

Gandhi - film and reality

PART 1: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND - GANDHI'S IDEA'S

This is a view copy. It shows the cover, table of contents and a few representative pages. For the complete publication, see www.historypicturesanddocuments.com

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Ben Kingsley in the role of Gandhi in the movie Gandhi.

A black and white photograph that Margaret Bourke-White took of Mohandas K. Gandhi in 1946

Introduction

Gandhi is one of the most fascinating people in history. Study of his words and actions enriches everyone's political, religious, social and economic insight. It also provides a good opportunity to ask what possibilities the individual has to exercise influence on decision-making in a state. The film *Gandhi* is a good starting point for these and other questions.

In what ways does the film give a reliable picture of the past? In what respect a questionable one? Everybody, also historians and filmmakers, sees past and present from his own frame of reference. Is it possible to write a history of decolonization on which both British and Indians agree? Applies to Gandhi and the filmmakers 'East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet'? And is it or will it ever be possible to interpret the decolonization of British India in a manner acceptable to both Pakistan and India?

The film *Gandhi* is in any case also remarkable as a joint Anglo-Indian production.

In two volumes we offer the opportunity to place the movie *Gandhi* in a historical context.

Volume 1 starts with a summary of the movie, chapter 1. Most documents of chapter 2 offer ideas of Gandhi at different occasions. In other documents Gandhi's beliefs can be compared with Christian principles. In the last part of chapter 2 Gandhi's closest political companion Nehru gives his opinion about Gandhi and his ideas.

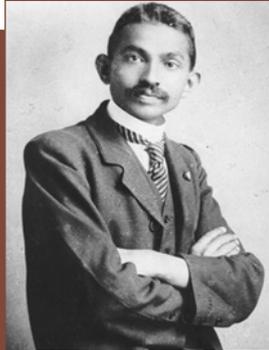
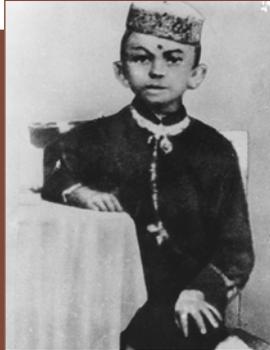
Volume 2 offers the possibility to see Gandhi through British eyes.

Volume 3, in Dutch language, contains a description of the content of the film, the film script, the entire spoken text in the film, Dutch reviews of the movie, and recommendations for the use of the film in secondary education.

The final draft of the screenplay by John Briley, the cast and crew credits you can find on internet.

This edition is derived from a publication of the project 'Bouwstenen voor intercultureel onderwijs' of the University of Leiden, D.H.A. Kolff, L.G. Dalhuisen and A.P.C. Vendel, *Gandhi: film en werkelijkheid* Leiden 1991.

1 A summary of *Gandhi*



The early life of Gandhi is not depicted in the film. Mohandas Gandhi was born and raised in a Hindu merchant caste family in India (October 2, 1869). He was married at thirteen to a girl of the same age, Kasturbai. Following the death of his father, Gandhi's family sent him to England in 1888 to study law. There, he became interested in the philosophy of non-violence, as expressed in the Bhagavad-Gita, Hindu sacred scripture, and in Jesus Christ's Sermon on the Mount in the Christian Bible. He returned to India in 1891, having passed the bar. He found in India little success in his attempts to practice law. Seeking a change of scenery, he accepted a position in South Africa for a year, where he assisted on a lawsuit. Photo left: Gandhi seven years old (1876). Photo right: Gandhi in South Africa.

1 MURDER AND FUNERAL

The film begins with the murder of Gandhi and his funeral. The movie script describes the funeral:

'The huge funeral procession, crowds such as have never been seen on the screen massed along the route. People everywhere, clinging to monuments, lamp standards, trees; and as the camera pulls back from the funeral cortege it reveals more and more... and more. All are silent. We only hear a strange, rhythmic shuffling, pierced by an occasional wail of grief. We see the soldiers and sailors lining the route, their hands locked together in one seemingly endless chain. We see the two hundred men of the Army, Navy and Air Force drawing the Army weapon-carrier that bears the body of Gandhi. And finally we see Gandhi lying on the weapon-carrier, surrounded by flowers, a tiny figure in this ocean of grief and reverence.

Commentators from all over the world are covering the ceremony. We concentrate on one, let us say the most distinguished American broadcaster of the time, Edward R. Murrow, who sits on the makeshift platform, a microphone marked 'CBS' before him, describing the procession as technicians and staff move quietly around him.' Scenes of the funeral are accompanied by words of broadcaster Murrow: 'The object of this massive tribute died as he had always lived – a private man without wealth, without property, without official title or office.

Mahatma Gandhi was not a commander of great armies nor ruler of vast lands, he could boast no scientific achievements, no artistic gift...

Gandhi with the stretcher-bearers of an Indian Ambulance Corps during the Boer War (1900). Gandhi had formed a group of 1100 volunteers ambulance drivers. He wanted to disprove the British idea that Hindus were not fit for activities involving danger and exertion. The group was trained and medically certified to serve on the front lines. The group carried at Spionkop wounded soldiers for miles to a field hospital because the terrain was too rough for the ambulances. Gandhi and thirty-seven other Indians received the War Medal.



Yet men, governments and dignitaries from all over the world have joined hands today to pay homage to this little brown man in the loin-cloth who led his country to freedom... We see the throng, following the weapon-carrier bier of Gandhi as it slowly inches its way along the Kingsway. Mountbatten, tall, handsome, bemedalled, walks at the head of dignitaries from many lands... and behind them a broad mass of Indians. For a moment we see their sandalled feet moving along the roadway and realize their quiet, rhythmic shuffling is the only noise this vast assemblage has produced.

Pope Pius, the Archbishop of Canterbury, President Truman, Chiang Kai-shek, The Foreign Minister of Russia, the President of France... are among the millions here and abroad who have lamented his passing. In the words of General George C. Marshall, the American Secretary of State, "Mahatma Gandhi had become the spokesman for the

conscience of mankind ... A man who made humility and simple truth more powerful than empires." And Albert Einstein added, "Generations to come will scarce believe that such a one as this ever in flesh and blood walked upon this earth."

'But perhaps to this man of peace, to this fighter who fought without malice or falsehood or hate, the tribute he would value most has come from General Douglas McArthur: "If civilization is to survive," the General said this morning, "all men cannot fail to adopt Gandhi's belief that the use of force to resolve conflict is not only wrong but contains within itself the germ of our own self-destruction". Perhaps for the rest of us, the most satisfying comment on this tragedy comes from the impudent New York PM which today wrote, "There is still hope for a world which reacts as reverently as ours has to the death of a man like Gandhi"'. "

2 SOUTH AFRICA 1893-1914

The story in the film flashes back to 1893. Gandhi, 24-year-old, is thrown off a South African train for being an Indian sitting in a first-class compartment despite having a first-class ticket.

He became involved in efforts to end discrimination against the Indian minority in South Africa, who were oppressed both by the British and by the Boers, descendants of the original Dutch settlers. Having intended to stay a year, he remains until 1914. His wife and children joined him in 1896.

Gandhi makes a speech, calling for non-violent resistance against the Pass Laws (every Indian should be fingerprinted and non-Christian marriages should be considered invalid). He is arrested (1908), for refusing to carry an identity card.

In 1906, the Transvaal government promulgated a new Act forcing registration of the colony's Indian population. Gandhi leads a march of striking miners against the Act. Gandhi, along with thousands of other Indian protesters, is imprisoned, but the mines remain closed. The South African government agrees a deal with Gandhi whereby the Act will be repealed, but Indian immigration will be stopped. All the protesters are freed.

3 FROM WORLD WAR TO WORLD WAR II

When Gandhi left South Africa and returned to India, he was known as a holy man: people called him a 'Mahatma', or 'great soul'. He is urged to take up the fight for India's independence.

Gandhi arrives in 1915 in Bombay, India. He is greeted by members of the Congress Party, including Pandit Nehru and Sardar Patel. They introduce him to Mohammed Ali Jinnah, member of Congress and leader of the Muslim League.

At this point, he was still loyal to the British Empire, but when the British cracked down on Indian civil liberties, Gandhi began to organize nonviolent protests.

After the end of World War I, the Congress Party presses for Home Rule. During a meeting of the Congress Party an old farmer asks Gandhi for help. Gandhi travels to the countryside. He met a farmer who told him: For years the landlords have ordered us to grow indigo, for dyeing the cloth. Always they took part of the crop as rent. But now the English factories make cloth for everyone. No one wants our indigo. And the landlords won't take their share. They say we must pay our rent in cash. Near to breakdown, he gestures around the empty house. What we could, we sold. The police have taken the rest. There is no food.'

In 1919 the British colonial government introduces the Rowlatt Act 'in order to control public unrest and root out conspiracy in India'. Constitutional opposition proved fruitless, so Gandhi and other Indian leaders organised actions: Indians would suspend all business and fast as a sign of their opposition. These actions are known as the Rowlatt Satyagraha. The protests brought India to a standstill. Gandhi was again arrested, but the British, in an effort to quell rioting, agreed to free Gandhi if he speaks for non-violence.

During a peaceful demonstration in Amritsar British troops gunned down peaceful Indian protestors. The British General Dyer orders his troops to open fire on peaceful demonstrators meeting, resulting in 1516 casualties. This Amritsar Massacre convinced Gandhi and India of the need for self-rule.

The Viceroy insists that Britain condemns the massacre, but Gandhi demands Home Rule for India. He appeals for Hindu-Muslim unity, calling on Indians to burn their British-made clothing. The British declare martial law in Bengal. During a march to burn British cloth,

the crowd turn on police, murdering them. Gandhi fasts in protest at the violence, and successfully stops it. He is arrested for sedition and pleads guilty during the trial: 'I have no defense, My Lord. I am guilty as charged. And if you truly believe in the system of law you administer in my country, you must inflict on me the severest penalty possible'. Judge Broomfield answers: 'It is impossible for me to ignore that you are in a different category from any person I have ever tried, or am likely to try. It is nevertheless my duty to sentence you to six years' imprisonment. If however His Majesty's Government could – at some later date – see fit to reduce that term, no one would be better pleased than I.

After Gandhi is released (1924) he withdrew from politics for a time. He travelled through India, working among the peasantry. But in 1930, he wrote the Declaration of Independence of India, and then led the Salt March in protest against the British monopoly on salt. Gandhi instigates a 240-mile march to the sea to make salt (illegal without a government licence), hoping to reach the sea on the anniversary of the Amritsar massacre. This touched off acts of civil disobedience across India, and the British were forced to invite Gandhi to London for a second Round-Table Conference. The first Round Table Conference ended with the Gandhi-Irwin Pact, a political agreement signed by Gandhi and Lord Irwin, the vice-roy on 5 March 1931.

The British government invited Gandhi to London, for a second Round Table Conference. Gandhi received a warm welcome in England. He was the sole representative of the Indian National Congress. No agreement was reached due to concerns about a rift between Muslims and Hindus. Gandhi withdrew from public life again. But independence came closer. The Government of India Act (1935) surrendered significant amounts of power to Indians, and the Indian National Congress clamoured for more.



Gandhi visit the British Prime-Minister in 10 Downing Street, London (1931)

When World War II broke out, India erupted into violence. Many nationalist leaders, including Gandhi, who would not cooperate with England went to prison.

4 AFTER THE SECOND WORLD WAR

After the war, the new British government wanted to get India off its hands quickly. But religious tensions between Hindus and Muslims erupted into nationwide violence. But Muhammed Ali Jinnah, the head of the Indian Muslim League, demanded that a separate state be



October 1947, a station in Amritsar, thousands of Muslims fled to Pakistan, Hindus Conversely fled en masse from Pakistan to India.

created for India's Muslims. To Gandhi's great distress, the Congress leaders and the harried British agreed. Horrified, Gandhi declares a hunger strike, saying he will not eat until the fighting stops. The fighting does stop eventually, but the country is divided by religion, Bangladesh-Pakistan and India.

Immediately after the division Hindus and Muslims killed each other in alarming numbers while refugees fled toward the borders. Heart-broken, Gandhi tried to calm the country, but to no avail. Many dissidents on both sides were involved in a conspiracy to assassinate

Gandhi. As murderer Godse shoots Gandhi in a scene recalling the opening, the film cuts to black and Gandhi is heard in a voiceover, saying "Oh, God". The audience then sees Gandhi's cremation; the film ending with a scene of Gandhi's ashes being scattered on the holy Ganga. As this happens, viewers hear Gandhi in another voiceover: 'When I despair, I remember that all through history the way of truth and love has always won. There have been tyrants, and murderers, and for a time they can seem invincible, but in the end they always fall. Think of it. Always.'