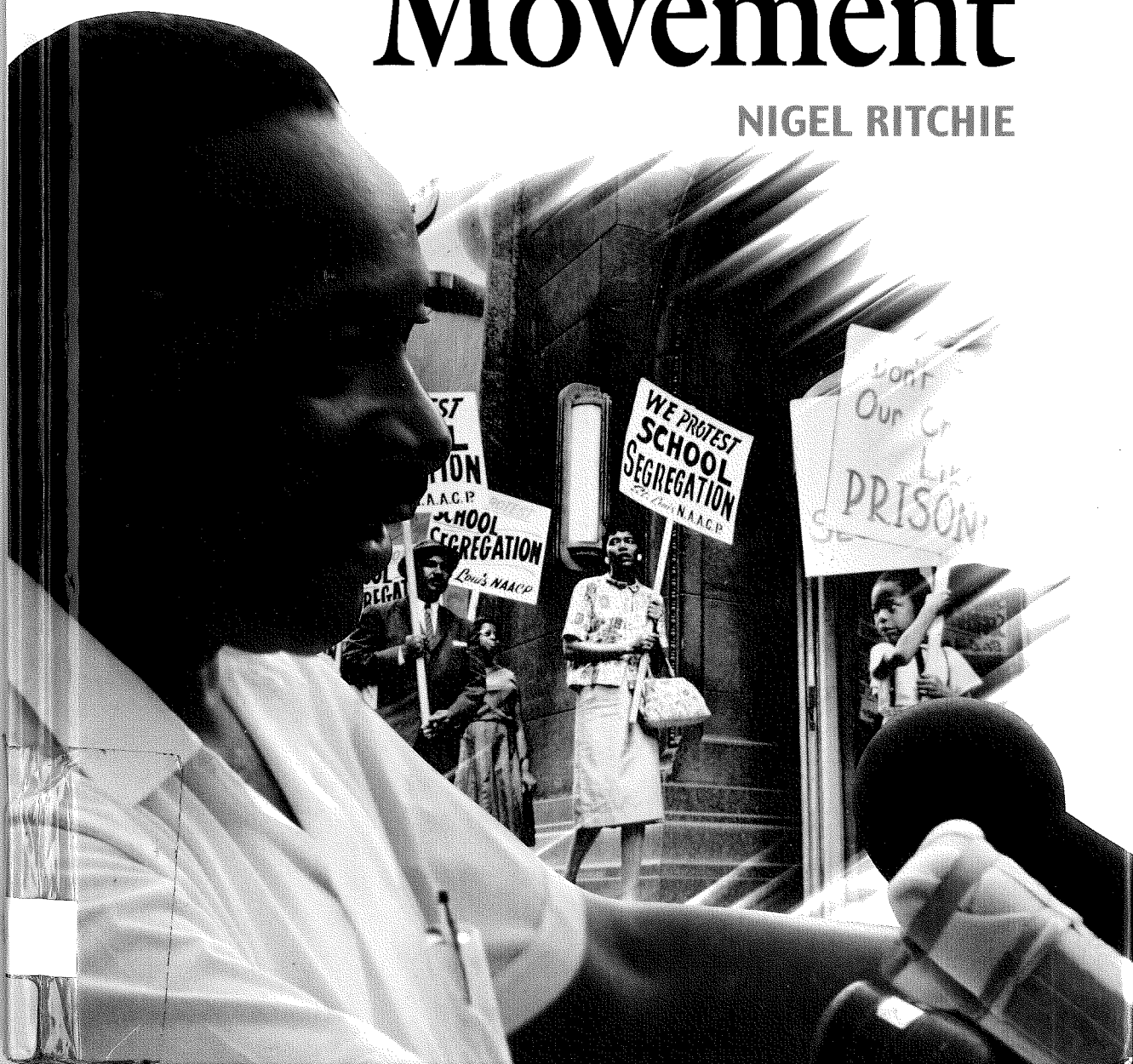
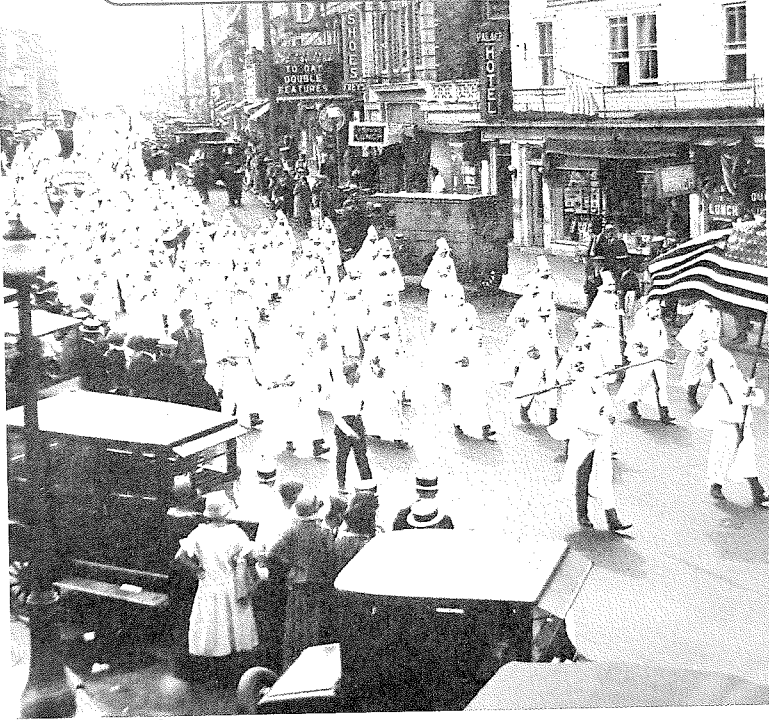


LIVES IN CRISIS

The Civil Rights Movement

NIGEL RITCHIE





The Klu Klux Klan parade through a Southern town, 1925.

1948: A. Philip Randolph (left) leads a protest against segregation in the army.



encouraged by a revived KKK, led to the 'red summer' of 1919. Twenty-five major race riots erupted across the USA in a taste of things to come.

During the Second World War (1939-45), the NAACP was transformed into a mass organization by the subscriptions of thousands of black servicemen who were infuriated by unequal treatment in the armed services. Although black and white soldiers fought together for the first time in 1945, military segregation was not abolished until 1948. While the NAACP concentrated on

bringing lawsuits, a different type of organization was founded in 1942. The Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) would use non-violent direct action to achieve change.

A. Philip Randolph (1889-1979), a black labour leader, won the first major victory for civil rights in 1941. By threatening a mass march on Washington DC, which would have caused international embarrassment, he forced President Franklin Roosevelt to issue a special Executive Order banning racial discrimination in the booming defence industries.

During the 1930s and 1940s, a series of successful lawsuits brought by the NAACP forced many school districts to improve their black schools. Then, on 17 May 1954, the Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka Supreme Court ruling rejected the 'separate but equal' doctrine and outlawed segregation in schools, opening

the floodgates for further legal challenges. The South responded by setting up local Citizens' Councils (made up of business and professional people) to fight its implementation. The fight for rights was on.

The murder of Emmett Till

The Brown decision provided a legal basis for challenging segregation, but another event had a more emotional effect on support for the civil rights movement: the lynching of Emmet Till, a 14-year-old boy from Chicago, visiting relatives in Money, Mississippi.

On 28 August, Till was kidnapped in the middle of the night and beaten to death by two men. His crime? Saying 'Bye, Baby!' and wolf-whistling at the white woman who ran the town store. When Till's body was returned to Chicago for burial, it was almost unrecognizable – the head was crushed in on one side, one eye was gouged out and a bullet was lodged in the skull. His grief-stricken mother held an open-coffin funeral to show the nation what had been done to her son. Horrified whites responded by pouring money into the NAACP war chest.

Till's killers were arrested and found not guilty by an all-white jury, despite eyewitness testimony. After the trial, the black witnesses had to be moved out of the state for their own protection. The anger and grief provoked by Till's murder aroused a determination to change things for the better. As one civil rights leader commented, 'it just set in concrete the determination of the people to move forward.'



Post-war momentum

'I think the beginning of this period from 1954 has its roots in the returning soldiers after 1945 ... There was a building up of militancy, not so much by going into the streets as by a feeling of "We're not going to put up with this anymore." ... What made 1954 so unusual was that the ... Brown decision established black people as being citizens with the rights of all other citizens. Once that happened, then it was very easy for the militancy ... to express itself ...'

(Bayard Rustin, quoted in Hampton and Fayer, *Voices of Freedom*)



Coming of age in Mississippi

Anne Moody was 14 at the time of Till's murder. Her mother urged her to avoid trouble by pretending not to have heard about it. But this reaction had as great an impact on Anne as the murder itself:

'I was fifteen years old when I began to hate white people. I hated ... all the other whites who were responsible for countless murders ... I also hated Negroes. I hated them for not standing up and doing something about the murders ...'

(Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi*)