

## Boycotts from history



### 1. The Meccan boycott (early 7th century)

After the Prophet Muhammad had begun preaching, many people in the city of Mecca boycotted Muhammad and the first Muslims. The ruling Quraysh tribe was angry that Muhammad criticised their traditional religion, which unlike Islam said there was not one God, but many. Muhammad and his followers had also made enemies by criticising inequality in the city.

Two powerful clans united to exclude the clan that protected Muhammad, Banu Hashim. Marrying or doing business with them was banned.

Meanwhile, filth and thorns were left on the ground outside Muhammad's house and sometimes he was assaulted. In the worst incident, a Muslim woman called Sumaya was killed. The Muslims had to live in an isolated part of the city.

Muhammad instructed his followers to be nonviolent in the face of this treatment, which lasted three years until they opted to leave and try to live in Medina instead of in the "Hijra".

There is a story that Muhammad and his friend hid from the angry Quraysh as they fled, and were only saved when a spider spun a web over the entrance, making it look undisturbed.

There would be more conflict and even war in the coming years, but eventually Muhammad returned to Mecca and united with the clans that had persecuted him and his followers.



### 2. Liverpool boycotts *The Sun* (20th century)

The worst disaster in British sport happened when part of the crowd was crushed at Hillsborough Stadium during a match between Liverpool and Nottingham Forest in 1989. 96 people died and hundreds more were injured in the disaster. The police had let too many people into the small space, but in the days and years that followed they blamed Liverpool fans.

Based on what some police said, *The Sun* newspaper published a front page headline that read "The Truth". Instead of explaining how fans helped save people, the newspaper wrote that they urinated on police from above, pick-pocketed dead fans and attacked rescue workers.

There was rage across Liverpool, with people burning *The Sun* in the streets. Sales in Merseyside fell from 524,000 to 320,000 overnight, and the boycott grew. In 1999 the Hillsborough Justice Campaign was formed by survivors, fans and bereaved families to call for the real truth about what had happened. They kept up the boycott and pushed for a full investigation into what really happened. This had still not happened by 2009 when 28,000 Liverpool fans came together to remember Hillsborough at Anfield Stadium, and drowned out Minister Andy Burnham's speech, chanting "Justice for the 96!".

In 2004 *The Sun* finally apologised. In 2016 a jury said the fans did nothing wrong and that the deaths were the fault of the police. Many in Liverpool still refuse to buy *The Sun*.



Image: *The Black Man's Lament* by Amelia Opie / wikimedia.org

### 3. Sugar boycott (18th/19th centuries)

Between 1662 and 1807 Britain shipped 3.1 million abducted Africans across the Atlantic Ocean – many died in horrible conditions during the journey. By the late 18th century, there was a growing “abolitionist” movement in Britain that wanted to stop slavery.

A lot of money was being made because slaves grew cash crops like tobacco, rum, coffee and above all sugar, which people in Europe had grown to love. In 1791 the British parliament had voted to allow the slave trade to continue, so the abolitionists looked for other strategies.

They realised that if enough people stopped using sugar, it would make slavery less profitable. By 1792 400,000 people had pledged to boycott slave-owned sugar. In a way their aims were like the modern Fair Trade movement. Sales of sugar grown by slaves in the West Indies plummeted, though this could not stop slavery by itself.

There was also pressure from former slaves and slaves who resisted or rebelled. The British government would eventually abolish first the slave trade and then slavery itself in 1833.

This did not end all slavery, and today there are tens of millions of slaves worldwide.



### 4. Nazi boycott of Jews (20th century)

Adolf Hitler became Chancellor of Germany in January 1933. Hitler believed that the Germans were a superior Aryan race, and that Jews were inferior.

In March Jews in the USA and Britain organised a boycott of Germany to protest the Nazis' antisemitic policies.

On 1 April the Nazis organised a boycott of Jewish businesses across the country. The Nazis claimed this was retaliation for the boycott of Germany, even though Hitler had said he wanted to eliminate Jews, and there was a long history of antisemitism in Europe.

Beginning with one day where Germans were aggressively discouraged from using Jewish shops, the “Brownshirts” – uniformed Nazi thugs – stood in front of shops to warn people away. Posters read “Kauf nicht bei Juden!” – “Don't buy from Jews!”

Josef Goebbels, the Nazi propaganda minister, said “the boycott will be resumed... until German Jewry has been annihilated”.

Many Germans ignored the boycott, but it was the beginning of worse persecution. In 1935 the racist Nuremberg laws were passed against Jews, and in 1938 came Kristallnacht, the “Night of the Broken Glass”. This saw the violent destruction of Jewish homes, businesses and synagogues. Some Jews fled Germany and Europe, but six million were killed by the Nazis in the Holocaust.





## 5. South Africa (20th century)

The British Boycott Movement was launched in 1959 to support the South African liberation movements who were fighting apartheid. Apartheid separated white and black citizens and allowed the white minority to rule and exploit the majority black population.

The boycott began in Britain at the request of the African National Congress (ANC), which campaigned for the rights of black South Africans. The campaign focused on Britain as South Africa's biggest trading partner. The idea was that if shoppers refused to buy South African goods, the apartheid government would come under increasing pressure.

The Boycott Movement grew into the Anti-Apartheid Movement, and the consumer boycott was extended to sport, culture and academia. South Africa was suspended from FIFA and the Football World Cup in 1961 and 1970. Protests also forced the cancellation of the South Africa cricket team's tour. The British government resisted imposing full sanctions and did not support the boycott, but South Africa was forced to leave the British Commonwealth, and by the 1980s big companies like Barclays were taking their money out of South Africa.

"The movement for the boycott of South African goods and for the imposition of economic and diplomatic sanctions against South Africa has served to highlight most effectively the despotic structure of the power that rules South Africa, and has given tremendous inspiration to the liberation movement in our country."

Nelson Mandela, 1962

Meanwhile, resistance to apartheid grew inside South Africa. Mass resistance in the townships, trade union action and sabotage by the ANC's armed wing Umkhonto we Sizwe combined with the international movement for boycott and sanctions to bring about the end of apartheid.

South Africa's first multi-racial elections, in which Nelson Mandela was elected president, took place in 1994.

Thanks to Action for Southern Africa. Read more at [aamarchives.org](http://aamarchives.org)



## 6. The Irish Land League (19th century)

Ireland was ruled from London in 1880, but most Irish people wanted home rule. Two million people had died in a great famine in 1845–49. The British government had done little to help.

Most of the land was owned by a small number of wealthy landlords, to whom farmers paid rent. The Irish Land League was formed to stop landlords from bullying farmers with high rents or evicting them from the land.

Enter Captain Charles Boycott, the Englishman from whom we get the word "boycott". He lived in County Mayo, but Boycott was not the landowner – he collected rents for the absentee landlord, Lord Erne. In 1880 poor harvests meant times were hard, and the farmers said they badly needed a 25 per cent reduction. Lord Erne refused, and Boycott started to evict tenants.

Meanwhile, Charles Stewart Parnell, the Irish nationalist leader, suggested an alternative to violence: "...give the lost man an opportunity of repenting. When a man takes a farm from which another has been evicted, you must shun him on the roadside when you meet him – you must shun him in the streets of the town – you must shun him in the shop – you must shun him on the fair green and in the market place, and even in the place of worship, by leaving him alone..."

This is just what happened to Captain Boycott. His employees left, and the postman, blacksmith, laundress and shopkeepers stopped taking any business from him. He couldn't harvest Lord Erne's own crops. It was big news in Britain and the government backed Boycott. They sent workers and soldiers to help him, and they eventually bought the estate's crops, but at great expense. Boycott fled to England, but "boycotts" were used in other places. In 1881 the British government passed a Land Reform Act, which granted the demands of the Irish Land League, but they also passed a law saying boycotters could be imprisoned without trial in future.



“Gandhian economic boycott, however, combined refusal to buy English textiles with the collection of funds for the merchants precisely not to confuse the key issue by threatening their livelihood.”

Johan Galtung

## 7. Bristol Bus Boycott (20th century)

In 1963 the Bristol Omnibus Company in England was refusing to employ black or Asian people to work on the buses. Inspired by Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott in the USA, the Bristol Bus Boycott was begun by four young black men: Roy Hackett, Owen Henry, Audley Evans and Prince Brown. They campaigned for Bristol's West Indians to stop using the buses altogether until non-white people were allowed to be bus drivers and conductors.

This was the time of the Windrush Generation, which saw new arrivals from West Indian islands like Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago. They were named after the MV Empire Windrush, one of the ships that brought them to Britain. Though they were invited to work in Britain, many experienced racism.

The Bristol Bus Boycott won media coverage in Bristol and nationwide. Their main opponents were the local Transport and General Workers' Union, which had voted to stop “coloured” workers on buses. The arguments were bitter, but after four months transport workers finally voted to remove the ban. Raghbir Singh, a Sikh, became Bristol's first non-white bus conductor, and more quickly followed.

The Race Relations Act was passed in 1968, making it illegal to refuse to employ someone based on their race.



### Journaling

- What do these examples of boycotts suggest to you?
- If you were taking part in a boycott, what would make it just or unjust?