

Name: George Botha

Date of Birth: 1946

Date of Death: 15 December 1976

In summary: George Botha, a South African teacher working in Port Elizabeth during the 1976 Soweto uprisings, was detained by the Port Elizabeth Security Branch due to his political involvement in the Black Consciousness Movement, his strong relationships with his students, and his involvement in the South African Students Organisation; after he was detained, security police killed Botha, yet they claimed his death was suicide after he admitted incriminating information in interrogations.

George Botha

The age of apartheid left families with lost loved ones, often not knowing where their family members were, why they were detained, or the reason for their death. This was the case for the Botha family. George Botha, father of the family, was born in South Africa on the eve of apartheid in 1946. Throughout Botha's life, [the African National Congress](#), known as the ANC, adapted and grew, shifting its tactics as needed. The movement became more unified with the goal of ending apartheid though internal divisions existed, particularly between Communists and Africanists. The ANC's members argued about the definition of blackness and questioned if Coloureds and Indians should be allowed membership. The group advanced from their ineffective, polite appeals for the black elite to be considered South African citizens with equal rights in the 1910s. As the group transitioned from passive resistance, to a more active, militant group, membership became more risky. ANC members started actively breaking the law. 1952 marked the beginning of the Defiance Campaign, when ANC members started to defy the laws they found unjust. The South African government deemed the group to be illegal in 1960, and thus membership could land black South Africans in prison. Determined not to give up, members formed [MK](#), the military wing of the ANC. In 1961, they started undertaking acts of sabotage; it is important to note that MK soldiers were not trying to kill people. Their intent was to cause havoc, not to target specific apartheid government leaders.

George Botha was a politically active citizen. Through his job as a teacher, he appealed to the younger generation and encouraged their political activism. As the government became more restrictive through laws such as the [Suppression of Communism Act](#) in 1950, the [Terrorism Act](#) in 1967, and the [Internal Security Act](#) in 1982, the state gained more power to detain black South Africans. The apartheid state was able to use the Cold War as an excuse for their overbearing laws and not giving prisoners access to trials. In response to these laws, the government jailed and exiled several of the main opposition groups such as the African National Congress (ANC), [the Pan-African Congress](#) (PAC), and the [South African Students' Organization](#) (SASO) leaders. George Botha, a South African teacher working in Port Elizabeth during the 1976 Soweto uprisings, was detained by the Port Elizabeth Security Branch due to his political involvement in the [Black Consciousness Movement](#), his strong relationships with his students, and his involvement in SASO. After he was detained, security police killed Botha, yet they claimed his death was suicide after admitting incriminating information in interrogations.

During the last five to seven years of Botha's life, the Black Consciousness Movement, (BCM) gained popularity, especially among teenage students. These students were the second generation to suffer under apartheid. 1968 marked the official beginning of the BCM. Black Consciousness is a "liberation movement confined to the 1970s and characterized by its bold politics and intellectual production."¹ After the 1960 [Sharpeville Massacre](#), the government banned the African National Congress and the Pan-African Congress. This initially hampered the movements as they worked to rebuild underground and in exile—creating an open opportunity for a new group to arise. Under the 1960 [Unlawful Organizations Act](#), the apartheid government

¹ Leslie Anne Hadfield, *Liberation and Development: Black Consciousness Community Programs in South Africa*. East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2016. Pg 2. Accessed December 5, 2017.

banned the ANC and PAC on 8 April, 1960.² The BCM is an umbrella term used to describe several groups with the Black Consciousness mentality: a termination of white oversight.³

Students were a huge and active part of the BCM. Black students left the [National Union of South African Students](#) (NUSAS), a multiracial group dominated by whites. Irritated with the white leadership in the NUSAS, black students split off, creating the South African Students' Organisation, SASO. The group was explicitly closed to white students, but did open up to Coloured, Indian, and Black South Africans. Some members questioned the exclusion of liberal, anti-apartheid whites from the group, but overall students and adults deemed a "no whites" policy to be in line with their goal of black self-reliance. The group expanded the definition of blackness to include Indians and Coloureds. Students were the most active members.

George Botha was a teacher, and in this way, the BCM was a central group in the last few years of his life. In 1972, four years prior to Botha's death, the BCM founded the [Black People's Convention](#), the BCP, to try to expand its membership past students.⁴ They appealed to young adults, parents, and other non-students, trying to get them involved in the movement. As the group became more representative of the black South African population with members coming from many age groups, goals within the group became clear and unified. The [Soweto student](#)

² Jonas, "African National Congress Timeline 1960-1969." African National Congress. December 12, 2013. Accessed November 20, 2017. <http://www.sahistory.org.za/topic/african-national-congress-timeline-1960-1969>.

³ "The O'Malley Archives." Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) - The O'Malley Archives. Accessed November 19, 2017. <https://www.nelsonmandela.org/omalley/index.php/site/q/031v02424/041v02730/051v03188/061v03193.htm>.

⁴ Angela Thompsell, "Voice of Anti-Apartheid Movement in South Africa." The Story of South Africa's Black Consciousness Movement in the 1970s. Accessed November 19, 2017. <https://www.thoughtco.com/black-consciousness-movement-43431>.

South African Democracy Education Trust. *The Road to Democracy in South Africa*. Cape Town: Zebra Press, 2004.

[uprisings](#) marked the pinnacle of the organization of the BCM.⁵ Almost all of the students involved were members of SASO; the group has a large presence in student marches. In the aftermath of the uprisings, police forces banned, detained, and tortured BCM leaders including leading Black Consciousness intellectual [Steve Biko](#). Within two years of the formation of the Black Consciousness Movement, the apartheid government confined many leaders to the area of their home.⁶ This confinement restricted the available leadership to the group, which was the government's goal. As a BCM member, George Botha risked his safety by being politically involved, specifically with encouraging student membership.

Regardless of how discriminatory life was for black South Africans, Botha lived a full life in Port Elizabeth. Before becoming a teacher, George Botha studied at University of the Western Cape between the years of 1967 and 1969.⁷ At UWC, Botha:

*“served on the first SRC at that institution and thus became a student leader. The post-Rivonia fear and trembling kept the lid on student politics, and the fact of running for office placed Botha in an activist category. [...] While at university the security police kept an eye on him and on occasion searched his home in Port Elizabeth”.*⁸

Just like a normal man, Botha went to work each morning and came home at the end of the day to his family. According to his wife, Praleen Botha, her husband was a strong parental figure for his sons Garth and Lyle.⁹ Although they were only four and two respectively at the time of their fathers death, they knew who their father was, and he had a role in their home life. According to Mrs. Botha, the entire family loved George; he was close to his sisters and extended family as

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Fritz Klaaste, Interview of Bruce Simon, “George Botha: Gelykheid Tot Die Dood Ons Skei,” Radio Sonder Grense, 16 February 2012.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Praleen Botha, Victim Testimony to the Truth and Reconciliation Committee, East London, 10 June 1997, http://sabctrc.saha.org.za/documents/hrvtrans/east_london/55230.htm?t=%2Bbotha+%2Bgeorge&tab=hearings.

well.¹⁰ Mr. and Mrs. Botha had a strong marriage, and anyone who knew Botha claimed he was not the type to kill himself, for such an action did not match his charismatic, loving, outgoing personality.¹¹ Although his peers did not believe that he killed himself, many of them were not surprised when they heard of his death; his colleagues found him too openly resistant of the apartheid government, and because other openly ant-apartheid teachers in other cities has been detained and killed previously, his death was sadly not a shock.¹² As someone willing to fight apartheid, Botha knew the implications and punishments that could possibly be enforced due to his actions, yet he still remained an outspoken critic of apartheid.

Botha not only had strong connections with his family, but he also related well to his students at Patterson High School in Port Elizabeth.¹³ Regardless of the fact that many of his students had clashes with the police in the months prior to his death, Botha was continuously supportive of them actively sharing their voice and fighting apartheid. Many teachers who had worked at Patterson High School longer than Botha, particularly the older teachers, discouraged their students from being politically active. These teachers were more conservative and feared detainment. They believed missing class for uprisings invalidated their student's education; their traditional views of "education for liberation" was ever present in their non-supportive behavior towards their high schoolers.¹⁴ Botha, on the other hand, accepted his key role in influencing his students, as did many other young teachers. These groups of young faculty, teachers like Botha, encouraged their students to share their voices, join opposition groups, and

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Alan Wieder, (2002). "Black Teachers and the Struggle against Apartheid: Oral Histories from South Africa." *MultiCultural Review*, 11(3), 42-51.

fight apartheid; they believed that was the only way for anything to change.¹⁵ Many of these teachers played active roles in the Black Consciousness Movement, and the majority of them were labeled as ‘rebel teachers’ for their illegal persuasion and encouragement. These ‘rebel teachers,’ Botha for example, possessed the mindset of “liberation for education”, and many got in trouble for their association with their students.¹⁶ Even if the teacher did not participate in any illegal activity, they were often found guilty for their student’s actions; they could face repression. Despite this possibility, Botha did not condemn his students for their political stances.

As students and the younger generation became more involved in the ANC, the group reconsidered its tactics to fight apartheid. At the beginning of this new period in ANC identity, uprisings were unorganised and often unsuccessful. The police would quickly shut them down, and sometimes the uprisings were small enough to simply ignore.¹⁷ The Soweto uprising was unignorable. In response to a strict re-enforcement of the [Bantu Education Act](#), where the African state required secondary education to be conducted in Afrikaans, students in Soweto protested. Many teachers did not like this new law, and few were qualified to teach it.¹⁸ The new language requirements were difficult for students to learn in and faculty to teach in. Some teachers refused to teach in it, valuing their student’s education over the law. If they refused the new language, the teachers were likely to lose their job. In response to the teachers who submitted to this law, students often refused to speak and use the language in their classrooms. Principals had low tolerance for these rebellious acts and often expelled students on the spot, immediately ending

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Steve Mufson, "Soweto's 1976 Riots Still Scar South Africa." *Wall Street Journal* (New York, N.Y.), June 13, 1986.

¹⁷ H. Pohlandt-McCromick, (2000). “I-saw-a-nightmare...’: Violence and the Construction of Memory.” (Soweto, June 16, 1976) (Apartheid, South Africa, protest, language). *History And Theory*, 39(4), 23-44.

¹⁸ Alan Weider, (2002). “Black Teachers and the Struggle against Apartheid: Oral Histories from South Africa.” *MultiCultural Review*, 11(3), 42-51.

their educations. This new law and inability to resist it upset students and faculty, so students went from school to school trying to mobilize other students to protest along side them. In 1976, [Soweto](#) was the largest black township. On 16 June 1976, students went to class like it was a normal day; they started the school day at 8 am. All at once, the students from many schools left class and started marching on the streets. Although it was clear this was an anti-apartheid, anti-Bantu education protest, the group of students did not consider what they would do once they got everybody on the streets.¹⁹ They were initially non-violent. In response to the mass numbers of students in the street, the police used tear gas and fired live ammunition. A policeman shot a 13-year-old boy, [Hector Pieteron](#), and by noon, violence had broken out in the streets of the township.²⁰ To defend themselves, students and faculty members used rocks, backpacks and bricks: anything they could get their hands on.²¹ Teachers played a large role in the Soweto uprisings. A few teachers did not participate in fear of punishment by the state, but even the ones who did not actively participate found a way to help their students plan and execute. The entire city of Soweto shut down in response to the march; the busses were stopped, and many students could not make it home for the night.²² Teachers opened their doors to house students, trying to support in anyway they could.

The resistance spread from Soweto to Cape Town and Port Elizabeth. Port Elizabeth's first uprising was at a boxing tournament held at Centenary Hall in New Brighton. Teachers in Port Elizabeth, such as Mncedisi Siswana, wrote slogans from the Soweto uprisings on their

¹⁹ South African Democracy Education Trust. *The Road to Democracy in South Africa*. Cape Town: Zebra Press, 2004.

²⁰ "Soweto Uprising: How a Photo Helped End Apartheid." Time Magazine South Africa. Accessed November 20, 2017. <http://time.com/4365138/soweto-anniversary-photograph/>.

²¹ Steve Mufson, "Soweto's 1976 Riots Still Scar South Africa." *Wall Street Journal* (New York, N.Y.), June 13, 1986.

²² Ibid.

blackboards, on display for their students. In Siswana's case, he wrote Soweto slogans on his blackboard at Wazakhele High school. Immediately, the principal called the Port Elizabeth Security Police, who photographed the boards, punished Siswana, and discouraged the students from behaving like their Soweto counterparts.²³ This made the students even more upset. They started scheduling routine meetings on school grounds. During these meetings, students would sing freedom songs and record their grievances. Older, more traditional teachers, the ones who feared punishment by the apartheid government, called the Port Elizabeth Security Branch, and as one student recalled, "all hell broke loose".²⁴ Policemen tear gassed the students outside in the schoolyard. With the immediate police response, students recognized they needed to organize quickly. They organized certain days they all would stay at home instead of going to school, and they participated in a series of different meetings to try to decide on a plan. One night, 9 September 1976, 43 students stayed at the school after classes. In this meeting, they separated the school into 43 sub groups; each group was deemed to be lead by a student present at the meeting.²⁵ Throughout the next day at school, 10 September, students would, as planned, group by group, slowly leave campus, and taking different forms of transportation, all arrive at the Mayor's Garden, the center of white Port Elizabeth.²⁶ To prevent getting caught before arriving, some students planned to take busses, while others planned trains or taxis. Somehow, police were tipped off and on the morning of 10 September, those 43 students were taken into police custody before the demonstration even began.²⁷ This specific example, though not at Botha's school, demonstrates that activism in Port Elizabeth came at a high cost. Students started to

²³ South African Democracy Education Trust. *The Road to Democracy in South Africa*. Cape Town: Zebra Press, 2004.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

become more politically involved in Port Elizabeth in 1976, and as they did, more and more were detained and arrested.

During the six months after the Soweto uprisings, there were many student and faculty deaths. There is no known comprehensive list of all who were killed in Port Elizabeth, but police arrested over 2,000 black South Africans.²⁸ In 1976, 87 busses were stoned. 20 black schools, five bottle stores, and 12 shops were all attacked; a total of 34 police cars and government buildings were damaged.²⁹ After Biko's death on 12 September, Port Elizabeth's uprisings peaked, especially during the time of Biko's October funeral. In November, all 39,000 of Port Elizabeth's primary and secondary students were on strike.³⁰ As the strikes escalated, police increased brutality on the adults behind the strike: teachers. The government attacked teacher's houses, assuming they had involvement and prior knowledge on the strikes. Four teachers were detained for their involvement in support of their students. George Botha was the first death while in police custody in Port Elizabeth.³¹ Botha died on 15 December 1976, just five days after police took him into custody.

On 20 December, 1976, the apartheid government detained George Botha from his place of work. This was within six months of the Soweto uprisings, and because the uprisings spread, even in Port Elizabeth, the police forces were closely monitoring students and faculty. Botha was arrested at the school around noon with a colleague Amelia Gervel, who was released later that

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Praleen Botha, Victim Testimony to the Truth and Reconciliation Committee, East London, 10 June 1997, http://sabctrc.saha.org.za/documents/hrvtrans/east_london/55230.htm?t=%2Bbotha+%2Bgeorge&tab=hearings.

day.³² The Port Elizabeth Security Branch took Botha into an unknown police station and then to Strand Street. He was held at the Strand Street Station and other police stations without his wife or sisters having access to his location. Under a group of laws referred to as the 90 Days Laws, the apartheid government had the right to detain and question someone for 90 days without notifying his or her family. Many of these laws were renewable after 90 days, making it so the apartheid government could detain someone even longer. The state justified these laws with the fear of “communism” and the idea of terrorism; the government was permitted to accuse someone of being a communist, a probable cause of detainment, even if there was no evidence leading an officer to believe they were communist. In this form of government, there was no balance of powers. If an officer accused a citizen of being communist, their word was said to be truth, and the citizen was immediately detained for questioning.

Students recall that two or three officers came to school to arrest Botha, but the men’s names were given to Praleen years before her TRC testimony. After Botha’s death, she heard that Colonel Snyman detained her husband, but by the time of her TRC testimony, too much time had passed for Praleen to deem that name to be reliable; she worried she might be messing up the officer’s name.³³ She, in fact, was correct; Colonel Snyman participated in George Botha’s case. On the Friday George was detained, Mrs. Botha went searching around several stations trying to find him. No officers or officials were willing to help her, or even tell her where her husband was being detained.³⁴ Snyman told her that at some point during the five days of detainment, Botha was held at the Despatch police stations overnight, but was often at the station on Strand Street

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

during the day.³⁵ The apartheid government tried to cover up their often-aggressive actions with these detainees. With that goal in mind, minimal records were kept as to where the prisoners were and on what day. Given the experiences of other detainees, Botha's family members concluded that he was likely questioned and tortured during his five days in detainment. According to Botha's report of detainment, issued by the apartheid state, the police detained Botha under section 22 of the General Laws Amendment Act. The General Laws Amendment Act, No. 39 was passed in 1963, and it allowed for 90 days in isolated detention without access to a trial, for the purpose of interrogation. With this specific law, once the 90 days were up, the police department was able to renew the detainment if they claimed they had not obtained the needed information from the prisoner. Botha's records show that the officers involved in his case were Major Harold Snyman, Sergeant Rowland E. Prinsloo, and Captain Daniel Petrus Sibert.³⁶ All three of these men were involved in countless cases similar to Botha's. The next year, Snyman and Siebert were two of the four officers responsible for Steven Biko's death in 1977. In 1985, they applied for amnesty for Biko's death. In that 1985 amnesty hearing, Snyman admitted to being present with Botha died, but he:

“repeated the version of events given by police to the inquest – that Botha had ‘broken free’ and jumped down the stairwell to his death. Nobody applied for amnesty for Botha’s death.”³⁷

Five days after Botha's detainment, the Port Elizabeth Security Branch told Mrs. Botha, through the distribution of his death report, that George had killed himself. Botha died in the Sanlam Building of the Port Elizabeth Prison.³⁸ In his official death report, the apartheid state

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ South Africa Truth and Reconciliation Committee, *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report*, vol. 3. Cape Town: Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 1998.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Praleen Botha, Victim Testimony to the Truth and Reconciliation Committee, East London, 10 June 1997,

claimed that Botha gave incriminating information during questioning, and in fear of what his punishment would be, he escaped and threw himself down six flights of stairs, resulting in his death.³⁹ The pathology report contradicts this statement. The report found that Botha had found skin abrasions all over his body: upper chest, right upper arm, shoulder, and armpit. These abrasions indicated that the wounds were sustained two to six hours before Botha's claimed suicide.⁴⁰ During the inquest, the biased judge deemed that there was not enough information on the case to investigate the officers involved in Botha's death.⁴¹ Although all evidence points to the fact that Botha did not kill himself, the judge protected the apartheid government and its officers, deeming the death to be a suicide.

After father and husband George Botha died, his family continued to try and clear his name, trying to prove that he in fact did not kill himself, and rather that the apartheid police force murdered him during his imprisonment. While the apartheid government was still in power, there was not much the family could do. Family and friends knew that Botha had not killed himself, but there was not anybody in power they could speak to without possibly being detained. During the end of the apartheid era, the government realized that a blanket amnesty would not be successful. Rather than giving a blanket amnesty, pardoning every person involved in awful crimes during apartheid, or imprisoning everyone, a compromise was made: [The Truth and Reconciliation Committee](#). The TRC is a three-body system, the Human Rights Violation Committee, the Amnesty Committee, and the Reparation Committee, that allows human rights abuses to come to light without full punishment. In the system, victims, victim's families, and

http://sabctr.c.saha.org.za/documents/hrvtrans/east_london/55230.htm?t=%2Bbotha+%2Bgeorge&tab=hearings.

³⁹ "Neill Aggett (1953 - 1982), Lived for his Country, Died in Detention." *Critical Health* Volume 40c No7 (1982): 9.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

abusers could testify their cases. Praleen Botha gave her testimony of what happened to her husband, determined for justice, but none of Botha's killers applied for amnesty.

Although there was not enough evidence to imprison Botha's killers, Mrs. Botha and the rest of the Botha family still try to have his name live on. Multiple groups with the focus of honoring freedom fighters who were killed during their death and detainment have named their lectures after George Botha. In the last year, there have been two lecture series honoring George Botha. These series speak to the importance of political activism and equality. They thank and honor all the men and women who gave their lives in the fight against apartheid.

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