What was apartheid?

KS3 KS4 Ages 11-18 ⏰ 3 min read

Apartheid (pronounced "a-PART-hate") is an Afrikaans word meaning "separateness." From 1948 to 1994, it was the name of South Africa's official government policy — a legal system built on the idea that people of different races should be kept apart, with white South Africans given power, wealth, and rights that were denied to everyone else.

What it meant in practice

Under apartheid, South Africans were classified by race: white, Black African, Coloured (mixed heritage), or Indian. These categories determined almost every aspect of your life. Where you could live. Which schools you could attend. Which jobs you could hold. Who you could marry. Which beaches and park benches you could use. There were separate hospitals, separate toilets, separate bus seats — all of it with the best reserved for white people and the worst (or nothing at all) for everyone else.

Black South Africans, who made up the majority of the population, were forced to carry "pass books" — identity documents that controlled where they were allowed to travel and work. Without the right stamps, you could be arrested simply for being in the wrong part of the country.

Imagine your school decided that children with brown eyes could only use certain doors, sit in certain classrooms, drink from certain water fountains, and were banned from the best equipment. Then imagine the people making those rules were a minority of blue-eyed students who had given themselves all the power. That's the daily reality of apartheid — applied to an entire country, enforced by a government, backed up by police and prisons.

Resistance

Many South Africans resisted apartheid at enormous personal risk. The **African National Congress** (ANC) led much of this resistance. One of its most famous members was **Nelson Mandela**, who was imprisoned in 1964 for his activism and spent 27 years in jail on Robben Island. He became a symbol of resistance not just in South Africa but around the world.

International pressure also grew steadily. Countries imposed economic sanctions — refusing to trade with South Africa — and South Africa was banned from international sport. The cost to the country's economy and reputation became impossible to ignore.

The end of apartheid

In 1990, President F.W. de Klerk began dismantling the apartheid laws and released Mandela from prison. In 1994, South Africa held its first fully democratic election in which all citizens, regardless of race, could vote. The ANC won with a huge majority. Nelson Mandela became South Africa's first Black president — a moment watched and celebrated around the world.

The legal system of apartheid was gone. But its legacy — in inequality, poverty, and land ownership — has proved far harder to dismantle, and South Africa continues to grapple with it today.

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