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GCSE Modern World
History

Third Edition

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HODDER
EDUCATION

SOURCE 4



Confrontation at Little Rock Central High School, Arkansas, September 1957.

SOURCE 5



One of the black students at Little Rock, 15-year-old Elizabeth Eckford, trying to ignore the abuse of the 1,000-strong crowd. Forty years later the woman yelling at Eckford publicly apologised for her actions.

The struggle for equal education: A legal challenge

For decades, it had been legal in the USA for states to have separate schools for black and white children. Schools for black children were almost always less well equipped.

Brown v Board of Education of Topeka, 1954

In September 1952 the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP) brought a court case against the Board of Education in Topeka, Kansas. The case was about a girl called Linda Brown who had to travel several kilometres and cross a dangerous rail track to get to school, rather than attend a whites-only school nearby. This was a test case to see whether the Supreme Court would allow states to continue to segregate schools.

In May 1954 Chief Justice Earl Warren finally announced in favour of Brown and the NAACP. Warren stated that segregated education could not be equal. It created a feeling of inferiority for black students and that meant that all segregated school systems were unequal ones. He ordered the southern states to set up integrated schools 'with all deliberate speed'.

The case demonstrated a pattern that was going to work well in the civil rights campaign that was to follow. The campaigners would pick up an individual story of discrimination and take it to the Supreme Court to see if it would declare the practice illegal. If the Supreme Court said that something was illegal or against the Constitution, then the states had to do something about it.

Little Rock, Arkansas

Integration was met with bitter resistance in some states. In 1957 the Supreme Court ordered the Governor of Arkansas, Orval Faubus, to let nine black students attend a white school in Little Rock. Faubus ordered out state troops to prevent the black students from attending school. He claimed that this was because he could not guarantee their safety. Faubus only backed down when President Eisenhower sent federal troops to protect the students and make sure that they could join the school. The troops stayed for six weeks.

James Meredith and 'Ole Miss'

What about higher education? Universities in the southern states of the USA were also segregated, including the famous 'Ole Miss' – Mississippi State University. In 1962 James Meredith, a black student, won his appeal to overturn the decision to exclude him from the university. Mississippi state and university officials objected, so President Kennedy's brother, Robert, the US Attorney-General, sent in federal marshals. Violence erupted, two marshals were killed and 160 people were wounded, but Meredith entered 'Ole Miss'. The Bob Dylan song 'Oxford Town' celebrates this breakthrough.

1 Why was the Brown v Board of Education of Topeka case significant?

SOURCE 6

The great glory of American democracy is the right to protest for right. There will be no crosses burned at any bus stops in Montgomery. There will be no white persons pulled out of their homes and taken out on some distant road and murdered. There will be nobody among us who will stand up and defy the constitution of the Nation.

From Martin Luther King's speech at Montgomery, Alabama, in 1955.

SOURCE 7

A law may not make a man love me, but it can stop him from lynching me. It can also stop him from refusing to serve me in a restaurant.

King writing to President Eisenhower in 1957 after the President expressed his view that laws cannot make people behave in a moral way.

- 2 Why was the Montgomery incident so important? Was it because of the victory won or the way in which it was achieved?
- 3 What evidence is there that civil rights actions increased racial tensions? Is this an argument against them?

The Montgomery bus boycott: Non-violent direct action

What we now call the civil rights movement is often said to have started with the actions of Rosa Parks from Montgomery, Alabama, in December 1955.

Montgomery had a local law that black people were only allowed to sit in the back seats of a bus and they had to give up those seats if white people wanted them. Rosa Parks was a civil rights activist and she decided to make a stand against Montgomery's racially segregated bus service. She refused to give up her seat to a white man. She was promptly arrested and convicted of breaking the bus laws.

The civil rights movement helped the black people of Montgomery to form the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA). The MIA decided that the best way to protest and to generate publicity was to boycott the buses. On the first day of the boycott, the buses were empty and 10,000–15,000 people turned out to hear a speech from the newly elected MIA president, Martin Luther King (see Source 6).

The boycott was a great success. The bus company lost 65 per cent of its income. The black community organised a car pool which carried about two-thirds of the passengers that the buses would have carried (the rest walked). It was the first major example of the power of non-violent direct action – that is, challenging discrimination by refusing to co-operate with it. It showed how powerful black people working together could be.

At the same time, civil rights lawyers fought Rosa Parks' case in court. In December 1956, the Supreme Court declared Montgomery's bus laws to be illegal. This meant that all other such bus services were illegal and by implication that all segregation of public services was illegal.

Throughout the boycott, its leaders were subjected to massive intimidation. King was arrested twice. Local judges passed an injunction declaring the car pool to be illegal. Churches and homes were set on fire and racially integrated buses were shot at by snipers (seven bombers and snipers were charged, but all were acquitted).

Direct action gathers pace

After the success in Montgomery, the civil rights campaign took off in the late 1950s and early 1960s. A number of different groups began to organise similar direct action.

King formed the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). It ran conferences and trained civil rights activists in techniques of non-violent protest and how to handle the police, the law and the media.

Black and white American students were deeply moved by the civil rights movement and played a major role in it. They set up the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Another civil rights activist, James Farmer, became the national director of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). Together these groups staged many different protests. For example:

- Four students refused to leave a lunch counter at the local Woolworths when they were refused service because they were black. The next day 23 more students did the same; the next day there were 66 students. With support from SNCC this non-violent tactic spread to other cities. By the end of 1960 lunch counters had been desegregated in 126 cities.
- In May 1961 CORE activists began a form of protest called 'freedom rides'. Many states were not obeying the order to desegregate bus services after the Montgomery ruling. The freedom riders deliberately rode on buses in the city of Birmingham, Alabama, to highlight this. They faced some of the worst violence of the civil rights campaigns. The SNCC then took up the freedom rides, with the same violent reaction as a result. Two hundred freedom riders were arrested and spent 40 days in jail. The Governor of Alabama, John Patterson, did little to protect the riders until he was put under pressure from the new US President, John F Kennedy, to protect them. Black Americans and their white supporters had shown that they were no longer prepared to be intimidated.

SOURCE 8



Black and white SNCC protesters in a sit-in at a segregated Woolworths lunch counter in Jackson, Mississippi, June 1963, being abused by racists.