

Book review

Prisoner 913

The release of Nelson Mandela

Riaan de Villiers and Jan-Ad Stemmet

Cape Town: Tafelberg

2020, 277 pages

ISBN 978-0-624-07632-2 (Softcover)

Readers who have read *The last trek – A new beginning: The autobiography* and the *Long walk to freedom*, will enjoy *Prisoner 913*, as it is the perfect book to balance the two points of view of the last prime minister of apartheid South Africa, as well as the first president of democratic South Africa.

Early in the book, the authors provide clarity on the differing prison numbers that belonged to Nelson Mandela. Commonly known as ‘Mandela’s prison number’ and later used to brand HIV/AIDS awareness, 466/46 was indeed Mandela’s prison number on Robben Island, whereas in the larger prison system, the number attributed to the imprisoned Mandela was 913.

Prisoner 913 provides a wealth of information about the events leading to Mandela’s release from prison and all the encompassing political events that took place during that time. The book comprises a copious number of documents and records from archives of the Archive for Contemporary Affairs (ARCA) at the University of the Free State. The archive initially belonged to Kobie Coetzee (henceforth ‘Coetzee’), the Minister of Justice and Prisons during the last years of the apartheid regime. Coetzee, in his capacity as minister, presided over Mandela during his last eight years of imprisonment and went on to oversee his eventual release. Coetzee, furthermore, initiated exploratory talks with Mandela from 1985 onward.⁷⁵⁷

Coetzee kept a file, detailing anything and everything Mandela did during those last years of his incarceration. This file was simply labelled ‘Prisoner 913’. Shortly before the advent of democracy in 1994, Coetzee removed the file and took it with him. The historian Jan-Ad Stemmet was on the verge of gaining access to this archive when Coetzee suddenly died shortly after their initial meeting. By an extraordinary coincidence, Stemmet found his way to Coetzee’s archive 13 years later, after Coetzee’s late wife had donated it to the ARCA. Stemmet considers the archive to be “one of the greatest single discoveries in recent South African political history”.⁷⁵⁸

The book heavily implies that the records Coetzee had on Mandela “exceeded the bounds of any conventional administrative function”.⁷⁵⁹ The file contained a vast amount of information that took Stemmet and his initial research partner on the 913

file, Professor Willie Esterhuysen, months to filter. The file even contained secret government memorandums. The archive further included clandestine recordings of most of Mandela's visitors in prison, which ranged from foreign dignitaries and government ministers to family members to other political role players.

The constant keeping of covert tabs on Mandela far exceeded the normal prerogative of prison wardens, but Coetzee further engaged in with what can easily be described as an intelligence operation that included multiple forms of surveillance on Mandela. Various questions arise from what Stemmet considers an intelligence operation of sorts. Such clandestine endeavours fall within the scope of the intelligence services. Was Coetzee the one advocating for this approach? If so, what was his ultimate aim with the abundance of information garnered from a thoroughly surveilled Mandela? In a time where many books and biographies are published on a specific topic, it comes as no surprise that there must have been teething problems when it came to corroborating a differing version. Perhaps Coetzee foresaw that the words of Mandela, FW de Klerk and other role players, such as the former head of the civilian intelligence services, Niel Barnard, would carry more weight than his own. Maybe this was one of the reasons Coetzee was so adamant for Stemmet to do research on his professional life.

The book notes the different types of transcripts in the archive, some being handwritten while others transcribed from clandestine recordings. The clandestine recordings, according to Stemmet, started with the rise of Mandela's political importance. Interestingly, the covert surveillance on Mandela provided far more information, one can assume, than would have been the case for less prominent political prisoners. This provides evidence of the motive of Coetzee, as the covert surveillance on Mandela was not monitored by the National Intelligence Service, but by Coetzee himself.

Despite the endeavours of guarding his most important prisoner, Coetzee's surveillance of Mandela provided a unique view of Mandela's beliefs and his approach to negotiating with the government. The book also provides a summary of Mandela's memorandum to PW Botha. Despite many inaccuracies regarding this memorandum and how it reached Botha, it still provides valuable insight into how Mandela politically approached the discourse with government. Mandela made it clear that he saw the need for interaction between the government and the African National Congress (ANC) and, rather sensationally, that he was acting without the consent or even knowledge of the ANC.⁷⁶⁰

Another piece of information unearthed from the archive is a secret document titled 'The management of Nelson Mandela'. No authors were identified, but it is considered by the authors of *Prisoner 913* to be the first document that relates to Mandela's unconditional release.⁷⁶¹ Worth a mention is the eventual meeting between Mandela and Botha. *Prisoner 913* provides an in-depth account of that particular meeting, written in a detailed record by Barnard.⁷⁶² The above serves as just a few of many examples of what was transcribed from the Coetzee archives.

Prisoner 913 provides much more clarity on the part Coetzee played, and delves deep into certain aspects which surrounded the release of Mandela, such as the unbanning of the ANC. One of the main focal points of this book is that the authors highlight the

differences between Mandela and De Klerk's narratives, and how often a selective point of view can lead to a misleading or a misunderstood narrative.

This book will provide interested readers with useful information to answer questions in other works about the release of Mandela. This thoroughly researched book lays bare a magnitude of information, which describes in detail the mechanics behind the scenes leading to the successful release of Prisoner 913.

Willem du Plessis

University of South Africa

ENDNOTES

⁷⁵⁷ R de Villiers & J Stemmet. *Prisoner 913*. Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2020, 11.

⁷⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁷⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. ix.

⁷⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

⁷⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

⁷⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 99.