

A thin chapter in the history curriculum

For 14 of the most brutal years of the anti-apartheid struggle, young people were the target of the government, yet this is given a scant 20 minutes coverage in the classroom

Catherine Sofianos & Leah Nasson

We need to learn about apartheid, a teacher may plead with a bored class, because we don't want to repeat it; because it teaches us about human rights abuses, and the folly of judging each other according to the colour of our skin.

And with that, almost half a century (to say nothing of the ones which came before) is trivialised in a moment of didactic opportunism and professional vulnerability.

It is an apathy shared across races and classes. Children from poor township schools seem as disinclined to learn about apartheid as their privileged, middle-class counterparts.

The South African Reconciliation Barometer shows a creeping wilful amnesia over the last two decades concerning apartheid. Yes, a majority of South Africans acknowledge the injustices of apartheid, but that number declines with each passing year. Fewer white people, in particular, believe that apartheid was a crime against humanity.

Scholars seem to feel apartheid is overplayed. They know the curriculum-curated story loosely enough to provide you with a broad outline. They may mention separate benches for different races, or people not being able to go to the same beaches. More often than not, it starts with the "Grand Finale".

They've learnt about it in Grade 4 and Grade 6. Words like "democracy", "freedom", "reconciliation" and "citizenship" have been banded around in classrooms.

But in a global culture that privileges European experience, learners seem more affected by the Holocaust. This brings to mind the author Beverley Naidoo's cry in an interview as she recounts becoming conscientised about apartheid: "How do you reconcile the child who cried about Anne Frank not seeing what was going on all around me?"

As it turns out, Germany is seeing the downplaying, minimising and questioning of the history of Holocaust as the far right gains ground. The co-leader of the Alternative for Germany party described the Nazi era as a "speck of bird poop" on Germany's history.

It's inevitable that politicians want to manipulate history. But in Germany as in South Africa misrepresentation of the past is a form of violence and keeping our reckoning with the past alive is essential for the peaceful rule of law.

The philosopher Susan Neiman reckons that if Americans were more familiar with the darkest parts of the country's past, Donald Trump would not have been elected. It's no coincidence his electorate is "fuzzy on the cause of the Civil War — slavery — and even more are unaware of the decades of racial terror and oppression that followed."

The political importance of history may explain why the post-apartheid history curriculum was put together by government representatives rather than experts. Teachers, universities and professional history bodies were barely involved. Of the various school subjects offered in the national curriculum, the aims of history (and, from Grade 4-9, the social sciences) are the most explicitly linked to the post-1994 national project of active citizenship and social cohesion.

By the time they reach Grade 12, we expect our students to hold a certain degree of naive myopia when engaging with the history of the transition to democracy.

The story of the new South Africa that is taught is not dissimilar from the founding myths of European nation-states, which emerged during the 19th century. Punctuating this narrative is the view that it was a result of a few, big, mostly men that apartheid came to an end: despite the violence (or because of it,



Young lions roar: The youth played a significant role during the anti-apartheid struggle. Records show that from 1986-1989, 300 children were killed by police, 1 000 were wounded, 11 000 detained, 18 000 arrested because of protests and 173 000 held while awaiting trial. Many underwent various forms of torture. Despite this period being something schoolchildren of today could probably relate to, it barely features in history lessons.
Photos: Canon Collins Archive

depending on which side you choose), it was because of the willingness of Nelson Mandela and FW de Klerk to reach a compromise that democratic South Africa was born.

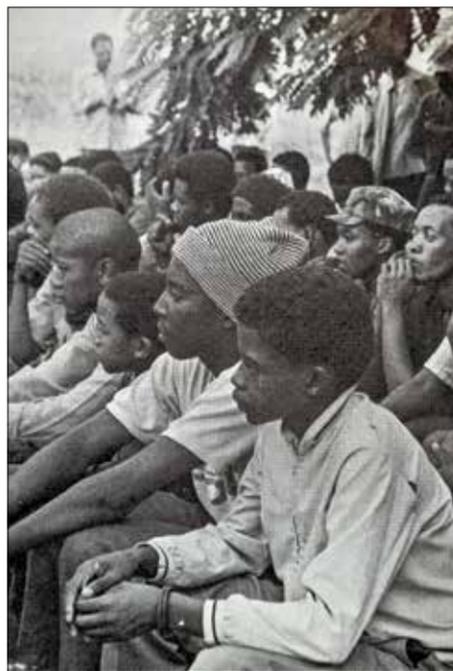
Over a quarter of a century later, there can be no shortage of learners gazing out of their classroom windows (where windows can be found), intuiting the incompleteness of this narrative.

What they are reacting against is the triumphant declaration of a transformation narrative in a barely transformed country. The transformation of South Africa was not so much a triumph as it was a negotiated surrender for both sides, and part of the surrender was what and how much would be remembered.

A Truth and Reconciliation Commission investigation found that from 1990 to 1994, the apartheid government destroyed "huge volumes of public records ... in an attempt to sanitise the official record and keep the secrets of the apartheid state buried".

But there is evidence for those years, in the International Defence and Aid Fund (IDAF) Collection, housed at the Mayibuye Centre at the University of the Western Cape.

For its wealth of information, however, the archive is wholly under-utilised. This is a



result of the politics of post-apartheid South Africa. Archive historian Geraldine Frieslaar, explains: "Liberation archives became caught within a nationalist liberation narrative that encourages selective amnesia while simultaneously venerating other aspects of the liberation struggle that fitted with a ... struggle narrative as authorized by the state."

Perhaps the problem was that by the end of that protracted battle against apartheid, the two sides of the war were beginning to resemble each other too closely — both sides had too many secrets, tendencies toward "control, dissimulation, accountability or lack thereof". Both sides seemed to have something to lose in bringing everything to the light of day.

The most easily apparent story that the IDAF's archives tell, which begins in the 1950s, was

that the period after 1976 till 1990 saw its greatest and most intense activity. This was the era of mass mobilisation. The demand for legal assistance, social welfare and information skyrocketed. It is an era that the history curriculum gives less than 20 minutes of consideration to.

In the 14 years that followed Hector Pieterse's murder, children and young people were the target of the South African government's brutal war against apartheid resistance. The IDAF archives tell the stories of these children of lesser gods — like cannon fodder before the omnipresence of evil, in all its banality, women, young people and children fought with all their might.

They fled across the borders in their thousands, many making it to the ANC's school in Tanzania and some as far as the UK. The Canon Collins Trust was formed in order to meet this need for education of young apartheid refugees. Its archives bear testimony to this thick stream of asylum seekers coming to the UK with a fire to learn, return and rebuild South Africa.

In 1986, President of the ANC, Oliver Tambo proclaimed over Radio Freedom: "The Young Lions, they must roar!" A female activist remembers, "that's when we started to roar. We have to burn the schools, we have to boycott the classes ... we have to make the world shake!"

In the three years following Tambo's call, IDAF recorded: "300 children killed by police, 1000 wounded, 11 000 detained without trial, 18 000 arrested on charges due to protest, and 173 000 held in police cells while awaiting trial. Approximately 40% of all detainees were under 18 years old." While in detention many of them were subjected to some form of physical abuse, torture and psychological torture including solitary confinement.

Children who were held or detained under the Emergency Act were not allowed to contact their parents or a lawyer. This brutality continued to 1990, when OR Tambo again addressed South African youth, "I salute you, the young lions, for unflinchingly bearing the brunt of state repression."

The media's influence was profound. Some described a situation orchestrated by anarchic youth. Other media described children as hostages of apartheid and victims of human rights abuses. None, said Mike Terry, then director of the Anti-Apartheid Movement, saw the mass mobilisation for what it was: "the decisive force for change".

For those who survived to tell the story, the violence they suffered at the hands of the police, was evidence of the significant contribution they were making in the fight against apartheid. They developed sophisticated skills to organise themselves and communicate. They recalled with pride: "Yes, we lost some of our comrades ... others, they were detained ... But we didn't stop because of that."

Perhaps one of our greatest losses in giving so little time to this period of the anti-apartheid struggle is the lesson that in the "Era of the Comrades," young people discovered the power of their social agency — that when faced with a situation of overwhelming violence they are capable of responsible, rational and violent actions themselves.

As the sutures of structural inequity in South Africa continue to fray, schools remain sites of embedded physical and symbolic violence. One could argue that the riots of 1976 marked the beginning of a long history of educational activism in South Africa that continues to this day through the work of organisations such as Equal Education and Bottomup.

South African history is just as much about broader movements as it is about the individuals who so often form the focus of the syllabus. It is about standing up to oppression and holding the government accountable for socio-economic and political ills. It is about conscientising young people to be critically engaged with the world around them on a local and a global scale.

This article was developed as part of the blog project "Troubling Power: Stories and ideas for a more just and open southern Africa", which marks the 40th anniversary of the Canon Collins Educational and Legal Assistance Trust