

“When All Hell Broke Loose”: The Vaal Uprising Revisited

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On the 3rd of September 1984 violence erupted in the townships of the Vaal Triangle south of Johannesburg, following a protest march against rent increases, poor service delivery and an illegitimate and defunct local government. Within the first few days, four black local councillors were brutally killed by so-called mobs and dozens of people were shot dead and wounded by the police. Burning tyres, rocks and other objects were used to block the roads, hindering the police from moving around the townships. Although the frequency of violent encounters subsided after the first days, the security forces and local authorities were neither able to quell protests nor break the rent boycotts that had started on that day. The Vaal Uprising heralded the beginning of a period of sustained popular protest that spread to large parts of South Africa, prompting the authorities to send in troops, to arrest the leadership and to declare a state of emergency.

The Vaal Triangle, an area that had been viewed as politically quiescent since the infamous Sharpeville massacre of 1960, became a centre where contesting discourses around political and socio-economic rights and the means by which change should or could be achieved emerged. Based on interviews and a variety of archival records, this paper discusses the relationship between political cultures, violence and control. It argues that a dichotomous concept of resistance versus domination hides the complexity and multi-layered character of the Vaal Uprising. Instead it analyses the spatiality and temporality of the events to highlight the multiplicity of resistances, which were rooted in diverse political cultures. It therefore aims to explore how the various strategies, including the use of political violence, and goals different groups had were played out through space and time. It traces the different local narratives, subjective understandings and experiences of the events and the way different protagonists of the conflict made sense of the eruption of violence as the use of political violence in particular was heavily contested.