Biography

Nelson Mandela led the world in the struggle against apartheid. He spent 27 years in prison and on his release led the negotiations that resulted in the first democratic elections in South Africa.

Nelson Mandela was born on 18th July 1918 in the village of Mvezo, near Qunu, in the Eastern Cape. He was the son of Hendry Gadla Mandela, the chief of Clan Madiba in the Thembu Kingdom and his wife Nosekeni. It was his teacher who decided to call him Nelson, presumably because she could not pronounce Rolihlahla, his Xhosa name. Mandela’s father died when he was nine and he was sent to be brought up by Jongintaba, the Prince Regent of the Thembu, who arranged for Mandela to be educated. Eventually, Mandela was sent to the “South African Native College” at Fort Hare (later Fort Hare University).

As a young man, fleeing an arranged marriage, Mandela went to Johannesburg. It was here that he met Walter Sisulu, who persuaded him to join the African National Congress (ANC). The ANC had been established on 8th January 1912 with the purpose of campaigning to secure the political rights of the African majority in South Africa. Mandela soon became active in the ANC Youth League. It was now that Mandela married Evelyn Mase, and had two sons, Themba and Makgatho, and a daughter, Makaziwe. The marriage then broke down, and eventually ended in divorce.

In 1948, in a whites-only election, the National Party came to power. They introduced the system of government called “apartheid”. This detailed exactly how the mixed race, Indian and African communities could live their lives. Apartheid detailed where people could live, where they could work, which schools they could attend, which hospitals, park benches and buses they could use, and even who they could fall in love with. Whole communities were driven from their homes, and forced to live where the government decided. The aim of apartheid was to ensure that standard of living for whites, including schooling and health care, was hugely better than the standard of living for everyone else.

The ANC decided to organise a “Defiance Campaign”, and Mandela was given the task of leading it. Thousands of people from all the communities joined in refusing to obey the instructions about where they could sit, what doors they could enter, and all the other apartheid regulations about how people lived their lives. It was a huge campaign. At this time Mandela set up the first black legal firm in South Africa, in partnership with his lifelong friend, Oliver Tambo. Together these two men would lead the South African liberation struggle for the next forty years.

In 1955, the ANC called a Congress of the People at Kliptown in Soweto, which adopted the Freedom Charter. This set out the aims and objectives of the ANC, when it became a government. It was also here that Father Trevor Huddleston was awarded the Isitwalandwe, the highest honour of the ANC, in recognition of his role in the struggle against apartheid.

The apartheid government responded to this by arresting 156 people, including Mandela, Sisulu and Tambo, and charging them with treason. Father Huddleston was recalled from
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South Africa by his order at this time. The trial was to drag on for four years before it eventually collapsed. By then the situation in South Africa had reached crisis point.

In 1956, the apartheid government decided to extend the Pass Laws to women. These required every black man to carry a residence permit at all times, and they were only issued on a short term basis. If you did not have a pass, or if your pass had expired, you could be arrested, and thousands were arrested on this basis. The ANC Women’s League organised a march of 20,000 women on Pretoria, the administrative capital, to protest. Strijdom, the then Prime Minister, refused to meet them and pressed forward with the plan.

It was at this time that Mandela, now divorced, met Nomzano Winnie Madikizela and married her. They had two daughters, Zenani and Zindiswe (Zindzi).

In 1959, the ANC called for a boycott of goods produced by firms supporting apartheid. Trevor Huddleston and others took up the challenge, founding the Boycott Movement.

In 1960, the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) called a march in Sharpeville, on 21st March, to protest about the extension of the Pass Laws to women. (The PAC had broken away from the ANC because they did not accept the Freedom Charter). The police opened fire, and killed 69 people, shooting most of them in the back. The apartheid government imposed a State of Emergency and banned the ANC, the PAC and other organisations. It was a criminal offence to be a member of a banned organisation.

In these circumstances, the ANC had to decide on what action to take. Oliver Tambo was sent abroad to set up the ANC External Mission. He was not to return to South Africa for 30 years. The ANC decided to set up an armed wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe (the Spear of the Nation), and Mandela was made its commander. Mandela left South Africa illegally, that is without government permission. Mandela came to London, met with Tambo, and then went on to military training in Algeria. He eventually returned to South Africa to organise the underground struggle.

Pylons and other high profile targets were blown up, without casualties. The press named Mandela “the Black Pimpernel”. Eventually he was caught and sentenced to five years in prison. Meanwhile, Umkhonto we Sizwe had set up its headquarters at the Lilliesleaf Farm in Rivonia near Johannesburg. The farm was raided by the Security Police and the whole leadership was captured, and charged with treason. Mandela was brought from prison to be tried with his friends. This was known as the Rivonia Trial.

Mandela was named as the first accused, and took the lead in making the defence statement. Mandela’s statement from the dock has become a political legend, ending with the words “During my lifetime I have dedicated myself to the 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 with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.”

Oliver Tambo, aided by the Anti-Apartheid Movement, ensured that these words echoed round the world. Huge pressure built up against the death sentence being imposed. When the time for sentencing came, the Judge announced life imprisonment. Denis Goldberg, one of the accused, called to his mother from the dock “Life – to live”. Mandela and all the
other prisoners, except Goldberg, were taken to prison on Robben Island. Goldberg was taken to Pretoria Central because he was white, and there was apartheid even in the gaols.

On Robben Island, the prisoners were put to work in the lime quarry. During this period, Mandela’s mother died and his son Themba was killed in a car crash. Mandela was not allowed to attend either funeral.

Meanwhile the pressure was growing on the apartheid regime. South Africa had left the Commonwealth in 1961 rather than face expulsion. There were huge demonstrations in the UK in 1969-70 and New Zealand in 1981 against visiting South African Rugby teams. South Africa was expelled from international sporting competitions. In 1977, the UN imposed an arms embargo.

Inside the country, there were a growing number of trade union strikes, and a growth in black consciousness. In 1976, the apartheid government decided that black children should be taught in Afrikaans, which was regarded as the language of the oppressor. The children in Soweto decided to hold a demonstration on 16th June 1976 and marched in protest from Morris Isaacson School. The South African police opened fire on the schoolchildren. This was the beginning of the Soweto Uprising. Hundreds were killed.

People fled the country to join Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), the armed wing of the ANC. The struggle intensified during the 1980s with the ANC aiming to make the country ungovernable. In 1980, a campaign for the release of Mandela and all political prisoners was launched in South Africa.

In 1984, Margaret Thatcher, the British Prime Minister, decided that the time had come to end the isolation of apartheid South Africa. She invited P W Botha, the apartheid Prime Minister, to Britain. The Anti-Apartheid Movement organised a huge demonstration in protest. Botha was not able to visit London because of it.

The pressure for sanctions against apartheid intensified. Thatcher resisted but could not prevent the imposition of sanctions by the Commonwealth. The demand for the release of Mandela and all South African political prisoners increased in strength.

Mandela and the others were moved from Robben Island to Pollsmoor Prison on the mainland so that secret negotiations could begin. Mandela was offered his release if he renounced violence. His daughter Zindzi read his reply at a mass rally in Soweto: “I cannot and will not give any understanding at a time when you, the people, are not free”.

In 1988, the Anti-Apartheid Movement celebrated Mandela’s 70th Birthday with a huge televised concert at Wembley Stadium, a march from Glasgow to London and a rally in Hyde Park addressed by Archbishops Huddleston and Tutu. On 18th July, a birthday party was held at the Commonwealth Institute hosted by Oliver Tambo and Trevor Huddleston.

Pressure intensified inside and outside the country. The country was ungovernable and was facing bankruptcy. Something had to be done. The new President, F W De Klerk, unbanned the ANC and other organisations on 2nd February 1990. Mandela walked from prison on 11th February 1990. Oliver Tambo, having just had a massive stroke, returned home.
Negotiations began. The next four years were amongst the bloodiest in South African history as attempts were made to undermine the negotiation process and to keep apartheid in place. This came to a head on 10th April 1993 when Chris Hani, Secretary-General of the South African Communist Party and one of the most popular leaders of the ANC, was assassinated. Mandela took control appealing for calm. The date for the election was set. Oliver Tambo attended Chris Hani’s funeral and died that same evening.

On a personal note, Mandela’s marriage to Winnie did not survive the 27 year separation. They were unable to live together and eventually they divorced.

The elections began on 27th April 1994 and lasted for four days. The ANC won a resounding victory. On 10th May 1994, Nelson Mandela was inaugurated as the first democratically elected President of South Africa.

Mandela dedicated his presidency to the theme of reconciliation. He famously wore a Springbok Rugby Shirt for the 1995 Rugby World Cup Final in Johannesburg (New Zealand versus South Africa). South Africa won. He also established the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, under the chairmanship of Archbishop Tutu, so that the families of the victims of apartheid could find out what had happened to their loved ones.

Mandela retired from the Presidency after one term, but took up the role of elder statesman. He helped the people of Rwanda to secure peace following the genocide that took place in the country. He also campaigned through his 46664 organisation on the issue of HIV/AIDS. (46664 was his prison number.) In 2005, he also spoke at a rally in Trafalgar Square in support of the “Make Poverty History” campaign.

On his 80th birthday in 1998, he married Graca Machel, the widow of President Samora Machel of Mozambique, who died in a mysterious plane crash.

Mandela is now living quietly just outside Qunu, near his birthplace.
Significant anniversaries in 2013.

10th April.  20th anniversary of the assassination of Chris Hani, Secretary-General of the South Africa Communist Party and a commander of Umkhonto we Sizwe, the armed wing of the ANC.

11th April.  80th birthday of Denis Goldberg, Rivonia Trialist.

19th April.  20th anniversary of the death of Oliver Tambo, ANC President 1967-1990.

11th June.  25th anniversary of the Wembley Concert celebrating the 70th birthday of Nelson Mandela.

12th June.  25th anniversary of the Nelson Mandela Freedom March setting out from Glasgow to London.

16th June.  Anniversary of the Soweto Uprising and the death of Hector Pietersen aged 13, the first person to be killed in the uprising.

17th June.  Centenary of the birth of Archbishop Trevor Huddleston, one of the founders of the Anti-Apartheid Movement.

17th July.  25th anniversary of the Hyde Park Rally calling for the release of Nelson Mandela, addressed by Archbishop Huddleston and Archbishop Tutu.

**Timeline**

8\(^{th}\) January 1912. African National Congress (ANC) is founded.

18\(^{th}\) July 1918. Nelson Mandela is born.


1948. National Party, under the leadership of Dr. Daniel Malan, elected as the government of South Africa in a whites-only election. Apartheid introduced.

1952. ANC launches the Defiance Campaign. Nelson Mandela is the chief organiser.


1956. Treason Trial. 156 people, including Nelson Mandela, are tried for treason.

9\(^{th}\) August 1956. 20,000 women march on the Union Buildings in Pretoria, protesting at the extension of the Pass Laws to women. This becomes South Africa Women’s Day.


1959. Chief Albert Luthuli, President of the ANC, is awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. He calls for a boycott of apartheid. Launch of the Boycott Movement, which became the Anti-Apartheid Movement.

21\(^{st}\) March 1960. Sharpeville Massacre. 69 protestors shot by the South African police, most of them in the back. In the following days, a state of emergency is introduced and the ANC, PAC and other organisations are banned. The Boycott Movement changes its name to the Anti-Apartheid Movement.

1961. South Africa leaves the Commonwealth, to pre-empt expulsion.

1961. ANC external mission set up by Oliver Tambo. Mandela goes to Algeria for military training.

16\(^{th}\) December 1961. Launch of Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), the armed wing of the ANC. Mandela is the Commander –in-Chief.

1962. Mandela arrested and sentenced to five years in prison.

1963. Arrest of the MK leadership at Lilliesleaf Farm, Rivonia.

1964. Nelson Mandela and the other Rivonia trialists sentenced to life imprisonment. UN imposes an arms embargo on South Africa, following lobbying from the Anti-Apartheid Movement. South Africa barred from the Summer Olympics.

1966. The South West Africa People’s Organisation (SWAPO) launches the armed struggle for the liberation of Namibia from South African occupation.
1968-9. Massive demonstrations in the UK against the visiting South African Rugby Team, led by the Anti-Apartheid Movement and the Stop the Seventies Tour Committee.

1970. South Africa is barred from the International Olympics Committee.


1974. New Zealand Government prohibits the visit by the South African Rugby Team.


16th June 1976. Children in Soweto demonstrate against the use of Afrikaans as a teaching medium for all their classes. The Police open fire, and hundreds are killed. The first to die was the 13 year old Hector Pietersen. This is now South Africa Youth Day.

10th September 1977. Murder takes place in custody of Steve Biko, the black consciousness leader.


1981. Huge demonstrations in New Zealand against the visiting South African Rugby team. (NB There had been a change of government in New Zealand since 1974).

1982. Nelson Mandela and others are transferred to Pollsmoor Prison on the mainland. The apartheid regime enters into secret negotiations with Mandela.

1983. PW Botha, the South African Prime Minister, introduces the Tri-Cameral Parliament, with one chamber for whites, one for coloureds and one for Indians. Formation of the United Democratic Front (UDF) to campaign against this constitutional change.

1984. PW Botha becomes President of South Africa under the new constitution.


1984. Margaret Thatcher, the British Prime Minister, invites PW Botha to the UK. Huge demonstration organised by the Anti-Apartheid Movement.


1985. Commonwealth imposes sanctions on apartheid, despite opposition from Margaret Thatcher.

1985. Township uprisings intensify. PW Botha imposes a state of emergency. South African police open fire on demonstrators on a more or less daily basis.

1985. Denis Goldberg is the first of the Rivonia Trialists to be released from prison, and is sent into immediate exile in the UK.

1986. Barclays Bank, after 17 years of pressure from the Anti-Apartheid Movement, leaves South Africa. Successful disinvestment campaigns in the United States increase the
pressure on the apartheid government. The Anti-Apartheid Movement launches a campaign against Shell’s involvement in apartheid South Africa.


1987. Govan Mbeki is the second Rivonia Trialist to be released. He is held under virtual house arrest in Port Elizabeth.

1987. ANC holds an international solidarity conference at Arusha in Tanzania. The decision to celebrate Nelson Mandela’s 70th birthday is taken.

October 1987 – March 1988. Defeat of the South African Army at the Battle of Cuito Cuanavale in southern Angola. Negotiations for the independence of Namibia begin as a direct result of this.

11th June 1988. Wembley Stadium televised concert calling for the release of Nelson Mandela and all political prisoners. The concert is televised in over 60 countries, and is available illegally in South Africa and Namibia.

12th June 1988. Nelson Mandela Freedom March sets out from Glasgow to London. 30,000 people turn out to see the march off and to hear speeches from Archbishop Trevor Huddleston, Andimba Toivo ya Toivo (SWAPO), Rev Allan Boesak (UDF) and Oliver Tambo (President of the ANC)

17th July 1988. Nelson Mandela Freedom March arrives in London. 250,000 people including the Lambeth Conference of Anglican Bishops meet the marchers at Hyde Park, where they are greeted by Archbishop Trevor Huddleston (AAM) and Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

18th July 1988. Oliver Tambo and Archbishop Huddleston host a 70th birthday reception at the Commonwealth Institute.

7th December 1988. Mandela is moved to the Victor Verster Prison.

1989. American Banks and others refuse to reschedule the repayment of loans by South Africa.

February 1989. PW Botha suffers a stroke and has to resign the Presidency. FW De Klerk becomes President in his place.

October 1989. Walter Sisulu and the remaining Rivonia Trialists, except Mandela, are released from prison.

November 1989. Elections take place in Namibia. SWAPO wins 57% of the vote.

2nd February 1990. FW De Klerk announces the unbanning of the ANC and other organisations.

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21st March 1990. Sam Nujoma, the leader of SWAPO, is installed as the first President of an independent Namibia. Nelson Mandela is one of the guests of honour.

16th April 1990. Concert held at Wembley to celebrate the release of Nelson Mandela. When Mandela walked onto the stage with Archbishop Trevor Huddleston the cheer that went up was incredible.

4th May 1990. First meeting of the negotiating teams to bring about democratic elections and the end of apartheid.


December 1991. Establishment of the Convention for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA) to facilitate the negotiating process.

1992. Whites-only referendum overwhelmingly supports the negotiations process.


March 1993. ANC hold a second international solidarity conference in Johannesburg.

10th April 1993. Assassination of Chris Hani, Secretary-General of the South African Communist Party. Mandela appeals for calm on TV, and brings the country back from the brink. Oliver Tambo died after attending the funeral of Chris Hani.

June 1993. Right-wingers from the Afrikaner Weerstandbeweging (AWB), under the leadership of Eugene Terreblanche, storm the negotiations.

18th November 1993. Transitional Executive Council established to oversee the elections process, the date having been agreed for 27th April 1994.

March 1994. Afrikaner Weerstandbeweging members invade the Bophuthatswana Bantustan, and are shot by the police. Bophuthatswana Bantustan is incorporated into South Africa for the forthcoming elections.

April 1994. The Inkatha Freedom Party, a Zulu based party led by Chief Buthelezi, decide to join the election, which they had been boycotting, with less than ten days to go.

24th April 1994. Extreme right-wingers launch a bombing campaign. The ANC Regional Office in Johannesburg is bombed and nine people are killed.

27th April 1994. Polling stations open, and millions of people vote for the first time in their lives. The election was extended to four days to ensure that everyone could vote. The ANC won 62.65% of the vote.

10th May 1994. Nelson Mandela was inaugurated as the first democratically elected President of South Africa.
1994. Reconstruction and Development Programme launched to deal with the legacy of apartheid. This provided essential investment in social services, housing, health and the introduction of parity in disability grants, old age pensions and child maintenance.

1995. Truth and Reconciliation Commission established with the remit of investigating apartheid crimes, and the granting of amnesty where appropriate, under the chairmanship of Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

1995. Nelson Mandela wears a Springbok shirt at the Rugby World Cup Final between New Zealand and South Africa in Johannesburg.


14th June 1999. Mandela steps down from the Presidency and is replaced by Thabo Mbeki.

15th October 1999. Julius Nyerere, retired President of Tanzania dies. Mandela takes over his role as the chief mediator in the peace process for Rwanda and Burundi.


5th May 2003. Walter Sisulu died.

June 2004. Nelson Mandela announces that he is retiring from public life.

18th July 2007. Nelson Mandela, Graca Machel and Desmond Tutu convene a group of world leaders known as “The Elders” to make their wisdom available where it was needed.

July 2008. 90th birthday concert in Hyde Park. Mandela calls upon the rich of the world to assist the poor.

2010. The United Nations declares 18th July “International Nelson Mandela Day” and asks people to donate 67 minutes to voluntary service to commemorate the 67 years that Nelson Mandela gave to public life.

8th January 2012. 100th anniversary of the founding of the ANC