

The Rivonia Trial

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The Rivonia Trial, named after the suburb of Johannesburg where sixteen leaders of the African National Congress had been arrested in July 1963, began on 26 November 1963.

Mandela and his fellow defendants were charged with 221 acts of sabotage designed to "ferment violent revolution".

The ANC had been operating underground since being outlawed in April 1960, one month after the Sharpeville Massacre of 67 protestors by police. The police had collected hundreds of documents from the ANC hideout at Rivonia about Operation Mayibuye (Operation Comeback).

Under the new General Law Amendment (Sabotage) Act of 1962 and the Suppression of Communism Act, the defendants faced the threat of the death penalty.

Mandela had a growing international reputation and the ANC sought to use the trial to win worldwide support and attention, hence Mandela's speech from the dock on April 20th which was delivered from his handwritten script.

For example, the speech was extracted in The Observer on Sunday April 26th, under the headline "Why I am prepared to die".

Mandela was described as "the black pimpernel of South Africa, on trial in Pretoria with eight others on charges of attempting a revolution by violence".

The newspaper told its readers that "the alleged offences are punishable by death. Last week he appeared in the witness-box for four-and-a-half hours to explain his stand. He admitted that he had organised sabotage. He explained why he had turned to violence, and what kind of South Africa he was prepared to die for" to introduce "the historic speech which could be his last".

On June 11 1964, at the conclusion of the trial, Mandela and the seven other defendants - Walter Sisulu, Govan Mbeki (father of current South African President Thabo Mbeki), Raymond Mhlaba, Elias Motsoaledi, Ahmed Kathrada and Denis Goldberg - were convicted. Mandela was found guilty on four charges of sabotage. All eight were imprisoned to life imprisonment.

The United Nations Security Council condemned the trial and began moves towards international sanctions against the apartheid regime. But it was 27 years before Mandela was released from prison on February 11th 1990, becoming President of South Africa following the first democratic multi-racial elections in 1994.