

INTERVIEWEE	James Sanders
DATE OF INTERVIEW	25 May 2007
PLACE OF INTERVIEW	Wits University



	<p>Hi, I'm James Sanders, I'm a journalist and academic and I've been writing about South Africa for the last 14 or 15 years.</p>
<p>James, can you tell us a little bit about the evolving security situation in the 1960's and how the state was responding to that?</p>	<p>Well, the odd thing about police and security power in South Africa is that it actually wasn't that strong in the 1950's. It becomes more and more dominant in a series of stages normally around particular events and certainly the security establishment remembered by people who were functioning whether in the ANC or friends of the ANC was small beer. Rather cozy policemen would come and have a chat to you and who, in retrospect, seemed quite gentle in comparison to what came later. Obviously this intensifies in the 1960's after the Sharpeville Massacre and after the armed struggle kicks in, and peculiarly intense around 1964, 1965, following the Rivonia Trial and with the station bombing. By the late 60's it's become the dominant feature of South African life for the majority of the population.</p>
<p>Can you give us a little background regarding the Security Police in that period?</p>	<p>The security police, which was in the early 60's headed by General Hendrik van der Berg, develops this offshoot of Republican Intelligence in the early 1960's, which was really his reward for catching Mandela, but meanwhile the Security Police continues to grow in dramatic numbers, but also in power and its influence and ability to intervene in people's life.</p> <p>Most dramatically the election of John Vorster in 1966, having been Minister of Justice is incredibly telling, because his supposed control of the security police and parts of the Intelligence structure are what take him to the primeministership of South Africa. And, just as 10 years later P.W. Botha becomes Prime Minister and then President off the backing of his military networks. It demonstrates the degree of power the security police it had in the 1960's that the Minister of Justice and quite unexpectedly becomes Prime Minister of South Africa following the death of Hendrik Verwoerd.</p>
<p>Are you aware of any reactions to the naming of the police station John Vorster Square?</p>	<p>No, it's a perfect example of exactly that...the degree of John Vorster's power was in the Security Police and in the Intelligence structures he'd established. It was obviously quite clumsy to name the headquarters John Vorster Square where all these appalling things happened.</p> <p>Really, it's about the intensity of that marriage of policing and politics and dominance within political structures, as well as, within the Afrikaner political structures, but also far and</p>

	<p>wide. The famous quote is Anthony Sampson's from a few years ago about coming back to South Africa in the 1970's to try and pick up the ties of all his old relationships. And, I'm not talking about heavily political people, just people who were associated with Drum writers, creative people...his big thing was the Sophiatown renaissance, but even that collapsed, because the scale of police and more particularly the scale of informers...the people who are now on the payroll you will if you are quietly having a coffee somewhere who will pass on the information that you were there, which makes life entirely unbearable.</p>
<p>That controlled situation in the late 60's and early 70's seems to unravel in the mid 1970's and on into the 80's perhaps you could talk a bit about that period?</p>	<p>Well, the police dominance unravels, because of the Soweto uprisings without a shadow of doubt. South African politicians of that period may well argue between themselves, as to whose fault the Soweto uprising was, but the people who are to blame are the police. The police are meant to know if there's going to be rioting and control it, that's why large amounts of money had been given to the police, especially the security police for that purpose. The interviews that van der Berg gave shortly after the Soweto uprisings are incredibly telling; he talks about huge Communist spectres that he can't control and the threat to the society. A police chief or intelligence chief doesn't do that; why would they do that? They obviously did that when they failed. Just as we now live with the image that terror is this gigantic that is 50 times bigger than it almost certainly is and it's consistently painted as that by the security forces and by the media. Van der Berg was caught in that trap; he had to build up his enemy, so that he could say that's why they couldn't be controlled. The absolute truth was there were tons and tons of warnings that this was going to happen in 1976, and the security police had basically been asleep...they hadn't seen it coming, they hadn't believed it was possible and they weren't ready to deal with it.</p>
<p>How effective was detention, as a weapon and how did that evolve during the period of the 60's, 70's and 80's?</p>	<p>Well, I think that certainly in the 1960's detention was an intimidation device. When there are only a limited number of people in a society that are resisting, detention is quite an effective weapon of holding people for 90-days or 180-days. It's an effective bullying tool that "encourages" people to talk or trade information in order to try and get a reduced sentence and also intimidates other people from engaging in political activity or resistance of any type. The problem with detention comes not totally in the growing embarrassment that emerges from people coming out of detention with all sorts of</p>

appalling injuries or have been murdered during detention, (being thrown out the window is something else), of which in the end there weren't that many, the numbers didn't spiral to genuine embarrassment, which would have caused trouble in the international community.

The problem really comes from the mid-70's the numbers of people engaged in politics is so much vaster. Where detaining people is a smart move, if you are talking about hundreds of opponents, with tens of thousands of them, it's useless, because it's just a club. What happens is you end up arresting hundreds of 14 year olds who can't tell you anything; anyway, they joined something that is almost imaginary. IT doesn't have serious link to the outside, it doesn't have serious links to the ANC or the PAC. Maybe their older brothers are members of the Black Consciousness Movement. But the form resistance was taking in the 1970's was destroying the very policing methods that had been so effective in holding down and crushing resistance in the mid and late 1960s. It was taking a headless form, it was not possible to pick out leaders any longer and if you did new leaders would appear very, very quickly.

The odd thing about police methods and resistance is that resistance nearly always finds a way to take a form that is un-policable; that can't be listed and controlled and locked up. All that they ended up doing with the mass detentions was politicizing more people; the brothers and sisters of people who had been detained for long periods of time or who had disappeared.

The first and most important thing that happens in the mid-70's is that in the grander system of South Africa security, the military begin to get the edge. This pushes the police into a really complicated place. Now, they're no longer the dominant force in South African security, and because of that they began to show quite weird signs. On the one hand an intelligence capacity they'd been developing since the early 1970's begins to become far more dominant in trying to do operations in intelligence terms, as opposed to political terms. With policing you go out and arrest your man or you try and build a network of informers and then be able to arrest people. Intelligence on the other hand you have sources and you try and keep your them out there, because they whisper to you what's happening which is entirely different and positively dangerous for the police to be trying to develop

	<p>and accelerating an intelligence capacity.</p> <p>Now, in the late 70's and early 80's that intelligence capacity grows exponentially within the police and becomes the dominant part of South African policing because now, no longer are they been called upon by the state to be the central voice of intelligence in South Africa. The military are calling for all the documents, they're looking to see exactly what the police are doing wrong. That doesn't mean that the military are out on the streets arresting people but the military are now calling the tune.</p> <p>So as the police wrestle to try and find solutions on the one hand they have this intelligence solution, which doesn't really work, and on the other hand, at the bottom level, there's the development of death squads, which is effectively what they're doing from the late 1970s onwards. They're drawing out certain kinds of policemen who have a particular affection for hurting people and giving them full reign. It's no shock at all that the numbers of people who die in police custody drops off in the mid 1980s at exactly the same time as the number of people who disappear starts to increase. In a weird way, without mocking it, they're really cutting out the middleman. It was getting embarrassing how many people were dying in police custody and there's a logic in saying that if we don't want these people back on the streets ever again then why take them to police headquarters at all, why not take them somewhere out there and deal with them there? I'm sure that that's the logic that started to kick in.</p>
<p>What role did torture play within police methodology and how important was it to the police?</p>	<p>It's a difficult question because whenever this whole subject is represented, whether in movies or in books, it always features a series of patterns that tell you that the police were all highly organized, working in a logical way through a headquarters, perhaps with a chief who didn't really know what was happening, but the policemen know exactly what's happening; they're funded to do a job and have places to do it and torture is there as if blessed from above by those at the very top.</p> <p>The problem is that torture is incredibly ineffective. It's the same problem that we have in the Western World now; it doesn't actually create the results that you want.</p> <p>And it's appallingly ineffective when you have mass detentions because how do you pick who</p>

	<p>to torture? It's not that easy, if you've got 3000 people held at different police stations you can't just start with No 1 and go through the list torturing people until you get to the end. Police don't have that kind of capacity in South Africa anyway. They would need islands to put people on and keep them on so that no one could see what was happening. You need a Guantanamo Bay to be able to engage in sustained long term intimidation of people's minds, which is effectively what torture is. It's an invasion of someone's head, whether through physical pain or the fear of physical pain.</p> <p>Then number of people been detained, especially from 84-86, as what was before just riots and disturbances, turns into a full-scale insurrection, no one ever fought a war by torturing those people who you kidnap or capture, you have to deal with the army that you're fighting against not with trying to squeeze tiny bits of information out of one or two individuals.</p> <p>So while torture remains a feature of the process it's not the dominant feature. There is a period in the 1960s and into the 70s when it one of the dominant features of the way South African policing works. While in the later period there are more examples of torture, that's because there are many more people being arrested but it isn't as dominant a feature. It doesn't mean that it was ordained from above or viewed as the only channel through which to get information.</p>
<p>Do we therefore have a distorted view of the South African Police Security Branch and if so where do we need to be looking for information?</p>	<p>The real problem with the security police is that they create their own distorted picture and the reason why it's distorted it's because of this strange marriage in the 80's; the strange journey that we are describing today, from an all dominant security police structure that had ears in every township to the 1980s where things change and the military come in.</p> <p>You have a sense in the 1980s of a very inchoate policing structure with an almost mystical intelligence activity going on level with plots in London, attempts to murder people in London all very strange and rather illogical and at the other level the equally strange use of killing as a method of operation which is not that productive and positively dangerous. It's what happens when you're hanging on the edge of the cliff. This sort of middle ground of getting your informants to tell you what's happening so that you can then prevent things from</p>

	<p>happening, which is the essence of policing, passes away completely. And in the end you end up with lone groups of people basically protecting themselves within a system that's long since lost control of orthodox policing, as anybody would understand it.</p>
<p>In this broader context what is the significance of John Vorster Square?</p>	<p>John Vorster Square had its dominant period during the 70's, when it was this symbolic, architectural representation of a form of terror.</p> <p>I certainly remember when I went there for the first time, which was for a book launch...one felt one was in this genuinely intimidating place that had this strange history in the very bricks, of people being pushed out of windows, extraordinarily intimidated.</p> <p>However, what's interesting about John Vorster Square is that in the 1970's it represented a centralized structure that both linked up policing, brutality and the state all at one place. It seemed to be a central focus of a particular kind of violence towards resistance whereas I think that in the 1980s that becomes much more disparate and spread out. There are appalling things happening in Port Elizabeth, there are appalling things happening two hours out of Johannesburg but they're not being brought into the heart of the city where the state and the whole structure are.</p> <p>Weirdly also; in John Vorster in the bar there're all these medals of various international police groups and you get this appalling sense that the whole international community approves of what happens there, it doesn't have to be true but it certainly feels like that. If the torturer is going down to the bar and enjoying his brandy and coke under a Metropolitan Police badge, it certainly doesn't make you feel confident about the nature of international policing and the relationships that global police have.</p>
<p>To what extent do you think the police have been able to shake this legacy, in the new South Africa they have been able to shake the legacy of the bad old days?</p>	<p>I think that's the reason that policing is in such a mess in South Africa. Policing is about a tacit relationship between the public and the state; that the public accepts the police as a viable force designed to arrest criminals, murderers, dangerous people, people who commit offences. When the law becomes ridiculous as it did under Apartheid, demanding certain things of a percentage of the population that are unnatural anywhere else on earth, eventually the law itself and policing fall into disrepute. It takes many years for them to be brought back into the mainstream. You can't just click your</p>

	<p>fingers and say, "There's a new regime now, everything's in order. You can trust your local Bobby again," it doesn't work like that. People who suffered at the hands of the police will remember that suffering for many years. It partly explains why, in South Africa, so many people don't feel the need to reach for the telephone to ask the police for assistance. It will take many years before that resolves itself.</p>
<p>How do you think that John Vorster Square, now Johannesburg Central, should be commemorated?</p>	<p>Well, I'd say it would be positively dangerous to call it after the Minister of Safety and Security. It ought to be turned into a museum. I remember when I was there on the day of the book launch; lots of people were going up in the lift to the famous window where people were thrown out. They should actually turn it into a tourist thing. That's the most humiliating thing for those policemen, is to have what they did there commemorated forever. Tourist sounds silly, it's more for students and for children to realize that actually this is what happens, it's like one of those television programs, "Policing gone wrong: the worst examples." I would commemorate the history of what happened there in exactly that way, by using the building to tell the story to say that these are the mistakes that we made in the past. Perhaps even also to host debates and seminars on how to do policing in the future, how to improve it.</p>

END OF INTERVIEW

