

Winnie Mandela: the Former Mother of the Nation

Winnie Madikizela-Mandela is one of the most contentious figures in modern South African history. On one side of the spectrum, Winnie Mandela, ex-wife of Nelson Mandela, is sometimes referred to as the “Mother of the Nation” for her activism and leadership during the apartheid era. On the other side, Mandela is vilified for her alleged involvement in criminal and violent activities. For all of her suspected heinous actions, her connection in 1988 to the death of fourteen year-old Stompei Moektsi, a supposed police informant, is one of the most controversial accusations against her. Stompei’s murder was committed by the Mandela United Football Club (MUFC), a quasi-football team that purportedly served as Winnie’s bodyguards. After an ensuing criminal trial that resulted in a mere fine and suspended sentence on appeal in 1991, Mandela was asked to appear before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in 1997. The TRC was designed to offer closure and appeasement to pained South Africans by uncovering the human rights violations that occurred during apartheid. The TRC additionally served as a forum in which perpetrators of violence could offer their testimony in return for amnesty. In short, the goal of the TRC was to heal South Africa as it transitioned towards a democratic and free society. In the *Special Hearing* for the MUFC presented before the TRC, Winnie Mandela, despite the overwhelming evidence against her, managed to only be accused of negligence in regards to Stompei’s murder. This TRC finding regarding Winnie Mandela’s controversial involvement in the death of a young child tainted not only Mandela’s name, but also the success and morality of the TRC.

Background: Winnie & the MUFC

Winnie Madikizela-Mandela’s walk to freedom was winding. Winnie married Nelson Mandela in 1958, and as Nelson ascended to the position of leader of the apartheid resistance,

Winnie too played a pivotal role. The so-called Second Lady was constantly at Nelson's side in the early years of their marriage, but as Nelson's African support grew, so did the overbearing National Party government's disdain for him. Following his acquittal in the Treason Trial (1956-1961), Nelson's growing role in the African National Congress (ANC), a political organization that represented the main opposition to apartheid, led him to formulate the military wing of the ANC, the Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK). In August of 1962, Nelson was arrested, and the ensuing court case, the Rivonia Trial, resulted in his sentence to life in prison. Winnie Mandela would gradually assume some of her husband's responsibilities in the resistance movement. Nelson famously stated, "I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die" (Mandela, 1994: 212). Winnie agreed with Nelson, remarking, "I was determined that if I had to die I was going to put up a fight and take one of them with me" (Harrison, 1985:124). And put up a fight she unquestionably did. However, while Winnie's resistance was initially peaceful, changing circumstances caused her to resort to more violent efforts of resistance.

Initially, for her close association with Nelson Mandela, Winnie Mandela was a target of attempted murders, assaults, and excessive harassment. The South African Police (SAP), the national police force during apartheid, shadowed each and every one of Winnie's motions, waiting for her to slip so that they could pounce. Eventually, after endless harassment tactics against her, Winnie recognized there was no escaping the iron-fist of the South African government. In fact, in response to such intimidation, she decided to send her children to be schooled in Swaziland in order to keep them safe. For the second half of the 1960s, Winnie attempted to remain under the radar. After years of being a target of intimidation and harassment,

Winnie's house was raided in 1969, and she was arrested.

Prison became commonplace for Winnie—her home-away-from home. Although Winnie's imprisonment was a result of ungrounded reasoning, solitary confinement was just another tactic the apartheid government would utilize to prevent Winnie from having a public presence. Just as her husband became a symbol for the resistance, Winnie too became a representation of opposition. SAP was incessant in their sabotage against Winnie. Throughout the 1970s, Winnie Mandela was victimized and transported in and out of prison, but she never backed down. During a rare period out of prison in 1975, Winnie ascended to leader of the ANC's Women's League. The masses took notice. In 1976, following the Soweto Uprising, Winnie was jailed and banned from living in Soweto. Exiled to Brandfort, the apartheid government used this opportunity to intensify their pursuit of Winnie. Aside from her intermittent disobeying of her banning order from Soweto, which, in each instance resulted in additional jail time, Winnie wallowed in Brandfort for nine years with rare contact with the ANC or with her husband. But in each visit to Soweto, the people were emboldened by her tenacity and enduring loyalty, knowing she would subsequently end up in jail.

During the 1980s, apartheid violence peaked, as organized resistance and vicious clampdowns swelled. By this time, many South Africans viewed Winnie Mandela as the "mother of our nation." By 1984, Winnie had served nearly seven non-consecutive years in prison. After nearly two decades of victimization, Winnie Mandela drastically changed her tactics. Winnie Mandela faced a psychological roadblock and radically altered her approach to bring about change: organized violence became the only way to achieve freedom. Winnie's transition to endorsing violence, specifically the brutal act of necklacing, can be seen in a speech during 1986, when she claimed, "with our boxes of matches and our necklaces we shall liberate

this country" (Malan, 1986). As a popular leader for black South African women and youth, Winnie's embrace of armed resistance caused many to follow suit. Winnie recognized SAP's "dirty tactics" and decided to challenge SAP at their own game (Myers, 1996: 86). In 1986, upon her return to Soweto, Winnie established a football club as a source of entertainment for the youths. The team, known as the Mandela United Football Club, however, often appeared to have an alternative agenda—protecting Winnie Mandela and their beliefs. Members of MUFC at times lived at Winnie's residence, acting as pseudo-servants, and aiding Winnie in nearly all of her activities. They kept the house in order, took care of Soweto youth, and most of all, followed Winnie's rules.

1986 marked Winnie Mandela's self-derived downfall. Winnie, with her new radical impulses, utilized the MUFC for "protecting Soweto," but for others, the MUFC instigated a reign of terror amongst the South African youth. 1986 was the height of the battle against white-minority rule, as children manned protest barricades, mothers harbored resistance fighters, and fathers smuggled weapons. On the other side, the forces of the National Party were prepared, ready to go from door to door, to beat, abduct, torture, and even kill. The members of MUFC, for the most part, came across as little more than lowlife thugs. Soweto was flooded with young blacks who fled from the police in other parts of the country, many of whom joined the MUFC (Gilbey, 1994: 159). The youths of MUFC behaved as a brainwashed instrumentality of Winnie and her hatred for the National Party. Given their poor and difficult backgrounds, they were easily manipulated and opposed all who were against them—black or white. Winnie offered these troubled youths a home, food, and finally, some attention. She easily persuaded them to carry out her demands. With the increasing role of children in the resistance movement, the MUFC, as well as SAP, hounded Orland West, a particularly violent township in Soweto, to find

children to work for them. The youths who did not join the MUFC were viewed as sellouts, or even collaborators, by the MUFC. Considering the passion of the apartheid resistance during this time, “to be branded a ‘sellout’ of the struggle was the kiss of death” (Duke, 1997). Peer pressure and initial excitement accelerated MUFC’s rise to control of the Soweto streets. The mounting tension in Soweto caused internal rifts, as youths and their families challenged the MUFC and violence intensified.

The Death of Stompei and the Criminal Trial

Following the unresolved deaths, assaults, and disappearances of a multitude of black youths, inquiries were being made against Winnie Mandela and her youthful gang of bodyguards. The United Democratic Force (UDF), an ANC surrogate organization, organized the Mandela Crisis Committee in 1988 to investigate the chaos in Soweto. At this point, Winnie was effectively cast out of the anti-apartheid movement and scorned by most of her former allies. The most discerning aspect of the Mandela Crisis Committee is the fact that the request for this task force came directly from Nelson Mandela. It is apparent that by 1989, Winnie had pushed the limits—she lost the trust of the ANC, fellow anti-apartheid activists, and more importantly, her husband. “We can’t control her,” lamented ANC President, Oliver Tambo (Meredith, 1999: 237). The Committee was particularly concerned with locating four Sowetan youths that had gone missing and were supposedly being held in Winnie’s Orlando West home. After rejecting multiple attempts by the Committee to search her house, Winnie ultimately revealed that three of the youths were in her house. The Committee alleged that two of three youths were badly beaten, and a fourth child was still missing—this child was Stompei.

The situation of the four missing youths would catalyze Winnie Mandela’s collapse. Stompei Moketsi, Kenny Kgase, Pelo Mekgwe and Thabiso Mono were four Sowetan youths

who the MUFC implicated as police informants. Under Winnie's orders, the MUFC kidnapped the four children from the house of a local pastor's, Paul Verryn, and brought them back to Winnie's residence in the back section, where an ensuing "trial" occurred. According to most witnesses of the beatings, MUFC members and Winnie beat the youths until Winnie was satisfied with the youths' answers to their questions. With external pressures to reveal the kidnapped youths, Winnie dealt with the Committee, Methodist Church, and other parties, while the MUFC held the children for over twenty days. Winnie claimed to the Committee that she took the youths from Verryn, because he has been sexually abusing the four children. When the MUFC and Winnie finally succumbed to the external pressures, Stompei had already been taken to the Sowetan border and been cut to death with gardening sheers by Jerry Richardson, one of the MUFC leaders. Winnie fabricated an alibi that the rest of the MUFC duly followed. She claimed to the press that religious leaders and the ANC were unrightfully attacking her. The entire situation exploded, as Sowetans cried foul play against the MUFC and the press began to examine what truly happened to the three youths and Stompei Moketsi. With substantial evidence building against Winnie and the MUFC, court cases against individual members ensued. This time truly marked the downfall of Winnie Mandela. Once viewed as the "Mother of the Nation," Winnie's fanatic radicalism distanced her from the ANC and likely her husband too. Once the symbol and icon for the liberation struggle, Winnie was now the symbol of corruption and violence.

The court cases in 1990 and 1991 against Winnie Mandela and MUFC resulted in the sentencing of several MUFC members to life in prison, while Winnie amazingly walked away unscathed. The people in Soweto who were tormented by MUFC, as well as concerned South Africans, were dismayed by the outcome of this trial. Jerry Richardson, considered the "coach"

of the MUFC, received the death sentence (later commuted to life imprisonment). The testimonies from the three surviving complainants, Kenny Kgase, Pelo Mekgwe and Thabiso Mono, implicated not only Richardson and other members, but also involved Winnie in almost all accusations. However, despite the alarming amount of evidence against Winnie, her five year prison sentence for kidnapping charges and additional one year for accessory to assault charge was appealed and reduced to a two-year suspended sentence and 15,000 Rand fine. The judge at the trial described Winnie as “a calm, composed, deliberate, and unblushing liar” (Meredith, 1999, 255). The reasoning for Winnie’s feeble sentencing is complicated, but it is certainly worth noting that many members of the MUFC, most who were imprisoned, refused to denounce Winnie. Richardson said of Winnie, who he affectionately refers to as “Mummy,” “I love Mummy with all me heart. I would have done anything to please her” (Meredith, 242: 1999). But as former MUFC members dwelled in prison, Winnie did not once visit the people she formerly considered part of her family. This would be a telling mistake in the coming years.

The TRC Special Hearing on the MUFC

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was established “to enable South Africans to come to terms with their past on a morally accepted basis and to advance the cause of reconciliation” (Day 1, 1997). The TRC was monitored on an international level, as millions of people strived to understand the horrors that occurred in South Africa since 1948. Under the newly established democratic government of Nelson Mandela, the *Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act*, No. 34 of 1995 mandated the creation of the TRC. Although reparations were divvied following the hearings, the TRC was not established to sentence or seek revenge, but rather, to shed light on activities during apartheid. If the TRC deemed someone worthy of amnesty for instance, they would not be ordered to a criminal or civil court.

Arguably, the most scrutinized case during the TRC was that of Winnie Mandela and the MUFC. Although the TRC analyzed numerous circumstances in which a law case was involved, Winnie’s trial of 1991 was internationally well-known. The most powerful female leader in South Africa walked away with freedom after serious charges of kidnapping and murder, and yet six years later, her innocence would be retried. The second case was compelling on an international level. During the commencement of the TRC, South Africans were asked to appear before or write to the Commission if they desired to formally accuse wrongdoings or express their feelings. If there was a worthy amount of complaints towards a certain sector or cause, the TRC would investigate further—these cases undertaken by the TRC were classified as special hearings.

The special hearings, unlike the amnesty hearings at the TRC, were entirely meant to be a fact-finding effort of identifying peoples’ actions during apartheid, in a public forum. For Winnie and MUFC, a special hearing determined that even though they could admit to wrongdoings, no legal action would ensue. Seeing that Winnie had already been tried in front of a criminal court and received no jail time, the world stood frozen, keen to see if the impenetrable Winnie Mandela would need to change her story. Before the Mandela United Football Club Special Hearing, sometimes referred to as “Winnie’s Hearing,” occurred, Winnie had the opportunity to seek pardon in an amnesty hearing. To this opportunity, Winnie responded: “For what? I am not apologetic to anyone on my contribution to the struggle” (Meredith, 1999: 225). She insisted on giving her testimony in front of the public, under the impression that this could help clear her name of wrongdoings. Winnie, never in short supply of confidence, had already escaped one significant trial, but six years later, after new evidence came to light and more

accusations emerged, escaping the special hearing would have telling consequences for Winnie, as well as for the TRC.

The Mandela United Football Club hearings lasted eleven nonconsecutive days, as witnesses, accusers, MUFC members, and even Winnie, testified. On the first day, a MUFC member, John Morgan, claimed that he lied in Winnie's 1991 trial and that she was in fact not in Brandfort, but at her house when the four youths, including Stompei, arrived. After the first day of the hearing, largely due to Morgan's testimony, the special hearing proved to differentiate itself entirely from Winnie's trial in 1991. New evidence and facts were now forthcoming. The second day of the hearings favored Winnie though, as Xoliswa Falati, a female member of MUFC who was serving a jail sentence, made outlandish accusations against Winnie, drawing laughter from the audience and suggesting unreliability of her testimony. Multiple unstable characters' testimonies were professed over the course of the hearings. Such testimonies provided Winnie with the opportunity to firmly assert her innocence. Jerry Richardson's testimony, though, hurt Winnie, after declaring, "I killed Stompei under the instructions of Mummy. Mummy never killed anyone but used us to kill a lot of people. She did not even visit us in prison! She used us!" (Day 8, 1997).

Another controversial piece of evidence that surfaced during the trial was a medical record proving that Winnie had taken one of the youths to Dr. Abu-Baker Asvat. Dr. Asvat, a former family friend of the Mandelas, had examined the beaten Sowetan boys and apparently, engaged in an argument with Winnie. Just days later, Dr. Asvat was found dead (Daley, 1997). Albertina Sisulu, Dr. Asvat's nurse, bizarrely denied the validity of the medical record, even though weeks before the TRC hearing, in a television interview, she declared the medical record was written by her. In another testimony, Cyril Mbatha and Thulani Dlamini offered identical

stories recounting how they were paid by Winnie to murder Dr. Asvat. During the first eight days of hearings, Winnie Mandela sat quietly in her chair, a smile on her face, as tens of people accused her of numerous criminal actions. But on day nine, Winnie took the stand with one strategy in mind—deny everything. “I have no idea why he is making up that fabrication...I know nothing about it...Katiza is a mental patient...I made no allegation against Paul Verryn...That is ludicrous” (Day 9, 1997). The special hearing concluded and Winnie Mandela, once again, after accusations of murder, assault and more, walked away unscathed.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s effectiveness has been hotly debated. In regards to the Mandela United Football Club special hearing, the TRC failed in its purpose, because the distressed South Africans who came to see Winnie Mandela finally confess her guilt, only saw her walk free again. The special hearing on Winnie Mandela only contributed to and exacerbated the pain and sufferings of those hurt by the MUFC. The TRC failed to provide any closure for these victims. The reasoning behind the TRC’s failure with Winnie’s trial can be analyzed in three categories: political, gamesmanship, and indetermination.

The Failure of the TRC: Political

The TRC and Winnie Mandela are inherently political. During the mid-1990s, Winnie served briefly as Second Lady, and in 1994, as Deputy Minister of Arts, Culture, Science, and Technology. It is well established that Winnie was an important political figure. What is so notable about the TRC though is that not one major political figure was found guilty at the hearings or had further action taken against them. The TRC refused 5,392 applications for amnesty, resulting in criminal and civil action against many of these people. The ending of apartheid and the ensuing implementation of a democratic government is peculiar considering primary leaders from both sides were not implicated for their wrongdoings. President Botha

supported the National Party's death squads, while future President Nelson Mandela advocated violence. But in order to maintain civility during the restructuring of the South African state, the leaders of both sides had to be untouched. Human nature forced the finger to be pointed at someone though—in this case, the smalltime perpetrators. Just like how Winnie's followers were imprisoned, Botha's men, like the infamous Vlakplaas leader Eugene de Kock, received jail sentences. Simply, due to political reasons, leaders from both sides, despite how guilty they may have been, were not held responsible (Simpson, 1998). Lastly, because of Winnie's political ambitions in the 1990's, a tainted image would affect the likeliness of her potential election to office. For people with political agendas who may have favored Winnie's government involvement, maintaining Winnie's reputation was of utmost importance (Myers, 1996:99).

The Failure of the TRC: Gamesmanship

Winnie's social connections helped her avoid serious consequences after her special hearing. The primary director in the TRC hearings was Desmond Tutu, a close personal friend of Winnie Mandela's. At one point during the hearing, after Winnie was goaded into a deep hole by the TRC lawyers, Tutu intervened, asking for Winnie's victims and their families to come forward for reconciliation. Mrs. Sepe, the mother of Stompei, awkwardly approached Winnie, and in what can be perceived as instigating from Tutu, embraced Winnie with a degrading hug. Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, a member of the TRC, said about this scene, "It was an embrace that stripped the victim of what we call dignity, the reverse of what the TRC public hearings were meant to do" (Gobodo-Madikizela, 2003: 101). Another obvious social connection was Winnie's relationship with the current South African president, Nelson Mandela. Although Winnie and Nelson were divorced by this time, incriminating information about Winnie

undoubtedly affected Nelson's image. In order to maintain stability in the new and not yet stable South Africa, the ex-wife of the president simply could not be a convicted murderer.

The Failure of the TRC: Indetermination

And lastly, indetermination failed the TRC. Considering the lack of congruity amongst the countless witnesses, no one source was more accountable. There was rampant corruption. Those who testified against Winnie certainly had an agenda. For instance, Katiza, a witness against Winnie, was also applying for amnesty. Had Katiza offered a worthy testimony against Winnie by acting calmer and avoiding hyperbole, amnesty could have been granted. Simply, even though the TRC was designed not to punish, but to establish truths, self-interest appeared to be people's first regard. In the end, despite what seemed to be overwhelming evidence against her, Winnie could not be held accountable for the murder of Stompei. Another reason for such inconsistency was fear. South Africa was not stable in 1997. In fact, before testifying before the TRC, Winnie received a bomb threat. Unidentified men, apparent body guards of Winnie wearing red berets, were supposedly seen roaming the building of her hearing, striking fear into those testifying (Daley, 1997). Fear tactics had been used by the MUFC just few years back—people tended not to forget this.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was too abstract in its purpose, exposing itself to hypocrisy in regards to Winnie's case. Certainly in many cases the TRC was effective, but with Winnie's trial, there was too much inconsistency for any commendable outcome. The TRC suggested Winnie ask for amnesty, but she rejected this, claiming her innocence—already it is established that Winnie would refuse to succumb to any allegations against her, despite unbelievable evidence. At this point, the TRC should have recognized that nothing could be achieved from this trial. Had Winnie been found guilty, no criminal trial could ensue because

she had already been tried, and there would always be vagueness regarding what truly happened because of the lack of coherence amongst the accusers. Tutu claimed, “the truth is decisive”, but in no way was the truth ever going to be revealed in regards to the MUFC (Meredith, 1999: 323). There were simply too many people involved, and too many facts distorted . Ultimately, the TRC found “...that [Winnie] failed to act responsibly in taking the necessary action required to avert [Stompei’s] death” (TRC Final Report, 1998: 549).

Conclusions

The overall goals of the TRC were to reveal truth, to ease the pains and sufferings of victims and their families, and to demonstrate that people were to be held accountable for criminal behavior. But Winnie Mandela had never and was not going to offer the truth of her actions because of her political aspirations and the fear of hurting her image. The TRC obviously had to acknowledge the MUFC and Winnie and their laundry list of injustices, but a trial against Winnie, as seen before, was not a winnable situation; little was accomplished other than tarnishing the image of the TRC and bringing further suffering to those who were affected.

Winnie Mandela remains a controversial figure in today’s South Africa. A woman once seen as a key leader in the resistance against apartheid, taking up a position that her imprisoned husband left, abused her status and strayed to the bounds of radicalism, endorsing violence against any who stood in her way. Winnie and her band of followers in the Mandela United Football Club instigated a reign of terror in Soweto. Many of the members of the club earned jail sentences for their violence, while their leader, Winnie, went on to gain the title of president of the ANC’s Women’s League and was elected to the ANC National Executive Committee. As for the TRC, the hearings are often viewed in a positive light, seeing that it managed to expose the necessary truths for South Africa to move on from apartheid to a democratic nation. One key

blemish on the TRC though was its handling of the Winnie Mandela case. Winnie was merely found to be negligent, despite her unquestionable involvement in the death of Stompei. However, Winnie's feeble conviction is not what truly tarnished the TRC. The TRC was flawed because one woman, Winnie Mandela, refused to offer the truth, thus causing the entire idea of the TRC to fail at its core. Without truth, justice could not be served--Winnie and the TRC left the victims, their families, and the millions of viewers far more hurt than healed. The images of the TRC and Winnie Mandela, hand-in-hand, are now together undeniably tainted.



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