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Civil Disobedience, Social Justice, Nationalism & Populism, Violent Demonstrations and Race Relations

Congress of Racial Equality

by Yvonne Johnson

IDENTIFICATION Interracial civil rights organization

DATE Founded in 1942

Better known by its acronym, CORE, the Congress of Racial Equality was the first modern civil rights organization to use civil disobedience in the form of sit-ins and freedom rides to destroy segregation.

CORE originated from within the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) as the Committee of Racial Equality. In 1941, James Farmer, a committed pacifist and equal-rights worker, accepted a position with FOR as a race-relations secretary and speechmaker. In early 1942, he produced a plan to destroy segregation by implementing a nonviolent Gandhian philosophy of civil disobedience. He also organized one of the first sit-ins in a Chicago restaurant and co-founded CORE along with George Houser and Bayard Rustin . CORE held its first national conference in 1943, and two years later, it formally separated from FOR, renaming itself the Congress of Racial Equality.

In its first years, CORE depended on local chapters and volunteers, both white and black, to protest segregation. When CORE volunteers were refused entrance or service in restaurants and department stores, they would refuse to leave until served or admitted. In 1947, CORE and FOR joined forces to protest segregated seating on interstate buses. In what was known as the Journey of Reconciliation, volunteers who refused to move to segregated seating traveled on buses to the upper South. The Journey had little immediate impact on segregation, and four of the volunteers, including Bayard Rustin , were arrested.

The 1950's was a seminal decade in the development of CORE. In 1950, Jimmy Robinson became executive secretary of CORE. Although Robinson's fund-raising skills and photo-offset letters kept the organization afloat, it suffered from declining membership and disagreements over strategy in the first years of the decade. Lula Farmer served as the organization's accountant, and Jim Peck edited the *CORElator*, CORE's official publication. Both Farmer and Peck offered their services on a volunteer basis.

By the mid-1950's, Robinson's successful fund-raising techniques had reestablished the organization's viability. The Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott , led by Martin Luther King, Jr., also breathed new life into the organization. CORE traveled to Montgomery to offer training in nonviolent resistance to bus boycotters. By the end of the 1950's, the organization had established fifty-three chapters throughout the United States and had moved its focus to the South.

Impact

CORE was among the first civil rights organizations to use nonviolent protest and to reveal the national scope of segregation. During the 1950's, CORE established new chapters and relocated to the South, allowing it to assume a leadership role in the Civil Rights movement the following decade. CORE volunteers offered support and training to protesters, encouraged southern "sit-ins," and inspired the Freedom Rides across the South in 1961.

Subsequent Events

In 1961, Farmer, who left CORE to work as a union organizer, returned to the organization to become the national director. CORE volunteers broadened their activities, participating in sit-ins in North Carolina, picketing grocery chains in Denver and Seattle, and fighting discrimination in trade unions in Philadelphia. CORE leaders also planned another integrated ride on interstate buses. Outside Anniston, Alabama, the first bus was assaulted and destroyed by firebombs. The riders of the second bus were arrested in Jackson, Mississippi, and incarcerated in the county jail and Parchman State Prison.

In 1964, three CORE volunteers, Andy Goodman, Mickey Schwerner, and James Chaney, were murdered during the Freedom Summer voter registration project. By the mid-1960's, many blacks in CORE became convinced that whites should not hold positions of leadership, and in 1966, CORE delegates to the national convention formally joined forces with the Black Power

movement. Internal conflicts and debate over CORE's membership caused organizational decline during the late 1960's, and the organization slipped from the forefront of the Civil Rights movement.

Further Reading

- 1 Bell, Inge Powell. *CORE and the Strategy of Nonviolence*. New York: Random House, 1968. A contemporary exploration of the group's philosophies and strategies.
- 2 Farmer, James. *Lay Bare the Heart: An Autobiography of the Civil Rights Movement*. New York: Arbor House, 1985. Farmer's memoirs of his experiences within CORE.

Citation Types

Type	Format
MLA Style	Johnson, Yvonne. "Congress of Racial Equality." <i>Civil Disobedience, Social Justice, Nationalism & Populism, Violent Demonstrations and Race Relations</i> , edited by Editors of Salem Press, Salem, 2017. <i>Salem Online</i> .
APA Style	Johnson, Yvonne. (2017). Congress of Racial Equality. In E. Salem Press (Ed.), <i>Civil Disobedience, Social Justice, Nationalism & Populism, Violent Demonstrations and Race Relations</i> . Hackensack: Salem. Retrieved from https://online.salempress.com
CHICAGO Style	Johnson, Yvonne. "Congress of Racial Equality." <i>Civil Disobedience, Social Justice, Nationalism & Populism, Violent Demonstrations and Race Relations</i> . Hackensack: Salem, 2017. Accessed January 10, 2019. https://online.salempress.com .