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Apartheid

For over 40 years, South Africa was governed by a system of institutionalized racial segregation known as apartheid. Today, we'll examine the apartheid regime, its impact on South African society, and its enduring legacy.

In the 15th century, European nations began to colonize the African continent. The Dutch conquered South Africa in the 1600s, enslaving much of the population and establishing a settlement where employees of the country's preeminent trading company could retire. Over the centuries, these Dutch-speaking colonists came to be known as Afrikaners, and their language evolved into a distinct dialect called Afrikaans.

Later, South Africa came under British control, but gained independence shortly after. Unlike other former colonies, South Africa still had a significant population of European descent, stemming mostly from that original Dutch settler colony. More importantly, the White population remained in charge of the government. In the early 20th century, politicians began writing segregationist laws in order to maintain Afrikaner dominance. They took voting rights away from Black South Africans, prohibited them from practicing skilled trades and buying property in many areas, and banned them from public office. At the same time, Afrikaner nationalism continued to rise, fueling the passage of these racist policies.

Racial discrimination escalated in the 1940s as the far-right National Party gained a majority in the South African parliament. They pursued a White supremacist agenda known as apartheid, the Afrikaans word for "separateness." (In Afrikaans, it's pronounced more like "apartheid.") In 1949, parliament passed the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act, outlawing interracial marriage. The 1950 Population Registration Act categorized all South Africans into one of three racial categories: Black, White, or Colored, the latter of which was used to describe people of mixed-race ancestry. South Africa had a significant population of Indians, who were also considered Colored. Many more discriminatory laws followed: Segregation was mandated in schools and public facilities, but most notably in residential areas. To make room for White farmers, Black South Africans were forced out of their homes and into small regions called "Bantustans." The Bantustans were rural and impoverished, with little industry, and often lacked electricity and even

plumbing. Leaving one's Bantustan was legally risky, and Black South Africans were required to carry a "passbook" at all times when entering White areas. Protesting was also made illegal, and Black labor unions were forbidden from going on strike.

South African activists immediately began working to resist these discriminatory laws. Leftist political parties like the African National Congress helped to organize strikes, protests, and boycotts of White-owned businesses. The government responded ruthlessly, jailing members of the opposition and ordering police to open fire on peaceful demonstrators. In 1962, after anti-apartheid leader Nelson Mandela was imprisoned on charges of treason, the United Nations officially condemned the apartheid regime. But much of the international community was seemingly indifferent. It was the height of the Cold War, and the National Party, like many governments around the world, categorically labeled protesters as communists to justify their violent suppression. As a result, capitalist countries like the United States turned a blind eye to the struggle against apartheid.

The following decade, things finally began to change. During the 1976 Soweto uprising, thousands of students took to the streets of Johannesburg to protest a new law that required Black schools to conduct lessons in Afrikaans. Police unleashed bullets and tear gas on the crowd, killing over 100 children. This horrific event was a turning point in the fight against apartheid, capturing the world's attention and sparking an international movement. The UN banned the sale of weapons to the South African government. South Africa's sports teams were barred from participating in the Olympics and the World Cup. Activists in Africa, the US, and Europe called on companies to stop conducting business in the country. And South Africans themselves continued to resist with mass protests across the country.

Throughout the 1980s, South Africa grew increasingly isolated from the rest of the world as countries imposed trade embargoes and economic sanctions. This intense international pressure forced leaders to begin to repeal apartheid policies. In 1990, President F. W. de Klerk lifted the ban on Black political parties, established new free speech laws, and released political prisoners. Two years later, a referendum to end apartheid was held. Though only Whites were allowed to vote, the referendum passed easily. Soon after, a new constitution, cowritten by de Klerk and Mandela, was approved, giving all South Africans the right to vote. For their efforts, Mandela and de Klerk were jointly awarded the 1993 Nobel Peace Prize. The next year, when the nation's first fully democratic elections were held, Mandela won the presidency in a landslide.

Though the apartheid regime had fallen, it was not the end of inequality in South Africa. Today, it remains one of the most segregated and economically stratified nations in the world—the direct result of centuries of racial oppression.