

Introduction to Apartheid



The first people to live in the area now known as South Africa were black Africans who spoke the Bantu language. They raised cattle and sheep near the coast. In 1652, the Dutch came to settle in South Africa. Even though they were recent immigrants, they believed the land was theirs. They defeated many Africans and forced them to work as servants and slaves. As the Dutch colony grew, they brought Africans from other parts of Africa to work for them. But they worried that the Africans might rise up against them. To prevent this, they made them carry identification cards, or passbooks, whenever they left their employer's property.

In 1806, Great Britain captured the colony from the Dutch. The British and descendants of Dutch settlers, known as the Boers, fought for control over the country for about 100 years. The British finally won. When diamonds and gold were discovered in South Africa, the British forced blacks off the mineral-rich land. They made them live on land they thought had little value, called "reserves."



In 1948, the racist Nationalist Party was elected to power. The Nationalist government combined all the poor treatment of blacks into an official policy called *apartheid*. Apartheid (pronounced *apart-hide*) means "apartness" in Afrikaans, the language of South Africa's Dutch descendants. Through apartheid, the South African government tried to completely separate the small number of whites from the black majority.



Under apartheid, the government divided people into four categories by race: "European," "African," "Asian," and "Colored" (people of mixed racial ancestry). Each racial group had different rights and roles. Whites controlled the government, factories, farming, education, the military, and the press. Even though whites were only 17 percent of the population in 1986, they owned 87 percent of the land. White South Africans lived in wealth and comfort, or *luxury*. They built modern cities with large houses, good schools, and fancy shops and restaurants.

Asians and mixed-race groups made up 13 percent of the population. They were generally treated better than blacks but worse than whites. Many Asians and mixed-race persons went to high school and held good jobs. In the 1980s, the South African

government let Coloreds and Asians vote for representatives in their own assembly. Still, they could not live in white areas or go to schools and public places reserved for whites only.

Above all, whites set up the system of apartheid to make sure the black majority would not gain any power. In 1958, the government separated black people from white people by making blacks live on reserves, or *homelands*. These reserves took up only 13 percent of the land, even though blacks made up 68 percent of the population. The land in the reserves was poor and hard to farm. And, the government built few factories, modern roads, schools, and hospitals. Blacks could not vote, received little education, and usually worked as servants for whites. The whites also controlled them by not allowing them to move around the country without passbooks.



Most black men had to leave their homelands to find work in mines or factories in white areas. They were forced to live apart from their families for as many as 11 months of each year. Women raised whatever crops they could or worked outside the reserves as servants in houses owned by white people. Even though it was illegal, some blacks who worked in white areas lived in shanty towns—overcrowded towns full of poorly built shacks on the edges of cities.

The shanty towns became centers for black groups who resisted the white government, such as the African National Congress. Blacks who were frustrated by the racism of apartheid joined these groups. Thousands of black South Africans resisted apartheid by refusing to work, refusing to buy white products, going into “whites only” areas, and marching in nonviolent demonstrations. Some also bought weapons and fought with the white South African police.

In 1986, the white South African government tried to destroy those who resisted apartheid. For 3 years, they arrested, tortured (hurt), and imprisoned over 20,000 people. Still, blacks increased their actions against the government. Countries around the world also put pressure on the government to change its policies. Finally, the



government agreed to discuss change with resistance leaders. They made the African National Congress, the largest anti-apartheid party, a legal political party. The party's leaders, including Nelson Mandela, were released from prison. In 1994, the government agreed to hold an open election. The ANC won, with 63 percent of the vote, and Nelson Mandela became the new president of South Africa. Apartheid was over, but the country had a lot of work to do to create a more equal society.

Two Africans Who Reached for Peace

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While most African nations achieved independence from European colonizers by the 20th century, in South Africa only some people enjoyed true freedom. Until the late 20th century, descendants of South Africa's British and Dutch settlers retained almost total political and economic control under a policy called apartheid, or "separation." Years of unrest, much of it increasingly violent, reflected the frustration of black South Africans and the fears of white South Africans. When the black majority finally took its rightful place in the political debate, two men—one black, one white—helped forge the path.



Black South African Nelson Mandela founded a youth wing of the African National Congress (ANC) as early as 1944. Elected ANC deputy national president in 1952, Mandela led a civil disobedience campaign against apartheid laws that year and took part in the mass protests against the establishment of separate black homelands in 1956. Mandela was arrested several times and finally sentenced to life imprisonment in 1964. Continuing to stand up for his people's rights to a political role, Mandela remained in prison until 1990. His release, and the subsequent legalization of the outlawed ANC, were spearheaded by then President Frederik de Klerk.

A white South African also trained as a lawyer, de Klerk's efforts as a National party leader were toward increasing participation by the black majority. As president, de Klerk opened the door to peace by replacing the politics of fear—security police, for example—with the politics of debate—releasing Mandela and acknowledging black African concerns. Together, these two men forged the way to South Africa's first democratic elections in 1994. They jointly received 1993's Nobel Peace Prize for their efforts.

