

The Historical Gandhi Exposed

Segregation and War in South Africa

The Durban Post Office: Gandhi's Segregationist History

In 1893, Gandhi was hired to serve as legal adviser to wealthy Indian traders in Colonial South Africa. He arrived there prior to apartheid, but during a time when the nation still suffered severe political unrest and racial segregation. That same year he was allegedly the victim of racial hatred when he was thrown off a train at Pietermaritzburg for refusing to give up his seat to a white man. This event was reportedly a pivotal moment in Gandhi's life which inspired him to fight against discrimination in colonial South Africa and later to lead the independence movement in India.

In 1895, just two years later, Gandhi began actively promoting racial segregation in Durban, South Africa. The local post office had two doors: one for whites and the other shared by Indians and black Africans. Gandhi was required to share a door with black South Africans, which deeply offended him. So he initiated a campaign to segregate the blacks from the Indians.

In his Collected Works (CWMG), Vol. I, pp. 367-368, Gandhi wrote: "In the Durban Post and telegraph offices there were separate entrances for natives and Asiatics and Europeans. We felt the indignity too much and many respectable Indians were insulted and called all sorts of names by the clerks at the counter. We petitioned the authorities to do away with the invidious distinction and they have now provided three separate entrances for natives, Asiatics, and Europeans."

Sgt.-Major Gandhi in the War on Blacks



In 1906, the Zulus rebelled against the colonial British government in a region of South Africa. In protest of a new poll-tax, Zulus confronted and killed two British tax collectors in 1906. In retaliation, the British declared war on the Zulus. They hung, shot, and severely flogged thousands of Zulus. Around four thousand Zulus were killed during the rebellion. This war was called the Bambatha Uprising.

Gandhi first cheered on the war efforts, encouraging Indians to send care packages to the soldiers "in order to express their sympathy." He suggested these packages include "fruits, tobacco, warm clothing and other things that they might need." In his words: "It is our duty." [CWMG, Vol. V, p. 259, June 9, 1906]

Despite Gandhi's current modern image as a dedicated pacifist, he berated the British for not raising an Indian regiment to help fight the black Zulus. He wrote: "If the Government only realized what reserve force is being wasted, they would make use of it and give Indians the opportunity of a thorough training for actual warfare." [CWMG, Vol. V, p. 11, Nov. 18, 1905] Early in 1906 he plead for an Indian regiment again, writing: "There is a population of over one hundred thousand Indians in Natal. It has been proved that they can do very efficient work in time of war... Is it prudent for the Government to allow a source of strength, which always lies at its disposal, to run to waste?" [CWMG, Vol. V, p. 124, Mar. 3, 1906]

Finally, he convinced the British to allow an Indian stretcher-bearer corps. But he seemed disappointed at the non-combatant status of the corps, writing: "The pity of it is that the Government...have not taken the elementary precaution of giving the necessary discipline and instruction to the Indians. It is, therefore, a matter of physical impossibility to expect Indians to do any work with the rifle; or, for that matter, to do any work in connection with war with much efficiency." [CWMG, Vol. V, p. 211, May 5, 1906]

Gandhi was appointed a Sergeant-Major, taking an oath to "be faithful and bear true allegiance to His Majesty King Edward" and "faithfully serve in the supernumerary list of the Active Militia Force." [CWMG, Vol. V, p. 262, June 6, 1906]

Before heading to the battlefield, Gandhi published an article titled "Should Indians Volunteer Or Not?" In it he argued for a religious reason to fight the black Africans, saying: "For the Indian community, going to the battle-field should be an easy matter; for, whether Muslims or Hindus, we are men with profound faith in God. We have a greater sense of duty, and it should therefore be easier for us to volunteer." He also urged Indians to volunteer: "There is hardly any family from which someone has not gone to fight the Kaffir rebels. Following their example, we should steel our hearts and take courage. Now is the time when the leading whites want us to take this step; if we let go this opportunity, we shall repent later." [CWMG, Vol. V, pp. 273-274, June 30, 1906]

To make matters worse, Gandhi lied about his participation in the war in his 1920s autobiography. He wrote: "I bore no grudge against the Zulus, they had harmed no Indian. I had doubts about the 'rebellion' itself." He also claimed, "My heart was with the Zulus." Yet in 1906, he vehemently advocated Indians be allowed to "[take] their share in the defence of the Colony," demanded the Indian community help fund the suppression of the Zulu rebellion, and cheered the chance to train for "actual warfare."

During his life, Gandhi vocally supported every major war. He supported the Second Bar War, Bambatha Uprising, World War I, World War II, and the forcible annexation by India of Kashmir, Hyderabad, and Junagarh.