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Mandela, Luthuli, and Nonviolence in the South African Freedom Struggle

Vinay Lal

*To the memory of Ronald Harrison, 1940-2011
artist, anti-apartheid activist, friend, and a gentle soul*

Prolegomenon

If the twentieth century was a century of total war, quite possibly the bloodiest period in history, it was also, unusually, witness to the most creative experiments in nonviolent resistance. Mohandas Gandhi, the author of the idea of *satyagraha*, “truth-force,” and the principal and certainly most well-known architect of India’s freedom struggle, was for much of the twentieth century the moral conscience of humankind; and it is from Gandhi that Martin Luther King, Jr. is commonly thought to have derived the inspiration and method that led him, in turn, to stage a remarkable demonstration in the American South of the power of nonviolent social transformation.¹ Many other names have been mentioned in association with the history of nonviolent resistance in the twentieth century. Some are now celebrated figures in their own right, among them the Chicano labor leader Cesar Chavez; the Dalai Lama, the spiritual and political leader of Tibetans, whose very laugh enrages Chinese communist party leaders; and that extraordinary leader of the Pathans, Badshah Khan, justly recognized by Gandhi as the perfect embodiment of nonviolent resistance but whose recent ascendancy in the public estimation of his worth has unfortunately much to do with the need among liberals in the West to discover “good Muslims.”²

Among those who are thought to have followed in the path of Gandhi and King, the name of Nelson Mandela reigns supreme. The careful and one might say conscientious student of the history of nonviolence has perhaps often had, for reasons to which I shall turn shortly, some difficulty in placing Mandela unambiguously in

the lineage of Gandhi and King, but the deification of Mandela permitted little criticism in this respect in his lifetime, more particularly after his release from long years of confinement in South African jails, the dismantling of the apartheid state, his assumption of the Presidency of South Africa after the electoral triumph of the African National Congress (ANC) in the first free elections in the country's history, and his magnanimous gesture in setting up the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in an attempt to have the oppressor confront his sins without the fear of retribution from the victims of apartheid. Thus, long before his passing on 5 December 2013, Mandela had already been inducted into the canon of the "heroes of nonviolence"; all over the world, but especially in India, his name was insistently invoked as the greatest link to Gandhi. It may be said that Mandela himself was mindful of the immense honor bestowed upon him as the inheritor of Gandhi's legacy, and that, in the evening of his life, he savored this association. *Time* magazine's end-of-the-millennium issue (31 December 1999) introduced Mandela's homage to Gandhi, "The Sacred Warrior," with the following words: "The liberator of South Africa looks at the seminal work of the liberator of India."

I: The ANC and the Advocacy of Nonviolence

The long and principled struggle against the apartheid state of South Africa became the paradigmatic instance of anticolonial resistance in the third quarter of the twentieth century. Though it was in South Africa that Gandhi first tested out his ideas of non-violent resistance, he confined his struggles to the rights of Indians. The long span of Gandhi's life in South Africa, extending to over two decades, has come under rigorous scrutiny in recent years.³ His most unforgiving critics have had no hesitation in pronouncing him an outright racist; some others remain troubled by his decision to exclude black South Africans from his nonviolent campaigns, and nearly everyone finds his position puzzling and even controversial. When Gandhi departed for India on 18 July 1914, on the eve of the outbreak of World War I, his second son Manilal stayed behind in South Africa to carry out the work commenced by his father. Meanwhile, the South African Native National Congress (SANNC), had been founded in 1912; just a little over a decade later, it was transformed into the African National Congress. The ANC derived

its inspiration from the Indian National Congress, which would become the model for nationalist organizations throughout much of the colonized world,⁴ and partly from the Natal Indian Congress, an organization founded by Gandhi in 1894 to help South African Indians secure their rights.⁵ The ANC was, for at least two decades after its inception, hobbled by disunity, by the activity of competing organizations, and most significantly by its elite character and its aloofness from the masses; but, as one historian of “passive resistance in South Africa” has suggested, the ANC’s recourse to nonviolence may have been sharply curtailed by less material considerations. “Passive resistance is usually regarded as compatible with Indian philosophy,” wrote Leo Kuper, “an expression of Indian asceticism and quietism. Among South African whites, at any rate, it is thought to be in the nature of the Indian that he should resist passively.”⁶

This early history of nonviolent resistance in South Africa is not of immediate concern, but it foreshadows the difficulties that are encountered in writing the history of ANC’s engagement with nonviolence. The election in 1948 of a National Party government set the stage for the formal introduction of apartheid and a draconian regime of racial separation enforced through legislative measures and police action. If the first casualty was the Communist Party of South Africa, which was disbanded in 1950, the unusually oppressive measures—among them the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act (1949), the Group Areas Act (1950), the Population Registration Act (1950), and the Immorality Act (1950)—energized the ANC and allied organizations, principally the South African Indian Congress, into forming a joint plan of resistance. Thus was born the Defiance Campaign of 1952; over 8,500 civil resisters deliberately violated pass laws, went out at night without a curfew pass, and failed to follow regulations that sought to keep blacks, colored people, and Indians out of railway waiting-rooms and coaches reserved for “Europeans only.” Resisters were jailed, and some were dismissed from their positions; at the United Nations, the repression unleashed by the regime became a subject for discussion in the General Assembly. As recorded by a witness to the events a decade later, “for the first time in the history of modern South Africa, the Africans’ militant achievement had kept the initiative hard-won through discipline and self-sacrifice. Only one thing could rob them of such initiative:

violence.”⁷ Four months into the campaign, it was still gathering force; the ANC had finally been transformed into a mass organization, and its paid membership sky-rocketed from 7,000 to 100,000.⁸ If white liberals were astonished by the discipline shown by non-whites, apartheid’s functionaries were alarmed; not surprisingly, “then, with no warning, rioting broke out” — first in Port Elizabeth, then in Johannesburg, Kimberley, and elsewhere.

“The Defiance Campaign,” the ANC leader Albert Luthuli was to write, “was far too orderly and successful for the Government’s liking, and it was growing. The prospect before the white supremacists, if they were going to react to our challenge in a civilised way, was that arrests would continue indefinitely. Behind the thousands already arrested there were more, many more. The challenge of non-violence was more than they could meet. It robbed them of the initiative.”⁹ The ANC, claiming that the riots had been instigated by *agents provocateurs*, unsuccessfully called for an official inquiry; indeed, the official response, justified on the grounds that the state was duty-bound to impose “law and order,” was to call for legislative reprisals against protestors and, using the cloak of the Public Safety Act and the Criminal Law Amendment Act, render all acts of resistance to the state illegal. Albert Luthuli was to say that “the end was in sight,”¹⁰ even if nonviolent actions continued sporadically over the decade. Towards the end of 1952, as the Defiance Campaign ground to a halt, the ANC appeared to unequivocally affirm its principled advocacy of nonviolent resistance by electing Albert Luthuli to the Presidency of the ANC.

II: South Africa’s Christ: Luthuli and the Commitment to Nonviolence

Albert Luthuli, the chief of Groutville, a Zulu and largely Christian community in the Umvoti Mission Reserve in Natal, is scarcely a household name, even among those with an interest in the struggle against apartheid or the history of nonviolent resistance. Yet, there is but little question that he was the most widely respected figure in African politics from the 1950s until his death in 1967, commanding the allegiance not only of the ANC but of all Africans who, in various ways, strove to free themselves of the yoke of colonial rule. His reputation was augmented with the award of the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1961, but a rather more

unusual and telling testament of the reverence in which he was held is provided by the story of a painting of him by the recently deceased artist, Ronald Harrison. When Harrison was but fifteen years old, apartheid's functionaries arrived at the black township of Sophiatown near Johannesburg and dismantled it within a few hours. Harrison was sensitized to apartheid's brutalities at an early age; by his late teens, he had gravitated towards art and also fallen under the spell of Luthuli. Late in 1961, when he was still in his early 20s, Harrison was struck by an epiphany. Why not represent the suffering of black people, he thought to himself, by calling forth the idea of the crucifixion of Christ, rendering Luthuli as "the black Christ" and apartheid's most hated figures and principal ideologues, Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd and Minister of Justice and Police John Vorster, as Roman centurions, "the tormentors of Christ"?¹¹ Harrison would pay a heavy price for this indiscretion, subjected to torture and frequent terms of imprisonment; his painting had to be smuggled into England for safe-keeping and could not be exhibited for over three decades, until several years after the demise of apartheid.

Luthuli had joined the ANC in 1945 and he rose to become president of its provincial Natal branch in 1951. He was to play a critical if understated role in the nonviolent protests of the following year, helping to orchestrate resistance to the notorious pass laws: as a native chief, he was expected to refrain from any direct involvement in politics. Writing later with reference to the Defiance Campaign, Luthuli recalled: "I did not myself defy any law. My job was to remain in the background, to keep up the pressure, and to organize."¹² But he was nevertheless seen as having engaged in deeply transgressive acts, and the apartheid state offered him the choice of renouncing his membership in the ANC or being removed as the elected chief of the Abase-Makolweni Tribe in the Groutville Mission Reserve. Luthuli refused to do either; he was, in consequence, stripped of his chieftainship. The ANC responded, one might say, by electing him as president of the organization; the apartheid state, in turn, placed Luthuli under a banning order which, by renewal every few years, kept him practically under house arrest until his death under highly suspicious circumstances in 1967. The banning of an individual in South Africa under the authority of the Suppression of Communism Act (1950) or the Riotous Assembly Act (1927), however, not only

entailed severe restrictions on the banned person's freedom of speech, mobility, or ability to meet with more than one person—barring family members—at a time; it even made it an offense for anyone to quote the banned person in any publication. The idea, of course, was to render the banned person a public nonentity, to wipe out any public traces of his or her existence.¹³

Luthuli, however, was not one to be easily intimidated, and the text of his public statement upon his dismissal was to set both the tone for his noncompliance and articulate his commitment to nonviolence. He described himself as having joined his “people in the new spirit that moves them today, the spirit that revolts openly and boldly against injustice and expresses itself in a determined and non-violent manner,” and rejected the suggestion that his association with the ANC “in its non-violent Passive Resistance Campaign was an act of disloyalty to the State.” Luthuli signaled his determination to carry out nonviolent resistance in the spirit of Christian teachings, arguing that laws and conditions that tended to “debase human personality, a God-given force,” had to be “relentlessly opposed in the spirit of defiance shown by St. Peter when he said to the rulers of the day: “Shall we obey God or man?”” The “Road to Freedom,” Luthuli submitted, is “via the CROSS,” and the way of the Cross entailed the embrace of nonviolent technique in “fighting for freedom” as “it is the only non-revolutionary, legitimate and humane way that could be used by people denied, as we are, effective constitutional means to further aspirations.”¹⁴

Delivering the Presidential Address to the Annual Conference of the ANC in Queenstown in December 1953, Luthuli offered a brief résumé of the manner in which apartheid had become entrenched in South Africa, arguing further that it was the openness with which the South African state pursued its policies that signified the further deterioration in the political situation. Luthuli minced no words: he declared the regime a “dictatorship,” ruthless in its determination to extirpate all opposition, united in its effort to propagate the theory of the white master race. What is all the more striking, then, is that Luthuli was to affirm the intention of the ANC “to keep on the non-violent plane.”¹⁵ His Presidential Address to the annual conference to the ANC in December 1955, delivered on his behalf by a colleague, is especially illuminating in this respect. The ANC, Luthuli argued, had been “busily engaged in a laudable effort to establish a spirit of defiance of unjust laws and

treatment along non-violent lines and in getting Africans to see that no one is really worthy of freedom until he is prepared to pay the supreme sacrifice for its attainment and defence.” But Luthuli was also prepared to acknowledge that there had been shortcomings, indeed “grievous mistakes,” in the implementation of the “Militant Programme of Action” of 1949: there had been some “laxity in the machinery of the Congress resulting in lack of sound disciplinary behavior in some Congress levels,” and many Africans were yet to understand the full requirements of the gospel of “service and sacrifice for the general and large good without a personal and at that immediate reward.” Luthuli would go so far as to say that “we cannot claim to have prosecuted our campaigns with anything bearing semblance to military efficiency and technique.”¹⁶ But for all these admissions, it is noteworthy that nowhere does Luthuli indicate a willingness to abdicate his belief in the efficacy of non-violence, and the failures of nonviolent resistance are attributed not to any want in the philosophy of nonviolence but to the shortcomings of those charged with leading the ANC. His letter of June 1957 to South Africa’s Prime Minister, while calling attention to his unshakeable belief in the need for the creation of a democratic society in South Africa for all its peoples, reiterates that the ANC “has always sought to achieve its objectives by using non-violent methods”¹⁷ It would have been easy, Luthuli would remind the audience gathered at Oslo to hear him deliver his Nobel Peace Prize address in December 1961, “for the natural feelings of resentment at white domination to have been turned into feelings of hatred and a desire for revenge against the white community,” but in South Africa the black people had assiduously set themselves “against racial vain-gloriousness.” In comparison with Europe, which too had witnessed a series of revolutionary upheavals, “our African revolution—to our credit, is proving to be orderly, quick and comparatively bloodless.”¹⁸

III: Mandela and the Road to the Umkhonto we Sizwe

That a principled commitment to nonviolence remained the policy of the ANC until the early 1960s can scarcely be doubted, and, as I have briefly sought to demonstrate, one can be even more certain that Luthuli remained an unstinting and dedicated advocate of nonviolent resistance. Did the ANC, or some section of it, repudiate the policy of nonviolence when it decided to launch

an armed struggle? Was nonviolence merely deemed ineffective, or did some ANC leaders adopt the view that, where necessary, nonviolent struggle would be augmented by armed resistance? Did those who decided upon initiating an armed wing of the ANC confide in Luthuli or did they, cognizant of the restrictions placed upon his mobility and his inability to make his presence fully felt among ANC leaders and cadres on account of the banning order, quietly sidestep Luthuli and take matters into their own hands? Did the decision to launch the Umkhonto we Sizwe—"Spear of the Nation," the armed wing of the ANC—amount to a deliberate abrogation of ANC policy? These questions have, in recent years, come to the fore and ignited considerable controversy, and it is vitally important to revisit them briefly in the interest of assessing what might be the implications both for the history and theory of nonviolent resistance and the writing of South African history.

There is some evidence that Nelson Mandela, who joined the ANC Youth League in 1944 and was elected its president in 1951 before being elected president of the ANC's Transvaal branch the following year, had been contemplating a turn towards armed struggle as early as 1952-53. Mandela would later admit that he asked Walter Sisulu—his close friend and the Secretary-General of the ANC, who was on a trip to Russia, China, and several other countries in 1953—to inform the Chinese "that we want to start an armed struggle and get arms."¹⁹ Oliver Tambo, another close associate of Mandela and the successor to Sisulu as the ANC's Secretary-General, was to recall many years later that the question of resorting to violence was often raised in the 1950s but "deferred" because of the situation,²⁰ but more arresting is the testimony of Mandela, who in conversations with Richard Stengel in the 1990s in connection with the preparation of his autobiography had this to say: "The Chief [Albert Luthuli] was a passionate disciple of Mahatma Gandhi and he believed in non-violence as a Christian and as a principle . . . Many of us did not . . . because when you regard it as a principle you mean throughout, whatever the position is, you'll stick to non-violence . . . We took up the attitude that we would stick to non-violence only insofar as the conditions permitted that. . . . Our approach was to empower the organization to be *effective* in its leadership. And if the adoption of non-violence gave it that effectiveness, that efficiency, we would pursue non-violence. But if the condition shows that non-violence

was not effective, we would use other means.”²¹ Not less revealing is the conversation, also after his release, between Mandela and his fellow Robben Island inmate Ahmed Kathrada:

Kathrada: Did you read Gandhi too?

Mandela: Oh yes. No, that’s true. No, that’s true.

Kathrada: So, that’s true.

Mandela: But, Nehru was *really* my hero [italics in original].²²

Who is speaking here? Mandela would have us believe that it is not he alone, as he purports to speak on behalf of some others, those — “many of us” — who apparently were persuaded that Luthuli’s leadership was no longer effective, or certainly that non-violence could not “empower the organization to be effective in its leadership.” And how should one construe the argument that nonviolence was no longer deemed to be “effective,” unless some tangible and persuasive measure of effectiveness is advanced? Was nonviolence not effective in mobilizing the masses, or was it not effective in shaming, if not overthrowing, the apartheid state? Just what would have been “effective”? The Defiance Campaign, by all accounts, had instigated a far-flung resistance, with the principled use of nonviolence, to the apartheid state; and, as Luthuli had argued, it was a measure of its success that the state had been ruffled enough to offer provocations to violence and commit thousands of resisters to jail. One scholar has argued that the late 1950s showed a turn to revolutionary violence in several parts of the world — the overthrow of the Batista government in Cuba comes to mind — and that in this changing climate “advocates of armed struggle [in South Africa] gained a more respectful hearing than in previous years.”²³ Perhaps, too, the argument for the turn to violence might have won a larger following in the ANC in the mid-1950s were it not for the fact that the pre-occupation with cementing a multiracial front against apartheid weighed heavily on the minds of ANC leaders. The Group Areas Act, the Bantu Education Act, and the Reservation of Separate Amenities Act were part of a slate of legislative actions in the early 1950s intended to foment divisiveness among nonwhites, but the ANC and its partner organizations — the South African Indian Congress, the Colored Peoples’ Congress, and the South African Congress of Democrats — furnished a decisive rebuttal by convening the “Congress of the People” at Kliptown on 26 June 1955. It is

this Congress that issued the historic “Freedom Charter,” where it was unequivocally affirmed that “South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white, and that no government can justly claim authority unless it is based on the will of the people.”²⁴

While the Freedom Charter offered a radical defense of the principle of equality, it remained agnostic on the question of violence. It asserted the right of all South Africans to freedom and dignity of life, but it had no new wisdom to offer on the means that black people were to adopt to attain their freedom. Luthuli would have been well within his rights to argue that nothing in the Freedom Charter degraded the ANC’s adherence to the policy of nonviolence. Mandela might have thought otherwise; in the event, it is now clear that he had been preparing for the resort to violence. One journalist writing in the 1980s—that is, well before Mandela’s own account of what transpired in the 1950s became public—argued that Mandela’s “M-Plan,” which envisioned the creation of a network of autonomous yet interconnected cells of activists, “represented the first practical effort from within the Congress to prepare for the days of underground activity ahead.”²⁵ The “Sharpeville Massacre” of 1960, originating in a demonstration in front of police station that led to a police firing and 69 fatalities, and more than twice as many wounded, led to worldwide condemnation of the apartheid state, which in turn precipitated further repression, including the proclamation of a state of emergency and the banning of the ANC. Though the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) had dissolved itself in 1950, it had established itself as an underground party three years later; now, in the wake of Sharpeville, its activists and ideologues began to contemplate the turn to violence. “Of the 15 people elected to the SACP central committee in 1958,” one historian has noted, “five were also members of the ANC”: one of those may have been Mandela.²⁶

The overlap between the ANC and the SACP, and Mandela’s own allegiance to communism, remain matters of considerable historical attention. However, what is much more germane is the consideration that the Sharpeville Massacre and the suppression of the ANC doubtless played a part in moving Mandela and like-minded others to jettison nonviolence as a nonnegotiable element of ANC policy. Mandela’s speech of 20 April 1964 from the dock would become the classic expression—a statement, moreover, that was uncontested, as it was neither delivered under oath nor

subject to cross-examination—of how, apparently, a man of learning and moderation was driven to embrace violence, though, as Mandela expressly and rightly pointed out, the Umkhonto we Sizwe had planned upon a course of sabotage that would lead to the destruction of government property and installations but would not compromise the notion of the sanctity of human life. The Court, Mandela argued, had immediately to be brought face to face with the facts regarding the question of violence: “Some of the things told to the court are true and some are untrue. I do not, however, deny that I planned sabotage. I did not plan it in a spirit of recklessness, nor because I have any love of violence. I planned it as a result of a calm and sober assessment of the political situation that had arisen after many years of tyranny, exploitation, and oppression of my people by the Whites.”²⁷ Such would be the road to the formation of the Umkhonto we Sizwe, whose first commander was none other than Nelson Mandela.

IV: Representations of the Struggle and the Question of Nonviolence

It comes as no surprise that the ANC has been actively engaged in purveying what it deems to be the authentic account of its role, and the role of its leading light, in the freedom struggle. The bronze statue of Mandela at Union Square in Pretoria, which at 30 feet towers over mere mortals, is one of many artefacts pointing to his gigantic stature in the evolving hagiography in which he is bathed. Though Luthuli is by no means an entirely forgotten figure, especially not in South Africa, it is nevertheless the case that the ANC has had to make some effort to, if I may offer a provocation, “rehabilitate” him—or, in more palatable language, bring Luthuli into the mainstream of ANC liberationist history and render him a less remote figure to the present generation of South Africans. Luthuli wielded the power of the Presidency of the ANC over a critical period in its history and he was the first African to become a celebrated international figure in modern times; moreover, we should remind ourselves, he never deviated from the path of nonviolence. The critical question remains: what did Luthuli know of the plan of a section of the ANC leadership, spearheaded by Mandela, to turn to violence? To what extent, if at all, did Luthuli, as president of the ANC, signal his agreement

with the proposed change in the policy on the use of violence? Of course, it will matter little to some whether Mandela was committed to nonviolence or not, and others will cite the magnanimity with which he treated his persecutors, and the perpetrators of apartheid more generally, as a new chapter in the history of non-violence itself. Just as certainly it will be argued by yet others that criticisms in hindsight must not be allowed to usurp our cognizance of the urgency with which the political actors of the day were called upon to respond to the changing political situation.

Luthuli died in 1967, as I have pointed out earlier, under rather suspicious circumstances. It has been argued that the Security Police at that time characterized Luthuli as someone who was “a staunch opponent of communism and violence,” while the SACP countered with the view that Luthuli was an “uncompromising revolutionary leader” who accepted that whether a struggle was “violent or non-violent” was “a matter of policy to be decided from time to time by the leadership in each country.”²⁸ Two scholars who have explored at some length the attempts by various parties to appropriate Luthuli to their respective political positions have documented the shifting perspective of the SACP, which a decade after his death had adopted the “new view which held that Luthuli did not know of, and never participated in, the discussions to adopt the armed struggle.”²⁹ Joe Slovo, a prominent antiapartheid activist who occupied leading positions in the ANC, SACP, and Umkhonto we Sizwe, wrote in his autobiography that the “grand old man of the ANC, Chief Albert Luthuli, whose presidential leadership had made immeasurable contributions to the radical struggle of the 1950s, was not a party to the decision, nor was he ever to endorse it.”³⁰ A biography of Moses Kotane, secretary-general of the SACP from 1939 to 1978, by Brian Bunting, himself a prominent antiapartheid activist and member of the SACP, similarly states bluntly that “Lutuli was not involved in the discussions which led to the formation of Umkhonto,” and it points to the “reluctance of the [Johannesburg-based] ANC leadership to engage in a discussion which might result in a Presidential veto before it was necessary.” According to Bunting, when Luthuli came to know of the formation of the Umkhonto, he demanded an explanation; in response to his summons, the ANC dispatched Kotane and another leader to Groutville. Luthuli persisted in the view that the turn to armed struggle ought to have been discussed by the ANC “through the usual channels”; driving home

the point that his authority as a chief and as the president of the ANC had been usurped, Luthuli furnished this parable: "When my son decides to sleep with a girl, he does not ask for my permission, but just does it. It is only afterwards, when the girl is pregnant and the parents make a case, that he brings his troubles home." Bunting concludes his own discussion of the matter with this somewhat anodyne observation: "He [Lutuli] was saddened by the violence, but to his dying day he refused to blame those who were driven to it as an act of self-defence against the violence of the state."³¹

Mandela's own account of how far, if at all, Luthuli was consulted in discussions that led to the creation of the Umkhonto is entirely at variance with the other narratives that shed light on this matter. He was to write in his autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom* (1994), that he decided to bring up the "issue of the armed struggle," about which he had been thinking since 1952, at the ANC's executive committee meeting at Durban in 1961. "I suspected," Mandela wrote, that "I would encounter difficulties because Chief Luthuli was to be in attendance and I knew of his moral commitment to nonviolence." At the recently concluded Treason Trial, Mandela continues, he among others had contended "that for the ANC nonviolence was an inviolate principle, not a tactic to be changed as conditions warranted. I myself believed precisely the opposite: that nonviolence was a tactic that should be abandoned when it no longer worked." If Mandela had obfuscated the truth at the Treason Trial, why should we not suppose that he was prepared to do so again? Thus, continuing his narrative of what transpired in Durban that evening, Mandela states that he made a case for violence, submitting that that "the state had given us no alternative to violence. I said it was wrong and immoral to subject our people to armed attacks by the state without offering them some kind of alternative." Mandela would have us believe that Luthuli was fully engaged in the discussions: "The chief initially resisted my arguments." But apparently, having been worked upon by Mandela and his supporters "the whole night," Luthuli caved in: "I think," Mandela concludes, "that in his heart he realized that we were right. We ultimately agreed that a military campaign was inevitable." Indeed, according to Mandela, it was Luthuli himself who suggested that the military operation be linked to the ANC and under its control and yet be "fundamentally autonomous."³²

There is, in fact, virtually no evidence to suggest that Luthuli was even present at the meeting where Mandela alleges he eventually concurred with the decision to launch the armed struggle. Even more disturbing, however, is Mandela's clumsy and what can only be described as disingenuous attempt to install his own narrative as the authoritative account. *Long Walk to Freedom* describes Mandela's secret visit to Luthuli's home in December 1961, shortly after Umkhonto was launched, where Mandela sought the chief's advice on his participation at a proposed conference in Addis Ababa on African liberation movements. The meeting, says Mandela, was "disconcerting." Just why is suggested by the following remarks: "As I have related, the chief was present at the creation of MK [Umkhonto we Sizwe], and was as informed as any member of the National Executive Committee about its development. But the chief was not well and his memory was not what it had once been. He chastised me for not consulting with him about the formation of MK. I attempted to remind the chief of the discussions that we had in Durban about taking up violence, but he did not recall them. This is in large part why the story has gained currency that Chief Luthuli was not informed about the creation of MK and was deeply opposed to the ANC taking up violence. Nothing could be further from the truth."³³ The supposition that Luthuli could not remember a vital discussion that transpired six months ago, and the insinuation that he was of feeble mind, beggars the imagination. It is Mandela's narrative that, nonetheless, would be authorized as the official ANC account of Luthuli's views on violence and nonviolence. Thus, while the ANC web page on Chief Luthuli celebrates him as "a beloved" president of the ANC and its "undisputed leader" during his lifetime, a "profound thinker, a man of powerful logic with a keen sense of justice; a man of lofty principles, a bold and courageous fighter and a statesman," it unambiguously adds: "There is a wrong and unfortunate impression that Chief Lutuli was a pacifist, or some kind of an apostle of nonviolence. This impression is incorrect and misleading." Luthuli, it is argued, did not originate the ANC policy of nonviolence; he correctly saw himself as entrusted with the task of implementing policies collectively decided upon by the party; and "when that policy [of nonviolence] was officially and constitutionally changed, he did not falter."³⁴

Luthuli's statement of 12 June 1964, issued at the end of the Rivonia Trial when Mandela, Sisulu, and six other ANC leaders were given sentences of life imprisonment, is exceptional in the oeuvre of his writings and speeches in its admission that "uncompromising white refusal to abandon" racial discrimination forced the hand of the ANC leaders. The party, Luthuli wrote, "never abandoned its method of a militant, nonviolent struggle, and of creating in the process a spirit of militancy in the people"; but, under the circumstances, "no one can blame brave just men for seeking justice by the use of violent methods."³⁵ Luthuli never doubted the immense courage of Mandela and others who had taken the decision to embrace armed struggle; everything suggests that he held them in the deepest respect. It is inconceivable that, on the occasion of a trial which was going to commit some of the country's greatest patriots and brightest young men to prison for life, Luthuli would not have issued a statement of unflinching support for them. But, by the same token, it is imperative to recognize that Luthuli remained equally unwavering in his profoundly Christian faith in the efficacy and moral superiority of nonviolent resistance. Scott Everett Couper, who thus far has produced the largest and best scholarly body of work on Luthuli, points to a piece by Luthuli published in the *Golden City Post* in March 1962, three months after the creation of the Umkhonto, where the chief "URGE[S] OUR PEOPLE NOT TO DESPAIR OVER OUR METHODS OF STRUGGLE, THE MILITANT, NON-VIOLENT TECHNIQUES. SO FAR WE HAVE FAILED THE METHODS—NOT THE METHOD US."³⁶ Couper has rather compellingly argued that it was only after Luthuli's death that the ANC felt emboldened to issue statements suggesting that Luthuli was supportive of armed struggle.³⁷

The history of the freedom struggle in South Africa is inextricably linked to the worldwide history of anticolonial and antiracist movements in the twentieth century and also constitutes a significant moment in our understanding of nonviolent movements and their efficacy. One of the most intransigent arguments encountered in the literature that is skeptical of the possibilities of nonviolence takes it as axiomatic that Gandhi in India and Martin Luther King Jr. in the United States succeeded because they were able to persuade their respective antagonists "to live up to the universalist moral principles they generally espoused."³⁸ On this view, Gandhi

would have been crushed had his antagonist been a Hitler, a Stalin, or a Pol Pot; luckily, both he and King faced gentlemen oppressors with a reverence for the rule of law. Leaving aside the question of whether colonial rule in India was akin to a Sunday picnic gone somewhat wrong, the realists have rarely troubled to understand nonviolence as a social process, nor have they probed exactly how nonviolent movements are fostered and the persistence with which they must be pursued. It is often argued that nonviolent movements require an international stage, something in which Gandhi and King made enormous strides, but that Mandela and his ANC cohorts could not count upon the support of the United States and Britain—states that consistently vetoed all attempts between 1960 and 1985 to impose sanctions upon South Africa and thus debilitate the apartheid state and render it into a complete pariah. But this begs several questions: Should we merely accept that the apartheid state was unusually brutal, impervious to all moral appeals? Why did the voices of Mandela and others not resonate sufficiently with the United States and Britain? Could it be that the “religious” idioms in which Gandhi and King cast their appeals have something to say to secular states that is little understood?

The postcolonial scholar Rob Nixon has suggested that from the outset “the South African state seemed to fear that Mandela possessed a talent for immortality.” The cult of Mandela was, during his long confinement at Robben Island, built up to “near-Messianic dimensions,” but Nixon argues that Mandela, “from the instant of his release,” strove “to dismantle the cult of personality constructed by the media and to subordinate his prestige to that of the ANC.”³⁹ It is certainly to Mandela’s credit that he was always exceedingly generous in acknowledging the contributions of his colleagues and friends in the freedom struggle and that he invariably recognized that the movement was much larger than he. However, on the question of the origins of the armed struggle in South Africa, Mandela unquestionably appears to have engaged in the obfuscation of the truth. His actions and narrative had the effect of marginalizing Luthuli, the greatest advocate of nonviolent resistance in South Africa, and the ANC’s deliberate distortion of the history of how nonviolence was jettisoned in the quest for freedom must be subjected to intense critical scrutiny. Nonviolence may have been abandoned much too quickly—and we should, perhaps, not be too surprised, since the patience of human beings with nonviolence has always been thin.

Experiments with nonviolence take place barely over a period of weeks, months, at best a few years, and are pronounced as failures; but such is the enchantment with violence that decades of violent struggle, leaving behind mounds of corpses and numerous trails of long-lasting bitterness, are still deemed by their architects and their supporters as insufficient time to assess their efficaciousness. The history of Mandela's relation to the question of violence and non-violence, contrary to the impression sought to be conveyed by the ANC and Mandela himself, is thus far from settled at this juncture.

Endnotes

¹ King was far from being the only African American leader who sought to deploy Gandhi's teachings in the United States. His contemporaries, some of whom—such as Bayard Rustin and the Reverend James Lawson—served as his tutors in the exploration of the Gandhian pharmacopeia, were equally dedicated practitioners of nonviolence, but in the common imagination King's name reigns supreme. For a brief elaboration of this subject, see Vinay Lal, "Gandhi's West, the West's Gandhi," *New Literary History* 40 (Spring 2009), 281-313.

² Badshah Khan is variously known as Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, Bacha Khan, and the Frontier Gandhi. See Eknath Easwaran, *Badshah Khan: A Man to Match His Mountains* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2001); more detailed is D. G. Tendulkar, *Abdul Ghaffar Khan: Faith is a Battle* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1967); and, for a recent biography, see Rajmohan Gandhi, *Ghaffar Khan: Nonviolent Badshah of the Pakhtuns* (New Delhi: Viking Penguin, 2004). He is also the subject of a powerful documentary by Teri McLuhan, "Frontier Gandhi: Badshah Khan, a Torch for Peace" (2008), inspired by Easwaran's biography, first published in 1984. The call for a "Muslim Gandhi" has been heard with renewed urgency in the wake of the 11 September 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center, and Badshah Khan's name is increasingly heard as a reminder that Islam, no less than any other religion, offers exemplary histories of nonviolent resistance. See the discussion in Jeffrey R. Halverson, *Searching for a King: Muslim Nonviolence and the Future of Islam* (Dulles, Virginia: Potomac Books, 2012).

³ There is a voluminous and still growing literature on Gandhi's South African years. I met T. K. Mahadevan, author of one of the earliest critical assessments of Gandhi's representation of the circumstances under which he decided to stay behind in South Africa, just as he had finished *The Year of the Phoenix: Gandhi's Pivotal Year, 1893-94* (New York: World without War Books, 1982). This book remains little known; but much the same argument is encountered in Maureen Swan's *Gandhi: The South African Experience* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1985), which has since its publication provided ammunition for those who have long held that Gandhi achieved little in South Africa and perhaps even set back the

possibilities for the radical transformation of that country. Surendra Bhana has devoted a lifetime of study to Gandhi and the history of Indians in South Africa, and among his latest works is (with Goolam Vahed) *The Making of a Political Reformer: Gandhi in South Africa, 1893-1914* (Delhi: Manohar, 2005). His work commends itself to our attention since, unlike most scholars who have worked on Gandhi's South African years, he is fully conversant with other aspects of the history of South African Indians. Among the more arresting works on this phase of Gandhi's life, Burnett Britton's *Gandhi Arrives in South Africa* (Canton, Maine: Greenleaf Books, 1999) comes to mind, as do Charles DiSalvo's *The Man Before the Mahatma: M. K. Gandhi, Attorney at Law* (New Delhi: Random House India, 2012), an astonishingly detailed and revealing study of Gandhi's law practice, and Giriraj Kishore's *The Girmitiya Saga*, translated from the Hindi by Prajapati Sah (New Delhi: Niyogi Books, 2010), an epic work of historical fiction that suggests how Gandhi became a Mahatma to his own people in South Africa. Gandhi continued to retain a strong interest in the affairs of the Indian community in South Africa long after his departure, as is amply demonstrated in *Gandhi and South Africa 1914-1948*, eds. E. S. Reddy and Gopalkrishna Gandhi (Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 1993).

⁴ "Inspired by the example of the Indian Congress party," the political scientist James S. Coleman has written, "a few educated Africans in the British West African territories organized the National Congress of British West Africa." See *Nigeria, Background to Nationalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1958), 191, cited by Ali A. Mazrui, "Black Militancy and Gandhi's Centenary," *The Indian Journal of Political Science* 31, no. 2 (April-June 1970), 99. In central Africa, Kenneth Kaunda, who had worked closely with the ANC before differences over political strategy in 1958-59 moved him into forming the Zambia African National Congress, was still dedicated to the idea of nonviolence and to the organizational strategies of the Indian National Congress. In a book co-authored with Colin Morris in 1960, *Black Government* (Lusaka: Christian Literature, 1960), he stated emphatically: "I reject absolutely violence in any of its forms as a solution to our problems" (cited by Mazrui, 103). Three years later we find Kaunda still affirming that "non-violence is, as Mahatma Gandhi described it, a 'big experiment in man's development towards a higher realization of himself'" (cited by Mazrui, 103).

⁵ Surendra Bhana, *Gandhi's Legacy: The Natal Indian Congress 1894-1994* (Piet-ermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1997).

⁶ Leo Kuper, *Passive Resistance in South Africa* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), 9. It is imperative to note that Gandhi rejected the term "passive resistance" and invariably distinguished it from "nonviolent resistance"; indeed, he saw himself as the exponent of nonviolence that could verge on being militant, and he often spoke of the nonviolent soldier. Kuper admits that "the term 'passive resistance' is misleading," and suggests that to most people it implies "acts of omission, such as the non-payment of taxes," whereas in fact "passive resistance campaigns have also been initiated by acts of commission, such as Mahatma Gandhi's march in protest against the salt tax in India, or the deliberate breach

of curfew laws in South Africa” (72). Kuper allows that “passive resistance may be described with greater accuracy as nonviolent resistance” (73).

⁷ Mary Benson, *South Africa: The Struggle for a Birthright* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1966), 151.

⁸ Ahmed Kathrada, *No Bread for Mandela* (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 2008), 103.

⁹ Albert Luthuli, *Let My People Go* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1962), 127.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 128.

¹¹ Ronald Harrison, *The Black Christ: A Journey to Freedom* (Claremont, South Africa: David Philip Publishers, 2007), 26.

¹² Luthuli, *Let My People Go*, 119.

¹³ Though a banning order imposed, in principle, severe restraints on a person’s mobility, freedom of speech, and freedom of association, the police had of course considerable discretion in their decision to apply it with greater or lesser rigor. Ahmed Kathrada, though under a banning order in August 1956, has written that he was nevertheless able to drive a number of women on 9 August that year to Pretoria where 20,000 women were to gather together to protest the imposition of pass laws on women. See Kathrada, *No Bread for Mandela*, 117.

¹⁴ “The Road to Freedom is via the Cross,” in *Lutuli Speaks: Portrait of Chief Lutuli* (New York: United Nations Centre Against Apartheid, [1967]), 8-12.

¹⁵ “Presidential Address to the 42nd Annual Conference of the African National Congress, Queenstown, 18-20 December 1953,” in *Lutuli Speaks*, 13-25.

¹⁶ “Message to the Annual Conference of the ANC in Bloemfontein, 16-19 December 1955,” in *Lutuli Speaks*, 30-35.

¹⁷ “Letter to the Prime Minister, Mr J. C. Strijdom, May 28, 1957,” in *Lutuli Speaks*, 36-44, esp. 42.

¹⁸ “Africa and Freedom” [11 December 1961], in *Lutuli Speaks*, 58-73, esp. 60, 69.

¹⁹ Nelson Mandela, *Conversations with Myself* (London: Macmillan, 2010), 74. See also Stephen Ellis, “The Genesis of the ANC’s Armed Struggle in South Africa 1948-1961,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 37, no. 4 (December 2011), 659.

²⁰ Ellis, “The Genesis of the ANC’s Armed Struggle,” *ibid.*

²¹ Mandela, *Conversations with Myself*, 52-53.

²² *Ibid.*, 53. Jawaharlal Nehru, Prime Minister of India from 1947 until his death in 1964, is also mentioned often in Luthuli’s speeches; though his stature as a leading figure of the nonaligned movement, and as a prime mover of antiracist and anti-imperialist initiatives, is well known, a comprehensive study of his role in fomenting worldwide opprobrium against the apartheid state of South Africa still remains to be written. We find Nehru mentioned twice with great approbation in Luthuli’s Presidential Address to the ANC in December 1953, the second time in the following terms: “We note with deep appreciation the initiative taken in this matter [of bringing up the problem of racial discrimination in South Africa

at the United Nations] by countries like India, under the leadership of its Prime Minister, Mr Nehru" (*Lutuli Speaks*, 19, 24).

²³ Ellis, "The Genesis of the ANC's Armed Struggle," 660.

²⁴ See the text of the "Freedom Charter" in Nelson Mandela, *The Struggle is My Life* (London: International Defence and Aid Fund for Southern Africa, 1986), 50-54.

²⁵ Stephen M. Davis, *Apartheid's Rebels: Inside South Africa's Hidden War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 6-7.

²⁶ Ellis, "The Genesis of the ANC's Armed Struggle," 666. Many activists were firmly of the view that Mandela was a member of the SACP but Mandela never admitted as much: see *ibid.*, 666-68.

²⁷ For the full text of his speech, see Mandela, *The Struggle is My Life*, 161-183, esp. 162.

²⁸ Jabulani Sithole and Sibongiseni Mkhize, "Truth or Lies? Selective Memories, Imagings, and Representations of Chief Albert John Luthuli in Recent Political Discourses," *History and Theory* 39 (December 2000), 72.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 73.

³⁰ Joe Slovo, *The Unfinished Autobiography* (Melbourne and New York: Ocean Press, 1997), 172.

³¹ Brian Bunting, *Moses Kotane: South African Revolutionary* (Belville: Mayibuye Books, University of the Western Cape, 1998), 273-74.

³² Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1994), 237.

³³ *Ibid.*, 250.

³⁴ Biography, "Albert John Luthuli," ANC webpage: <http://www.anc.org.za/show-people.php?p=1> [accessed 6 December 2014].

³⁵ Statement by Chief Lutuli [12 June 1964], in Mandela, *The Struggle is My Life*, 181-83.

³⁶ Scott Everett Couper, "'An Embarrassment to the Congresses?': The Silencing of Chief Albert Luthuli and the Production of ANC History," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 35, no. 2 (June 2009), 339; emphasis in original. See also Scott Couper, *Albert Luthuli: Bound by Faith* (Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2010), 152-84.

³⁷ Couper, "'An Embarrassment to the Congresses?'" 339.

³⁸ See, for example, Gay W. Seidman, "Blurred Lines: Nonviolence in South Africa," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 33, no. 2 (June 2000), 161. This view has a long genealogy, but the distinction of those who have sometimes been associated it with does not *ipso facto* confer credibility on it. Martin Buber's rejoinder to Gandhi's views on the possibility of nonviolent resistance in Nazi Germany is close to being one of the inaugural documents of this mode of critique. For an extended discussion, see Vinay Lal, "Gandhi and Palestine," *Critical Muslim*, no. 6 (April 2013), 171-90; *idem*, "Gandhi's West, the West's Gandhi," *New Literary History* 40 (Spring 2009), 281-313.

³⁹ Rob Nixon, "Mandela, Messianism, and the Media," *Transition*, no. 51 (1991), 42-43.