

## Book Review

# Spear: Mandela and the Revolutionaries

Paul S Landau

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*Spear: Mandela and the Revolutionaries* by Paul S Landau is an insightful and detailed account of Nelson Mandela's journey as a revolutionary and his involvement with the African National Congress (ANC), spanning the years just before Mandela's arrest in 1960 until his passing in December 2013. Landau is a professor of history at the University of Maryland at College Park, as well as a fellow of the History Centre of the University of Johannesburg. Landau delves into the complex relationships between Mandela and his contemporaries, such as Walter Sisulu, Oliver Tambo, and other key figures in the anti-apartheid movement. This book offers the *sui generis* perspective on Mandela's political ideology, his strategies for achieving freedom, and his evolution as a leader. Landau's in-depth research and interviews with people who intimately knew Mandela provide a deep understanding of Mandela's character, his beliefs, and his motivations.

*Spear* chronicles, in hindsight, our comprehension of Mandela with emphasis on this intense, yet comparatively overlooked period of escalation in the fight against apartheid. Although neither a biography, nor a history of a militia, Landau's work is a gripping narration about ordinary civilians arguing and acting in unison, yet *in extremis*. By placing in context, the activities of both Mandela and Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) amidst anticolonial shifts and black Marxism in the early 1960s, *Spear* also addresses contemporary transnational antiracism protests, as well as global struggles against oppression.

While the book can be dense at times, it offers a compelling account that sheds new light on the struggle against apartheid in South Africa. The title *Spear* refers to the symbol of the spear, which has been used as a political symbol throughout African history, representing strength, courage, and unity. The book delves into the complex political and social dynamics that shaped the anti-apartheid movement and the role played by key figures, such as Mandela. The book explores the complex dynamics of the movement, including the various factions and ideologies that shaped it, as well as the internal and external forces that influenced its trajectory.

In *Spear: Mandela and the Revolutionaries*, Landau approaches the structure and themes of the book by focusing on the intersection of Nelson Mandela's leadership and the

broader struggle against apartheid in South Africa. The book is divided into three parts, each focusing on a different phase of Mandela's life and the struggle for racial justice in South Africa.

The first part of the book focuses on the early years of Mandela's activism, including his involvement in the ANC and his opposition to the apartheid regime. This section provides a detailed account of the political and social conditions that shaped Mandela's worldview and helped him become one of the key leaders of the anti-apartheid movement.

The second part of the book focuses on Mandela's imprisonment and the effect this had on the movement. This section highlights the role that Mandela's imprisonment played in inspiring activists both within South Africa and around the world and explores the various ways in which the struggle against apartheid continued to evolve and adapt during this period.

The final part of the book focuses on Mandela's release from prison and his leadership role in the post-apartheid era. This section explores the challenges and opportunities that Mandela faced as he sought to reconcile the various factions within South African society and build a new, more just society. Throughout the book, Landau touches on key historical themes and landmark developments, such as the Sharpeville massacre, the Soweto uprising, and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. He also explores the various strategies and tactics used by the anti-apartheid movement, including boycotts, strikes, and armed resistance.

After the 1960 Sharpeville police shootings of civilian protesters, Mandela, and his comrades in the mass-resistance order of the ANC and the South African Communist Party (SACP) pioneered the use of force, and formed MK, or Spear of the Nation. As a civilian-based militia, MK stockpiled weapons and waged a war of sabotage against the state with pipe bombs, Molotov cocktails, as well as dynamite. In retort, the state passed draconian laws, militarised its police, and incarcerated its opponents short of trial. In what appears a rear-view mirror glimpse into history, Landau also provides a chart of two parallel processes in the 1940s and 1950s, marking the foundations of the formation of MK. These processes, the elevation of the Youth League's vision, the promotion of Mandela's closest patron, Walter Sisulu, as well as the radicalisation of support in Natal, reset the trajectory of the ANC.

With the declaration of the state of emergency in March 1960 by Hendrik Verwoerd, both Mandela and the leadership of the ANC called for the fast-paced reassessment and reorganisation of the ANC and the SACP – since the nature of the effort against apartheid had just morphed. These transformations revolved around revisiting non-violence as a strategy in the fight against the oppressive regime, and perhaps replacing it with a call to arms. During these shifts, activists split the ANC into two: the pan-Africanist anti-communist faction broke away and became the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), as the founding Youth League.

Following the creation of MK, the persuasive efforts by Mandela shifted towards mobilisation and sending men abroad for military training, as well as the role of personal



morasses, trial, and error, as well as sheer luck. In grounding his revolutionary endeavours on theory, Mandela sought to prepare MK by immersing himself in class, alliance-tolerant, relativistic, urban-generated, but action-oriented Chinese Communist thought imbued with a pan-Africanist anti-government revolutionism of Anton Lembede. Yet, the enigma of MK remained its pertinence to a South African model of a small, strict hierarchy of guerrillas whose membership was steeped in secrecy. MK would thus remain a mystery until demystified by its activities. In this instance, Indres Naidoo was ridiculed for his timidity in not working for MK, whereas he was already a trainee who just could not admit to such – thus marking the genesis of “going underground”.

While MK executed its first attempt at what appeared like guerrilla attacks, with both expected and unexpected consequences, Mandela had excursions to the north, following African independence. Although Mandela’s solicitous visit to Africa matched with his personal incapacitation on the home front, his interactions with heads of state transmuted his attitude. His demeanour changed and oozing with confidence, he led the resolution by the Action Council of National Executive Committee (NEC) to shift from the Party towards an African national liberation with the ANC as its vanguard.

In what appeared a significant setback for the struggle for liberation in South Africa, the ANC was banned by the apartheid government in 1962, and many of its leaders were arrested, including Nelson Mandela, who was sentenced to life imprisonment. In response, MK carried out several sabotage operations against government targets, including power stations and government buildings. Overall, in 1962, the struggle for liberation in South Africa was marked by a significant increase in government repression against anti-apartheid groups, but also by the emergence of armed resistance and a determination to continue the fight for freedom.

The period between mid-1963 and mid-1964 was a critical time in the South African liberation struggle, marked by significant political and social developments. The Rivonia Trial, which took place in that period, was a landmark event in South African history. The trial centred on the charges of sabotage and conspiracy to overthrow the apartheid government brought against ten leaders of the ANC, including Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, and Ahmed Kathrada. The accused were charged under the Suppression of Communism Act (No. 44 of 1950) and the newly enacted Sabotage Act (No. 76 of 1962).

In *Spear: Mandela and the Revolutionaries*, Landau argues that Mandela was a central figure in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa, and his leadership played a critical role in bringing about the end of apartheid and the establishment of a more just society. Landau also argues that Mandela’s vision of a non-racial and democratic South Africa was not only a response to the injustices of apartheid, but also an attempt to draw on broader traditions of African humanism and democratic governance.

In terms of his conclusions, Landau suggests that while Mandela’s leadership was instrumental in ending apartheid, the work of building a more just society is a continuous process that requires ongoing effort and commitment. He also emphasises the importance of truth and reconciliation in the aftermath of apartheid, arguing that these processes



could help to foster healing and a sense of shared responsibility among South Africans.

In terms of its strengths, *Spears* can be lauded for providing a comprehensive and detailed account of Nelson Mandela's life and the broad struggle against apartheid in South Africa. The author provides valuable insights into Mandela's leadership and his role in bringing about the end of apartheid. Landau's analysis of the broad historical context and the various strategies and tactics used by the anti-apartheid movement helps readers understand the complexity of the struggle against apartheid. The book is well researched and drew on a range of primary and secondary sources.

In general, the weaknesses of the publication stem from the fact that some readers have criticised the book for being too focused on Mandela, and not providing enough analysis of other key figures and movements within the anti-apartheid struggle. At the same time the book is quite dense and may be difficult for some readers to follow, particularly those who are less familiar with the history of apartheid in South Africa. The author's writing style can be somewhat academic, which may make the book less accessible to general readers than perhaps scholars interested in the history of the liberation struggle.

Overall, *Spears* is a comprehensive and engaging account of Mandela's life and the struggle against apartheid in South Africa. Landau's research and insights offer a valuable perspective on one of the most important political figures of the twentieth century. The audience for *Spears: Mandela and the Revolutionaries* is likely to be a wide range of individuals interested in the history of apartheid in South Africa and the struggle for racial justice. These include scholars and researchers in the fields of history, political science, and African studies, as well as general readers who are interested in learning more about this pivotal period in South African history.

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