
Mandela and Castro: Friends, Comrades and Allies

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On the first anniversary of his death, the world remembers Nelson Mandela as the freedom fighter and president who liberated South Africa from apartheid.

But many look back with a selected memory of how the former prisoner's story unfolded. The man who former British prime minister Margaret Thatcher branded a "terrorist" was a close personal friend and political ally with Cuban revolutionary Fidel Castro.

Mandela was inspired by Fidel and the Cuban Revolution in 1959 when he began a South African resistance militia to end racial oppression.

"Any and every source was of interest to me," Mandela wrote in his autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*. "I read the report of Blas Roca, the general secretary of the Communist Party of Cuba, about their years as an illegal organization during the Batista regime. In *Commando*, by Deneys Reitz, I read of the unconventional guerrilla tactics of the Boer generals during the Anglo-Boer War. I read works by and about Che Guevara, Mao Tse-tung, Fidel Castro."

What's more, on his release from prison in 1991, Mandela traveled to Cuba to meet his friend in person, and to thank him for sending soldiers to Angola during the 1970s and 1980s to fight apartheid regimes, a significant catalyst to the later ending of Apartheid.

He began his speech, "We have come here today recognizing our great debt to the Cuban people. What other country has such a history of selfless behavior as Cuba has shown for the

people of Africa?

"How many countries benefit from Cuban health care professionals and educators? How many of these volunteers are now in Africa?

"What country has ever needed help from Cuba and has not received it? How many countries threatened by imperialism or fighting for their freedom have been able to count on the support of Cuba?"

Castro responded, "I have not visited my homeland South Africa, but I love it as if it were my homeland."

In 1994, Castro was able to return the visit, to attend Mandela's presidential inauguration, when he was elected as South Africa's first black president. Four years later, on a return visit to South Africa, Castro was given a hero's welcome, delivering a speech to a packed African National Congress. Castro could barely get through his address for the cheers of "Cuba, Cuba," and "Fidel, Fidel."
