

Name: Wellington Mlungisi Tshazibane

Date of Birth: 1946

Date of Death: 9 December 1976

In summary: [Wellington Tshazibane](#) was from Soweto and attended both [Fort Hare](#) and Oxford University where he studied engineering. Following an explosion in a Johannesburg restaurant, police arrested Tshazibane under the Terrorism Act and brought him to the famous detention center, [John Vorster Square](#). Just two days later he was supposedly found hanging in his cell. Further examination of Tshazibane's case, testimony from others who had been arrested at John Vorster, and medical records released two decades later suggest that police forces were almost certainly responsible for hundreds of wrongful deaths of inmates.

In 1976 the *New York Times* reported that... 'Mr. Tshazibane was the 29th black detainee to die since political detentions became common in the early 1960s'.¹ This excerpt from the *New York Times* tells a story that would be alarming to the average person in today's world.

Flashback to the dark times of [apartheid](#) and such a headline seamlessly blends into the strikingly common themes of institutional racism and intense brutality. While most people are familiar with the basic attributes of the racist governmental system that was apartheid, it is safe to say that many are not familiar with the true scope and implications of said system. An entire country was governed via a set of rules that ruthlessly subjugated and oppressed the vast majority of its citizens. When one approaches a given time in history with the intent of fully comprehending it, he/she often starts with the big picture and works down to smaller details as a way to compartmentalize such a large amount of information. The following dissection of the tragic fate of Oxford-educated Wellington Tshazibane is the perfect 'smaller detail' for lending even greater context and understanding to the big picture. Wellington Tshazibane's story lends historians an insightful look into the overarching themes surrounding death in detention in South Africa.

¹ Burns, John F. "South African Black Dies While in Prison." *New York Times* (1923-Current File), December 14, 1976, 9.

Tshazibane most likely died from police brutality, and further examination raises concerns about the validity of other official autopsy reports of many other black detainees. Shrouded in mystery and uncertainty, the death of Wellington Tshazibane could very well be linked to the infamously brutal treatment at John Vorster Square as suggested by shocking testimony released decades later.

Wellington Tshazibane was originally from [Soweto](#), a black township outside Johannesburg, not far from a plethora of mining activity. Tshazibane attended the Fort Hare University, but was eventually kicked out for political activities that the government associated with Communism and the anti-apartheid movement. After receiving a scholarship from his employer, Anglo American, he traveled to Oxford in 1969 where he received an education in engineering. Tshazibane then returned to South Africa where he began working for Anglo American. Wellington worked in a mining research laboratory in Booyens, a suburb of Johannesburg, which gave him access to explosive materials and lent him the knowledge of how to use them.²

For these reasons the police targeted him following an explosion in Johannesburg. On the morning of 7 December 1976, a bomb was detonated outside a restaurant at the Carlton Centre in Johannesburg, injuring several people. Isaac Siko was the supposed accomplice and lost his right hand during the explosion. Wellington Tshazibane was believed to have trained Siko using his knowledge of explosives.³ Just two days later, police arrested Tshazibane on 9 December 1976 promptly after he got off a flight from Lesotho where he was working in a DeBeers mine.⁴ Shortly after his arrest, South African police raided both his home and the laboratory where he

² Ibid.

³ Mphaki, Ali, "Carlton Centre Bomber Kills Himself." *IOL News* (Current File). September 17, 2012.

⁴ Ibid.

worked with the other suspected accomplices. A cache of dynamite and fuses were found ‘a short distance from the mining laboratories’ where Wellington and the others worked.⁵ He was detained under the [Terrorism Act](#) that provided for ‘detention without trial’.⁶ Police forces took Tshazibane to the infamous detention center known as John Vorster Square. This cold cement building was where the majority of police brutality related deaths took place and the main detention center for political criminals in Johannesburg.⁷

Only two days after his initial arrest and at the young age of 30, the Oxford-educated engineer from Soweto was apparently found hanging in his cell. Tshazibane was ‘found dead in his cell’ on 11 December 1976. The official cause of death according the security personnel in charge of his detention at the time was death by suicide via hanging. According to the police, Wellington hung himself using ‘a strip torn off a blanket’.⁸

⁵ “A Cache of Dynamite is Found: Two South African Blacks Held.” *New York Times* (1923 – Current File). December 15, 1976, 9.

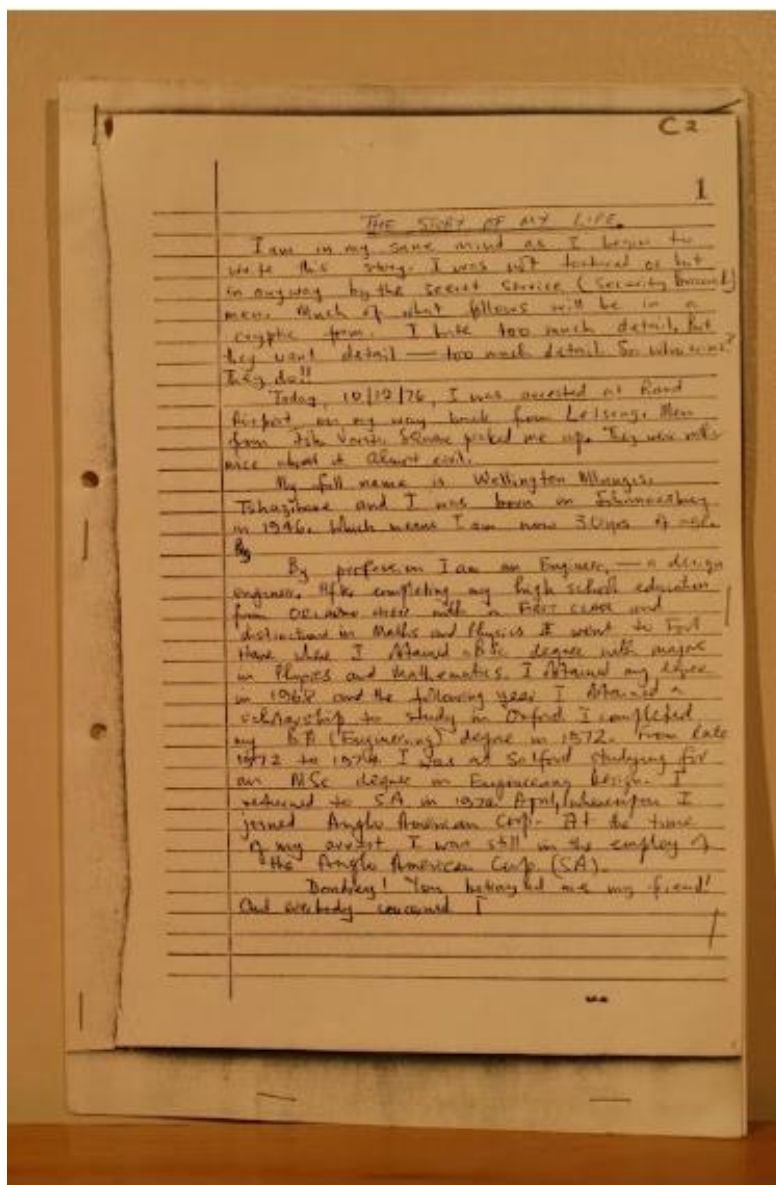
⁶ Burns, John F. “South African Black Dies While in Prison.” *New York Times* (1923-Current File), December 14, 9.

⁷ Matthews, Debora. 2007. “Detention Without Trial in John Vorster Square.” *South African History Archive* (2012), 2007.

⁸ *Ibid.*

One must start by examining the disciplinary beast that swallowed Tshazibane alive and spit him out as just another gruesome statistic, John Vorster square. The physical treatment of prisoners, living conditions, and interrogation practices used at John Vorster Square were horrific. The brutality and inhumanity of John Vorster Square was a microcosm of the apartheid regime's practices in general. One must begin with the legal aspects of Tshazibane's case in order to understand why police were actually allowed or encouraged to commit some of the atrocities that will be

discussed later on. In 1967, the apartheid government of South Africa passed what is known as the Terrorism Act of 1967. The act was designed ‘...to prohibit terroristic activities and to amend the law relating to criminal procedure’.⁹ The act goes on to define what is meant by ‘terrorist’ or ‘state’. Two aspects of this law are especially alarming and provide proof as to how much leeway and room for interpretation was evident in the prosecution of those deemed ‘criminals’ under apartheid at the time. The act provides a very broad definition of what exactly ‘terrorism’ is. The law was tailored in a manner that made any act of protest or defiance an act of terrorism. Such a broad definition gives police the ability to essentially detain anyone they want with the ability to cite the Terrorism Act. Another alarming aspect is the idea that anyone detained under this act is essentially guilty until proven innocent. This provides zero protection to the accused and the potentially innocent.



Statement given by Tshazibane (1976)

<https://www.google.com/culturalinstitute/beta/asset/>

⁹ “Terrorism Act, Act No. 83 of 1967”. *Digital Innovation South Africa* (1987). June 6, 1967.

Just hours before his death, Tshazibane gave a written statement to the police. The statement is titled ‘The Story of My Life’ and is riddled with strange sentences. Above is an image of the actual statement.¹⁰ The first sentence begins with ‘*I am in my sane mind as I begin to write this story*’.¹¹ This suggests that the police wanted him to prove that he was sane when he composed the statement to validate the document and protect the image of security police. The second sentence states ‘*I wasn’t tortured or hurt in any way by the security police*’. Not only is this statement highly unlikely, as will be demonstrated later, is also very strange to see in the beginning of a statement to police let alone a story of one’s life. This also supports the idea that the police could have easily intimidated or tortured Tshazibane into fashioning an ideal and public relations friendly statement. The statement goes on to describe his arrestors as ‘*very nice...almost civil*’.¹² The note then continues to briefly describe his background as an engineer and his education. This note appears to the audience as having been artificially crafted and implies the notion that security forces worked hard to protect their interests and manipulate public opinion. When one studies the tactics used by police at John Vorster it makes sense that they could have easily manipulated the statement described above.

The security forces at John Vorster Square were well known for their practices of torture and misleading interrogation tactics. For example, interrogators at John Vorster were taught to make the accused ‘*...understand that he/she is alone against forces great in number*’.¹³ This technique, meant to intimidate and demoralize, would help police evoke a guilty plea from a possibly innocent party. Once a guilty plea is induced, the police have free reign on how to

¹⁰ Tshazibane, Wellington. “The Story of My Life.” *Between Life and Death: Stories from John Vorster Square*. South African History Archive (2012). December 10.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Conley, Tim. "Captive Audience: Confession, Fiction, and the South African State." *ARIEL* 33, no. 3-4 (2002).

handle and prosecute said prisoner. The same report on John Vorster cites a UN release describing how the legal atmosphere helped protect police officers from being prosecuted and restricted communication between the accused and the outside world. This atmosphere ‘*created a situation wherein detailed discussion of specific violations of human rights was fruitless*’.¹⁴ This is significant because it helps explain why the police were able to get away with such mistreatment and cruelty for so long. The article goes on to explain how interrogators were imbued with a sense of being infallible and taught various methods about how to evoke a criminal confession and how to act accordingly.¹⁵ Such a report is crucial because it proves that the police were directly taught how to be manipulative and highlights the idea that they acted without regard for humanity or moral concern.

Wellington was not the only one to experience such inhumanity and the accounts of others help historians get a better idea of what conditions were really like inside John Vorster. To start, the cells where activists were held were ‘*specifically designed for solitary confinement*’. A foam mattress, a lightbulb that never turned off, a toilet, and a window with bars were all of the furnishings. Former detainee Jaki Seroke describes John Vorster Square as ‘*the pinnacle of torture chambers*’.¹⁶ Methods of torture included sleep deprivation, mental abuse, beatings with blunt objects like chairs and metal bars, dehumanizing acts, electrocution, and other horrific methods of inflicting pain and suffering.¹⁷ These testimonies and examples come from actual survivors and help paint a better picture as to what Tshazibane’s experience inside the jail was like. Characterizing and studying both the security forces and John Vorster square provides

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Matthews, Debora. 2007. “Detention Without Trial in John Vorster Square.” South African History Archive (2012), 2007.

¹⁷ Ibid.

context to interpret the evidence surrounding Tshazibane's death. It would take decades for proof to emerge that cemented the idea that the security forces at John Vorster Square were responsible for the number of deaths, including Wellington Tshazibane, that were originally attributed to accidents and suicide.

Finally, in 1992 a man by the name of [Dr. Jonathan Gluckman](#) dropped a bombshell that would help provide almost certainty that the police were responsible for the deaths of hundreds of anti-apartheid activists while they were detained. Dr. Gluckman is a world renowned pathologist and had a hand in hundreds of post-mortem examinations of activists like the famous Steve Biko. Following a police scandal in Johannesburg, Dr. Gluckman decided to add more fuel to the fire and released '*...more than 200 files of post-mortems he had performed on blacks that died during detention*'.¹⁸ Gluckman was certain that more than 90 percent of the people he examined were killed by police saying... '*this is straightforward murder by police*'.¹⁹ Gluckman's testimony helps build the case that Tshazibane most likely did not actually kill himself and was in fact a victim of police brutality. The University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg has a list of people that were included in the over 200 files that were released by Dr. Gluckman. One of the names on the list is Wellington Tshazibane.²⁰ There is no public access to the actual post-mortem report of Tshazibane at the request of his family. Regardless, historians can be certain that Tshazibane was one of the people that Gluckman examined and was most likely a victim of John Vorster Square's brutal detention system. Gluckman is a reputable source because he also did the autopsy of legendary anti-apartheid activist [Steve Biko](#)

¹⁸ Van Niekerk, Phillip. "Pathologist Reveals Deaths in Custody." *The Guardian* (1992), no. 11. (July 27, 1992).

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Gluckman, Jonathon. "Dr. Jonathon Gluckman Records. 1970-1993." Historical Papers Research Archive (2006).

and later was able to prove death by severe trauma and not hunger strike or dehydration. Gluckman revealed to authorities in the 2000s evidence that Biko's spinal fluid contained blood, a clear indicator of severe brain trauma.²¹ This is important because it establishes the credibility of Gluckman and asserts his medical track record as a knowledgeable and truthful one. What is very interesting is the idea that Anglo American LTD, the employer of Tshazibane at the time of his arrest, personally commissioned Gluckman to be the 'third party' present at the post-mortem report conducted by the apartheid state.²² At the time of Tshazibane's death, this could have been very misleading because it implied to the public that the post-mortem report of Tshazibane was objective and most likely very accurate. This is most likely far from the truth as this essay demonstrates, and history shows Anglo American as being a company that did certain things just to maintain a public image. Anglo American has a history of exploiting workers, tending carefully to its public image, collaborating with apartheid groups, and human rights abuses.²³

Supported and explained by recent testimony by Gluckman, the tragic death of Wellington Tshazibane helps provide insight into the wicked past of John Vorster Square and the apartheid regime as a whole. Tshazibane was able to attain an education at a prestigious university and worked a job that did not require brutal forced labor. This did not apparently grant any privileges as he was quickly arrested after being accused of taking part in a bombing in Johannesburg. What followed between then and the time he was apparently found dead in his cell will never be known. One can however use primary and secondary sources to make reasonable inferences. As previously established, the place where Tshazibane spent his last few

²¹ Flanagan, Jake. "Helen Zille, the Woman who Exposed a Major Apartheid-era Coverup, is Leaving South African Politics." Quartz (2015).

²² John F. Burns, "South African Black Dies While in Prison." *New York Times* (1923-Current File), December 14, 9.

²³ Ashton, Glenn. "Anglo American: Homegrown Exploitation Gone Global." South African Civil Society Information Service (2011).

hours alive, John Vorster Square, had an infamous reputation as a place where torture and murder occurred. Wellington likely met brutal torture methods, manipulating interrogations, and inhumane conditions. It would be almost 20 years until bombshell evidence of said atrocities would come to the light. In 1992, Dr. Jonathan Gluckman released the files of over 200 men he had performed post-mortems on, and on that list was Tshazibane. Gluckman was certain that the vast majority of the deaths he studied were the result of police brutality. This evidence shatters any credibility of government documents or statements at the time and provides a crucial detail that can be used when approaching the study of death in detention during apartheid.

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