

The Whole World Was Watching:
*The International Dimension of
 Dr. Martin Luther
 King Jr.
 and the Civil Rights Movement*

Dr. Laurence Glasco

Associate professor. Department of History. University of Pittsburgh.



Many people think of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's as a distinctly American phenomenon. In fact, however, the movement had important but often overlooked international dimensions. For example, Dr. King developed his philosophy of non-violent resistance from the successful movement led by Mohatma Gandhi, who helped India gain independence from Britain. Dr. King and the Civil Rights Movement had a major impact on struggling minorities around the world from Northern Ireland to Poland to Palestine to China to India to Japan to South Africa and many other places. Dr. King was a world citizen and peacemaker who ultimately won the Nobel Peace Prize for his humanitarian efforts. So, in many ways the Civil Rights Movement owed its success to world-wide influences and, in turn, it helped support

other world-wide movements for racial and social justice.

Dr. King's personal background gave little indication that he would become the leading symbol and spokesman of the legendary Civil Rights Movement in America. He was born on January 15, 1929 in Georgia, a southern state with a large black population and known for physical violence and injustices towards blacks. Lynchings, beatings and other forms of racial violence were long woven into the social fabric of Georgia and other southern states. Dr. King was the son and grandson of prominent Atlanta ministers. Early on, he had plans to become a minister himself. In 1948, he graduated from the all-black prestigious Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia. After graduating, he enrolled in the predominantly white Crozer Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania and, in 1955, received a doctorate degree from Boston University.

While at Crozer, Dr. King became entranced with the non-violent philosophy and teachings of Gandhi. He was already familiar with "On Civil Disobedience," the highly influential tract by the 19th century American philosopher and abolitionist, Henry David Thoreau, and was inspired by the notion of non-cooperation with an evil government. While Thoreau's resistance or philosophy focused on the individual, Gandhi's philosophy or principle of Satyagraha ("truth force or love force") focused on collective non-violence perspec-

tive. Gandhi's teachings convinced Dr. King that the love ethic of Jesus could be expanded beyond that of individual resistance to embrace a collective movement against evil in a non-violent way.

Dr. King moved to Montgomery, Alabama in 1954 where he became pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. Not long after his arrival, he became leader of the well-known Montgomery Bus Boycott where blacks in that city initiated their own, spontaneous non-violent movement. The movement began when Rosa Parks, a black seamstress, refused to obey the prevailing segregation laws which required that she give up her seat to a white patron because the bus was full. Inspired by Ms. Parks' courage, Dr. King and other blacks launched a non-violent boycott which lasted 382 days. As a result of the boycott, the Supreme Court, the highest court in the U.S., declared segregation on public transportation as unconstitutional laws requiring segregation on public transportation.

In 1957, after the bus boycott, Dr. King helped found and was elected head of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. He drew on the combination of grass-roots Christian initiatives undertaken by blacks and whites and Gandhi's non-violent philosophy and tactics to spearhead the Civil Rights Movement until his assassination on April 4, 1968.

The similarities between Gandhi's and Dr. King's philosophy and tactics are quite clear and can be seen in a brief comparison of their underlying principles. For example, Gandhi's principle of *satyagraha* decreed that:

"A *satyagrahi*, i.e., a civil resister, will harbour no anger. He will suffer the anger of the opponent. In so doing he will put up with assaults from the opponent, never retaliate; but he will not submit, out of fear of punishment or the like, to any order given in anger. When any person in authority seeks to arrest a civil resister, he will voluntarily submit to the arrest, and he will not resist the attachment or removal of his own property, if any,

when it is sought to be confiscated by authorities. If a civil resister has any property in his possession as a trustee, he will refuse to surrender it, even though in defending it he might lose his life. He will, however, never retaliate. Non-retaliation includes swearing and cursing. Therefore a civil resister will never insult his opponent, and therefore also not take part in many of the newly coined cries which are contrary to the spirit of *ahimsa* [non-violence]. A civil resister will not salute the Union Jack, nor will he insult it or officials, English or Indian. In the course of the struggle if anyone insults an official or commits an assault upon him, a civil resister will protect such official or officials from the insult or attack even at the risk of his life."

Dr. King spelled out his non-violent philosophy in his book entitled, *Stride Toward Freedom*. In his book, Dr. King elucidated six key points about nonviolence:

First, it is not based on cowardice; although it may seem passive physically, it is spiritually active, requiring the courage to stand up against injustice. Second, nonviolence does not seek to defeat the opponent but rather to win his understanding to create "the beloved community." Third, the attack is directed at the evil not at the people who are doing the evil. Fourth, in nonviolence there is a willingness to accept suffering without retaliating. Fifth, not only is physical violence avoided but also spiritual violence; love replaces hatred. Sixth, nonviolence has faith that justice will prevail.

The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's was successful, but not without great suffering on the part of many black and white protesters. Ironically, much of this success came about because non-violent resistance to segregation laws and customs—often referred to as "Jim Crow"—provoked shock nationally when the violence and injustices toward blacks and the whites who tried to help them were widely publicized by the media. These actions forced the American government to act. The most dramatic example of this occurred on March 7, 1965, a day known as "Bloody Sunday", when hundreds of civil

rights marchers tried to march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama to protest denial of voting rights for blacks. The marchers only got as far as the Edmund Pettus Bridge, located six blocks away, when state and local policemen attacked them with billy clubs and tear gas and drove them back into Selma. The confrontation was televised nationally and viewers were repulsed by graphic instances of violence against the non-violent demonstrators. Later that month, on March 21, 1965, the march resumed with over 3,000 marchers leaving Selma. By the time they reached Montgomery over 25,000 people participated in the march. The march included nationally prominent figures, both black and white. Later that year, public pressure forced the Congress and President of the United States, Lyndon Johnson, to pass the historic Voting Rights Act, the capstone bill of the Civil Rights Movement.

The civil rights movement achieved many victories and remained non-violent partly because it took place at a particular point in American history, when the country was engaged in a decisive Cold War struggle with the Soviet Union. A key part of that struggle involved competition to win the minds and hearts of colored peoples around the world. As Time magazine pointed out, America's significance in the world arena was obvious impacted by Dr. King and the Civil Rights Movement

"It is only because of King and the movement that he led that the U.S. can claim to be the leader of the "free world" without inviting smirks of disdain and disbelief. Had he and the blacks and whites who marched beside him failed, vast regions of the U.S. would have remained morally indistinguishable from South Africa under apartheid, with terrible consequences for America's standing among nations. How could America have convincingly inveighed against the Iron Curtain while an equally oppressive Cotton Curtain remained draped across the South?"

Several examples, drawn from Kelefa Sanneh's review of Borstelman's, *The Cold War and the Color Line*, illustrates this link.



End of March from Selma to Montgomery, March 1965.

Shortly after the end of World War II and the beginning of the Cold War between the U.S. and Russia, Blacks Americans had embarrassed the Truman administration by filing three separate appeals demanding that the United Nations intervene in the struggle for civil rights. In one of these filings, "An Appeal to the World," W. E. B. Du Bois wrote, "It is not Russia that threatens the United States so much as Mississippi." A national scandal was becoming an international issue.

In 1961, a State Department representative urged the state of Maryland to desegregate restaurants along one of its major highways, Route 40. He explained that integration would help ensure "the success of the foreign policy of the United States." Apparently, Route 40 was used regularly by diplomats traveling between New York and Washington, and African dignitaries tended to be less cooperative after they had been denied entrance into restaurants along that route. President Kennedy wasn't immediately sympathetic; informed of the Africans' complaints, he responded, "Tell them to fly!" Since the Cold War was redrawing the colonial map of Africa, the United States couldn't afford to alienate potential allies. So in 1963, when Maryland's desegregation bill was finally signed into law, it was one small step for civil rights — and one giant leap for American diplomacy.

During the Vietnam War, Vietcong troops sometimes expressed solidarity with black American soldiers; leftist African lead-

ers appropriated or took for their own use the language of the Civil Rights Movement; and Moscow radio pointedly claimed that Sputnik I passed over Little Rock every day. The Cold War forced America to put its own racial house in order.

Not only did the Civil Rights Movement in America benefit from the watchful eye of world public opinion, it inspired oppressed groups worldwide to seek greater freedom for themselves. I personally became aware of this during the spring of 1989 when I taught in Beijing, China, where the Student Democracy Movement was gathering momentum. I taught a course in African American history which I erroneously presumed would be a difficult topic to get through to Asian students who live halfway around the world. To make the topic more accessible, I utilized autobiographies, beginning with the life of Frederick Douglass, the famous 19th century American slave and abolitionist. Because I assumed it would be a long stretch to make his life relevant and understandable to Chinese students, I regularly asked, through an interpreter, if they understood what I was teaching. "Yes, yes," they replied, "just like China." Initially, I thought that this must have been some form of Chinese politeness. So, I finally asked them to tell me exactly why they found Douglass' life "just like China." They enthusiastically proceeded to cite ways in which the life of a student in Communist China had uncanny parallels with Douglass' life as a slave in America. They went on to say how inspired they were by the struggles of black Americans and how much they admired Dr. Martin Luther King. Later, at Tiananmen Square, they eagerly pointed out to me banners that proclaimed, in Chinese, a variant of one of Dr. King's most famous slogans: "We Have a Dream."

I got another sense of the world-wide impact of the Civil Rights Movement a few years later when, during a visit to Madras, India, I met leaders of the Untouchable Caste, who called themselves Dalits. Two large portraits hung on the walls at the Dalit

Liberation Trust headquarters. I was told that one was their national hero, Ambedkar, and the other I easily recognized as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. When I expressed surprise at seeing Dr. King's portrait, they told me that they greatly admired Dr. King and closely followed the civil rights struggles of black Americans. Indeed, some of the more militant students called themselves "Dalit Panthers," in recognition of America's "Black Panthers"!

Numerous other examples can be cited of groups around the world who have been inspired by the Civil Rights Movement in America. In Northern Ireland, Catholics sang "We Shall Overcome" while marching for religious justice. Demonstrators for political, racial, ethnic, and religious justice in diverse locations such as Poland, Prague, Berlin, Palestine, Australia, South Africa, and Brazil have also drawn inspiration from America's Civil Rights Movement. In Havana, Cuba, I had the pleasure of visiting the Martin Luther King Center and talking with its founder, Reverend Raul Suarez.

The whole world was watching America's civil rights movement and helped ensure its success. Even in America, one can say the whole world was watching. Women, other ethnic groups, the elderly, gays, and the handicapped all were inspired by the movement. Also, they benefitted from its success, for laws that banned discrimination on the basis of race also banned discrimination on the basis of color, nationality, religion, gender, sexual orientation, age, and disability.

The Civil Rights Movement, although aimed primarily at correcting historical injustices suffered by black Americans, unleashed a movement that benefitted from being closely watched by others around the world. And the movement, in turn, inspired and benefitted. This was quite an impressive accomplishment.