

Podcasting the Past
European and world history
Part G: USA, 1918-1968

This document is part of a series that summarises recent research published on the key issues outlined in Section G of the [Higher History Course Specification](#). Although the summaries are wide-ranging, they do not cover all the literature ever published on the key issues. Instead, the summaries highlight some new research findings and directions, and illustrate how new historical research informs old historical debates, broadening our understanding of the past. This document is intended to supplement, not replace, pre-existing guidance on this topic.

6. An assessment of the effectiveness of the Civil Rights movement in meeting the needs of black Americans, up to 1968

A) Roles of the NAACP, CORE, SCLC (and SNCC?)

- Until 2009, the literature, generally, presented the NAACP as ‘a legalistic top-down interest group wedded to the liberal establishment and out of touch with the true aspirations of the black masses.’ **Verney and Sartain’s (2009)** edited collection changed that view: the NAACP was, mostly, a middle-class organisation, but not necessarily a socially or culturally conservative one. Similarly, **Bynam (2013)** argues that, through its youth councils, the NAACP ‘created space for youth activism’ and, in turn, young people made the NAACP more ‘dynamic’ in its approach to activism. **Sullivan (2009)** shows the NAACP played a central role in the Brown vs. Board of Education decision in 1954, setting in motion ‘a chain of events that would transform America.’ Like Verney and Sartain’s edited collection, however, Sullivan does not address the role of the NAACP in the 1960s. Did the NAACP reach the zenith of its influence in 1954 and, by the 1960s, had the torch passed to others in the civil rights movement? If so, why?

- **Kirk (2014)** has explained the role that CORE played in Arkansas. Other historians have looked at the role CORE played in Brooklyn (**Purnell, 2014**) and Seattle (**Singler et al, 2014**). Some of the questions arising from this recent literature are: did CORE suffer from not having a charismatic national leader like MLK, was CORE primarily a southern organisation or a national organisation, and did CORE bring about lasting change in the states where it was most active? The apparent consensus in the recent literature is that CORE was a low-profile, parochial organisation that only achieved moderate success.

- According to **Ling and Duffy (2021)**, the 1963 Birmingham Children’s Crusade literally changed the fortunes of the Southern Christian

Leadership Conference (SCLC) and its whole approach to campaigning. They challenge the notion of 'continuity' in the literature on 'the long civil rights movement.' Similarly, **Burrow (2015)** argues that it was SCLC, in partnership with other organisations like SNCC, that 'orchestrated pivotal civil rights events that shaped the 1960s and helped spur the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.' **Jones (2014)** notes that SCLC, and its northern counterparts, funded MLK's catalytic activism, and **Finley et al (2016)** have challenged the orthodoxy and concluded that SCLC, in partnership with other organisations, had a considerable impact in northern cities like Chicago as well as southern cities like Birmingham.

- What role did students and young people play in civil rights activism? **Morgan et al (2012)** also challenge the notion of 'continuity' in 'the long civil rights movement' by arguing that the involvement of young people with new ideas gave the 1960s civil rights movement much greater dynamism than before.
- Was the civil rights movement nonviolent? **Akinyele Omowale Umoja (2013)** shows that, in many communities, armed resistance became more influential after 1964 and only declined in the late 1970s. Similarly, **Cobb (2018)** argues that 'black Christianity' was not wedded to nonviolence. Is it more accurate to say that nonviolence was only part of civil rights activism in the early 1960s?

B) The Role of Martin Luther King, Jr.

- The orthodox view, largely unchallenged, is that King played a major role in the struggle for civil rights. According to **Ling (2015)** King 'kept his faith' even after the challenges mounted after 1965, but he was, admittedly, at his most effective as a campaigner prior to 1965. After that, he was a much less effective agent of change. **Yanco (2014)** contends that King's activism expanded over time: by the end of his life, he was as closely associated with campaigns against 'militarism and materialism' as he was with the civil rights movement. Two questions that arise from this recent research are: was King the undisputed leader of the civil rights movement, and did his influence wane after 1965? If so, why?

C) Changes in federal policy

- Recent research in this area has found the Voting Rights Act was the 'transformational' moment in American democracy (e.g., **May, 2013**). A minority of scholars take the view that the Act was 'an anachronism' that remedied 'past discriminations' (e.g., **McCool et al, 2012**) but others argue that the VRA was a necessary, but insufficient step, in

addressing racial inequality (Crowley, 2013).

- Recently, historians have noted that, unlike the Brown vs. Board of Education decision a decade earlier, the Civil Rights Act did not meet with the same concerted resistance because the civil rights movement had already changed many attitudes, paving the way for the Bill to become an Act (Kirk, 2014). Others have concluded that dynamic local activism in relation to public amenities like, for example, libraries made the implementation of the CRA inevitable and rendered opposition futile (Wiegand, 2018 and Tuuri, 2016).

D) Social, economic, and political changes

- Recent research emphasises the connection between the civil rights movement and President Johnson's Great Society. Johnson aimed to advance both civil and political rights, in the form of the Civil Rights Act, Voting Rights Act and Fair Housing Act, and social and economic rights, in the form of the Economic Opportunity Act, the Social Security Act, and other similar legislative interventions (e.g., Zeitz, 2018 and Zelizer, 2015). All this legislation was part of the same process of advancing the position of non-white Americans and poorer Americans.
- Aside from top-down social, economic, and political change, recent research has explored the apparent link between the civil rights movement and urban rioting. The causes of the riots were complex, and conservatives reaped political rewards by mischaracterising them, but rioting did not divide the civil rights movement in the way that is sometimes imagined (e.g., Levy, 2018). Other recent research has examined housing as an 'important site of racial contest' (e.g., Perkiss, 2014).
- There is also a well-established connection between the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War: the two were interlinked but recent research has concluded that black Americans and civil rights leaders were not agreed on how to respond to the War (Lucks, 2014).

E) Rise of black radical movements

- Recent research shows the central role of women in the Black Power movement (e.g., Farmer, 2017; McGuire, 2010) and the Nation of Islam (Taylor, 2017; McDuffie and Woodard, 2013). Other recent research stresses that students and young people turned the Black Power movement into a serious challenge to relatively conservative institutions like the NAACP (e.g., Kinchen, 2017 and Spencer, 2018). On the apparent discordance between Black Power and 'white liberalism'

historians have recently concluded that there was 'much greater' interaction between 'liberal whites and black nationalists' than is commonly understood: the two movements had a, mostly, positive influence on each other (**Fergus, 2010**).