

## Session 5

### The Struggle for Civil Rights

#### *Aftermath of World War 2*

Prior to World War II, most black people were low-wage farmers, factory workers, domestics or servants. By the early 1940s, war-related work was booming, but racial discrimination was rife in the field of wages.

In June 1941 President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8802 which opened national defence jobs and other government jobs to all Americans regardless of race, creed, colour or national origin. Black men and women served heroically in World War II, despite suffering segregation and discrimination during their deployment, yet many were met with prejudice and scorn upon returning home. This was one of the factors that started the Civil Rights ball rolling.

#### *Brown versus the Board of Education*

The southern states of America were still holding fast to the “equal but separate” doctrine that led to separate facilities and resources for black and white people, including school. In 1951 Rev Oliver Brown filed a class-action suit against the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas, after his daughter was denied entrance to Topeka’s all-white elementary schools. In his lawsuit, Brown claimed that schools for black children were not equal to the white schools. When Brown’s case and four other cases related to school segregation first came before the Supreme Court in 1952, the Court combined them into a single case under the name *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*. In September 1953 the justices ruled that segregated schools were unequal.

#### *Rosa Parks*

Another area of segregation was in transport, where black people had to sit in separate seats at the back of buses. On Thursday, December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks, a member of the National Coalition for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), was commuting home from a long day of work at the Montgomery Fair department store by bus. At one point on the route, a white man had no seat because all the seats in the designated “white” section were taken. So the driver told the riders in the four seats of the first row of the

“coloured” section to stand, in effect adding another row to the “white” section.

The three others obeyed but Parks did not.

Eventually, two police officers approached the stopped bus, assessed the situation and placed Parks in custody. On the day of her trial, the black people of Montgomery boycotted the buses. This was so successful that it was decided to carry on with the boycott until segregation in public transport was stopped. A certain young Baptist minister named Martin Luther King jnr. was elected as the leader of the campaign.

On November 13, 1956, the Supreme Court ruled that bus segregation was unconstitutional.

### ***Little Rock Nine***

In response to the Brown v. Board of Education decisions and pressure from the local chapter of NAACP, the Little Rock, Arkansas, school board adopted a plan for gradual integration of its schools. The first institutions to integrate would be the high schools, beginning in September 1957. The school asked for volunteers from all-black high schools to attend the formerly segregated school. On September 3, 1957, nine black students, known as the Little Rock Nine, arrived at Central High School to begin classes. They were met by the Arkansas National Guard (on order of Governor Orval Faubus) and a screaming, threatening mob. In the end the only way the children could enter the school and attend classes was with the protection of federal troops.

### ***Civil Rights Act 1957***

Technically all Americans had gained the right to vote. But many southern states made it difficult for black people. They often required them to take voter literacy tests that were confusing, misleading and nearly impossible to pass. The Eisenhower administration wanted to show a commitment to the civil rights movement and minimise racial tensions in the South. The administration pressured Congress to consider new civil rights legislation. On September 9, 1957, President Eisenhower signed the Civil Rights Act of 1957 into law. This was the first major civil rights legislation since Reconstruction. It allowed federal prosecution of anyone who tried to prevent someone from voting. It also created a commission to investigate voter fraud.

### ***Freedom Rides***

The Freedom Rides involved mixed groups of black and white people who road interstate buses to challenge segregation in facilities such as cafes and waiting rooms. The first group left Washington DC on May 4<sup>th</sup> 1961 and travelled into the hard-line southern states. They met with violent mobs and their bus was bombed. Eventually Freedom Riders were imprisoned in the maximum-security penitentiary in Parchman, Mississippi. The rides continued over the next several months, and in the autumn of 1961, under pressure from the Kennedy administration, the Interstate Commerce Commission issued regulations prohibiting segregation in interstate transit terminals.

### ***March on Washington***

Arguably one of the most famous events of the civil rights movement took place on August 28, 1963: the March on Washington. More than 200,000 people, black and white, congregated in Washington, D. C. for the peaceful march. The main purpose was the forcing of civil rights legislation and establishing job equality for everyone.

The highlight of the march was Martin Luther King's speech in which he continually stated, "I have a dream..."

### ***Civil Rights Act, 1964***

On 2nd July 1964 President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act— legislation initiated by President John F. Kennedy before his assassination. King and other civil rights activists witnessed the signing. The law guaranteed equal employment for all, limited the use of voter literacy tests and allowed federal authorities to ensure public facilities were integrated. This was taken a stage further in the following year when President Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act into law on August 6, 1965. The new law banned all voter literacy tests and provided federal examiners in certain voting jurisdictions.

### ***Two Assassinated Leaders***

#### ***Malcolm X***

Malcolm Little was born in Omaha, Nebraska, in 1925. Malcolm was the son of James Earl Little, a Baptist preacher. Threats from the Ku Klux Klan forced the

family to move to Lansing, Michigan, where his father continued to preach his controversial sermons despite continuing threats. In 1931, Malcolm's father was brutally murdered by the white supremacist, Black Legion, and Michigan authorities refused to prosecute those responsible. Subsequently Malcolm's mother was admitted into a mental hospital and he was taken from his family by welfare caseworkers in 1937.

By the time he reached high school age, he had dropped out of school and moved to Boston, where he became increasingly involved in criminal activities. In 1946, at the age of 21, Malcolm was sent to prison on a burglary conviction. It was there he encountered the teachings of Elijah Muhammad. Elijah was the leader of the Nation of Islam, whose members are popularly known as Black Muslims. The Nation of Islam advocated Black Nationalism and racial separatism. Muhammad's teachings had a strong effect on Malcolm, who entered into an intense programme of self-education and took the last name "X" to symbolize his stolen African identity.

After six years, Malcolm was released from prison and became a loyal and effective minister of the Nation of Islam in Harlem, New York. In contrast with civil rights leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X advocated self-defence and the liberation of African Americans "by any means necessary."

In 1964 Malcolm left the Nation of Islam because of increasing differences of opinion with Elijah Muhammad. He made a Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca, where he was profoundly affected by the lack of racial discord among orthodox Muslims. He returned to America and in June 1964 founded the Organization of Afro-American Unity. This advocated black identity and held that racism, not the white race, was the greatest foe of the African American.

Malcolm's new movement steadily gained followers. His more moderate philosophy became increasingly influential in the civil rights movement, especially among the leaders of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee. On February 21, 1965, one week after his home was firebombed, Malcolm X was shot to death by Nation of Islam members while speaking at a rally of his organization in New York City.

### *Martin Luther King*

Martin Luther King Jr. was born on January 15, 1929, in Atlanta, Georgia, the second child of Martin Luther King Sr., a pastor, and Alberta Williams King, a former schoolteacher. King grew up in the city's Sweet Auburn neighbourhood,

then home to some of the most prominent and prosperous African Americans in the country.

A gifted student, King attended segregated public schools and at the age of 15 was admitted to Morehouse College where he studied medicine and law. Although he had not intended to follow in his father's footsteps by joining the ministry, he changed his mind. After graduating in 1948, King entered Crozer Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania, where he earned a Bachelor of Divinity degree and in 1953 he gained a doctorate from Boston University.

While in Boston he met Coretta Scott, a young singer from Alabama who was studying at the New England Conservatory of Music. The couple wed in 1953 and settled in Montgomery, Alabama. King became pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church.

On December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks, refused to give up her seat to a white passenger on a Montgomery bus and was arrested, starting the bus boycott. They chose Martin Luther King Jr. as the protest's leader and official spokesman.

By the time the Supreme Court ruled segregated seating on public buses unconstitutional in November 1956, King—heavily influenced by Mahatma Gandhi —had entered the national spotlight as an inspirational proponent of organized, nonviolent resistance. King had also become a target for white supremacists, who firebombed his family home that January.

King's philosophy of nonviolence was put to a particularly severe test during the Birmingham campaign of 1963. In this activists used a boycott, sit-ins and marches to protest segregation, unfair hiring practices and other injustices in one of America's most racially divided cities. King was arrested for his involvement on April 12th. In prison King penned the civil rights manifesto known as the "Letter from Birmingham Jail." This is an eloquent defence of civil disobedience addressed to a group of white clergymen who had criticised his tactics.

On the evening of April 4, 1968, Martin Luther King was assassinated. He was fatally shot while standing on the balcony of a motel in Memphis, where King had travelled to support a sanitation workers' strike. In the wake of his death, a wave of riots swept major cities across the country, while President Johnson declared a national day of mourning.

James Earl Ray, an escaped convict and known racist, pleaded guilty to the murder and was sentenced to 99 years in prison. He later recanted his confession and gained some unlikely advocates, including members of the King family, before his death in 1998.

After years of campaigning by activists, members of Congress and Coretta Scott King, among others, in 1983 President Ronald Reagan signed a bill creating a U.S. federal holiday in honour of King. Observed on the third Monday of January, Martin Luther King Day was first celebrated in 1986.