MAHATMA GANDHI: SOLDIER OF NONVIOLENCE

1869 Born
1888–1891 Studied law in England
1893–1914 Lived in South Africa
1915–1920 Leader of the Indian National Congress
1922–1924 Imprisoned for sedition
1928–1934 Leader of the cause of Indian independence
1947 Indian independence achieved
1948 Died

Mahatma Gandhi was one of the best-known people in the world in the 1930s and 1940s, instantly recognizable from the pictures of him in newspapers, magazines, and newsreels—a frail little brown man in a loincloth, swathed in a shawl that he had woven himself out of yarn he had spun himself on a hand spinning wheel. He had no wealth and, for most of his life, no official political position. He was not an intellectual nor a political theorist. He was a moral leader, for millions in his native India and for millions more throughout the world. The American general and secretary of state George C. Marshall called him “the spokesman for the conscience of all mankind.” But it was not the whole world where he chose to play out the drama of his life. It was India. And his cause was Indian independence from the British Empire. Gandhi became the driving force in its final achievement in 1947, after two centuries of colonial rule. In that process he became a world figure.

Mohandas K. Gandhi was born in 1869, the fourth and youngest child of his father’s fourth wife. He was born in the poor little provincial capital of Porbandar on the west coast of India. His father was an official in the state administration of the Indian ruling prince, and by native standards the family was reasonably well off. His mother was a deeply religious woman and Gandhi was raised as a devout Hindu.

After completing grammar school Gandhi, following his father's wishes, traveled to England to study law in 1888. He was enrolled in the Inner Temple and was called to the bar in 1891. He immediately returned to India. He had made an unimpressive record as a law student; he was even less impressive as a struggling young lawyer in Porbandar. In 1893 a business firm in the city offered to send him to South Africa for a year as its representative, and he accepted.

In South Africa Gandhi came face to face with the racial segregation policies of the government. He was a “colored,” hence an inferior person. The indignities he suffered there—and more, the indignities suffered by his fellow Indians—galvanized Gandhi and started him on his life's work. He did not return to India after his year's contract was up. Instead he stayed in South Africa, opened a law office in Durban, and quickly became the spokesman for the rights of the many Indians there. He organized the Natal Indian Congress; he wrote dozens of eloquent petitions to the government on behalf of Indian rights; he wrote pamphlets to the same purpose. His activities and his views gained him wide coverage in the press in India and in Britain; at the same time, these activities and views—and their coverage in the foreign press—infligated South African white extremists. He was threatened, even assaulted. He neither resisted nor brought charges against his attackers.

Then in 1899 the Boer War broke out and Gandhi, to the consternation of many of his fellow Indians, organized and led an Indian Ambulance Corps of over a thousand volunteers. Gandhi argued that if they claimed the right to be treated as subjects of the British Empire, they incurred the obligation of defending the Empire.
The Origin of Nonviolence

M. K. GANDHI

In spite of the most heroic service in the war, at its conclusion the Indians of South Africa found their status not at all improved, either with the Boers or with the British. Indeed, the situation deteriorated. In the late summer of 1906 an ordinance was proposed by the Transvaal government that would require all Indians to register with the authorities and to carry a certificate at all times on penalty of imprisonment or deportation. Gandhi, along with most of the Indian leaders, was convinced that this "Black Act" would mean absolute ruin for the Indians of South Africa. After a preliminary strategy session among the leaders, a public meeting was called. In the course of it Gandhi discovered the tactic that would be the fundamental center of his life's work—nonviolence, or as he called it, Satyagraha.

Here is his own account of the event.

The meeting was duly held on the 11th September 1906. It was attended by delegates from various places in the Transvaal. But I must confess that even I myself had not then understood all the implications of the resolutions I had helped to frame; nor had I gauged all the possible conclusions to which they might lead. The old Empire Theatre was packed from floor to ceiling. I could read in every face the expectation of something strange to be done or to happen. Mr. Abdul Gani, Chairman of the Transvaal British Indian Association, presided. He was one of the oldest Indian residents of the Transvaal, and partner and manager of the Johannesburg branch of the well-known firm of Mamad Kasam Kamrudin. The most important among the resolutions passed by the meeting was the famous Fourth Resolution, by which the Indians solemnly determined not to submit to the Ordinance in the event of its becoming law in the teeth of their opposition and to suffer all the penalties attaching to such non-submission.

I fully explained this resolution to the meeting and received a patient hearing. . . . The resolution was duly proposed, seconded, and supported by several speakers, one of whom was Sheth Haji Habib. He too was a very old and experienced resident of South Africa and made an impassioned speech. He was deeply moved and went so far as to say that we must pass this resolution with God as witness and must never yield a cowardly submission to such degrading legislation. He then went on solemnly to declare in the name of God that he would never submit to that law, and advised all present to do likewise. Others also delivered powerful and angry speeches in supporting the resolution.
When in the course of his speech Sheth Haji Habib came to the solemn declaration, I was at once startled and put on my guard. Only then did I fully realize my own responsibility and the responsibility of the community. The community had passed many a resolution before and amended such resolutions in the light of further reflection or fresh experience. There were cases in which resolutions passed had not been observed by all concerned. Amendments in resolutions and failure to observe resolutions on the part of persons agreeing thereto are ordinary experiences of public life all the world over. But no one ever imports the name of God into such resolutions. In the abstract there should not be any distinction between a resolution and an oath taken in the name of God. When an intelligent man makes a resolution deliberately he never swerves from it by a hair's breadth. With him his resolution carries as much weight as a declaration made with God as witness does.

Full of these thoughts as I was, possessing as I did much experience of solemn pledges, having profited by them, I was simply taken aback by Sheth Haji Habib's suggestion of an oath. I thought out the possible consequences of it in a single moment. My perplexity gave place to enthusiasm. And although I had no intention of taking an oath or inviting others to do so when I went to the meeting, I warmly approved of the Sheth's suggestion. But at the same time it seemed to me that the people should be apprised of all the consequences and should have explained to them clearly the meaning of a pledge. And if even then they were prepared to pledge themselves, they should be encouraged to do so; otherwise I must understand that they were not still ready to stand the final test. I therefore asked the President for permission to explain to the meeting the implications of Sheth Haji Habib's suggestion. The President readily granted it and I rose to address the meeting. I give below a summary of my remarks just as I can recall them now:

"I wish to explain to this meeting that there is a vast difference between this resolution and every other resolution we have passed up to date and that there is a wide divergence also in the manner of making it. It is a very grave resolution we are making, as our existence in South Africa depends upon our fully observing it. The manner of making the resolution suggested by our friend is as much of a novelty as of a solemnity. I did not come to the meeting with a view to getting the resolution passed in that manner, which redounds to the credit of Sheth Haji Habib as well as it lays a burden of responsibility upon him. I tender my congratulations to him. I deeply appreciate his suggestion, but if you adopt it you too will share his responsibility. You must understand what is this responsibility, and as an adviser and servant of the community, it is my duty fully to explain it to you.

"We all believe in one and the same God, the differences of nomen-
clature in Hinduism and Islam notwithstanding. To pledge ourselves or to take an oath in the name of that God or with Him as witness is not something to be trifled with. If having taken such an oath we violate our pledge we are guilty before God and man. Personally I hold that a man who deliberately and intelligently takes a pledge and then breaks it forfeits his manhood.

"I know that pledges and vows are, and should be, taken on rare occasions. A man who takes a vow every now and then is sure to stumble. But if I can imagine a crisis in the history of the Indian community of South Africa when it would be in the fitness of things to take pledges that crisis is surely now. There is wisdom in taking serious steps with great caution and hesitation. But caution and hesitation have their limits, which we have now passed. The Government have taken leave of all sense of decency. We would only be betraying our unworthiness and cowardice, if we cannot stake our all in the face of the conflagration which envelopes us and sit watching it with folded hands. There is no doubt, therefore, that the present is a proper occasion for taking pledges. But every one of us must think out for himself if he has the will and the ability to pledge himself. Resolutions of this nature cannot be passed by a majority vote. Only those who take a pledge can be bound by it. This pledge must not be taken with a view to produce an effect on outsiders. No one should trouble to consider what impression it might have upon the Local Government, the Imperial Government, or the Government of India. Every one must only search his own heart, and if the inner voice assures him that he has the requisite strength to carry him through, then only should he pledge himself and then only would his pledge bear fruit.

"A few words now as to the consequences.

"We might have to go to jail, where we might be insulted. We might have to go hungry and suffer extreme heat or cold. Hard labor might be imposed upon us. We might be flogged by rude warders. We might be fined heavily and our property might be attached and held up to auction if there are only a few resisters left. Opulent today we might be reduced to abject poverty tomorrow. We might be deported. Suffering from starvation and similar hardships in jail, some of us might fall ill and even die. In short, therefore, it is not at all impossible that we might have to endure every hardship that we can imagine, and wisdom lies in pledging ourselves on the understanding that we shall have to suffer all that and worse. If some one asks me when and how the struggle may end, I may say that if the entire community manfully stands the test, the end will be near. If many of us fall back under storm and stress, the struggle will be prolonged. But I can boldly declare, and with certainty, that so long as there is even a handful of men true to their pledge, there can only be one end to the struggle, and that is victory.

"A word about my personal responsibility. If I am warning you of
the risks attendant upon the pledge, I am at the same time inviting you to pledge yourselves, and I am fully conscious of my responsibility in the matter. It is possible that a majority of those present here might take the pledge in a fit of enthusiasm or indignation but might weaken under the ordeal, and only a handful might be left to face the final test. Even then there is only one course open to the like of me, to die but not to submit to the law. . . . Although we are going to take the pledge in a body, no one should imagine that default on the part of one or many can absolve the rest from their obligation. Everyone should fully realize his responsibility, then only pledge himself independently of others and understand that he himself must be true to his pledge even unto death, no matter what others do.”

I spoke to this effect and resumed my seat. The meeting heard me word by word in perfect quiet. Other leaders too spoke. All dwelt upon their own responsibility and the responsibility of the audience. The President rose. He too made the situation clear, and at last all present, standing with unraised hands, took an oath with God as witness not to submit to the Ordinance if it became law. I can never forget the scene, which is present before my mind’s eye as I write. The community’s enthusiasm knew no bounds.

None of us knew what name to give to our movement. I then used the term “passive resistance” in describing it. I did not quite understand the implications of “passive resistance” as I called it. I only knew that some new principle had come into being. As the struggle advanced, the phrase “passive resistance” gave rise to confusion and it appeared shameful to permit this great struggle to be known only by an English name. Again, that foreign phrase could hardly pass as current coin among the community. A small prize was therefore announced in Indian Opinion\(^2\) to be awarded to the reader who invented the best designation for our struggle. We thus received a number of suggestions. The meaning of the struggle had been then fully discussed in Indian Opinion and the competitors for the prize had fairly sufficient material to serve as a basis for their exploration. Sr. Maganlal Gandhi\(^3\) was one of the competitors and he suggested the word “Sadagraha,” meaning “firmness in a good cause.” I liked the word, but it did not fully represent the whole idea I wished it to connote. I therefore corrected it to “Satyagraha.” Truth (Satya) implies love and firmness (Agraha) engenders and therefore serves as a synonym for force. I thus began to call the Indian movement “Satyagraha,” that is to say, the Force which is born of Truth and Love or non-violence, and gave up the use of the phrase “passive resistance,” in connection with it, so much so that even in English writing

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\(^2\)A journal founded by Gandhi for which he often wrote.

\(^3\)A noted disciple of Gandhi whom he wished to make a disciple of himself.
we often avoided it and used instead the word “Satyagraha” itself or some other equivalent English phrase. This then was the genesis of the movement which came to be known as Satyagraha, and of the word used as a designation for it.

Gandhi and Civil Disobedience in India

JUDITH M. BROWN

For the next decade Gandhi’s program of Satyagraha led thousands of Indians in South Africa to resist the government, to endure hardship and danger and deprivation, even imprisonment. Gandhi himself was jailed for two months in 1908, the first of several such terms of prison for him in South Africa. Thousands of Indians were deported with the loss of all their property, and thousands of Indian indentured servants and miners who remained went on strike. The government remained firm, although many liberal whites, including many clergymen, openly supported Gandhi and the cause of Indian justice in South Africa. Gandhi made two trips to England to appeal to the imperial government, but to no avail. In South Africa the government tightened its restrictions. By 1914, largely under the pressure of world opinion and in the face of even more massive resistance than it could handle, the government of what was by now the Union of South Africa offered Gandhi a compromise. By its terms some of the most outrageous provisions against Indians were repudiated. It was no more than half a victory for Gandhi, but he accepted it as the best he could do. He shortly left South Africa for India.

When he arrived in Bombay on January 9, 1915, Gandhi already had a worldwide reputation as a nonviolent political activist because of his work in South Africa. He also had a considerable knowledge of Indian affairs, which he had followed closely during the years of his absence. There were programs being advocated by various factions for Indian self-rule, or swaraj. But Gandhi was reluctant to embrace any of them too quickly. He took the better part of a year to travel all over India—always by third-class rail—to get to know the people. He spoke, quietly but emphatically, whenever he was invited to do so, often on disturbing topics such as the shame of the untouchables or peasant poverty. He set up a headquarters in the form of a communal farm.

With allied victory in World War I, British repression in India tightened. In 1919 the government proposed a series of antisedition bills that were bitterly opposed by most Indians. It was at this point that Gandhi entered the battle for swaraj. In the spring of 1919 he announced a Satyagraha struggle. It swept the country, with work stoppages, boycotts, and nearly total noncooperation. Gandhi was its inspiration: he had begun to be called Mahatma or “great soul,” a traditional Hindu title of respect. He had also become the spokesman of the Indian
National Congress, which was rapidly becoming the political vehicle for his program of Indian independence. The British authorities reacted to Gandhi's campaign of nonviolent resistance with a proclamation of martial law and mass imprisonment for sedition. Gandhi himself was in prison from 1922 to 1924. In 1928 he formally proposed in the Congress a resolution calling for dominion status for India within a year. It was ignored, and repression continued.

Early in 1930 Gandhi led a Satyagraha against the salt tax, which was a longstanding burden on the poor. Again he was spectacularly successful. The British were forced to imprison more than 60,000 people. In the following year Gandhi was imprisoned again. The British had proposed a new constitution for India as an alternative to independence, but Gandhi found both the concept and its provisions unacceptable. While still in prison he took up a fast. The threat to the Mahatma's life quickly brought the cancellation of the most odious provisions of the constitution, but not of the proposal for the constitution itself. While Gandhi was still far from his goal of purna swaraj or "total independence," by the early 1930s he had attained a unique position of leadership in his nation.

The following excerpt is from the most detailed and authoritative history of this period of Gandhi's life and of the Indian struggle for independence, Judith M. Brown, Gandhi and Civil Disobedience: The Mahatma in Indian Politics, 1928–34.

In the 1920s and 1930s, despite and in a sense because of the growing experience of reformed political institutions in Delhi, the provincial capitals and the localities, India did not have a single well-defined political system in which Indians encountered their compatriots and their rulers, but a cluster of intermeshing systems in each of which ideals, strategies, and alliances were being created. In this complicated environment of political interaction Gandhi played a crucial role for over a quarter of a century. He was for much of the period the figurehead of the Indian National Congress; and at particular times led agitations which constituted a serious challenge to the raj's moral authority and its power to control its subjects. He evoked popular adulation of a kind and to an extent never before enjoyed by an Indian politician; and he attracted the respect of numerous idealists outside India. Gandhi's role and standing in Indian politics were extraordinary phenomena when seen against the barriers to continental political leadership created by regional and social divisions and the limited development of mass media. . . .

At the level of conscious aspiration Gandhi was compelled into politics by a consuming vision of the nature of man and the type of society and government which permitted men to realize their true nature. He believed that in satyagraha he possessed the perfect mode of political action because he saw it as means and end, by its action producing the sort of people whose personal transformation was the foundation of the Indian society. . . . Here was an explosive political mixture: a man careless of the conventional trappings of power, with
the iron will of a fanatic, who entered politics with a messianic zeal for the purification of individuals and their relations with each other, one who was willing to bend on many matters but refused to compromise on what he considered essentials though others considered them mere fads, one who would only participate in organized politics if he was undisputed leader. He claimed to be guided by an "inner voice"; and his willingness to suffer privation and the prospect of death in the pursuit of what he perceived as Truth suggests that he was utterly convinced of the reality of his inner guidance and was neither charlatan nor humbug, covering the tracks of self-seeking ambition with the cloak of religion.

Gandhi’s vision of the span of public work essential to his pursuit of swaraj was a significant aspect of his perception of his public role. His interest in health, diet, hygiene, clothing, social customs, and religious practice was as strong as his concern for politics. Such activities contributed to Gandhi's continental and international reputation, generating respect for him among segments of Indian society which it was difficult to touch with a more conventional political appeal. They also gave him a flexibility which few other political leaders possessed. If he felt at a particular juncture that he could not act as a political leader without compromising his ideals, he could devote himself to these matters temporarily without a sense of defeat, secure in the belief that they were as important steps on the road to the final goal as promoting resistance to the raj through civil disobedience. The absence of any internal constraint of aspiration to a political career through office in Congress or the governmental structures gave the Mahatma a flexibility which paradoxically was vital in enabling his continued political importance in a period of rapid change.

The most dramatic manifestations of public response to Gandhi were the crowds who flocked to see him and hailed him as a Mahatma. But theirs was not truly political support. Curiosity and veneration were rarely emotions which impelled men into following his exhortations, whether to wear khadi,\(^4\) to abandon the observation of Untouchability or to join the ranks of the satyagrahis. Nonetheless Gandhi’s public image across the land among vast multitudes was a factor which impinged on the attitudes towards Gandhi of men who were active in politics. The British acknowledged this in their agonized discussions on the time and place to jail him, and the need to avoid his death in prison. Responsivists became reluctant satyagrahis, and moderates refrained from public criticism, in deference to the Mahatma’s unprecedented repute among their compatriots.

It was in the all-India gatherings that Gandhi achieved his greatest prominence and influence because as all-India leader he performed a

\(^4\)Homespun cloth.
multiplicity of service roles in the particular context of 1928–31. He proved pre-eminent among Congressmen as an arranger of compromises because of his skill with words, his aloofness from factional strife, and his ability to set a goal which could provide a focus of unity and a propaganda weapon. It was to achieve a vital unity that some of them deliberately called him back to Congress in 1928, and because of his success in satisfying this need that he was able to assert a new authority at the Calcutta session with the acquiescence of the majority.

Thereafter, as the civil disobedience “expert,” Gandhi was of extraordinary value to Congressmen in circumstances where a campaign of opposition to parts of the imperial structure seemed the best tactic to exert pressure on the raj and to mask their own divisions. Satyagraha solve many of the dilemmas conflict posed in their relations with their rulers and their compatriots. It was a mode of direct action which permitted them temporarily to leave the paths of cooperation while avoiding the pitfalls of violent resistance, which they were ill equipped to organize, and would not only have threatened many of their vested interests but also alienated many Indians and foreign observers whose sympathy was important if they were to put pressure on the British. Civil disobedience provided an umbrella for a host of individual and corporate protest movements, as it coincided fortuitously with the onset of the depression. It helped them to cement local followings, to elicit support from businessmen, and to exert pressure on more moderate Hindu politicians who felt themselves isolated and their constitutional endeavours threatened by the evidence of widespread support for the movement. It also attracted considerable foreign sympathy. . . . Added to the advantages of placing Gandhi in a leadership position as civil disobedience “expert” were his skill in fund-raising and his energy as an organizer, qualities which convinced Vallabhbhai Patel, for example, that the Mahatma was a man who meant business and was worth following.

Gandhi reached the peak of his influence early in 1931. His dominance was however only in the realm of all-India politics, because only in that context were his skills valued. Even in that arena the pressures to which he was subjected by those who looked to him for leadership, and his failures in asserting authority, most markedly among Muslims, showed the weakness inherent in a position which hinged on the ability to perform a lubricant function in the processes of political action rather than the capacity to forward the clear interests of a cohesive group. The nature of his leadership was even clearer in 1933–4, when his position of ascendancy was rapidly eroded. The civil disobedience campaign inaugurated in 1932 elicited far less popular support than the 1930 campaign, and was soon stifled by the government. Consequently it strengthened neither Congressmen’s cross-regional alliances nor their links with those who should have been the rank and file. . . . It had far less influence than the 1930 campaign on moderate politicians who continued, though with a wider base, to believe in the efficacy of constitutional means.
erable gloom, to cooperate in British reform plans. Ultimately it even alienated those Bombay businessmen who had financed it in the hope that it would assist them in gaining control over economic policy. The cumulative result was the campaign’s failure to put pressure on the British and bring Congress into negotiations on the forthcoming constitution. Now Gandhi’s tactic was a force isolating and dividing Congressmen instead of uniting them and integrating their different levels of political activity. Moreover Gandhi’s skills and potential as an ally were judged of little use by the British.

In 1934 Gandhi recognized that in the changing circumstances he could no longer act as continental leader in the role of civil disobedience “expert.” Such were his personal aspirations and priorities that he preferred to solve the dilemma his presence and insistence on satyagraha created for his Congress colleagues by liberating them from a technique which for them was a mere tactic and so preserve it and his own integrity, and “retire” rather than retain an all-India leadership position by performing the functions they now desired of him. However, these decisions did not mean the end of Gandhi as an all-India political leader. Congressmen would not lightly ignore him; and civil disobedience remained an important tactic for use when confrontation with the raj offered more benefits than cooperation, or when no other programme could secure among them an essential unity. Nor had Gandhi himself lost interest in politics: he had merely redirected his energies to preserve himself and his technique from compromise. Ironically, by “retiring” Gandhi did for himself what the British had done for him in 1922. He took time to review the changing situation where the politics of elections, conciliatory and even acceptance of office would probably become Congressmen’s primary concerns. In this political context men like Vallabhbhai Patel who could weld the disparate elements in the Congress movement into a coherent and disciplined party would be of supreme importance. It was a leadership function Gandhi was ill fitted to perform either by inclination or by expertise. What his role might be in the new context was unclear late in 1934; but by abandoning a role which had proved redundant for his contemporaries he freed himself to adopt another on which a new position of continental leadership could be based, if a situation developed where his personal inclinations and expertise dovetailed with the needs of contemporaries, and offered him a sphere and mode of political action which could forward both their aims and his vision of swaraj.

Nonetheless, Gandhi’s civil disobedience campaigns between 1930 and 1934 were of lasting importance in the development of Indian politics. Although civil disobedience neither led to purna swaraj nor very significantly influenced the process of constitutional reform, it proved a powerful bonding agent among Indians within and across regions under the Congress banner. It gave many activists a new sense of unity born of shared illegal activities and sojourns in jail. Participa-
tion in it became one qualification for political place and a source of prestige in the years which followed. Moreover the campaigns were recruiting grounds for Congress, involving younger people and numbers of women in Congress organizations and activities for the first time and educating them for future positions in the Congress and state structures. The experience of running a continental campaign and Gandhi's emphasis on efficiency were also significant factors in Congress's success in turning itself into an all-India party geared to attract the votes of an enlarged electorate. The Congress name and organization, sketchy though the latter was, had been an important resource in politics in the 1920s. This importance was magnified as Congress emerged from civil disobedience into constitutional competition for power. Few Hindus would now lightly isolate themselves from it, and the influence of those who controlled its central organs was increased because they offered rewards and wielded sanctions which the Mahatma had never had at his command.

In less material ways civil disobedience also equipped Congress for a new political dispensation. It had been a remarkable publicity operation, demonstrating political ideas and actions throughout the land and generating political awareness even in remote villages. It convinced many Indians, and to a lesser extent their rulers, that Congress was a significant factor in political life which could not be ignored. Although its claims to be the people's intermediary with government had not received formal recognition, once Congress returned to constitutional politics most Hindus with political ambitions regarded it as the natural channel through which to pursue them, while the majority of the community who had no aspirations to political activism were sympathetic to its aims and claims. Gandhi's political activities had provided Congress with a pedigree. . . . This was soon clear, in the 1934 Assembly elections, when the poll was higher than in any previous Assembly election and Congress successes outstanding. No other group came near it in organization, resources, and appeal. . . .

Gandhi and Indian Independence

JAWAHARLAL NEHRU

In 1934 Gandhi resigned completely from the Indian National Congress, convinced that the other leaders of the movement had adopted nonviolence only as a political tactic rather than as a fundamental political and philosophic commit-
ment. He was disillusioned with politics. In the next few years he devoted himself to increasingly severe asceticism and to the advocacy of social reforms. He restricted his diet to a mere handful of vegetables a day. His personal possessions were reduced to little besides his spectacles, his food bowl, and his sandals, loincloth, and homespun shawl. He kept a small ivory carving of “The Three Wise Monkeys” given him by a friend in South Africa. Though his wife and family continued to live in the commune, Gandhi himself had long since renounced all sexual contact and stayed alone in a small cell where he slept, took his meals, worked, and wrote.

He continued to defend the cause of the untouchables: he called them Harijans or “children of God.” He was equally concerned about the vast number of Indian peasants, almost universally impoverished, ignorant, and hopeless. For them he prepared educational texts, proposed the teaching of a single language, and strongly advocated a return to Indian cottage industry—the making of khadi or homespun cloth, for example. This, of course, meant his rejection of industrialization, which the British had brought to India and which many progressive Indian leaders had welcomed.

With the outbreak of World War II the question of Indian independence became hopelessly mixed with that of India’s role in the war. In 1942 the British cabinet minister Sir Stafford Cripps came to India with a proposal. The Cripps proposal called for complete British control of India as part of the allied war effort but held out the promise of full dominion status after the war. Gandhi said to Cripps, “Why did you come if this is what you have to offer? If this is your entire proposal to India, I would advise you to take the next plane home.” To Gandhi the plan was fatally flawed in that it called not for a united but a pluralistic India, with independence for Hindus and Moslems, even for the Indian princely states. The other Congress leaders objected to the plan on other grounds.

Gandhi now reentered the political arena. Within months of the rejection of the Cripps proposal he demanded immediate British withdrawal from India. This became the famous “Quit India Resolution.” The British reacted by jailing the entire leadership of the Congress, including Gandhi. Britain and India were now totally estranged.

With the end of the war it was clear that Indian independence, at long last, was at hand. There were intense negotiations over its terms. The stumbling block was the Moslem insistence on a separate state, an insistence underscored by widespread violence. Partition was finally accepted in the plan that Lord Louis Mountbatten, the last British viceroy, proposed in the early summer of 1947. This plan became the basis for independence and for the creation not of one India but of the two new nations of India and Pakistan, in August 1947.

Gandhi was brokenhearted at the failure to achieve a united independent India. Nevertheless, he worked unceasingly to heal the divisions between Hindus and Moslems and bring an end to the religious violence. On January 30, 1948, he died, a victim of that religious violence, shot to death by a Hindu fanatic on his way to his evening prayers.

Gandhi had been, unquestionably, the leading force in the independence movement. His role in the last years of the struggle is evaluated by his lifelong friend,
fellow Congress leader, and the man who would become the first prime minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru. The selection is taken from Nehru’s biographical reflection on Gandhi’s life, Mahatma Gandhi, written a few months after his assassination.

When Gandhiji raised in 1940 the question of non-violence in relation to the war and the future of free India, the Congress Working Committee had to face the issue squarely. They made it clear to him that they were unable to go as far as he wanted them to go and could not possibly commit India or the Congress to future applications of this principle in the external domain. This led to a definite and public break with him on this issue. Two months later further discussions led to an agreed formula which was later adopted as part of a resolution by the All-India Congress Committee. That formula did not wholly represent Gandhiji’s attitude; it represented what he agreed, perhaps rather unwillingly, for Congress to say on this subject. At that time the British Government had already rejected the latest offer made by the Congress for co-operation in the war on the basis of a national government. Some kind of conflict was approaching, and, as was inevitable, both Gandhiji and Congress looked toward each other and were impelled by a desire to find a way out of the deadlock between them. The formula did not refer to the war, as just previously our offer of co-operation had been unceremoniously and utterly rejected. It dealt theoretically with the Congress policy in regard to non-violence, and for the first time stated how, in the opinion of Congress, the free India of the future should apply it in its external relations. That part of the resolution ran thus:

[The A.I.C.C.] firmly believes in the policy and practice of non-violence not only in the struggle for Swaraj, but also, in so far as this may be possible of application, in free India. The Committee is convinced, and recent world events have demonstrated, that complete world disarmament is necessary and the establishment of a new and juster political and economic order, if the world is not to destroy itself and revert to barbarism. A free India will, therefore, throw all her weight in favour of world disarmament and should herself be prepared to give a lead in this to the world. Such lead will inevitably depend on external factors and internal conditions, but the state would do its utmost to give effect to this policy of disarmament. Effective disarmament and the establishment of world peace by the ending of national wars depend ultimately on the removal of the causes of wars and national conflicts. These causes must be rooted out by the ending of the domination of one country over another and the exploi-
tation of one people or group by another. To that end India will peacefully labour, and it is with this objective in view that the people of India desire to attain the status of a free and independent nation. Such freedom will be the prelude to the close association with other countries within a comity of free nations for the peace and progress of the world.

This declaration, it will be noticed, while strongly affirming the Congress wish for peaceful action and disarmament, also emphasized a number of qualifications and limitations.

The internal crisis within the Congress was resolved in 1940, and then came a year of prison for large numbers of us. In December 1941, however, the same crisis took shape again when Gandhiji insisted on complete non-violence. Again there was a split and public disagreement, and the president of the Congress, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, and others were unable to accept Gandhiji’s view. It became clear that the Congress as a whole, including some of the faithful followers of Gandhiji, disagreed with him in this matter. The force of circumstances and the rapid succession of dramatic events influenced all of us, including Gandhiji, and he refrained from pressing his view on the Congress, though he did not identify himself with the Congress view.

At no other time was this issue raised by Gandhiji in the Congress. When later Sir Stafford Cripps came with his proposals, there was no question of non-violence. His proposals were considered purely from the political point of view. In later months, leading up to August 1942, Gandhiji’s nationalism and intense desire for freedom made him even agree to Congress participation in the war if India could function as a free country. For him this was a remarkable and astonishing change, involving suffering of the mind and pain of the spirit. In the conflict between that principle of non-violence, which had become his very lifeblood and meaning of existence, and India’s freedom, which was a dominating and consuming passion for him, the scales inclined toward the latter. That did not mean, of course, that he weakened in his faith in non-violence. But it did mean that he was prepared to agree to the Congress not applying it in this war. The practical statesman took precedence over the uncompromising prophet.

The approach of the war to India disturbed Gandhiji greatly. It was not easy to fit in his policy and programme of non-violence with this new development. Obviously civil disobedience was out of the question in the face of an invading army or between two opposing armies. Passivity or acceptance of invasion were equally out of the question. What then? His own colleagues, and the Congress generally, had rejected non-violence for such an occasion or as an alternative to armed resistance to invasion, and he had at last agreed that they had a right to do so. But he was none the less troubled, and for his own
part, as an individual, he could not join any violent course of action. But he was much more than an individual; whether he had any official status or not in the nationalist movement, he occupied an outstanding and dominating position, and his word carried weight with large numbers of people. . . .

While this struggle was going on in India’s mind and a feeling of desperation was growing, Gandhiji wrote a number of articles which suddenly gave a new direction to people’s thoughts, or, as often happens, gave shape to their vague ideas. Inaction at that critical stage and submission to all that was happening had become intolerable to him. The only way to meet that situation was for Indian freedom to be recognized and for a free India to meet aggression and invasion in co-operation with allied nations. If this recognition was not forthcoming then some action must be taken to challenge the existing system and wake up the people from the lethargy that was paralyzing them and making them easy prey for every kind of aggression. . . .

Some of us were disturbed and upset by this new development, for action was futile unless it was effective action, and any such effective action must necessarily come in the way of war effort at a time when India herself stood in peril of invasion. Gandhiji’s general approach also seemed to ignore important international considerations and appeared to be based on a narrow view of nationalism. During the three years of war we had deliberately followed a policy of non-embarrassment, and such action as we had indulged in had been in the nature of symbolic protest. That symbolic protest had assumed huge dimensions when thirty thousand of our leading men and women were sent to prison in 1940–41. And yet even that prison-going was a selected individual affair and avoided any mass upheaval or any direct interference with the governmental apparatus. We could not repeat that, and if we did something else it had to be of a different kind and on a more effective scale. Was this not bound to interfere with the war on India’s borders and encourage the enemy?

These were obvious difficulties, and we discussed them at length with Gandhiji without converting each other. The difficulties were there, and risks and perils seemed to follow any course of action or inaction. It became a question of balancing them and choosing the lesser evil. Our mutual discussions led to a clarification of much that had been vague and cloudy, and to Gandhiji’s appreciating many international factors to which his attention had been drawn. His subsequent writings underwent a change, and he himself emphasized these international considerations and looked at India’s problem in a wider perspective. But his fundamental attitude remained: his objection to a passive submission to British autocratic and repressive policy in India and his intense desire to do something to challenge this. Submission then, according to him, meant that India would be broken in
spirit, and whatever shape the war might take, whatever its end might be, her people would act in a servile way and their freedom would not be achieved for a long time. It would mean also submission to an invader and not continuing resistance to him regardless even of temporary military defeat or withdrawal. It would mean the complete demoralization of our people and their losing all the strength that they had built up during a quarter of a century's unceasing struggle for freedom. It would mean that the world would forget India's demand for freedom and the postwar settlement would be governed by the old imperialist urges and ambitions.

Gandhiji was getting on in years, he was in the seventies, and a long life of ceaseless activity, of hard toil, both physical and mental, had enfeebled his body. But he was still vigorous enough and he felt that all his lifework would be in vain if he submitted to circumstances then and took no action to vindicate what he prized most. His love of freedom for India and all other exploited nations and peoples overcame even his strong adherence to non-violence. He had previously given a grudging and rather reluctant consent to the Congress not adhering to this policy in regard to defence and the state's functions in an emergency, but he had kept himself aloof from this. He realized that his halfhearted attitude in this matter might well come in the way of a settlement with Britain and the United Nations. So he went further and himself sponsored a Congress resolution which declared that the primary function of the provisional government of free India would be to throw all her great resources in the struggle for freedom and against aggression and to co-operate fully with the United Nations in the defence of India with all the armed as well as other forces at her command. It was no easy matter for him to commit himself in this way, but he swallowed the bitter pill, so overpowering was his desire that some settlement should be arrived at to enable India to resist the aggressor as a free nation.

While we were doubting and debating, the mood of the country changed and from a sullen passivity it rose to a pitch of excitement and expectation. Events were not waiting for a Congress decision or resolution; they had been pushed forward by Gandhiji's utterances, and now they were moving onward with their own momentum. It was clear that whether Gandhiji was right or wrong, he had crystallized the prevailing mood of the people.

On August 7 and 8, 1942, in Bombay the All-India Congress Committee considered and debated in public the resolution which has since come to be known as the "Quit India Resolution." That resolution was a long and comprehensive one, a reasoned argument for the immediate recognition of Indian freedom and the ending of British rule in India "both for the sake of India and for the success of the cause of the United Nations. The continuation of that rule is degrading and enfeebling India and making her progressively less capable of
defending herself and of contributing to the cause of world freedom. . . . The possession of empire, instead of adding to the strength of the ruling power, has become a burden and a curse. India, the classic land of modern imperialism, has become the crux of the question, for by the freedom of India will Britain and the United Nations be judged, and the peoples of Asia and Africa be filled with hope and enthusiasm.” The resolution went on to suggest the formation of a provisional government which would be composite and would represent all important sections of the people, and whose “primary function must be to defend India and resist aggression with all the armed as well as the non-violent forces at its command, together with its Allied Powers.” This government would evolve a scheme for a constituent assembly which would prepare a constitution for India acceptable to all sections of the people. The constitution would be a federal one, with the largest measure of autonomy for the federating units and with the residuary powers vesting in those units. “Freedom will enable India to resist aggression effectively with the people’s united will and strength behind it.”

This freedom of India must be the symbol of and prelude to the freedom of all other Asiatic nations. Further, a world federation of free nations was proposed, of which a beginning should be made with the United Nations.

The committee stated that it was “anxious not to embarrass in any way the defence of China and Russia, whose freedom is precious and must be preserved, or to jeopardize the defensive capacity of the United Nations.” (At that time the dangers to China and Russia were the greatest.) “But the peril grows both to India and these nations, and inaction and submission to a foreign administration at this stage is not only degrading India and reducing her capacity to defend herself and resist aggression but is no answer to that growing peril and is no service to the peoples of the United Nations.”

The Committee again appealed to Britain and the United Nations “in the interest of world freedom.” But—and there came the sting of the resolution—“the Committee is no longer justified in holding the nation back from endeavouring to assert its will against an imperialist and authoritarian Government which dominates over it and prevents it from functioning in its own interest and in the interest of humanity. The Committee resolves therefore to sanction, for the vindication of India’s inalienable right to freedom and independence, the starting of a mass struggle on non-violent lines” under the inevitable leadership of Gandhiji. That sanction was to take effect only when Gandhiji so decided. Finally, it was stated that the Committee had “no intention of gaining power for the Congress. The power, when it comes, will belong to the whole people of India.”

The resolution was finally passed late in the evening of August 8,
1942. A few hours later, in the early morning of August 9, a large number of arrests were made in Bombay and all over the country.

Freedom came to us, our long-sought freedom, and it came with a minimum of violence. But immediately after, we had to wade through oceans of blood and tears. Worse than the blood and tears was the shame and disgrace that accompanied them.

Questions for Review and Study

1. How did Gandhi's experiences in South Africa prepare him for his later work on behalf of Indian independence?
2. How important to his lifelong work was Gandhi's commitment to peaceful nonresistance?
3. How important to his lifelong work were Gandhi's spiritual and religious views?
4. How was the strident problem of the religious conflict between Hindus and Moslems dealt with in the struggle for Indian independence?
5. Why was Gandhi always so eager to relate to England?

Questions for Comparison

1. Compare Gandhi as an opponent of racism and British imperialism with Mandela (see p. 323) as an opponent of racism. What conditions provoked their resistance, and what forms did it take? What strategies did each employ, and to what ends? On whose behalf did these men act, and whose support did they earn? How complete was Gandhi's and Mandela's opposition to things Western? Do Gandhi and Mandela impress you more as moral or as political leaders? In what ways do these men recall earlier men of conscience such as Socrates and Luther?

Suggestions for Further Reading

Gandhi himself was a prolific writer; the official collection of his works fills sixty-four volumes. His autobiography, while it appears in the Collected Works, was originally written in Gujarati in 1927–29 but translated into English by Mahadev Desai and separately published as Gandhi's Autobiography. Because he wrote it very early in his life, the autobiography is not very useful as a source of biographical information. There are, of course, many anthologies and collections of Gandhi's works. Some of these reflect the adoring discipleship of his followers and emphasize his personal qualities and his philosophy: see, for exam-
ple, Gandhi’s India or The Quintessence of Gandhi in His Own Words. Others contain more substantial selections dealing with his political career as well as with his life and philosophic concerns. These include The Gandhi Reader, edited by Homer A. Jack, excerpted in this chapter; The Essential Gandhi, edited by Louis Fischer; and Gandhi in India in His Own Words, edited by Martin Green. Of rather special interest is Selections from Gandhi, collected and translated by Professor Nirmal Kumar Bose, endorsed in a foreword by Gandhi himself just a year before his death.

Of the biographical reminiscences of Gandhi by people who knew him well, one of the most valuable is Mahatma Gandhi by Jawaharlal Nehru, excerpted in this chapter; it is valuable not only because of Nehru’s lifelong friendship with Gandhi but because of his central position in Indian affairs. An equally useful work devoted to Gandhi’s early years was written by his personal secretary Pyarelal Nair and is rich in detail. Of the same sort is My Days with Gandhi by Nirmal Kumar Bose.

There are several works by Western journalists who knew Gandhi and spent time with him. Vincent Sheean’s Lead, Kindly Light is a luminous appreciation of Gandhi as a philosophical, and especially religious, figure. More gritty and realistic are William L. Shirer’s Gandhi, based on Shirer’s acquaintance with Gandhi in the early 1930s, and Louis Fischer’s The Life of Mahatma Gandhi, based on Fischer’s close association with Gandhi through the crucial 1940s. The latter is also a full-scale biography, the first to appear after Gandhi’s assassination.

Among a number of other excellent biographies, the two best are Gandhi, by Geoffrey Ashe, and The Life and Death of Mahatma Gandhi, by Robert Payne. One of the best important scholarly books on specialized topics is Judith M. Brown’s Gandhi and Civil Disobedience, excerpted in this chapter. Equally good is her earlier book Gandhi’s Rise to Power. Two other excellent studies of other periods of Gandhi’s life are Gandhi in South Africa, by Robert A. Huttenback, and India’s Revolution, by Francis G. Hutchins. Two books can be recommended among the many devoted to aspects of Gandhi’s political and philosophic views: Social and Political Thought of Gandhi, by Jayantatunga Bandypadhyaya, and Nonviolence and Aggression, by H. J. N. Horsburgh.

A good many books on Gandhi have been published in the early 1990s. There are two special studies by Mohil Chakrabarti: Gandhian Humanism and Gandhian Spiritualism. A similar special study is Naresh Dadhich’s Gandhi and Existentialism. Robert Payne’s text is now considered a standard biography. A further reminiscence is E. Stanley Jones’s Gandhi. Two books devoted to Gandhi’s program of nonviolence are Gandhi’s Truth, by Erik H. Erikson, and Mahatma Gandhi; by Dennis Dalton. Martin Green’s Gandhi is devoted to the years Gandhi spent in England and South Africa. It is based on previously unavailable materials such as correspondence and autobiographical writings. See also Ved Mehta’s Mahatma Gandhi and His Apostles.


