

PERSONAL MEMOIRS OF THE EVENTS AT STEADVILLE, 2000–2008: A SOCIO-POLITICAL EXPLORATION

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ABSTRACT

In the year 2000, Steadville (a township near Ladysmith in the province of KwaZulu-Natal) descended into chaos as two factions of the African National Congress (ANC) in the area clashed. The violence claimed more than 50 lives. More than 80 per cent of those killed were community members who were not involved in the violence. Following an investigation by the Provincial Department of Safety and Liaison in KwaZulu-Natal in 2008, a number of gang members were arrested for their involvement in the violence. The alleged gang leaders were killed in 2003 and 2005, but the violence continued after their deaths, with gang members seeking revenge. The literature and newspaper reports do not do justice to the situation that prevailed in the area for over eight years. The aim of this paper is to share personal narratives of people who were involved in the violence as well as community members whose lives were affected. There were no-go areas, scholars were unable to attend school out of fear for their own safety, and people vacated the area because the violence affected their quality of life. This study does not aim to tell all the stories of the people of Steadville. However, it hopes to encourage further research into this under-explored topic and elicit aid, so that affected people may find some form of healing and reconciliation. The qualitative research method, the oral history methodology as well as the traditional methods of historical research were employed to examine why there was such violence in Steadville, and how it started. Smaller focused samples were used, and owing to the nature of the study, the researcher relied on group discussions, texts, telephonic interviews, oral testimonies, and individual conversations.

Keywords: Steadville; violence; gangs; politics

INTRODUCTION

Steadville is a township near Ladysmith in the province of KwaZulu-Natal (KZN). As a result of scant historical information about the area, in conducting the research reported on here the researcher relied on personal testimonies of residents. The primary aim of this paper is to share personal memoirs of Steadville residents during the violence that erupted there in the year 2000 and continued for over eight years. Although this was not the first time the area had seen upheavals of this nature, the violence in this instance claimed more lives than did the violence between the African National Congress (ANC) and the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) in KZN in the early 1990s. Many residents believed that the violence that erupted in 2000 was due to unresolved issues between the two parties during the transition from apartheid to democracy in South Africa. In those years, scores of people lost their lives in what was believed to have been a battle for political power. Each side accused the other of creating no-go areas in KZN – areas controlled by one group and out of bounds to the other. The IFP alleged that by May 1995, 84 areas were no-go areas for its supporters. The ANC claimed that the entire area north of the Tugela River (the old Zululand) had become out of bounds to ANC supporters (Jeffery 1997). Jeffery argues that this violence may have been due to a number of other factors such as housing shortages and the growth of shack settlements; poor social conditions; poor economic circumstances; political factors; faction fighting, especially in the Msinga region; and ease of access to firearms (Jeffery 1997). The violence spread throughout KZN, and in Ladysmith it was most prevalent in Steadville and Ezakheni. A hostel which housed IFP members became a battle ground. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa report has revealed that Bonga Nyathi, who was an ANC supporter, was fatally shot by members of the South African Police on 12 April 1994 during conflict between ANC and IFP supporters amid allegations that ANC supporters were trying to prevent IFP hostel dwellers from attacking the Steadville community. Violence then broke out. Reasons for the attack are unknown to the researcher. Such attacks continued in the area even after the establishment of a democratic dispensation (SABC 1998). In the early years of the millennium, the local newspapers carried numerous stories of violence in Steadville between two factions of the ANC. A number of rumours did the rounds, but the township dwellers did not know the real reasons for the sudden war; it would appear that such misinformation continues to circulate. For a while, not even the police were able to stabilise the situation. The lives of innocent people were lost, people lost limbs, and young people (prospective breadwinners in their homes) were imprisoned. Other wounds may have been left unhealed, especially in the case of families who lost their loved ones, as there was no form of compensation or reparation for families and/or victims. There was no intervention by the government, and no platform to speak out about these atrocities.

CAUSES OF THE VIOLENCE

It was reported in the *Natal Witness* of 7 August 2002 that ANC factional violence, which led to a spate of assassinations and the arrest of more than 30 members on serious criminal charges, had led to the collapse of the entire leadership structures of the ANC in Northern KZN over the previous two years (Kockott and Ayoob 2002). A fact sheet released by the ANC provincial leadership revealed that some senior ANC officials were implicated in the violence in Steadville. This report, which was handled by the then chairperson of the ANC in KZN, Sibusiso Ndebele, linked some senior ANC leaders to drug trafficking, hiring hit-men, arms smuggling and collusion with senior police officials who stalled investigations of the murders (*City Press* 2002). This was also confirmed by Captain Charmain Struwig after the shooting and killing of Duma Stanford Luvuno in March 2007. Struwig stated that “Steadville flares up from time to time in an ongoing struggle between two criminal groups – the Ndawo group and the Zwane group – who have been fighting for dominance in the suburb” (IOL News 2007).

The violence was between two gangs, led by Peter Ndawo and Mangethe Zwane (Ladysmith regional chairperson of the ANC), who were killed in January 2003 and 2005 respectively (Memela 2007). Zwane was arrested on 4 February 2003 with Nomusa Mbhele and Simiso Shongwe at a house in White City, a section of Steadville, having been sought for 18 months for allegedly shooting Richard Nzimande in October 2001. Nzimande was left paralysed and ill after the shooting, and subsequently died on 25 February 2002. Shongwe was also being investigated for the murder of gang leader Peter Ndawo in January 2003. After these arrests, Superintendent Madonsela stated: “Steadville has been a flashpoint for criminal gang violence since 1999 and we are confident that the arrest of these other people will contribute enormously in stabilizing the area” (South African Government 2003).

According to an interview with Asande Fakude¹ on 15 September 2014, the conflict started when two groups of youths from Steadville, who had been drinking, were involved in a confrontation in the early hours of the morning over girlfriends and jewellery. The two sides continued to fight the next day, when they were sober. It was then that people were stabbed and one man was shot and killed. When one group sought to avenge the death of their friend, war broke out. Fakude went on to explain that this became a political battle only when politicians used the existing conflict to their advantage. When asked, most people in the area knew this story, although it may not be the truth. The interviewee mentioned that the two groups started shooting at each other, but it is not clear where they obtained their guns from.

According to another interviewee, who requested that his identity be protected (interview held on 11 September 2014), this was basically a conflict between two factions of the ANC in Steadville. Other political parties were used as a smokescreen to cover the politicians who were involved so that it would seem as though war was being waged against them. As already mentioned, these two gangs were led by the late Ndawo

1 Not the interviewee’s real name.

and Zwane and although other members of parliament were involved, these two were on the ground with the rest of the gang members.

According to Fakude, the conflict started in the late 1990s, and became particularly rife in 1998 when he was in grade 5. He was still young at the time and had not been involved; however, he was well aware of what was happening. He later became a member of the Ndawo gang, which was fighting Zwane, who was his grade 5 teacher. Over the years, the violence escalated to the point where political and financial backing was provided by political party members, some of whom held prominent positions in society. A substantial number of pupils dropped out of school, joined the conflict and took up arms.

NO-GO AREAS

Steadville is divided into five large sections, namely Rooi, New Look, Jabavu, Suburbs and White City. Rooi, White City and upper Jabavu fell under the Zwane faction, while Suburbs, New Look and lower Jabavu fell under Ndawo. It is not clear, however, how this apportionment of territory was arrived at. Geographically, Rooi is the first section one encounters on entering Steadville, followed by New Look, with Suburbs to the left. Jabavu is situated further along, followed by White City.

According to Sibonakaliso Mazibuko,² movement was greatly restricted in the location. He reported: “I almost got killed several times because we were area bound. At first, I could walk freely in Steadville until a time when a mob from White City tried to stab me because I was in their area. One time I was shot at; luckily, I didn’t get hurt. I was coming from my aunt’s house who lives in upper Jabavu. Due to this violence, we couldn’t even visit family members who lived in other areas apart from Jabavu and New Look.” Mazibuko says that growing up in the area at that time was extremely difficult. People had to dodge bullets daily; taking a minibus taxi to go to school was fraught with difficulty. Minibus taxis travelling to town pass Rooi section, and on occasion young men would have to hide under the seats to avoid being identified. Many youths had to drop out of school, while others were sent to study in Tsakane, a short distance from White City.

School grounds also proved unsafe, as young people were often attacked by members of the rival group. Lunch breaks were often spent in the principal’s office. In an interview held on 11 September 2014, Musa Khumalo explained: “I went to school in town. Waiting for a taxi was a nightmare. They would pass remarks because I was not involved, therefore I was called a traitor. People would stab each other at the taxi rank, you constantly had to look over your shoulder. Fortunately, I never got hurt.”

According to Nonkululeko Makhwasa, in an interview on 6 October 2014, life at the location was difficult for everyone, but for her family it became worse after a family member, Sabelo Makhwasa, was killed. Her family was holding the customary ritual

2 Not the interviewee’s real name.

after his death,³ and gang members from Jabavu opened fire as the family were seated outside. Makhwasa reported that the gang leader Ndawo was at the forefront. She said, “He shot at us, disregarding innocent people and the fact that the family was paying respect to the deceased.”

POLICE AND POLITICAL INTERVENTION

Interviews and newspaper articles revealed the violence to be due to political battles within the ANC. The Ndawo faction was considered to be IFP; in fact, the IFP began to infiltrate the Ndawo faction towards the end of 2004. In 2002, the National Working Committee (NWC) of the ANC instituted a probe into the murders of at least 15 of its members in the northern KZN region. According to *City Press*, reports linked at least one senior leader to drug trafficking, hiring hit-men, arms smuggling and collusion with rogue senior police officials who stalled investigations into the alleged murders in the Ladysmith region. The ANC feared that the report would cause division within the ANC, as the organisation was approaching its provincial congress in September 2002. At the time, the party was split into two main factions: one supporting Sibusiso Ndebele and the other supporting Dr Zweli Mkhize, who was MEC (member of the executive council) for Health (*City Press* 2002).

Zwane, during an interview with *City Press* in 2002, stated: “I might be killed at any time. I have been forced to abandon my family, wife and children, and I also lost my teaching job because of her and her assassins [a reference to a woman MPL (Member of Provincial Legislature) whom he alleged had put a price on his head and that of other ANC leaders in the region] (*City Press* 2002). According to Zwane, Ndebele dragged his feet in handling the situation in the Ladysmith region. When expected to deal with the issue during a meeting held with the leadership in Ladysmith, Ndebele instead requested that leaders revive the organisation in the region ahead of the party’s regional congress. “Ndebele is gambling with our lives. Look how many of my comrades are living in the caves now and our families are suffering because of that woman and her hit-men. Ndebele as a leader is failing to resolve the problem” (*City Press* 2002).

While numerous reports had been sent to both the provincial and national leadership of the ANC, no help was received by the region. Among those to lose their lives were Ladysmith Executive Committee member Sabelo Makhwasa, who was stabbed to death while in hiding in Mandeni, taxi owner Khehla Khanyile, Ntokozo Tshanini, Majikane Qwabe, Sithembiso Sibeko, Totozi Gama, Sandile Shoti Chamane and a certain Mbele. Zwane alleged that before Sibeko died, he confessed to him that he had been sent by the woman MPL to assassinate him as he was blocking her way to parliament. Zwane reported the matter to the ANC provincial leadership; nevertheless, Sibeko was killed (*City Press* 2002, 8).

3 Most Zulu families hold a ceremony, at which a goat is slaughtered, at least a month after a person has died.

The ANC NWC instructed its top members and national MPs, Magwaza Maphalala, Nathi Nhleko and Peggy Nonkonyeni, to investigate the matter in Steadville. Nhleko stated that the report would be handed over to the then National Police Commissioner, Jackie Selebi, to investigate and decide whether criminal charges could be laid against all persons implicated. Mtholaphi Mthimkhulu, who was the ANC provincial spokesperson, stated that the party would find ways to bring normality to the region and to ensure that the leaders who had fled would come back (*City Press* 2002, 8).

In 2001, an Uzi submachine gun was recovered by police at Steadville and two men, one aged 30 and the other 26, were arrested in connection with conflict within the ANC. The arrest followed the death of two men, Themba Ramollo and Xolani James Thusi, who were gunned down with AK-47 assault rifles and an Uzi submachine on 30 September 2001. The attack is believed to have been in revenge for the murder of Obed Bongani Mkhwanazi, who was fatally shot on the same day. The killings were believed to be related to ongoing violence in the area which erupted in the year 2000 between different groups aligned to the ANC (Zondi 2001). Sulani Mwelase, ANC councillor at the time, dismissed this claim, stating that these murders were purely criminal acts and the local police were to be blamed, as they were in cahoots with local criminals. Mwelase further stated that township dwellers feared for their lives, as a group of criminals involved in mandrax trafficking were being assisted by the local police. Criminals had since been dubbed *Izinkabi* – a term used for hit-men involved in taxi violence – because of their involvement in the related murders. “It is a well-known fact that these criminals received their guns and ammunition from corrupt members of the local police who have a stake in the drug trade” said Mwelase (Zondi 2001).

In 2007, the then MEC for Safety and Liaison in KZN, Bheki Cele, appointed a high-level police task team to investigate the violence in Steadville involving ANC members. This task team was headed by Senior Superintendent Simon Madonsela, who was appointed by the MEC. The team was set up to probe the deaths of all those who had been killed since 2000. According to Cele, it was confirmed that the fighting was between two factions within the ANC. The team also looked into allegations that some women in the area were harbouring criminals and also hid weapons under their skirts when police raids took place (Kockott and Ayoob 2002).

The fact sheet on the report by the ANC investigating team stated that in June 2001, a year after special police investigations into the matter were started, 30 people from both factions were arrested. This sheet did not disclose the charges members faced, who they were or what positions they held in the ANC. It did, however, give an account of the steps that the ANC aimed to take to resolve the violence. A decision was also made to disband the entire regional executive committee of the ANC in northern KZN in July 2000 and elect a new one by June 2001. The special investigation team, which was established in 2001, was withdrawn in December following successful arrests. According to Madonsela, arrests came within hours of his team setting up their office in the area (Kockott and Ayoob 2002).

A member of the Ndawo faction (who in an interview on 11 September 2014 asked not to be named) reported that in 2006 he was convinced that there was now peace in

the location. However, in his view this was a strategy to lure the group into what had previously been no-go areas so that they would be killed. He and two companions were shot at at close range one evening, and the assailants stopped firing only when they realised that he also had a gun. Although there were no deaths, people in the car were badly injured. “Often, the police or the ANC did not listen to us due to this propaganda, so we retaliated. The gang from White City had heavy ammunition because they had access to the guns which had been used during the early 1990s.”

A community spokesperson stated: “We want Cele to end this violence. We have lost faith in the police. Every night we hear gunfire. It’s going to be worse this weekend” (*Sowetan* 2007).

PERSONAL MEMOIRS

“I almost got killed twice. In the year 2000, gunshots were hailed at me, but I managed to escape unharmed. It was immensely difficult for us to live in that era because everything happened right in front of our eyes. We then fought back to defend ourselves. I had to do whatever it took to ensure that I was safe. I knew what my enemy was planning, I therefore had to protect myself; at that time, protecting myself meant I had to carry a gun with me every time, and probably fire when necessary” (Interviewee asked to remain anonymous).

Musa Khumalo said that growing up at the time was difficult because there was no freedom of movement: “I felt caged because most people I knew were involved. I went to school in town. Waiting for a taxi was a nightmare. They would pass remarks because I was not involved, therefore was called a traitor. People would stab each other at the taxi rank, you constantly had to look over your shoulder. Fortunately, I never got hurt.”

Asande Fakude reported:

“I came close to being killed several times as I was constantly shot at, harassed when going to school, being hunt down like an animal and almost at death’s door a number of times. I remember there was one incident specifically when I almost died in front of my school mates. As there was only one way in and out of the township, especially when going to town, I feared for my life each day I went to school. It was early in the morning going to school after a morning encounter with the opposition, where almost every day the opposition would shoot at us whilst people were going to work or school. I was in a taxi, which used to take us to school when they conducted a stop and go search of the people they thought were a threat to them and obviously would kill them, right on the stop with everyone watching. I was seated right at the back seat, so that they would not spot me. I was unfortunately spotted immediately and the taxi was stopped at a speed bump. These were mostly people I grew up with, most of them were actually good friends about a year ago. When one of them saw me inside a taxi, they immediately tried to open the window and took out their knives to try to stab me. The driver was also held at knife point so that he would not speed off. Fellow learners were screaming as they were terrified; in the midst of this, I managed to shout at the driver, asking him to please take off.

This was just before the guy with the gun came to the taxi. I became involved by association. My older cousin was a member of the Ndawo gang, and this meant I was automatically an enemy. In my defence, I circumstantially joined to defend myself. This became a daily job for those who were directly involved and a daily struggle to those who were affected.”

Siphokazi Madondo, whose brother was killed during the violence in Steadville, had the following to say:

"Growing up in Steadville had always been a battle of its own with the violence we grew up with, of which I don't think anybody remembers how it started. Personally, I think it started way before 2000 and by 2000 it had escalated to something that we had known to be hell. We got to eat, sleep and breathe it. Literally, getting to town for basic needs became a struggle; not knowing when the shootings might start or when they'll cut our power supplies to carry out their violent escapades.

This violence affected me, along with almost the entire community. I lost my brother Nhlakanipho "Mbijo" Madondo, one person I knew wasn't involved in the violence that almost destroyed Steadville. A soccer player, well known for his talent, everyone knew he was not involved, which is why it became so difficult for the family to understand what had happened to him. The way he passed, elaborated by the witnesses and the friends who took him out that morning, is still baffling to me and my family. His passing left me with hatred, anger and vengeance towards his killers. I never had peace in my heart after that and would wish terrible things for his killer. I would even wish to come across them so as to do harm to them as much as they hurt him, my family and I. I distanced myself from any community activities and the people of Steadville because half the blame I put on them for not doing anything and yet they'll praise my brother on how he was such a good person.

Justice did fail us. The killers got to still graze the streets of Steadville while my brother was six feet under, with the case dragging on for years. Personally, I think the police could have done a better job in investigating and asking the community for help in the matter.

Apparently there were witnesses but police chose to ignore certain aspects and the case got to be dismissed because there wasn't enough evidence.

I have healed, with time even though the wound is still there. I chose to embrace the great times we had and that alone did help with my healing. People of Steadville will and can heal with time if they are given the opportunity to do so, perhaps through speaking out and the government's involvement.

A memorial stone with the names of all the victims of this violence, may be erected. This might just help with the healing process for many in Steadville."

Sibonakaliso Mazibuko reported:

"I live in Jabavu section; although I am aware of the violence, and that this freely anywhere in Steadville especially going to my relatives outside Jabavu, but this put me in grave danger. At one time I almost got stabbed by a mob from White City and one time also shot at, point blank range while walking from my aunt's place in upper Jabavu.

Growing up in a place like that was terrible as it effected every aspect of life, especially school. Some of my close friends dropped out of school because of this violence. The moment I stepped out of the gate on my way to catch a taxi to school, I would often dodge bullets just to get in a taxi. As the taxi, on its way to town passes Rooi section, one had to hide under seats so that we wouldn't be identified. School wasn't safe either because guys from White City would come in the school grounds looking for anyone from Jabavu. The principal's office became our hiding place during lunch breaks. After school was worse as they would wait for us at the taxi rank in town. If we were lucky, they wouldn't be at the taxi rank, but we knew that they were waiting for us at the location. Three of my close friends and my cousin were killed. Although any person would want to retaliate after losing so many people, I maintained that I would not take a gun to kill."

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that more research be conducted into the reasons behind the violence in Steadville, as those responsible for it may still be walking free. A memorial stone could perhaps also be erected, as one interviewee has suggested, as a gesture of support and acknowledgement to families and the community from the government. There is fear that the violence will again erupt in Steadville, but if there is a platform for healing and reparation, the chances of this may be reduced. As residents still live in fear, law enforcement as represented by the police will also need to be strengthened, and this will renew the community's trust in the police.

CONCLUSION

Conducting this research proved difficult, as most Steadville residents were afraid to speak out owing to the nature of the violence. During Zwane's funeral in January 2005, members of the Ndawo faction, in IFP regalia, camped not too far from where the funeral service was being held. Although it is now known that the fight was within the ANC, this leaves room for further research to understand why they did this. Was it some form of retaliation? Had they now decided to join the IFP? Even when the Ladysmith municipality was governed by the IFP, Steadville remained in the hands of the ANC. This suggests the need for future research.

During this study the limited involvement of the police came to the fore, either because the two groups disregarded the police, or because the police themselves were involved in the violence. Some interviewees claimed that the police were useless, that they supplied the gangs with guns, and that they were responsible for the lack of evidence and lost police dockets.

Although at the time the study was conducted people were unwilling to speak out, if a legal structure were established for their protection, it is possible that they might speak out, and subsequently heal. Although the healing process may not be guaranteed, there would be the possibility of closure.

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