



Sgt. Major Gandhi

Gandhi was born to a Hindu family in 1869 in British-ruled Gujarat, India. In 1888 he went to study law at University College in London, England. After a short stint as an attorney in India, he was hired to work in Durban, South Africa as a legal adviser for a wealthy Indian merchant firm. He moved there in 1893. Prior to Gandhi's arrival in South Africa, the black Zulu South Africans were in the middle of a nonviolent civil rights movement against their colonial British masters. They refused to pay taxes and often even to work. Surprisingly, to those unfamiliar with the real Gandhi, he refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of their movement, and actively campaigned against it. He endorsed a British war on South African blacks, sought comfort and assistance for British troops, and pursued recruitment into the armed services. Eventually, he was appointed a Sgt. Major in the British Army. He then wrote propaganda about the war, and years later lied about the form of his involvement in his autobiography.

### British Declare War on Blacks

In protest of a new poll-tax, Zulus confronted and killed two British tax collectors in 1906. In retaliation, the British declared war on the Zulus. They hung, shot, and severely flogged thousands of Zulus. Around four thousand Zulus were killed during the rebellion.

While the British took active measures to raise and equip an armed force for suppressing the blacks, Gandhi also began to prepare for the war against those he called "Kaffirs."

### Gandhi Endorses British War

For over six months Gandhi actively encouraged the British to raise an Indian regiment for use against the Zulus. Though considered an Apostle of Nonviolence, Gandhi eagerly pursued a chance for military service. His campaign began in late 1905, when he wrote "An Indian Volunteer Corps" for the Indian Opinion, saying, "If the Government only realized what reserve force is being wasted, they would make use of it and give Indians the opportunity of a thorough training for actual warfare."

Gandhi expressed his frustration that the British had not yet raised an Indian regiment in his Mar. 17, 1906 "A Plea for Indian Volunteering." He sounded almost desperate to participate in the war on blacks when he wrote: "The Natal Native trouble is dragging on a slow existence.... There is a population of over one hundred thousand Indians in Natal. It has been proved that they can do very efficient work in time of war.... Is it prudent for the Government to allow a source of strength, which always lies at its disposal, to run to waste?"

## **Gandhi Campaigns For Care Packages for British Troops**

While the Zulus continued their war for freedom, Gandhi urged the Indian community to send money and care packages to the white militia fighting the black Zulus. In “The Natal Rebellion,” Feb. 2, 1906, he wrote: “The substance of it is that the Indians are not able to go to the battle-field, but that they can assist the men at the front with the requisite amenities.” In the same letter, he also urged Indians to help fund the war effort, saying, “It will be good to collect some money and send it to the Government or to some Fund that might have been started. We shall then be considered to have done our duty to that extent. We hope the leaders of the community will take up this matter.”

In his June 6, 1906 “Soldier’s Fund,” he glowingly wrote, “The Durban Women’s Association has started a special fund for the soldiers who have gone to the front to fight the Kaffirs. All leading men have contributed to the Fund and some Indian names are seen among the contributors. It is our advice that more Indians, traders and others, should subscribe to the Fund.” He also demanded that civilians send care packages to the soldiers. Strangely, the staunch Brahmanist Gandhi suggested these include tobacco, use of which is considered a sin in Hinduism. He wrote: “The soldiers’ life is a hard one.... Those, therefore, who do not go to the front should, in order to express their sympathy, raise a fund for the purpose of sending the soldiers fruits, tobacco, warm clothing and other things that they might need. It is our duty to subscribe to such a fund.”

## **Gandhi Seeks Recruitment Into British Armed Services**

Gandhi finally managed to convince the British government to allow an Indian stretcher-bearer corps. He seemed a little disappointed at the non-combatant status of the corps, however, when in his May 12, 1906 “Indian Volunteering” he wrote: “The pity of it is that the Government...have not taken the elementary precaution of giving the necessary discipline and instruction to the Indians. It is, therefore, a matter of physical impossibility to expect Indians to do any work with the rifle; or, for that matter, to do any work in connection with war with much efficiency.”

Still bent on convincing the British to arm that corps, however, Gandhi spoke of an “amendment of the Fire-Arms Act” in his June 9, 1906 “Indians and the Native Unrest.” This amendment would “[provide] for the supply of arms to Indians...intended to give Indians an opportunity of taking their share in the defence of the Colony.”

He also displayed his selfish reasons for raising an Indian regiment, which had nothing to do with actually helping the British and completely ignored the just cause of the black Zulus. He wrote: “Indians have now a splendid opportunity for showing that they are capable of appreciating the duties of citizenship. At the same time, the fact of the corps being raised is nothing to be unduly proud of. Twenty Indians, or even two hundred, going to the front is a flea-bite. The Indian sacrifice will rightly be considered infinitesimal. But it is the principle involved which marks the importance of the event. The Government have, by accepting the offer, shown their goodwill. And if Indians come successfully through the ordeal, the possibilities for the future are very great. Should they be assigned a permanent part in the Militia, there will remain no ground for the European complaint that Europeans alone have to bear the brunt of Colonial defence, and Indians will cease to feel that, in not being allowed to participate in it, they are slighted.”

## **Gandhi Becomes a Sergeant Major**

On June 6, 1906, in “Pledge of Allegiance,” Gandhi transcribed his oath: “We, the undersigned, solemnly and sincerely declare that we will be faithful and bear true allegiance to His Majesty King Edward the Seventh, His Heirs and Successors, and that we will faithfully serve in the supernumerary list of the Active Militia Force of the Colony of Natal as Stretcher-Bearers, until we shall lawfully cease to be members thereof, and the terms of the service are that we should each receive Rations, Uniform, Equipment and 1s. 6d. per day.”

It was official. Gandhi was appointed a Sgt. Major in the British Army, and would lead 20 Indian volunteers to assist the war against the black Zulus.

## **Gandhi Writes Propaganda for War on Blacks**

As a last touch before heading to the battlefield, Gandhi published “Should Indians Volunteer Or Not?” on June 30, 1906, in the Indian Opinion. He passionately urged Indians to volunteer, saying: “There is hardly any family from which someone has not gone to fight the Kaffir rebels. Following their example, we should steel our hearts and take courage. Now is the time when the leading whites want us to take this step; if we let go this opportunity, we shall repent later. We therefore urge all Indian leaders to do their duty to the best of their ability.”

He made sure to downplay the dangers of going to war by inventing statistics regarding previous British wars. “The Crimean War,” he wrote, “caused heavy casualties; yet it has been estimated that fewer men died from bayonet or bullet wounds in that war than through sheer carelessness or perverse living. It was calculated that, on an average, more men died of fever and other diseases during the attack on Ladysmith than by Boer bullets. The experience in every war has been similar.”

Gandhi also advertised military service as physically and mentally beneficial, saying: “Those who can take care of themselves and lead regular lives while at the front can live in health and happiness. The training such men receive cannot be had elsewhere.... A man going to the battle-front has to train himself to endure severe hardships. He is obliged to cultivate the habit of living in comradeship with large numbers of men. He easily learns to make do with simple food. He is required to keep regular hours. He forms the habit of obeying his superior’s orders promptly and without argument.”

Completely ignoring the underlying cause of the Zulu rebellion, which was a desire for freedom, Gandhi argued for a religious reason to wage war on the black natives of South Africa. He said, “For the Indian community, going to the battle-field should be an easy matter; for, whether Muslims or Hindus, we are men with profound faith in God. We have a greater sense of duty, and it should therefore be easier for us to volunteer.”

## **Gandhi Lies About His Involvement in War on Blacks**

Gandhi tried to rewrite his South African history in his 1920s autobiography. He wrote: “I bore no grudge against the Zulus, they had harmed no Indian. I had doubts about the ‘rebellion’ itself.” He also claimed, “My heart was with the Zulus.” Yet in 1906, he vehemently advocated Indians be allowed to “[take] their share in the defence of the Colony,” demanded the Indian community help fund the suppression of the Zulu rebellion, and cheered the chance to train for “actual warfare.”

His lying was even more blatant, however.

In his autobiography, Gandhi insists, “I was delighted, on reaching headquarters to hear that our main work was to be the nursing of the wounded Zulus.” He also wrote that “the work of my Corps consisted only in nursing the wounded Zulu.” Yet in “Fatigue Duties,” his final dispatch from the battlefield, Gandhi describes his duties:

“Early on the morning of the 27th, therefore, one-half of the Corps, with two stretchers under Sgt.-Major Gandhi and Sgt. Joshi proceeded to Otimati, where instructions were received to take a stretcher to carry one of the troopers who was dazed. Fortunately, the trooper had recovered before the party reached Thring’s Post. But by an unfortunate accident, another trooper, by name Forder, had received a bullet-wound in the thigh from a co-trooper. He, however, pluckily rode to the camp. The stretcher party had to assist Mr. Stokes, of the N. M. C., in treating the wounded trooper, and others, who had received slight injuries through accidents or otherwise, requiring medical help. On the 28th, the stretcher party at Otimati were to take to Mapumulo Private Sutton of the Durban Reserves, whose toe was crushed under a waggon wheel, and Trooper Forder. The latter had to be carried on a stretcher, as his wound was very delicate. The work of carrying Trooper Forder proved to be much heavier than we had thought. The energy of all the available men had to be taxed to the utmost in carrying the wounded men, especially as it meant going uphill all the way. As we were nearing Mapumulo, the Captain of our escort sent word that, if it could be managed, Forder should be placed in the ambulance waggon, as the Natives about the hill might wrongly consider that the rebels had succeeded in wounding at least one of our men. Trooper Forder, on hearing the message, gladly volunteered to go into the wagon. And the fatigued bearers were equally glad to be relieved of the necessity of having to carry their charge up the very steep hill near Mapumulo.”

Although years later Gandhi claimed his military work consisted “only” of nursing wounded blacks, his earlier writings tell a completely different story. His main work was caring for British troops wounded during the war against blacks.

## **Summary**

The indisputable truth is that Gandhi chose to actively endorse and participate in a war waged solely to deprive black people of their liberties. At a time of extreme racial conflict, Gandhi knowingly sided with the oppressive white race. He even thirsted for Zulu blood, ruefully saying in July, 1906: “At about 12 o’clock we finished the day’s journey, with no Kaffirs to fight.”