

Malcolm X



Malcolm X was important in shaping a Black Muslim and black power movement that challenged the nonviolent and integrationist struggle for African-American equality favored by Martin Luther King Jr.'s civil rights movement.

Born Malcolm Little in Omaha, Nebraska on May 19, 1925, Malcolm was one of eight children of Earl Little, a Baptist minister and follower of Marcus Garvey, the black nationalist, and Louise Little. For many years, Malcolm knew only poverty and violence. In 1929, the family moved to East Lansing, Michigan, where white racists tried to burn down their house. Two years later, Earl was run down by a trolley car, probably an act of murder. By that time the country was mired in the Great Depression, and Louise found it impossible to feed and care for her children. The children were placed in separate foster homes and institutions, and Louise was declared incompetent and placed in a mental hospital, where she spent the next quarter century.

At 13, Malcolm was sent to a juvenile detention home for a minor act of mischief. Three years later, he went to live with a sister in Boston. No longer attending school, he took on odd jobs and learned about street life in the black ghetto. Eventually he got a job as sandwich man on trains between Boston and New York City and was quickly introduced to drugs and crime in Harlem. Sporting a zoot suit (a fad in the 1940s, it was a suit with long, draped pants, tight at the ankle, and a jacket with wide shoulders), Malcolm became a recognized underworld figure. He talked his way into a draft exemption from the armed forces during World War II. Back in Boston, he was arrested in 1946 for burglary and sentenced to 10 years in prison. He was 20 years old.

Prison was to be Malcolm's salvation. He began to read history, philosophy, and religion. Through his brother, he learned about the Nation of Islam, also known as the Black Muslims, led by Elijah Muhammad. Based in Chicago, Muhammad preached against white racism and advocated a Muslim way of life, which forbade drinking, smoking, and drugs; he insisted that members have jobs. The movement's separatist ideology was extreme. Not only did it dismiss the civil rights movement's goal of full black integration into white society as illusory, it also depicted all whites as descended from the devil, born to harm blacks.

By the time Malcolm was released from prison in 1952, he was committed to the Nation of Islam and took the name Malcolm X, dropping what the Muslims considered a slave name. He progressed through the ranks rapidly, recruiting first in Detroit, then Boston and Philadelphia, and finally in New York. Malcolm had become an eloquent speaker, and owing largely to his efforts, which included starting a national Muslim newspaper, the movement attracted thousands of members. In 1959, the nation watched a television documentary on the Muslims called "The Hate That Hate Produced" on *The Mike Wallace Show*, and by the end of the year, the Muslims could claim 100,000 followers. One source of new recruits for the Muslims was the country's jails. An estimated 600 convicts joined the movement each year, most of them staying out of jail when released and dramatically altering their values and behavior.

On one hand, the Muslims were effective in organizing schools and businesses and in providing encouragement and moral support for their members. On the other hand, the movement frightened whites and the growing civil rights movement. Since the Muslims were anti-integration, they considered nonviolence absurd and would not cooperate in demonstrating with such groups as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People or the Congress of Racial Equality. Malcolm was especially extreme in his

statements of hate for whites.

By the early 1960s, Malcolm's position of leadership had brought him into conflict with Muhammad as well as with some of the other leaders, who criticized him for forgetting the original religious intentions of the Muslims and being swayed by the glory of politics. When in 1963 Malcolm spoke of President John F. Kennedy's assassination as a case of "the chickens coming home to roost," suggesting that the hate directed at African Americans had been responsible for the killing of the president, Muhammad suspended him from the movement.

On his part, Malcolm had become suspicious of Muhammad's lifestyle and morals and the general Muslim policy of "nonengagement" from active confrontation with racism. In 1964, he broke with Muhammad and formed his own group, called the Muslim Mosque, Inc., determined to make the group international and to initiate a back-to-Africa movement. The same year, he made a pilgrimage to Mecca and visited several African countries, meeting and having discussions with prominent Muslim leaders and scholars. He discovered that the views of many Muslims differed from his racist views, and he seriously reconsidered his position. When he returned to the United States, he announced that his visit in the Islamic world had helped to alter his view that all whites were evil and racist. He now believed that the plight of African Americans was caused by Western civilization and hoped that Islamic leaders abroad would help him bring before the United Nations the issue of American racism and its capitalistic ramifications in Africa. He formed the Organization of Afro-American Unity to unify black groups he had previously feuded with. This willingness to work with integrationists offended more militant Muslim followers at the same time that his anticapitalism brought support from Marxists, though he was not actually committed to Marxism.

In early 1965, Malcolm's house was firebombed, and a week later, he was assassinated on February 21, 1965 while speaking at a rally at the Audubon Ballroom in Harlem. He was 39 years old. He had long believed he would be killed by the Black Muslims, but although two of the three men convicted of shooting him were members of the Nation of Islam, no conspiracy was ever proved.

Malcolm, who had renamed himself El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz after his pilgrimage to Mecca, was survived by his wife Betty Shabazz, whom he had married in 1958, and four children. His funeral was attended by many African-American leaders, including Bayard Rustin, who had differed with him, and a huge crowd of followers. His words and actions have continued to fuel separatist tendencies in African-American communities, especially during moments, such as the late 1960s and late 1980s, when progress toward the integration of black and white America has been halted or reversed.

That people responded so strongly in different ways to a man who began his life by hating whites and ended it by having questioned his own deepest convictions is evidence of Malcolm X's influence and at the same time characteristic of an era of great struggle in the American conscience.

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