

Mandela's violence: the glamorization of passive resistance

[People](#), [Nelson Mandela](#)



Nelson Mandela was the first black president of South Africa, a political prisoner, and a vastly known revolutionary. His advances to gain freedom in South Africa was and still is influential to many politicians, activists and revolutionaries throughout time. We will be taking a close look at the life of Mandela, analyzing his use of violence and comparing it to Frantz Fanon's *On Violence* chapter from his widely known novel, *The Wretched of the Earth*, and critiquing the glamorization of passive resistance through Mandela.

Rolihlahla Mandela was born 18 July 1918 into the Madiba clan in the village of Mvezo, South Africa. He was raised by his mother, Nonqaphi Nosekeni, and his father Nkosi Mphakanyiswa Gadla Mandela. His father was the principal counsellor to the Acting King of the Thembu people. His name, Rolihlahla, means pulling the branch of a tree, but colloquially it means troublemaker. In 1925, he attends school in Qunu, South Africa and his teacher, Miss Mtingane, had asked him what his name was and he gave her his African name, and she refused and asked him again what his Christian name was and he had told her he does not have a Christian name. She had then told him from that day forward his name would be Nelson. In 1930, at just 12 years old, his father passed away from a lung illness. Shortly after, his mother let him go to attend a ritual where a boy becomes a man, this was also called initiation. The king takes him under his wing. Due to his father's status and living with the king, Nelson was given the best education a black South African could get. He attended middle school at Clarkebury Boarding Institute and went on to Healdtown, a Wesleyan high school. By 1939, Mandela began his studies for a Bachelor of Arts degree at the

University College of Fort Hare but did not complete his degree due to being expelled for joining in on a student protest. On his arrival back to the Palace, the king was furious with him. The king had suggested he ought to be married, Mandela believed he was not ready to be married and so he ran away with his cousin Justice to Johannesburg where they worked as mine security officers. After meeting Walter Sisulu, an estate agent, he was introduced to Lazer Sidelsky. He then did his articles through a firm of attorneys Witkin, Eidelman and Sidelsky. Mandela then begins to informally attend ANC meetings. Finally, in 1943 Mandela completed his BA at the University of South Africa and had decided to go back to Fort Hare for his graduation. In 1944, he helped to form the ANC Youth League (ANCYL). Later on in that year, Mandela fell in love and married Walter Sisulu's cousin, Evelyn Mase, a nurse. The couple had two sons, Madiba Thembekile "Thembi" and Makgatho, and two daughters both called Makaziwe, the first of whom died in infancy. Evelyn and Mandela's marriage began to fall apart once he spent a lot of his time with the ANC. His wife believed he was neglecting his fatherly duties and their relationship became rocky. It has also been reported that Mandela had affairs with other women during their marriage and that he got physical with Evelyn at some point. He and his wife divorced in 1958. Later on in the year he meets Nomzamo Winnie Madikizela and they fall in love and get married. The couple have two daughters: Zenani and Zindzi.

On March 21, 1960, an incident in the black township of Sharpeville, South Africa, police fired on a crowd of black South Africans, killing or wounding

some 250 of them. It was one of the first and most violent demonstrations against apartheid in South Africa. A member of the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC) organized the anti-apartheid protest. In order to reduce the possibility of violence, he wrote a letter to the Sharpeville police commissioner announcing the upcoming protest and emphasizing that its participants would be non-violent. Around 7, 000 South Africans gathered at the Sharpeville police station. At the scene, there were about 300 police officers. A police officer was knocked down and protesters began moving forward to see what had happened. Police quickly began shooting at the protesters without a warning shot. 69 Africans were killed and 186 were wounded, with most shot in the back. Tensions between authorities and Black South Africans arose. The Sharpeville Massacre awakened the international community to the horrors of apartheid. The massacre also sparked hundreds of mass protests by black South Africans, many of which were ruthlessly and violently crushed by the South African police and military. On March 30, the South African government declared a state of emergency which made any protest illegal. The ban remained in effect until August 31, 1960. During those five months, roughly 25, 000 people were arrested throughout the nation including Mandela. The South African government then created the Unlawful Organizations Act of 1960 which banned anti-apartheid groups such as the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC) and the African National Congress (ANC). Days before the end of the Treason Trial, Mandela travelled to Pietermaritzburg to speak at the All-in Africa Conference. The conference resolved that he should write to Prime Minister Verwoerd requesting a national convention on a non-racial constitution. He also warned the prime

minister that if he did not agree there will be a national strike that would make South Africa a republic. After he and his colleagues were acquitted in the Treason Trial, Mandela was forced to go underground. No one knew of his whereabouts except his colleagues and wife Winnie. While Mandela was underground, he began planning a national strike for the 29th, 30th and 31st of March. The strike was called off in face of massive mobilization of state security. In June of 1961 Nelson Mandela was asked to lead the armed struggle and helped establish Umkhonto weSizwe (Spear of the Nation), which launched on December 16th, 1961 with a series of explosions. Mandela adopted the name David Motsamayi and had secretly travelled all over Africa and also travelled to England to gain support for the armed struggle. On his trip, he had gained military training in Ethiopia and Morocco and finally returned back to South Africa in July of 1962. Mandela was in a car returning back from KwaZulu-Natal where he had met with ANC President Albert Luthuli to speak about his trip and inform them of new knowledge he had gained. Mandela was road blocked by police outside of Howick and arrested him for illegally leaving the country and attempting to incite a worker's strike on August 5th, 1962. He was sentenced to five years which he began to serve at Pretoria Local Prison. . He was then transferred to Robben Island on May 27th, 1963 and returned to Pretoria by June. Within that month the ANC hideout, Liliesleaf, in Rivonia, Johannesburg was raided and arrested ANC/ Communist party members, Walter Sisulu, Denis Goldberg, Govan Mbeki, Ahmed Kathrada, Lionel ' Rusty' Bernstein, Raymond Mhlaba, James Kantor, Elias Motsoaledi and Andrew Mlangeni. The trial is called the Rivonia trial and on December 3rd Mandela pleads not

guilty in the accusation of attempting to overthrow the government. At the courthouse, he gives his famous Rivonia speech in which he states This then is what the ANC is fighting. Their struggle is a truly national one. It is a struggle of the African people, inspired by their own suffering and their own experience. It is a struggle for the right to live. During my lifetime I have dedicated myself to this struggle of the African people. I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.(Mandela, 1964). He and seven other men were sent to life imprisonment at Robben Island whereas, their white comrade Denis Goldberg was sent to a white prison.

During Mandela's imprisonment, his wife Winnie was being harassed by authorities. They would arrest her right before her two daughters would come home from school so they would come to an empty home. One of Winnie's arrests lasted longer than the others. She was in prison for a total of 491 days where she was tortured and treated inhumanely. Her husband on the other hand, was only allowed to visits a year and was allowed to also send two letters a year. He was not allowed to have any physical contact with his visitors until many years later. When Mandela was arrested his daughters were toddlers when he was arrested and were not allowed to visit him until they turned 16. Mandela's mother passed away in 1968, and his eldest son Thembekile was killed in a car accident along with ten others. He

was not allowed to attend either of the funerals. In 1982, he was transferred to Pollsmoor Prison in Cape Town with Sisulu, Mhlaba and Mlangeni. Kathrada joined them in later on in October. Mandela is offered to be released from prison by President PW Botha's if he renounces violence and he declines the offer through his daughter Zindzi. From 1985-1988 Mandela deals with a series of health issues from getting prostate surgery to being diagnosed with tuberculosis. He then is Moved to Victor Verster Prison in Paarl where he is held for 14 months in a cottage. He begin to meet with President de Klerk to resolve the race war taking place on the streets of South Africa. In 1990, the ANC is unbanned and shortly after on February 11th, Mandela is finally free. In 1993, he is awarded the Nobel Peace Prize with President de Klerk. Mandela urges the people to vote in the upcoming election, he hoped it would be how the people would finally gain their freedom. On May 10th, 1994 Nelson Mandela is inaugurated as South Africa's first democratically elected President and Apartheid is finally banned.

In contrast, Mandela's politics leading up the Rivonia trial has been heavily critiqued. Mandela himself believes that his politics at the time were not very effective. He was described as violent but I believe otherwise and so would Fanon. We have seen how the government agent uses a language of pure violence. The agent does not alleviate oppression or mask domination. He displays and demonstrates the with the clear conscious of the law enforcer, and brings violence into the homes and minds of the colonized subject. (Fanon, 4). Frantz Fanon was a psychiatrist, philosopher, writer and revolutionary from the French colony of Martinique in the Caribbean ocean.

He analyzed the psychology of the colonized subject and endorsed armed resistance. Fanon believed that in order for violence to take place, it always comes from those in power. Apartheid was a violence act against the African people therefore, the African people are incapable of being violent it only makes sense to be armed in defense of the oppressed subject.

Decolonization is always a violent event. (Fanon, 1). In this case, decolonization he speaks of is the walk to freedom from Apartheid. Mandela and his brethren were captured and put in prison for treason but was it truly treason? They were simply freeing themselves from the violent and oppressive system of Apartheid and reciprocating the energy as their oppressors. One must fight for his country. Because nonviolence worked so well as a tactic for effecting change and was demonstrably improving their lives, some black people chose to use weapons to defend the nonviolent Freedom Movement. (Cobbs, 1). After Mandela was released from prison he adopted the nonviolent love thy oppressors mentality. For the oppressed, it is nearly impossible to show love to those who have put your people through a living hell. Despite seeing potentiality in violence, Fanon does not think that violence should be used lightly or as an end unto itself. Fanon also documents the dangerous and negative effects of violence. The physical aspect of violence is obviously harmful to the the oppressed. Fanon is not saying that in order to free oneself, the oppressed should burn everything down, he is simply stating that the act of freeing the oppressed, there is always violence and it is a violent act.

In today's world, many non violent activists are overly glamorized. The oppressed adopt the love thy oppressor that will never bring them true freedom and liberation. Passive resistance has been overly glamorized by mainly white liberals. Civil Rights icons like Martin Luther King is seen as a true freedom fighter and an example of what activism should truly look like. Not everything is solved by holding hands and singing Kumbaya. Nonviolence recognizes that evildoers are also victims and are not evil people. This ideology does not makes sense because an evildoer is essentially, evil. We have seen that this violence throughout the colonial period, although constantly on edge, runs on empty. We have seen it channelled through the emotional release of dance or possession. We have seen it exhaust itself in fratricidal struggles. The challenge now is to seize this violence as it realigns itself. Whereas it once revealed in myths and contrived ways to commit collective suicide, a fresh set of circumstances will now enable it to change directions. (Fanon, 21).

Furthermore, Nelson Mandela has influenced thousands of marginalized and privileged people worldwide. His politics may be critiqued in whichever aspect of his life, whether he was violent or peaceful. He will always be the father of South Africa, a human rights advocate and the best of teachers. The life Mandela lead showed the world that he was our king. Our black, shining king that was willing to die for the liberation of his people because he loved them so much.