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Review of Nelson Mandela: Peace Through Reconciliation

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***Nelson Mandela: Peace Through Reconciliation.* Neera Chandhoke. New York: Routledge, 2021, paper, 108 pp., ISBN 9780367353292**

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Neera Chandhoke's short volume, *Nelson Mandela: Peace Through Reconciliation*, offers some interesting insights into the political life and work of democratic South Africa's first president from a pacifist perspective. The basic argument of the book is that Mandela, an advocate of armed struggle and founder of the African National Congress's (ANC) armed wing, the Spear of the Nation (MK) became a supporter of a peaceful transition to power and reconciliation with South Africa white population as the result of reflections during his long time in prison. This conversion, Chandhoke argues, allowed Mandela to lead South Africa to black majority rule without significant bloodshed and to oversee the creation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) that facilitated healing between the competing political forces. Chandhoke is clear that Mandela was not a principled pacifist but rather adopted non-violence out of his life circumstances. At one point the author seeks to equate Mandela's positions to the tactical non-violence adopted by Mohandas Gandhi in the Indian independence struggle. In my view this comparison is difficult to make because while Gandhi acknowledged that in limited circumstances armed action might be needed to save lives, Gandhi never led an armed wing of the independence movement in the way that Mandela led the MK of the ANC.

The author makes the case that Mandela's views on armed struggle evolved during his long time in prison, but she does not provide definitive proof of that conversion. Rather, as a scholar of the ANC and the transition to democratic rule I would argue that it was much more the historic moment of the late 1980s and the decision of the apartheid leaders to negotiate with the leaders of the liberation movement that moved Mandela and other ANC leaders to the idea of a non-violent transition and subsequent effort to seek reconciliation with their former enemies. In the view of many liberation leaders, including Mandela, the armed actions of the ANC in South Africa and those of the Cuban army in Angola had contributed in an important way to the realization by the National Party (NP) that apartheid and white minority rule was no longer sustainable. Mandela and the ANC only surrendered their commitment to armed struggle when it was clear to them that the transition to black majority rule was clearly underway and irreversible.

It is absolutely valid to say that once Mandela was convinced that his side had the upper hand in the negotiations his political trajectory was to promote peace and reconciliation. The strength of Chandhoke's book is in its presentation of the documentation of Mandela's style of reconciliation. The author does that by focusing on his role in key moments in the 1990-1994 transition when South Africa could have fallen into a race-based civil war. Crucial was her attention to Mandela's peacekeeping role in the wake of the assassination of liberation leader, Chris Hani in 1993 when initial popular anger threatened to undue the peace process. Hani was a charismatic leader who was seen by some as a future president of South Africa. The author documents a decisive speech by Mandela that calmed the situation and kept the transition on course. She also documents the role that Mandela played in mitigating the impact of the violence in Natal Province initiated by the

Inkatha Freedom Party against ANC members that threatened the holding of the decisive 1994 elections that brought the ANC to power.

The other well-documented section concerned the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) established during Mandela's term in office. The TRC was led by Archbishop Desmond Tutu and was not an idea that came directly from Mandela, but his endorsement and support of it was important.

The TRC was a multiyear process that both highlighted the crimes of the apartheid era and also provided some closure for the victims of the crimes and, to a lesser degree, for the perpetrators. In the years following many other such commissions have been created in countries coming out of civil conflict.

There is no ground breaking scholarship here but the book is recommended for those who wish to see the South African transition to democracy through the lens of conflict resolution and peacemaking.