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Communism and the Tutelage of African Agency: Revisiting Mandela's Communist Ties¹

Nana Osei-Opare

Abstract²

African liberation movements and Communist parties often collaborated in their efforts to remove the yoke of colonialism and imperialism from the African continent. This cooperation is not evidence of Communist parties dictating the affairs and decisions of these liberation movements. This inference may be applied to the African National Congress (ANC), Nelson Mandela, and the South African Communist Party (SACP). While the ANC and Mandela worked with Communists and the SACP, Mandela himself was not a Communist, nor did the SACP manipulate or dictate his actions. Mandela worked with Communists, and Communists joined the ANC, where they assumed high positions within that party. Both the ANC and SACP came to realize that their goals of removing colonialism and imperialism were identical and that they thus needed to work together. This essay looks at the relationship and symbioses between Mandela and the SACP, as well as popular media's perceptions of this relationship.

I found that African nationalists and African Communists generally had far more uniting them than dividing them. The cynical have always suggested that the Communists were using us. But who is to say that we were not using them?

—Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*³

Nelson Mandela's life has become a trajectory intimately tied to establishing a space where human dignity and liberty have been sought. Mandela collaborated with individuals and organizations from a wide range of ideological leanings to ensure that the economic, physical, and psychological alienation nonwhites encountered daily in apartheid South Africa were erased. Due to polarizing Cold War prisms, the word "communism" and its manifestations have slipped into being nearly synonymous with

evil or *criminal*. To discredit someone in some Western circles, particularly in the United States and apartheid South Africa, all one had to do was suggest that someone was “a Communist,” “Socialist,” or “Red.”⁴ Even though the Cold War ended approximately twenty-five years ago, use of these terms to discredit individuals continues.⁵ Barack Obama’s detractors label his policies “socialist” as a means to undermine them and connote a sense of “evil” or incompetency. Through a very deliberate and systematic process of marginalization, the meanings of socialism and communism have been blurred, misunderstood, and associated with negative underpinnings in Western mainstream and fringe outlets.⁶ Cognition of this outer political reality, of the social and political connotations of communism, is important.

According to Keith Robbins, the global structures, the super-power blocs, that have arisen since World War II have been complex and continue to be layered with overlapping, divergent, and at other times, congruent layers of ambitions, cultural norms, and ideas. Such is the web of these complexities that unless one who is immersed within these layers is “detached” from this configuration, one remains unable to escape the “limitations produced by his [or her] own location in time and space.”⁷ In asserting that Nelson Mandela was a Communist, Stephen Ellis, in *External Mission: The ANC In Exile, 1960-1990*, has fallen prey to Robbins’ predicament. Culturally and socially situated during the Cold War, like most individuals from a certain historical epoch, Ellis’ vantage point is inevitably colored by those lenses. Yet to accept or contradict Ellis’ findings based on his own spatial and temporal understandings is to severely prejudice his work. In this paper, I will seriously engage with Ellis’ evidence and reasoning for his claim that Mandela was a member of the South African Communist Party (SACP) and popular media’s perceptions of this relationship.

Unpacking Ellis’ Argument

Former South African Communist Party members admitted that Mandela was a part of the Party. According to Ellis, Joe Matthews, a member of the African National Congress (ANC), revealed that Mandela was on the SACP’s Central Committee at the same time he, Matthews, was. Furthermore, according to Ellis, seven other prominent SACP members “testified to Mandela’s Party

membership,” while others implied that Mandela was a Party member.⁸ For example, in a 1982 interview, John Pule Motshabi, a former Central Committee member, contended that the SACP recruited Mandela into the Party at the same time J. B Marks was recruited.⁹ Hilda Bernstein, a member of the South African Labour Party League, SACP, and a founding member of the Federation of South African Women, in 2004, insisted that while Mandela continued to deny he was a SACP member, that in fact, he was a member of the Party for a period of time.¹⁰

While very compelling, these interviews are not the only evidentiary premises upon which Ellis builds his claim. The South African police, according to Ellis, also deduced that Mandela was a member of the South African Communist Party. The police reached this conclusion when the South African state confiscated Chinese Communist Liu Shaoqi’s sixty-two page manuscript entitled, “How to be a Good Communist,” written in Mandela’s handwriting and produced at the Rivonia trial in 1964.¹¹ According to Ellis, the police concluded that Mandela had joined the South African Communist Party by 1960, was appointed to their Central Committee, and participated in the Party’s December 1960 conference, where the decision to launch Umkhonto weSizwe (MK) was made. In addition, Ellis argues that Mandela was duplicitous in a 1966 response letter to the South African Department of Justice, in asserting that he was not a member of the “CPSA” (Communist Party of South Africa); for Ellis, this is telling because Mandela *knew* that the CPSA had been disbanded in the 1950s. Indeed, for Ellis, what was really being asked of Mandela was whether he was a member of the South African Communist Party, which then, according to the logic, would mean that he was a Communist.¹² Other evidence suggesting that Mandela was a Communist was the South African Communist Party’s acknowledgment, upon his death, that Mandela was a SACP member.¹³ While the evidence certainly seems convincing, it is important to examine how it differs from or is corroborated by what Mandela and others have revealed about Mandela’s relationship with the South African Communist Party, the Communist Party of South Africa, and communism, and how a different lens might lead one to a different conclusion.

Redefining the Relationship between Communism & Non-Communism

First, in attempting to classify and reveal Mandela as a Communist, it is important to define what or who a Communist is. While there are numerous definitions, I shall draw upon the thoughts and writings of a few scholars. In 1847, Frederick Engels, in “The Principles of Communism,” defined communism as the doctrine “of the conditions of the liberation of the proletariat.”¹⁴ The proletariat, according to Engels, was a class of people who lived “entirely from the sale of its labor” and was unable to profit from its labor. Thus, to be a proletarian, one had to fulfill two conditions—to earn a living solely from one’s physical exploits *and* be incapable of acquiring dividends from these exertions. The demand for labor, according to Engels, created this category of people.¹⁵ What, then, was the aim of Communists or communism? In another pamphlet entitled “Draft of a Communist Confession of Faith,” Engels maintained that communism’s aim was to organize society in such a manner that all people could develop and use their “capabilities and powers in complete freedom and without . . . infringing the basic conditions” of the society.¹⁶

Rett R. Ludwikowski insists that a socialist economy or state is predicated upon four realities. First, the state is to obtain ownership of the “productive resources in the form of state property.”¹⁷ This could be classified as the nationalization of private enterprises. Second, the central government must administer the income redistribution process.¹⁸ This second step constitutes the acquisition and reallocation of wealth and goods from the few to the majority. Third, central planning becomes a vital function of the state’s decision-making apparatus and process.¹⁹ Finally, Ludikowski maintains that in “democratic centralism” the economic zone is a combination of “a centralized decision-making process,” which is dependent on local managers’ creativity and initiative. The final two processes require that a central state party or organization, with limited internal electoral processes, determine who controls the planning and execution of the national economy.²⁰

However, as John H. Kautsky writes, the distinctions Ludwikowski offers are fluid and not static. The differences, according to Kautsky, between Communist parties and non-Communist

parties seeking to modernize their states have become less distinguishable.”²¹ Kautsky argues that this phenomenon has occurred for two reasons. First, Communist parties in these colonized and economically underdeveloped nation-states gradually began to support the policies of the non-Communist parties and subject themselves to their leadership, in some cases even merging with them.²² Second, because non-Communist party modernizing movements encountered conditions eerily identical to the ones faced by Communist parties, non-Communist parties advocated and pushed similar policies to those of the Communists themselves.²³ For instance, the Communist and non-Communist parties in liberating movements advocated for the “nationalization of foreign property,” antagonism and opposition towards imperialism, colonialism, and the push towards government organization of agriculture and resources for the betterment of the many. These were some of the like-minded goals that both Communists and non-Communists advocated. However, this is not to maintain that these non-Communist parties were socialist or Communist because they absorbed some Communist party members and ideas. As Kautsky puts it, “the very concept of communism has become a source of confusion. It is hence useless for analytical purposes, useful as it remains as a myth to both those who support and those who oppose whatever they choose to regard as Communism.”²⁴ It was not disingenuous, then, for the South African Communist Party to express after Mandela’s death its “solidarity with the African National Congress” and its “comrades” in the “broader liberation movement.”²⁵ The mutuality of these two movements was predicated upon their cooperation during the apartheid struggle. I shall return to this theme later.²⁶

During the South African liberation struggle, Communist Party members assisted the African National Congress.²⁷ Self-identified Communists such as J. B. Marks, Dan Tloome, and Moses Kotane held high positions within the ANC because the ANC shared the Communist Party’s general goal of opposing imperialism, colonialism, and the unjust conditions of the South African black labor force. “All modernizing movements in under-developed nations,” according to Kautsky, had Western-educated or -influenced people in its leadership positions, who were inspired by “well-formulated Western ideology.”²⁸ Marxism was no exception to this. Marxist ideology was not only attractive

to Communists in economically underdeveloped countries, but to non-Communists as well.²⁹ Consequently, in these countries, an amalgamation of various ideologies, including those of American, British, and French, transpired. However, within each situation and context, each national party molded these theories to its own realities. For what was true in England was not pertinent in Kenya, nor in Swaziland. African political leaders, including Mandela, became versed in these various ideological dogmas. Yet these leaders, like Kwame Nkrumah and Mandela, did not drink from these ideological cups without first putting their own additives in.

Understanding Marxism & Its Relationship to Mandela

Mandela was a staunch anti-Communist until the 1950s and often argued about the usefulness and purpose of communism in the African context with Moses Kotane, the general secretary of the ANC, who was a Communist, and with other Communists such as Ismail Meer and Ruth First.³⁰ Furthermore, staunch Communist members—like Edwin Mofutsanyana, one of the first Africans to join the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA),³¹ J. B. Marks, Dan Tloome, David Bopape, and others, who were former Communist Party members and still strong Communists—were now members of the ANC. Thus, we began to witness, as Kautsky argues, the overlapping between the national liberation movements and the Communist parties. For Kautsky, ultimately, Communists came to “support non-Communists.”³²

While Mandela strongly opposed communism during the early 1950s, he did not hold antagonisms towards Communists, since some of his closest friends were Communists. Mandela studied Marxist theorists to better debate his Marxist friends, some of whom joined the ANC. With this, Mandela acquired and diligently studied Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, Mao Tse-tung, and other socialist and communist works. Mandela noted that there was “no contradiction” between being an African nationalist and subscribing to dialectical materialism. Indeed, for Mandela, dialectical materialism became a way to “illuminate the dark night of racial oppression and a tool that could be used to end it.”³³ These works revealed to Mandela that the struggle in South Africa was not simply a racial one, but also had a class component. He became acutely cognizant of the fact that if the ANC hoped to

overcome apartheid the dualistic prism of white and black had to be removed.

Mandela revealed that the concept of dialectical materialism became important to him because the very notion of the value of goods being tied to the amount of labor infused into them was appropriate and tangible in South Africa's peculiar economic situation.³⁴ This predicament was evidenced in the thriving South African mining industry, which paid African laborers low wages and then added value to the cost of the goods.³⁵ Mandela became increasingly impressed with how the Marxists and the Soviet Union seemed to give "serious attention to the national liberation movements."³⁶ Indeed, Mandela's views against Communists softened, through what appeared to be a process of intellectual awakening. He considered himself an African nationalist struggling for the Africans' "emancipation" from white minority rule and wanted Africans to have the right and freedom to determine and control their own destinies. In this endeavor, he admits that he was "prepared to use whatever means to speed up the erasure of human prejudice and the end of chauvinistic and violent nationalism."³⁷ One of these means was dialectical materialism, for it provided Mandela the room to understand societal relations in more ways than a black-and-white paradigm. Dialectical materialism became another means for Mandela to unravel the apartheid state's fabric. He was attracted to Marx's notion of "existing relations of production" alienating the self from labor, land, and intellectual and political structures, because he himself lived in a society that had psychologically, spatially, and, economically alienated Africans from their lands and selves.

Furthermore, as Ludwikowski acknowledges, socialist doctrine proselytized ideas of "equality, freedom, and justice."³⁸ Yet for socialists, this dream could only be achieved by "a total reconciliation between individual and social interests."³⁹ A shift towards a "collective mentality," which had to supersede individual interests, was a necessary baseline for the attainment of communism.⁴⁰ If socialism pushed for *equality*, *freedom*, and *justice*, then it would have been difficult for these ideals not to have attracted Mandela, whose law practice with Oliver Tambo had been undermined by the society's racial order, and who, as a nonwhite person, had been marginalized in a racial hierarchical order that put whites at the

top, and disenfranchised and alienated nonwhites from their lands via several legal acts.⁴¹

Simply, Mandela intimately understood that he did not “need to become a Communist in order to work with them.”⁴² He realized that the liberation movements, Communist and non-Communist alike, had a lot more uniting than dividing them. It had always baffled Mandela that many would believe that the partnership between the Communists and African nationalists would suggest that the former were using the latter, rather than the latter using the former.⁴³ To look only at this collaboration and argue that the Communists controlled the ANC, but fail to conclude the reverse dispensation, is to insinuate an intellectual inferiority of the African nationalists to their Communist counterparts. This underlying assumption, a lack of agency on Mandela’s part, continues to dominate discussions of whether or not Mandela was a Communist.

The apartheid government used a particular word to describe Communists joining the ANC: “infiltrate.” This word casts entrance into the ANC body politic as a virus entering the physical human element. This argument strand, and its varieties, were pushed by the American, British, and South African governments, and by individuals seeking to fight against the tide of national liberation movements during the twentieth century as a means to delegitimize attempts to remove the yoke of colonialism and/or imperialism. Mandela reveals that the Nationalist Party, the United Party, and the National Minded Bloc, led by Seloape Thema, a former member of the National Executive Committee, who had left the ANC when it appointed J. B. Marks to the presidency of the Transvaal ANC branch, strongly argued that the Communists had taken over the ANC, with Indians also exploiting the Africans.⁴⁴ Furthermore, during the 1960 trial, Patrick Duncan, the editor and publisher of the liberal weekly *Contact*, a founding member of the Liberal Party, and one of the first white defiers during the Defiance Campaign, had repeatedly asserted that the Communists had been dictating the ANC’s policy. Duncan, however, changed his mind after paying close attention to the trial proceedings, and acknowledged that he could no longer hold on to the notion that Communists were controlling the ANC’s policies.⁴⁵ The essays and opinions that individuals like Duncan wrote, however, left lasting impression on their readers.

Brian Bunting argues that it was difficult to find an ex-Communist Party member active in the ANC movement during the fifties who was not already an active ANC member before 1950. M. B. Yengwa, a former secretary of ANC Natal and a non-Communist, told the court during the treason trial that there had been no infiltration of Communists in the ANC after 1950. Bunting contends, on the other hand, that countless examples exist of ANC members joining the illegal Communist Party in the 50s and 60s, with many rising to prominent leadership positions within the Party.⁴⁶

In 1950, the South African government passed the Suppression of Communism Act.⁴⁷ This legislation effectively considered any antigovernment activity Communist, or Communist inspired, even though an individual was a not a member of the Communist Party; this was referred to as “Statutory Communism.”⁴⁸ This subsequently had the logical effect of attempting to associate communism with anti-governmental activity. Importantly, whether or not the person was a Communist was irrelevant to this form of attack. It was an effective anti-liberation struggle strategy. The Nationalist Party of South Africa continued to push the notion that Chief Albert Luthuli was a “dangerous agitator at the head of a Communist conspiracy.”⁴⁹ Kenneth Kaunda, leader of the United National Independence Party of Northern Rhodesia, future president of Zambia, and one-time ANC member, informed Mandela that the ANC’s close relationship with the “white Communists . . . reflected poorly” on the ANC throughout Africa.⁵⁰ This sentiment surprised Mandela. Yet this recurring belief—that the Communists were puppeteering the ANC—undermined the ANC’s liberation struggle credibility in some eyes.⁵¹

Mandela revealed that not only the Nationalist Party of South Africa, but the Pan African Congress (PAC), spearheaded by individuals like Robert Sobukwe, was spreading these falsities. Sobukwe had been an ANC member, but had broken away from the ANC once it began to incorporate nonblacks into the party. He told the deputy of the United National Independence Party of Northern Rhodesia, Simon Kapwepwe, that the “UmKhonte weSizwe [wa]s the brainchild of the Communist Party and the Liberal Party, and that the idea of the organization is merely to use Africans as cannon fodder.”⁵² UmKhonto weSizwe (MK), meaning the Spear of the Nation, was the ANC’s armed wing.

Kapwepwe's subsequent conversation with Mandela underscored to Mandela how the tactic of stating that whites and Communists were using the ANC was an astute way of discrediting the ANC. Furthermore, during the Rivonia trial, Bruno Mtolo had testified that while he had once been an ANC member, he had lost faith in the ANC's principles when he realized that the MK were the instruments of the Communist Party. The Pan African Congress and the Nationalist Party, two parties with opposite intentions, both knew that to infer that the Communists were involved with the ANC was to insinuate that first, the ANC was a dangerous group, and second, that white Communists were infiltrating and dictating to the Africans. For many years, this was a successful tactic to undermine the ANC's credibility.

These accusations stung Mandela and Thambo to such an extent that after returning to South Africa, they informed the MK Working Committee group—which included Walter Sisulu, Moses Kotane, Govan Mbeki, Dan Tloome, J. B. Marks, and Duma Nokwe—that while people abroad supported the ANC's cause, the stipulation that the PAC was a pure African nationalist cause, while the ANC worked with Communists and whites, undermined the ANC's credibility on the African continent.⁵³ This newfound realization pushed Mandela to attempt to alter the ANC's image. Rather than appearing to be working with the Communists and nonblacks on an equal footing, Mandela argued that the ANC had to have the appearance of being independent and the first of equals in order to obtain the funding necessary for UmKhonto weSizwe (MK).⁵⁴ Such was the distortion of Mandela's political leanings that some of the prisoners in Robben Island believed that Mandela was a PAC member when he was in prison. Mandela quickly dismissed those rumors and stated that they were part of numerous PAC propaganda efforts to undermine the ANC.⁵⁵

The trope of Communists and whites controlling the African nationalists is also evident in Ellis' work. He pushes the argument that a white person wrote the ANC constitution. While it is accurate that a white person and Communist, Rusty Bernstein, played a part in writing the document, it is misleading to insinuate that writing and authoring are the same. The ANC's constitutional ideological formation was written in consultation with numerous individuals. This other narrative, intentionally or unintentionally, attempts to circumvent and undermine African agency.

Mandela admitted to working with Communists; however, this is not to be conflated with being dominated or manipulated by them. At his treason trial on August 3, 1960, Mandela revealed that, while he was not a Communist or a member of the Communist Party, he did not want to be “seen as distancing” himself “from [his] Communist allies,” even though it would have been in his best interests to do so.⁵⁶ In his autobiography, Mandela revealed that although he knew that sympathizing with the Communists could send him to jail, he did not “hesitate to reaffirm the tremendous support the Communists had given” him and the African liberation struggle in South Africa.⁵⁷ Even after his release from prison, Mandela held on to this sense of gratitude to those who had assisted in the anti-apartheid cause by meeting with Fidel Castro and Colonel Gaddafi, despite the United States’ strong objections.

During the early part of the 1960s, Mandela became convinced that armed struggle was necessary to overthrow the apartheid state.⁵⁸ Cognizant that the South African Communist Party had been forced underground and was redefining itself under a more militaristic banner, Mandela, after his treason trial, became increasingly steadfast that nonviolence was simply a tactic, and not an inviolate principle.⁵⁹ Nonviolence ceased being useful when the South African government continued to counter it with increasing violence. Mandela and Walter Sisulu convinced Chief Albert Luthuli that violent struggle was unavoidable, as militia units were forming across the country. It was imperative that the ANC remain relevant during this shift.⁶⁰ Despite Luthuli’s strong opposition to violence, he deferred to Mandela and Sisulu on this question. However, Luthuli informed Mandela that the military movement had to be an independent organ, distanced from the ANC, but still under ANC leadership.⁶¹ Mandela created UmKhonto weSizwe (MK) to undertake this new military front. He recruited Joe Slovo and Sisulu to assist in MK’s formation. Through Slovo’s communist ties, Mandela attracted Communist Party members experienced in executing acts of sabotage, such as “cutting government telephone and communication lines.”⁶² These included individuals such as Jack Hodgson, a Springbok Legion who had fought in World War II, and Rusty Bernstein, both self-proclaimed South African Communist Party members.⁶³

From Mandela's own admission, he worked closely with SACP members during the late 1950s and early 1960s. This situation aligns itself with Kautsky's proposition that the differences between the Communist parties and non-Communist parties became less distinguishable as the Communist parties in nation-states gradually began to support the non-Communist parties and their policies.⁶⁴ This phenomenon accurately describes this phase of the ANC's history, as it began to support a more militaristic agenda. A new intimacy existed between the ANC and SACP, this was further evidenced by individuals holding high positions within both the ANC and the SACP.

In his autobiography, Mandela continually refers to the South African Communist Party as just the "Communist Party." The name change and shift from the CPSA to SACP appeared irrelevant to Mandela since, in reality, the same individuals within the CPSA started the SACP.⁶⁵ Rusty Bernstein remarked that the members of the SACP created a code of absolute silence whose basic principles owed to those of the CPSA. This was done deliberately to continue CPSA connections.⁶⁶ Indeed, former CPSA members, in some instances, joined the ANC and/or SACP after the CPSA was dismantled.

Mandela goes to great lengths to highlight the tight-knit relationship he shared with the Communist Party during his most difficult days, revealing that he and Michael Harmel, "a key figure in the underground Communist Party," had long and intimate conversations about the relationship between the Communist Party and the ANC.⁶⁷ One of Mandela's first MK recruits was Raymond Mhlaba, a staunch trade unionist, Cape executive, and Communist Party member, and the first ANC leader arrested in the Defiance Campaign.⁶⁸ Mandela acknowledged that he asked the self-proclaimed Communists, Mhlaba, Slovo, and Bernstein, to help him draft the MK constitution.⁶⁹ It is no surprise, then, that Mandela took a picture with Mofutsanyana after his release from prison, and kept in close connection with the South African Communist Party until his death.⁷⁰

For someone supposedly under Communist control or eager to hide the truth of his Communist influences, it is surprising that Mandela is extremely forthright about asking Communist members to assist him in drafting the MK constitution, or that he sent individuals like Mhlaba to China and the Soviet Union to train in

the arts of guerrilla warfare. The amalgamation of the two parties was transpiring as they sought to remove imperialism, colonialism, and the deep-seated racist capitalist structures that had manifested in South Africa. Mandela never denied working closely with the South African Communist Party to unravel the suffocating seams of apartheid.

The aforementioned historiography is important in understanding and analyzing recent revelations insisting that Mandela was a Communist. While not always the case, an underlying factor in asserting that individuals or organizations were Communists was, and is, to remove agency and credibility from individual groups and actors.⁷¹ One cannot dismiss the underlying assumptions that permeate discussions when people assert that an individual is a Communist. When Ellis states that the ANC was a Communist front, or that Mandela was a Communist, he ever so gently insinuates that Communists controlled and manipulated the ANC and Mandela. Furthermore, when Ellis emphasizes that a white man wrote the ANC's freedom charter, and fails to highlight the charter's *authorship*, in the broader sense, he moves into murkier territory.

Popular Media Depictions and Understandings

Since Mandela's death, contemporary politics, remembrance, and debates have pivoted on whether or not Mandela was a Communist and what it means to Mandela, the ANC, and the liberation struggles' legacies if he was a Communist. In an article entitled, "Was Madiba Co-Opted into Communism?" Hugh Macmillan, author of *The Lusaka Years: The ANC in Exile in Zambia, 1963-1994*, concludes that Ellis' arguments that Mandela was a Communist are tendentious. Furthermore, Macmillan offers the subtle critique that Ellis' choice of the word "admitted" implies that being a SACP member is akin to "admitting" to crimes and other misdemeanors.⁷² While this critique hinges on a single word, it captures the sentiments pervading the association of an individual with communism as being "evil" or somehow "criminal."

Unlike Macmillan, Bill Keller, in his *New York Times* op-ed, "Nelson Mandela, a Communist," found that Ellis' evidence was "convincing" in showing that Mandela was a Communist. Yet Keller cautioned readers that this new *revelation* must not

be used as “gleeful red baiting.” For Keller, Ellis’ conclusion simply highlights Mandela’s pragmatism in a temporal and spatial period where the South African Communist Party and ANC had few friends.⁷³ Keller argues that Mandela’s nonracialism, which initially conflicted with some ANC members’ ideas of only permitting African members into the party is a legacy of Mandela’s communist ties. Ellis, in “C.I.A. and Mandela’s Arrest,” responded to Keller’s op-ed by highlighting the fact that the SACP had acknowledged Mandela’s involvement in the Party and that it was precisely this link, between Mandela and the SACP, that spurred the C.I.A. to assist the South African government in arresting Mandela in 1962.⁷⁴

In another article, “ANC Suppresses Real History to Boost Its Claim to Legitimacy,” Ellis wrote that at the Emmarentia conference in December 1960, twenty-five SACP members initiated the armed struggle, and not Mandela, as Mandela had previously insisted. According to Ellis, Mandela was simply one of the few black people present at the event.⁷⁵ Again, these words continue to imply that Mandela was a communist stooge, a non-active player in the crafting of history. As I have already shown, Mandela acknowledged that he was aware that the Communist Party had been pushed underground and was reestablishing itself under a more militaristic banner. Indeed, Mandela informs us that the ANC was behind the times, as numerous other militia units were being formed around South Africa. He warned Chief Luthuli that it was important for the ANC to stay ahead of this new development or risk losing relevancy in the liberation struggle.

One of the most “liked” comments after Ellis’ article was by a writer with the username “common-tator,” who wrote that Ellis’ work reveals how the Communists were “conniving, lying dirt.” For this writer, the Communists “used every deception in the book to get their murderous little corrupt feet into the country (South Africa) to create a sham called democracy.”⁷⁶ This comment encapsulates the continuing belief that Communists “manipulated” the ANC.⁷⁷

Ron Radosh, whose website, PJMedia, displays arched across its left-hand side: “Exposing the ideas of the influential American left wing,” wrote:

We've known for some time that Nelson Mandela was a member of the South African Communist Party. It was hard for fawning liberals to acknowledge the meaning of his membership, so they came up with a narrative explaining it. Their story went something like this: He only briefly joined to get the benefit of their organizational talent, and his membership was rather symbolic, and hardly meaningful. What is important is his steadfast commitment to nonviolence, his adherence to political democracy, and the role he played after emerging from prison in the waning days of apartheid.⁷⁸

In an effort to shore up his argument, Radosh argued that Mandela's unpublished autobiography states:

I (Mandela) hate all forms of imperialism, and I consider the US brand to be the most loathsome and contemptible. To a nationalist fighting oppression, dialectical materialism is like a rifle, bomb or missile. Once I understood the principle of dialectical materialism, I embraced it without hesitation. Unquestionably, my sympathies lay with Cuba [during the 1962 missile crisis]. The ability of a small state to defend its independence demonstrates in no uncertain terms the superiority of socialism over capitalism.⁷⁹

Mandela did not cower from his growing cognizance of and negotiation with the ideological construct of dialectical materialism. He came to sincerely believe that dialectical materialism was a good tool to remove apartheid. During his trial, Mandela famously noted that he had fought against both white and black domination and that this was an ideal he was prepared to die for.⁸⁰ Thus, it is not radical, or new, to assert that Mandela was against all forms of imperialism—Mandela admitted that himself. Furthermore, Mandela wrote that he was against the economic features and exploitation of the capitalist-centric mining industry which exploited the African laborer. He thought a return to a more traditional African economic blueprint was far more desirable than capitalism. It is as though Radosh was unaware of the economic conditions in South Africa that shaped Mandela's ideological and social frameworks.

In *NewsBusters: Exposing & Combating Liberal Media Bias*, Tim Graham wrote an article lambasting the U.S. media. Unlike

the United States' media coverage of Margaret Thatcher's death, which often showed her in cohorts with Chile's Augusto Pinochet, Graham maintains that the U.S. media deliberately failed to highlight Mandela's ties to individuals like Castro and Gaddafi.⁸¹ Yet it must be noted that Mandela asked who the Americans were to question and dictate whom he could and could not see, since individuals like Gaddafi and Castro had long supported the anti-apartheid movement, unlike the Americans and British, who, Macmillan argues, only began to divest from South Africa when a fierce campaign was waged in their countries to do so.⁸² In response to Graham's piece, the most "liked" comment was by "David Davis," who wrote:

That the self-loathing white liberals are falling over themselves to fawn over the corpse of this communist is no surprise. That so many who call themselves conservatives are doing so is sickening. Every man who died fighting Communism for this country, as well as the Boer farmers being murdered by Mandela's henchmen cry the truth from the[ir] graves, but our media can[']t hear them. Mandela, suffering his eternal punishment will hear them forever.⁸³

One of the most liked comments in the British paper, *the Telegraph*, in response to Colin Freeman's article, "Nelson Mandela 'Proven' to be a Member of the Communist Party after Decades of Denial," states quite simply:

Mandela and his communist pals in the ANC are entirely to blame for the utter destruction of the once most prosperous, modern, civilized, advanced and creative African nation in history. Now, much like Zimbabwe, it has been utterly destroyed by the same people. Everything Ian Smith said would happen to SA and Zimbabwe has been proved sadly correct. Why on earth a communist terrorist like Mandela is treated like some kind of saint is beyond me, can[']t people see what he and his party did to South Africa? Bottom line is this, both SA, Zimbabwe, Haiti and just about every other former African colony were better off under white minority rule and control.⁸⁴

These comments, which I apologize for citing in full, encapsulate the underlying racial sentiments that the utterance of communism

illuminates in some circles. These public and personal spaces of communication and social gathering highlight the lingering assumptions in some societal segments.

Conclusion

While only Mandela would truly know whether he was a “Communist,” this paper has attempted to show the general implications of Ellis’ work, and the assumptions embedded within it. Assertions and arguments are not divorced from their political and social contexts and realities. Ellis, in arguing that Mandela was a Communist, has taken evidence and arrived at his own set of conclusions based upon an underlying assumption that Communists were smarter, or more savvy than the African nationalists. Furthermore, with that assumption, he has dismissed the notion that a mutual partnership between the Communists and the African nationalists was plausible. This unwittingly reproduces an all-too-familiar narrative that circumvents and diminishes African agency.

As Mandela maintained, and as the South African Communist Party acknowledged in a statement after his death: “For Madiba, national reconciliation was a platform to pursue the objective of building a more egalitarian South African society free of the scourge of racism, patriarchy and gross inequalities. And true national reconciliation shall never be achieved in a society still characterized by the yawning gap of inequalities and capitalist exploitation.”⁸⁵ Indeed, the new and democratic South African government has struggled to close the social and capital gaps within South Africa, and these inequities persist to this very day.

Mandela’s works highlight his dissatisfaction with the exploitative features of capitalism, as laid bare by the realities of the South African mining industry and economic structure for Africans. Mandela had never cowed from the fact that he had worked with Communists prior to and after the creation of MK, that some of his best friends were Communists, that he admired how the Communists helped liberation struggles, or that he had begun to think that some of the Marxist principles, like dialectical materialism, applied to the South African struggle. Ultimately, the close collaboration between the Communist Party and the non-Communist liberation parties should not be viewed as the mental inferiority of the latter, but as two groups with similar

visions—anti-imperialism and ant-iracism—pushing to achieve similar ends. Or as Mandela eloquently articulated, “I found that African nationalists and African Communists generally had far more uniting them than dividing them. The cynical have always suggested that the Communists were using us. But who is to say that we were not using them?”⁸⁶

Endnotes

¹ A version of this paper was initially submitted in Professor William H. Worger’s African history seminar at UCLA and a different, truncated version was published June 18, 2014 in The Africa Collective (theafricacollective.com).

² I would like to give many thanks to Professor William H. Worger, Vivian Chenxue Lu, and Nancy Sayre for their feedback and edits on this piece. However, all mistakes contained within this essay are mine, and mine alone.

³ Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom: An Autobiography of Nelson Mandela* (New York: Little, Brown, 1994 & 1995), 121.

⁴ This cycle of unfortunate opportunism may be illuminated through several instances. For instance, the J. Robert Oppenheimer case, the McCarthy era in the United States, or throughout the African continent where national and imperial liberation movements were described as communist or socialist to discredit their goals of liberty, sovereignty, and self-determination. For more information on this phenomenon, see Ted Morgan, *A Covert Life: Jay Lovestone: Communist, Anti-Communist, And Spymaster*. (New York: Random House, 1999).

⁵ Alex Newman, “South African Communist Party Admits Mandela’s Leadership Role,” *The New American*, <http://www.thenewamerican.com/world-news/africa/item/17128-south-african-communist-party-admits-mandela-s-leadership-role>, (accessed May 20, 2014). Newman refers to Mandela as a terrorist because he thinks Mandela is a Communist.

⁶ Some individuals still deem socialism and communism as one and the same.

⁷ Keith Robbins, *The World Since 1945: A Concise History*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1998).1.

⁸ Stephen Ellis, *External Mission: The ANC in Exile, 1960-1990*. (London: Hurts, 2012), 22.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 21; Rusty Bernstein revealed that he lent Mandela a Chinese booklet called, *How to Be a Good Communist* by Liu Shao Chi. Rusty Bernstein, *Memory Against Forgetting: Memoirs From a Life in South African Politics, 1938-1964*. (London: Penguin Group, 1999), 229. Mandela maintains that he was translating the document and that was why it was in his own handwriting.

¹² Ellis, *External Mission*, 21-22.

¹³ Workers World Staff, “Statement of the South African Communist Party on Nelson Mandela,” *Workers World*, <http://www.workers.org/articles/2013/12/06/statement-south-african-communist-party-nelson-mandela/> (accessed May 20, 2014).

¹⁴ Frederick Engels, “The Principles of Communism,” *Marxistsorg*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1847/11/prin-com.htm> (located within “What is Communism” section), (first written in 1847),(accessed February 7, 2014), first published in 1914 by Eduard Bernstein in the German Social Democratic Party’s *Vorwärts! Translated Selected Works, Volume One*, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969), 81-97; Translated by Paul Sweezy.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Frederick Engels, “Draft of a Communist Confession of Faith,” *Marxistsorg*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1847/06/09.htm> (first written in 1847) (located within response to “Question #2”), (accessed February 7, 2014), *Birth of the Communist Manifesto*, (International Publishers, 1971); First published: in *Gründungsdokumente des Bundes der Kommunisten*, Hamburg, 1969. *One*, (Moscow, Russia: Progress Publishers, 1969), 81-97; Translated by Paul Sweezy.

¹⁷ Rett R. Ludwikowski, *The Crisis of Communism: Its Meaning, Origins, and Phases*, (Washington D.C.: Pergamon-Brassey’s, Press, 1986), 6.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ John H. Kautsky, *Communism and the Politics of Development: Persistent Myths and Changing Behavior*, (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1968), 5.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 162.

²⁵ Workers World Staff, “Statement of the South African Communist Party on Nelson Mandela,” *Workers World*, <http://www.workers.org/articles/2013/12/06/statement-south-african-communist-party-nelson-mandela/> (accessed May 20, 2014).

²⁶ Brian Bunting further argues, “The consequences of the cross-pollination between the Communist Party and the national movement were two-fold. On the one hand, the Communist Party achieved and incorporated in its programme and policy a truer understanding of the nature and importance of the national movement than it had ever before. On the other hand, the national movement was moved towards an appreciation of the class forces which underlay the national conflict in South Africa; and to abandon its former almost parochial preoccupation with its own problems.” Brian Bunting, *Moses Kotane: South African Revolutionary* (Bellville, South Africa: Mayibuye Books, University of the Western Cape, 1998), 199.

²⁷ Further proof of this cross-pollination is evident in Barry Gilder’s account; Gilder was Deputy Director-General Operations of the South African Secret

Service from 1995 to 1999. Barry Gilder, *Songs and Secrets: South Africa from Liberation to Governance* (Auckland, South Africa & United Kingdom: Jacana Media & C. Hurt & Co., 2012), 193-4.

²⁸ John H. Kautsky, *Communism and the Politics of Development*, 4.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 162, 172-183.

³⁰ Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, 119.

³¹ Edwin Mofutsanyana also studied in the Soviet Union. His alias name was Greenwood. Robert Edgar, *The Making of an African Communist: Edwin Thabo Mofutsanyana and the Communist Party of South Africa 1927-1939*. (Pretoria: UNISA Press, University of South Africa, 2005) and Woodford McClellan, "Black Hajj to 'Red Mecca': Africans and Afro-Americans at KUTV, 1925-1938" in *Africa in Russia, Russia in Africa: Three Centuries of Encounters*. ed. Maxim Matusevich. (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2007), 70.

³² John H. Kautsky, *Communism and the Politics of Development*, 162.

³³ Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, 120.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ More information about these disparities may be gleaned through Charles H. Feinstein's work, *An Economic History of South Africa: Conquest, Discrimination and Development* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2005) and William H. Worger's work, *South Africa's City of Diamonds: Mine Workers and Monopoly Capitalism in Kimberley, 1867-1895* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

³⁶ Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, 121.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 121.

³⁸ Rett R. Ludwikowski, *The Crisis of Communism*, 7.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ One of the grievances Africans faced was expulsion from farms and not even being permitted on the land reserves because of overcrowding. Gerald J. Pillay, *Voices of Liberation: Volume 1: Albert Lutuli* (Pretoria, South Africa: HSRC Publishers, 1993), 38.

⁴² Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, 121.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 135.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 265.

⁴⁶ Brian Bunting, *Moses Kotane: South African Revolutionary*, 198-199.

⁴⁷ Leonard Thompson, *A History of South Africa*. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990). 198; Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, 137-8.

⁴⁸ Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, 138.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 284.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 295.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 296.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Ibid., 311.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 347-8.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 252.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 271.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 272.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid., 272-3.

⁶² Ibid., 274.

⁶³ In efforts to educate himself on guerrilla warfare, Mandela read Blas Roca's report; Roca was the general secretary of the Communist Party of Cuba. Mandela also familiarized himself Che Guevara, Mao Tse-tung, and Fidel Castro's works. What appealed to him about these individuals was that they had orchestrated successful guerrilla warfare strategies. Guevara had gone to the Democratic Republic of Congo to assist Patrice Lumumba's supporters in guerrilla warfare and thus understood guerrilla warfare in the African context. Rusty Bernstein also handed Mandela a first-hand account of the Filipino guerrilla uprising, Huk Balahap, entitled *Born of the People*. See Rusty Bernstein, *Memory Against Forgetting: Memoirs From a Life in South African Politics, 1938-1964* (London: Penguin Group, 1999), 229; Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, 275.

⁶⁴ John Kautsky, *Communism and the Politics of Development*, 145-162.

⁶⁵ Former magistrate Mr. J. de Villiers Louw, in a replying affidavit, denied that the Communist Party had ceased to exist or that Moses Kotane had ceased to function as its general secretary. The document went on to state that despite the fact that individuals such as I. O Horvitch, Fred Carneson, B. P. Bunting, D. J. du Plessis, and Dr. Y. M. Dadoo submitted affidavits claiming that the Communist Party had been dissolved and that they were no longer members, in fact they were and the Party was still in existence. See Brian Bunting, *Moses Kotane: South African Revolutionary*, 183.

⁶⁶ Rusty Bernstein, *Memory Against Forgetting*, 131.

⁶⁷ Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, 280.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 281.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 280.

⁷⁰ Picture is located in Robert Edgar, *The Making of an African Communist*

⁷¹ For documentation of the fear the United States had about the spread of communism in Africa, see, "The Attempted Communist subversion of Africa through Nkrumah's Ghana." Published/Distributed: Washington: *Subcommittee to Investigate the Administration of the Internal Security Act and Other Internal Security Laws of the Committee on the Judiciary*, U.S. Senate: for sale by the Supt. of Docs., U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1972.

⁷² Hugh Macmillan, “Was Mandela Co-Opted Into Communism,” *The Mail & Guardian*, <http://mg.co.za/article/2014-01-16-was-madiba-co-opted-into-communism> (accessed February 8, 2014).

⁷³ Bill Keller, “Nelson Mandela, a Communist,” *New York Times*, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/08/opinion/sunday/keller-nelson-mandela-communist.html?pagewanted=2&_r=0 (accessed January 28, 2014).

⁷⁴ Stephen Ellis, “C.I.A. and Mandela’s Arrest,” *New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/10/opinion/cia-and-mandelas-arrest.html> (accessed January 29, 2014).

⁷⁵ Stephen Ellis, “ANC Suppresses Real History to Boost Its Claim to Legitimacy,” *The Mail & Guardian*, <http://mg.co.za/article/2014-01-02-anc-suppresses-real-history-to-boost-its-claim-to-legitimacy/> (accessed February 7, 2014).

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ron Dosh, “New Evidence Emerges about Nelson Mandela and His Secret Communist Past,” *PJMedia*, <http://pjmedia.com/ronradosh/2014/01/19/new-evidence-emerges-about-nelson-mandela-and-his-secret-communist-past/> (accessed February 1, 2014).

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Nelson Mandela, Speech, Rivonia Trial. Pretoria Supreme Court, 20 April 1964 <http://www.anc.org.za/show.php?id=3430>.

⁸¹ Tim Graham, “Rest in Whitewash: Networks Set to Ignore Mandela’s Communist Party Ties, Dictator Friends,” *NewsBusters: Exposing & Combating Liberal Media Bias*, <http://newsbusters.org/blogs/tim-graham/2013/12/07/rest-whitewash-networks-set-ignore-mandelas-communist-party-ties-dictato> (accessed February 7, 2014); Barry Gilder, *Songs & Secrets: South Africa from Liberation to Governance*, 276.

⁸² Hugh Macmillan, “Was Mandela Co-Opted Into Communism,” *The Mail & Guardian*, <http://mg.co.za/article/2014-01-16-was-madiba-co-opted-into-communism> (accessed February 8, 2014).

⁸³ Tim Graham, “Rest in Whitewash: Networks Set to Ignore Mandela’s Communist Party Ties, Dictator Friends,” *NewsBusters: Exposing & Combating Liberal Media Bias*, <http://newsbusters.org/blogs/tim-graham/2013/12/07/rest-whitewash-networks-set-ignore-mandelas-communist-party-ties-dictato> (accessed February 7, 2014);.

⁸⁴ Colin Freeman, “Nelson Mandela ‘Proven’ to be a Member of the Communist Party after Decades of Denial,” *The Telegraph*, <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> (accessed February 9, 2014).

⁸⁵ Workers World Staff, “Statement of the South African Communist Party on Nelson Mandela,” *Workers World*, <http://www.workers.org/articles/2013/12/06/statement-south-african-communist-party-nelson-mandela/> (accessed May 20, 2014).

⁸⁶ Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, 121.