

Gandhi, King and Mandela: What Made Non-Violence Work?

The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy. Instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it. – MLK, Jr.

The history of violence in the world is well documented. However it is also possible to use non-violence to bring about change. This DBQ will look at three countries where a non-violent movement was successful.

Historic Context

India, the United States, and South Africa. Three important nations on three different continents. But although they looked strong on the outside, each one suffered from a disease that threatened the health of the whole. For India, the disease was colonialism. For the United States and South Africa, it was racial segregation.

Three Conditions

In each of these nations three conditions help explain why non-violence worked. **The first condition** was that all of them had been colonies of England. And like England all three countries thought law was very powerful – more powerful even than government officials.

The second condition was the presence of violence. Without the possibility of a violent revolution, the government might not have been willing to change.

The third condition was the presence of a leader — Mohandas Gandhi in India, Martin

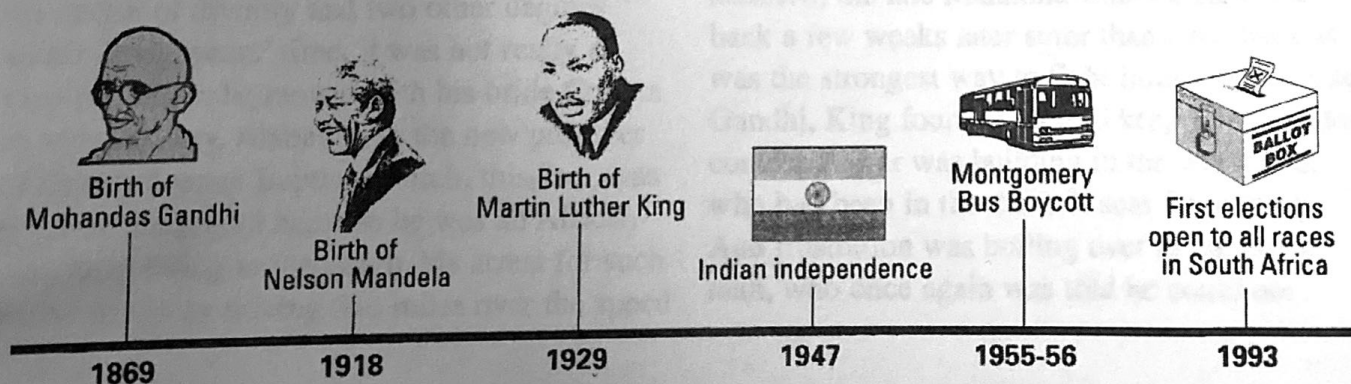
Luther King in the United States, and Nelson Mandela in South Africa. Each of these men was so charismatic he could lead his followers to a non-violent victory. All of them gave their lives to the cause. Gandhi and King were shot by assassins; Mandela spent almost twenty-seven years of his life in prison. These are their stories.

Mohandas Gandhi

Mohandas Gandhi was born in 1869, in Porbandar, India. His father taught his son respect for all religions. His mother taught him that all living things are holy. Following custom, Gandhi married at age 13; his wife, Kasturbai, was even younger. At age 19 he went to London to study law, and at age 22 Gandhi completed his studies. He now felt more than ever that the English, who had ruled India for almost two centuries, were law-abiding and fair. Hopes high, he sailed for home.

Gandhi tried to set up a law practice in India but was so shy he failed miserably. When someone suggested he try his luck in South Africa, he jumped at the offer. But no sooner had he arrived there than he was thrown off a train, just for being a “colored” man holding a first class ticket! Even for a shy man, it was too great an insult. When he fought back he was sent to jail. It was there he became a leader, bringing about important changes for South Africa’s Indian community.

When Gandhi returned to India, he was paraded around like a hero because of his South



African victories. But everywhere he looked he was horrified by the poverty he saw. He saw, too, that to be successful in the world the English had built, Indians had to imitate their rulers – their clothes, their manners, and their standards of beauty. Gandhi refused!

Gandhi wanted people to live free of all kinds of snobbery, even the ones imposed by India's ancient **caste system**. The first thing he

*An eye-for-an-eye only makes
the whole world blind.*

— Mohandas Gandhi

did was to build a different kind of community where he could model this classless society. He dressed in the clothes a poor man would wear and did chores an **untouchable** [people so low they are below caste] would do. Most Indians thought he was absurd. But slowly his strange ideas were accepted until Gandhi came to be known as '**Mahatma**' or 'Great Soul.'

Gandhi saw that India's self-respect was tied to independence. But England was a giant with colonies all around the globe. And Indian politicians had worked for independence for at least half a century. How much harder would it be for the gentle Gandhi. Yet in the end Gandhi succeeded. The question is how?

Martin Luther King, Jr.

Michael King, Jr. was born in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1929. His father was a Baptist preacher, his mother a schoolteacher. So when Martin Luther, as he came to be called, earned his doctor of divinity and two other degrees within seven years' time, it was not really a surprise. When he moved with his bride Coretta to Montgomery, Alabama, as the new preacher of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, this, too, was not a surprise. And because he was an African-American living in the South, his arrest for such trivial things as driving five miles over the speed

limit wasn't altogether a shock. What was surprising was what he chose to do about it.

About this time a woman named Rosa Parks refused to give her bus seat to a white man and set the civil rights struggle in motion. In one courageous act, she had challenged "**Jim Crow**," the segregationist laws of the South that had dominated the lives of African-Americans far too long. The back of a bus, the back of a theater, the back of a sandwich shop, poll taxes, inferior schools, segregated housing, lynching by hooded mobs – these were the things Southern blacks faced every day of their lives.

King and other black ministers met together in 1957 to find a peaceful solution to these problems. From that meeting, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) was born and King was chosen as its first president. There were honors that came with his new title, like a meeting with President Eisenhower and a trip to Africa. But there were also risks, frightening ones, like death threats and fire-bombings to his home. And when those arrested for the crimes were proven guilty, all-white juries freed them.

But the campaign for civil rights had begun and there was no turning back. In 1959, King

*Hate cannot drive out hate;
only love can do that.*

— Martin Luther King, Jr.

went to India to meet with friends and family of a man whose non-violent techniques he admired, the late Mahatma Gandhi. He came back a few weeks later surer than ever that this was the strongest way to fight injustice. But like Gandhi, King found it hard to keep things under control. Anger was building in the white man who had been in the driver's seat for so long. And frustration was boiling over in the black man, who once again was told he could not

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enter a certain school or voting booth or park or library or restaurant. How could he, King wondered, achieve the goals he and his followers longed for? And how could this be done without violence?

Nelson Mandela

Rolihlahla Mandela was born in 1918 in a tiny village in South Africa. He was still a baby when his father, a tribal chief, was dethroned for disrespecting an English judge. At age seven he was sent to a boarding school where he learned to live under **apartheid**, a Dutch South African word meaning "racial apartness." There he was given the name "Nelson" because his African name, which could sometimes be translated as "Troublemaker," wasn't European. This was the first time, though not the last, that Mandela felt

*People must learn to hate,
and if they can learn to hate,
they can also be taught to love.*

– Nelson Mandela

disrespected for his blackness.

In the 1930s it was rare for a black South African to attend college. But Mandela not only attended, he graduated, got a degree from law school, and set up a practice in Johannesburg which he hoped could support his small family. Yet apartheid was always a humiliation to him. When the **Afrikaner**, or Dutch South African, Nationalists came to power in the 1948 election, the segregation habits of the past three hundred years became law. Hoping for a brighter future, Mandela joined the African National Congress (ANC) and became its first Youth leader.

In the 1960s, many of the colonial nations of Africa were gaining independence. The ANC was encouraged and campaigned for democracy in South Africa. They were mild campaigns at

first, but as the government became more hostile, so did ANC protests. In November 1961, a military branch of the party was organized with Mandela as its head. It authorized the limited use of arms and sabotage against the government, which got the government's attention – and its anger! Mandela went into hiding. In 1964, he was captured, tried, and sentenced to life imprisonment. It was a sad day for black South Africa.

As days stretched to months, months to years, and years to decades, Mandela lived most of them at brutal Robben Island Prison. There his guards did their best to break his spirit with isolation and abuse. Remarkably he kept his hope and dignity alive. Then, twenty-six and a half long years after his imprisonment began, he was released. Again Mandela could tackle the job of dismantling apartheid. He hoped, like the Afrikaner government that freed him, that he could keep South Africa from erupting into civil war.

The Question

Gandhi, King and Mandela were sitting on powder kegs built of hate and injustice. The people in each society knew the powder kegs existed. More importantly their governments knew they existed. Yet all three men were able to bring about non-violent change. Gandhi brought independence to India; King brought civil rights to the United States; Mandela brought democracy to South Africa.

So how did they do it? The presence of violence, the respect for law, the leadership of a charismatic individual – these three ingredients were important, but not the whole story. Now examine the documents that follow, looking for further ways that non-violent change was achieved in India, the United States, and South Africa. Again, the question – *Gandhi, King, and Mandela: What made non-violence work?*