

Mandela, Communism and South Africa

by Stephen Ellis

The documentary evidence of Nelson Mandela's membership of the South African Communist Party can contribute to a more truthful assessment of the country's modern history, says the scholar who uncovered it, Stephen Ellis.

A recently discovered document shows that Nelson Mandela was a member of the South African Communist Party (SACP) in the early 1960s, when he became the first commander of the guerrilla organisation *Umkhonto we Sizwe* (Spear of the Nation). [Mandela](#), the first president of post-apartheid South Africa (1994-99) after his release from twenty-seven years' imprisonment, has always denied having been a communist.

The document is in a collection of private papers kept at the University of Cape Town. The vital paragraph is contained in the minutes of a SACP meeting held on 13 May 1982 at which a veteran former member of the party's central committee, [John Pule Motshabi](#), explained to those present the background to Mandela's recruitment.

At least six other senior members of the [SACP](#) have confirmed Mandela's party membership. "Mandela denies that he was ever a member of the party but I can tell you that he was a member of the party for a period", another former central-committee member, [Hilda Bernstein](#), told an interviewer in 2004. Yet another leading communist, the late [Joe Matthews](#), has said that Mandela served on the SACP's central committee at the same time as himself.

The decisive shift

The orthodox view of the African National Congress ([ANC's](#)) armed struggle has long been based on Mandela's classic [speech](#) at the [Rivonia trial](#) in Pretoria in 1964, famous for his "I am prepared to die" peroration. Mandela, facing a likely death sentence, explained why he was advocating violence against a state that denied voting rights to the majority of the population and a government that refused dialogue. He gave a brief account of the formation of *Umkhonto we Sizwe*, implying that the decision to turn to armed struggle arose from discussions in the second quarter of 1961. He said that the key decision was taken "at the beginning of June 1961".

Members of both the SACP and the ANC have continued to insist that the two organisations, working in parallel, came to the decision to begin an armed struggle at about the same time. As allies, they agreed to found a new [organisation](#) - *Umkhonto we Sizwe* - that would be nominally independent of the ANC, which itself remained formally committed to non-violence.

Now, historical documents show the truth to have been rather different. South Africans of various political persuasions were willing to take up arms against the government after the [Sharpeville](#) massacre of March 1960, but in this new context it was the Communist Party that had the best international connections. Four top party members secretly visited Beijing,

where they had discussions with Mao Zedong personally, and Moscow. In both capitals they received assurances of support.

When they returned to South Africa, a SACP congress held before the end of 1960 voted to [launch](#) an armed struggle. But the SACP - with a strength at the time of at most only 500 members - needed wider support (see Stephen Ellis & Tsepho Sechaba, [Comrades Against Apartheid: The ANC and the South African Communist Party in Exile](#) [Indiana University Press, 1992]).

Here, Mandela played the crucial role in getting the backing of key ANC committees and isolating the organisation's [president](#), Albert Luthuli, who remained opposed to violence. Indeed, Luthuli's [award](#) of the Nobel peace prize in 1960 came near to the moment when members of his own organisation were to throw themselves into the armed struggle. "Luthuli was simply brushed aside", one party veteran told an interviewer in 1991. "He was told that MK [*Umkhonto we Sizwe*] was separate from the ANC, that the ANC should stay committed to non-violence - but that he shouldn't expel individual ANC members who participated in MK".

The real currents

Umkhonto we Sizwe [undertook](#) its first attacks on 16 December 1961. The interest of these new insights is both the light they shed on Nelson Mandela's political [career](#), and that they arrive just before South Africans celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the armed struggle at the end of 2011.

The revelation that [Mandela](#) was a prominent Communist Party member does not detract from his historic [stature](#). It does, however, mean that the version of history propagated by the ANC, which has governed South Africa since 1994, is seriously flawed.

The leading journalist [Allister Sparks](#) has noted that the ANC, "steeped in a socialist ideology throughout the struggle years", saw its intellectual universe collapse during the period after the fall of the Berlin wall when it was preparing to come to power. As it took the reins of South Africa's state the movement was "pitched into a globalised free-enterprise environment it didn't understand and was reluctant to accept." In its seventeen years in power, shorn of its pro-Soviet ideology, the ANC has increasingly emphasised its right to govern by reference to its revolutionary [past](#) - in particular by claiming that its own armed struggle was mainly responsible for the overthrow of apartheid.

It was one of South Africa's most penetrating analysts, the late [Frederik van Zyl Slabbert](#), who observed that "one thing the 'old' and the 'new' South Africa have in common is a passion for inventing history. History is not seen as a dispassionate inquiry into what happened, but rather as a part of political mobilisation promoting some form of collective self-interest."

This is exactly how the myth of the armed struggle is being used in South Africa today. South Africa's rulers urgently need to look long and hard at the history of the last fifty years if they

are to get to grips with the real currents in their society. Perhaps the revelation of Nelson Mandela's party membership can make a small contribution to that process.

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