In 1974 John Anthony Copelyn noted that the Pondoland revolt was ‘often mentioned but rarely discussed’ (1974: 1). In a recently published biography of Oliver Tambo, Luli Callinicos (2004: 242) writes that the Pondo uprising was ultimately to influence the African National Congress (ANC) in its decision to take up armed struggle two or three years after the revolt. Similarly, Ben Turok (2003: 120, 122) writes that the Pondo revolt was ‘the most important of the rural uprisings in the modern period’ and that it influenced the Congress Movement to ‘review our own approach to resistance in the country’. If Callinicos and Turok are correct, the ultimately unsuccessful revolt that took place in the rural backwaters of the northeastern Transkei in 1960 and 1961 could rightfully be described as ‘the high water mark of peasant resistance in South Africa’ (Kayser 2003: 95). It seems logical that this zenith of modern rural resistance is often mentioned, but why is it so rarely discussed?

An understanding of the ways in which discussions of the revolt have been politicized provides one answer to this question. Contemporary accounts, including newspaper articles, government reports, and the descriptions of eyewitnesses, fit the revolt into an existing framework of political and social upheaval. Indeed, these accounts did more than simply reflect observers’ perspectives; their
creators often hoped their readers would draw from them lessons applicable to continuing struggles. Scholars’ analyses of the revolt, which have often drawn on these sources, have likewise derived from broader projects shaped by particular lines of inquiry.

This essay explores trends in writing on the revolt over the past fifty years and argues that understanding those patterns is essential to understanding the continued significance of the revolt. It begins with a consideration of the limitations of the published and archival sources pertaining to the revolt, and on which subsequent scholars have drawn in their interpretations of the revolt. This chapter then considers early efforts by liberal historians to approach the revolt from a scholarly perspective, as well as the notable silence of Afrikaner nationalist historians, in a highly fraught political climate. Subsequently, revisionist and social historians would build upon the work of liberal historians through close attention to issues of political economy. More recently, cultural historians have added to the literature through examinations of the importance of witchcraft and attempts to explicate how local people made sense of a time of political and social upheaval. Scholars have generally agreed that the implementation of Bantu Authorities and Betterment were at the heart of the revolt. However, other aspects of their interpretations vary markedly. These disparities illuminate broader political and cultural contests over understandings of the revolt by showing how the revolt fits within a variety of ideological and scholarly frameworks. The malleability of the meanings of the revolt has ensured its centrality in South African political culture.

Biases in Contemporary Accounts

Many pitfalls face an historian trying to cobble together a coherent narrative of the events that transpired in Eastern Pondoland between 1959 and 1960. Some of these difficulties, particularly the shortcomings of newspaper reports, archival material, firsthand accounts, and secondary analysis are common in attempts at historical reconstruction based on documentary evidence. Archival sources, for example, tend to paint a picture that corresponds with prevailing hegemonies. The voices of those in power tend to be articulated in these sources, while those of the weak or ‘subaltern’ are stifled. Once accessed, archival documents marked ‘classified’ or ‘secret’ can put this picture in perspective. On the whole, however, the story that emerges tends to be relatively one-sided.