

The Bulhoek Massacre

the power of prophecy



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Historical Documents – Clues to a Terrible Tragedy

In this lesson plan, learners are encouraged, through their study of historical documents, to explore the reasons for a religious group risking their lives to defy Smuts's government in 1921. Learners will also be asked to think about why the Smuts government and its police used violent force against the so-called Israelites.

The Bulhoek Massacre (24 May 1921)

Enoch Mgiijima was born in 1868 as one of nine children, whose parents brought them up as Wesleyans. Whereas his brothers studied up to tertiary level, Enoch only got as far as Standard Three (Grade Five) because he suffered from terrible headaches. So, he remained at home in Ntabelanga (Mountain of the rising Sun). Here he became a landowner and hunter as well as a lay preacher in the Wesleyan Methodist Church. Later, after a vision, he left the Wesleyans to join a small church from the USA, the Church of God and Saints of Christ, which was run by black Americans. When Enoch refused to obey them concerning another vision he had, they expelled him. Enoch started his own faction of the church called the 'Israelites'.

In 1919, Enoch uttered a prophecy that was interpreted as meaning that his followers should go to his home, Ntabelanga, to wait for the Lord's coming. The Israelites decided not to leave after celebrating Passover as they usually did. By 1921, there were about 3 000 Israelites living at Ntabelanga who had come from all over the country. Some of the people who already lived in the location resented the presence of the strangers and their domestic animals. The government accused the Israelites of illegal squatting and tried to persuade them to leave. Negotiations between the government and the Israelites failed. On the 24th May 1921, the police, acting under the government's instructions, confronted the Israelites who made it clear that they would fight. Although the figures are disputed, it seems between 160 and 170 Israelites were killed when the police started shooting. 129 were wounded and 95 taken prisoner, including Enoch, who was sentenced to six years in prison. He died four years after being released.



Israelite in captivity after the Bulhoek Massacre
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The Keir River looking northwards towards Ntabelanga, 1921
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Israelites prisoners and Charlie Mgiijima with a bandaged leg
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What made so many people follow the prophet Enoch Mgiijima?

Look at what the judge said when he was sentencing Enoch and other 'ringleaders' for their role in the resistance:

'I am... sure that the real bond which bound these people (the Israelites) together under Enoch and (his brother) Charles was the crazy notion that the day was coming when the black man was to have his freedom.'

'Curtain Falls on Israelite Drama' by Special Representative, The Star, 3rd December 1921

Why did the judge think it was a 'crazy notion'? What is crazy?

Source A

Commissioner of Police, Theo Truter, writes a letter to Enoch Mgiijima and the Israelites on May 21st 1921.

To.

ENOCH MGIJIMA and ALL associated with him and styling themselves "ISRAELITES" at NTABELANGA.

YOU ARE HEREBY NOTIFIED that upon instructions of the Government, I have come to Queenstown and will arrive at Ntabelanga on Monday the 23rd instant with adequate force to carry out certain orders which are detailed hereunder namely:

1. To arrest certain men against whom warrants have been issued in order that they should be dealt with according to law.
2. To see that all unauthorized residents leave Ntabelanga and go back to where they came from.
3. To destroy all houses erected without authority.
4. On completion of these operations a Force will be left on Ntabelanga to prevent any unauthorized resident squatting there.

Every one's person and property will be respected.

YOU ARE WARNED however than any resistance to lawful authority will be drastically dealt with.

Commissioner South African Police,
Queenstown, 21st May 1921

Source B

Now read Enoch's response to Truter's letter the next day

Ntabelanga
Cape Province
22nd May 1921.

To Theo T. Truter
Commissioner,
South African Police,
Queenstown.

Sir,

Yours of the 21st instant duly to hand, I feel glad that today I am able to express myself to you, how God has sent me to his people. On the 19th April 1907, the Lord God had appeared to me by a vision. I was only a hunter of game and a sinner before God, but the God of Heaven and earth appeared to me and sent me to His people and whosoever shall hear his word, saying for you to hear the sound from the west. The Lord informed that the war will begin in 1914, and from thence there shall be no peace on earth. The Lord God also informed me from what side it shall appear when it comes in Africa. You are just on its track, as you now stand. This war is not for the kings nor the rulers of this world, but it is the war of the Lord God of Israel. I, the servant of the Lord, do inform you therefore that this war is not caused by me nor any earthly kind.

I understood that you Sir, intend to come out to Ntabelanga with an adequate force. May it therefore be known by you and all, that the armies and forces shall be ruled by God. As for myself, I am a messenger before the blood. The whole world is going to sink in the blood. I am not the causer of it but God is going to cause it.

I have been praying the Government to allow the Israelite to pray to their God. You are informing me that you are coming out with an adequate force. Do you mean that you are coming out to war against the God of Israel? If you then Sir, Mr Truter, are coming out to make war please inform me. I shall then write or say my last word before you destroy me.

Yours faithfully,
(sd) E.J. Mjijima.

Jus, Vol. 288, Ref 2/853/20, National Archives, Pretoria

Learner Activities

Discuss these questions related to Source A and Source B as a class:

- Do you think that Truter (the Commissioner of Police) and Enoch Mjijima had the same religious beliefs?
- What did Truter mean when he said that resistance would be 'drastically dealt with'?
- Was Enoch wrong to expect violence?
- Was Enoch wrong to say that from the start of the First World War (in 1914) there was no peace on earth?
- If Truter had fought in the First World War, would he have thought that God was on his side?

Now study Source C:

The Communist Party put the Bulhoek massacre into a group with other atrocities committed by the Government.

- What did the Communist Party think that all the groups attacked by the Government had in common?
- Write a dialogue between a government negotiator and Enoch Mjijima in May 1921.



Enoch Mjijima chatting to one of his followers after the shootings
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Source C

2/853/20

MURDER! MURDER!! MURDER!!!
THE BULLHOEK MASSACRE
CHRISTIANS SLAUGHTER THEIR CHRISTIAN BRETHREN
GREAT EMPIRE DAY CELEBRATION.

How appropriate and how much in keeping with the Matabele Massacre, and other of their brutal Empire building tactics. And the Bullhoek tragedy was either by fate or circumstances enacted on their very Empire Day.

We accuse the responsible Government, whose forces are headed by a brutal assassin, of murdering unarmed strikers in Johannesburg 1913,— slaughtering unarmed natives in Port Elizabeth 1920,— and their latest debauch is the gruesome mutilation of hundreds of natives who were Christians and passive community.

Hence, this brutal invasion is truly symbolical of Governmental tyranny in their hysterical efforts to exploit the workers, irrespective of their particular colour or religious beliefs, and to maintain their position functioned by an idle and parasitic class; their armies are ever available to suppress any liberarian effort from the oppressing yoke of Capitalism.

A condemnation meeting will be held on the Parade at 11 a.m. Sunday morning.

Sunday evening Adderley Street.

St. Marks Schoolroom, Tennant Street, Monday evening 30th at 7.30 p.m.

Published by the United Communist Party, 20 Plein Street, Cape Town, and printed by The Commercial Press, 64 Sir Lowry Road, Cape Town.

Published by the United Communist Party, 20 Plein Street, Cape Town

Other Ideas

Find out about other religious movements in which large numbers of followers have lost their lives.

Criteria for Assessment

- Learners will be able to provide reasons for the Israelites' resistance to government authorities.
- Learners will be able to identify the reasons for the failure of the government negotiators.

Curriculum Link – Grades 10 & 11

LO 1, AS 3 & 4

LO 2, AS 2

LO 3, AS 4

Grade 11 Content Link – How was segregation a foundation for apartheid?



This lesson has been developed by the South African History Archive (SAHA)