


Steve Biko

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Stephen Biko	
	
Born	Stephen Bantu Biko 18 December 1946 Ginsberg Township, South Africa
Died	12 September 1977 (aged 30) Pretoria, South Africa
Occupation	Anti- apartheid activist
Spouse(s)	Ntsiki Mashalaba
Children	Nkosinathi Biko, Samora Biko, Lerato Biko, Motlatsi Biko and Hlumelo Biko ^{[1][2]}

Stephen Bantu Biko (18 December 1946 – 12 September 1977)^[3] was an [anti-apartheid](#) activist in [South Africa](#) in the 1960s and 1970s.

A student leader, he later founded the [Black Consciousness Movement](#) which would empower and mobilize much of the urban black population. Since his death in police custody, he has been called a [martyr](#) of the anti-apartheid movement.^[4] While living, his writings and activism attempted to empower black people, and he was famous for his slogan "black is beautiful", which he described as meaning: "man, you are okay as you are, begin to look upon yourself as a human being".^[5]

Even though Biko was never a member of the [African National Congress](#) (ANC), the ANC has included him in the pantheon of struggle heroes, going as far as using his image for campaign posters in South Africa's first non-racial elections in 1994.^[6] [Nelson Mandela](#) said of Biko: "They had to kill him to prolong the life of apartheid."^[7]

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Early life

Biko was born to parents Mzingayi Mathew and Alice 'Mamcete' Biko in [Ginsberg Township](#), in the present-day [Eastern Cape](#) province of [South Africa](#).^[8] His father was a government clerk, while his mother did domestic work in surrounding white homes.^[9] The third of four children, Biko grew up with his older sister Bukelwa; his older brother Khaya; and his younger sister Nobandile.^[10] In 1950, at the age of four, Biko suffered the loss of his father who was studying law.^{[11][12]}

Biko was a [Xhosa](#). In addition to [Xhosa](#), he spoke fluent [English](#) and fairly fluent [Afrikaans](#). As a child, he attended Brownlee Primary School and Charles Morgan Higher Primary School.^[13] He was sent to [Lovedale](#) High School in 1964, a prestigious [boarding school](#) in [Alice, Eastern Cape](#), where his older brother Khaya had previously been studying.^[14] During the [apartheid era](#), with no [freedom of association](#) protection for non-white South Africans, Biko was expelled from Lovedale for his political views, and his brother arrested for his alleged association with Poqo (now known as the [Azanian People's Liberation Army](#)).^[15] After being expelled, he then attended and later graduated from St. Francis College, a [Roman Catholic](#) institution in [Mariannhill, Natal](#).^[8]

He studied to be a doctor at the [University of Natal](#) Medical School.

Marriage and children

Biko married Ntsiki Mashalaba in 1970.^[16] They had two children together: Nkosinathi, born in 1971, and Samora.

He also had two children with [Dr Mamphela Ramphele](#), a prominent activist within the BCM: a daughter, Lerato, born in 1974, who died of pneumonia when she was only two months old, and a son, [Hlumelo](#), who was born in 1978, after Biko's death.^[1]

Biko also had a daughter with Lorraine Tabane, named Motlatsi, born in May 1977. ^[*citation needed*]

Activism



Steve Biko's house in King William's Town, Eastern Cape.

Biko was initially involved with the multiracial [National Union of South African Students](#), but after he became convinced that Black, [Indian](#) and [Coloured](#) students needed an organization of their own, he helped found the [South African Students' Organisation](#) (SASO), whose agenda included political self-reliance and the unification of university students in a "black consciousness."^[17] In 1968 Biko was elected its first president. SASO evolved into the influential [Black Consciousness Movement](#) (BCM). Biko was also involved with the [World Student Christian Federation](#).

In the early 1970s, Biko became a key figure in [The Durban Moment](#).^[18] In 1972, he was expelled from the University of Natal because of his political activities^[17] and he became honorary president of the [Black People's Convention](#). He was [banned](#) by the apartheid government in February 1973,^[19] meaning that he was not allowed to speak to more than one person at a time nor to speak in public, was restricted to the King William's Town magisterial district, and could not write publicly or speak with the media.^[17] It was also forbidden to quote anything he said, including speeches or simple conversations.

When Biko was banned, his movement within the country was restricted to the Eastern Cape, where he was born. After returning there, he formed a number of grassroots organizations based on the notion of self-reliance: Zanempilo, the Zimele Trust Fund (which helped support former political prisoners and their families), Njwaxa Leather-Works Project and the Ginsberg Education Fund.

In spite of the repression of the [apartheid](#) government, Biko and the BCM played a significant role in organising the protests that culminated in the [Soweto Uprising](#) of 16 June 1976. In the aftermath of the uprising, which was met with a heavy hand by the security forces, the authorities began to target Biko further.

Death and aftermath



Stephen Bantu Biko's grave

On 18 August 1977, Biko was arrested at a police [roadblock](#) under the [Terrorism Act No 83 of 1967](#) and interrogated by officers of the [Port Elizabeth](#) security police including [Harold Snyman](#) and [Gideon](#)

[Nieuwoudt](#). This interrogation took place in the Police Room 619 of the Sanlam Building in Port Elizabeth. The interrogation lasted twenty-two hours and included torture and beatings resulting in a coma.^[17] He suffered a major head injury while in police custody at the Walmer Police Station, in a suburb of Port Elizabeth, and was chained to a window grille for a day.

On 11 September 1977, police loaded him in the back of a [Land Rover](#), naked and restrained in manacles, and began the 1,100 kilometres (680 mi) drive to [Pretoria](#) to take him to a prison with hospital facilities. He was nearly dead owing to the previous injuries.^[20] He died shortly after arrival at the Pretoria prison, on 12 September. The police claimed his death was the result of an extended [hunger strike](#), but an autopsy revealed multiple bruises and abrasions and that he ultimately succumbed to a brain hemorrhage from the massive injuries to the head,^[17] which many saw as strong evidence that he had been brutally clubbed by his captors. Then [Donald Woods](#), a journalist, editor and close friend of Biko's, along with [Helen Zille](#), later leader of the [Democratic Alliance](#) political party, exposed the truth behind Biko's death.^{[21][22]}

Because of his high profile, news of Biko's death spread quickly, publicizing the repressive nature of the apartheid government. His funeral was attended by over 10,000 people, including numerous ambassadors and other diplomats from the United States and Western Europe. Donald Woods, who photographed his injuries in the morgue as proof of police abuse, was later forced to flee South Africa for England. Woods later campaigned against apartheid and further publicised Biko's life and death, writing many newspaper articles and writing the book, *Biko*, which was later turned into the film [Cry Freedom](#).^[23] Speaking at a National Party conference following the news of Biko's death then–minister of police, [Jimmy Kruger](#) said, "I am not glad and I am not sorry about Mr. Biko. It leaves me cold (Dit laat my koud). I can say nothing to you ... Any person who dies ... I shall also be sorry if I die."

After a 15-day inquest in 1978, a magistrate judge found there was not enough evidence to charge the officers with murder because there were no eyewitnesses.^{[24][25]} On 2 February 1978, based on the evidence given at the inquest, the attorney general of the [Eastern Cape](#) stated he would not prosecute.^[26] On 28 July 1979, the attorney for Biko's family announced that the South African government would pay them [R65,000](#) ([\\$78,000](#)) in compensation for Biko's death.^{[25][1]}

The [Truth and Reconciliation Commission](#), which was created following the end of minority rule and the apartheid system, reported that five former members of the South African security forces who had admitted to killing Biko were applying for [amnesty](#). Their application was rejected in 1999.^[24]

On 7 October 2003, the South African justice ministry announced that the five policemen accused of killing Biko would not be prosecuted because the time limit for prosecution had elapsed and because of insufficient evidence.^[24]

A year after his death, some of his writings were collected and released under the title *I Write What I Like*.^[27]

Influences and formation of ideology

Like [Frantz Fanon](#), Biko originally studied medicine, and, like Fanon, Biko developed an intense concern for the development of black consciousness as a solution to the existential struggles that shape existence, both as a human and as an African (see [Négritude](#)). Biko can thus be seen as a follower of Fanon and [Aimé Césaire](#), in contrast to more multi-racialist ANC leaders such as [Nelson Mandela](#) after his imprisonment at [Robben Island](#), and [Albert Luthuli](#) who were first disciples of [Gandhi](#).^{[28][29][30][31]}

Biko saw the struggle for African consciousness as having two stages, "Psychological liberation" and "Physical liberation". The [nonviolent](#) influence of Gandhi and [Martin Luther King, Jr.](#) upon Biko is then suspect, as Biko knew that for his struggle to give rise to physical liberation, it was necessary that it exist within the political realities of the apartheid government, and Biko's nonviolence may be seen more as a tactic than a personal conviction.^[32]

Biko's relevance in the present

In the present post-Apartheid South Africa, Biko is now revered across the political spectrum despite obvious ideological differences. Many of these people see Biko's philosophy as irrelevant after 1994. However, in 2004, he was voted 13th in the [SABC3's Great South Africans](#).

However, many present-day social movements, activists, and academics continue to stress the relevance of Biko's black consciousness. This includes a strong critique of voting by writer and political activist Andile Mngxitama who has said that if Biko were alive today, he would not be supporting any

political party, would not even vote, but would be marching with the social movements against government.^[33] ^[34] ^[35]

Tributes

Biko is buried in the Ginsberg township cemetery, a place called the Steve Biko Garden of Remembrance in the Eastern Cape.^[citation needed]

Apart from Donald Woods's book called *Biko*, his name has been honoured at several universities. Locally, the main Student Union buildings of the [University of Cape Town](#) are named in his honour and each year a [commemorative Steve Biko lecture](#), open to all students, is delivered on the anniversary of his death. Internationally, the [University of Manchester's student union](#), the Steve Biko Building, on the Oxford road campus, is named in his honour. [Ruskin College, Oxford](#) has a Biko House student accommodation. The bar at the [University of Bradford](#) was named after Biko until its closure in 2005. Numerous other venues in Students Unions around the United Kingdom also bear his name. The [Santa Barbara Student Housing Cooperative](#) has a house named after Steve Biko, themed to provide a safe, respectful space for people of colour. In [London](#), streets in both [Finsbury Park](#)^[36] and [Hounslow](#)^[37] are named after him. At the University of California, Santa Cruz, there is a section of dormitories named "Biko House" located in the Oakes College Multicultural Theme Housing. The Steve Biko Institute was founded in Salvador, Brazil to support the education and pride of Black Brazilians.^[38] The Pretoria Academic Hospital was renamed the Steve Biko Academic Hospital^[39] in 2008. [Durban University of Technology](#) has acknowledged Steve Biko's contribution to South African Society by naming its largest campus after him. A bronze bust of Steve Biko was unveiled in Freedom Square on this campus as a tribute to him.

References in the arts

Literature

- [Benjamin Zephaniah](#) wrote a poem titled "Biko The Greatness", included in Zephaniah's 2001 collection, *Too Black, Too Strong*.
- "The Compound Arcane" is a poem written in 1975 by [Jack Hirschman](#), subtitled *Homage to Steve Biko*, which is published in *The Arcanes*. This poem is notable for having been composed before Biko's death, yet already the poet was inspired enough by Biko's life to recognize him as a martyr.
- "In Detention" by Chris van Wyk (b. 1957)

Theatre, film and television

- [World in Action](#) recounted Biko's story in a documentary called *The Life and Death of Steve Biko*, broadcast on [ITV](#) in the UK on 3 October 1977.^[40]
- A 1979 play titled [The Biko Inquest](#), written by Norman Fenton and Jon Blair. In 1985, a television adaptation of the original stage play was created, directed by [Albert Finney](#) and originally aired in the US through [HBO](#) in 1985.^[41]
- In 1987, [Richard Attenborough](#) directed the movie [Cry Freedom](#), a biographical drama starring [Kevin Kline](#) as Donald Woods and [Denzel Washington](#) as Biko.
- A starship USS *Biko* appears in the [Star Trek: The Next Generation](#) episode "[A Fistful of Datas](#)."

Music

- The most widely known musical tribute was by British musician [Peter Gabriel](#), who released "[Biko](#)", which became a UK hit single in 1980.^[42] Gabriel's song has subsequently been recorded by artists including [Robert Wyatt](#), [Joan Baez](#), [Simple Minds](#), [Manu Dibango](#) and [Paul Simon](#).
- [A Tribe Called Quest](#) titled a song after Steve Biko on their 1993 album [Midnight Marauders](#).
- [Steel Pulse](#) dedicated the song "Biko's Kindred Lament" to Steve Biko on the album [Tribute To The Martyrs](#).

See also

- [Civil disobedience](#)

- [Frances Ames](#)
- [Nonviolence](#)
- [Nonviolent resistance](#)

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Further reading

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External links



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- [Thesis on the prospects of Bikoism in today's South Africa](#)
- [The Steve Biko Foundation](#)
- [The relevance of Black Consciousness today](#)
- [Donald Woods talks in 1987 about his friendship with Steve Biko](#)
- [New Introduction to I Write What I Like by Lewis Gordon](#)
- [Black Consciousness: The dialectics of liberation](#)