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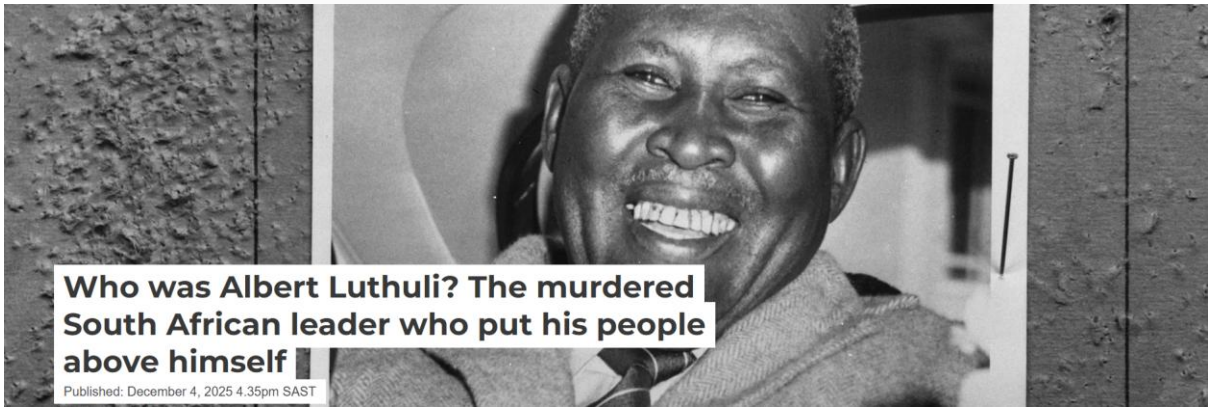

Albert Luthuli's autobiography Let My People Go deserves wider readership. Anefo/Dutch National Archive/Wikimedia Commons

Published: December 4, 2025 4.35pm SAST

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Disclosure statement

Judith Coullie does not receive funding from any organisation.

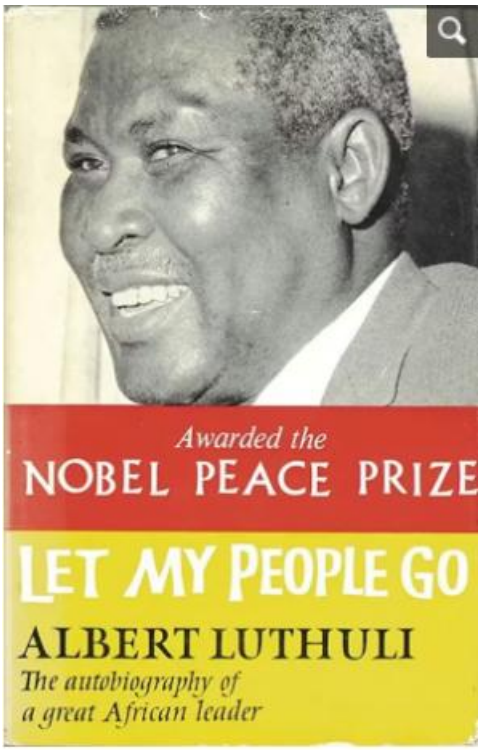
University of Kwa-Zulu Natal provides funding as a partner of The Conversation AFRICA.

South African liberation leader Albert Luthuli died on 21 July 1967 near his home in Groutville, in the South African province of KwaZulu-Natal. A government inquest concluded his death was an accident – that he was hit by a train. This was always disputed by his family and almost 60 years later they were vindicated.

In 2025, a court ruled that Luthuli was murdered, his death the result of "assault by members of the security special branch of the South African police". The ruling corrects long-standing historical records. It adds Luthuli's murder to the catalogue of torture and assassination that the apartheid government increasingly relied on to suppress dissent.

Albert John Mvumbi Luthuli was born around 1898. He was an educator, Zulu chief, and religious leader. Africa's first Nobel Peace Prize winner was also president-general of the African National Congress (ANC) from 1952 until his death at 69.

The ANC resisted white minority rule in South Africa and Luthuli was active in the organisation's defiance campaign. He became head of the ANC in 1952, four years after apartheid was formalised.



Collins

In the last decades of his life, Luthuli was silenced and persecuted. Once democracy was achieved in 1994, honours were heaped on him – his image is the watermark on South African passports.
Still, Luthuli is largely overshadowed by fellow Peace Prize winners Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu. And while over 14 million copies of Mandela's autobiography, Long Walk to Freedom, have been sold, Luthuli's account of his own life, Let My People Go, is comparatively little known.

Much of my research on life writing has focused on autobiography published during apartheid, including analysis of Let My People Go.

It's a book that deserves to be more widely read. It defies expectations that the autobiographer will offer a candidly personal account of self and life.

Luthuli's autobiography mostly focuses on the struggle for justice. It depicts a steadfastly moral man whose fight against racist oppression inspired activists within and beyond South Africa, and should still.

Who was Albert Luthuli?

Let My People Go offers a brief sketch of Luthuli's ancestors and early life. His grandparents were Zulu Christian converts. He was born, he calculated, "in the year 1898, and certainly before 1900" near Bulawayo, in today's Zimbabwe. He was not born in his ancestral home, Groutville, because his father had left to serve in the Second Matabele War. After the conflict, his parents stayed on at a Seventh Day Adventist mission station.

His father died when Luthuli was a baby. At about 10, he was sent back to Groutville for his schooling. Qualifying as a teacher, he became principal of a small school. A government bursary allowed him to study further at Adams College, where he performed exceptionally well and was invited to join the staff and rose up the ranks. He met Nokukhanya Bhengu there and they married in 1927.

Luthuli loved teaching. However, in 1935, after prolonged urging from tribal elders, he and Nokukhanya decided he was duty-bound to accept nomination as chief of the Umvoti Mission Reserve.

For 17 years, he dedicated himself to improving the lot of the people of Groutville and providing principled leadership in confronting the injustices of racism. He took the “revolutionary step of admitting women” to local meetings. He organised African sugar farmers and held a seat on the Native Representatives Council. In 1938, he was a member of the executive of the Christian Council of South Africa.

In the years that followed he would remain deeply involved in Christian and civic organisations. In 1945 he was elected onto the executive of the ANC’s provincial branch, becoming president of it in 1951 and, in 1952, of the whole organisation.

A young Luthuli. Wikimedia Commons

Overseas travel widened Luthuli’s perspective, whether it was a missionary conference in India (1938) or a nine month church-sponsored lecture tour of the US (1948).

His autobiography recounts in detail his religious, civic and political involvement, weaving in a narrative of increasingly draconian and devastating apartheid policies.

Writing painstakingly and usually without emotion – though disgust and horror sometimes break through – he challenges the “twisted, distorted” versions of history promoted by the regime. He offers meticulous evidence of the irrationality and immorality of racism.

Banned

From 1953, repeated banning orders prevented Luthuli from leaving his home or publishing or distributing any written material. In 1956 he was arrested on a charge of high treason. (Discharged in 1957, he was acquitted in 1961.)

Despite this, Luthuli carried on with his autobiography, dictating his story to his friends Rev Charles Hooper and his wife Sheila Hooper. They compiled the draft which Luthuli then edited.

It was a foregone conclusion that Let My People Go would be banned and Luthuli knew it was unlikely to enlighten apartheid rulers:

There is not really even a common language in which to discuss our agonising problems. (They) cannot speak to Africans except in the restricted language of Baasskap.

The term refers to whites being boss, and anyone classified as non-white adopting a position of subservience.

Nonetheless, the narrator insists that:

If the whites are ignorant of the realities, the fault does not lie with us.

Autobiography of a selfless self

Readers of autobiography tend to look for insight into the author's personal life, but Luthuli's gives greater weight to political-historical analysis.

In the book, he repeatedly denies his own importance, reminding readers that much of what he experienced was shared by other oppressed South Africans. This is key to the depiction of his character in the book.

He only briefly mentions his family. He and Nokukhanya have seven children, but he doesn't share their names and draws a "veil" over any details about their marriage.

From left, statues of Luthuli, Tutu, De Klerk and Mandela, peace prize winners. flowcomm/Flickr, CC BY

Nokukhanya, he writes, “ungrudgingly” assumed full responsibility for their home and smallholding so that he could focus on his public duties. At Adams College, for example, he was also a choirmaster, soccer team administrator and Zulu cultural organiser, and served on an association for African teachers.

Under his leadership, the ANC became a mass organisation. Luthuli had to travel the country in support of the defiance campaign:

I quite literally neglect my family and feel extremely guilty about it.

Luthuli’s reserve is reinforced by his use of the passive voice. For instance, he describes being urged to take leadership roles, rather than seeking these himself.

Nonetheless, even in these apparent self-deflections, Luthuli’s character emerges: his centre of gravity does not lie in the domestic sphere but in service to the community. He is driven by his “desire to serve God and neighbour”.

By refusing the “self-assertion and self-display” that is typical of autobiography, Let My People Go portrays a selfless self.

The humility of a man who cannot be humiliated

Luthuli's story depicts a humble man who refuses to yield, despite growing persecution. Or, as Charles Hooper observes in the introduction, the "humility of a man who cannot be humiliated". Luthuli expresses gratitude when outrage might seem more reasonable. He describes his prison cell, when he was ill and isolated, as a prayerful "sanctuary".

Statue of Luthuli in KwaZulu-Natal, where he was born. J Ramatsui/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA

Accounts of casual racism, police harassment and brutal assault are harrowing. Hard to read, too, is Luthuli's self-recrimination. He reproaches himself for "having contributed too little" to the political struggle.

This reserve doesn't obscure his character, it illuminates it. He emerges as a thoughtful, humble man committed to non-racism, non-violence and justice who even tries to understand Afrikaners' fears of "being swamped".

Farsighted, he predicted the rise of "terrorism (and) legalised murder by army and police forces". Yet he retained faith that "the outcome of the struggle" would be justice for all.

After his release from prison, Luthuli, still banned, lived in isolation in Groutville. He was murdered before the banning order expired.

- South Africa
- Nelson Mandela
- Apartheid
- White supremacy
- South African history
- Police brutality
- African writers
- Autobiography
- Desmond Tutu
- Liberation struggle
- Albert Luthuli
- Anti-apartheid struggle
- African National Congress (ANC)
- Zulu history
- African books
- African history + heritage

Reference:

DOI https://doi.org/10.64628/AAJ.xggj4pc7y

Coullie, Judith. (2025). *Who was Albert Luthuli? The murdered South African leader who put his people above himself* from The Conversation, 4 December 2025, [online]. Available at https://theconversation.com/who-was-albert-luthuli-the-murdered-south-african-leader-who-put-his-people-above-himself-269729 . Accessed 8 December 2025.