Mogale City, a midsize municipality selected for its representative character. These chapters color rather than substantiate his main claims. In Chapter 3—the book’s true, academic introduction—Lieberman lays out his argument, previews the scope of his analysis, and justifies framing South Africa as “an intrinsically important case” (p. 53). He then measures democracy’s performance by situating the polity’s first twenty-five years after apartheid within historical (Chapters 4 and 5) and global (Chapters 6–8) contexts. Chapter 9 returns the reader to Mogale City, where Lieberman explores the meaning of the 2019 election and underscores the lessons South African democracy offers the world.

The chapters using global comparison are the book’s most compelling. In these, Lieberman empirically traces a causal relationship between democratic process and the delivery of material and human benefits. Readers wanting to appraise Lieberman’s creation and use of datasets can turn to the “Author’s Note on Primary Data and Analysis” in the book (pp. 271–273) and his book’s companion website.²

As Lieberman himself admits, how one reads South Africa’s record and weighs the evidence—if, for example, “one puts more weight on current deficits, especially with respect to unemployment, inequality, and violence,”—necessarily shapes the conclusions one may draw (p. 68). Many are telling South Africa’s story differently. The master-narrative history Lieberman offers and his assessment of the Freedom Charter’s value to South Africa’s democratic constitutional order are subjects of considerable scholarly and political debate. Regardless, the difficult case Lieberman advances is worth serious engagement by scholars, pundits, and democracy’s doubters. It is one that leaves him “hopeful” (p. 260). Me too.

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It is not easy to reverse engineer myths back into history. That Nelson Mandela is the twentieth century’s most legendary figure is cliche, conventional wisdom, and true. In Spear: Mandela and the Revolutionaries, Paul Landau chips away at the bronze to reveal the very human experiences that brought Mandela and his small number of comrades to the attention of apartheid South Africa’s repressive state during the early 1960s. A historian through and through, Landau restores contingency, fallibility, naïveté, failure, and idealism to the phase of South African liberation history often glossed as the “armed struggle,” between Sharpeville in 1960 and the Rivonia Trial’s guilty verdicts in mid-1964. Landau’s readers leave sensitized to how “events arrive, as they do in life, as a surprise, not according to prophecy,” even for Nelson Mandela (p. 14). Landau proves that even legends

² https://evanlieberman.org/southafricabook
live in time. That the thick experience Mandela and his colleagues lived was the struggle against apartheid—an absolute “evil” (p. 1)—undertaken by those on “the radical pursuit of good, and justice” (p. 2), only raises the stakes for understanding what it meant to be among the small host that was Umkhonto we Sizwe, or MK.

Of course, this is well-trodden territory for South African history, where the turn to armed struggle has been discussed and debated ever since Walter Sisulu visited post-revolutionary China in the early 1950s, and activists watched anxiously as settler-colonies like Kenya and Algeria were plunged into brutal violence. In recent years, historians like Scott Couper, Robert Vinson, Thula Simpson, Stephen Ellis, Stephen Davis, Simon Stephens, and Landau himself have continued this debate, focusing variously on the role that the Communist Party played in either leading or following the ANC to armed struggle in Sharpeville’s wake, and how the ANC’s spiritual and political leader, Nobel Peace Prize laureate Albert Luthuli, supported, rejected, or condoned that shift. All of that is part of Landau’s story, along with so much more.

*Spear* is a multi-scalar history. Within the seemingly daily recounting of 1960–1964, we see the intimacy of romantic relationships; we see the expansive imagination of young South Africans annotating heroic accounts from Cuba; we find that in the quotidian pursuit of change, sexual congress could sometimes be as meaningful as other forms of congress. We find the expansive geography of late 1950s and 1960s, Cold War revolution—the Soviets, the Chinese, conniving British intelligence agents just over the border in Bechuanaland, Ethiopian military trainers who had themselves been trained in the tradition of the Zionist Irgun. Landau authors careful readings of Mandela’s experiences in Algeria, where FLN veterans noted that the killing of civilians had been politically effective—a move MK was hesitant to make—and to Ethiopia, where, as elsewhere on the continent, sympathies were with the ANC’s rival, the Pan Africanist Congress, which continental luminaries saw as more aligned with continent-wide African nationalism and less with the imperatives of multiracial or non-racial revolution. The ANC downplayed its links to global communism, Landau argues, at least in part to fend off its Africanist flank, yet Mandela, Sisulu, and the rest were committed to the Party’s non-racialist vision, which they understood to be driving towards a peculiarly South African variant of African Nationalism.

This is a clearly stated and impactful historiographical argument. South African political activists and those who study them love to name things and then debate whether the name is appropriate. Were MK saboteurs or terrorists, revolutionaries or civil rights activists? Was the ANC African Nationalist, non-racialist, multi-racialist, opportunistic, cynical, pragmatic, socialist, communist, compromised, etc., etc.? Landau dispenses with many of these debates, opting instead to make it plain. Yes, Mandela was a Communist, a member of the Party, who allied with people of various backgrounds who shared his political commitments—but he was foremost and remained an “African Nationalist”—as were many of his white, Indian, and Coloured comrades. More than anything else, Landau emphasizes praxis: for all the theorizing, Mandela’s African Nationalists “are understood not so much from their writings, as from their actions—as people making themselves who they were” (p. 12).
While they made themselves, they tried also to make a revolution, which Landau defines as “a thoroughgoing and rapid reversal or preferably destruction of those hierarchies determining unequal access to life’s opportunities” (p. 15). Circumstances demanded that they had to pursue it incrementally, and here the historian’s labor is apparent. Spear is the outcome of years of dogged research, including dozens of archives and the mining of oral interviews, 239 of them, many Landau’s, many others’. From this deep well of evidence, Landau surfaces a fine-grained detail that is enormously helpful for reimagining and understanding what it took to be revolutionary in early 1960s South Africa: Walter Sisulu journeying to Colenso, in Natal coaling country, in the early winter of 1961, “tarrying” outside a centrally located Indian shop with a sympathetic owner, just long enough to attract a small group of “six or seven African men,” both to assure them that the ANC lived on in the wake of government banning, and to urge them to organize themselves into a small cell, one of dozens similarly scaled across the country (pp. 106–107). Dozens of similar instances populate the book. This was the armed struggle—“particularized by city and region”—a handful, a few dozen, hundreds at most, trying to bring down a mid-century Goliath with a military, police force, and intelligence agencies in support (p. 187).

Because I favor the history of thinkers and ideas, my favorite chapter is Ch. 5, “Mandela’s Bookcase,” which delves into Mandela’s references and annotations, as of 1961, considering how the reader Mandela considered texts like Menachem Begin’s history of the Irgun, from which he learned how to organize through dispersed underground structures, (“underground like a mole” as one former activist put it [p. 127]) while nevertheless maintaining the decision making hierarchies necessary to preserve consistency and order. Sometime in 1961 Mandela read Che and Blas Roca, and Mao, and thought about how South Africa differed from Algeria and Cuba and China, and in which ways. Those revolutionaries learned from trial and error, and so too did MK.

When we leave the fictive bookcase behind, however, we find that the MK vanguard valiant but doomed, and at times unprepared for the roles that circumstances and ambition led them to play. Misadventures and misgivings abound. Landau refers frequently to the autobiography of saboteur Shadrack Maphumulo from Natal, for example, who recalled that the sound of the explosion he initiated was “totally shocking … terrifying” (p. 146). It was, but at the same time, Landau’s attention to the day-to-day suggests that small bombs were also acts that were easily lost in the routine violence and premature death that marked black South African urban life (p. 150). Still, the state and its allies paid attention and energetically repressed MK. One of Landau’s finest moments occurs when he breaks chronology temporarily to detail his own dogged efforts to track down the CIA’s man in Durban, Don Rickard, who lived until 2016 “in an Arizona golfing community” (p. 181), more than a half-century since he had received a tip that Mandela was in Durban and alerted the security police.

This is Landau’s third monograph; he is one of our most accomplished historians. Many of his readers will know what to expect. Like all his work, Spear is deeply learned, offering a cascade of information and words, each meaningful to him, not always apparent how or what they are supposed to signify for the readers. Of the Mpondo rebels who in some ways rehearsed the rural rebellion against the state that MK was not quite able to
organize, Landau writes that they “went into hiding in Ndlovu Hill, ‘the Hill,’ in the mountains, their liberated center” (p. 77). Four ways of saying the same thing? What I call breathless or fast-paced, some readers might find exhausting. The aforementioned Ch. 5 is one of the few times when Landau slows down. And with so much information to convey, it is not surprising that some of it comes out wrong. For a book that emphasizes timing, there are anachronisms—on p. 47 Landau recounts the “Doctors’ Pact” between the ANC and the Indian Congresses, which his own footnote indicates was signed in 1947; in the narrative it comes “partly in response to the Durban killings” of January 1949. Two hundred pages later, we meet Prime Minister John Vorster, repressing the Rivonia detainees, who two pages later is revealed to be Minister of Law-and-Order John Vorster—the latter the correct office in 1963, which is why he had so much to do with the fates of those arrested during the raids that broke most of MK’s networks.

Yet even overwhelmed or nit-picking readers ought to persevere because Spear is worth it. The writing is sometimes elegant and stirring, and the insights unparalleled. One such stirring moment comes towards the end, when Landau rereads Mandela’s speech from the dock during the Rivonia Trial. Annotating Mandela as Mandela once annotated others, Landau restates his thesis, subtly, that their revolution was one of more of necessity than desire, of praxis more than ideology. In Mandela’s elegant summation of his non-racialist African Nationalism, Landau sees the urgent appeal of someone who above all else pursued humanity. “Racism and apartheid stole Black people’s dignity,” Landau’s Mandela teaches us, “and dignity was necessary for the fullness of life” (p. 262). I have some gripes with how he goes on to turn Mandela’s words into a lesson for the “democratic West’s ongoing struggle with itself, its better angels,” when other scholarship—including Landau’s own—has showed these to be ideals deeply rooted in local experiences and discourses (p. 262). Perhaps he was thinking about his likely audience and thought it worth risking this deeply Africa-centered story for a moment of centering other stories instead. But even that observation in no way detracts from what Landau has accomplished. MK’s revolution failed and still fails. But after Spear, we understand better how its protagonists struggled; we see them—including their leader—more intimately, more historically, more sympathetically. In the end, then, a book like Spear is its own sort of revolution.

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Of Africa’s political and security institutions, state police forces remain chronically understudied. Akali Omeni’s thorough historical treatment of the Nigeria Police Force (NPF)—the largest police force in Africa—portrays an institution whose trajectory tracks closely