



Early Apartheid and its Context

Directions: Read the article and then discuss the connection questions that follow.

Between 1948 and 1994, South Africans lived under a racist system of laws called apartheid, which concentrated power, wealth and opportunity in the hands of white South Africans, at the expense of the Black indigenous African population and other Non-White migrant groups.

While apartheid formally began when the National Party, an Afrikaner nationalist party, won South Africa's 1948 election, its roots can be found in the history of colonialism in South Africa, a region that was colonised by both the Dutch and British over several hundred years.

Before the Dutch colonists arrived in the mid-1600s, the region was divided into various kingdoms, ruled by different indigenous ethnic groups. At first, the Dutch used the region as a strategic point for restocking ships travelling between Europe and Asia with supplies, but they then began colonising land from and oppressing the indigenous African population. While some of the indigenous population was captured and forced into labour, many ethnic groups fought against the colonisers' theft of land and cattle, and their kingdoms continued to prosper.

British colonisers – with superior military technology and a large army – arrived in the late 1700s, capturing land from the Dutch colonists and from different indigenous groups. The British colonists and their descendents soon dominated urban areas and took control of politics, trade, finance, mining, and manufacturing. While there was fighting between the Dutch colonists, the British colonists and the indigenous African population, the superior firepower of the British allowed them to dominate in the region.

There were also divisions along racial lines. Both colonising groups saw themselves as superior to the local Black indigenous African population and other Non-White migrants, many of whom were brought to South Africa enslaved. These racist attitudes fuelled exploitative working practices (both white coloniser groups generated their own wealth through slavery and by exploiting Non-White labour) and led to policies of segregation that were the precursors to Apartheid.

Throughout the next century the conflicts between the English-speaking South Africans (descended from the British) and the Afrikaans-speaking South Africans (descendants of the Dutch who came to be known as Afrikaners) continued, leading to two wars at the end of the 1800s and in the early 1900s.¹ The British descendents won. This further provoked existing feelings amongst the Afrikaners that they were a persecuted group who had been occupied by the British, and fed into the formation of an Afrikanist nationalist movement. Despite their conflicts with the Afrikaners, the English-speaking South Africans intentionally treated them better than Black South Africans, paying them higher wages and implementing laws that restricted the movement of Black South Africans to areas where the Afrikaners worked. Encouraging a sense of division between the groups was a means of maintaining power. This normalised Afrikaners asserting their own rights in part by denying those of the indigenous Black South African population.

¹ These wars have been referred to as the 'Boer Wars', 'The Wars of Independence', and the 'Anglo-Boer Wars', while some scholars have referred to 1899-1902 war as the 'South African War' to acknowledge how many people, including the Black population, were affected by it, not just the colonial powers.

The British also won conflicts against the African kingdoms who had fought against both British and Dutch colonialism, bringing them under British colonial rule in the early 1900s. However, in 1910, the British granted South Africa independence and handed the country over to white South Africans (the descendents of both the Dutch and British colonisers), rather than to the Black South Africans. This led the ethnic indigenous groups from the different kingdoms to unite against the colonisers. In 1912, the African National Congress (the ANC) was formed to fight for the freedom and rights of all indigenous South Africans.

Over the next decades, the white South Africans continued to oppress the Black South Africans, introducing strict labour laws and continuing to restrict their movement. Again, this racial discrimination was resisted as Black South Africans organised strikes and protests against their mistreatment.

South Africa's political landscape was impacted by the World Wars, particularly World War Two. South Africa's government supported the side of the British in both wars, and many Black South Africans fought in the wars in the hope that this would lead to Britain helping them secure more freedoms and rights. Their involvement in fighting – and the lack of support from the British post-war – led to Black South Africans becoming more assertive at home and to greater mobilising for rights. Additionally, Black South African support of the British, particularly in World War Two, further stoked division with the Afrikaners, many of whom had felt more aligned with the Germans. This fuelled Afrikaner Nationalist sentiment and led to the formation of the National Party, which won the 1948 election. One of the party's pledges was to stifle Black South African resistance. The National Party's shock electoral success was also driven by white anxiety over increased Black migration to South Africa's cities and the economic fear they would have to compete with Africans for work.

The win was also enabled by racist voting laws. Despite only making up 20 percent of the population, white people made up the majority of eligible voters (most indigenous Africans and people from other ethnic groups were banned from voting in 1948).

Once in power, the National Party passed a range of laws that restricted the rights, movements and opportunities available to Non-Whites, particularly Black South Africans.

Examples of apartheid laws:

- Prohibition of Mixed Marriages (1949): Banned marriage between whites and Non-Whites.
- Population Registration Act (1950): Created a national register in which every individual's race was officially recorded. The government split the country into racial categories of 'White', 'Native' (Black, sometimes referred to as Bantu or Africans), 'Coloured' (mixed-heritage) and, later, 'Indians (people of Asian heritage)'.
- Group Areas Act (1950): Created distinct residential areas for each race.
- Suppression of Communism Act (1950): Outlawed communism and allowed the detention of those who objected to or protested Apartheid on charges of communism.
- Bantu Authorities Act (1951): Created Bantustans ('homelands' and governments) for Black South Africans.
- Pass Laws Act (1952): Made it a legal requirement for all Black South Africans over the age of 16 to carry a pass outlining their personal information, where they were allowed to travel and to have written permission to travel in areas designated for white people. While pass laws had existed previously in certain areas, this meant they applied to the whole country.

- Bantu Education Act (1953): Set up a separate and inferior educational system for Black South Africans.
- Separate Amenities Act (1953): Enforced the segregation of all public amenities, including buildings and transport, the standard of which was superior for White communities.
- Native Resettlement Act (1954): Allowed the removal of Black South Africans from areas reserved for whites.

Despite making up the majority of the population (almost seventy per cent), Black South Africans were treated as the most inferior of the racially classified groups. During the decades of apartheid, they resisted their unjust treatment in a range of different ways, using tools like non-violent civil disobedience. Their efforts ultimately led to the end of Apartheid in 1994.

Connection Questions

1. What was apartheid?
2. How did the listed apartheid laws impact those they targeted?
3. How did colonialism play a role in the formation of apartheid?
4. What do you find surprising and/or troubling about this information?
5. What, if any, parallels do you see between how people were treated during apartheid and how groups of people are treated today?
6. What does it mean when people are excluded or treated unfairly in society because of their identity (including protected characteristics like race)?
 - How does it feel?
 - What are the consequences?