



Movements to End Racial Injustice

By Sharika D. Crawford

After the Second World War, movements for civil rights and equality emerged. Despite some successes, racism and inequality were unresolved in the generations that followed.

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Introduction

After the Second World War (1939-1945), the calls to end racial inequality increased in many countries. Many people in the Allied countries, including the U.S., saw similarities between Nazism in Germany and ideas of racial superiority at home. The Allies refers to Great Britain, the U.S., and Russia who had joined together to fight in World War II.

When veterans returned home, they joined others in demanding full political rights for Black Americans. Many Black people themselves had been fighting for those rights since the end of slavery. By the 1950s and 1960s, the actions to end racial discrimination became a mass movement. It came to be known as the Civil Rights Movement.

Similar movements against racial segregation and discrimination soon emerged elsewhere. Some successfully made racial segregation and discrimination unlawful. However, even today, racism and racial inequality persist worldwide.

The long Civil Rights Movement

Black Americans had already been fighting against racial injustice by the start of the Civil Rights Movement. By the 1900s, some activists had become increasingly attracted to internationalist movements. Some, like labor organizer A. Phillip Randolph, became socialists and a smaller number, like entertainer Paul Robeson, joined the communist party. Socialism is a philosophy that advocates for the citizens of a country to share equally in resources as determined by a democratic government. Communism is a philosophy that advocates for most resources to be owned and controlled by the government. Other Black American activists organized transnational Black movements.



More than a million African Americans—including these Tuskegee Airmen—served in the US military during the Second World War. Yet, while serving aboard, they faced the same segregation and discrimination as they had at home. © Getty Images.

During the 1940s, there were many important movements to combat racism in the U.S., but no unified strategy. For example, W.E.B. DuBois began the Pan-African Congress, and Marcus Garvey founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association. Both had similar goals, but DuBois and Garvey were notoriously at odds with how to reach those goals.

The Second World War presented another opportunity to fight for racial justice. The popular Black American newspaper the *Pittsburgh Courier* launched a “Double V” campaign. It promoted a victory overseas against fascism *and* at home against racial discrimination. The campaign publicized issues important to Black Americans. It boosted their ability to organize. These early efforts helped lay the groundwork for the Civil Rights Movement in the United States.

The Civil Rights Movement describes a number of approaches used in an effort to achieve equal rights for Black Americans. Actions included the use of the legal system to fight discriminatory laws. Racial segregation had been legal in the United States since the 1896 ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson*.

In 1954, in *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka*, Brown’s side argued that it was harmful to have racial segregation in public schools. This time, the U.S. Supreme Court agreed that having separate facilities was “inherently unequal.” The *Brown* ruling overturned *Plessy v. Ferguson*.

Other activists used civil disobedience. They actively disobeyed laws as a way to enact change. This is exactly what happened in 1955. Rosa Parks was told to give her seat to a white passenger on a public bus in Montgomery, Alabama. She was told to move toward the back of the section reserved for Black American riders, but she refused. Her refusal was unlawful.



Rosa Parks arrested for the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1956. © Getty Images.

Parks's civil disobedience led to the Montgomery Bus Boycott. This boycott drew in the young activist Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

The boycott lasted nearly a year. It ended when the Supreme Court outlawed racial segregation on public buses. In addition to lawsuits and boycotts, civil rights activists organized peaceful rallies. One example was the 1963 March on Washington.

Together, these approaches brought pressure on Congress to pass landmark legislation. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 made racial discrimination unlawful in education, employment, housing, and public facilities. Then, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 removed voting barriers such as literacy and poll tests. These had stopped Black American southerners from exercising their right to vote. Beyond these gains, Black American women in the Civil Rights Movement extended the fight to gender equality. By the 1970s, some of these women pushed onward to fight for racial *and* gender equality.

Racial democracy challenged in Latin America

Unlike in the U.S., racial segregation was not legally sanctioned in Latin America. Still, racism and racial discrimination were widespread.

Many Latin Americans drew inspiration from the American activists. In Brazil, Afro-Brazilians adopted a strong sense of racial identity. It often reflected a global sense of Blackness. During the 1970s, Afro-Brazilians regularly wore an afro hairstyle and dressed in African attire. They also attended parties playing soul music like James Brown's "Black and Proud." This embrace of a Black identity renewed efforts to end racially discriminatory policies in Brazil.

In 1978, Brazilian activists formed the Black Unified Movement (or MNU, from *Movimento Negro Unificado*). They sought to respond to the poverty and the violence affecting people of African ancestry. This was an ambitious goal. Since 1964, the Brazilian military had ruled the country with a repressive hand. They had banned the right to protest or organize. Military leaders considered MNU a threat to the country's image. Still, the MNU met and successfully lobbied for November 20 as a National Day of Consciousness. It also gained ancestral rights to the descendants of the *quilombo*, which were communities of enslaved people who had escaped.

As in the United States, these efforts spurred female activists. Afro-Brazilian female activists separated and formed new organizations devoted to ending both racism and sexism. By 1988, they had organized the First National Encounter of the Black Woman to attain national recognition as a distinct collective identity in the country: *a mulher negra* or "the Black woman".

By the 1980s, Indigenous movements emerged in the region. They were similarly motivated to end racially biased laws and assert their cultural and political rights. The movements sought to end policies that had failed to protect their traditional languages and cultures. Some even fought against economic policies that harmed the environment or limited their economic opportunities. In 1986, Ecuador's fourteen Indigenous ethnicities formed the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE).

They, in turn, formed a political party that lobbied for Ecuador's recognition as a multicultural state. Activists wanted the state to do more to preserve the cultural rights of Indigenous peoples. In Guatemala, Indigenous communities openly protested against racial stereotyping and discrimination. Like CONAIE, the Guatemalan Maya peoples formed a movement to create laws promoting the Maya language and cultural traditions. Unlike Indigenous communities in Ecuador, the Maya faced insecurity. The government waged an ongoing civil war against them.

The plight of the Maya and the civil war gained international attention in 1992. That year, Maya activist Rigoberta Menchú received the Nobel Peace Prize. She was the second Guatemalan awarded a Nobel Prize. She introduced readers to the hardships of the Indigenous communities in her memoir *I, Rigoberta Menchú*.¹ Despite the activism, the 1999 Guatemala legislature refused to grant cultural and political rights to the Maya peoples.



Rigoberta Menchú marches during a demonstration against oppression against indigenous groups in Guatemala. © Getty Images.

Conclusion

By the late 1900s, people worldwide began to organize around issues of racial justice. Through the civic and political movements in the United States and Latin America, governments made racial discrimination unlawful. Yet racism and racial violence persist as a force shaping the lives of many people across the globe. In response, people are once again organizing to end not just racial discrimination but also racial violence. This is seen from the United States to Brazil. In 2013, young activists in the U.S. formed the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. The movement denounced the alarming number of police shootings of unarmed Black Americans. They helped launch a global movement against state-centered violence toward Black communities.

These issues are not unique to the United States. In Latin America, Black and Indigenous activists are the victims of violence due to their activism. Since 2015, over one hundred Afro-Colombian activists have been killed because of their work to protect ancestral land rights. These tragic deaths are a terrible reminder that there is still much to do to attain racial equality and justice for all.

¹ Although an American anthropologist later discovered Menchú had fabricated some details in her account, most activists and scholars acknowledge *I, Rigoberta Menchú* still reflects a truthful representation of the collective experience of many Maya families.

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Image credits

Cover: Composite image of Civil Rights Marchers crossing Edmund Pettus Bridge in 1965, © Bettmann / Getty Images (top) and US President Barack Obama, First Lady Michelle Obama, former US President George W. Bush, Laura Bush, and US Representative John Lewis, Democrat of Georgia and one of the original marchers, lead a walk across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in 2015 (bottom).

More than a million African Americans—including these Tuskegee Airmen—served in the US military during the Second World War. Yet, while serving aboard, they faced the same segregation and discrimination as they had at home. © Afro Newspaper / Gado / Getty Images.

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