



British Hills Knowledge Base: South Africa

The region of South Africa has been settled by humans for at least 170,000 years, and researchers have found fossils of human ancestors and stone tools up to 3 million years old.



For many thousands of years, the Khoi Khoi and the San people lived in South Africa. About 2000 years ago, other African people moved South from central and Western Africa. This created several Kingdoms across the southern region.

The arrival of Europeans and subsequent colonization and wars had a profound effect on the people of the South African region. In 1487, explorers from Portugal arrived in what is today Namibia. At this time, the goal of Europeans was to make a safe route to the Indian Ocean, and the rich trade there. However, in 1652 the Dutch East India company made the first permanent settlement at what is today Cape Town. This settlement was made to provide a safe, permanent place for ships to stop.

Soon, Dutch-speaking settlers came to Cape Town and made farms in the area. Their descendants, known as “Boers” (farmers), later became known as the Afrikaans people of South Africa, who currently form a large part of white South African culture. The number of farms and Boers quickly grew. They also brought in slaves from regions such as India and East Africa. There were several conflicts with the Khoi Khoi people, who used the land to graze cattle. The Europeans turned land traditionally used to graze livestock into farms. By the 1700s, the traditional Khoi Khoi way of life was destroyed.

In 1795, Britain invaded Cape Town to prevent Napoleon’s French possibly taking control. As a result, a large number of Boers moved further inland, into Khoi Khoi and other South African land. Boers and the British often fought, especially after Britain banned slavery in 1834. The banning of slavery, use of the English language, and religious differences led to the “great trek,” when thousands of Boers headed deeper into the region, away from British control.

The great trek caused many wars between the Boers and African people. For example, the first, second, and third Xhosa wars with the Xhosa people in 1779 and 1803, and the battle of Blood River with the Zulu people in 1838.

The Zulu, Xhosa, Boers, and others also fought the British. By 1902 Britain controlled the region, but only after the Anglo-Zulu war, Xhosa wars, and Anglo-Boer wars. These were violent, and British tactics included the burning of villages, the destruction of food and crops, and the imprisonment of women and



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children. During the second Anglo-Boer War 1900-1902, concentration camps were used to imprison 116,000 white people, and 115,000 black people. These camps were separated by race, crowded, full of disease, and prisoners were often deliberately mistreated. Up to 48,000 people died in these camps.

Despite all this, and perhaps because of this, South Africa became independent in 1910. In Britain, there was a strong reaction against the atrocities in South Africa, and anger was of course stronger in South Africa. However, this was “independence” only for white people. Voting was limited to white men, and white women from 1930. Only a few Asian and mixed-race people were allowed to vote, and black people were not allowed to vote at all. The “Afrikaaner” minority descended from the Boers dominated politics, and instituted many racist laws and systems to maintain control.

South Africa was ruled by a white-nationalist government under a system known as *Apartheid*. This maintained the power of the white minority while oppressing the black, coloured and Asian majorities. Under Apartheid, people were categorized by race and restricted to live and work in specific areas by the Group Areas Act of 1950. Public areas were segregated, non-white people were forced to carry special ID cards called “dompas”, and many jobs and government positions were restricted to whites only.

Under Apartheid, the government had the power to suppress virtually all criticism of its policies. Demonstrations and strikes by Black African groups, with the support of some whites, were often suppressed with violence and the killing of protestors. One example is the Soweto Uprising.

In 1976, a law to force the use of the Afrikaans language in schools caused mass protests. This was called the Soweto uprising. Many black school students began protesting this rule in the streets of Soweto, a major black township where no one spoke Afrikaans. In response, police killed anywhere from 176 to 700 people, many of them children. Today, June 16th is known as Youth Day and is a public holiday, to remember this day and the many innocent lives lost.

Negotiations to end Apartheid only ended in the late 1980's, and South Africa held its first democratic election in 1994, where for the first time national elections allowed all races to vote. That year saw the largest voter turnout in South African history, with people queueing hours to cast, for many non-whites, their first ever vote. These resulted in a government with a Black majority led by antiapartheid activist Nelson Mandela, the country's first Black president. The Republic of South Africa is now a parliamentary democracy based on **universal suffrage** – the right to vote regardless of income, gender, race, ethnicity, or any other restriction. However, the effects of Apartheid continue today. The current government is still working to create equality between different racial groups.



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Read the text, and answer the questions below:

1. For how long have humans lived in South Africa?

2. What peoples lived in the South African region before the European arrival?

3. Why did the Dutch East Indies company make a settlement at Cape Town?

4. When did Britain take control of the whole South African region?

5. When did South Africa become independent from Britain?

6. What was *Apartheid*?

7. Who was Nelson Mandela?

8. What is *universal suffrage*?
