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*Spear: Mandela and the Revolutionaries*

Following the release of Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela in February 1990, most international media focused on his role as an icon of forgiveness, a peacemaker who realized that the way forward for South Africa lay in reconciliation and in the formation of (a somewhat idealized) multicultural democracy. In this interpretation of his vision, past divisions, oppression, injustice, and state-sponsored violence (which had enjoyed at least tacit widespread support among the white electorate) were to be acknowledged (for example though the Truth and Reconciliation Commission) but then subsumed by the process of nation building. This was confirmed by the unfolding political process, including the Government of National Unity, Mandela’s refusal to accept a second term of office as president, and a host of symbolic gestures such as his inviting his jailers to his inauguration, his having both black and white bodyguards, his joint acceptance of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1993 with F. W. de Klerk, his having tea (he actually drank coffee) with Betsie Verwoerd in 1995, and his appointment of Zelda la Grange to a variety of secretarial roles from 1994, culminating in that of his private secretary in 1999. Admittedly, there were still his conservative detractors who kept reminding anyone who would give them airtime about what they saw as his “violent terrorist” past where he and his comrades were determined to overthrow the state—and the whole capitalist system—through violent and bloodthirsty revolution. However, through to his death in 2013, his status as the exemplar of unity, forgiveness, and reconciliation was by far the dominant image of Mandela as person and politician. So much so that, against the background of the post-Mbeki African National Congress (ANC) government’s failure to effectively deal with corruption and offer a better life for all, there is currently a growing and (in my interpretation) lamentable tendency among students and other commentators to view him as a sellout.
Against this background, Landau’s meticulously researched and detailed book is a crucially important one. My original misgivings about yet another exploration of the life and times of Mandela (is there really anything new to say?) were soon dispelled. I got to know Paul some years ago when he had already been working on the book for a considerable period of time. He then spent even more time working on it—more than a decade in fact. The list of sources is extremely impressive, covering a wide variety of archives (both physical and internet), and including papers, letters, trial records, recently released CIA and US State Department material, and somewhere around 250 interviews (published and unpublished, conducted both by the author and others). Significantly both uncoerced and coerced material is included. Those interviewed and whose contribution is discussed cover participants from Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) and its allies, as well as its enemies and fellow contenders and competitors for power. “Mandela and his fellow radicals are understood not so much from their writings, as from their actions—as people making themselves who they were.” There is also a conscious effort to shift the focus away from interpreting the history of the period “through the eyes of educated White people fighting apartheid” and to focus instead on the role of the black men and women who led and conducted the Struggle under the “genuine leadership” of Mandela at the center of MK, without losing sight of its nonracial dynamic and the contribution of ordinary activists and citizens (p. 12).

The book opens with the “crisis” of March 1960 when police emptied the magazines of their automatic weapons into a fleeing crowd in front of Sharpeville’s central police station. Landau then takes a brief step back to the development of links between the ANC and the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA, later the South African Communist Party, SACP) in the post-WWII years, the breakaway of the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), the growing role of Mandela in ANC leadership structures, and the interaction between the personal and political lives of Mandela and his comrades (a recurring theme). Landau goes on to explore how, in the face of increasing state repression and the routinization of violence perpetuated by the state, Mandela and other black South African activists were convinced that there was no viable alternative to defeat the apartheid social formation but to adopt armed struggle. In doing so, they were influenced by the dominant ideologies of anticolonialism, Pan-Africanism, and Marxism, much debated at the time. The driving force behind this change in focus came from within the ANC and MK, not from the white communist agitators so beloved of the apartheid propaganda machine, an interpretation that characterizes much of the existing literature. However, links with the CPSA/SACP were essential in facilitating this process and operationalizing it. While Mandela would follow Sisulu into the CPSA, probably in 1955, and certainly adopted a Marxist ideology (Landau refers to him and his comrades as “Black Marxists” on a number of occasions), even serving on the Central Committee, the author also makes it clear that he should continue to be seen predominantly as an African nationalist. Moreover, due to the skilled tactical strategy of Mandela and his comrades, even Chief Albert Lutuli, the ANC president, who was opposed to violence, communism, and worker action and liberationist rhetoric which threatened “nonracialist harmony” (p. 94), reluctantly came to concede that the ANC should disavow criticizing armed struggle and working with communists as long as it did not totally transform the organization into a military formation or a tool of the CPSA/SACP. In fact, after the Rivonia Trial, he would issue “a statement supporting MK as a reasonable reaction to the state’s brutality” (p. 265). Landau’s analysis of these trends and developments, and Mandela’s skill in shaping and navigating them, is both exceptionally well informed and nuanced.

The middle section of the book looks at the unfolding development and conduct of the armed struggle. Operational planning, targets, logistical
modes, activities, and the challenges faced by MK as it organized underground are explored through the lives of lesser-known members. There is a sensitive and well-argued discussion about the intricacies and stresses of operating underground, operationally and psychologically/personally. We are even given some intriguing insights into the technology of bomb making. The activities of the breakaway PAC and its armed wing, Poqo, receive sympathetic attention—an interpretation often lacking in histories of the ANC and CPSA/SACP. So too do the behind-the-scenes talks about unity between the ANC and PAC in the early 1960s—a theme almost completely ignored in the Struggle historiography of the period. Further light is also cast on Mandela’s travels to other African countries in 1962 and the arguably pragmatic and skillful way he downplayed his own, and the ANC’s, links to, and collaboration with, the SACP. In Landau’s analysis, this was largely a tactic designed not to alienate financial and other support from within and outside the county. This broad section ends with an analysis of Operation Maybuye: “a plan for an invasion of trained guerilla commandos, in order to spur an uprising in the towns and the countryside” (p. 210).

On one level, this ending is understandable—Landau set out to explore the failed attempt at a revolution. I am nevertheless left with an uneasy feeling that it is (unintentionally) slightly too pessimistic. I feel that he should have picked up more fully on the reconceptualization and revival of armed struggle, attempts to make the country ungovernable, and the revival of the idea of a “people’s war” as tactics after the Soweto uprising in the concluding section. However, despite my unease at this, it is essentially a quibble that does not significantly detract from the book’s impact. Spear is an invaluable contribution to our understanding of the armed struggle. We are provided with fresh insights into the thoughts and actions of Mandela and his fellow revolutionaries and the development of the Struggle, and the interplay between Marxism and African Nationalism, at a level largely absent from the existing historiography. Despite the focus on black African activists (countering the apartheid propaganda about white and Indian activists manipulating and duping their black comrades), the activities of their white, Indian and coloured comrades are seamlessly integrated and explored. The role and contribution of previously neglected comrades is emphasized. I found the mentions to Peter Molefe, the first victim of MK’s armed struggle as a result of the premature detonation of the bomb he was carrying, moving and an important testimony. We are given fresh insights into the thinking, actions, and making of informers, informants, and other enemies of the Struggle who served as state witnesses and undermined its effectiveness. Landau’s exploration of the difficulties of using coerced testimony and that of those who had rejected, or opposed, the Struggle, as well as his use of this evidence, is sophisticated and nuanced. His expos-
ure of the (complex and sometimes contradictory or vacillating) role of international supporters of apartheid and formations such as the CIA and MI-6 is similarly skillful and informative. So too is his exploration of the contribution of other African nations and the training and support offered by the German Democratic Republic, the USSR and (despite the Sino-Soviet split) the People’s Republic of China. Unpopular in the more recent international climate, the links between the ANC and Israel, who offered technical and military training support through the Mossad are explored. A useful part of the book is the reminder that, even after its adoption of armed struggle, the ANC and MK continued to focus on the centrality of political work, a stance vehemently held by Walter Sisulu among others. Predictably, but no less valuable because of this, we are also again reminded of the failure of MK to make significant impact in the areas outside of the cities. Sometimes Landau’s immersion in his sources and the tremendous amount of work that he has put into his research means that one needs to concentrate seriously when reading so as not to get lost in the detail, but the detail that is there is fascinating and valuable for promoting thinking, reflection and further research.

I particularly enjoyed discussion of “Mandela’s Bookcase,” the eclectic range of sources ranging from classics such as The Communist Manifesto and Das Kapital, through Che Guevara and Mao Zedong, books on Malaysia, Burma, and the Philippines, Clausewitz, Sun Tzu, books on the Spanish Civil War, Denys Reitz’s Commando and other works on the South African War, works on Afrikaner history and the history of the trekboers, to works on Zionist militancy that influenced the development of Mandela and, through him, his co-revolutionaries’ ideologies and practice. Perhaps reflecting my own personal history and interests too much, I was also fascinated by the discussion of the development of the armed power of MK, ranging from Molotov cocktails, home concoctions and detonators, cooking up “Black powder” on a stove, the use of cow dung in the creation of hand grenades (something I had never come across before), the theft of dynamite and detonators, through to more sophisticated explosive devices. This is accompanied by discussion of the infrastructural and symbolic targets of MK operations, including, among others, the telecommunications and electrical pylons well known through the then-contemporary press through government buildings such as pass offices and post offices, school board offices, electrical substations, the Old Synagogue in Pretoria where political trials such as the Treason Trial and the Rivonia Trial had taken place, the Portuguese Embassy (the other major colonialist power in the region), and even the house of the minister of agriculture in Pretoria (which was completely destroyed). Landau also reminds us of MK’s mandate not to harm people in these attacks at this stage. Discussion of the disguises adopted by activists underground also tweaked the “Boy’s own” hidden parts of my personality. As you should be increasingly coming to see, there is something in this work for everybody!

For me, most significantly in the face of contemporary attempts to diminish the role of Mandela and his comrades, or even dismiss them as sellouts, Landau clearly reminds us of the degree to which they sought to bring revolutionary change and create a new society. This work should occupy a central space on the bookshelf of any scholar of South African history, especially that of the liberation struggle. While I was writing this review, the work won the Martin A. Klein Prize in African History from the American Historical Association. This honor is well deserved.