

Biography: Lungile Tabalaza
Death: 1978
In summary: Lungile Tabalaza was a black anti-apartheid student activist who died in detention in Port Elizabeth in 1978.

Lungile Tabalaza was a black student activist involved in the resistance to [apartheid](#) in [Port Elizabeth](#). He was subject to inhumane treatment at the hands of security police. Tabalaza was one of many South Africans that died while being held in custody at Port Elizabeth's Sanlam building. In 1978, police ruled his death a suicide, though evidence suggests that this ruling was false. South African security police wrongfully abused and killed Tabalaza, while using their authority to mask their atrocities.

Apartheid was by far the most prominent transgression in South Africa during the 20th century. Under the [National Party](#), South Africa's black majority was subject to legislation that treated them as inferiors, imposed harsh restrictions, and divided the country racially. This oppression was met with resistance from protestors that sought a democratic system of government that treated all individuals impartially. However, protestors were often detained by security police and forced to endure maltreatment in custody. Security police were allowed to detain individuals who were under suspicion of insurrection and hold them without indefinitely without trial. In 1986 alone, 26000 individuals were arrested and forced to suffer terrible conditions in jail.¹ Many individuals were beaten, tortured, raped, and, in the case of Tabalaza, killed.

Little information is known about Tabalaza's personal life aside from what his mother had disclosed in an interview with the [Truth and Reconciliation Commission](#). His birthplace is unknown but it is likely that he was born and raised in Port Elizabeth where he was

¹ South African Democracy Education Trust. "Port Elizabeth." In *The Road to Democracy in South Africa: 1970-1980*, 584-90. Vol. 2. Road to Democracy. Unisa Press, 2004.

arrested at the age of 20. Tabalaza had aspirations to become a doctor and was an excellent student in school. His mother described him as a quiet, reserved individual. Unbeknownst to her, Tabalaza served the anti-apartheid movement by distributing political papers.²

Civil insurrection had spread from the [Soweto](#) uprising to Port Elizabeth by July 1976. The youth in the city were the primary instigators of conflict with South African authorities. Their main methods of resistance were stoning and arson of police property. Students targeted schools, police vehicles, and municipal bottle stores. They also held demonstrations, protests, and marches. Their revolt was met with fierce opposition from police. Protests were disrupted by riot police who were prepared to neutralize and detain insurgents. Furthermore, some of these interactions proved to be fatal. Approximately 33 people died between July and September of 1976 and damages totaled R1.4 million.³

The activity of protestors surged once again shortly after news of [Steve Biko's death](#) spread in September 1977. Tension between activists and police had peaked the following month in October. In a single day, police arrested over 450 protestors and shot and killed another six.⁴ The following month, every primary and secondary school in the township went on strike. As students continued to protest and demonstrate, police responded with increasing levels of aggression.

In 1978, police charged a large number of South Africans with unrest-related offences such as arson, public violence, and destruction of property. The number of charges against individuals in Port Elizabeth had reached 1400. At the same time, deaths in detention had

² Tabalaza, P.T. Testimony to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, East London, April 17, 1996, <http://www.justice.gov.za/trc/hrvtrans%5Chrvel1/tabalaza.htm>.

³ South African Democracy Education Trust. *The Road to Democracy in South Africa: 1970-1980*, 584-590.

⁴ South African Democracy Education Trust. *The Road to Democracy in South Africa: 1970-1980*, 584-590

risen too. In the span of three years, Tabalaza became the fourth person to die in police custody at the Sanlam building in Port Elizabeth.

On July 10, 1978, Tabalaza and another man were arrested on suspicion of theft. The two men had allegedly been involved in an incident with a stolen bakery truck. Security police detained the men and placed them in custody at the Sanlam building. Tabalaza gave a statement to the magistrate and was held in an officer's room on the fifth floor. Shortly thereafter, officers entered the room and found it to be vacant. Tabalaza's body was found outside the Sanlam building later the same day. Police released a statement that the death was a suicide and that Tabalaza had jumped out of an unbarred window under his own will.⁵

Some of the same interrogators involved in the detention and death of famed activist Stephen Biko interrogated Tabalaza. Both individuals were held in custody by the same police force in the same building. Biko had died 10 months earlier due to head injuries inflicted by police.⁶

Detention in South Africa was epitomized by blatant malevolence and cruelty. Security police often detained individuals without trial under the [Terrorism Act](#) to quell anti-apartheid protestors. According to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, a majority of detainees claimed that they experienced harsh physical abuse at the hands of security police.⁷ Individuals were subject to electric shocks, suffocation, among other harmful torture

⁵ "Fleshing out the skeletal facts of SA's dark and troubled past," *Sunday Times*, April 5, 2015, accessed November 20, 2017, <https://www.pressreader.com/south-africa/sunday-times/20150405/282312498582325>.

⁶ Barbara Slavin, Michael Wright, "The World," *New York Times*, July 23, 1978, 3.

⁷ Padraig O'Malley, "Torture and Death in Custody," O'Malley Archive, accessed November 20, 2017,

techniques. Steve Biko, for example, had his head rammed into the wall of the interrogation room by the security police who then manacled him to the metal grill of the door and left him there, unconscious and foaming at the mouth.⁸

Although he was in custody for less than an hour, Tabalaza was subject to a great deal of physical abuse as well. Government doctors stated that the bruises and lacerations he suffered could have been inflicted prior to his fall. Tabalaza's mother corroborated the inconsistency of injuries in a Truth and Reconciliation Commission interview by noting that his back was scarred, eyes missing, and forehead cut post-mortem.⁹ Likely, he was beaten and tortured by officers before his death, resulting in additional injuries that are not consistent with free fall damage.

Furthermore, the magistrate who took Tabalaza's statement disclosed the prisoner's explicit fear of assault by police. Tabalaza was afraid that his captors would attack him if he did not make a statement. His plea suggests that he was under extreme duress from authorities.¹⁰ Security police were unforgiving and they often manipulated individuals by threatening them with violence. The commonality of police brutality and obvious injuries indicates that Tabalaza's abuse was veritable. Police exploitation likely escalated and resulted in more severe bodily harm. This, in turn, supports the contention that Tabalaza was in fact killed by police.

<https://www.nelsonmandela.org/omalley/index.php/site/q/031v01538/041v01828/051v01993/061v02000.html>

⁸ Bill Rolston, "Police Room 619," International State Crime Initiative, accessed November 18, 2017, <http://statecrime.org/state-crime-research/police-room-619/>.

⁹ Tabalaza, P.T. Testimony to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission

¹⁰ South Africa Truth and Reconciliation Commission. *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report*, vol.3. Cape Town: Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 1999-2003.

Immediately, the South African government sought to dismiss allegations about the role of police in Tabalaza's death. Justice Minister [Jimmy Kruger](#) quickly launched an investigation into the situation to alleviate public outrage. He, however, firmly stood by the police statement that Tabalaza's death was a suicide.¹¹ He further stated that he would focus on improving suicide prevention in prison since some windows in the detainment area were not barred. Still, Kruger's response to the situation was a rather ignorant one as he failed to consider evidence that would have potentially incriminated police in Tabalaza's death. With assistance from the government, security police were essentially allowed to act without consequence.

On the other hand, a police commissioner did note that the officers handling Tabalaza did not adhere to safety policy. As a result, the three officers were disciplined through reassignment to a new police branch.¹² The forgiving nature of this punishment highlighted the negligence of the South African police force. Officers had little regulation and often operated above the law. They faced few consequences for their actions and many officers retained their jobs regardless of their conduct. Charges were rarely brought against officers and murder convictions had never been handed down.

In 1996, Tabalaza's mother urged the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to investigate the case further in order to find her son's murderer. Subsequently, the group began to conduct their investigation under Section 29 of the [Promotion of National Unity Act of 1995](#).¹³ This act allowed the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to gather testimony

¹¹ South Africa Truth and Reconciliation Commission. *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report*, vol.3.

¹² John F Burns, "South Africa Moves to Discipline Police," *New York Times*, July 22, 1978, 1.

¹³ "Fleshing out the skeletal facts of SA's dark and troubled past," *Sunday Times*.

from individuals while granting them immunity from prosecution. This clause ensured that perpetrators would not be punished for their prior crimes and, thus, more likely to provide veritable accounts of their actions. Moreover, testimony from some hearings were kept from the public to grant witnesses further protection.

The confidential nature of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's records caused uproar amongst activists. They believed that the records should be released in order to provide accountability of the abuse that South Africans had endured. Eventually, the South African History Archive fulfilled this desire by winning an 11-year old legal battle with the Department of Justice over the accessibility of the records. Subsequently, many apartheid era transcripts were released including those involving Tabalaza's elusive testimony. In his account, Tabalaza states that he was falsely charged with the theft of a bakery truck and then forced by officers to make a statement that was self-incriminating. Moreover, he claimed that another officer had forcefully gouged him in the eyes.¹⁴

Tabalaza's testimony was quite staggering as his account corroborated the suspected malpractice of security police. He had been detained unlawfully and manipulated by police into providing a false statement. The most interesting aspect of Tabalaza's narrative, however, was his mention of police brutality. The gouging of Tabalaza's eyes by security police is consistent with injuries he had suffered in the Sanlam building. His eyes were missing post-mortem.

Tabalaza's treatment by South African security police epitomized a horrific facet of apartheid policy. In South African prisons, police officers victimized revolutionaries in private while burying the truth from the public. Using this veil of deceit, officers were able

¹⁴ Fleshing out the skeletal facts of SA's dark and troubled past," *Sunday Times*.

to exploit prisoners to no end without facing consequences. Although he did not live to see equality in South Africa, Tabalaza's case helped support the struggle against apartheid. In his death, Tabalaza garnered widespread attention and support. His legacy inspired the song "Lungile Tabalaza" by Roger Lucey, which called attention to the repeated occurrences of death in detention.¹⁵ People across the world became cognizant of injustice in South Africa and began to champion the anti-apartheid movement. Ultimately, this outside pressure brought about the eventual demise of the apartheid regime.

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¹⁵ Drewett, Michael. "Exploring 'Space' in Censorship Battles: The Case of Popular Musicians in 1980s South Africa." *South African Review of Sociology* 45, no. 1 (2014): 3-26.

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