

Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela: **A Symbol of Resistance and** **Reconciliation**



Introduction:

Nelson Mandela is one of the most iconic figures of the **20th century**, known for his leadership in the fight against apartheid in **South Africa** and his enduring commitment to peace, justice, and reconciliation. Born in 1918 in the rural village of Mvezo, Mandela's life was shaped by the oppressive structures of colonialism and racial segregation¹. His journey from political prisoner to president symbolized not only a personal victory but also a profound transformation for **South Africa** and the world. European powers, both historically complicit in colonization and later instrumental in applying pressure on the apartheid regime, played a complex role in shaping the landscape in which Mandela's achievements unfolded.

¹ racial segregation is the separation of people into racial or other ethnic groups in daily life. Segregation can involve the spatial separation of the races, and mandatory use of different institutions, such as schools and hospitals by people of different races.

Nelson Mandela early life:

Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela, born on 18 July 1918, was a prominent South African **anti-apartheid revolutionary and political leader**. A **Xhosa**, Mandela was born into the **Thembu royal family** in the rural village of Mvezo in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa. His father, **Gadla Henry Mphakanyiswa**, was a chief and advisor to the Thembu king, but he lost his position after a dispute with colonial authorities. After his father's death, Mandela was placed under the guardianship of **Chief Jongintaba Dalindyebo**, a high-ranking regent of the Thembu people. Raised in the royal homestead at **Mqhekezweni**, Mandela was deeply influenced by traditional leadership, tribal customs, and the values of community, justice, and collective responsibility. He often sat in on tribal council meetings, where he witnessed democratic decision-making processes based on consensus an experience that would shape his political outlook in later years.

Mandela began his formal education at a local **Methodist school**², where a teacher gave him the English name "Nelson," in accordance with colonial custom. He proved to be a capable student and went on to attend **Clarkebury Boarding Institute** and later **Healdtown, a strict Methodist college**. In 1939, he enrolled at the **University of Fort Hare**, the only institution of higher learning available to Black South Africans at the time. While there, Mandela became increasingly involved in student politics and was elected to the Student Representative Council. However, he was expelled in his second year for leading a boycott against university policies. Determined to complete his education, he moved to **Johannesburg**, where he worked as a clerk and eventually finished his **BA** through the University of South Africa. He later studied law at the **University of the Witwatersrand**, where he was the only Black African student in his class. There, he encountered liberal and leftist students and professors, and for the first time interacted extensively with people of other races who opposed the **apartheid** regime. Though he did not complete his law degree there, his experiences at Wits deepened his political convictions and sharpened his understanding of systemic racial injustice.

While in **Johannesburg**, Mandela met key figures in the **anti-apartheid** movement, including **Walter Sisulu**, who became a lifelong friend and mentor. With Sisulu's encouragement, Mandela joined the **African National Congress**³ (**ANC**) in 1943, which had been founded in 1912 to **defend the rights of Black South Africans**. Frustrated by

² methodic school was a branch of medical though in ancient Greece and Rome. It arose in reaction to both the Emperic school and the dogmatic school.

³ ANC is a political party in south africa. It originated as a liberation movement known for its oppsition to apatheid and has governed the county since 1994, when the first post-apartheid election resulted in Nelson Mnadela being elected as president, has served as president of the ANC since 18 december 2017.

the **ANC's** cautious approach, Mandela, along with Sisulu, **Oliver Tambo**⁴, and others, co-founded the **ANC Youth League (ANCYL) in 1944**. The Youth League pushed for a more radical and mass-based resistance strategy. Over the following years, Mandela became a rising star in the organization, advocating for civil disobedience, strikes, and nonviolent protest against discriminatory laws. After the National Party came to power in 1948 and formally instituted apartheid a brutal system of racial segregation and white supremacy; Mandela and the ANC intensified their resistance efforts. He was appointed president of the **ANC's Transvaal branch**⁵ and played a leading role in organizing the **1952 Defiance Campaign**, a mass civil disobedience movement that challenged unjust apartheid laws through peaceful protest. He also helped draft the **Freedom Charter**⁶ at the **1955 Congress of the People**, a visionary document that outlined a future nonracial, democratic South Africa.

Mandela's activism made him a frequent target of state surveillance and repression. He was arrested multiple times and banned from attending gatherings or leaving **Johannesburg**. In **1956**, he was among **156 leaders** charged with treason in a lengthy trial that lasted until 1961, ultimately ending in acquittal. Throughout this period, Mandela's political philosophy evolved. He was influenced by various ideologies, including African nationalism, liberalism, and increasingly, **Marxism**⁷. Believing that capitalism and colonialism were at the root of South Africa's racial inequality, Mandela secretly joined the banned **South African Communist Party**⁸ (**SACP**), aligning himself with a broader struggle against imperialism and class oppression. Although he initially advocated for nonviolent protest, by **1961**, convinced that peaceful resistance alone could not defeat the violent apartheid regime, Mandela co-founded **uMkhonto we Sizwe** ("Spear of the Nation"), the armed wing of the ANC. The organization launched a sabotage campaign targeting infrastructure and symbols of state power, aiming to avoid loss of life while escalating pressure on the government to negotiate.

⁴ Oliver Reginald Kaizana tambo was a south african anti-apartheid politician and activist who served as president of the african national congress from 1967to 1991.

⁵ the branch was actively involved in various compaigns and initiatives, including anti-pass campaign, protests against the shooting of africans in Sophiatown, and the defiance campaign of 1952.

⁶ the freedom charter was a document outlining the fundamental demands for a democrtatic, non racial south africa, adopted at the congress of the people in kliptown, soweto, on june 26, 1955.

⁷ Marxism is a social, political, and economic theory developed by karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. It analyses societal structures and historical developement through a materialist lens, focusing on class relations and conflict.

⁸SACP is communist party in south africa. It was founded on 12 february 1912 as the communist party of south africa, and tactically dissolved itself in 1950 in the face of being declared illegal by the government national party under the suppression of communism Act, 1950.

Nelson Mandela's imprisonment:

Nelson Mandela's imprisonment stands as one of the most powerful symbols of resistance to oppression in modern history. For 27 years, Mandela was confined by the apartheid regime of South Africa, yet his spirit remained unbroken. His incarceration not only defined his personal journey but also advocated for a global movement against racial injustice and played a pivotal role in South Africa's eventual transition to democracy.

Mandela was arrested on August 5, 1962, after years of underground political activity. He had been secretly traveling across Africa and Europe to garner support for the **African National Congress (ANC)** and to receive military training. Upon his capture, he was charged with leaving the country illegally and inciting workers to strike. However, these charges soon escalated when he and several others were brought to trial in what became known as the **Rivonia Trial⁹ (1963–1964)**. The trial resulted in Mandela and his co-accused being sentenced to life imprisonment for sabotage and conspiracy to overthrow the apartheid government.

He began his sentence in **1964 on Robben Island**; a harsh prison located off the coast of **Cape Town**. For 18 years, Mandela endured backbreaking manual labour in a lime quarry, minimal rations, and harsh restrictions on communication. Political prisoners like Mandela were deliberately isolated to prevent them from influencing other inmates. Despite the physical and emotional toll, he remained a steadying influence, advocating for dignity, discipline, and unity among his fellow prisoners. Over time, Mandela's name became synonymous with the broader anti-apartheid struggle, transforming him into a global icon of resistance.

In 1982, Mandela was transferred to **Pollsmoor Prison in Cape Town**. The move came amid increasing international pressure on the South African government. Conditions were somewhat better, and Mandela was allowed more regular access to reading and writing materials. This period also marked the beginning of secret talks between Mandela and government officials, who began to see that a negotiated settlement might be the only path forward.

His final years of imprisonment were spent at **Victor Verster Prison**, where he lived in a private house within the prison compound from 1988 until his release in 1990. These last years were crucial; Mandela continued discreet negotiations with the regime,

⁹ its name comes from Rivonia, a suburb of Johannesburg where police had raided a farm used by ANC members as a secret headquarters.

particularly with **President P.W. Botha and later F.W. de Klerk**. These discussions laid the groundwork for South Africa's peaceful transition from apartheid to democracy.

On February 11, 1990, Nelson Mandela walked free after 27 years behind bars. His release was watched by millions around the world and celebrated by those who had campaigned tirelessly for his freedom. Remarkably, Mandela emerged without bitterness, preaching reconciliation over revenge. He would go on to become **South Africa's first Black president in 1994**, leading the country through its early years of democracy with a focus on healing and unity.

Nelson Mandela's long imprisonment was more than just a personal ordeal; it became a rallying point for a global movement. It highlighted the brutal realities of apartheid and inspired generations to fight for justice. More importantly, Mandela's ability to forgive and lead a fractured nation toward reconciliation remains one of the most profound lessons in leadership and humanity the world has ever witnessed.

Nelson Mandela's Achievements after his release from prison

Nelson Mandela's release from prison on **February 11, 1990**, marked a historic turning point not only for **South Africa** but for the world. After spending 27 years behind bars for his resistance to apartheid, Mandela emerged not with **bitterness**, but with a vision of peace, democracy, and reconciliation. The years following his release were marked by extraordinary achievements that reshaped South Africa and established Mandela as a global symbol of justice, humility, and leadership. His post-prison legacy is defined by his role in ending apartheid, leading the nation's first democratic government, and promoting peace and human rights across the world.

One of Mandela's most significant achievements after his release was leading South Africa's peaceful transition from apartheid to democracy. As the deputy president of the African National Congress (ANC), Mandela worked closely with **then-President F.W. de Klerk**¹⁰ to begin dismantling **apartheid laws** and negotiate a new political order. This was a delicate and dangerous process, as the country was on the brink of civil war. Mandela's ability to advocate for peaceful negotiation while maintaining the confidence of oppressed South Africans was crucial. He helped calm tensions even during moments of crisis, such as the assassination of **ANC leader Chris Hani in 1993**. Mandela's leadership during this period earned him, along with de Klerk, **the Nobel Peace Prize in**

¹⁰ Frederik Willem de Klerk, was a South African politician who served as the seventh and final state president of South Africa from 1989 to 1994 and as deputy president alongside Thabo Mbeki under President Nelson Mandela from 1994 to 1996.

1993 a recognition of his efforts to bring an end to institutionalized racism and create a path toward freedom.

In 1994, Mandela became **South Africa's first black president** after the country held its first fully democratic elections. His presidency, from 1994 to 1999, was centered on national unity and healing. He led the country through the early years of **democracy** with a focus on reconciliation between racial groups, rather than revenge for past wrongs. One of his key initiatives was the establishment of the **Truth and Reconciliation Commission**¹¹, which allowed both victims and perpetrators of apartheid-era violence to share their stories publicly. This process promoted healing and forgiveness, setting a powerful example for the rest of the world.

Mandela also took steps to unite the country through **symbolic acts**. A famous example was during the **1995 Rugby World Cup**, when he wore the jersey of the national team, which was previously seen as a symbol of **white South African pride**. By doing so, he extended a hand of friendship to white citizens and encouraged all South Africans to see themselves as one nation. Under his leadership, South Africa adopted a new democratic constitution, expanded access to services like education and healthcare, and began to address the deep inequalities left behind by apartheid.

Even after stepping down from the presidency in 1999, Mandela remained an **influential global figure**. He became a respected elder statesman and advocate for peace, using his reputation to support **humanitarian causes**. Mandela was particularly active in raising awareness about **HIV/AIDS**, a disease that was heavily stigmatized and widespread in South Africa. Following the death of his own son due to **AIDS-related illness**, Mandela became a vocal campaigner, encouraging open discussion and international support for prevention and treatment.

In addition, Mandela established the **Nelson Mandela Foundation**, which promotes social justice, democracy, and education. He also launched **the Mandela Rhodes Foundation** to support academic scholarships for young African leaders. His legacy was further honoured with the creation of **Nelson Mandela International Day by the United Nations in 2009**, celebrated every year on his birthday, **July 18**. This day encourages people around the world to spend 67 minutes in service to others, symbolizing the 67 years Mandela devoted to public service.

¹¹ TCR is a temporary body established to investigate and address past human rights violations, often in post-conflict or transitional societies. These commissions aim to uncover the truth about abuses, promote healing, and foster reconciliation between victims and perpetrators.

Nelson Mandela's influence on the European union

While his most direct impact was in Africa, **Nelson Mandela** ideals and legacy extended far beyond his homeland. Among the international bodies influenced by Mandela, the **European Union (EU)** stands out as an institution that has both acknowledged and been shaped by his commitment to democracy, human rights, and peacebuilding.

1. Mandela as a Symbol of Universal Values

The **European Union** is founded on principles of **respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, and the rule of law**. These values echo the very ethos that Mandela fought for throughout his life. His unwavering commitment to **justice** and **reconciliation** made him a global figure whose ideals transcended national borders. For the EU, Mandela became a symbol of the universal values it seeks to promote within and outside its member states.

Mandela's peaceful transition from apartheid to democracy became a case study in diplomacy and conflict resolution. European leaders often referenced his legacy in shaping the **EU's external action policies**, particularly in the **promotion of democracy and human rights in its foreign affairs**.

2. EU-South Africa Relations and Development Cooperation

Mandela's presidency marked a turning point in **EU-South Africa relations**. After the fall of apartheid, the EU was quick to engage with the new democratic government. In 1999, the EU and South Africa signed the **Trade, Development and Cooperation Agreement (TDCA)**, which significantly enhanced political and economic relations. While the agreement was built on shared interests, it was Mandela's leadership and his vision for a democratic and globally engaged South Africa that laid the groundwork for this partnership.

The EU has also supported development initiatives in **South Africa** in areas such as education, health, and governance sectors that Mandela prioritized in his post-presidency efforts. His emphasis on education as a tool for empowerment aligns with EU development priorities, making Mandela a guiding figure in **EU-Africa cooperation** frameworks.

3. Mandela's Legacy in EU Public Discourse.



Nelson Mandela's enduring legacy as a global icon of justice, reconciliation, and moral courage continues to resonate within the public discourse of the **European Union (EU)**. His stature as a symbol of peaceful resistance against oppression and his emphasis on dialogue and forgiveness have deeply influenced the EU's self-image and normative values.

One of the most symbolic acts of European recognition came in **1988**, when the European Parliament awarded Mandela the **Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought**, despite his ongoing imprisonment by the apartheid regime. This decision was both bold and politically significant. At a time when Western governments were still grappling with how to respond to apartheid, the EU's legislative body took a definitive stance, aligning itself with the anti-apartheid movement and affirming its commitment to universal human rights. The award marked Mandela not only as a South African leader but as a global moral figure whose ideals transcended national borders.

Following his release and especially after his passing in 2013, Mandela's legacy continued to feature prominently in EU political rhetoric. Tributes from EU institutions including the European Commission, the European Council, and national leaders emphasized Mandela's role as a moral compass. Statements praised his life-long commitment to **nonviolence, human dignity, democratic governance, and racial reconciliation**, framing his leadership as exemplary of the values that the EU seeks to promote internally and in its foreign policy.

Mandela's legacy is regularly invoked in **parliamentary debates**, particularly those concerning global justice, anti-discrimination efforts, and international human rights advocacy. EU politicians often reference his vision when debating the Union's role in

promoting **multilateralism, conflict prevention, and democratic norms** in regions facing systemic oppression or recovering from authoritarian rule. His example continues to serve as a reference point for how moral authority can drive political transformation.

Additionally, cultural and symbolic gestures such as exhibitions, public commemorations, and educational programs; regularly honour Mandela's contributions. Streets and public spaces in several EU countries have been named after him, and his speeches and writings are included in civic education curricula, especially in discussions on civil liberties and peaceful resistance.

Conclusion:

Mandela's philosophy and political practice have left a tangible imprint on the EU's approach to peacebuilding and human rights. His emphasis on reconciliation, inclusivity, and restorative justice rather than punitive measures reshaped global norms around conflict resolution, influencing how the EU designs and implements its external action strategies.

Mandela's support for the **South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)**, which prioritized truth-telling, forgiveness, and institutional reform over retributive justice, provided a concrete model for transitional justice that the EU has studied and adapted in various conflict-affected regions. EU delegations and special representatives involved in peace processes especially in the **Western Balkans, the Sahel, and the Horn of Africa** have looked to the South African experience as a source of best practices in post-conflict rehabilitation.

This influence can be seen in the EU's increasing emphasis on **dialogue facilitation, inclusive governance, and civil society engagement** in its **Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP)** missions and development programs. **The European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR)**, for example, supports grassroots reconciliation initiatives and memory-building efforts that echo Mandela's focus on healing divided societies through inclusive narratives and participatory processes.

Moreover, Mandela's legacy has informed the EU's **normative approach to international law and justice**, including its advocacy for the International Criminal Court and support for transitional justice frameworks that blend accountability with community-based healing. This is particularly evident in the EU's policy documents and funding strategies, which increasingly stress the need for **justice mechanisms that address root causes of conflict** and support long-term societal resilience.

Finally, Mandela's example has inspired the EU to elevate the role of **leadership ethics** in foreign policy. His blend of humility, vision, and inclusive governance has been cited in EU leadership forums and diplomatic training as a template for ethical statecraft something the Union aims to promote in its partnerships with countries undergoing democratic transitions.

Bibliography:

<https://multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/en/photoset/nelson-mandela-visited-the-european-parliament-in-june-1990-just-months-after-being-released-from-prison-to-receive-the-1988-sakharov-prize-like-a-number-of-other-recipients-over-the-years-he-was-unable-to-attend-the-award-ceremony-in-1988-as-he-was-imprisoned-by-the-apartheid-regime> 1990C343 C356

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nelson_Mandela

<https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/justice-and-prison-reform/nelsonmandelaruleshistory.html>

<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Nelson-Mandela>

https://www.un.org/en/events/mandeladay/mandela_rules.shtml

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2012_Nobel_Peace_Prize

<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20181106IPR18325/the-eu-and-africa-are-bound-by-common-values-says-south-african-president>

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/live/2024/jan/29/giorgia-meloni-italy-africa-summit-europe-latest-updates>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South_African_Communist_Party#:~:text=The%20South%20African%20Communist%20Party,communist%20party%20in%20South%20Africa.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/F._W._de_Klerk