

PROFILE OF RESISTANCE

Steve Biko

Anti-Apartheid activist, founder of the South African Black Consciousness Movement

“The most potent weapon of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed.”

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FIGURE 1 COURTESY OF THE TELEGRAPH

Background Information

Born: December 18, 1946; Died: September 12, 1977

Steve Biko was born in King William’s Town, South Africa, on December 18, 1946. He lived during Apartheid. Apartheid was a system in South Africa that segregated people based on race, similar to Jim Crow in the United States. His father was a policeman, and his mother worked as a cook. Steve was a gifted child in school but encountered discrimination from white authority figures in school. An association with activists caused his expulsion from school. After graduating from a different school in 1966, Biko began attending the University of Natal Medical School. He had dreams of working in the medical field. Steve was active in the National Union of South African Students in college. The multiracial organization wanted better conditions and stronger rights for Black citizens.

Biko’s Resistance

Steve Biko wanted a different approach to Black freedom in South Africa. In 1968, Biko co-founded the South African Students' Organization. The all-Black student organization worked to resist apartheid. Apartheid was a system in South Africa that segregated people based on race. Steve’s teachings about African pride and self-help started the Black Consciousness Movement in the region. He wanted Black South Africans to be proud of their race, skin color, and heritage. Biko popularized the slogan, “Black is Beautiful,” in the country. He also wanted Africans to resist government oppression by creating their own programs. As his philosophy became popular, Steve Biko became a target of the government. Officials wanted to stop the spread of Black Consciousness. In 1973, Biko was banned from sharing his writings or speaking publicly. Officials also forbade him from talking to the media or from speaking to more than one person at a time. Due to the ban, the South African Students' Organization temporarily paused its activities. Instead of ending the organization, Biko supported the movement by working undercover. Biko frequently faced arrests for long periods without formal charges or trials. During that time, he created the Zimele Trust Fund to help political prisoners and their families.ⁱ He died while in police custody in September 1977.

Achievements

Steve Biko has received several posthumous degrees, the first was given in 1998 from the University of Fort Hare with a Doctor of Social Sciences Honors Causa. For his work he was also awarded an NAACP Image award (1978), the South African State President’s Award for Meritorious Service (in Gold) (2002) and the Mahatma Ghandi Satyagraha Award (2012).ⁱⁱ

Essential Questions

1. How did Steve Biko support Black Liberation South African Students' Organization?
2. How did Biko resist the South African government's ban on his public speaking?
3. ***“The most potent weapon of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed.”***
 - a. What does this quote mean to you?
 - b. Do you agree or disagree with it?

ⁱ <https://www.biography.com/activist/steve-biko>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.sbf.org.za/home/honors-and-awards/>