Nobel Peace Prize Winners
6 Articles

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Wangari Muta Maathai
by ReadWorks

Wangari Muta Maathai was born on April 1, 1940, in Nyeri, Kenya. She was a student for many years and attended a total of four undergraduate and graduate schools. In fact, Wangari was the first woman to earn a doctorate in biology within the region of East and Central Africa. Her studies focused on biological sciences, and she eventually started teaching veterinary anatomy.

Eric Muthoga / UNESCO (CC BY-SA 3.0 IGO)

illustration of Wangari Muta Maathai

In addition to her interest in animals, Wangari was passionate about the environment. In 1977, she developed an organization called the Green Belt Movement, a movement in which organized groups of women would plant trees. This movement was very successful. Over 20 million trees were planted on church compounds and school grounds! The campaign's goal was to combat the rampant deforestation that was hurting Kenya's agricultural industry and its workers. On a more symbolic level, this campaign was also made to unite women together under a common cause.

Maathai was also involved in Kenyan politics. She was active in opposing Daniel arap Moi's regime, which became increasingly authoritarian over time. She actively fought for democracy. In 2004, Maathai was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize "for her contribution to sustainable development, democracy, and peace."

Shirin Ebadi
by ReadWorks

Photo Credit: GeorgeCaulfield, CC BY-SA 4.0

Photograph of Shirin Ebadi

Shirin Ebadi was born on June 21, 1947, in Hamedan, Iran. In 1948, Shirin and her family moved to Tehran, the capital of Iran. Growing up in a family of academics, Shirin was passionate about learning and education. After graduating from secondary school, Shirin attended law school and graduated three years later with a degree in law. Then, she earned a doctorate in private law from Tehran University. At the young age of 28, Ebadi was named the president of one of the benches in Tehran's court system. Her appointment made history, for she was the first female ever to fill this role in Iran's judicial system.

But Ebadi's luck changed as Khomeini, a religious leader, came to power. He was extremely conservative and did not think women should be judges. After a law was introduced prohibiting women from serving as judges, Ebadi had to leave her job. In 1992, Ebadi was

finally able to obtain a lawyer's license and establish a private practice. Khomeini had passed away three years earlier, and Ebadi finally had the freedom to fight for justice.
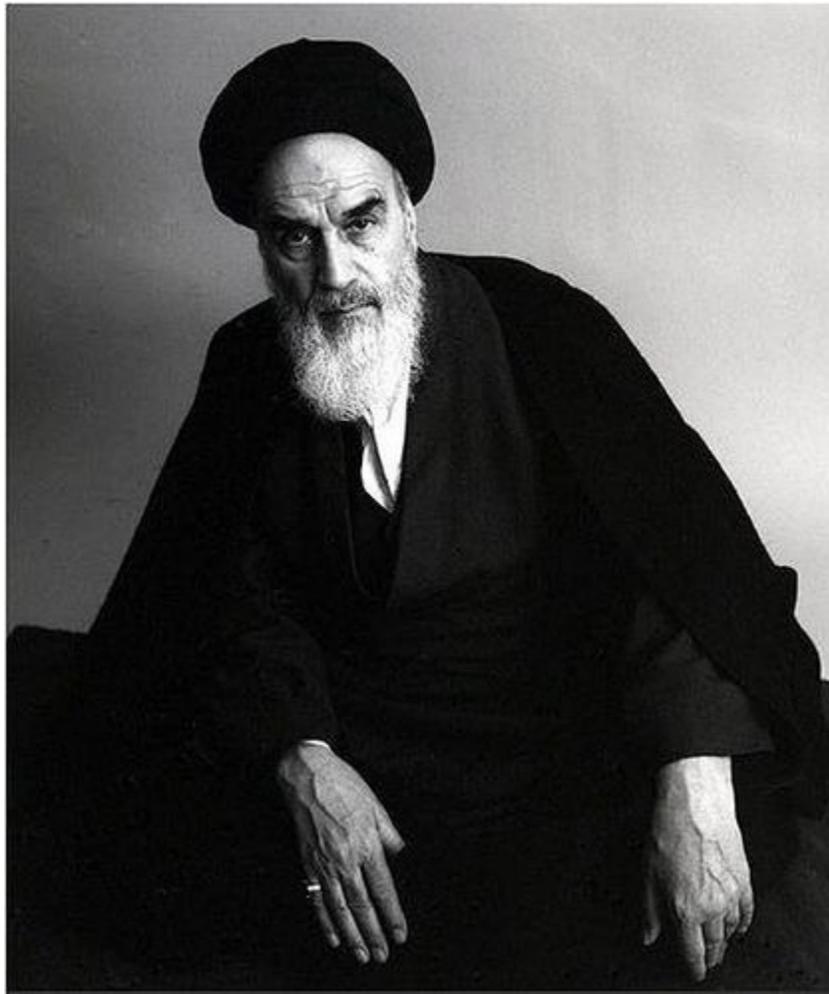
Photograph of Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini

And she certainly did. Ebadi took on many cases that gave her the opportunity to defend the rights of marginalized groups like women and children. Sometimes she was even arrested for representing vocal opponents of the Iranian government. In addition to her bravery in the courtroom, Ebadi set up multiple organizations dedicated to human rights advocacy. One of her organizations, Million Signatures Campaign, aims to stop discrimination against women in Iran's judicial system. In 2003, Ebadi won the Nobel Peace Prize for "her efforts for democracy and human rights."

Malala Yousafzai
by ReadWorks

Photo Credit: DFID - UK Department for International Development (Malala Yousafzai: Education for girls), CC BY 2.0

Photograph of Malala Yousafzai

Malala Yousafzai was born on July 12, 1997, in Mingora, Pakistan. As a young child, Malala was exposed to the importance of education. Her father was in charge of running a local learning institution and instilled in Malala the value of attending school. Everything changed for Malala and her family when the Taliban began to have more authority in the Swat Valley region around 2007. The Taliban, a violent fundamental Islamist group, prohibited females from participating in many activities, including attending school. The Taliban were so committed to banning female access to education that they destroyed around 400 schools within two years of their control.

But Malala would not be deterred from her passion for learning. Not only did she continue to attend school, but she also spoke publicly about her dissent. On a Pakistani televised

program, Malala was brave enough to express her disbelief; "How dare the Taliban take away my basic right to education?" Malala boldly proclaimed. Under the pseudonym 'Gul Makai,' she also began to blog about what it was like as a female under the Taliban's oppressive rule. Life became so dangerous for Malala and her family that they had to flee their home as a temporary safety measure. When they returned, Malala and her father started to become more vocal in opposition to the Taliban's sexist rules. Word started to spread about this father-daughter duo and Malala began to win awards for her bravery. The Taliban was extremely unhappy with Malala, and on October 9, 2012, a member of the Taliban shot Malala in the head.

Malala received immediate medical attention, and after multiple surgeries, she woke up from a coma. Miraculously, the trauma did not cause any permanent brain damage! As the story of her survival and bravery spread, Malala became an international icon and an education advocate. Since recovering from her wound, Malala has written a best-selling book and started a foundation for female empowerment. In October 2014, Malala won a much-deserved Nobel Peace Prize.

Photograph of the Obama family meeting with Malala

Juan Manuel Santos
by ReadWorks

Photo Credit: Wilson Dias (Agência Brasil, CC BY 3.0

photograph of Juan Manuel Santos

Juan Manuel Santos was born on August 10, 1951, in Bogota, Colombia. His family had a great deal of political influence in Colombia, with his great-uncle being Colombia's president from 1938 to 1942. Juan was, therefore, exposed to life in politics from a very early age. The importance of journalism was also instilled in Juan since his family owned the largest newspaper in the country.

School played a very large role in Juan's young adulthood. Not only did he study business and economics at the University of Kansas, but he also earned degrees from both the London School of Economics and Harvard University in public administration. Soon after graduating, Juan returned to Colombia, where he began to report for his family's newspaper, *El Tiempo*. He proved himself to be a skilled reporter, and he received awards for his work. He eventually

transitioned his career over to politics, and after holding multiple positions in the government, Juan was elected the president of Colombia.

The primary goal of his presidency was to end Colombia's civil war. A rebel group called FARC had been fighting with the Colombian government for decades, and Santos made it his mission to create a peaceful resolution. Santos worked long and hard to come up with a peace deal, which would have granted amnesty to thousands of rebel fighters. In the fall of 2016, however, the Colombian citizens voted against this deal. Despite this undesired outcome, Juan was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize "for his resolute efforts to bring the country's more than 50-year-long civil war to an end."
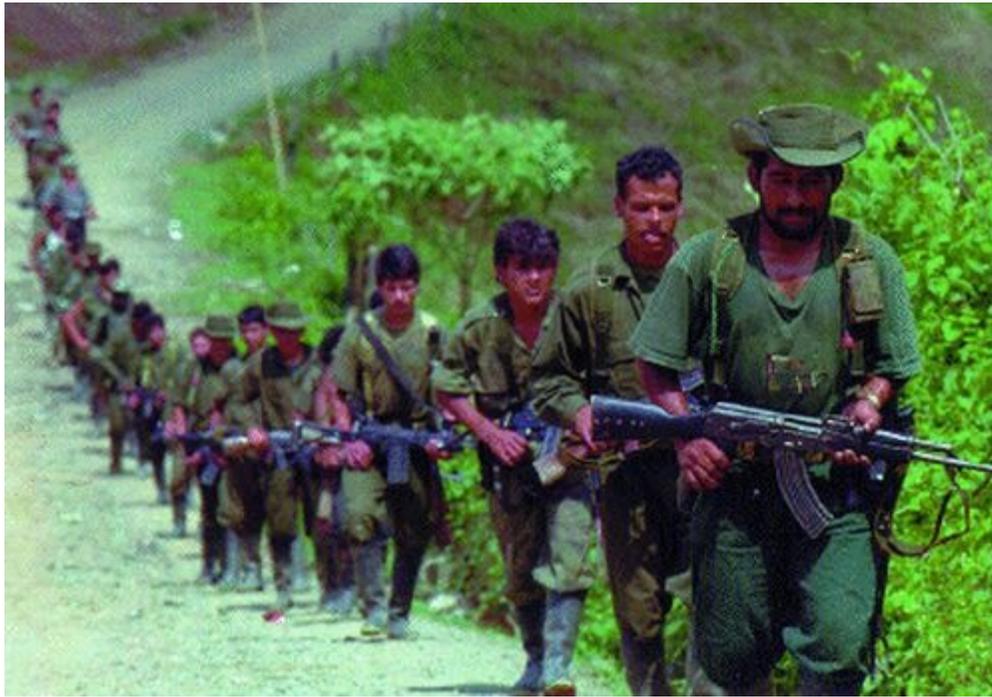
photograph of FARC fighters

Liu Xiaobo

by ReadWorks

Liu Xiaobo was born on December 28, 1955, in Changchun, China. As a student, he loved to study philosophy and literature and, after he graduated, he worked as a writer and a literary critic. His writings were radical, especially in their criticisms of the status quo. For example, the 1987 publication of Liu Xiaobo's first nonfiction book, *Criticism of the Choice: Dialogues with Li Zehou*, was an explicit disparagement of Confucianism, a traditional Chinese philosophy that had a strong influence on China's reigning cultural values. Following this publication, Liu Xiaobo received his doctorate in literature and began traveling around the United States as a guest university lecturer.

Photograph of Tiananmen Square

Liu Xiaobo returned home in 1989 to participate in the Tiananmen Square student protests in Beijing. In opposition to the ruling Communist party, these protestors wanted China to be a more democratic country. The Chinese government was extremely unhappy with this public event of resistance, so they ordered troops to kill and arrest thousands of the protestors. While Liu Xiaobo survived this event, he was sent to prison for two years as a consequence of his participation. Jail time did not quiet Liu Xiaobo, however, and he continued to speak out against the government following his release from prison. His criticism of the one-party system in China led to his second arrest and his three-year sentence at a labor camp.

But his voice could not be silenced. He believed that the Chinese government was not adhering to the Chinese Constitution, which states that Chinese citizens have the right to "freedom of speech, of the press, of assembly, of association, of procession and of demonstration." After publishing a manifesto calling for democracy in China, Liu Xiaobo was

arrested for the third time and was sentenced to eleven years in prison. When he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2010, his chair was empty. On July 13, 2017, he passed away in prison.

Photograph of person protesting Liu Xiaobo imprisonment

Elie Wiesel
by ReadWorks
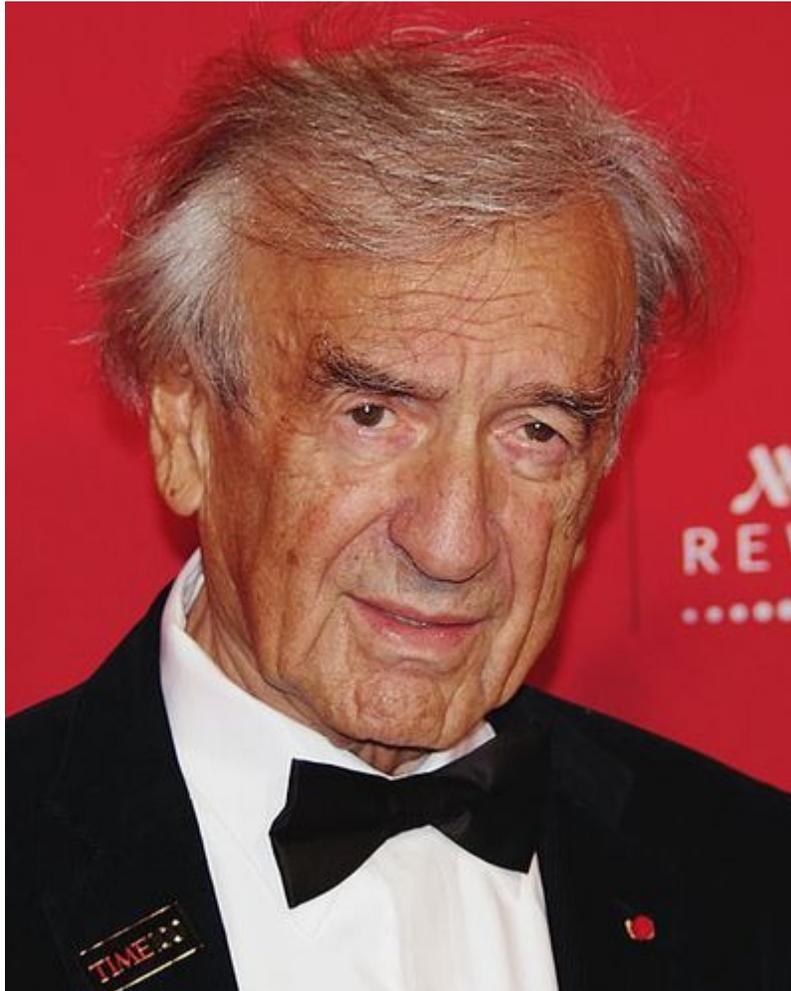
Photo Credit: David Shankbone, CC BY 3.0

Photograph of Elie Wiesel

Elie Wiesel was born on September 30, 1928, in Sighet, Romania. He grew up in a tumultuous and violent time in Europe, with World War II raging from 1939 to 1945. It was an especially dangerous time for Wiesel's family because they were Jewish. Hitler, the leader of the German Nazi party, wanted to eliminate Jews and started to send Jewish people to concentration camps. At these camps, prisoners were forced to work as slaves, starved, or murdered. In 1944, Hitler's forces took control of Hungary and ordered for Jewish people in the region to be sent to camps. The first camp that the Wiesel family was sent to was Auschwitz, where his mother and younger sister were killed. He and his father were then sent to the Buchenwald camp in Germany, where his father passed away of starvation. But Elie Wiesel was still alive when the camp was liberated in 1945 with the end of World War II.

Photograph of child survivors being freed from Buchenwald

After his release, Elie Wiesel studied in Paris, where he soon started writing as a journalist. Thirteen years later, he published a memoir called *La Nuit*, which translates to 'Night.' It told the story of his time at the horrific concentration camps. He continued to write about the Holocaust, and ended up publishing almost thirty books in his long writing career.

Wiesel became one of the most important international voices on the Holocaust. He believed that it was necessary to keep the memory of concentration camps alive as a warning against public indifference to evil. One of Wiesel's most famous quotes is, "The opposite of love is not hate, but indifference." In 1986, Wiesel was awarded with the Nobel Peace Prize for his work as a writer and an activist.