

IN 1957, THE U.S. SUPREME COURT DECISION IN *BROWN V. BOARD OF EDUCATION*, WHICH BANNED RACIAL SEGREGATION IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS, WAS THREE YEARS OLD, BUT CITIES AND STATES WERE STILL REFUSING TO IMPLEMENT THIS CHANGE. PRESIDENT DWIGHT D. EISENHOWER ORDERED SOLDIERS FROM THE NATIONAL GUARD AND THE ARMY TO ENFORCE SCHOOL DESEGREGATION AT CENTRAL HIGH SCHOOL IN LITTLE ROCK, ARKANSAS. ALSO IN 1957, THE MONTGOMERY BUS BOYCOTT'S SUCCESSFUL CHALLENGE TO RACIAL SEGREGATION ON CITY BUSES HAD ONLY RECENTLY ENDED. THAT CAMPAIGN HAD INTRODUCED A YOUNG PREACHER, DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., TO THE WORLD.

Meanwhile, in pop culture in 1957, comic book publishers were struggling to stay in business following congressional hearings a few years earlier that had claimed reading comic books led to juvenile delinquency. This was the context in which the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) decided to publish a comic book telling the story of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. The comic book detailed how activists in Montgomery, Alabama used nonviolent direct action to fight segregation. It provided background on Gandhi's teachings on nonviolence and lessons that anyone could use to challenge oppression.

HOW THE MARTIN LUTHER KING AND THE MONTGOMERY STORY COMIC BOOK CAME TO BE

FOR provided significant support to the Montgomery Improvement Association, the organization that led the bus boycott. One of FOR's key field staff, a white, Methodist minister named Glenn Smiley, traveled to Montgomery in early 1956, bringing materials and

helping to lead trainings in active nonviolence. Building on the work of his former colleague Bayard Rustin (see below), Smiley spent time with Dr. King and played a key role in deepening the young minister's understanding of nonviolence. Rustin, Smiley, and FOR would all remain important allies and advisors of Dr. King.

The idea of telling the story of the bus boycott in comic book form came from Alfred Hassler, who was then FOR's head of publications (and soon its executive director). Hassler thought that a comic book could reach more people -- including people who couldn't read well -- with the story of the bus boycott and the main ideas of nonviolent activism. He worked with a writer and editor from the comic book industry named Benton Resnik to create the comic book. Until recently, the artist was unknown; in 2018, renowned illustrator Sy Barry confirmed that he had done the artwork for *Martin Luther King and the Montgomery Story*.

Once he had a draft of the story's script, FOR's Hassler sent it to Dr. King for his approval. He responded in a letter dated October 28, 1956: "I have read the script very scrutinizingly, and frankly there is hardly anything I could add or subtract. It is certainly an excellent piece of work." Dr. King suggested edits on a couple of factual issues, and they were added to the final version.

The first copies of *Martin Luther King and the Montgomery Story* were published in December 1957, almost exactly one year after the boycott ended. FOR staff and allies then distributed it nationwide. Ministers and organizers James Lawson and Glenn Smiley, along with Rev. Ralph Abernathy of the newly-formed Southern Christian Leadership Conference, criss-crossed eight southern states, where they visited Black schools and churches and led workshops and seminars

on nonviolence. At these events, they handed out the comic book and an FOR pamphlet titled "How to Practice Nonviolence."



James Lawson leading a workshop for staff at the annual Southern Christian Leadership Conference meeting, 1966. (Photo credit: Bob Fitch Photography Archive, Stanford University Libraries <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/lawson-james-m>)

THE IMPACT OF MARTIN LUTHER KING AND THE MONTGOMERY STORY

Rev. James Lawson's nonviolent action workshops of the late 1950s and early 1960s had an especially lasting effect on the Black freedom struggle. One young minister who attended sessions in Nashville was C.T. Vivian, who became a key advisor to Dr. King and a leading figure in civil rights activism. He remembered the power of Lawson's training sessions: "... the workshops in nonviolence made the difference. We began to understand the philosophy behind it, the tactics, the techniques, how to in fact begin to take the blows and still respond with some sense of dignity."

The comic book informed nonviolent struggles for justice far beyond the segregated southern United States. Activists resisting the apartheid regime of racial segregation in South Africa shared the comic book there by the late 1950s. FOR soon published a Spanish-language edition for distribution throughout Latin America. And as FOR's work in the 1960s and '70s focused increasingly on opposing the U.S. war in Vietnam, the comic book was translated into Vietnamese to provide a teaching and organizing tool for nonviolent resistance in that southeast Asian country.

In 2008, Dalia Ziada, a young Egyptian human rights activist learned about the comic book and believed it could be helpful for civil rights groups across the Arab world and in Iran. She spearheaded its translation into Arabic and Farsi. And she credited "nonviolent technique[s] of negotiation and pressure" for her success

in getting it approved by government censors in Egypt. As protesters filled the streets of Cairo in early 2011 demanding an end to the dictatorship of Hosni Mubarak (who was soon forced to resign), Ziada was circulating through the crowds handing out the Arabic edition of *Martin Luther King and the Montgomery Story*.

IMPORTANT FACTS MARTIN LUTHER KING AND THE MONTGOMERY STORY LEFT OUT

As powerful a story and a teaching tool as the comic book was (and still is), it has some important limitations. It was the selective version of the Montgomery story that the Fellowship of Reconciliation and key early civil rights movement leaders chose to tell in the United States in 1957. So the narrative reflects biases that include putting women on the sidelines and erasing the essential contributions of a gay man. But without them, there would have been no "Montgomery Story."

THE REAL ROSA PARKS

The comic book's description of Mrs. Parks's decision not to give up her seat on December 1, 1955 says, "Because she was tired and her feet ached, Parks refused to give up her seat in the bus." But as she later clarified, "The only tired I was, was tired of giving in." Not that Rosa Parks had ever been someone who gave in.

By the time of her arrest, she was an experienced and widely respected activist. She had worked on campaigns defending young Black men falsely accused of rape, had been an investigator for the NAACP advocating for Black women who had been sexually assaulted by white men, was elected to a statewide leadership role in the NAACP, and had energized the Montgomery NAACP's Youth Council. She had not planned to get arrested that day, but when the moment came, she was extremely well-prepared for it.

JO ANN ROBINSON AND THE WOMEN'S POLITICAL COUNCIL

If Mrs. Parks was ready to take on the personal and political implications of her arrest, then the rest of Black Montgomery was ready to boycott the buses thanks in part to groundwork that had been laid by a woman named Jo Ann Robinson. She was the president of an organization called the Women's Political Council (WPC). Robinson and the WPC had been challenging conditions on the segregated buses long before Mrs. Parks's arrest. In a letter to the mayor of Montgomery in May

1954, the WPC had let him know that Black riders were prepared to stop riding the buses if they weren't treated better.

Robinson and the WPC had rallied behind 15-year-old Claudette Colvin and 18-year-old Mary Louise Smith when they were arrested earlier in 1955. When Mrs. Parks was arrested, it was Robinson and the WPC that sprang into action to mobilize the boycott. Though the comic book depicts the narrator Jones and other men responding to Mrs. Parks's arrest, it was Jo Ann

Robinson who overnight made tens of thousands of copies of the flyer calling for a boycott of the buses the following Monday. And it was Jo Ann Robinson who led key organizing and strategizing efforts that kept that boycott running for over a year.

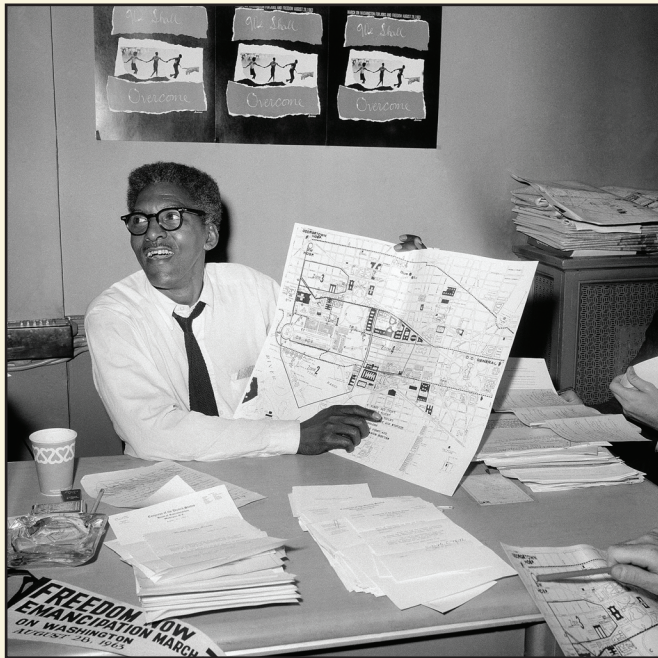
BAYARD RUSTIN

In 1955 Dr. King was not an expert on nonviolence. Bayard Rustin was instrumental in helping him to understand (and then explain to others) what it meant to fully embrace nonviolence and to apply it to push for social change. Raised a Quaker, Rustin had been a student and a practitioner of pacifism and nonviolence, as well as an activist for racial justice and labor rights, since his youth. In the early 1940s, Rustin joined the staff of FOR and, in that role, worked with the founders of the Congress of Racial Equality as they launched the organization. He also traveled to India in 1948 to study Gandhi's approach to nonviolence.

Because of his deep expertise, Rustin was invited to Montgomery in February 1956 "to consult with certain leaders of the bus boycott." He attended meetings and worked long hours with MIA leadership. And he mentored Dr. King on the practice of nonviolent resistance, including through a lengthy dialogue that persuaded him to get rid of the guns being used to guard his home. But in the comic book, Rustin and his expert contributions are absent. This is partly because he was a gay man when being gay was not only seen as unacceptable; it was against the law. Rustin was also considered a potentially controversial figure by some people in FOR and the wider movement because of his affiliation with the Communist Party in his youth and his imprisonment for resisting the draft in World War II. Until quite recently, Rustin's role and leadership in many key moments of the civil rights movement -- especially the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, of which he was the main organizer -- were almost always left out of the story.

GEORGIA GILMORE AND THE CLUB FROM NOWHERE

When he looked back in a 1957 speech at the lessons of the boycott, Rustin said, ". . . *the women of Montgomery have made this possible* [emphasis added]. . . . In addition to all else, it was the women who collected money that was needed." And nobody collected money better than Georgia Gilmore and the Club From Nowhere.



Bayard Rustin showing reporters a map of the March on Washington route, 1963. (Photo credit: Associated Press, via <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/21/us/california-mlk-lgbtq-bayard-rustin.html>)

BAYARD RUSTIN often paid a high price for being a gay man, including in his career with FOR. In 1953, he was arrested and convicted in Pasadena, California for having consensual sex with a man. At that time, and for much of the 20th century, homosexuality was illegal in California and across the U.S. Following his arrest, Rustin was asked to resign from FOR. Regrettably, key leaders of the organization viewed his conviction as incompatible with the pacifist organization's then-Christian identity. A few months later, Rustin was hired as the head of the War Resisters League (WRL), a secular pacifist organization that had long been considered a sister movement to FOR. While Rustin continued to collaborate with FOR staff in the years that followed, there was not a formal process of reconciliation during his lifetime for his dismissal. In collaboration with Rustin's surviving partner, FOR posthumously issued "An Amends" in 2015 -- a public acknowledgment of the harm it had done decades earlier -- and also launched a fellowship in Rustin's name.



Georgia Gilmore, photographed in 1978.

(Photo credit: Mark Wallhimer, The Montgomery Advertiser, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Georgia_Gilmore_front_wave.jpg)

Gilmore and the friends she enlisted cooked and sold food to support the boycott from day one. Their mysterious name was on purpose: it made them anonymous when selling food and protected them from police attention. As the club's fundraising efforts took off, it encouraged other groups to try to compete with them. Rev. B.J. Simms, a member of the MIA Executive Board, said that Gilmore's and her club's contributions were "indispensable." Yet as working class women operating behind the scenes, Georgia Gilmore and the Club From Nowhere do not appear in the comic book.

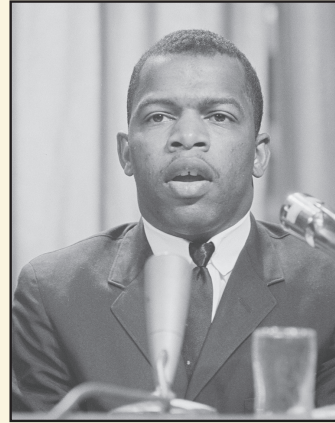
CONCLUSION

For all these exclusions, the *Martin Luther King and the Montgomery Story* comic book still offers powerful lessons for us today. Though it focuses on Dr. King, it also shows us the humanity and courage of many other Black people of Montgomery in 1955 and 1956. It reminds us that nonviolent resistance takes work and study, preparation and practice. Nonviolence wasn't a given in the Black freedom struggle in the United States. And it wasn't the only way that Black people asserted their dignity and fought for justice. But it worked in Montgomery, and it therefore shaped important parts of the rest of the civil rights movement. *Martin Luther King and the Montgomery Story* helped to capture that moment and to inform future struggles in the United States and around the world.

QUESTIONS FOR WRITING AND/OR DISCUSSION

1. What are some ways the story of the comic book helps to deepen our understanding of the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the wider Black freedom struggle?
2. What is the significance of the stories that were left out of the comic book? What are the implications of those exclusions for our study of history? For thinking about social movements? For addressing injustice today?
3. What are questions you still have (or new questions you have) about the comic book and/or the Montgomery Bus Boycott?

JOHN LEWIS (1940-2020)



John Lewis, photographed in 1964. When this photo was taken, the future congressman was 24 years old and chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).

(Photo credit: Marion Trikosko, U.S. News & World Report Magazine Photograph Collection, Library of Congress, <http://loc.gov/pictures/resource/ppmsc.01270/>)

John Lewis was one of the college students trained in nonviolence by Rev. James Lawson in Nashville, Tennessee. He later recalled what the comic book had meant to him: "It was part of learning the way of peace, the way of love, of nonviolence. Reading the Martin Luther King story, that little comic book, set me on the path that I'm on today." Lewis's path was a lifetime of working for justice. He was a leader in the 1961 Freedom Rides, during which he and other riders were brutally beaten by a white

mob. He became the chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in 1963, and in that role was a key organizer of and speaker at the famed March on Washington. In 1965, he led the first (attempted) march from Selma, Alabama to Montgomery in support of voting rights. He and other marchers were attacked and beaten by police as they crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge. Lewis became a U.S. congressman in 1987. As a legislator, he never stopped fighting to secure civil rights for all Americans and never stopped believing in the power of nonviolent resistance.

Much of what we know about the history of *Martin Luther King and the Montgomery Story* comes from the research and writing of Andrew Aydin, a long-time aide to Rep. Lewis. Aydin made it the subject of his master's thesis and suggested that Lewis tell his own story of struggle in a similar way. Together with illustrator Nate Powell, Lewis and Aydin created a trilogy of award-winning graphic memoirs about Lewis's life and the civil rights movement called *March*. In August 2021, a new series titled *Run* debuted to profile the second major phase of his adult life: his decision to go into politics.

John Lewis passed away in July of 2020. On the day of his funeral, *The New York Times* published a message he had left for young people. It read, in part, "... I urge you to answer the highest calling of your heart and stand up for what you truly believe. In my life I have done all I can to demonstrate that the way of peace, the way of love and nonviolence is the more excellent way. Now it is your turn to let freedom ring. When historians pick up their pens to write the story of the 21st century, let them say that it was your generation who laid down the heavy burdens of hate at last and that peace finally triumphed over violence, aggression and war."

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