week which followed he was informed about a variety of criminal activities being carried on by the inhabitants of the black township. After consultations with, amongst others, the location superintendent, he decided to carry out a raid on the township. His decision was partly prompted by the desire to clamp down on the illegal trade in alcohol. At 15h00 on Saturday, 18 September, he assembled a force of sixteen members of the South African police and seven black constables of the municipal police at the location superintendent's office and divided them into three groups. Each group was ordered to search all the dwellings along a route leading to the large square in the middle of the township.⁹

The raid started, as far as the police were concerned, in a satisfactory manner. Sorghum beer was found in several dwellings and a number of arrests were made. Those arrested were placed in a pick-up van and taken to the superintendent's office. When Snyman, who was driving the van, finally reached the central square, a large number of blacks — he estimated their number at 500 — had congregated there. Some were dancing and others playing a draughts game called *morabaraba*. Snyman got out of the van, but he and two other white constables suddenly became the target of stones thrown by blacks. One constable was hit on the cheek and the van's rear window was smashed. An attempt to arrest the stone throwers failed. One constable fired some shots in the air, but the black crowd was not deterred and the police moved off in the van. They found one of the raiding parties in a side street and were informed that, while the stone throwing was going on in the square, a black police constable had been severely injured when he was attacked by a black township dweller.¹⁰

After withdrawing from the location, Snyman reported the incident to his District Commandant, Captain Du Toit of Heidelberg. He added that, as vast quantities of sorghum beer had been found during the interrupted raid, he would like to have reinforcements in order to continue the raid early the next morning. Du Toit seemed satisfied, as he ordered twelve men to join Snyman's force. He also approved a later request of Snyman to postpone the raid until 14h00 on the Sunday afternoon.¹¹

Snyman's intention in ordering the raid on the afternoon of Sunday, September 19, was, according to his own testimony, to arrest offenders under liquor laws, pass laws and tax laws. He had thirty-one men — white and black — under his command. Fourteen were armed with service revolvers. The rest had batons and sticks. They were joined by six or seven black location police. The whole force was divided into raiding parties consisting of two white and two black constables. As had been the case on the previous day, each party had to move up a street leading to the central square, raiding from house to house, and all the parties were to meet again on the square. Snyman himself, accompanied by four policemen, drove the patrol van to the square.¹²

9. CAD, TPB box 2051, file TA 16408, Vereeniging Municipality Location Riots Commission 1937, *op. cit.* p. 18.

10. CAD, TPB box 2051, file TA 16408, Vereeniging Municipality Location Riots Commission 1937, *op. cit.* p. 4; CAD, NTS box 7671, file 87/332, Vereeniging Location Native Riots, Part I: Additional Native Commissioner Vereeniging — Director of Native Labour in Johannesburg, 23.9.1937; UW, AD 843 SAIRR Papers, Rheinallt Jones Collection, Ja 2.8 Vereeniging Riots 1937: Court Papers, Preliminary hearings, Evidence of M.P.J. Snyman, pp. 2–4.

11. CAD, TPB box 2051, file TA 16408, Vereeniging Municipality Location Riots Commission 1937, *op. cit.* pp. 5–6; UW, AD 843 SAIRR Papers, Rheinallt Jones Collection, Ja 2.8 Vereeniging Riots 1937: Court Papers, Preliminary hearings, Evidence of M.P.J. Snyman, pp. 4–5.

12. CAD, TPB box 2051, file TA 16408, Vereeniging Municipality Location Riots Commission 1937, *op. cit.*, pp. 5–7; UW, AD 843 SAIRR Papers, Rheinallt Jones Collection, Ja 2.8 Vereeniging Riots 1937: Court Papers, Preliminary hearings, Evidence of M.P.J. Snyman, p. 5.

The police raiding parties moved through the streets of the location in the general direction of the central square, searching for liquor and demanding passes and tax receipts, and at the same time instructing all the Africans to proceed to the square. It was never determined why they were ordered to go there. According to the evidence of a large number of location inhabitants, including the members of the location's Native Advisory Board, the police used sticks to chase the Africans to the square, and assaulted several in the process.¹³ At least two of the Africans accused the police of having sinister motives on the Sunday afternoon. The Reverend Tletsis of the Methodist Church in Vereeniging, ventured the opinion that

the thing was prearranged by the Police. Their intention was not to search for beer but to harass the Natives. They tried to send every Native they could find to the square so that they could punish them for Saturday's occurrence.¹⁴

Blockman Holana, a member of the Native Advisory Board, declared:

My views are that the police were fighting on Saturday. They lost and they went to get more police at Heidelberg and Evaton. They said 'Let us go to Vereeniging and kill the natives'¹⁵

When the police in the pick-up van drove onto the square, they immediately realised there were more blacks than usual congregated on it — most likely because of the instruction issued to the location blacks by the raiding parties to proceed to that locality. Snyman estimated that there must have been a crowd of 2 000. They were dancing and seemed to be in a hostile mood. Some were armed with sticks and others with rocks and iron bars. Snyman and Constable Greyling climbed out of the van and walked towards one of the raiding parties emerging onto the square. They were, however, halted by the black crowd which stopped dancing and started throwing stones at the police. Snyman pulled out his service revolver and started shooting, ordering his colleagues to do the same. Some of the police raiding parties had by then reached the square, and endeavoured to assist Snyman and his group. All was in vain, as the crowd was not deterred by the bullets fired at them, but pushed forward. The police soon ran out of ammunition and had to retreat down a side street.¹⁶

While Snyman and his men ran for the safety of the location superintendent's office, Constable Pienaar ran for the patrol van. He managed to start its engine, but a stone soon afterwards hit him on the head and he lost control of the moving vehicle. It came to a stop in the backyard of a house next to the square. This did not mean that Pienaar was out of danger — on the contrary, the van was surrounded by the black crowd which kept throwing stones at it and at Pienaar in the cab. Several stones hit him. Some blacks stabbed at

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13. CAD, NTS box 7671, file 87/332, Vereeniging Location Native Riots, Part I: Additional Native Commissioner Vereeniging — Director of Native Labour, Johannesburg, 23.9.1937; UW, AD 843 SAIRR Papers, Rheinallt Jones Collection, Ja 2.8 Vereeniging Riots 1937: Statements by G. Taoane, S. Mareka and S. Matsheng (all undated) and statements made at meeting of SAIRR and Vereeniging Location Advisory Board, 22.9.1937.
 14. UW, AD 843 SAIRR Papers, Rheinallt Jones Collection, Ja 2.8 Vereeniging Riots 1937: Statement by Rev A.M. Tletsis, undated.
 15. UW, AD 843 SAIRR Papers, Rheinallt Jones Collection, Ja 2.8 Vereeniging Riots 1937: Statements made at meeting of SAIRR and Vereeniging Location Advisory Board, 22.9.1937.
 16. UW, AD 843 SAIRR Papers, Rheinallt Jones Collection, Ja 2.8 Vereeniging Riots 1937: Court Papers, Preliminary hearings, Evidence of J.L. Pienaar, 12.10.1937, pp. 1—2 and G.N. van Loggerenberg, 12.10.1937, p. 6.

him with sticks, iron bars and a knife. He soon lost consciousness and the crowd obviously thought him dead, as he was virtually buried under stones in the cab of the van.¹⁷

Snyman, unaware of Pienaar's hopeless position, had to wait for almost an hour before he could move back into the black township. When the police finally did return, they found that the crowd had dispersed. Pienaar was located in the cab of the damaged pick-up van and taken to hospital. He lived to recount his traumatic experience, but two of his white colleagues, Constables Greyling and Van Staden, were not that fortunate, and were killed by the crowd. A number of other policemen suffered injuries. No blacks were killed but a few, both men and women, received bullet wounds.¹⁸ Thus ended the events which became known as the Vereeniging Location Riots.

One very noticeable fact about the events in the black township was that the blacks did not attack the small raiding parties, but concentrated their energies on the pick-up van and the police in its immediate vicinity. This is very important as it provides a crucial clue to the causes of discontent in Vereeniging. The black hatred for the pick-up van was not born in Vereeniging and could not have come as any surprise to the authorities. In the report of a governmental Commission of Enquiry into the Police, which was published three months before the riots, it was stated that all blacks were convinced that the police abused the vans and that blacks in general lived in great fear of the "pick-up".¹⁹ The pick-up van thus became the symbol of oppression of the blacks by the police. The Communist Party newspaper *Umsebenzi* claimed in a report in November 1933 that:

At any time of the day or night, but mostly during weekends, when people are not working and are visiting their friends in the locations, the police come out in a motor van. They proceed to any populous locality, jump out of the van and arrest anyone they can lay their hands on. The arrested persons (all Natives, of course) are bundled into the van, often seriously assaulted in the process, [and] taken to the lock-up ...²⁰

Umsebenzi can hardly be regarded as representative of black opinion during the 1930s, but at a meeting of the Vereeniging Town Council's Native Advisory Board some two weeks before the riots, the black members of the Board made it clear that the blacks in general were afraid of the pick-up van. In the chain of events in the Vereeniging location a marked change in the attitude of the blacks towards the police since the introduction of the van was clearly noticeable. Allegations of rough handling by the police of blacks were associated with the van.²¹ The Native Advisory Board met again on the morning after the riots, and confirmed that the cause of the trouble was the rough handling Africans experienced when they were bundled into the pick-up van.²² This contention was repeated a few days later when a delegation of the South African Institute of Race Relations met the Advisory

17. UW, AD 843 SAIRR Papers, Rheinallt Jones Collection, Ja 2.8 Vereeniging Riots 1937: Court Papers, Preliminary hearings, Evidence of J.L. Pienaar, 12.10.1937, pp. 2–5.

18. UW, AD 843 SAIRR Papers, Rheinallt Jones Collection, Ja 2.8 Vereeniging Riots 1937: Court Papers, Preliminary hearings, Evidence of G.C. van der Merwe, 12.10.1937, pp. 13–14; CAD, TPB box 2051, file TA 16408, Vereeniging Municipality Location Riots Commission 1937, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

19. Union of South Africa: *Report of the Police Commission of Inquiry* (UG 50, 1937), p. 78.

20. Quoted in E. Roux: *Time Longer Than Rope. A History of the Black Man's Struggle for Freedom in South Africa* (Madison, 1978 reprint), p. 277.

21. CAD, NTS box 7672, file 87/332, Vereeniging Native Riots Commission 1937, Minutes of Evidence: Evidence of J.L. Sharpe, 11.10.1937, p. 22.

22. CAD, NTS box 7671, file 87/332, Vereeniging Location Native Riots, Part I: Additional Native Commissioner Vereeniging — Director of Native Labour, Johannesburg, 23.9.1937.

Board, and was supported by the evidence of a number of inhabitants of the location.²³ Blacks thus viewed the pick-up as synonymous with police brutality.

In the opinion of Africans not directly involved in the riots, the main cause of the outburst was enmity between the Police and Africans. Thus Jameson Gilbert Coka, editor of the newspaper *African Liberator*, observed in a letter to the Secretary of Justice that

Africans feel that they are being hunted like animals and are gradually coming to the conclusion that it is better to die like men than to live under constant raids ...''²⁴

In an editorial in the newspaper *The Bantu World* it was asserted that "for what happened at Vereeniging the Police are to a large extent responsible, for in their dealings with the African people they are tactless and unsympathetic."²⁵ However, not all Africans blamed the police. Thus the Reverend Abner Mtimkulu, a prominent member of the Natal African National Congress, rather apologetically explained with reference to the events in Vereeniging:

We feel the Government has sustained an injury ... Those who have done these things are the children of the Government, but a father often realises that when a child does certain things it does them through foolishness."²⁶

The use of the patrol van by the police was arguably the main reason for the explosion of black anger in Vereeniging in September 1937. But there was obviously a variety of contributory causes and circumstances which influenced the events. A sector of white opinion quickly but rather vaguely suggested that 'Communist agitators' were responsible. At the funeral of the policemen killed by the blacks the presiding minister alleged

It was heathendom that killed Piet Retief and his men at Dingaans Kraal, ... and it was heathendom that killed Constables van Staden and Greyling. Unfortunately to-day white heathens are busy instigating the black heathendom in our country, not only at Vereeniging but throughout the land ...''²⁷

And at a public meeting of whites in Vereeniging a few days after the riots a leader of the fascist Greyshirt movement asserted that the Communists made it their business to incite the Africans against whites.²⁸ However, a governmental Commission of Enquiry could find no evidence that the communistic doctrine played any role in the action of the black crowd, or even of any infiltration by or support for the Communist Party of South Africa in the Vereeniging area.²⁹

The Mayor of Vereeniging and Chairman of the Town Council's Native Affairs Committee was of opinion that visitors from outside the location were primarily to blame for

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23. UW, AD 843 SAIRR Papers, Rheinallt Jones Collection, Ja 2.8 Vereeniging Riots 1937: Statements made at meeting of SAIRR and Vereeniging Location Advisory Board, 22.9.1937 and statements made by E. Pululu, G. Taoane, S. Mareka (all undated) and others.
 24. CAD, NTS box 7671, file 87/332, Vereeniging Location Native Riots, Part I: J.G. Coka — Secretary, Department of Justice, 22.9.1937.
 25. *The Bantu World*, 2.10.1937, Editorial: The Tragedy of Vereeniging.
 26. Quoted in *The Star*, 4.10.1937: Children Who Have Done Wrong'.
 27. RDM, 22.9.1937: Big Crowd Attends Funeral of Policemen.
 28. RDM, 23.9.1937: Crowd Assaults Native at Protest Meeting.
 29. CAD, TPB box 2051, file TA 16408, Vereeniging Municipality Location Riots Commission 1937, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

the incidents on 18 and 19 September.³⁰ The opinion was shared by the Additional Native Commissioner in Vereeniging, who stated that the visitors from adjacent compounds were mostly responsible for the assaults on the police.³¹ That was possibly the case, but both Commissions of Enquiry, (South African Government and South African Institute for Race Relations) found a wealth of discontent in the black township itself. This discontent must be considered against the broad background of the socio-economic position of urban blacks in South Africa. The township dwellers were not content with their way of living. The overpopulation of the township, the overcrowding of living quarters and the poverty of the people in general provided fertile soil in which discontent became hatred. The police had to bear the brunt of the black loathing of unpopular statutes, such as the prohibition on liquor trade and public drunkenness, and the pass laws. On the other hand the police stimulated the hatred because of the way they treated the blacks. The governmental Commission of Enquiry severely criticized the police, stating that although it was not generally the case, some policemen were more often than not inhuman in their handling of not only arrested blacks but also of ordinary law-abiding black civilians, especially while carrying out raids in black townships.³²

Although the essential motive of the black crowd on the afternoon of 19 September was to give vent to their hatred of the patrol van, political overtones did come to the forefront. Those were, to quote George Rudé, author of various studies on the crowd in history, "intrusive rather than intrinsic" to the movement,³³ but they were unmistakably present. While Constable Pienaar in the patrol van was being stoned by the black crowd, a woman shouted that she "wanted the damned 'Boer's' heart to cook it". And when it was found after the stoning that Pienaar was still alive, a black man exclaimed that "the bloody 'Boer' is not yet dead".³⁴

When news of the events in Vereeniging reached Pretoria during the late afternoon of 19 September, a force of 123 police were rushed to the riot scene.³⁵ On their arrival they immediately surrounded the whole location. From 01h00 onwards a systematic search of the area was then undertaken, during which between 420 and 450 Africans were arrested and taken to the charge office for questioning. Of those the vast majority were charged for failing to produce tax receipts and passes. On Monday afternoon, however, the local magistrate received instructions from Pretoria that all the Africans who were charged in connection with tax receipts and passes had to be released, which was done.³⁶ Edward Roux claims that they were released because the arrests caused labour shortages at the large factories in Vereeniging and vicinity — labour shortages at inter alia a large power station, which threatened the supply of electricity to the gold mines of the Witwatersrand.³⁷ In the absence of evidence it would be safer to suggest that the release

30. CAD, NTS box 7672, file 87/332, Vereeniging Native Riots Commission 1937, Minutes of Evidence: Evidence of J.L. Sharpe, 11.10.1937, p. 22.

31. CAD, NTS box 7671, file 87/332, Vereeniging Location Native Riots, Part I: Additional Native Commissioner Vereeniging — Director of Native Labour Johannesburg, 23.9.1937.

32. CAD, TPB box 2051, file TA 16408, Vereeniging Municipality Location Riots Commission 1937, *op. cit.* pp. 13—17.

G. Rudé: *The Crowd in History: A Study of Popular Disturbances in France and England, 1730—1848* (New York, 1964), p. 90.

UW, AD 843 SAIRR Papers, Rheinallt Jones Collection, Ja 2.8 Vereeniging Riots 1937: Court Papers, Preliminary hearings, Evidence of J.L. Pienaar, 12.10.1937, p. 5.

35. RDM, 20.9.1937: Three Police Killed in Fight With Mob at Location.

36. CAD, NTS box 7671, file 87/332, Vereeniging Location Native Riots, Part I: Additional Native Commissioner Vereeniging — Director of Native Labour, Johannesburg, 23.9.1937.

E. Roux: *Time Longer Than Rope. A History of the Black Man's Struggle for Freedom in South Africa* (Madison, 1978 reprint), p. 283.

was aimed at pacifying black rancour.

Of the 420–450 Africans arrested during the night most were released. Some seventy were kept in custody on several charges in connection with the attack on the police and the van. They appeared before a magistrate on 21 September on charges of public violence, and were remanded.³⁸ Two Africans were charged with attempted murder.³⁹

The release of the majority of the arrested Africans was severely criticised by many whites in the Vereeniging area. According to newspaper reports those whites were in favour of severe punitive measures against the Africans. They regarded the release as a grave error, because "natives do not understand such humane treatment, and the consideration shown them will be taken as a sign of weakness" and will make them "ready for more mischief".⁴⁰

Evidence exists that some elements in the white population of Vereeniging exploited the tragic death of the policemen to foment hatred of whites against Africans. Thus it was reported that white schoolchildren were forced to walk past the bodies of the murdered policemen, and that the damaged pick-up van was driven round the streets of Vereeniging.⁴¹ On the Wednesday following the clash in the location, a so-called general people's meeting attended by some 1 500 – 2 000 whites, of whom the vast majority were Afrikaans speaking, was held in the Vereeniging market square. General Smuts, who was Minister of Justice, was called upon to attend the meeting, but declined on the ground that the government regarded the meeting as quite unnecessary. The meeting passed a number of resolutions, including one calling on Smuts to resign because he failed to attend the meeting and had ordered the release of the majority of arrested Africans. But the resolutions which give the clearest indication of the mood prevalent amongst those who attended the meeting was one demanding a revision of the government's racial policy and the restoration of the dividing line which existed between white and black in the days of the South African Republic, and one demanding that every white attacked by an African should have the right to shoot his assailant.⁴²

During the meeting an unfortunate event took place which, on the one hand, did not do credit to the whites who attended the meeting, but on the other hand serves as a further indication of how enraged the whites were about the murder of the two white policemen. An African happened to ride down one of the streets adjoining the market square on his bicycle. When he was spotted some two hundred whites rushed after him, caught up with him and without any provocation started assaulting him. The police quickly intervened and thus probably saved the African's life. Even so he was completely covered with blood and the first reports of the incident – which even reached a British newspaper – indicated that he was killed.⁴³ He did not sustain serious injuries and was discharged from hospital the next day. He never lodged a formal complaint against his assailants for the simple reason that they were so numerous that it would have been impossible to identify those

38. RDM, 22.9.1937: Government Taking Serious View of Riot.

39. RDM, 23.9.1937: Sixty-Seven Natives in Court.

40. RDM, 22.9.1937: Government Taking Serious View of Riot.

41. UW, AD 843 SAIRR Papers, Rheinallt Jones Collection, Ja 2.8 Vereeniging Riots 1937: Notes by Taylor on visit to Vereeniging, 29.9.1937.

42. RDM, 23.9.1937: Crowd Assaults Native at Protest Meeting; *Die Burger*, 23.9.1937: Tweedui-send mense eis dat genl. Smuts bedank.

43. CAD, NTS box 7671, file 87/332, Vereeniging Location Native Riots, Part I: Transcription of newspaper cutting from *London Daily Mirror*, approx. 23.9.1937.

who were actually guilty of assault.⁴⁴ Several other unprovoked attacks on Africans by whites took place in the Vereeniging area at that time.⁴⁵ As a result, according to newspaper reports, no Africans could be seen in the streets after sunset, and those who worked late did not return to their homes in the location.⁴⁶

During the general people's meeting on 22 September all the local lawyers were requested not to defend any of the Africans involved in the riots. But when the Vereeniging firm of attorneys, Dempers and Slomowitz, was approached by the South African Institute of Race Relations to appear for the defence, they consented.⁴⁷ They soon afterwards received a letter from the organisers of the general people's meeting warning them to withdraw, or they would be "dealt with".⁴⁸ The warning was ignored, whereupon a meeting of some three hundred whites held in Vereeniging in October resolved to boycott the firm of Dempers and Slomowitz in future.⁴⁹ It is not known whether the boycott decision was implemented. The importance of this white resistance against possible defence of blacks lies in the fact that it indicated a strong feeling amongst a sector of the white population that the blacks should be given no rights whatsoever but should be "put in their place".

Prime Minister Hertzog himself came very close to supporting a similar view when he commented on the events in Vereeniging during a public address at the end of September. He took the side of the whites who, he contended, were virtually forced to "a conviction of a deep and far reaching and perhaps organised enmity on the part of the Native as against the European ..."⁵⁰ He added that the "European is as determined to-day as he was in the days of the Voortrekkers to rule the country in terms of European civilisation".⁵¹ But in the Orange Free State the provincial leader of the opposition National Party, Dr. N.J. van der Merwe, warned that the writing was on the wall for white South Africa because the government was too liberal to implement a really strong racial policy.⁵²

Although Smuts did not attend the 'people's meeting' on 22 September, he decided as Minister of Justice to have the riots investigated on the highest possible level. Thus the governmental Commission of Enquiry already referred to, with the Secretary of Native Affairs (D.L. Smit) and Maynard Page, a later chief magistrate of Johannesburg, as members, was appointed on 24 September to investigate and report on matters leading up to and culminating in the events of 18 and 19 September.⁵³ The Commission began their investigation in Vereeniging on 11 October and adjourned their public sessions on 16 October. Fifty-one witnesses, including twenty-nine blacks, gave evidence to the Commission.⁵⁴ Its report was published on 17 November and its findings were reported in

44. CAD, NTS box 7671, file 87/332, Vereeniging Location Native Riots, Part I: R Saunders — Commissioner South African Police, 8.12.1937 and J.J. du Toit — Deputy Commissioner South African Police, 6.12.1937.

45. CAD, NTS box 7671, file 87/332, Vereeniging Location Native Riots, Part I: Additional Native Commissioner Vereeniging — Director of Native Labour Johannesburg, 23.9.1937).

46. RDM, 24.9.1937, "Bitter Feelings Between Natives and Europeans".

47. *The Star*, 7.10.1937: Attack in Location.

48. CAD, NTS box 7671, file 87/332, Vereeniging Location Native Riots, Part I: Unidentified newspaper clipping titled "Defence Attorney Seeks Court Protection".

49. *The Bantu World*, 16.10.1937: Boycott of Attorneys Urged.

50. CAD, NTS box 7671, file 87/332, Vereeniging Location Native Riots, Part I: General Hertzog's Speech on the Vereeniging Riots.

51. *The Bantu World*, 2.10.1937: Europeans Determined To Rule As In Voortrekkers' Days.

52. *Die Burger*, 23.9.1937: Naklanke ook in die Vrystaat.

53. CAD, URU 1678, p. 41: Minute No. 2625.

54. CAD, NTS box 7672, file 87/332, Vereeniging Native Riots Commission 1937, Minutes of Evidence.

great detail in the South African press.⁵⁵ Editorial comment in English language newspapers generally overflowed with praise for the report.⁵⁶ But in the Afrikaans newspapers the finding that the use of the pick-up van was partly to be blamed for the outbreak of violence was sharply criticized.⁵⁷ The Afrikaans newspapers did not stand alone in their objections, and certainly mirrored the opinion of a large number of whites. Objections against that finding was aired from all over the country. Thus the Jagdrif branch of the Wakkerstroom 'Boerevereniging' (Farmers' Society) resolved at a meeting to publicly state its aversion to the finding.⁵⁸

In the long run only a few superficial steps were taken to diminish the causes of black discontent in Vereeniging. On the advice of the Commission of Inquiry the Native Location Police were prohibited from carrying sjamboks. Plans were furthermore set afoot to remove the overpopulated location to a larger area.⁵⁹ This eventually culminated in the establishment of a new township for Vereeniging's African population. It was called Sharpeville and ironically became the scene of the worst single confrontation between the police and urban Africans in South Africa.

The Vereeniging riots of 1937 were by no means the first nor the last instance of black resistance against the police in South Africa. In Durban in 1929, for example, violence erupted around the issue of municipal beer halls. Under the leadership of A.W.G. Champion the Durban blacks organised a boycott of the beer halls. Pickets were placed at the entrances to the halls. The police intervened to protect those blacks who were not in favour of the boycott and who intended to keep visiting the halls. The boycotters were not to be intimidated. Violence ensued in June 1929 and claimed a few lives.⁶⁰ What basically happened was that individual policemen became the target of black resistance because the police force was conceptualized as the agency which threatened to sabotage the effectiveness of the beer hall boycott — a local issue of utmost importance in the minds of many blacks. Comparatively speaking the attack on the police in the pick-up van in Vereeniging in 1937 was not organised by a black leader or organisation. It was rather a spontaneous eruption on the part of a black crowd venting their hatred against a local symbol of oppression.

Black eruptions of that nature were sporadic occurrences in the South Africa of the 1940s and 1950s. In January 1950, for example, a crowd of blacks in Newclare, Johannesburg, attacked a black policeman attempting to arrest a black civilian allegedly in possession of liquor. The flying squad of the South African police was called in and six cars arrived, two of which were surrounded and stoned by the black crowd. A white civilian who happened to drive by was also stoned, and so were some trains and the houses (occupied by whites) at the Newclare railway station. Shouts of "Kill the Police" were continuously heard. The police eventually managed, with the aid of massive reinforcements, to quell the disturbances, but rioting resumed two weeks later in the same area. To the staff of the American Embassy in South Africa — and one cannot but agree — it was clear that "the

55. See e.g. RDM, 18.11.1937: Vereeniging Commission's Report; *Die Transvaler*, 18.11.1937: Gebelgdheid oor Polisiewa Oorsaak van Onluste op Vereeniging.

56. See e.g. RDM, 18.11.1937: editorial.

57. See e.g. *Die Vaderland*, 22.11.1937 (Editorial): Polisie-optrede op Vereeniging.

58. CAD, NTS box 7671, file 87/332, Vereeniging Location Native Riots, Part I: I.D. du Plessis — Minister, Dept van Naturellesake, 28.11.1937.

59. CAD, NTS box 7671, file 87/382, Vereeniging Location Native Riots, Part I: Town Clerk, Vereeniging — Secretary of Native Affairs, 19.1.1938.

60. F.A. Mouton: *Swart verset teen die Durbanse Munisipale Administrasiestelsel, 1929—1930* (Unpublished MA thesis, University of Pretoria, 1985).

riots were directed against the white European police and grew from grievances of the natives against the white authorities". And, as in the case of the Vereeniging riots, the black resistance against the police

really had its roots in much deeper causes of a fundamental and chronic nature ... (It) was an expression of ... increasing (black) ... dissatisfaction with their entire status, economic and living conditions, and more immediately, the increasingly stringent police control measures to which they ... (were) subjected".⁵¹

Resistance against laws which were, in the opinion of black South Africans, unjust, rather than hatred for the police, led to the Defiance Campaign of 1952 and the Sharpeville incident in March 1960. Neither did the Soweto revolt of 1976—77 have its origins in resistance against the police — at least not in the narrow sense of the word, although the police as symbol of white authority and as law enforcing agency was continually involved. Black resistance in South Africa did, over the fifty years since the Vereeniging riots, move beyond local issues as such. Black anger is still directed at the police, as is evidenced by the so-called necklace executions of black policemen, but the aims of black resisters go much further than merely revenge — or, to state it bluntly, to "kill the police". Policemen became, in the course of time, merely symbols of what is regarded as an oppressive system which many blacks intend to wipe from the face of the earth.

51. Confidential U.S. State Department Central Files, South Africa, 1950—1954, Internal Affairs, Microfilm reel 1, frames 38—40: American Consul General Johannesburg — State Department, 17.2.1950.