

This Day in History... July 18, 1918

Birth of Nelson Mandela

Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela was born on July 18, 1918, in Mvezo, Cape Province, South Africa. His long struggle against apartheid would carry him from prison to the presidency and make him a worldwide symbol of reconciliation and democratic change.

The son of a local chief, Mandela spent much of his childhood herding cattle and was enrolled in a local Methodist school at the age of seven. He went on to attend a Methodist high school and college, where he enjoyed playing sports, particularly long-distance running and boxing.

Mandela went on to attend the University of Fort Hare but was suspended for boycotting the quality of food. Just before he returned home, he discovered an arranged marriage had been planned for him and he fled to Johannesburg. There he worked as a clerk in a law office and earned his bachelor's degree through a correspondence course at the University of South Africa.

After that, Mandela studied law and became involved in the African National Congress (ANC). He then helped create the African National Congress Youth League to help mobilize the younger generation.

In 1948, South Africa's National Party government established apartheid, a system of racial segregation that benefited whites. Mandela was a leading figure in the ANC at that point and pushed for direct action, including boycotts and strikes. By 1950, he was a national executive of the ANC and the national president of the ANC youth league.

In 1952, Mandela led a series of protests that made him widely known throughout South Africa. He was briefly arrested but released. As the protests continued, the ANC's membership increased from 20,000 to 100,000. In response, the government passed harsher laws that permitted martial law. Mandela was arrested again and was banned from attending any meetings with more than one other person present.

Mandela then opened the only African-run law firm in the country. Despite their popularity, they were forced to move to a more remote location, leading to a decrease in business. Mandela would be banned from public meetings two more times, though he eventually began to ignore these bans. Mandela's revolutionary activities got him and other ANC leaders arrested several more times, but they were ultimately released.

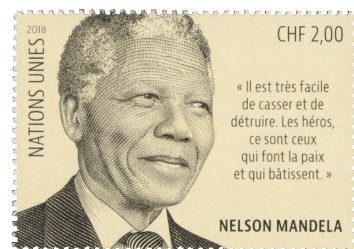
In 1961, Mandela and others founded the "Spear of the Nation" militant group, also known as MK. Their goal was to carry out acts of sabotage against the government but nothing that would hurt people. They staged several bombings that December. Mandela was arrested again on August 5, 1962, for encouraging workers' strikes and leaving the country without permission. He was sentenced to five years in prison. However, after he found to be a part of MK, he was sentenced to life in prison.

Mandela would spend the next 27 years in prison. While there, he spent his days in a rock quarry and his nights working on his law degree. He was placed in solitary confinement several times for possession of news clippings, which were banned. Mandela also took part in work and hunger strikes to protest prison conditions.

In 1989, a new president took office in South Africa who believed that apartheid was wrong. He began releasing ANC members from prison, including Mandela, who left prison on February 11, 1990.

By 1993, Mandela was named Time magazine's "Man of the Year" and received the Nobel Peace Prize for helping to peacefully bring an end to apartheid and create a new democratic government to South Africa. A year later, Mandela helped to organize the first multiracial general election. He went on to win that election, becoming the nation's first black president. Taking office on May 10, 1994, Mandela worked to reconcile the differences between the nation's racial groups and established a commission to investigate the human rights violations of the past. He also worked on land reform, poverty, and healthcare. Serving until 1999, Mandela was often called the "Father of the Nation."

Mandela remained active in the community and philanthropy before dying on December 5, 2013.



UN Geneva Office stamp issued in honor of Mandela's 100th birthday.

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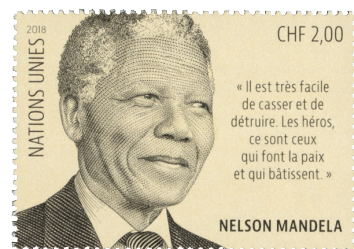
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