

**To what extent did the work of Martin Luther
King Jr. have an impact on the African American
Civil Rights Movement in the early 1960's?**

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Section 1: Identification and evaluation of sources

This investigation will explore the question: To what extent did the work of Martin Luther King Jr. have an impact on the African American Civil Rights Movement in the early 1960's?

The first source discussed is Dr. King's personal letter from when he was arrested in 1963, "Letter from Birmingham Jail". This is a primary source, as it's a personal letter written by Dr. King to 8 white clergymen who convicted him of participating in civil rights protests in Birmingham. The purpose is to inform them as to why he is involving himself in the protests in Birmingham. As a young Baptist minister, he felt a calling from his religion to help others in need. In the letter he states "Just as the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ...so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home town." (King Jr, 1963), "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." (King Jr, 1963). He refers to himself as a messenger for freedom, that he feels compelled to spread his fight to a bigger perspective in order to help the entire African American community. To be a symbol of hope. He also acknowledges the struggle of the whole nation, not only in Alabama or Birmingham, but as a nation fighting for freedom together. A clear value of the source is that in the letter King explains why he uses the methods he has in the fight for freedom, which is to great use when discussing his impact on the movement. "In any nonviolent campaign there are four basic steps: collection of the facts to determine whether injustices exist; negotiation; self purification; and direct action." (King Jr, 1963). Dr. King explains that direct action establishes a non-violent, creative tension to force negotiations, and thereby validates his pro-direct action position. He understands that white people see black people as aggressive, and he therefore wants to achieve his goals by opposing that stereotype. So it can't be used against him or his followers. The letter shows

how King viewed himself and the movement, as well as explaining the objective of his campaign thus indicating his importance in the organisation of the movement.

The second source discussed is an article from Britannica about Martin Luther King Jr. Britannica is an encyclopaedia written by credible and identified authors, therefore making it a reliable source. In the article about Dr. King the writer, David L. Lewis, describes him as “A leader of the American civil rights movement” (Lewis, 2022) and that his main achievement was the fact that he organised a number of peaceful protests which all contributed to the establishment of the Civil Rights Act in 1964. The article contains an in detail account as to how and why Dr. King rose to recognition and fame and became the spotlight of the movement, as well as discussing how the different events occurred such as the Montgomery bus boycott. The article has the value of also presenting King’s failed campaigns and how that impacted his image presenting a more unbiased view on his campaign. It presents the pressure from his supporters to turn to a more violent and radical campaign, which he would then oppose as it went against what he believed was the right way of protesting. Similar to King’s own personal letter, it is argued that he is a prophet for freedom and a prominent figure in the civil rights movement there to give people hope. This is a more factual article, it presents no actual opinion and its purpose is to inform the reader about Dr. King’s life and achievements.

Section 2: Investigation

In order to discuss King's work, it is important to acknowledge the situation prior to his involvement in the Civil Rights movement. The United States of the mid-nineteenth century was a post-slaverism country. With slavery having been abolished a hundred years prior by the 13th amendment in 1865, a series of racial laws had come along. Black people and other people of colour were still considered to be below white people, to be worth less. And although in the Reconstruction period after 1865 former male slaves were allowed to vote, southern state started applying methods shortly after to deny them the right to vote such as: a poll tax, literacy and comprehension tests, citizenship tests, property requirements, and intimidation. All of these were used to discourage the African American population to vote and therefore limit their influence on politics. A set of laws called the Jim Crow laws had also been established in order to segregate the two populations from each other; the civil rights movement sought to get these abolished. The movement consisted of several events and several activists as well as the African American population working as a united community in order to abolish segregation and achieve equal rights.

Dr. King was first invited to join the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955 by the MIA (Montgomery Improvement Association), which would turn out to be what is probably the best-known event in the Civil Rights Movement. The boycott began when a black woman Rosa Parks boarded a bus and refused to give up her seat to a white man when it became too crowded. She was arrested and on the day of her trial the black people of Montgomery were encouraged to boycott the bus services of the town. Through meetings held in churches, the black community organised themselves with the help of preachers such as Dr. King.

Dr. King is one of the most spoken of civil rights activists of the movement. His non-violent approach to protests, organisation skills, public speeches and oratory helped bring together a nation to fight for a united cause. He helped lead to some of the most

significant advances in civil rights equality in all of US history, such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964. As mentioned before, his first appearance in the Civil Rights Movement was when he was asked to be the head of the MIA prior to the Montgomery bus boycotts. This would be where he would hold his first moving public speech in front of hundreds of residents attending a mass meeting. By using his ability with words, he was able to encourage the attenders to initiate the boycott, which then went on for 381 days. As the boycott turned out to be a success, the attention of the nation was turned to this new young minister. In 1957, the SCLC (Southern Church Leadership Conference) chose Dr. King as its president. His presence was crucial. He had proven to have great organisational skills, and as many civil right groups were under the SCLC, a person who could keep them all united was needed. These skills are what made him gain fame and attention as an activist during the movement. His ability to move people with his words and organise marches, boycotts and encourage the African American people to keep fighting is what, amongst other factors such as other activists, kept the community together and motivated them to fight for a better future. This was the main impact of his work. On August 28th 1963, he delivered his most known speech, “I Have A Dream”, to a mighty group of civil rights marchers (250.000 to be more exact) gathered at the Lincoln memorial in Washington DC. Here, the words he delivered influenced the Federal government to take more direct actions to more fully realise racial equality:

“I say to you today, my friends, so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. ...I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream that...one day right there in Alabama, little Black boys and Black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.” (King Jr, 1964)

This helped push the Civil Rights Act forward, which was declared in 1964. It is important to acknowledge this act when considering King's work, as he had been working towards a goal like this through his entire time as civil rights leader. The Act contains eleven titles, most important being which establish prohibitions on discrimination in public accommodations (Title II), federal funding (Title VI), and employment (Title VII) (Warren, 2014). King said the the act was nothing less than a "second emancipation", with this he meant a second liberation, a second time that the African Americans were freed from slavery.

But one might wonder, did King achieve everything he fought for? Or did some of his attempts "go to waste"? His main focus was to bring freedom to the entire nation, and by contributing to the establishment of the Civil Rights Act he managed to do so. He acknowledged that there was so much established hate in the nation that it would take a great time to break it down, but that he seeks a future where people are judged for their character and not for the colour of their skin.

Dr. King was one of the driving forces of the Civil rights movement. He organised protests, demonstrations and rallies all which helped the nation unite as a whole and pleaded with the politicians to abolish segregation and make all men and women in the US equal. His presence gave people hope, they saw him as a leader and his non-violent approach to struggle inspired the African American community to keep fighting for their rights, for the rights of their children, and all future generations to come.

Section 3: Reflection

While investigating this topic I was able to gain an insight on some of the struggles a historian might face when analysing a certain person's impact in a specific period of time. One really big struggle of mine when conducting this investigation was finding contradicting sources. There are thousands of articles and books which argue for Dr. King's impact on the Civil Rights movement as it is quite undeniable, but very few which argue against his impact. It was therefore very hard, if not impossible, to find a range of arguments and sources which could argue both for and against the question and to present a range of opinions. It was therefore hard to present an unbiased opinion, which is a thing I believe some historians may struggle with. It's hard not to let both others' opinions and your own affect a conclusion drawn from such an important event in history. It is hard to argue against a person so highly held as Dr. King, as he is acknowledged by most historians to have had one of the main roles in the civil rights movement, might also make one lose interest in writing a paper that argues against his significance. It might be intimidating to do so.

The historian's role in this case is to distinguish between bias and selection, meaning to find the difference between not being able to find any unbiased sources and only selecting sources that prove one's point and main arguments. This could implicate an investigation such as mine as it limits what arguments that can be presented and how many resources there are available to back them up.

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