**Nelson Mandela 'proven' to be a member of the Communist Party after decades of denial**

A new book claims that, 50 years after he was first accused of being a Communist, Nelson Mandela was a Communist party member after all.



Nelson Mandela, the former South African president Photo: AP



**By**[**Colin Freeman**](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/journalists/colin-freeman/)**, and Jane Flanagan in Cape Town**

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For decades, it was one of the enduring disputes of South Africa's anti-apartheid struggle. Was Nelson Mandela, the leader of the African National Congress, really a secret Communist, as the white-only government of the time alleged? Or, as he claimed during the infamous 1963 trial that saw him jailed for life, was it simply a smear to discredit him in a world riven by Cold War tensions?

Now, nearly half a century after the court case that made him the world's best-known prisoner of conscience, a new book claims that whatever the wider injustice perpetrated, the apartheid-era prosecutors were indeed right on one question: Mr Mandela was a Communist party member after all.

The former South African president, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1993, has always denied being a member of the South African branch of the movement, which mounted an armed campaign of guerrilla resistance along with the ANC.

But research by a British historian, Professor Stephen Ellis, has unearthed fresh evidence that during his early years as an activist, Mr Mandela did hold senior rank in the South African Communist Party, or SACP. He says Mr Mandela joined the SACP to enlist the help of the Communist superpowers for the ANC's campaign of armed resistance to white rule.

His book also provides fresh detail on how the ANC's military wing had bomb-making lessons from the IRA, and intelligence training from the East German Stasi, which it used to carry out brutal interrogations of suspected "spies" at secret prison camps.

As evidence of Mr Mandela's Communist party membership, Prof Ellis cites minutes from a secret 1982 SACP meeting, discovered in a collection of private papers at the University of Cape Town, in which a veteran former party member, the late John Pule Motshabi, talks about how Mr Mandela was a party member some two decades before.

In the minutes, Mr Motshabi, is quoted as saying: "There was an accusation that we opposed allowing Nelson [Mandela] and Walter (Sisulu, a fellow activist) into the Family (a code word for the party) ... we were not informed because this was arising after the 1950 campaigns (a series of street protests). The recruitment of the two came after."

While other SACP members have previously confirmed Mr Mandela's party membership, many of their testimonies were given under duress in police interviews, where they might have sought to implicate him. However, the minutes from the 1982 SACP meeting, said Prof Ellis, offered more reliable proof. "This is written in a closed party meeting so nobody is trying to impress or mislead the public," he said.

Although Mr Mandela appears to have joined the SACP more for their political connections than their ideas, his membership could have damaged his standing in the West had it been disclosed while he was still fighting to dismantle apartheid.

Africa was a Cold War proxy battleground until the end of the 1980s, and international support for his cause, which included the Free Nelson Mandela campaign in Britain, drew partly on his image as a compromise figure loyal neither to East nor West.

"Nelson Mandela's reputation is based both on his ability to overcome personal animosities and to be magnanimous to all South Africans, white and black, and that is what impressed the world," said Prof Ellis, a former Amnesty International researcher who is based at the Free University of Amsterdam. "But what this shows is that like any politician, he was prepared to make opportunistic alliances.

"I think most people who supported the anti-apartheid movement just didn't want to know that much about his background. Apartheid was seen as a moral issue and that was that. But if real proof had been produced at the time, some might have thought differently."

Mr Mandela made his denial of Communist Party membership in the opening statement of his Rivonia trial, when he and nine other ANC leaders were tried for 221 alleged acts of sabotage designed to overthrow the apartheid system. The defendants were also accused of furthering the aims of Communism, a movement that was then illegal in South Africa.

Addressing the court, Mr Mandela declared that he had "never been a member of the Communist Party," and that he disagreed with the movement's contempt for Western-style parliamentary democracy.

He added: "The suggestion made by the State that the struggle in South Africa is under the influence of foreigners or communists is wholly incorrect. I have done whatever I did, both as an individual and as a leader of my people, because of my experience in South Africa and my own proudly felt African background, and not because of what any outsider might have said."

Mr Mandela joined the ANC in 1944, when its leadership still opposed armed struggle against the apartheid state. However, by the early 1950s he become personally convinced that a guerrilla war was inevitable, a view confirmed by the Sharpeville Massacre in March 1960, when police in a Transvaal township opened fire on black demonstrators, killing 69 people.

But while other ANC leaders also came round to his way of thinking after Sharpeville, the group still had no access to weaponry or financial support. Instead, says Prof Ellis, Mr Mandela looked for help from the Communists, with whom he already had close contacts due to their shared opposition to apartheid.

"He knew and trusted many Communist activists anyway, so it appears he was co-opted straight to the central committee with no probation required," said Prof Ellis. "But it's fair to say he wasn't a real convert, it was just an opportunist thing."

In the months after Sharpeville, Communist party members secretly visited Beijing and Moscow, where they got assurances of support for their own guerrilla campaign. In conjunction with a number of leading ANC members, they set up a new, nominally independent military organisation, known as Umkhonto we Sizwe or Spear of the Nation. With Mr Mandela as its commander, Umkhonto we Sizwe launched its first attacks on 16 December 1961.

Its campaign of "sabotage" and bombings over the subsequent three decades claimed the lives of dozens of civilians, and led to the organisation being classed as a terrorist group by the US.

In his book, Professor Ellis, who also authored a publication on the Liberian civil war, elaborates on other murky aspects of the ANC's past. One is that bomb-making experts from the IRA trained the ANC at a secret base in Angola in the late 1970s, a link disclosed last year in the posthumous memoirs of Kader Asmal, a South African politician of Indian extraction who was exiled in Ireland. He was a member of the Irish Anti-Apartheid Movement, which, Prof Mr Ellis says, in turn had close links to the British and South African Communist parties.

The IRA tutoring, which was allegedly brokered partly through Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams, led to the ANC fighters improving their bombing skills considerably, thanks to the expertise of what Mr Ellis describes as "the world's most sophisticated urban guerrilla force".

Angola was also the base for "Quatro", a notorious ANC detention centre, where dozens of the movement's own supporters were tortured and sometimes killed as suspected spies by agents from their internal security service, some of whom were "barely teenagers". East German trainers taught the internal security agents that anyone who challenged official ANC dogma should be viewed as a potential spy or traitor.

On Friday night, a spokesman for the Nelson Mandela Foundation said: "We do not believe that there is proof that Madiba (Mandela's clan name) was a Party member ... The evidence that has been identified is comparatively weak in relation to the evidence against, not least Madiba's consistent denial of the fact over nearly 50 years. It is conceivable that Madiba might indulge in legalistic casuistry, but not that he would make an entirely false statement.

"Recruitment and induction into the Party was a process that happened in stages over a period of time. It is possible that Madiba started but never completed the process. What is clear is that at a certain moment in the struggle he was sufficiently trusted as an ANC leader to participate in Party CC meetings. And it is probable that people in attendance at such meetings may have thought of him as a member."

Mr Mandela, now 94, retired from public life in 2004 and is now in poor health. He did, though, allude to a symbiotic relationship with the Communists in his bestselling biography, *The Long Walk to Freedom*. "There will always be those who say that the Communists were using us," he wrote. "But who is to say that we were not using them?"

***"External Mission: The ANC in Exile, 1960-1990", is published by Hurst and Co.***

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/nelson-mandela/9731522/Nelson-Mandela-proven-to-be-a-member-of-the-Communist-Party-after-decades-of-denial.html>