

A Divided Country

Nelson Mandela was born into a divided country. The rulers¹ of South Africa were white people whose ancestors² came from Europe. They came to the country only a few hundred years earlier but the ancestors of the black majority³ had lived in South Africa for thousands of years.

The Dutch were the first Europeans to live in South Africa. They arrived at the Cape of Good Hope in 1652. The Cape was a trading post⁴. Dutch ships could stop there for fresh food and water. The people who lived in the area were called Hottentots and Bushmen. The Dutch wanted the Hottentots to work for them, but the Hottentots refused⁵. So the Dutch brought prisoners and slaves⁶ from Asia to work for them.

Soon more white people came. They wanted to live in the country and become farmers, or *boers*, as they are called in Dutch. At first the Africans shared the land. But more white people came and they wanted more and more land. When the Europeans took land they expected to keep it forever. The Boers sometimes caught Africans to make them slaves. The Africans fought the Boers, but they could not win against European weapons⁷.

In the early 1800s, the British took over the Cape from the Dutch. The British liked the warm weather and the good land for farming. Soon they were coming in large numbers. The Boers were not happy about this. The British had a different language and different ideas. The British made slavery illegal⁸ and gave equal rights⁹ to non-whites. This made the Boers angry. In 1836, thousands of Boers gathered their slaves, cattle and sheep and moved north. They wanted to escape the British. During the journey, the Boers fought many battles

with the African tribes¹⁰. The Xhosa, Sotho and Zulu all tried to stop them, but they only had spears and clubs¹¹. The Boers had guns. In one fight, three thousand Zulus were killed near a river. Today that river is called Blood River.



Boer soldiers on Spion Kop, Ladysmith, in the early 1900s

The Boers moved north of the British and founded two independent countries, Transvaal and the Orange Free State. The Boers did not think of themselves as Dutch anymore. They were 'Afrikaners,' they said, 'the white tribe of Africa'.

In the beginning, the British were not interested in the Afrikaners. That changed when diamonds and gold were found in the late 1800s. Between 1880 and 1902, the British and Boers fought two wars. But Britain had more weapons and its army was more powerful. In 1910, the Union of South Africa became one country and a part of the British Empire¹². Before the war, the British promised that all black Africans would be able to vote. However, the new British leaders only gave votes to blacks living in the Cape. And most of these blacks could not take part in elections. Only white people could do that. So blacks in the Cape could vote – but only for white people. And many blacks in the rest of South Africa could not vote at all.

In 1912, the African National Congress (ANC) was created¹³ to help black people. But blacks continued to lose their rights. In 1913, a law was created which said that blacks could only buy land in certain areas of the country. That created a problem for the white government because they did not want blacks living in white areas. But they also needed blacks to work in the country's gold and diamond mines¹⁴.

So the Government created a pass system¹⁵ to control the movement of blacks inside South Africa. The passes allowed blacks to travel from their home to their workplace. But they could not travel anywhere else in the country. Blacks were no longer free to travel in their own land. They could live only in black-only 'townships' where the land was not good. They had no running water, telephones or electricity.

This system was later called 'apartheid', the Afrikaner word for 'apartness'. This was the world Nelson Mandela was born into. This was the world that Nelson Mandela would change.