

Three Freedom Fighters

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There are many wars and conflicts going on in the world today. Some people tend to see violence as the best means to solve a conflict. However, there are other ways; freedom and justice can be achieved also by peaceful means. Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela are prominent examples of how freedom and democratic rights can be won through non-violent methods.

Mahatma Gandhi



Gandhi

During the first half of the 20th century the British Empire began to decline and the colonies were gradually given their independence. India, which was known as "The Jewel in the Crown" among the British colonies, won its independence in 1947. The fight against British rule in India was led by a little man dressed in a loincloth and wearing sandals. Mahatma Gandhi lived for nearly 25 years in South Africa working as a lawyer, after which he returned to India in 1914 and started his work for a free India. What he had seen and experienced during his time in South Africa formed the basis for his philosophy. He was devoted to a non-violent struggle and his ideas of passive resistance influenced many activists fighting for a free and independent India. Because of his political activity and resistance against the British, he was imprisoned many times; his policy of non-cooperation and pacifist ideals made his movement difficult to fight with traditional means. He lived to see the end of British rule in India, but the political turmoil after the British withdrew had two results: the controversial division of India into Islamic Pakistan and Hindu India in 1948, and the tragic assassination of Gandhi by a fanatic Hindu nationalist in New Delhi. Gandhi's spiritual influence and ideals have given inspiration to people and political leaders all over the world, including Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.



Martin Luther King

Dr. King was one of the many leaders who have been inspired by Mahatma Gandhi. He became the front figure in the fight for equality and civil rights for the black people of the southern states in the USA. The segregation and open racism which prevailed in the south was ruled unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in 1954, a verdict that inspired many activists to take up the fight against racism and segregation. King grew up in Atlanta, Georgia, and had experienced discrimination and racism at first hand. He preached non-violent resistance even when faced with brutal opposition. In the early sixties, many Blacks, including Dr. King, were impatient with the speed of desegregation. Dr. King led nearly 250,000 people in a peaceful protest march on Washington D.C. in 1963 where he gave his famous "I Have a Dream" speech. Gradually, his work and efforts produced results, and he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964. Despite this prestigious recognition, racist attitudes of many white people in the south were hard to deal with and in 1968 he was assassinated outside his hotel in Memphis. During the fight for equal rights, protest marches were often met with brutal force by the police and many of King's co-activists were also killed. However, the struggle was won little by little, and one of the prime results was that in 2008 the USA elected the first black president in history.

Nelson Mandela



Statue at his prison close to Stellenbosch, made after a photo of Mandela on the day he was released
Nelson Mandela, Vilseskogen, Flickr

The white population of South Africa were mainly descendants of British and Dutch colonists and maintained their power over the black population by a brutal segregation policy called apartheid. As in the southern states of the USA, the Blacks were kept down by the white rulers and discriminated against in every possible way. Nelson Mandela (born 1918) was trained as a lawyer and became an activist and leader of the African National Congress (ANC) - a movement fighting for the rights of the black people of South Africa. In 1964, he was arrested for his activities and imprisoned on Robben Island, where he was to spend the next 27 years. But even from his cell his work continued and he became a symbol of the liberation process and an icon of the struggle for freedom for people all over the world. He was released in 1990 after continuous international pressure including the embargo and boycott of South Africa. He then took up negotiations with the apartheid regime and an agreement was reached in 1992 which included the first election where all South Africans were free to vote. In 1994, he was elected the first black president of the Republic of South Africa in the first free election ever.

Mandela was an admirer of both King and Gandhi, but he saw non-violence as one of many practical means and not as an absolute principle. He had, after all, in his early career been the leader of the ANC's military wing.

Today, Mandela is still a highly praised and admired key figure in the fight for justice and democracy. He has been honoured with many prizes including the Nobel Peace Prize and is an attraction wherever he goes in the world giving speeches to inspire people never to give up the fight for freedom.

These three strong leaders have been and still are role models for many people around the world. They have given massive inspiration to everyone who protests against injustice and discrimination and their significance can not be overestimated for the course of freedom in the world.

Comprehension

Answer the True/False questions in this interactive task.

[True or False - Three Freedom Fighters](#)

Pair Work and Class Discussion

Work with a friend or in a small group and consider these issues, then make a class-room discussion.

1. What would you say that Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela have in common?
2. The three leaders were active during the last half of the 20th century. Why did these movements come so close in time and occur in such recent history? Do you know of any similar movements in earlier times?
3. Mention some reasons why a group of people will commit injustice towards another group. Have the reasons changed during history?
4. Discuss briefly the issue of non-violence versus militant action. List some arguments supporting both views.