


Background Information on MLK Jr.

When you see the  symbol, stop and discuss the questions listed beside it.

Martin Luther King Jr. was born on January 15, 1929, in Atlanta, Georgia. Both Martin's father and his maternal grandfather were Baptist preachers, and Christianity played an important role in Martin's life. As a young boy, Martin attended Sunday school every week, learning the stories and morals of the Bible. From an early age, he knew that his father expected him to become a preacher. Consequently, after attending college, Martin enrolled at Crozer Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania to study for the ministry.

While at Crozer, King became familiar with the philosophy and teachings of Mohandas Gandhi. Gandhi had led India's struggle for independence from British rule. Throughout his crusade, he had preached a message of love and nonviolent resistance. Gandhi had won independence for India through peaceful acts of civil disobedience, not violent rebellion.

In Gandhi's philosophy, King felt he had found a means of helping his own people overcome the racial injustices he saw in the United States. As a young boy growing up in the South during the 1930s and 1940s, King had witnessed racial prejudice firsthand. By the time he graduated from Crozer as a minister in 1951, he knew that he wanted to dedicate himself to fighting for social justice.


-  • What role did religion play in Martin Luther King Jr.'s youth?
- How did Gandhi's ideas influence King? What was Gandhi's appeal?
- What motivated King to become active in fighting for social justice?

In 1953, King married Coretta Scott, a music student he had met while studying for his doctoral degree. They moved to Montgomery, Alabama, where King became the pastor of a black Baptist Church. It was there that he began his struggle for civil rights.

In December 1955, Montgomery police arrested an African American woman, Rosa Parks, for refusing to obey a city law that required blacks on public buses to give up their seats to whites. In protest, King helped lead a black boycott of the city's bus system. During the boycott, blacks refused to ride the buses until legislators changed the law.

As the leader of this movement, King earned the hatred of many white people in the city. Authorities eventually arrested him and threw him in jail. Someone also bombed his house. Throughout the yearlong boycott, however, King continually urged his followers not to respond with violence to any threats or mistreatment they might receive.

Ultimately, the Rosa Parks case went before the Supreme Court. In late 1956, the Court ruled that the Montgomery law—as well as all of Alabama's laws on segregated busing—was unconstitutional. It ordered the city to integrate the buses. King and his supporters had won an enormous victory in the fight for civil rights for African Americans.

-  • How did Rosa Park's actions affect the course of King's life?
- What discrimination did King face in the Montgomery bus boycott?
- How do you think King felt about the outcome of the boycott?

In 1957, King and other black clergymen formed the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). The group aimed to spread and coordinate nonviolent civil rights protests across the South. After moving back to Atlanta in 1960, King set out on several campaigns to desegregate all-white establishments in Southern cities.

By 1963, the movement for civil rights had grown very powerful. Thousands of African Americans—as well as many sympathetic whites—had participated in

sit-ins, marches, and other demonstrations to demand an end to segregation and other unfair racial practices.

However, the lack of federal government support for the civil rights effort disappointed King. He became convinced that a massive action was needed to bring the cause to the attention of the whole nation. He called for a "March on Washington." On August 28, 1963, more than 200,000 people attended a march and rally in the nation's capital to show their support for civil rights.

At the rally, King gave the most memorable speech of his lifetime. In words that rang with forcefulness and spirit, he declared, "I have a dream." His dream was that blacks and whites would live together in peace and that blacks would be able to fully participate in all aspects of American society without fear or prejudice.

For the next five years, King was the unquestioned leader of the civil rights movement in the United States. In 1964, he received the Nobel Peace Prize in honor of his work. His activities brought about major changes in federal law, including passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Yet for many African Americans who continued to face prejudice in their daily lives, progress came too slowly. Some black leaders complained that King's insistence on nonviolent protest—when protesters were often beaten and even killed—sent the wrong message to a mostly white nation. African Americans such as Malcolm X constantly criticized King for his nonviolent stance. King, however, never changed his views. He maintained that the best—and the only—way to effect change was by peaceful means.

In April 1968, King was in Memphis, Tennessee, supporting a strike by black garbage workers. On the night of April 4, as he stood on his hotel balcony, King was shot. He died a short time later at a local hospital. Many people believed that his killer, James Earl Ray, was hired by other people who wanted to see King dead. That theory was never proven, and Ray was sentenced to prison for life.

Like King's hero, Mohandas Gandhi, this man of nonviolence had been struck down in the most violent of ways. And, just as occurred with Gandhi, millions of people around the world mourned the death of Martin Luther King Jr.



- Describe the types of protests that King and the SCLC organized.
- What accomplishments could King be proud of? What conditions frustrated him?
- What were the circumstances of King's death? What was sadly ironic about the way he died?

Quotations from Martin Luther King Jr.

"I want to say that we are not here advocating violence. We have never done that. . . . The only weapon that we have in our hands this evening is the weapon of protest. . . . And certainly, certainly, this is the glory of America, with all of its faults. . . . the great glory of American democracy is the right to protest for right."

—in a speech to supporters at the start of the Montgomery bus boycott,
December 5, 1955

"For years now I have heard the word 'Wait!' It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This 'Wait' has almost always meant 'Never.'"

—"Letter from Birmingham Jail," April 16, 1963

"There are two types of laws: just and unjust. I would be the first to advocate obeying just laws. . . . [But] I would agree with St. Augustine that 'an unjust law is no law at all.' . . . Any law that degrades human personality is unjust. All segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality. . . .

"I have no fear about the outcome of our struggle in Birmingham, even if our motives are at present misunderstood. We will reach the goal of freedom in Birmingham, and all over the nation, because the goal of America is freedom."

—"Letter from Birmingham Jail," April 16, 1963

"I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: . . . that all men are created equal. I have a dream that one day . . . the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood."

—in a speech at the March on Washington, August 28, 1963

"I conclude that this award . . . is profound recognition of . . . the need for man to overcome oppression and violence without resorting to violence and oppression."

—in a speech accepting the Nobel Peace Prize, December 10, 1964


"Today I want to tell the city of Selma, today I want to say to the state of Alabama, today I want to say to the people of America and the nations of the world, that we are not about to turn around. We are on the move now. Yes, we are on the move and no wave of racism can stop us."

—in a speech to supporters at an antiviolence rally
at the Alabama state capitol, March 25, 1965

"Violence is not going to solve our problem. And in his litany of articulating the despair of the Negro without offering any positive, creative alternative, I feel that Malcolm has done himself and our people a great disservice. . . . urging Negroes to arm themselves and prepare to engage in violence, as he has done, can reap nothing but grief."

—in an interview with Alex Haley, January 1965


Background Information on Malcolm X


When you see the  symbol, stop and discuss the questions listed beside it.

Malcolm X was born on May 19, 1925, in Omaha, Nebraska. The fourth of eight children, his birth name was Malcolm Little. When Malcolm was six years old, his father suffered a gruesome death, getting run over by a trolley car. Later in life, Malcolm came to believe the death was a murder. He suspected a group of white men who opposed Mr. Little's activities in the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). Founded by Marcus Garvey, the UNIA preached a philosophy of "black separatism" and black pride. It aimed to compel millions of blacks to return to Africa because, according to Garvey, blacks would never be treated justly in a country ruled by whites.

His father's death destroyed Malcolm's home life. His mother went insane, and her younger children, including Malcolm, were placed in different foster homes. Malcolm was a very bright student, but he was an angry and bitter child, and he lost interest in school as he grew older. At age 15, Malcolm quit school and moved to Roxbury, Massachusetts, the black section of Boston. There he lived with an older half-sister.

For the next several years, Malcolm lived the life of a street hustler. He held a few legitimate jobs, but he quit or was fired from them all. Instead, he earned money illegally. He also used drugs. Finally, in 1945, Malcolm's lifestyle—and the law—caught up with him. Police in Boston arrested him for a series of burglaries of wealthy people's homes, and a judge sentenced him to ten years in jail. Malcolm was not yet 21 years old.

-  • How and why was Malcolm Little's father killed?
- How might Malcolm's father's association with the UNIA have influenced young Malcolm's development?
- Describe Malcolm's late teenage years, after his father's death.

Malcolm served seven years in prison. During that time, he learned that four of his siblings had joined the Nation of Islam, a religious group led by a man named Elijah Muhammad. Members of the group were called Black Muslims. They preached a philosophy similar to that of Marcus Garvey's UNIA. They favored a path of racial separation for black Americans and believed in black self-determination. The group viewed white Americans with suspicion, if not outright hatred, and had no interest in integration with white society. 

Black Muslims operated their own restaurants, stores, and farms. The Nation of Islam also preached a strict code of member behavior. Eating pork and using alcohol, tobacco, and drugs were prohibited.

From prison, Malcolm wrote Elijah Muhammad, inquiring about the Nation of Islam. He received a warm reply. When Malcolm was released from prison in 1952, he went to Chicago to join the Nation of Islam. As other Black Muslims had done, Malcolm changed his last name. Black Muslims considered their family names to be part of their slave past, so they rejected them in favor of the suffix "X." Malcolm Little became Malcolm X.

Malcolm rose quickly within the Black Muslim movement, becoming minister of a mosque in Harlem, New York, in 1954. There he built a strong following, and before long he became the Nation of Islam's most effective and well known spokesperson.

By the early 1960s, Malcolm began to openly condemn white racism and to advocate any means necessary to retaliate against that racism—including violence. At the same time, he publicly criticized any African American who favored cooperating with the "white establishment" in the United States, including those who sought to integrate blacks into all segments of white society.

-  • What beliefs did Elijah Muhammad and Black Muslims hold?

- What do you think drew Malcolm Little to the Nation of Islam?
- How did Malcolm X's involvement with the Nation of Islam change his beliefs? What were Malcolm's opinions on the use of violence?

His philosophy put Malcolm in opposition to African American leaders, such as the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who were fighting for civil rights for blacks through integration. Dr. King advocated using nonviolent protests to push Americans to eliminate segregation where it still existed. King also believed in cooperating with the white politicians who were sympathetic to the civil rights cause in order to get laws passed that would ensure that African Americans achieved equality and justice.

By 1964, Malcolm had become the most famous Black Muslim in the United States. He continued to push his radical civil rights views, which had begun to catch on in urban black ghettos across the country. Malcolm's popularity caused some resentment within the Nation of Islam, and a rift developed between him and Elijah Muhammad. As a result, Malcolm left the group in March 1964. However, he stated that he would remain a Muslim and continue to preach his separatist racial views.

In April, Malcolm made a pilgrimage to both the Middle East and Africa. In Mecca, the spiritual home of Islam, he was impressed by the harmony he saw among the various racial groups who visited there. But despite this experience, Malcolm continued to preach the philosophy of black separatism. However, he did modify his feelings about cooperating with white people. In May 1964, Malcolm stated, "we will work with anyone, with any group, no matter what their color is, as long as they are genuinely interested in taking the type of steps necessary to bring an end to the injustices that black people in this country are afflicted by."

By early 1965, Malcolm had become extremely unpopular with a segment of the Nation of Islam. He received death threats, and his house was set on fire. On February 21, 1965, three men—who were all members of the Nation of Islam—assassinated Malcolm X. A court convicted the men of murder and sentenced them all to prison. The question of who, if anyone, had ordered Malcolm's assassination remained unanswered.



- What were Malcolm X's views about Martin Luther King Jr.?
- What impact did Malcolm X's trip to Mecca have on his beliefs?
- How did Malcolm X die? Who was responsible for his death?

Quotations from Malcolm X

“Independence comes only by two ways; by ballots or by bullets. . . . historically you’ll find that everyone who gets freedom, they get it through ballots or bullets. Now naturally everyone prefers ballots, and even I prefer ballots but I don’t discount bullets. I’m not interested in either ballots or bullets, I’m interested in freedom.”

—in an interview with Claude Lewis, December 1964

“We are taught by Mr. Muhammad that it is very important to improve the black man’s economy, and his thrift. But to do this, we must have land of our own. The brainwashed black man can never learn to stand on his own two feet until he is on his own.”

—in an interview with Alex Haley, May 1963

“I don’t see how you could call rapid strides being made in the field of integration rapid when you don’t have one city in this country that can honestly say it is an example of sincere integration.”

—in an interview with radio station WUST, May 12, 1963

“I myself would go for nonviolence if it was consistent, if everybody was going to be nonviolent all the time. . . . If they make the Ku Klux Klan nonviolent, I’ll be nonviolent. If they make the White Citizens Council nonviolent, I’ll be nonviolent. . . . If the leaders of the nonviolent movement can go into the white community and teach nonviolence, good. I’d go along with that. But as long as I see them teaching nonviolence only in the black community, we can’t go along with that. We believe in equality.”

—in a speech to Mississippi teenagers visiting Harlem, December 31, 1964

“Every time I hear Martin [Luther King] he’s got a dream. And I think the Negro leaders have to come out of the clouds, and wake up, and stop dreaming and start facing reality.”

—in an interview with Claude Lewis, December 1964

“[Our goal is] to bring about the complete independence of people of African descent here in the Western Hemisphere, and first here in the United States, and bring about the freedom of these people by any means necessary.”

—in a speech announcing the formation of the Organization of Afro-American Unity, June 1964

Venn Diagram of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X

In your group, discuss the information you have read about Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. Then complete the Venn diagram below by writing unique characteristics of each leader in the corresponding section and characteristics common to both leaders in the section at the center of the diagram.



Characteristics of
Martin Luther King Jr.



Characteristics of Both



Characteristics of
Malcolm X

