



Gandhi Reconsidered: When Paganism Met Progressivism

That certainly is the narrative created by historians — who, history has taught us, *can* tell a lie — and works such as Richard Attenborough’s award-winning 1982 film *Gandhi*. But there is a reason why Indian-born novelist Salman Rushdie responded to that movie by lamenting, “Deification is an Indian disease. Why should Attenborough do it?” And with Gandhi back in the news owing to a newly published biography about him, it’s fitting to examine what that reason might be.



Any discussion of Gandhi should start with what most characterizes his image: non-violence and respect for all peoples. And the image certainly is a bit different from the reality. Everyone knows, for instance, about how Gandhi advocated non-violence in India’s struggle against the British; what is less well known is that, after the British’s 1906 declaration of war against the Zulus in South Africa, Gandhi encouraged that nation’s Indians to support the military effort, [writing](#), “If the Government only realised what reserve force is being wasted, they would make use of it and give Indians the opportunity of a thorough training for actual warfare.” And while the British weren’t amenable to this — thus, ironically, doing more at that time to ensure Indian pacifism than the drum-beating Gandhi — he was appointed a Sgt. Major in the British army and allowed to lead a stretcher-bearer corps.

But while we can’t be sure if Gandhi really was concerned about the “The Natal Native trouble....,” as he put it, he certainly had reasons for supporting the war: He believed it would help Indians secure full citizenship rights from the British. And he seemed to have no compunction about achieving this on the backs of South African blacks. For example, he once [said](#) that “to be placed on the same level as the - Natives seemed too much to put up with. Kaffirs [a now derogatory term for blacks, although it likely had a different connotation a century ago] are as a rule uncivilized - the convicts even more so. They are troublesome, very dirty and live like animals.” He also asserted that Indians are “undoubtedly infinitely superior to the Kaffirs.”



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Yet when Gandhi had the opportunity to support a truly just war, he again was found wanting. While the British were defending India against the Japanese in 1942, all Gandhi could think to do was busy himself trying to get the British to leave the subcontinent. And given that 40 percent of American POWs, 17 percent of Filipinos, and 23 million ethnic Chinese perished at the tyrannical Tokyo regime's hands, Gandhi's success would no doubt have meant disaster for his countrymen. Gandhi, however, was perhaps oblivious to such possibilities. After all, this was a man who believed there was "an exact parallel" between the British and the Third Reich.

Some may now say that he should have tried telling this to the Nazis' millions of Jewish victims.

Well, he just might have.

As Andrew Roberts [wrote](#) in his review of *Great Soul* by Joseph Lelyveld (the aforementioned Gandhi biography):

We do know for certain that he [Gandhi] advised the Czechs and Jews to adopt nonviolence toward the Nazis, saying that "a single Jew standing up and refusing to bow to Hitler's decrees' might be enough 'to melt Hitler's heart.'" ... Starting a letter to Adolf Hitler with the words "My friend," Gandhi egotistically asked: "Will you listen to the appeal of one who has deliberately shunned the method of war not without considerable success?" He advised the Jews of Palestine to "rely on the goodwill of the Arabs" and wait for a Jewish state "till Arab opinion is ripe for it."

At best, this is childish naiveté. It's also true, however, that Gandhi's attitude toward violence visited on others could range from indifference to joy. On one occasion, for instance, he said to a fellow Hindu who was concerned about their co-religionists' safety, "I do not mind if each and every one of the 500 families in your area is done to death." Then, Roberts provides an example involving the Indian leader's 17-year-old great-niece Manu:

He could also be vicious to Manu, whom he on one occasion forced to walk through a thick jungle where sexual assaults had occurred in order for her to retrieve a pumice stone that he liked to use on his feet. When she returned in tears, Gandhi "cackled" with laughter at her and said: "If some ruffian had carried you off and you had met your death courageously, my heart would have danced with joy."

Thankfully, Gandhi never could experience the joy of a dead Manu — but the live one was a different matter. While he criticized the nakedness of "Kaffirs," the 70-something Gandhi encouraged Manu and other young women to sleep in the nude with him. Some in his 100-member personal entourage objected to this, which resulted in their resigning or being fired. As for Manu's father, Gandhi told him that the girl was sharing his bed so that he could "correct her sleeping posture" (holy philanderer, Batman, even Bill Clinton didn't think of that one!).

Of course, some will say that Gandhi did little more than sleep during his salacious slumbers. After all, he said that his arousal at these times "was an altogether strange and shameful experience" and that he could not "imagine a thing as ugly as the intercourse of men and women." And perhaps this helps explain the true lust of his life, something about which he apparently felt no shame: his relationship with a German-Jewish bodybuilder named Hermann Kallenbach.

Despite being married with four sons, Gandhi left his wife for Kallenbach in 1908. The pair then, [writes](#) Daniel Bates in his *Daily Mail* review of *Great Soul*, "lived together for two years in a house Kallenbach built in South Africa and pledged to give one another 'more love, and yet more love ... such love as they hope the world has not yet seen.'" Bates continues:



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At one point he [Gandhi] wrote to the German:

"Your portrait (the only one) stands on my mantelpiece in my bedroom. The mantelpiece is opposite to the bed."

Although it is not clear why, Gandhi wrote that vaseline [sic] and cotton wool were a "constant reminder" of Kallenbach.

He nicknamed himself "Upper House" and his lover "Lower House" and he vowed to make Kallenbach promise not to "look lustfully upon any woman."

For Gandhi's part, he might have had no trouble at all abiding by this restriction, as he also wrote to Kallenbach: "How completely you have taken possession of my body. This is slavery with a vengeance."

Of course, we haven't heard much about the real Gandhi, and if you know about revisionist history, you know why. What you probably don't know, however, is that the Indian leader started this revisionism, enjoining journalists to not report his actual words but instead file transcripts that he authorized — and sometimes heavily edited. Thus, while Gandhi is famous for uttering (or writing later, or, or, well ... who knows?) the condemnation of the West, "Your Christians are so unlike your Christ," we could say, figuratively speaking, that Gandhi is so unlike Gandhi.

Not surprisingly, Lelyveld's book and its reviews have caused quite a stir. *Great Soul* was promptly [banned](#) in the Indian state of Gujarat, and Indian and other Eastern scribes have leapt to Gandhi's defense. For example, Indonesian writer Maya Safira Muchtar [takes exception](#) to the labeling of Gandhi's Kallenbach relationship as "homosexual," saying that it was only "homoerotic." She condemns the West, saying that it could not at the time understand the two men's mutual attraction because it was not yet acquainted with "unconditional love" (she — a Muslim — also criticizes Europeans for colonizing the East).

While her defense of the Upper House/Lower House relationship seems a stretch, I accept that there is some nuance to the Indian leader. After all, we're talking here about a rather odd man who drank his own urine and was obsessed with fecal matter. So maybe Gandhi really did change his views on war after the Zulu campaign; perhaps he slept naked with young women to, as he claimed, test his virtue; and I suppose that his attitude towards others' deaths could be chalked up to his belief in reincarnation. Maybe, perhaps, I suppose. But the kicker is that, on top of all this, he is overrated as a political leader. He failed to achieve virtually all his stated goals, sometimes alienating allies and often dropping the ball when it most mattered. Of course, the British did leave India, but is this a surprise? Formerly the richest country in Europe, the UK emerged from WWII one of the poorest. The sun was going to set on the British Empire regardless.

None of this matters to Gandhi's defenders, however. Their attitude is best summed up by Lelyveld's statement about the Indian leader's life (*Great Soul*, mind you, is actually favorable to Gandhi): "What stands out is the commitment rather than the futility."

Ah, the valuing of symbolism over substance.

It's a typical progressive fault — and Gandhi has benefitted from it because he was quite a progressive man. Of course, with his gaunt physique and Spartan dress making him seem like an ascetic down from the mountain, we may not think of him that way. But remember that he was trained as a lawyer at University College London; served the British; was his day's version of a "community organizer"; and, like so many contemporary leftists, praised the European fascists (he called Benito Mussolini a



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“superman”). It’s that difference between image and reality: The white robes and shaven head, like the non-violence, were adopted later.

Having said this, I do believe that Gandhi was more misguided soul than miscreant. It also seems, however, that the best thing one can say about him is that he was a relatively ineffectual kook. As for his deification, well, let us examine what he had to say about it. In 1920, before being given the title “mahatma” (Great Soul), the Indian leader said, “I do not accept the claim of saintliness.... I am prone to as many weaknesses as you are.” This is one time when we certainly should take his words to heart.



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