

Elmon Malele

Born: 1920 in [Limpopo Province](#)

Died: January 20th, 1977 in John Vorster Square, Johannesburg, South Africa

In Summary: Elmon Malele was an activist and a member of the [African National Congress](#). This work led to his arrest during the [Treason Trial](#) and during the 1961 [General Strike](#). In early 1977 police detained him under the [terrorism act](#) after a bombing; he died after sustaining a blow to the head while in custody at the John Vorster Square Prison.

Early Life

Elmon Malele was born in 1920 in Mapulaneng, which is part of the Limpopo Province in the furthest northeast reaches of the country.¹ He moved to Johannesburg in 1943, where he lived until 1957. While in Johannesburg, Malele lived in [Alexandra Township](#), a shantytown on the edges of Johannesburg. Malele was forced out of Alexandra Township and into the Moroka Emergency Camp. It is not clear when he moved exactly, but it was likely in the late 1940s due to the South African government's policy of relocating people from the shantytowns and into "emergency camps."

As black South Africans moved into the city during the period of industrialization and urbanization that, they came to a city facing a crisis. In 1946, nearly 384,628 black South Africans lived in Johannesburg, up from 229,122 in 1936.² This created a housing shortage in the townships, which were occupied by squatters and lacked many basic services. Thus, the South

¹"Struggle Heroes Honored in Soweto." City of Johannesburg . December 17, 2008. Accessed November 20, 2017.

https://joburg.org.za/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=3320&catid=136&Itemid=222.

²A.W. Stadler. "Birds in the Cornfield: Squatter Movements in Johannesburg, 1944–1947." *Journal of Southern African Studies* 6, no. 1 (Oct. & nov. 1979): 93-123. Accessed November 20, 2017. doi:10.1080/03057077908708008, page 110.

African government decided to remove many of the squatters in the townships to areas like Moroka, and they did so forcibly. This was mostly completed by 1947.³

The following year, the Reunited National Party won the [1948 South African election](#), and enacted rules that further restricted the lives of black South Africans. This came about due to fears that arose among white South Africans, especially the [Afrikaners](#), who feared that the influx of black South Africans would threaten their safety and their livelihoods. Following the election, the government set forth the laws that came to define the apartheid era in South Africa.

Not much is known about Malele from his time in Moroka until 1952, but at some point during this stretch, he became involved with the African National Congress. This occurred as the government restricted the voting rights of black South Africans, and they began to fight back against the powers that be. By the 1950s, the ANC had formed several alliances with other organizations, some of which represented the [Indians in South Africa](#), who found themselves oppressed as well in the new form of government. Together, the alliances helped spur the “[Program of Action](#),” in 1949. This called for new protests and a program of civil disobedience in order to protest the white government.⁴ The organization continued to mount protests against the government in the following years, growing its membership, culminating in a “[national day of protest](#)” in 1950. In 1952 the ANC set forth to embark on its most ambitious project yet—The [Defiance Campaign](#). Set to take place on the two-year anniversary of the National Day of Protest, this campaign called for volunteers and black South Africans to break what they considered to be “unjust laws.” Many were sent to jail after breaking said laws. But it was largely a success. The ANC saw 8,500 people take part in the campaign, and saw its membership

³ Stadler, *Birds in the Cornfield*, 101.

⁴ Nelson Mandela. *Long Walk to Freedom: the Autobiography of Nelson Mandela*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1994, 72.

increase five-fold.⁵ However, new laws were passed in 1953 that banned protest meetings, and the campaign had to be called off. Malele was an organiser in this campaign, and was one of the 80,000 people that joined the ANC during the defiance campaign. He was based out of [Soweto](#), near his home in Moroka.

A Revolutionary Leader

In the early morning hours of 5 December, 1956, the South African Police raided the homes of people whom they suspected were conspiring against the government. The police arrested 156 in all, from all over South Africa, and brought them to face trial in Johannesburg. Elmon Malele was listed as a defendant in the trial.⁶ Along with other ANC leaders like Nelson Mandela, Malele was charged with high treason in a conspiracy to overthrow the government and replace it with a communist state.⁷ Malele faced the death penalty.

The charges stemmed from a number of incidents. It was a politically-motivated trial from the start, however, as the defendants were charged for their involvement in the Defiance Campaign, the resistance to the [Sophiatown removal](#), and for involvement in [the Congress of the People](#). They were now enemies of the state, people whom the state viewed as an imminent threat to its safety. [Nelson Mandela](#) was one of the key figures arrested.

Malele and the others faced the jury for the first time on 19 December as part of a preparatory examination in which the state presented its evidence in front of a judge, and the judge decided if the state should indict the defendant. This part of the trial lasted for nearly two days. Malele was released after posting a 25-pound bail on 21 December, along with many of the other defendants at the conclusion of the hearing.

⁵ Mandela, *A Long Walk*, 73.

⁶ "The Treason Trialists, 1956." South African History Online. September 27, 2016. Accessed November 20, 2017. <http://www.sahistory.org.za/topic/treason-trialists-1956>.

⁷ Mandela, *A Long Walk*, 116.

But his name was not cleared yet. The government still had to pour upon the evidence admitted to the court as part of the preparatory stages of the examination, and that took quite a while for them to do—all of 1957, in fact. In early 1958, 61 of the accused were let go.⁸ Many, as Mandela points out, were minor figures in the ANC. Among them was Elmon Malele. After over a year of imprisonment, Malele was a free man. But he still had a burden on his back. Malele was now known to be a revolutionary, someone opposed to the apartheid state, and the powers that be were forced to keep an eye on him. It would not be his last run in with the law.

In the 1950s and the 1960s, South Africa found itself caught up in the Cold War. Forced to take sides, the country sided with Britain and its European counterparts. After all, it was a democratic state (in name), and not a communist one. In 1950, the government passed an act that banned the [Communist Party of South Africa](#), and declared promoting communism to be an offence against the state. Any group that was suspected of promoting communism or subscribing to its ideals could be banned by the state. The definition of communism was left very broad in order to give the state more power over it.⁹ The African National Congress was banned in 1960 after the [Sharpsville massacre](#) in an act known as the [Unlawful Organizations Act](#). Still, they existed in secret, knowing full well the dangers of doing so. In 1961, Malele was charged with delivering leaflets in support of the banned South African Communist Party.¹⁰ He was charged under the 1950 act. The leaflets that Malele had in his possession supported the May, 1961

⁸ Mandela, *A Long Walk*, 123.

⁹ "Suppression of Communism Act, No. 44 of 1950 approved in parliament." South African History Online. September 26, 2016. Accessed November 20, 2017.
<http://www.sahistory.org.za/dated-event/suppression-communism-act-no-44-1950-approved-parliament>.

¹⁰ "Charged with distributing communist party leaflets." *New Age* (Johannesburg), August 3, 1961. Accessed October 20, 2017.
http://www.historicalpapers.wits.ac.za/inventories/inv_pdfo/AG2887/AG2887-A8-31-003-jpeg.pdf.

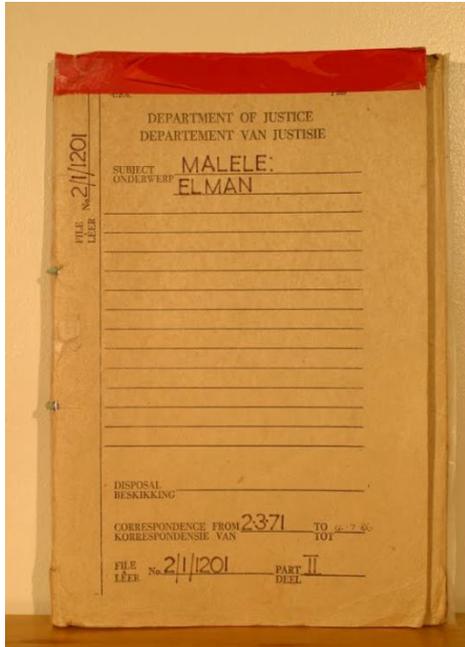
“general strike” organised by Nelson Mandela and the African National Congress. They called for people to once again protest apartheid, and the [founding of the Republic of South Africa](#) by not attending work on 29 May.¹¹ The African National Congress was pushing for a new constitution in the new government, one that they would have a say in. However, their calls went unheard, so they went on strike to protest.

Sometime around 29 May, two South African policeman watched Malele’s house in a stakeout. Malele came out of the house and grabbed a bicycle, while holding a parcel of the leaflets. The policemen approached him and Malele tried to take off on his bike, but was eventually caught by the police. Malele tried to argue that he had never opened the parcel and did not know what the leaflets said. However, the state ultimately ruled against him. Malele was sentenced to two years in jail after he was found guilty in August 1961.

The fact that two police officers were watching Malele’s residence proved that the government was keeping tabs on him. He was a wanted man, and had the arrest record to prove it. We don’t know much about him in the following decades, but starting in 1971, the South African Department of Justice started to keep a security file on him (Figure A).¹²

¹¹ Mandela, *A Long Walk*, 269.

¹² "Department of Justice Security File on Elmon Malele." Digital image. Google Arts and Culture. Accessed October 20, 2017.



[Figure A—Department of Justice security file on Elmon Malele from SAHA Collection](#)

Death

In June of 1976, as many as 20,000 black students took to the streets of Soweto to protest educational policies that mandated that classes had to be taught in Afrikaans.¹³ What started as a peaceful protest soon turned violent. Students were met by police, and ordered to disperse. They refused, and were met with tear gas. At some point, one of the policemen opened fire into the crowd, and others followed his example. An uprising started and the town began to burn. When the smoke cleared, black students lay dead in the streets. Between 100 and 700 were killed by policemen.¹⁴

Many students and young people, disillusioned with the ideas of non violence, turned to [UMkhonto we Sizwe](#), meaning spear of the nation, or MK for short. It was founded in 1961 by

¹³ "The June 16 Soweto Uprising." South African History Online. May 21, 2013. Accessed December 7, 2017. <http://www.sahistory.org.za/topic/june-16-soweto-youth-uprising>.

¹⁴ "The 1976 Soweto Uprising in South Africa." *The Huffington Post*. October 29, 2015. Accessed November 21, 2017. https://www.huffingtonpost.com/adst/the-1976-soweto-uprising_b_8416954.html.

Mandela and others as the armed wing of the African National Congress, and its members undertook bombings and other missions sight unseen. Following the [Soweto Uprising](#), it became a refuge for people who wanted to strike back at the apartheid regime.

Elmon Malele may have been one of them. In early 1977, he was arrested along with five other people after a bomb detonated at their “bomb making factory,” killing one person. All six were tried under the Terrorism Act, and were tied to another plot in which activists had tried to blow up a railway line leading between Johannesburg and Vereeniging.¹⁵ While Malele had not been at the house when the others were arrested, he was described as being the contact man who communicated on behalf of the six with the African National Congress. In addition, he was placed at the scene of the railway bombing.

He was arrested on 10 January, three days after the other five had been taken into custody.¹⁶ On 12 January, he was interrogated by Captain Arthur Cronwight in John Vorster Square. He sustained head injuries during the interrogation, and was rushed to a nursing home, where he underwent surgery before dying on 20 January.¹⁷ The next day, police officers testified that he had fainted while they were questioning him, and hit his head on a desk (figure B)¹⁸. A coroner later ruled that he died from a brain bleed, and that nobody could be held accountable for his death.¹⁹ Gashes on his head suggested otherwise.

¹⁵ Lobban, Michael. *White Mans' Justice: South African Political Trials in the Black Consciousness Era*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006, 161.

¹⁶ "Security police photograph of the office where Elmon Malele allegedly lost his balance." Digital image. Google Arts and Culture. Accessed October 20, 2017.

¹⁷ Lobban, White Mans' Justice, 161.

¹⁸ "Security police photograph of the office where Elmon Malele allegedly lost his balance." Digital image. Google Arts and Culture. Accessed October 20, 2017.
<https://www.google.com/culturalinstitute/beta/asset/security-police-photograph-of-the-office-where-elmon-malele-allegedly-lost-his-balance/AAEnxFtYOtmL7A>.

¹⁹ H.J. Simmons. *Struggles in Southern Africa for Survival and Equality*. New York: St. Martins Press, 1997.



Figure B—[The office in which Malele hit his head from the SAHA archive](#)

Reactions

Still, there were those who questioned the official conclusion. Malele was the third person since 1971 to die in custody at John Vorster Square, and the 17th person to die in custody since March of 1976.²⁰ Reactions came from all around the globe as international pressure cast a spotlight on the dealings of the South African government. His death was covered in newspapers in America, where the Associated Press juxtaposed his death alongside the comments made in parliament by the South African president that promised “adjustments” to the structure of apartheid.²¹ One year later, South Africa came under the scope of Amnesty International, who

²⁰ Gillian Antsey. "Going to Goch Street." *Sunday Time Heritage Project*. Accessed November 3, 2017. http://sthp.saha.org.za/memorial/articles/going_to_goch_street.htm.

²¹ "South Africa Promises Apartheid 'Adjustments'." *The Journal* (Odgensburg, NY), January 21, 1977. Accessed October 20, 2017. <http://nyshistoricnewspapers.org/lccn/sn84031170/1977-01-21/ed-1/seq-1/>.

called attention to the deaths in detention. Malele's name was on the list of deaths that Amnesty published.²² The foundation of apartheid had begun to crumble.

Just eleven years after Malele's death, the South African government announced that the apartheid regime was coming to an end. It could not hold up in the face of increased international pressure, in a changing world. Seventeen years after Malele died, South Africa elected a black man to run the country. Now the African National Congress is the ruling party in the country, having long since been unbanned. Black South Africans live with more freedom than they once did, but still face many challenges.

But memories of how far they have come surround them. In the neighbourhood of Soweto, where Malele once lived, there is now a park named after him. It is an appropriate way to honour his legacy, to remember a man who fought for his people, his country, and for the greater good in general.

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²² *Political Imprisonment in South Africa*. PDF. London: Amnesty International, 1978.

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