Gandhi

Human history has long been marked by war. In the 20th century alone, there were huge, years-long global conflicts like the two World Wars and the Vietnam War, as well as many shorter ones like the Six-Day War and the Gulf War. War has played a large part in reshaping political boundaries and creating and destroying alliances between countries.

But among all this conflict, peace has also had monumental effects on global politics. Today we're going to talk about one influential figure in the nonviolence movement of the 20th century: Gandhi.

Let's back up for a minute. In 1600, a group of English businessmen established the East India Company, a royal charter that created a monopoly on trade with India and other Southeast Asian countries. The Company traded Indian goods like spices, tea, indigo, and silk. It eventually seized large parts of the Indian subcontinent and established military power. In 1858, the British Crown took direct rule over India, beginning a period called the British Raj.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was born during the Raj, in a city called Porbandar in 1869. Raised in a Hindu family with many Jain neighbors, he practiced vegetarianism, spiritual fasting, and peace toward all living creatures. These values would influence his philosophy of nonviolent resistance.

When he was 18, Gandhi went to London to study law and become a barrister. But he couldn't find work when he came back to India, so he took a job in Natal, South Africa, which was then also controlled by Britain and had a large Indian population.
Discrimination against Indians was blatant in South Africa. Local laws dictated where Indians could live, what they could trade, and what property they could own. One of Gandhi's first encounters with racism occurred when he was kicked out of a first-class train car that was designated Whites-only. In response, he formed the Natal Indian Congress and spent the next two decades leading Indians in civil disobedience against racist laws. It was in Johannesburg that he first went to jail. Gandhi coined the term "Satyagraha," or "adherence to truth," to describe his philosophy of nonviolence.

Gandhi returned to India in 1915 with the belief that Satyagraha could be used to gain Indian independence. Under British rule, most Indians lived in poverty, working as farmers or laborers on land they did not own. Gandhi organized strikes against British landowners and circulated petitions for Indian civil rights. In 1921, he became leader of the Indian National Congress. In 1930, he led the Salt March, a 23-day march to the coast to protest a British tax on salt. Three years later, he fasted for 21 days to protest the discriminatory treatment of the low-ranking Dalit caste. One of his biggest acts of nonviolent protest was organizing the Indian community to refuse to support Britain in World War II. For these and other acts, Gandhi was sentenced to jail multiple times, sometimes for years at a time. But he became incredibly popular among Indians, who started calling him "Bapu," which means "father," and "Mahatma," or "great soul." His efforts paid off: in 1947, India became an independent nation.

Tragically, just a few months later, a Hindu extremist assassinated Gandhi in New Delhi.

Gandhi's legacy has turned him into a larger-than-life figure: the "Father of the Nation" of India. With his self-sacrifice and dedication to civil rights, his story sounds too good to be true—and, well, it kind of is. In addition to his admirable commitment to nonviolent protest, Gandhi also held some racist views. When he was in South Africa, he aligned himself and other Indians with White people. He wasn't concerned with the rights of Black South Africans and considered Indians superior to them. He also treated women and girls with contempt and is known to have had misogynistic beliefs. It can be hard to reconcile these different sides of Gandhi: on one hand, fighting for equal rights and self-determination for his people, but on the other, perpetuating racism and sexism. His story, like most stories, is complicated and shouldn't be mythologized as just one thing.

Let's review. Gandhi was born during the British Raj and worked his whole adult life to secure civil rights for Indians, first in South Africa, then in India. Through nonviolent protests and civil disobedience, he was instrumental in achieving Indian independence in 1947. And though some people see him as a god-like figure, it's important to remember that he was just one man, with human flaws and a dedication to seeking Satyagraha.