



Map by Alexander Sayer Gard-Murray

Note to Students

In these readings, references to skin color and ethnic groups roughly follow current South African usage. We will use the terms “black” and “African” to describe people of African descent, “white” to describe people of European descent, “Asian” to describe people of Asian descent, and “coloured” (the British spelling of colored) to describe people of mixed heritage, as is common in South Africa. While in South Africa “black” can refer to blacks, Asians, and coloureds collectively, we will refer to each group specifically so as not to confuse U.S. readers. We will use the modern term “Afrikaner” to describe the ethnic group made up primarily of Dutch descendants, unless the older term “Boer” is historically more appropriate.

Introduction: A Negotiated Revolution

In 1994, Nelson Mandela became the first black president of South Africa, following the first truly democratic elections in that country. It was the first time Mandela had been allowed to vote in his seventy-six years. One of the most famous political prisoners of the twentieth century, Mandela spent twenty-seven years in South African prisons for violating the laws of apartheid. His original sentence was life.

What was apartheid?

Apartheid, an Afrikaans word that means “separate” or “apartness” in English, was the law of the land in South Africa from 1948 to 1990. This system of racial discrimination was designed to keep whites, blacks, coloureds, and Asians separate from each other in every way. The government segregated all schools, housing, jobs, and transportation. People were often forbidden to speak against the government, blacks were not allowed to vote, and the government could detain people for months and even years without charging them. Some have described apartheid as the most complex system of racial discrimination ever devised.

The United Nations, members of the international community, and many South African residents condemned the apartheid government. But it took nearly fifty years of internal and international pressure to remove the apartheid laws from the books.

During his decades in prison Mandela had plenty of time to think about how he and others could change the racist system.

“We [the prisoners] established a very strong relationship [with the warders] because we adopted a policy of talking to the warders and persuading them to treat us as human beings.... Sit down with a man, [and] if you have prepared your case very well, that man, after he has sat down to talk to you, will never be the same again. [Talking] has been a

very powerful weapon.”

—Nelson Mandela

This spirit of dialogue ultimately made it possible for South Africa in the 1990s to make the remarkable transition from the repressive rule of a white minority government to an inclusive democracy. Many had predicted that a violent civil war would precede the change in government. That did not happen. A member of the new South African Constitutional Court, Albie Sachs, whose right arm was blown off by a car bomb the government planted in 1988, called the transition a “negotiated revolution.”

“It wasn’t a miracle. It didn’t just come to pass. Our transition had been the most willed, thought-about, planned-for event of the late twentieth century.... For the doubters, it had been a miracle, while for those with intense belief, it had been entirely rational.”

—Justice Albie Sachs

These readings will take you back to a point in time when whites, blacks, coloureds, and Asians in South Africa were debating how to solve the “South Africa Problem.” The first reading traces the early history of South Africa, providing background on the peoples of the region and on the development of a segregated society. Part II explores the responses to apartheid by whites, blacks, coloureds, and Asians in South Africa as well as the international community.

In 1961 leaders of the anti-apartheid movement met to discuss their options. Their comrades were being jailed and killed, the apartheid laws were becoming ever more stringent, and whites were becoming more conservative. What was the solution to the apartheid problem? Using primary sources, you will delve into questions that changed the course of South African history. An epilogue will explain the outcome of the 1961 debate.