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Correspondence should be addressed to:

The Administrator
New Zealand Journal of Public History
Public History Research Unit (PHRU)*
History Programme
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences *Te Tari Tumu Korero*
The University of Waikato *Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato*
Private Bag 3105
New Zealand

Or by electronic mail to: phruadmin@waikato.ac.nz

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Stories Told About Violence: Hamilton During the 1981 Springbok Tour

Nikita Prinsloo

After effortlessly ripping down the fence and manhandling cattle trucks out of their way,¹ 250 to 350 protesters stormed Hamilton's Rugby Park, throwing the 1981 Springbok tour of New Zealand into turmoil by voicing their opposition to it.² Occupying the centre of the grounds, these protesters — part of 'Operation Everest', a larger protest group of approximately 3000 people — forced the cancellation of the Springbok match against Waikato. An appeal was made to the group to leave the field when pro-tour supporters burst through the fence, led by a woman brandishing an umbrella who attacked the protesters.³

The crowd in the centre of the field was chanting, 'The whole world is watching.' The protest was streamed live for the entire world to see.⁴ The nation, too, was watching, and many New Zealanders believed that the tour was a chance to address the issue of racism within New Zealand.⁵ Showing unity in support against racism in South Africa was New Zealand's way of demonstrating that racism would no longer be tolerated in this country. After the events in Hamilton, opposition leader Bill Rowling described the country as being on the threshold of carnage.⁶

Rivalry between the South African Springboks and the New Zealand All Blacks continues to this day. Many New Zealand players regarded playing the Springbok Rugby team as the pinnacle of their rugby career. On 1 May 1981, an estimated 75,000 New Zealanders took to the streets across New Zealand in a first step to publically demonstrate their opposition to the proposed 1981 Springbok Rugby tour.⁷ The Muldoon Labour government at the time approved the New Zealand Rugby Football Union's invitation for 32 South African men to tour New Zealand. The team was to play 16 football games over six weeks in 12 different locations.⁸ The tour sparked nationwide controversy. The uproar brought about by the tour was unprecedented in New Zealand. The country was torn between those who believed that the tour must go on, and those who believed that the tour demonstrated New Zealand's support for South Africa's inhumane Apartheid regime.

The second game of the tour was to be played in Hamilton on 25 July 1981. The events which erupted surrounding the game proved to be the peak of change on the tour. There is no single opinion, story or history which explains the details of the occurrences at the Hamilton Stadium on that day in July. Like the nation at the time, 'facts' and narratives

concerning the events are fickle. Many accounts are simply a reflection of popular or unpopular opinion at the time concerning the tour. However, one thing is clear: the breakout of violence in Hamilton on this day was extreme.

Following the arrival of the Springboks in Hamilton, a candlelight rally was held in Garden Place, Hamilton, to 'lighten up the gloom of the Springbok tour.'⁹ The rally organiser, Ron Kilgour, held the event for anti-tour protesters who wished to show their support but who did not want to take part in the active disruption of Saturday's game. He believed that this would prevent violence in other parts of the city, by offering those out-of-town protesters a non-violent way of showing their support.¹⁰ The protesters marched to the Ambassador Motel where the Springboks were staying. The group, now growing in numbers exceeding 500, chanted and sang songs of freedom as they marched on the motel grounds, stopping opposite the wing in which the Springbok rugby team was staying.¹¹

A handbook was formulated by the group 'Mobilisation to Stop the Springbok Tour' (M. O. S. T.) for those who wished to protest. This handbook notes that the philosophy of New Zealand's anti-apartheid protesters is and always has been one of non-violence, 'but not passiveness.'¹² The handbook goes on to encourage people to organise non-violent action training camps to teach protesters how to act in a peaceful manner during protests.¹³ Many accounts of the events in Hamilton state that it was those who were protesting against the tour who were most violent. However, events during the protest and afterwards in Hamilton tell a slightly different story.

For Nurse Carol Thomas, one of four volunteer nurses from Auckland set up outside the stadium, the events at Hamilton Stadium quickly turned into a terrifying nightmare. Pro-tour supporters violently attacked a car used to transport an injured anti-tour protester to the hospital. Luckily, the car got away. However, as the nurses were trying to load an injured girl into another van, the pro-tour supporters turned and attacked the nurses and the girl. Once the girl was placed safely in the van, the protesters were rocking the vehicle back and forth in an effort to tip it. Not one person escaped the violence which erupted as a result of the increasing frustration felt by pro-tour supporters.

The account given under oath by Marilyn Waring, a member for the National Party, states that she 'read of property damage carried out by protesters, I saw spray painted slogans ... Shops which had mounted displays of rugby jerseys and photos had their windows smashed.'¹⁴ Waring also reported that once the anti-tour protesters drew level with the rugby supporters, crates were heaved over the fence, while beer cans became missiles and crude words of abuse became spears. Waring legitimately entered the grounds and made her way to

the top of the embankment in order to photograph the ensuing chaos which was developing on the field below. After a short time there, she was viciously attacked by a pro-tour supporter. She was punched; attempts were made to wrench her camera from her as she was thrown down the embankment. Once the game was cancelled and people were making their way off the field, many protesters — including Waring — feared for their physical safety.¹⁵ Following the cancellation of the Hamilton game, Waring was informed of death threats received by institutions that were involved in the anti-tour movement in Hamilton, as well as obscene phone calls made to clergymen throughout the Waikato.¹⁶ The post-game atmosphere in the region was bitter and unforgiving.

Many were attacked in their homes by pro-tour supporters. Some who were against the tour were attacked in their homes, while many others were harassed verbally on the phone with abusive and threatening messages.¹⁷ One demonstrator reportedly had his hand broken at work the next day by workmates who disagreed with his stand on the tour.¹⁸ Students at the University of Waikato barricaded themselves in the Halls of Residence. Police cordoned off the Halls following an attack by a large group of pro-tour protesters, who smashed windows and chanted ‘we want rugby.’¹⁹ The Vice-Chancellor of the University at the time, Don Llewellyn, later confirmed that two students were treated in hospital for their injuries following the attacks on the Halls of Residence that Saturday night.²⁰

After the cancellation of the Hamilton match, Halt All Racist Tours (HART) vice chairman Mike Law was reluctant to speak of the events after a series of attacks on anti-tour protesters’ homes. After receiving stitches for his injuries, John Minto, HART National Organiser, was followed to the home of Dr Anthony Rogers.²¹ A call for assistance was later received at the home; the house had been invaded by pro-tour supporters.²² John Minto, Mr Law and Dick Cuthbert were all badly beaten,²³ and were forced into hiding in order to ensure their own safety.

Such violence showed Hamilton and the world that there were deep and passionate responses to the Springbok tour of New Zealand. The evidence tells us that there was a large amount of unnecessary violence at the match in Hamilton. Interest in the tour became largely focused upon the violence, rather than the central issue of the conflict between apartheid and sport. The Hamilton match illustrated the division within New Zealand at the time of the tour, as well as the extreme violence many people were willing to employ in order to defend what they believed to be their natural rights.

Notes

- ¹ 'Park Fences Fell Easily in Bok Fray', *Waikato Times*, 27 July 1981, p. 3.
- ² Alex Veysey, 'Tour in Turmoil', 26 July 1981, p. 25. From *Sporting Contacts with South Africa*, Christchurch, New Zealand Room, Canterbury Public Library, 1990, p. 17.
- ³ Veysey, p. 17.
- ⁴ Geoff Chapel, *1981: The Tour* (A. H., A. W. Reed: Wellington, 1984), images at centre of book.
- ⁵ 'Impact — 1981 Springbok Tour', *New Zealand History Online*, updated 20 December 2012, <www.nzhistory.net.nz/culture/1981-springbok-tour/impact-of-the-tour> [accessed August 2013].
- ⁶ 'Country on Threshold of Carnage', *Waikato Times*, 27 July 1981, p. 3.
- ⁷ 1981 Springbok Tour of New Zealand, *Demonstrators Handbook: Northern Edition*, Gisborne-Whangarei (M. O. S. T.: Auckland, 1981), p. 3.
- ⁸ *Demonstrators Handbook*, p. 8.
- ⁹ Veysey, p. 25.
- ¹⁰ 'Protesters Plan to Lighten the Gloom', *Waikato Times*, 23 July 1981, p. 1.
- ¹¹ Thomas Oliver Newnham, *By Batons and Barbed Wire* (New Zealand: Graphic Publications, 1983), p. 36.
- ¹² *Demonstrators Handbook*, p. 8.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- ¹⁴ Marilyn Waring, *Statement Made Under Oath Regarding the Events in Hamilton on Saturday 25 July 1981* (Wellington, 1981), p. 4.
- ¹⁵ Waring, pp. 4-6.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- ¹⁷ Digital Library at the University of Canterbury <<http://digital-library.canterbury.ac.nz/data/library3/archives/113513.pdf>> (2 September 1981) [accessed September 2013].
- ¹⁸ Digital Library at the University of Canterbury <<http://digital-library.canterbury.ac.nz/data/library3/archives/113513.pdf>> (2 September 1981) [accessed September 2013].
- ¹⁹ 'Protesters Living in Fear', *Waikato Times*, 27 July 1981, p. 1.
- ²⁰ 'Protesters Living in Fear', p. 1.
- ²¹ Newnham, p. 36.
- ²² Waring, p. 6.
- ²³ Chapel, 1984.