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The revolution will be photographed

BY

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Peter Magubane was one of South Africa's foremost resistance photojournalists, exposing the world to the cruel spectacle of the apartheid regime.

At the televised funeral service of Peter Magubane, the famed South African photojournalist who died at 91 on January 1, 2024, a number of his peers stood beside his casket to perform a cannon salute with their cameras. It was a captivating tribute to a man whose body of work sought to unravel the injustices of the apartheid regime. His images recorded the full humanity of the victims and survivors of the system, capturing them at the height of grief, revolt, tenderness, and courage.

As the cameras shuttered throughout Bryanston Methodist Church in Johannesburg, you couldn't help but reflect on how closely Magubane danced with death at the most difficult times of his career. It backdropped the events he documented so fearlessly, serving as a background character in each shot. Magubane was part of a generation that cataloged decades of protest against apartheid, illustrating the different phases of resistance and the attempts to neuter them. Not only did his work chart the development of social documentary photography in 20th-century South Africa, but also proved the importance of the form at the time. Alongside Ernest Cole, Alf Kumalo, Bob Gosani, Gopal Naransamy, and Victor Xashimba, he was part of a group of resistance photographers who provoked the world into caring about the plight of the black majority suffering at the hands of the regime.

Magubane was born on January 18, 1932, in Vrededorp, a small suburb of Johannesburg. Together with the suburb Pageview, the area was collectively known as Fietas, a place whose demographic changes would reflect the impetus to enact stricter racial legislation in the Union of South Africa, and later apartheid South Africa. He spent his childhood in the neighboring suburb of Sophiatown, a hub for black political, intellectual, and cultural life in Johannesburg. After receiving a Kodak Brownie as a gift from his father, Magubane took photos of his friends for a fee, honing his skills of observation by practicing his fledgling craft on the people he knew best. In a 2021 essay for the *Mail & Guardian*, he wrote that because there were “no places for black photographers to learn, experience, and exchange ideas,” they had to “learn on the job by watching others and teaching [themselves].”

It was the same Sophiatown that provided a wellspring of inspiration to the writers, editors, artists, and photojournalists of *Drum*, the magazine where Magubane would develop his chops as a photojournalist. Having pored over editorials in magazines like *Life*, *Time*, and *Der Spiegel*, he decided to pursue photography as a career. Speaking to *News24* in 2014, Magubane said that he first got his foot in the door as a driver for *Drum* in 1954, then as a darkroom assistant for Jürgen Schadeberg, *Drum*'s German-born chief photographer and picture editor at the time. In June 1955, he was assigned to cover the adoption of the Freedom Charter by the African National Congress (ANC) in Kliptown, Soweto, as well as the liberation movement's 44th national convention later that year.

The 1950s was the decade when the apartheid regime introduced some of its most repressive laws. The Group Areas Act saw Sophiatown razed to the ground. The Suppression of Communism Act deemed any criticism of apartheid a treasonous act. The Reservation of Separate Amenities Act legislated the racial segregation of institutions, buildings, parks, beaches, and other public facilities. And the Native Laws Amendment Act forced black men over the age of 16 to carry identity papers and permits with them at all times.

Magubane was there to chronicle the rebellion against these laws, creating one of the most comprehensive archives of the earliest struggles against apartheid. He was there to photograph the 1956 Treason Trial, where Nelson Mandela and 155 members of the Congress of the People were tried for drafting the Freedom Charter in Kliptown. He captured striking images of apartheid segregation, one of which included a young white girl sitting on the “Europeans Only” side of a bench, while her black domestic worker sat on the “Natives Only” side, fixing the back of her hair. He also covered the Women's March to Union Buildings in Pretoria, the executive capital, where more than 20,000 women of all races demonstrated against the enforcement of identity document laws (informally known as “pass laws”) to black women.

To avoid getting apprehended by the police, Magubane learned ways to hide his camera, stashing it in a loaf of bread, or carton of milk to ensure he got the shot he was looking for. But

these unconventional tricks of the trade couldn't have prepared him for the brutality of the Sharpeville Massacre in 1960, where a demonstration against pass laws organized by the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) resulted in police killing 69 people and injuring more than 300 (though in recent years these figures have been estimated to be higher).

Not only did the tragedy shock the international community into taking a more critical stance against the apartheid government, but also revealed the lengths to which the National Party was prepared to go to maintain white minority rule. One of the most haunting images Magubane took in the aftermath of the massacre shows a mass funeral with a group of mourners surrounding a long row of caskets waiting to be lowered into the ground. It was a scene that would be repeated in the forthcoming decades as the apartheid government escalated its attempts to quell the liberation struggle. The sentencing of Mandela and other ANC leaders to life imprisonment on Robben Island in 1964 was a declaration of intent by a state determined to eliminate dissent.

For Magubane, this meant more threats and obstacles to his ability to work. After leaving *Drum* in 1963 and freelancing in London, he returned to South Africa and began working for the *Rand Daily Mail* in 1966. Three years later, he was arrested for photographing a protest outside Winnie Madikizela-Mandela's home in Soweto, where she was under house arrest. In one image, Madikizela-Mandela is seen pressing her head through the burglar bars on her front gate, her face somber and fatigued, bearing the weight of harassment and abuse that she suffered at the hands of the police. Magubane would also have his share of persecution from the state. Between 1969 and 1976, he was arrested and interrogated numerous times, spent a cumulative 586 days in solitary confinement, and even received a five-year ban from photography, which he violated.

Despite these efforts to deter him from documenting the events around him, Magubane remained active, covering the Soweto Uprising in 1976. When students decided to stage a protest against the implementation of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction in black schools, he had to persuade them to be photographed, stating that "a struggle without documentation is no struggle." His camera narrated the plight of students with the insight and sensitivity of someone who understood the role of the youth in reviving the militancy of the anti-apartheid movement. In a photo taken before the police opened fire on the students, we see them marching through the streets in rebellious jubilation, elated at the prospect of breaking the rules for the right reasons. In another photo shot in the aftermath, a newspaper envelopes the lifeless body of a student who is only identifiable through a curled hand. These images exposed the brute force that sought to eliminate the threat posed by this generation and also showed the fire that had been ignited in the youth, catalyzing the eventual downfall of apartheid.

Magubane continued to chronicle the struggle against apartheid well into the 1980s which would prove to be one of the bloodiest in modern South African history. Upon the release of Mandela in 1990, he became his official photographer until the struggle icon was elected president in 1994. Five years later, Magubane was awarded the Order of Meritorious Service by the ANC government, with Mandela commending him on his “bravery and courage during the darkest years of apartheid.”

Throughout his career, Magubane produced images that commanded our attention. His work dared us to bear witness to a system of oppression that corroded every sphere of life, refusing to let us ignore the injustices meted out against the nation’s majority. Yet his work also showed the humanity of his subjects, reveling in their ordinariness, their otherworldly defiance, and their ability to find warmth, love, and community despite the relentless assaults on their dignity.

About the Author

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