Landmarks of Resistance

AiCE Africanism & Pan-African Studies — Defiance, Sharpeville, Robben Island, Soweto

The Defiance Campaign (1952) and the Freedom Charter (1955)

The anti-apartheid struggle was as old as apartheid itself. The ANC, founded in 1912, had spent four decades petitioning, appealing, and negotiating — always peacefully, always through proper constitutional channels, always being ignored or met with new legislation. When the National Party came to power in 1948 and began systematically constructing the apartheid system, the ANC's younger generation — the Youth League, including Nelson Mandela, Oliver Tambo, and Walter Sisulu — forced the organisation toward mass action.

The Defiance Campaign of 1952 was the first mass civil disobedience campaign in South African history. Volunteers deliberately violated apartheid laws — entering whites-only waiting rooms, using whites-only entrances, ignoring curfews — and were arrested. The campaign was peaceful, disciplined, and deliberately Gandhian in its inspiration, demonstrating that mass non-violent resistance was possible and would expose the apartheid state's violent character to the world.

The Freedom Charter, adopted at the Congress of the People at Kliptown on 26 June 1955, remains the most important political document in South African history after the Constitution. Drafted through community consultation across the country, it articulated a vision of a non-racial, democratic South Africa in language that was radical for its time and remains inspiring today. Its opening declaration: 'South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white, and no government can justly claim authority unless it is based on the will of the people.'

Sharpeville, 21 March 1960: The Massacre That Changed Everything

On 21 March 1960, in the township of Sharpeville in the Transvaal, a crowd of approximately five thousand people gathered peacefully around the police station to

protest the pass laws. The protest was organised by the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), which had broken from the ANC in 1959; PAC leader Robert Sobukwe had called on Black South Africans to leave their passes at home, march to police stations, and offer themselves for arrest — a mass act of civil disobedience intended to overwhelm the pass law system.

The police opened fire, firing 705 rounds into the crowd, most from behind — into the backs of people who were running away. Sixty-nine people were killed; one hundred and eighty were wounded. International condemnation was immediate. Share prices on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange collapsed. The government declared a state of emergency, banned the ANC and PAC, and arrested thousands of activists.

Sharpeville Massacre: Key Facts
Date: 21 March 1960 — now commemorated as Human Rights Day in South Africa.
Organiser: Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) under Robert Sobukwe.
Crowd: approximately 5,000 peaceful, unarmed protesters.
Police response: 705 rounds fired into the crowd.
Dead: 69 people — most shot in the back while fleeing.
Immediate consequence: ANC and PAC banned; mass arrests; state of emergency.
Historical consequence: end of the exclusively non-violent strategy; founding of Umkhonto we Sizwe in 1961.

Sharpeville was the moment the non-violent strategy of the ANC's leadership finally ran out of road. Nelson Mandela and the ANC's executive, after long and agonising debate, concluded that non-violent resistance had exhausted its possibilities against a regime willing to shoot peaceful protesters in the back. Umkhonto we Sizwe — the Spear of the Nation — was founded in 1961. The armed struggle had begun.

Robben Island: The University of the Revolution

Robben Island — a windswept island in Table Bay, seven kilometres off Cape Town — served as a political prison from 1959 to 1991, at its peak holding hundreds of South Africa's most important political leaders: Mandela, Walter Sisulu, Govan Mbeki, Ahmed

Kathrada, Robert Sobukwe, and many others. Conditions were harsh: prisoners quarried limestone in conditions that permanently damaged Mandela's eyesight from the glare; they were denied news from the outside world and subject to arbitrary punishment.

But the prisoners of Robben Island refused to be merely victims. They turned their prison into what they called the 'University of the Revolution' — organising clandestine study groups, debating political philosophy and strategy, educating less-educated prisoners, and maintaining the organisational culture of the liberation movement while the world was told they had been silenced. Mandela earned his LLB degree by correspondence from the University of London while imprisoned. Living alongside Afrikaner warders for twenty-seven years, learning their language and culture, shaped the capacity for reconciliation without forgetting that he would bring to the negotiations of the 1990s — not something he had to intellectualise, but something he had lived.

The Soweto Uprising, 16 June 1976: The Children Who Changed History

On 16 June 1976, approximately twenty thousand students from Soweto's schools marched to protest the mandatory use of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction. They were between thirteen and twenty years old, unarmed, and met with police bullets. Hector Pieterson — thirteen years old — was among the first shot. The photograph of Hector Pieterson being carried by a fellow student, his sister Antoinette running alongside in anguish, taken by photographer Sam Nzima, became one of the defining images of the twentieth century.

The uprising was not spontaneous. It was the product of years of organisation by the South African Students' Organisation and the Black Consciousness Movement Steve Biko had built. The demand that Afrikaans be removed as a language of instruction was simultaneously a practical educational demand and a profound statement of psychological self-determination: we will not learn in the language of our oppressors. The uprising spread from Soweto across South Africa; in the following months, approximately six hundred people were killed by police, and thousands were arrested. The generation that grew up in its aftermath — the Soweto generation, including Chris Hani and Cyril Ramaphosa — had seen the state murder children, and drew the necessary conclusions.

> *"The children of Soweto did not die for Afrikaans. They died for dignity."*
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> **— Adesina Olagunju, Founder, AiCE**

Key Takeaways

Resistance to apartheid moved through distinct phases: the disciplined non-violence of the Defiance Campaign and Freedom Charter; the turn to armed struggle after the Sharpeville Massacre proved non-violence alone was not enough; the sustained intellectual and organisational resilience of Robben Island; and the youth-led Soweto Uprising that showed a generation shaped by Black Consciousness would not accept their own dehumanisation. The next lesson examines the broader liberation struggle these landmarks fed into — the ANC in exile and the global solidarity movement.