

BOOK REVIEW

John Kane-Berman. *Soweto: Black Revolt, White Reaction*, Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1978. Pp. 265.

Soweto has come to characterize an aspect of South Africa's recent history which for some represents a solitary aberration of a system accommodating change; others view it as a grim portent of an even grimmer future. Soweto has become a psychological anthem; it represents some people's deepest fears while for others it is the rallying point of the future.

John Kane-Berman's book is one of the most comprehensive analyses of the events surrounding Soweto to have been published to date. The author, who is South African, a former Rhodes Scholar, and an assistant editor of South Africa's *Financial Mail*, has brought a deep understanding of South African society to focus on Soweto. The book which was published in South Africa, and is still difficult to obtain in the U.S., is written in a very dry factual manner. While this may have something to do with its prolonged availability in South Africa, there is much evidence presented in the book to show that those factors which gave rise to Soweto have not significantly changed.

The issue of the Soweto schoolchildren being compelled to study through the medium of Afrikaans is commonly offered as the spark that touched off the Soweto revolt, but it was nothing more than a spark. This reason alone doesn't explain the fact that within four months of June 16, 1976 there had been outbreaks of revolt to varying degrees in 160 black communities in South Africa. Nor does it explain how the highly politicized high school students were able to organize a series of work boycotts by Soweto's workers. It does have bearing, however, on the fact that by the end of December, 1976, more than 1,556 people had been convicted of charges arising out of the disturbances. Of that number, 434 were adults and 1,122 were juveniles (under 18 years of age).

Soweto is an acronym - derived from South-western townships - for a 33 square mile area just outside of Johannesburg consisting of 28 townships. There are an estimated 1.25 million people who live there and 52 percent are under 25 years of age; there are 170,000 school children, 34,000 of whom are in secondary school.

As a journalist in South Africa, John Kane-Berman is in a sensitive but advantageous position to view the inner-workings of this smouldering city. He has documented his analysis with a broad range of public and private materials:

reports by the Cillié and Viljoen Commissions, and the South African Institute of Race Relations which publishes an annual survey of race relations - to name only three of perhaps 100 different reports: publications such as the *Rand Daily Mail*, *Trends* (a statistical publication of the University of Stellenbosch), and *Hansards* (a publication of the South African House of Assembly containing their debates and deliberations); and, of course, the opinions of many people who were involved in the revolt, black and white.

Primarily, *Soweto: Black Revolt, White Reaction* is an intricately detailed analysis of the black perception and response to the "totality of white power" and the subsequent mechanisms of enforcement. Apartheid, the prime mechanism of enforcement, is described as "a comprehensive and technologically sophisticated system seeking continuing political and economic mastery of one race and class by another." Its central components are banning, detention without trial, interrogation without cause, compulsory fingerprinting of all Africans over 16 years old and the computerization of individual pass, influx and labor data. The degree of regulation, surveillance and control is unrivalled in Western society.

Despite this enormous apparatus of control, the white minority is clearly concerned about the future. The spectre of guerrilla infiltration from other countries has become a reality for South Africa. In June, 1978, Brigadier C.F. Zeitzman, chief of security police, estimated that 4,000 black South Africans were undergoing guerrilla training in various African countries under the auspices of the African National Congress (ANC) and the Pan-African Congress (PAC). The security chief characterized this growth in guerrilla activity as a "natural result" of the mass exodus of blacks from South Africa after June, 1976. This exodus is underscored by the fact that in June, 1978 there were only 14,379 students attending secondary schools in Soweto, compared with 34,656 in the first half of 1976. As Kane-Berman says, "the exodus of students from Soweto and other townships may turn out to greater import for South Africa's future than their activities within the townships."

Internally, the students formed the Soweto Students' Representative Council (SSRC) in the wake of the revolt and it functioned as an autonomous part of the black consciousness movement. For about a year the SSRC was the dominant civil authority in Soweto. It wielded enough power to close the "shebeens," to tell the students when to go back to school and to organize a series of work stoppages. This is important for two reasons. First, it showed that in Soweto there was a lack of fear of the state authorities and that the young people were willing to oppose them whatever the cost. As Steve Biko said in an April, 1977, interview, "lack of fear... is a very important

determinant in political action." Secondly, these activities instigated by the SSRC indicated a united perspective between the older and younger generations in Soweto.

The author pays attention to placing the causes of the Soweto uprising in the broader context of South Africa's social and political conditions. During the period 1975/76, South Africa experienced a recession which contributed to a sharp increase in African urban unemployment. In an effort to move people out of the cities to their homelands, the Department of Bantu Administration put a virtual halt on all construction of new housing, thus creating a severe shortage. In 1976, there was a backlog of 22,131 houses that had been requested, while only 441 were built.

This situation was undoubtedly influenced by a 36 per cent increase in the number of secondary school students leaving school in 1975. In 1973 the government changed the administrative structure of all townships by placing them under 22 Bantu Affairs Administration boards. It appears that the new West Rand Board was less responsive to the needs of Soweto, expressed through the nominal civic leaderships of the Urban Bantu Council, than its predecessor, the Johannesburg City Council had been. Not only was anger rising over the Afrikaans issue but the looming independence of the Transkei caused great feelings of insecurity as many township Africans contemplated the consequences this would have for them - the loss of their South African citizenship.

John Kane-Berman views black consciousness, a political-cultural force, as the single most important factor in the outbreak of civil unrest in Soweto. Its impact was accentuated by the liberation of Angola and Mozambique, and the accelerating events in Rhodesia and Namibia, and "it is likely to have contributed heavily to the spirit of determination and assertiveness so evident among younger blacks all over the country."

Paradoxically, this aspect is the most undeveloped part of the book. One is not informed in any detail of the role of black consciousness in South Africa since its origins in 1967-68, the depths of its involvement with other nationalist groups and its political position vis-a-vis other important groups and leaders. In an environment as turbulent as Soweto it becomes very important to know not only the extent of the black consciousness movement's influence, but also its perspective on political change and the future that it envisions for South Africa.

As it is defined, 'Black Consciousness' philosophy consists of three major ideas: 1) psychological liberation which would enable blacks to purge themselves of their negative self-conceptions and replace it with positive self-awareness; 2) the weaning of blacks away from depending on whites, particularly

those whites claiming to be sympathetic to their cause; and 3) the effort to unite all black people in South Africa, including Inidan and Coloured people. As with most African political organizations in South Africa, nearly all the black consciousness groups and organizations were banned on October 17, 1977, in the aftermath of the death of the movement's founder, Steve Biko. Yet its impact remains. It has fundamentally increased the level of political debate and criticism among black South Africans.

In terms of lives, Soweto was very costly. The precise total is not available but Kane-Berman arrives at a death-toll of 661, based on figures compiled by the South African Institute of Race Relations (SAIRR). Twenty-three people were said to have died in Port Elizabeth, 153 in the western Cape, and 442 in the Transvaal of which Soweto accounted for between 350 and 400. Also, there were 43 other deaths of unknown circumstances.

Soweto was an epicenter of revolt in South Africa, not a solitary incident. Just as it cannot be isolated from other occurrences of revolt in the months following June 16, 1976, it similarly cannot be isolated from the events at Sharpeville in 1960, the liberation of Mozambique and Angola in 1974, and most recently the strikes at the Ford Motor Company and General Tire in Port Elizabeth in December, 1979. The principal connection between them all is the inevitability of social, political and economic change in South Africa. John Kane-Berman makes this abundantly clear.

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