

Albert Luthuli

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## Introduction

# Who Was Albert Luthuli?

When Albert Luthuli, president of the African National Congress (ANC), South Africa's leading antiapartheid organization, became the first African-born recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in December 1961, the world celebrated his advocacy of nonviolent civil disobedience. The prize signaled international recognition for his Gandhian strategy to end apartheid, South Africa's disastrous white supremacist political policy of racial subordination and separation, and connected South Africa's antiapartheid struggle to the growing global human rights campaigns exemplified by the 1948 United Nations Declaration of Human Rights. It propelled Luthuli to global celebrity and raised the profile of the ANC, which he had led since 1952. The ANC would survive lethal state repression in the 1960s and throughout two ensuing decades. As a mass organization, it articulated a broad, inclusive African nationalism and led the Congress Alliance, a multiracial, multi-ideological antiapartheid coalition that shared Luthuli's vision of a nonracial, democratic, equitable South Africa.

Luthuli's admirers regarded him as a global icon of peace and reconciliation, similar to Mahatma Gandhi

and Martin Luther King Jr. More than thirty years before Nelson Mandela walked out of prison in 1990 onto the world stage with his stirring statesman's vision of racial reconciliation in a democratic South Africa, Luthuli was "Mandela before Mandela," adored by Africans, Indians, Coloureds, and an increasing number of whites as a unique unifying figure. At that time, many regarded the ANC president as South Africa's likely political leader if the disenfranchised majority could vote in a post-apartheid, democratic state. Although some regarded Luthuli as a South African version of King, his fellow Nobel laureate declared himself a follower and admirer of Luthuli. Both men shared a vision of universal love and Christian activism against the moral evil of white supremacy, linking South African and American freedom struggles to decolonization and labor movements in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean. But while Gandhi facilitated Indian independence, King won major civil rights victories that ended a century of legalized Jim Crow segregation, and Mandela would become South Africa's first democratically elected president, Luthuli's extraordinary statesmanship did not result in similar victories. By the late 1950s, increasingly restrictive state banning orders limited his ability to participate in political activity. Luthuli is known as a staunch advocate of nonviolence, a moderate who never countenanced the ANC's armed resistance. But recently available archival documents and a rich vein of autobiographical accounts and oral interviews reveal that Luthuli, who rejected

claims that he was a moderate, had a lesser-known, harder-edged activism. He eventually accepted armed self-defense against an apartheid state that he regarded as a relic or reinvention of Nazi-era fascism, engaged in virtual slavery and the literal imprisonment of a multitude of Africans.<sup>1</sup> Apartheid continued for decades after his tragic 1967 death on railway tracks in the isolated reserve of Groutville. Africa's first Nobel Peace Prize winner became a forgotten man, particularly outside South Africa.<sup>2</sup>

How did Albert Luthuli's many life experiences—as a Zulu, an African, an educator, a Christian, a government chief, a doting family man, and a sportsman—shape him as a person and a political leader? On the night of December 15, 1961, as Luthuli and his wife returned to South Africa five days after his Nobel acceptance, ANC members of a new military wing known as Umkhonto weSizwe (Spear of the Nation, or MK) set off the explosive charges that marked the start of their armed struggle.<sup>3</sup> The MK explosions raised doubts then and now: Was Luthuli a political contortionist, climbing the pedestal of peace while stooping to war? Had he been disingenuous to Nobel luminaries about his commitment to nonviolence? Or did Luthuli's trip to Norway give ANC renegades the opportunity to contravene his strategy of civil disobedience? Was he complicit in MK's incendiary debut? If so, was his nonviolence more pragmatic than principled, more situational than unshakeable? How did he react to the appeals of future

Nobel recipient Nelson Mandela, who wanted Luthuli's approval before destroying installations and training saboteurs? What relevance do his life and times have for today's South Africa and for the contemporary world? This biography aims to recover Luthuli from historical obscurity and highlight his key leadership of the ANC as it transformed into a mass antiapartheid movement and his revolutionary belief that apartheid South Africa could become one of the world's first truly multiracial democracies. Far from being a moderate, Luthuli was a revolutionary for his deep conviction that South Africa, founded on the bedrock of racial subordination and racial separation, could be a global model for a radical new form of multiracial democracy.