

Preface

THIS BOOK IS ABOUT the citizens who battled the evil, racist system extending over their lives, *apartheid*. In a very short period, at the very start of the 1960s, Nelson Mandela's group, Umkhonto we Sizwe, "Spear of the Nation," assailed the South African state. Umkhonto, mostly called MK, and other radicals allied to its cause derailed freight trains, downed telephone lines, blew up post offices and pressured less enthusiastic citizens to cooperate with them. Under an onslaught of the racist state's retributive policing, MK and other groups recruited daring young people, training them and culling state informants from their number, and prepared them for urban guerrilla warfare, for attacking human targets.

Apartheid denied Black people basic legal protections and rights every day. It proceeded from their dispossession from their historic land, and placed them under the purview of special laws and regulations justified because Whites were allegedly more advanced. Apartheid's logic betrays its shared heritage with German Naziism, something its leaders recognized. Daniel F. Malan, then leader of the white Afrikaner National Party (NP), even briefly considered adopting a swastika in the NP flag in 1936.¹ Apartheid served to guard South Africa as a "white man's country" and prevented democratic reforms. Racist legislation suppressed Black mobility, wages, residence rights, healthcare, and education, and prevented Blacks from participating meaningfully in their own governance.

A "wind of change" was, however, blowing through the imperial world, setting India and a slew of other countries a-sail apart from the French and British mainlands. Prime Minister Harold Macmillan used

the phrase to remind South African members of parliament of the African part of the trend in 1960. Black nationalists and Black Marxists, in Africa as in the United States and the Caribbean, were jettisoning European colonialism and White liberal guidance in seeking their independence. They published, rallied, petitioned, downed tools and walked on picket lines, and gathered and agitated, and sometimes went to war. Mandela's group, MK, was part of this transnational, titanic midcentury contest to reshape the modern world. The apartheid government would thwart the transformation, and renormalize its racist rule, undermining the struggle for equality everywhere, from Australia to Zimbabwe (Southern Rhodesia), and even in the United States. South African revolutionaries, on their side, would mobilize relentlessly, uttering warnings, arming themselves, preparing to fight in the streets to free the future for another sort of country, a different world, with room for everyone regardless of race.

The principal focus of this book is that confrontation, and so the story of the radical pursuit of good, and justice, behind an attempted push to mass insurgency from 1960 through 1963, inside South Africa. Nelson Mandela, and other revolutionaries, some allied to him and some not, created an offensive counterthrust to the government's police regime of terror and extrajudicial brutality. More than a reaction, it was a positive revolutionary nationalist claim. Mandela's MK as a group composed itself as a civilian force, nonprofessional, using wire cutters, hacksaws, and homemade chemical bombs rather than AK-47s and grenades, to beat back fascism and make room for a nonracialist, open, fair, and cosmopolitan society. The NP government encouraged the formation of White civilian militias in response, and the government mechanized its military and retrained its police.

Spear: Mandela and the Revolutionaries is about how MK and its allies raced against the growing power of the apartheid state. Revolutionaries debated among themselves as to how best create a movement of the people behind them in sugarcane farms, cities, and small segregated "locations." MK made global connections, detailed below, and liaised directly with contacts in Moscow. Yet MK was a domestic movement. It received substantial foreign Communist funding only as its health deteriorated. MK was to be the vanguard for a mass struggle. Under state assault MK accelerated its plans in 1963, a last home effort, but the state caught up with its leaders and destroyed it. *Spear* is about the entwining of the personal and the political across MK's diverse operations up to that point. It is about vigor even as strategic success became a waking dream.

Looking back, in fact, it may seem unreasonable that revolutionaries thought they could prevail in South Africa in the early 1960s. At that time,

however, the apartheid status quo appeared to rest on rotten foundations. Mass civil disobedience had brought down other regimes, notably the Raj, Britain's "jewel in the crown," and in 1957, Ghana's "positive action" campaigns ushered Kwame Nkrumah's nationalist party to power. In Algeria, strikes and marches had given way to mutually terroristic warfare before a settlement was achieved. Surely South African fighters might organize the mass of Black people to achieve victory. Mandela, and his mostly Communist allies, and Pan-Africanists in parallel with him, undertook campaigns based on the logic of attracting the majority of the people to their methods and leadership.

Mandela affiliated before 1960 with the Communist Party, which proved critical to his aims. Yet he emerged first as an activist and a leader in the African National Congress, the oldest mass political organization in Africa. He began as an African nationalist, in favor of majority enfranchisement and empowerment in South Africa, and (it will become clear) he ended as one. As Aimé Césaire said in 1956, speaking in essence for Mandela, "What I demand of Marxism and Communism is that they serve the black peoples, not that the black peoples serve Marxism and Communism."² The effective mobilization of Black people was in fact, however, the revolutionaries' highest goal. Striving to find a path toward mass mobilization, Mandela and his fellow revolutionaries borrowed ideas from the Americas, West Africa, the Middle East, Algeria, and Communist strategists, but Mandela understood that South Africa, with its unique profile, required its own paradigm. The population included heterogeneities that apartheid both encouraged and trampled. The Black public varied from region to region, and from city to countryside, in history and experience. That is why educating rural people to contest their situations in a common focus was a revolutionary occupation.

There is no natural correlation of human behavior with race, although it is also true that *no* identity has ultimate grounds, *pace* Wittgenstein, outside of what human interactions offer.³ As Frantz Fanon perceived, however, the colonial settler is correct in claiming to "know" the native insofar as the settler's dominance makes "the native" a position: it lacks a relative meaning until its confinement, and its resistance.⁴ During the years that Mandela organized in the Communist Party, and in the African National Congress (ANC), as he built and led MK, Black leaders and intellectuals everywhere were elaborating a working vocabulary for their expected Black liberation, for reversing the Native-Settler position and then if possible erasing its meaning. They mobilized in Trinidad and Jamaica, Detroit, Accra, Harlem, and a few years later, in Rio and Nordeste Brazil, inhabiting the subjected status in order to reverse its position and draw

strength from one another. They understood that freedom for individuals had no meaning in their countries until Black people first got theirs.⁵ Alongside world Marxism, centered on Moscow and Beijing, Black and “native” nationalism shaped the South African revolutionaries, making fresh possibilities thinkable for everyone.

In much of the world, “the focus of Black revolt,” as Robin D. G. Kelley quotes Cedric Robinson to remind us, “was always on the structures of the mind, . . . [the] metaphysics not the material.”⁶ Mandela encountered this reservoir of experience indirectly, in his reading and conversation in South Africa, about events and movements, but also directly, in engaging abroad with foreign leaders and colleagues who had cosmopolitan experience. His reason for immersing himself in historical and contemporary reports from all over the world was to be a better leader. In this book, Mandela and his fellow radicals are understood not so much from their writings, as from their actions—as people making themselves who they were. Below, as we watch them lead an insurrection, however, we also note how they thought, acted, and spoke in the global domain of other people’s ideas, not just South African ones.

In this book, intellectual and emotional forces interweave. Relatedly, unlike in some histories of the broader period and even biographies of Nelson Mandela, close attention is paid to the people around Mandela, especially to his Black comrades, colleagues, and competitors.⁷ There is a vein of writing about South Africa which adopts the perspective of world Whiteness, and which purports to be interested in everyone, but seen through the eyes of educated White people fighting apartheid. This makes Mandela and Black leaders with him, among them Walter Sisulu, Oliver “O.R.” Tambo, and Moses Kotane, almost into figureheads.⁸ In trying to redress this distortion, *Spear* highlights Mandela’s genuine leadership at the center of this group in MK. We see the man and his decisions in the weave of the relationships around him, as we see his mettle in the hurricane of events that eventually overtakes him.

Much seemed possible in 1960. School hallways, factory floors, marital bedrooms, and adolescents’ soccer clubs bound revolutionaries together in political and personal webs. MK drew on people in these channels, from different walks of life and from every apartheid category, “Bantu” (Black African), “Coloured” (mixed), “Indian” (South Asian descended) (both Black), and so-called European (“White”). Many other South African movements of the past had threatened the state by putting oppressed farmers and workers together without regard to “tribe,” refusing any salience to the “Coloured” or “European” label. MK was a multiracial force in this tradition.⁹ We will see how particularly the Communist Party

(herein mostly called “the Party” for short) provided a kind of surrogate family in which urban activists in Johannesburg could midwife MK. The Party was a family accustomed to argument and dissent, cross-cut by muted racial divisions. As we will see, however, Mandela’s senior, Black, Party colleagues, especially Walter Sisulu and Moses Kotane, successfully brokered Mandela’s leadership.

Behind the debate and decision-making at the leadership level, we will see how men and women created the forms of association in which Nelson Mandela emerged as peerless, and then modes over which no central leader could maintain control. Most surprisingly, perhaps, Mandela rose in tandem with the expansion of the deployment of violence. The fact is the state was the first, and most consistent, purveyor of brute force in the epic contest described below. The state attacked the majority of the population with force. Settler control in South Africa’s history, in fencing and repurposing “private” land and demanding taxes and laborers, was always based on violence, but the apartheid state police shot and killed increasing numbers of people, even unarmed, protesting civilians in several incidents in the 1950s. And 1960 brought a further, critical change in the use of force, as we will see in the following chapter. The state episodically massacred scores of protesters and methodically criminalized its most committed opponents. They responded not just with a defense, but with a strategic offense.

The government’s declarations of states “of emergency,” and the passing of extraordinary regulations and laws, framed the revolutionaries’ options, as we will see. Still, policing, investigations, and trials are not the main concern of this book, while the revolutionaries’ actions and motives are. State enforcement, when it arrived, spelled the end of activists’ instrumental political power.¹⁰ The state’s use of violence in destroying MK appears toward the end of the book, but most accounts correctly note that apartheid violence got worse after the start of MK, from the winter of 1962, when the South African police force began to professionalize its enforcement, and the parliament passed laws giving it fresh military powers. After defeating MK in 1963–64, the state continued to develop extrajudicial means of oppression which it deployed for several decades more. Meanwhile the ANC’s coercive military camps outside South Africa would normalize force and the language of violence, a common part of the lingua franca in South African political discourse. The state rhetorically attacked “terrorists,” and exiled antiapartheid leaders spoke of the impossibility of compromise. Pain and loss were carried forward by the revolutionaries in their persons, in deprivation and torture, in psychic and physical wounds; violence was borne further downstream in the generations in the alienation of spouses

and in the uncomprehending ache of children, bereft of their parents, jailed, exiled, or dead: children who would grow up with a personal version of the unhealing pain the country would collectively suffer.

TO REVISE THE TALE OF AN icon, Mandela, a hero enmeshed in deep, mythic metanarratives, a great man if there are any in the world, is guaranteed to provoke criticism. That is how it must be. Nelson Mandela's espousal of violence and revolt may shock some readers. The figure in these pages was a recent divorcé, emotionally and materially unsettled, but increasingly connected to his fellow radicals, combative, wholly devoted to the cause, pragmatic, sometimes even cruelly so in his relationships, as some fellow prisoners later reported. Helen Joseph, a lifelong friend, recalled that Mandela overtly threatened their memories of closeness when one particular matter to hand required her immediate action: "It reduced me to tears."¹¹ He prized his ability to make quick adjustments, but he led by arguing his point coldly, followed by a seeking of consensus with his views. He did not attack his seniors, but was prepared to move forcibly past critics if he felt it necessary. He emerges here as heroic, deeply principled, but also distinctly fallible, and his actions, and the actions of others following the path he traced before his capture, are justly subject to further scrutiny.

The aim of the book above all is to stay at the front edge of revolutionary organization in South Africa, over the years 1960–64, to see and hear what history's subjects could, and no more; to eschew, in the narrative, knowledge from after the event, or outside that time. We may feel we know Mandela better than he did at early moments; we may feel we can better judge what Mandela and his fellow revolutionaries were doing, than they themselves—what was really possible and what not. But the better task for *us*, which will divulge rewards, is to imagine what it was like to face the future *without* knowing its shape. There is no foreshadowing of events; there is no juxtaposition of later trajectories with narrated vectors in this story.¹² Irony is also therefore avoided. Even within each chapter, thematic discussion is reserved for moments when the theme intruded in one or more person's consciousness, and the temporal interval of the story is only briefly suspended in most cases. And so signal events arrive, as they do in life, as a surprise, not according to prophecy.

Every effort revolutionaries undertook against apartheid, as the state concurrently moved against them, risked disaster, capture, immobilization, physical harm. The worst was imagined and assiduously avoided. The state was powerful. International networks of capital investments, connected to racial prerogatives often re-represented as the defensible habits of class, underpinned apartheid. Its bureaus were a massive warren, staffed

by an increasingly large proportion of Afrikaner men. Parastatals and organized trade, the receipts from the sale of gold from the country's central gold mines, underwrote White landlord-organized production in the countryside; labor monopsonies, banking cabals, Boer farmers' organizations, all massed profits at the top and fed apartheid's coffers. The National Party (NP) government withdrew South Africa from the Commonwealth, after Macmillan's speech, and accepted their exile from the United Nations, it is true, but South African Whites traveled freely everywhere, sat at international banquets, seminars, and tournaments, bought chemicals and military hardware from the West, cooperated with Western military intelligence. South African universities engaged with some of the world's leading economists and social scientists. The state's experts gleaned policies from colonial friends, from segregationist policing in the USA, and adopted techniques of torture from regimes east and west. The United States' Central Intelligence Agency as we will see supported the apartheid government. Against these forces stood only the potential of absolute, mass intransigence.

Let us briefly define social revolution beyond the Fanonist move of reversing the position of Settler and Native, and itemize the evidentiary base for describing it. We will take revolution to mean a thoroughgoing and rapid reversal or preferably destruction of those hierarchies determining unequal access to life's opportunities.¹³ The South African state was, like all modern states, an elevation of ascendant social groups, linked together in a symbiosis. The state supplied a structure for rotating governments, here representing variants of White interests, binding its mechanisms tightly to the National Party apartheid government from 1948 on. The revolutionaries tried to weaken and hobble the NP's ability to govern, to compel it to dissolve and pull the state down with it, to permit a new constitution. They also fought to upend the hierarchies which held racism in place, relationships based in different rights in property, as a necessary completion of their actions. The National Party also made itself much more like the state. Fighting the state was not a straight path, nor a single decision, as will become apparent, even so, but rather a kind of navigation.

A lot happened in a short period of time. The men and women active in the early 1960s lived through a zone of hyperaction and redefinition, acceleration and terminal decision-making. Their autobiographies and biographies in this vein are best handled as retrospective compositions making sense of a compressed part of their individual lives in a longer span, and not eyewitness accounts reliably illuminating particular situations for later use. Nor, to sharpen the point, do Mandela's own self-writings, including his two autobiographies, provide a simple aperture into the early

1960s. The Mandela who argues in favor of Castro's approach with ANC president Chief Albert Lutuli (as we will see) is not precisely the same man who composes a speech facing life in prison, nor the man who speaks at his inauguration as president of a postapartheid South Africa in 1994. Mandela agreed with such caution: he wrote to Fatima Meer in 1971, "What a sweet euphemism for self praise the English language has evolved. Autobiography they chose to call it . . ." ¹⁴

And yet his self-understanding, in writings and interviews (which created his published autobiography), and that of others around him, collectively, make up the book's evidentiary core. That is as it should be, proceeding with due caution. More than any other source, oral interviews—hundreds of them, with participants in the actions of the period—inform this book, and they are often autobiographical in tone. In the pages that follow, about 250 interviews, some of them in turn consisting of several sessions and many cassette tapes, are cited or quoted. Some persons appear as interviewees several times over the years, in different recordings. Interviewees include leaders from the ANC breakaway association, the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), and participants in the PAC's military affiliate, Poqo, as well as MK, ANC, and Communist Party members; but also, some ordinary citizens, and other activists unattached to other organizations, are represented. Lastly, state-cooperating witnesses, most of whom spoke only under duress, drawn from the middle (or the edges) of the insurgencies, are a *major* source for reconstructing events. These police-deposed accounts have especially been weighed and cross-checked, as they entail compelled information, or motivated testimony, or a combination of the two—in which telling a lie was an act of heroism. ¹⁵

Most interviews by far were done by other researchers, for various past historical projects, not by your author, who consulted those interviews in their many archives. To switch to the first person is to exit the storyline, but in any case, I accessed this oral material in five countries (South Africa, Britain, Botswana, Germany, USA), and also, I examined national and local archives of letters, reports, and court transcripts relevant to the ANC, PAC, Party, and MK, apart from oral interviews or testimonies. There were by my count forty-nine collections of papers, in nineteen locations, I consulted in person; and seven other depots of archives, including in Moscow, Jerusalem, Gaborone, Atlanta, Maseru, London, and Accra, accessed with the assistance of helpful colleagues listed in notes and in Sources. In addition, insofar as I could, I perused everything that Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela had, in the early '60s, ever written and, insofar as possible, ever read.

All activists' writings, memoirs, and commentaries, not just Mandela's,

are approached not as statements to posterity, but as messages functional to the simultaneous material political efforts they conjoined, and in which others were also involved. The narrative (to repeat the point) stays with the timeline of actions, rather than deviating to accommodate a wider argumentative structure. This treatment of deliberate expression as something best understood alongside and in light of behavior is designed not to close down further interpretations of expression, but in truth, there have been many interpretations of words already. The unruly syntagmatic parts bearing contrary messages were often subsumed. Here, against the appearance of totality or completeness, it is accepted that documents and spoken memories of self and other can never fairly capture a person's humanity, and nor can this book. What we are, and what we intend, push past all narrative efforts, because there is an entire world in each one of us. Following from that simple insight, secondly, I invite readers to break open the book's structure, to contest, challenge, and disassemble it, using their superior knowledge and experience aided by the apparatus of citations to the listed Sources. But it is not much regretted that I missed some things, and even less that I deliberately blurred and excluded others, as there would be no book otherwise. "Forgetting is essential to action of any kind," Nietzsche tells us in his essay on the uses of history.¹⁶ But it may also be, no doubt will be, that there is a missed coherence in what is left out, what is yet to be described.

Some basic chronological road-signs for seeing up ahead may be useful at the outset. The first chapter launches the story from the particular crisis of 1960. A second chapter provides the necessary background for fathoming who Mandela was, and why many of his past colleagues operated together, or at odds. The core of the backstory concerns the ANC "Youth League," a greenhouse of African liberatory nationalism, in conversation with anticolonialism and antiracism worldwide. After that, events and trends arrive in rough chronological sequence for ten chapters. The middle of the book amounts to a month-by-month ethnography of Mandela's and his colleagues' interactions, as they agitated to build support and formed relationships with external sources of knowledge. The chapters are chronological, but because each stage of the conflict changed the future nature of the beast, the chapters each feature a unique thematic emphasis. Chapter 3 proceeds from the apartheid-declared state of emergency, in mid-1960, and the state's criminalizing of the African National Congress (ANC). Chapter 4 recounts Mandela's unsuccessful effort to take command of the illegal ANC, and in that situation locates the formation of MK, relating the story up through August 1961.

The reader will see how, with MK, Mandela initiated actions that he

supposed might lead to guerrilla war, and widespread disorder, and how, eventually, he *pursued* irregular warfare as a necessary response to the state's militarized repression. Unaffiliated revolutionaries around him trod the same road. Mandela traced his historical knowledge to the experiences not just of Africans and Caribbeans but of past and contemporaneous revolutionaries worldwide, European, American, and Asian. He closely studied Mao's peasant model, looking also at renegade anti-empire Zionist fighters, the Irgun. Chapter 5 is about this process, and about Mandela's and fellow revolutionaries' transnational ideas, drawing on Mandela's handwritten notes and inventories of his and others' bookshelves. Chapter 6 is about the end of the state's massive "Treason Trial," and about Mandela and his lieutenants as they leapt into action, many of them "underground." It is about how he and his recruits organized MK in different parts of the country.

Chapter 7 is about MK's essential action: destruction, in its operations and immediate effects, its targets and logistical modes. In the same span of time, Commander Mandela departed South Africa, traveled for over half a year, and received personal military training in Ethiopia by presidential guard officers. He traveled through Africa to forge pan-Africanist solidarity and ultimately a new at-home unity in a wider "front." Interspersed in these middle chapters is an account of the PAC's violent group, Poqo, and of other Liberal and Marxist saboteurs, desired for a unified front, whose actions mutually impacted MK's.

Chapter 8 features an abrupt double caesura, the crisis occasioned by the Sabotage Act, which imposed severe penalties for political actions, including worker strikes, and the trauma of Mandela's capture. British official intelligence services, working *with* the ANC and the SACP, facilitating them despite their international Communist affiliation, played all sides of the game. An agent of the American government in regular contact with South African White mercenaries reminds us of the nature of the international forces arrayed against the radicals.

The three subsequent chapters are about how MK and the ANC survived into 1962, meeting obstacles which ultimately stopped their revolutionary effort. Inevitably our readerly perspective shifts to police office, jail, and barracks and apartments abroad. The stuff of human relationships forms the matrix for tracing the revolutionaries' thinking and actions in these chapters, just as in the previous ones. Chapter 9 concerns the fragmentation of MK's operational unity over the vast expanse of South Africa, the divergence of regional human relational patterns as components of MK, followed by MK's penetration by secret agents of the state. Chapter 10 is about the dual heirs to the ANC Youth League, having split into ANC

and PAC in 1959, and their two mass nationalist insurgencies in 1963, which resembled each other, but which have most often been recollected as if unrelated (and unserious). Chapter 11 is about the mass arrests of members of MK, the ANC, and PAC, and about torture and damage, and escape, and disaster. The revolutionaries were put on trial for sedition, with Mandela, who was taken out of a penitentiary cell to join them in court under guard. Chapter 12 is about the price paid for the repression of his vision, by the radicals in exile, in prisons and in military camps abroad, and by South Africa's political culture.

A jumble of human connections were quickly braided together in the effort to bring down the aggressive racist state. Apartheid survived, and was maintained for an additional thirty years, and the structures built under apartheid have in some ways lasted longer, even today mapping social disparities countrywide.¹⁷ The gap between rich and poor yawns wider in South Africa than anywhere else, as 2021's politically tinged urban uprisings and riots painfully reminded us all. For a short period, a lifetime ago, in the early '60s, Nelson Mandela and other revolutionaries tried to make another world. They mobilized against unprecedented state misrule, the epitome of the world's racists' denial of common humanity, to meet it with an attack creating an unpredictable escalation, in which the Black majority would prevail and initiate a genuine social revolution. The effort was deadly serious. It is time to look back at what Mandela and his comrades were trying to do, what they did, and how they met defeat.