



Name _____ Date _____

SOURCES IN CONTEXT

When historians examine sources, they ask several questions about the documents to help them understand why they were written and what kind of information they can provide. Read the two documents provided on the following pages, and use them and the background information provided to answer the following questions.

Background:

In April, 1963, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King and his colleagues traveled to Birmingham, Alabama, to coordinate marches and sit-ins protesting segregation. On April 12, he and many of his companions were arrested and thrown in jail. The next day, a newspaper published an open letter from a group of local clergymen denouncing the actions of King and his colleagues. A friend brought King the newspaper while he was in jail, and King began to write his reply in the margins of the newspaper. The reply was soon published as a letter to the clergymen. We now call this “Letter from Birmingham Jail.”

Document 1:

A Call for Unity

A Group of Clergymen
April 13, 1963

...We are now confronted by a series of demonstrations by some of our Negro citizens, directed and led in part by outsiders. We recognize the natural impatience of people who feel that their hopes are slow in being realized. But we are convinced that these demonstrations are unwise and untimely.

We agree rather with certain local Negro leadership which has called for honest and open negotiation of racial issues in our area. And we believe that this kind of facing of issues can best be accomplished by citizens of our own metropolitan area, white and Negro, meeting with their knowledge and experiences of the local situation. All of us need to face the responsibility and find the proper channels for its accomplishment.

Just as we formerly pointed out that “hatred and violence have no sanction in our religious and political traditions,” we also point out that such actions as incite to hatred and violence, however technically peaceful those actions may be, have not contributed to the resolution of our local problems. We do not believe that these days of new hope are days when extreme measures are justified in Birmingham.

...We further strongly urge our own Negro community to withdraw support from these demonstrations, and to unite locally in working peacefully for a better Birmingham. When rights are consistently denied, a cause should be pressed in the courts and in negotiations among local leaders, and not in the streets. We appeal to both our white and Negro citizenry to observe the principles of law and order and common sense.



Name _____ Date _____

Signed by:

C.C.J. Carpenter, D.D. LL.D., Bishop of Alabama

Joseph A. Durick, D.D., Auxiliary Bishop, Diocese of Mobile-Birmingham

Rabbi Milton L. Grafman, Temple Emanu-El, Birmingham, Alabama

Bishop Paul Hardin, Bishop of Alabama-West Florida Conference of the Methodist Church

Bishop Nolan B. Harmon, Bishop of the North Alabama Conference of the Methodist Church

George M. Murray, D.D., LL.D, Bishop Coadjutor, Episcopal Diocese of Alabama

Edward V. Ramage, Moderator, Synod of Alabama Presbyterian Church in the United States

Earl Stallings, Pastor, First Baptist Church, Birmingham, Alabama

1. What is this document? (book, photograph, newspaper article, etc.)

an open letter

2. Is this a primary or a secondary source? How do you know?

This is a primary source because it was written by people who were present at the time.

3. When was this document written?

April 13, 1963

4. Where was this document written?

Birmingham, Alabama

5. What was going on in this place at this time? How do you think this affected the contents of this document?

Dr. King and his colleagues were staging sit-ins and protests. The clergymen were probably responding to what they thought of as a disruption to their community.

6. Who wrote this document?

a group of Alabama clergymen



Name _____ Date _____

7. Who is the intended audience for this document? How do you know?

Answers may vary but should include Dr. King and his colleagues.

8. What do the writers of this document mean when they say the following?

And we believe that this kind of facing of issues can be best accomplished by citizens of our own metropolitan area, white and Negro, meeting with their knowledge and experiences of the local situation.

Answers may vary but should include the idea that Dr. King and his colleagues are outsiders and that the writers of this letter are telling them to mind their own business.

9. How can this statement be seen as a criticism of Dr. King?

Answers may vary but should include that the letter is saying that Dr. King comes into communities that are not his own and disrupts them and that his methods invite violence, even if they are not violent themselves.



Name _____ Date _____

Document 2:

Letter from a Birmingham Jail

16 April 1963

My Fellow Clergymen:

...

I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the prophets of the eighth century B.C. left their villages...I am compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home town...

Moreover, I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial "outside agitator" idea. Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere within its bounds.

You deplore the demonstrations taking place in Birmingham. But your statement, I am sorry to say, fails to express a similar concern for the conditions that brought the demonstrations. ... There can be no gainsaying the fact that racial injustice engulfs this community. Birmingham is probably the most thoroughly segregated city in the United States. Its ugly record of ugly brutality is widely known. Negroes have experienced grossly unjust treatment in the courts. There have been more unsolved bombings of Negro homes and churches in Birmingham than in any other city in the nation. These are the hard, brutal facts of the case. On the basis of these conditions, Negro leaders sought to negotiate with the city fathers. But the latter consistently refused to engage in good faith negotiation...

...We did not move irresponsibly into direct action...You may well ask, "Why direct action, why sit-ins, marches, and so forth? Isn't negotiation a better path?" You are exactly right in your call for negotiation. Indeed, this is the purpose of direct action. Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and establish such creative tension that a community that has consistently refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored...

Yours in the cause of Peace and Brotherhood,
Martin Luther King, Jr.

1. What is this document? (book, photograph, newspaper article, etc.)

A letter from Dr. King addressed to the clergymen who wrote "A Call for Unity."

2. Is this a primary or a secondary source? How do you know?

This is a primary source because it was written by Dr. King himself at the time in question.



Name _____ Date _____

3. When was this document written?

April 16, 1963

4. Where was this document written?

a jail in Birmingham, Alabama

5. What was going on in this place at this time? How do you think this affected the contents of this document?

Answers should include that Dr. King had just been thrown in jail for organizing nonviolent

protests, and the local clergymen had just written a letter telling him to mind his own

business. He was responding directly to these events when writing this letter.

6. Who wrote this document?

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

7. Who is the intended audience for this document? How do you know?

Answers should include: the clergymen who wrote this letter, which we know because it is

addressed to them. But answers could also include that the letter was intended for the

American public, because that is the audience when you publish a piece of writing.

8. How would you describe tone of this document?

Answers may include kind, righteous, explanatory, annoyed, frustrated.



Name _____ Date _____

9. What does the author of this document mean when he says, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere”?

Answers may vary, but may include that people must go fight injustice wherever they see it because that injustice threatens the peace and justice of their own communities.

10. How does this statement respond to the statement from Document 1 discussed in question 8?

Answers should include that the clergymen were telling Dr. King to allow the community of Birmingham to settle its own problems, and Dr. King is saying that the problems in Birmingham are everybody’s problems, and so he is in Alabama to fight them.

11. What evidence does the author of this document give as justifications for the actions of himself and his colleagues?

Answers should include that King lists some of the outrageous acts of segregation and racism committed by the people of Alabama, as well as their failure to negotiate. King uses these as justification for the nonviolent protests he and his colleagues are staging.



Name _____ Date _____

Final Reflections:

1. Consider the experience of examining these two documents. How did reading the background information and Document 1 inform your reading of Document 2?

Answers should include that King responds directly to the statements made in Document 1, so to read the one without the other is to miss a large part of the story.

2. Why do you think it's important that historians ask all of these questions while they read historical documents? What do they gain from doing so?

Answers should include the importance of understanding the background of a piece of writing in order to understand what it's trying to do, who it's trying to speak to and its impact on the world at the time.