

South Africa's AMRITSAR? Responsibility for and the significance of the Port Elizabeth shootings of 23 October 1920

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Introduction

On 23 October 1920, a demonstration outside of Port Elizabeth's Baakens Street Police Station to demand the release of union leader, Samuel Masabalala turned into a tragedy. The crowd was dispersed when policemen and vigilantes opened fire on it. The casualties numbered 24 dead and many more injured.

The above paragraph with its brief description of the 1920 Port Elizabeth shootings is typical of the references to this event to be found in textbooks of South African history.¹ Equally cursory references are also made to these events in more specialised works on black politics,² trade unionism,³ and the South African Police.⁴ These secondary sources which allude to the shootings have perpetuated numerous errors in their versions of the events. They include considerable inaccuracy in relating the sequence of events which precipitated the shootings, identifying the strikers and victims of the shootings, understating the number of fatalities arising from the shootings and explaining the causes of the shootings.

More detailed treatments of the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union of Africa have related the Port Elizabeth events to developments elsewhere in the country.⁵ However, even these works provide little more than narrative accounts of the events which culminated in the Port Elizabeth shootings. The only scholar who has examined the subject matter of this article from a historical materialist perspective, has made a valuable contribution to contextualising developments within the local political economy. But given his own admission of the paucity of evidence consulted, he begs more questions than he answers.⁶

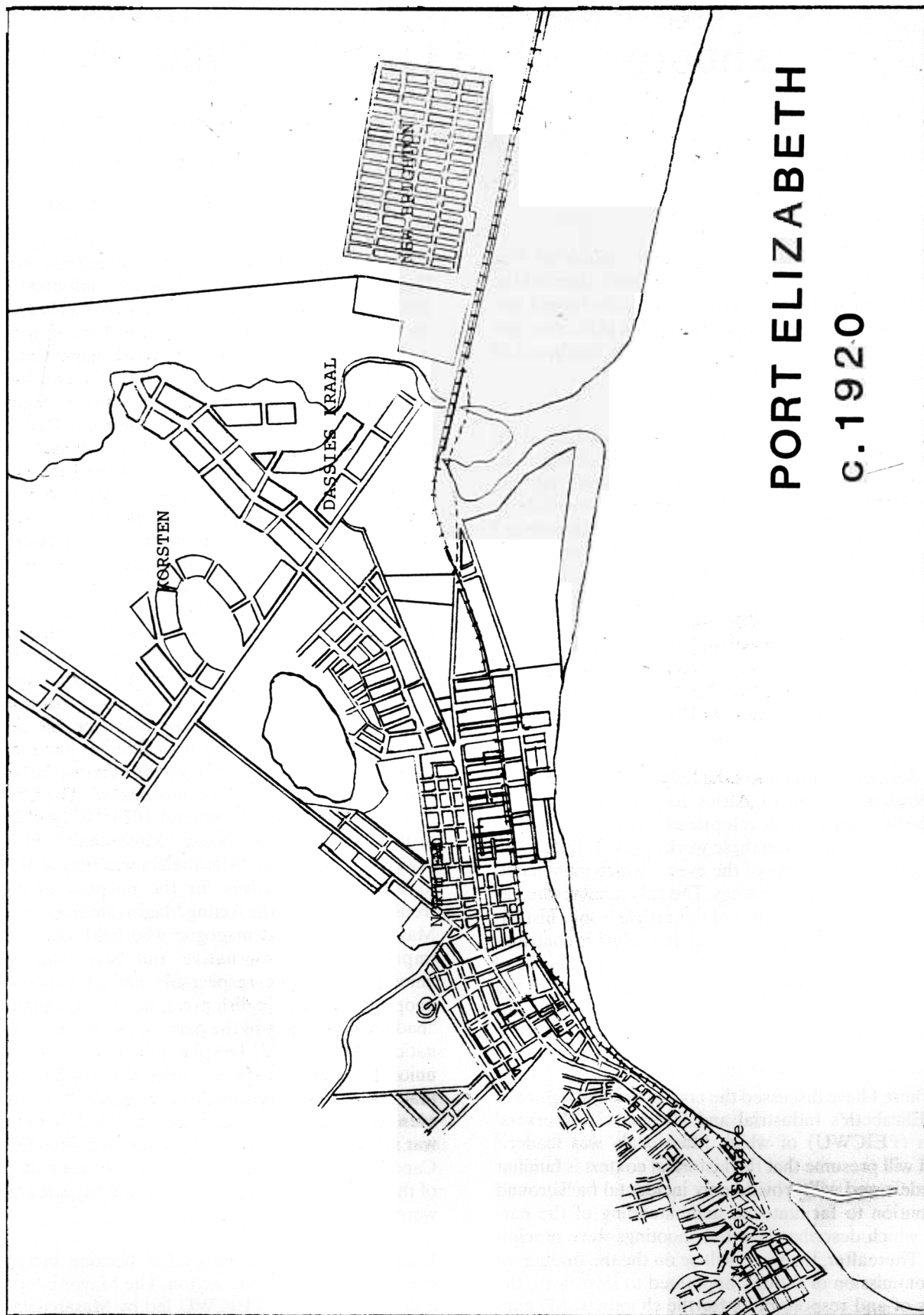
Elsewhere I have discussed the emergence and nature of Port Elizabeth's Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union (PEICWU) of which Masabalala was leader.⁷ Thus I will presume that the historical context is familiar to readers and will provide only incidental background information to facilitate an understanding of the narrative which describes how the shootings were precipitated. Thereafter, the focus will be on the findings of the Commission of Inquiry appointed to investigate the causes of and responsibility for the shootings. My concern is especially with the consequences of this crisis for the state – at both the local and national levels. This article, then, offers a case study of the wider political ramifications of an event in Port Elizabeth's history.

The General Strike and Masabalala's Arrest

The starting point for our narrative is the inaugural conference of the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union of Africa (ICWU) held in Bloemfontein in July 1920. Masabalala attended in his capacity as President of the Port Elizabeth Amalgamated Industrial and Commercial Coloured and Native Workmen's Union. Although the launch of the first national union for black workers under the leadership of Selby Msimang was weakened by the disaffection of Clements Kadalie and his ICU contingent from Cape Town, Masabalala appears to have thrown in his lot with the Bloemfontein-based leader at this stage. Upon his return home, Masabalala's union affiliated to the national organisation and reconstituted itself as the Port Elizabeth Industrial and Commercial Workers' (Amalgamated) Union of Africa (PEICWU).⁸

Masabalala continued his six month-old campaign for a 10s. minimum wage despite the Bloemfontein conference's decision to agree to 8s. per day for unskilled workers in industry and commerce. He probably did not wish to be seen to be backing down on his previous demand for fear that it might weaken his hand in negotiation with employers. They, on the other hand, believed that Masabalala was an *agent provocateur*. The Chairman of the PE Chamber of Commerce (PECOC) and director of the large merchant house "Mosenthals", H.J. Harraway, reckoned that "Masabalala was only sent ... here to organise the natives for the purpose of creating trouble".⁹ As far as the Acting Magistrate was concerned, Masabalala was a demagogue who held sway over the impressionable 'raw native' but had little support amongst the "more respectable natives and coloured people".¹⁰ To the English press, he was an agitator who "had been led astray by the pernicious doctrines of International Socialism".¹¹ Despite police surveillance of the union, there seems to be no evidence to support the view that Masabalala was influenced by white socialists. Yet, even the conservative black press claimed that the post-war sequence of strikes in Johannesburg, Bloemfontein, Cape Town and Port Elizabeth was the result of "a tour of the whole country by two [unidentified] agitators who were preaching the 'Black strike'".¹²

Local employers and authorities became increasingly concerned to avert strike action. The Mayor interviewed a deputation of the PEICWU led by Masabalala on 23 September in a bid to resume wage negotiations.¹³ However, Port Elizabeth's principal employers of unskilled labour adopted a hardline attitude. At a meeting on 28 September, the aforementioned PECOC Chairman, ar-



PORT ELIZABETH

c. 1920

gued that “merchants of this town [should] refuse to negotiate with this Native Union in any shape or form” for such action would imply recognition. Figures were cited to suggest that the PEICWU had a membership of only 2 000 and was not representative of the local black workforce.¹⁴ Although prepared to concede that some relief should be granted the ‘civilised native’ who was a family man and resided permanently in the city, Haraway argued that the migrant who performed menial labour was usually paid more than 3s.6d., the accepted minimum wage for ‘raw natives’. He also reckoned that under the depressed commercial conditions many merchants could afford to dispense with such employees and warned that if a strike was called “they would not hesitate to cut down their numbers very considerably”.¹⁵

Notwithstanding these veiled threats, Masabalala called for a general strike at a public meeting held on 3 October. Rejecting an alternative proposal to renew negotiations with employers, a majority endorsed Masabalala’s resolution. The resolution was ruled out of order by the PEICWU’s Chairman, Paul Kettleadas, who said that in terms of the Union’s constitution, it should have been adopted by the Committee before being put to public vote. When the resolution was referred back to the Committee, it rejected strike action by a majority of 8 to 4.¹⁶ This hiatus signalled that the split in the ranks of the PEICWU leadership between the moderates and radicals had finally come to a head. Masabalala’s proposed course of action had much popular support, but not the unanimous backing of his fellow Committee members.

The local authorities reckoned that the time had come for preventative action. Captain H.J. Halse, the District Commandant of the SAP, summoned Masabalala to a meeting and “pointed out to him the seriousness of preaching violence and of preventing those willing to work from doing so”. It is unclear whether Halse had acted out of concern for the possible breakdown in law and order or whether, like employers, he was concerned with the economic costs of a general strike. In any event, Masabalala refused to be intimidated and declared that there would be no need to enforce strike action for all members of the Union “would come out simultaneously”.¹⁷ Masabalala pressed ahead with his independent course of action and by the end of September rumours were rife as to the prospect of a general strike.

The presence in New Brighton of the prominent African leader and Congregational Minister, Rev Walter Rubusana,¹⁸ in early October was regarded as a fortuitous occurrence by moderate community leaders and local officials. At the invitation of members of the Native Employees Committee, which represented non-PEICWU members, he addressed public meetings at Korsten and New Brighton – the latter with the express permission of Location Superintendent, Evelyn Grattan, who probably considered Rubusana the ideal foil for Masabalala’s influence because of his record in negotiating a succession of recent wage settlements in East London.¹⁹ However, Rubusana apparently received a mixed reception when he appealed to his audience to “seek a peaceable and constitutional means to gain their object”.²⁰

At another public meeting held at Korsten on Sunday 17 October, the PEICWU Chairman, Kettleadas, again expressed reservations about the wisdom of strike action. He noted that the Union was not in a sufficiently strong financial position to support members on strike and that there was every likelihood of employers replacing strikers with ‘scab’ labour. When Masabalala took the platform, he accused his own Committee of being out of touch with the rank and file Union membership and attacked Rubusana – who was present – for allowing himself to be co-opted by the authorities. Masabalala’s bluster caused an element of the crowd to turn upon and assault Rubusana, who sustained minor injuries.²¹

The incident widened the breach between supporters and opponents of strike action. Masabalala himself held that Rubusana had every intention of “subverting the demands of the Union”. The Cape Town-based ICU mouthpiece, *The Black Man*, asserted that Rubusana had allowed himself to become captive to a ‘conservative clique’ whose influence on the local community had been arrested by the growth of the PEICWU.²² The *Eastern Province Herald*, in reporting the assault, spoke of the appeal of “some self-constituted native leaders” with extreme views exercising a strong influence on the “irresponsible and generally youthful element” who had engaged in “protest and dangerous talk”.²³ To unsympathetic observers, then, the assault on Rubusana was part of a pattern of increasing militancy by a group of activists who were prepared to use violence to achieve their objectives.

The following notice appeared in the press early in the next week:

We notify the public of Port Elizabeth and the employers of labour that if we do not get a satisfactory answer before 3rd November, at 11 a.m. we are going on strike, even a decrease on food-stuffs and clothing to pre-war prices, will do but nothing else as we can no longer wait, we have tried all efforts.²⁴

Masabalala had drafted the strike notice without the authorisation of the PEICWU Committee, which was a clear indication that his break with the moderates was irrevocable. The notice was greeted by employers with a mixture of relief and bathos as the long-rumoured general strike now appeared to be imminent. Certainly, employers had no intention of conceding the strikers’ demands for fear that it would be the thin edge of the wedge. Their intransigence in the protracted wage negotiations,²⁵ combined with Masabalala’s own ‘excessive and unreasonable’ demands, brought matters to a head.

White traders and officials living in New Brighton apparently appealed for police protection against attack. In contrast to previously expressed views, Grattan suggested that there was a likelihood of factional violence between supporters and opponents of the strike, particularly if action was taken to prevent ‘scabbing’.²⁶ This is the only allusion to the possibility of violence accompanying the strike in evidence which predates the shootings. However, there is a considerable body of retrospective evidence of white fears of violence and intimidation of

non-strikers in the week preceeding the shootings. It is difficult to know whether such fears were real or simply projected backwards in time following the violence – some of which was directed at whites – after the shootings and the ‘black peril’ scare which subsequently gripped the city [see below].

In any event, the authorities decided to try to pre-empt the strike. On 21 October, Magistrate C.E. Stidolph requested ‘special authorisation’ from the Minister of Justice to prohibit public meetings in terms of the Riotous Assemblies Act. Failing this, he wished to be granted some means to remove Masabalala “from the district as an undesirable for the space of six months or so”.²⁷ But this was refused and so it was decided to act upon another section of the Act and charge Masabalala with incitement to public violence for provoking the assault on Rubusana the previous Sunday. With a sworn affidavit by Rubusana but no warrant, the SAP arrested Masabalala early on the morning of Saturday 23 October.

Halse’s statement that “the threatened strike had nothing to do with Masabalala’s [*sic*] arrest” and was a result of the spate of violence following his speech of 17 October appears to be a *post hoc* vindication of the actions of the authorities.²⁸ While admitting that this decision had been taken in consultation with Stidolph and Grattan, Halse assumed full responsibility for the consequences of the arrest of Masabalala.²⁹ *The Black Man* maintained that the Government had condoned the illegal arrest of Masabalala before strike action had been decided upon.³⁰ At least two secondary sources suggest that the arrest was effected on instructions from Pretoria,³¹ but this is not substantiated by the available primary sources. This, in itself, does not make the state any less culpable for it must bear responsibility for the actions of its functionaries. And, in this instance, the parties involved were all in the employ of the central authority. The District Commandant of the SAP and the Magistrate of Port Elizabeth were officers of the Justice Department, and the Superintendent of New Brighton Location was answerable to the Native Affairs Department (NAD). This is not to propose any sort of conspiracy, but to suggest instead that this decision was initiated and acted upon by local representatives of the central state. Thus, an understanding of the mechanics of decision-making requires a grasp of the lines of authority between Pretoria and Port Elizabeth.

The Demonstration and Shootings outside Baakens Street Police Station

Word of Masabalala’s arrest spread rapidly amongst Port Elizabeth’s black workers and after 1 p.m. a crowd gathered in Market Square to discuss what action should be taken. A deputation led by two PEICWU officials was appointed to attempt to secure Masabalala’s release on bail. An interview with Halse was conducted within the Baakens Street Police Station where Masabalala was being held whilst a crowd of a few hundred awaited news outside [see **Photos 1 & 2**]. But the outcome was a foregone conclusion because of the SAP District Commandant’s previous agreement with the Magistrate to deny bail. Halse’s announcement, interpreted by Union officials, that Masabalala would obtain bail when the case

came to trial the following Monday, failed to placate the restive crowd. After a further round of speeches and deliberations, a decision was taken to present the authorities with an ultimatum: if Masabalala was not released by 5 p.m., the Police Station would be forcibly entered and he would be freed. After this message was conveyed to Halse, some of the crowd dispersed but threatened to regroup at the appointed hour if their demand was not met.

Halse took the warning seriously enough to take precautions. He increased the numbers on duty at the Police Station and placed all available men on standby. Meanwhile, news of the impending showdown spread and during the course of the afternoon a crowd numbering between two and four thousand assembled outside the Police Station. Both contemporary testimony and film footage [see **photo 3**] confirm that the crowd consisted mainly of Africans and Coloureds, but that a fair number of white onlookers took up positions in order to follow the proceedings. Initially the mood of the crowd appears to have been fairly restrained. But as the deadline for the expiry of the ultimatum approached, members of the crowd became increasingly voluble in demanding Masabalala’s release. The policemen, under the charge of Sub-Inspector M.J. Hart, guarding the entrance to the Police Station, were the target of occasional stones and other missiles and had to fend off blows with rifle butts by persons in front of the crowd wielding sticks. Although hard pressed to withstand the pressure of the crowd bearing down upon them, they were not ordered to load their weapons. Indeed, the men on the steps acted with exemplary discipline under considerable provocation.³²

Repeated calls for the crowd to disperse fell on deaf ears. At about 5.30 p.m. four policemen mounted on horses charged the crowd but were unseated in the ensuing melee. They discharged shots into the air to frighten off would-be assailants. While the crowd in front of the Station had momentarily parted in the face of the charge, at least thirty white volunteers entered the Police Station and offered their services to Halse. They were issued with rifles and ammunition and most of them took up positions on the balcony overlooking the crowd. From this vantage point a further attempt was made to disperse the crowd by means of a firehose, but this effort and the previous debacle only succeeding in inciting an ugly mood.

Shortly thereafter, and without warning, a volley of rifle fire erupted. A reporter described the scene as follows:

[F]or an awful two minutes... the rifles spat death into the massed ranks of the assailants who soon intermingled with hundreds of spectators... men and women fell right and left, dead and dying.³³

When the firing ceased, the crowd had dispersed [see **Photo 4**] but bodies were scattered far and wide. Only two bodies were said to have been found directly in front of the steps. Others were found as far as Castle Street Corner, which was 100 metres from the Police Station.³⁴ The weight of evidence pointed to only a few rounds having been discharged by the policemen guarding the entrance, but indiscriminate firing on the part of the vigilantes stationed on the balcony. They fired not only

into the massed ranks of the crowd immediately in front of the Police Station, but raked Baakens Street, Market Square and Main Street in the direction in which the crowd fled [see **Street Plan**]. Many of the vigilantes were World War One veterans,³⁵ and appear to have relished being 'back in action'.

Estimates of the number of casualties varied considerably, from between 76 to 153 wounded and 23 to 26 dead. An official list enumerates 26 deceased. This included a white female bystander who was the victim of an assault immediately after the shootings and an African who was shot some distance from Baakens Street. One other white male was killed in the shootings and the remaining deceased were Africans and Coloureds. The average age of those killed was nearly 37 years.³⁶ The *EP Herald* noted that the number and age of deceased 'Cape Coloureds' did not conform to its preconceived notion of the identity of Masabalala's followers. It stated that analysis showed them to be "generally middle aged" and "far from being the wild and irresponsible native young bloods many thought they were".³⁷ Thus, the same newspaper which had sought to argue that "most of the respectable coloured and native people held aloof from Masabalala",³⁸ now conceded that it was mistaken.

Word of the shootings caused tension amongst Port Elizabeth's white population which feared acts of retribution. A 'black peril' scare was fuelled by stories that domestic and other workers had threatened the lives of their white employers. Steps were taken to defend white suburbs and patrol those parts of the city adjacent to Korsten and New Brighton by armed ex-servicemen, in cooperation with the police. During the course of the night futile attempts at arson and sabotage were made on a petrol storage depot and power station, which only served to confirm the worst fears of whites. Sporadic gunfire also caused panic to spread amongst the black population, with the result that a considerable number fled the city. Masabalala was removed to Grahamstown in the belief that this would help defuse the situation. But police reinforcements were brought in and the Defence Force was placed on the alert. By the following Monday, calm had returned to Port Elizabeth and within a few days labourers were back at work.

The reaction of the local press was that firm and decisive police action had averted an even greater catastrophe. An *EP Herald* editorial asserted that

"had the Police not taken the extreme steps they did, Port Elizabeth would, in all probability, have had a far greater and terrible tragedy to mourn and deplore."³⁹

Similarly, the Inspector of Labour, W. Ludorf, justified police action with the words:

One fact has impressed itself indelibly upon my mind and that is unless prompt action had been taken Port Elizabeth would have been in the throes of something too awful to contemplate.. in my considered opinion the prompt action taken in firing is fully justified and quelled a very serious native revolt against constituted authority.⁴⁰

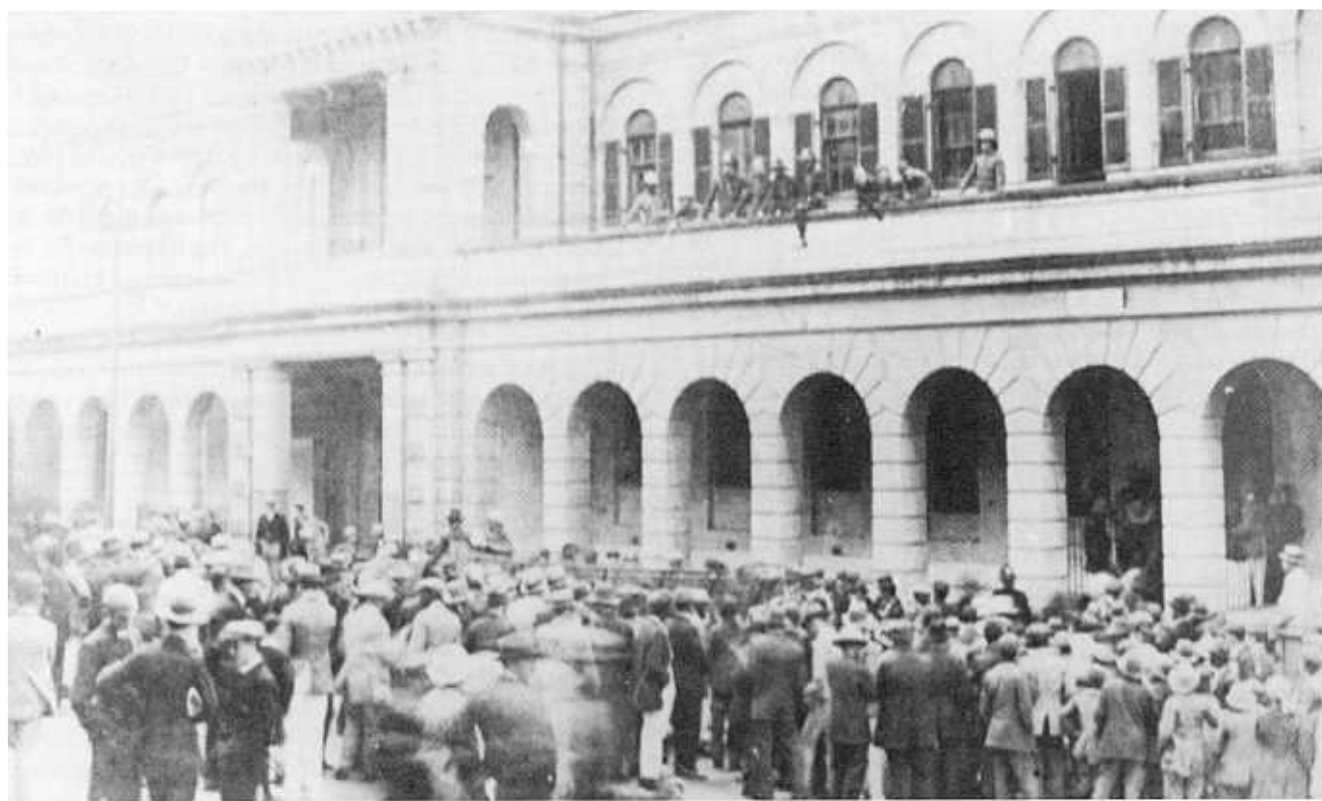
The press also dwelt disproportionately on the assault on the young woman and suggested that it was indicative of the violent intentions of the crowd.⁴¹ The act of an individual in the throes of death killing an innocent white woman was depicted as a more heinous deed than the massacre of black demonstrators and a few, unfortunate spectators. The *Herald* was able to report three days after the shootings that it had 'proof' that the first shots were fired from the crowd and that, by implication, the police had only acted in self-defence. This prefigured the evidence of certain police witnesses to the Commission of Enquiry [see below] who sought to justify firing on the crowd without orders to do so.

However, the Schweizer Commission came to see the handling of the situation by the police and the consequences of the shootings in a very different light to white public opinion.

The Controversy and Consequences of the Schweizer Commission's Findings

There was considerable public representation for the Government to appoint a Commission of Enquiry to undertake a thorough investigation into the Port Elizabeth disturbances. The Secretary for Justice, however, argued that the holding of an inquest into the deaths was adequate to meet its obligations to the public.⁴² He also argued that if a wage settlement was arrived at between black workers and employers in Port Elizabeth, the appointment of a commission would be unnecessary.⁴³ Once it had been decided to appoint a commission, there was some debate in Government circles whether it should concern itself solely with the shootings, or whether it should also investigate the socio-economic conditions of Port Elizabeth's black population. The Secretary for Justice considered the latter question a separate matter for the Native Affairs Department (NAD).⁴⁴ But the Commission's terms of reference included both the causes of the disturbances and "the general economic conditions as they affect the native and coloured population", a brief which would have satisfied the NAD rather more than the Department of Justice.

The composition of the Commission would have done little to mollify the Department of Justice either. It was to be chaired by Senator C.A. Schweizer, an attorney and farmer from Burghersdorp, and previously South African Party MP for Aliwal. The Commission included the Lovedale educationist and member of the standing Native Affairs Commission, Dr A.W. Roberts, and the leader of the African Peoples' Organisation and spokesman of the Coloured elite, Dr Abdullah Abdurahman.⁴⁵ Both Schweizer and Roberts were traditional Cape liberals who found themselves increasingly at odds with the direction of Government policy towards Africans.⁴⁶ And Abdurahman was the first black person to be appointed to sit on a Commission of Enquiry. Wickins reckons that the composition of the Commission was a ploy to engender support for the forthcoming (March 1921) Elections, especially amongst the potentially significant black voters in certain marginal Cape constituencies.⁴⁷ If this was the case, then it was soon to be negated by the Smuts Government's ambivalent response to its findings.



*The Scene outside the Baakens Street Police Station during the early afternoon of 23 October 1923
(SAP Museum Archives, Pretoria).*

The Commissioners' virtually unanimous report was submitted to the Prime Minister's office in January 1921. Whilst it condemned "the ... behaviour of the natives in assembling in force before the Police Station with the avowed determination of forcibly effecting the release of Masabalala in defiance of law and order",⁴⁸ it did not consider the behaviour of the demonstrators as a ready-

made recipe for violence. The thrust of the Commission's findings was that Captain Halse, as senior police officer on duty, should be censured for a sequence of poor judgment calls. It argued that he had acted unwisely in peremptorily declining to release Masabalala on bail.⁴⁹ Halse was also criticised for not issuing clear instructions to the armed volunteers as to police drill in dealing with



The Shootings: A Section of the Crowd in Flight (SAP Museum Archives)

the dispersal of crowds, nor placing a police officer in charge of the balcony in order to ensure disciplined conduct.⁵⁰ It was the unrestrained firing by the vigilantes, in contravention of the Standing Orders of the SAP, for which the Commission reserved its strongest indictment. It concluded that:

all the firing which took place after the mob broke away was directed against fugitives; that it was unnecessary, indiscriminate, and it was moreover brutal in its callousness, resulting in a terrible toll of killed and wounded without any reason or justification.⁵¹

Halse might have been able to avert the shootings had he handled the situation differently and, therefore, bore much of the responsibility for the tragic loss of life.

Meanwhile, the Report was tabled by the Minister of Native Affairs, F.S. Malan, soon after the commencement of the new Parliamentary session. It was subsequently referred to the Select Committee for Native Affairs.⁵² Captain Halse and other policemen involved in the disturbances, including Magistrate Stidolph, were afforded another opportunity to defend their conduct. Their response to the Commission's report was solicited⁵³ and at the insistence of the Minister of Justice, these statements were published together with the Commission's original report (with consecutive pagination), and tabled in Parliament three months later.⁵⁴ In allowing this, the Government implicitly accorded the views of witnesses equal status with those of the Commissioners and impugned their credibility. The Commissioners, in turn, responded with a letter to Acting Prime Minister, F.S. Malan, in which they condemned the Government's

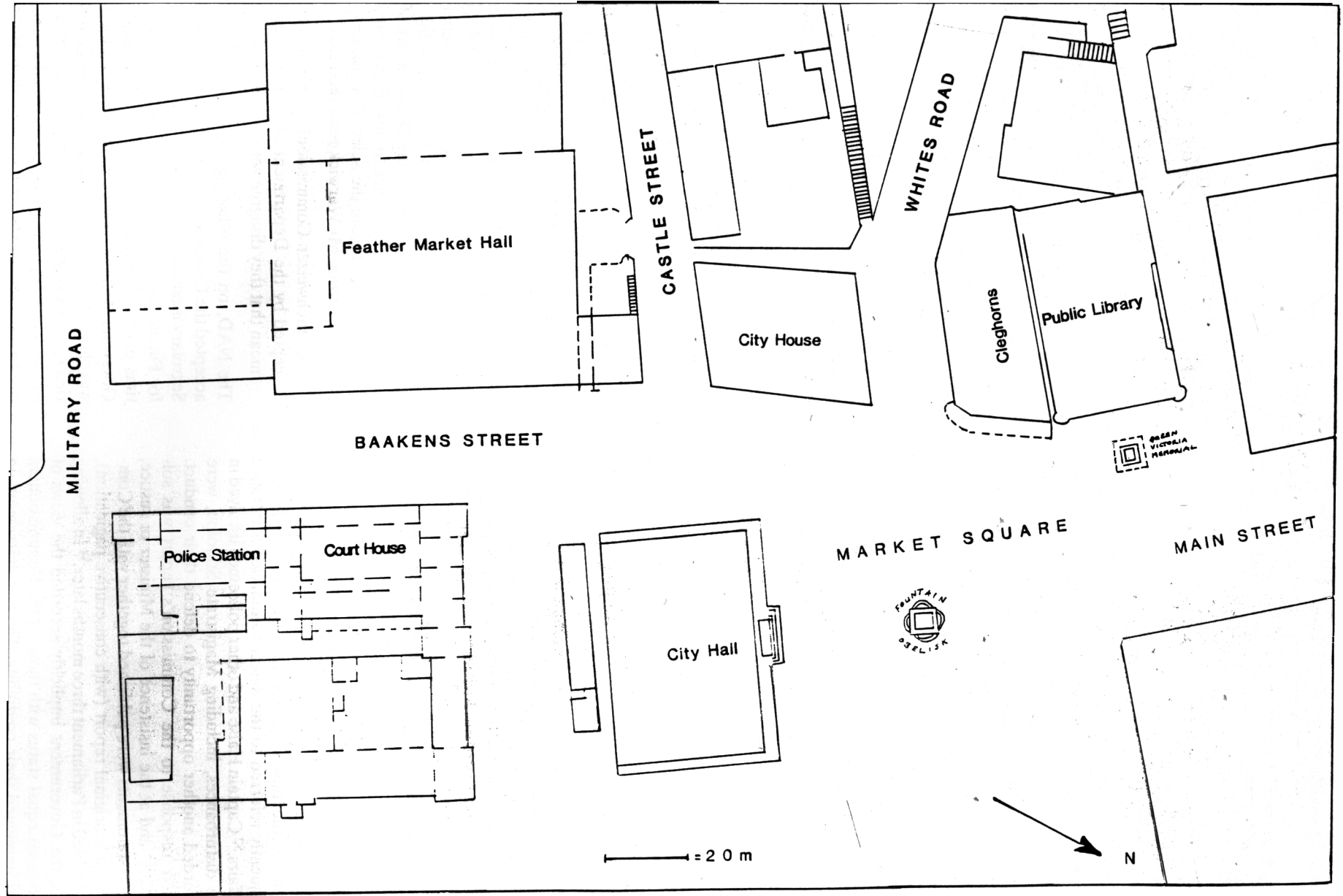
breach of faith and defended their own integrity. For as they put it, this "extraordinary proceeding ... cannot be otherwise construed than as a reflection upon the impartiality of the members of the Commission".⁵⁵ The attempt to absolve the SAP from culpability for the shootings was also given considerable support in certain sections of the press which seemed intent on discrediting the Commission and 'whitewashing' its findings.

The publication of the Commission's Report not only prompted justifications of the actions of the SAP, but also led to mutual recriminations between state departments. The Government's equivocal response to the Report reflected a conflict between the Departments of Justice and Native Affairs. Evidence to this effect is provided by statements made before the Select Committee of Native Affairs. A certain Mr Warwick remarked that:

The [Schweizer Commission] Report is not accepted by the Department of Justice. By that I mean that they disagree with a great deal of it.⁵⁶

The NAD, on the other hand, would appear to have accepted the Commission's findings if the opinion of the Secretary is anything to go by. In a letter to the Secretary for Finance about the question of compensation to victims of the shootings, he expressed the view that the Government should accept liability because the shooting was "largely unnecessary, was unauthorised and was carried out with weapons placed in the hands of the killers by the Government".⁵⁷ Unlike the position adopted by the Department of Justice, this statement amounted to an unambiguous admission of the culpability of the state for the shootings.

STREET PLAN OF AREA SURROUNDING BAAKENS STREET POLICE STATION



Wickins holds that Smuts cannot be held accountable for the Port Elizabeth shootings,⁵⁸ although he offers no explanation as to how he arrived at this conclusion. Bloch, on the other hand, has asserted that the Port Elizabeth shootings should be seen as a case of the Smuts Government utilising the repressive apparatus of the state in order to suppress popular protest.⁵⁹ According to this view, the police, army and courts are instruments of state power which are used to defend the capitalist system. But even if the actions of the police and vigilantes were calculated acts of repression and intimidation by the state, it does not necessarily follow that they coincided with the interests of the local state. It could also be argued that the direct responsibility of the Smuts Government was limited by virtue of the autonomy of the local state. Although Mayor W.F. Savage issued statements expressing appreciation for the actions of the police in quelling the 'riot',⁶⁰ the local authority had sought a peaceful resolution of the crisis. The Mayor had used his office to facilitate wage negotiations between employers and the PEICWU. As a major employer of unskilled labour the Port Elizabeth City Council (PECC) had as much stake in the outcome of these negotiations as business. But the local state was not simply an instrument of urban capital or the locally dominant classes. Indeed, this analysis has suggested that the interests and views of the local state need to be disaggregated when examining the nature of central-local state relationships. For power relations at the local level cannot be "simply reduced or equated with those occurring at national level."⁶¹

Conclusion

Abdurahman referred to the Port Elizabeth shootings of 23 October 1920 as 'South Africa's Amritsar'.⁶² His reference to the massacre in India the previous year was probably for want of a suitable comparison. The Port Elizabeth incident, though, was not the only occasion in the country's recent past where vigilantes assisted the law-enforcement authorities to crush protest by Africans. During the Grahamstown riot of 1917, virtually the entire white population was mobilised behind the 'forces of law and order'.⁶³ Nor was the Port Elizabeth shootings to be the last occasion during Smuts's first term of office as Prime Minister when excessive force was used to suppress protest. There were to be further occasions when Herzog would be able to charge that Smuts's hands were dripping with the blood of his countrymen when Bulhoek (1921), Bondelswartz (1922) and the 'Rand Revolt' (1922) followed the Port Elizabeth shootings in quick succession.⁶⁴

At the second conference of the ICU held at Cape Town in July 1921, the delegates called upon the Smuts Government to allow workers to commemorate 23 October as a national holiday. The request went unheeded and the events of that day have all but disappeared from popular memory. In retrospect, the loss of life on that occasion might seem to pale into insignificance in the light of the staggering loss of life as a result of resistance to white minority rule since 1920. Even the recovery of 23 October by historians is unlikely to win it the status of, say, 21 March and 16 June as milestones in the liberation struggle. If anything, its significance has been negative.

For as a chapter in our history of institutionalised violence it has arguably contributed to the breakdown of the social fabric and to the endemic violence of South African society.

It was not merely the scale of the killings at Amritsar but its long-term significance for India's struggle for independence which suggest that Abdurahman's parallel was not really apt. Amritsar was a turning point for Gandhi which led to the launch of his non-cooperative movement against the British Government.⁶⁵ For Masabalala, the Port Elizabeth affair made him an instant celebrity amongst Africans but an 'enemy of the state' to the white authorities. Although the charges against him were eventually dropped – an admission that he was arrested on a 'trumped up' charge – Masabalala was never able to reclaim his pre-eminence in the PEICWU which was destined to collapse. This was partly because violent resolution of the crisis strengthened the hand of the moderates within the Union and local employers in further wage negotiations. Unlike Gandhi whose stature in India grew enormously, Masabalala's popularity waned because of his unscrupulous political opportunism.

After the alliance between Masabalala and Kadalie in 1921, the Cape Town leader sought to appropriate the sacrifices of Port Elizabeth's workers for the national movement with the remark that "with blood the ICU was set on its way to work for the amelioration of labour".⁶⁶ But with the benefit of hindsight, we know that this overstates the significance of both the Port Elizabeth disturbances and the success of the ICU in South African history.

ENDNOTES

- See, for example, E. Walker, *A History of Southern Africa* (London, 1964), p.587; D.W. Kruger, *The Making of a Nation* (Johannesburg, 1975), p.128; J. & R. Simons, *Class & Colour in South Africa 1850-1950* (London, 1983), pp. 241-2; T.R.H. Davenport, *South Africa: A Modern History* (3rd ed., Johannesburg, 1987), p.263; P. Maylam, *A History of the African People of South Africa* (Cape Town, 1986), p.160; T. Cameron & B. Spies (eds.), *An Illustrated History of South Africa* (Johannesburg, 1986), p.244.
2. M. Benson, *South Africa: The Struggle for a Birthright* (Harmondsworth, 1966) p.43; E. Roux, *Time longer than rope: The Black Man's Struggle for Freedom in South Africa* (Wisconsin, 1978) pp.156-7; P. Walshe, *The Rise of African Nationalism in South Africa* (London, 1970), pp.72,74; J. Grobler, *A Decisive Clash? A short history of black protest politics in South Africa 1875-1976* (Pretoria, 1988), p.54.
3. E. Feit, *Workers Without Weapons* (Hamden, 1965), p.16; I. Walker & B. Weinbren, *2000 Casualties: A History of the South African Labour Movement* (Johannesburg, 1961), p.279; D. Ncube, *Black Trade Unions in South Africa* (Johannesburg, 1985), p.31.
4. M.de W. Dippenaar, 'Die SA Polisie – Die geskiedenis van die 'Dun blou lyn' (Deel 1), *Lantern*, July 1985, p.40.
5. S.W. Johns, 'The Birth of Non-White Trade Unions in South Africa' *Journal of Social Studies*, 23(3), 1967, pp.181-3; 'Trade Union, Political Pressure Group or Mass Movement? The Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union of Africa' in R. Rotberg & A. Mazrui (eds.), *Protest and Power in Black Africa* (New York, 1970), pp.702-4; P. Wickins, *The Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union of Africa* (Cape Town, 1978), pp.52-57.

6. R. Bloch, 'The high cost of living: the Port Elizabeth Disturbances of October 1920', *Africa Perspective*, 19, 1981, pp.39-59.
7. 'From Populism to Unionism: the emergence and Nature of Port Elizabeth's Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union, 1918-20', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 17(4), 1991, pp.679-716. This and the present article are based on my unpublished thesis, 'The Port Elizabeth Disturbances of October 1920' (M.A., Rhodes University, 1988).
8. *The Black Man*, November 1920; Wickens, *The ICU of Africa*, p.54.
9. Central Archives, Pretoria (CeA), Native Affairs (NTS) 7657 3/332, Memo of meeting, 28.9.1920.
10. *Union of South Africa Parliamentary Papers, Report containing the views of Police Officers in connection with the Report of the {Schweizer} Commission, Ans. 582 - 1921*, pp.22-23.
11. *The Star* cited in Bloch, 'The cost of living', p.47.
12. *Imvo Zabantsundu* 26 October 1920. See my 'From Populism to Unionism', p.714 for possible identification of these 'agitators'.
13. Cape Archives Depot (CAD), PE Town Clerk's Files, 3/PEZ 3/1/1/138. p.349.
14. CeA, NTS 7657 3/332, Memo of meeting, 27.9.1920.
15. CeA, NTS 7657 3/332, Statement by H.J. Harraway, 2.10.1920.
16. *EPH* 19.11.1920, Evidence of Kettlelas at Masabalala's preparatory examination.
17. CeA, JUS 275 2/950/19, District Commandant, SAP, PE to Deputy Commissioner, Grahamstown, 4.11.1920 and Statement of Halse to Inquest, p. 35; *Port Elizabeth advertizer*, 6.11.1920.
18. For biographical information, see T.D. Mwelu Skota, *African Yearly Register, being an illustrated national biography of black folks in Africa* (Johannesburg, 1932), p.251; G. Gerhardt & T.Karis, *From Protest to Challenge*, Vol.4: *Political Profiles* (Stanford, 1977), pp.134-5; *Imvo*, 15.3.1951.
19. Wickins, *The ICU of Africa*, pp.51-52.
20. *EPH*, 15.10.1920.
21. *PEA*, 6.11.1920; CeA, JUS 276 2/950/19, Inquest Evidence, p.32.
22. *The Black Man*, Nov. 1920, Letter from Masabalala. Two other articles in the same issue criticised Rubusana in no uncertain terms. Writing in *Umteteli wa Bantu*, 2.12.1920, M.M. Maxeke described Rubusana as a 'turncoat' and compared him to Judas Iscariot for "siding with Europeans against his own people". Accounts of the incident in *Imvo*, 19.10.1920 and *Ilanga lase Natal*, 22.10.1920 were far more sympathetic of Rubusana.
23. *EPH*, 18.10.1920.
24. *EPH*, 19.10.1920.
25. *Union of South Africa Parliamentary Papers, report of the Commissioners appointed to enquire into the causes of, and occurrences at, the Native disturbances on the 23rd October 1920, and the general economic conditions as they affect the Native and Coloured population, Ans. 143 - 1921*, para.6.
26. CeA, JUS 275 2/950/19, Supt. of New Brighton Location to Actg. Magistrate, 21.10.1920.
27. CeA, JUS 275 2/950/19, Magt., PE to Sec. for Justice, 21.10.1920.
28. CeA, JUS 275 2/950/19, Comdt., SAP, PE to Deputy Commissioner, SAP, Grahamstown, 4.11.1920.
29. CeA, JUS 276 2/950/19, Inquest Statement by Halse, p.35; *PEA*, 6.11.1920.
30. *The Black Man*, Nov. 1920.
31. Walker, *A History of Southern Africa*, p.587 and Roux, *Time Longer than Rope*, p.157 who bases his account largely on S.H. Kemp, 'The Masabalala Bloody Upheaval', *Illustrated Bulletin*, May 1946. The author of this piece was chief Sanitary Inspector of Port Elizabeth at the time of the shootings and gave evidence before the Schweizer Commission. See UNISA Documentation Centre for African Studies, Microfilm Nos. 5849-53, Abdurahman Family Papers, Evidence of S.H. Kemp, 30.11.1920, pp.121-6.
32. *Ans. 143 - 1921*, para.68.
33. *The Star*, 25.10.1920 cited in Bloch, 'The cost of living', p.41.
34. *Ans. 143 - 1921*, para. 30. But cf. *An 582 - 1921*, p.13.
35. *The Black Man*, Nov. 1920; Cf. Walker, *A History of Southern Africa*, p.243.
35. CeA, JUS 276 2/950/19, Lists of Dead at Police Station and Hospital.
37. *EPH*, 14.12.1920.
38. *EPH*, 28.10.1920.
39. *EPH*, 25.10.1920.
40. CeA, JUS 2/950/19, Inspector of Labour to Chief Inspector of Labour, Pretoria, 25.10.1920.
41. See, for example, coverage in *EPH*, 25.10.1920.
42. CeA, JUS 275 2/950/19, Sec. to Minister of Justice, 27.10.1920.
43. CeA, JUS 275 2/950/19, Sec. for Justice to Magt., PE, 27.10.1920.
44. CeA, NTS 7657 3/332. Sec. for Justice to SNA, 29.10.1920.
45. For further biographical information, see *The South African Dictionary of Biography*, Vol.1, p.1 and Gerhardt & Karis, *Political Profiles*, p.1.
46. Not much biographical information is available on Schweizer, but for Robert's liberal *bona fides*, see S. Dubow, *Racial Segregation and the Origins of Apartheid in South Africa* (Basingstoke, 1989), *passim*.
47. Wickins, 'The ICU of Africa', p.162.
48. *Ans. 143 - 1921*, para. 66.
49. *Ans. 143 - 1921*, para.65.
50. *Ans. 143 - 1921*, para. 69.
51. *Ans. 143 - 1921*, para. 74.
52. *EPH* 3.6.1921.
53. CeA, JUS 2/950/19, Commissioner, SAP, Pretoria to Sec. for Justice, 13.4.1921 and return telegram of 22.4.1921.
54. CeA, NTS 7657 3/332, SNA to Schweizer, 30.6.1921.
55. This letter tabled on 5 July 1921 was published as an addendum to *Ans. 143 - 1921* and *Ans. 582 - 1921*. See *Union of South Africa, Annexure to the Votes and Proceedings of the House of Assembly, Ans. 656 - 1921*. Citation from p.1.
56. *Select Committee of N (12A - 1921)*, p.5.
57. *S.C. 12A - 1921* p.3.
58. Wickins, 'ICU of Africa', p.212.
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