

History Topic of the Month

Claudia Jones (1915–1964), Journalist and Activist

Many people in history have dedicated their lives to fighting inequality. Claudia Jones campaigned for equal rights across two continents. She faced racism and prejudice, but was determined to help build a better world. She wanted to change the lives of ordinary people, by helping them find better homes and jobs, and giving them something they could feel pride in. She always put other people first.



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Claudia Jones

Claudia's early days

Claudia was born in Trinidad, then a part of the British Empire. When she was eight years old, her family migrated to New York so her father could find work. Claudia spent her childhood and teenage years growing up in Harlem where she experienced racism every day. When she was 17 years old Claudia caught the dangerous bacterial infection tuberculosis and she was left with health problems for the rest of her life.

Despite being an award-winning student at High School, being both poor and a black immigrant meant Claudia did not go to college. The problems Claudia and her family faced growing up – poverty, the struggle to find jobs, poor housing and racial prejudice – were the problems she would spend her life fighting against.

Claudia starts a life of campaigning

In 1936 Claudia joined the Communist Party of the United States of America. She believed in the Communist Party's stated goals to build a better world for all working people, including black people. Claudia's talent and passion was quickly recognised. In 1937 she joined the editorial staff of the Communist Party newspaper, *The Daily Worker*. By 1945 she was a respected member of the party, becoming a strong spokesperson not only for equal rights for black people, but also for women. She campaigned for more job training, equal pay, reduced food prices and childcare.

Arrested!

In 1948 Jones was arrested for being a member of the Communist Party – at this time it was illegal for immigrants to join the Communist Party. She was imprisoned on Ellis Island – from the window of her cell she could see the Statue of Liberty. She wrote about the statue that its, "back is turned squarely on the USA. It's no wonder, considering what she would have to look upon. She would weep, if she had to look this way".

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Claudia was in and out of prison four times over the next seven years. During this time she suffered her first heart attack. The courts eventually ordered that she be deported back to Trinidad. During her trial she argued that racism in America made “a mockery of [the USA’s] claims of a ‘free America’ in a ‘free world’”.

Arrival in Britain

Claudia was refused entry to Trinidad and Tobago as the British governor of the islands believed she would “prove troublesome”. Instead, she made a new home in Britain, leaving America for the last time in December 1955. On arrival she was met by several campaigners in the black community, including the British Caribbean war-hero and civil rights campaigner Billy Strachan. She immediately joined the Communist Party of Great Britain.

The black community in Britain

During the 1950s, the ‘Windrush generation’ was arriving in Britain. These Caribbean migrants were travelling to Britain to help the country rebuild after the Second World War, many of them taking jobs in the NHS and the transport industry.

However, racism was a big problem in Britain, just as it was in the US. Black people faced prejudice and discrimination in every part of their lives. Landlords refused to rent to black people. Many pubs and businesses refused to serve black people. Anti-immigrant groups argued all migrants should be ‘sent home’. Black people were under-paid and often paid high rents for dirty and crowded houses, in areas where bomb-damage from the Second World War had still not been repaired.

Claudia starts campaigning

When Claudia arrived in London, she found most black people had few people to represent them. Many black people in London were living in only a few small areas – like Notting Hill and Brixton – where white landlords would agree to rent to them (at a high price).

Claudia immediately got involved in campaigns in the local area. She argued for the same rights of better jobs, housing and equal rights that she had campaigned for in America. Claudia didn’t want things to be ‘good enough’ she wanted them to be better – for black people to have the same opportunities as white people.

Billy Strachan was amazed at her energy - “because we had people working on the buses... Claudia said what about [them] being made Inspectors? Which we had not even foreseen because we thought we’d achieved a hell of a lot by just getting [them] a job!”



Claudia Jones was founder of the first Caribbean festival in London. Why do you think it was so important in helping to give people a voice?

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The West Indian Gazette

In 1958 Claudia set up a newspaper called the *West Indian Gazette*. The newspaper became Britain's first major black newspaper. It was written by, and for, the Caribbean community in Britain – and Claudia was the editor.

In the 1950s, before the internet or social media, newspapers were how many people found out about the news, as well as job and housing opportunities, and events. In Britain, the newspapers very rarely covered stories about the black community – and if they did they were often negative or sensationalised. Newspapers were vital to help communities have a voice.

Claudia's newspaper helped to give black people a voice. The paper covered the news and focused on the daily struggles of the black community in Britain. Claudia wrote about civil rights campaigns across the world, from the US to Nelson Mandela in South Africa.



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Trinidad-born journalist and activist Claudia Jones at the offices of the *West Indian Gazette* at 250 Brixton Road, Brixton, south London, 1962. Jones founded the newspaper in 1958 and was its editor until her death.

The paper became one of the leading voices for civil rights in Britain. Claudia wrote in an essay in 1964 that the paper stood for "full economic, social and political equality and respect for human dignity for West Indians and Afro-Asians in Britain".



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Campaigning for civil rights

The newspaper helped give a voice to the many issues Claudia campaigned for. As well as lobbying for black people to get more senior jobs in London Transport, she also campaigned against “colour bars” (unspoken barriers stopping black people from getting promotions, joining societies or entering certain buildings) in employment and in people’s social lives.

Claudia campaigned strongly against the 1962 Commonwealth Immigrants Bill, which was designed to make migration to Britain from the Commonwealth harder.

In August 1963, Claudia led a civil rights march to the American embassy, in support of the March on Washington organised by Martin Luther King Jr. in the USA. King later travelled to London in 1964 and met Claudia.

From riots to carnival

One of Claudia’s most lasting legacies was founding what was to become the Notting Hill Carnival. In August 1958, Notting Hill had seen several nights of riots after racist groups launched attacks on the black community, who were forced to defend themselves. Similar attacks had already happened in Nottingham. The riots made national headlines, and made people more aware of the dangers of racial violence.

While Claudia believed it was important that people understood the dangers of racism, she didn’t want the Caribbean community to be defined by this. Claudia thought it was important to “wash the taste of [the riots] out of our mouths”. She thought the best way of doing this was a carnival celebrating the art and music of the Caribbean.



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Scene from Bramley Road, Notting Hill, where police were called to prevent trouble between black and white residents in the area on 31 August 1958.

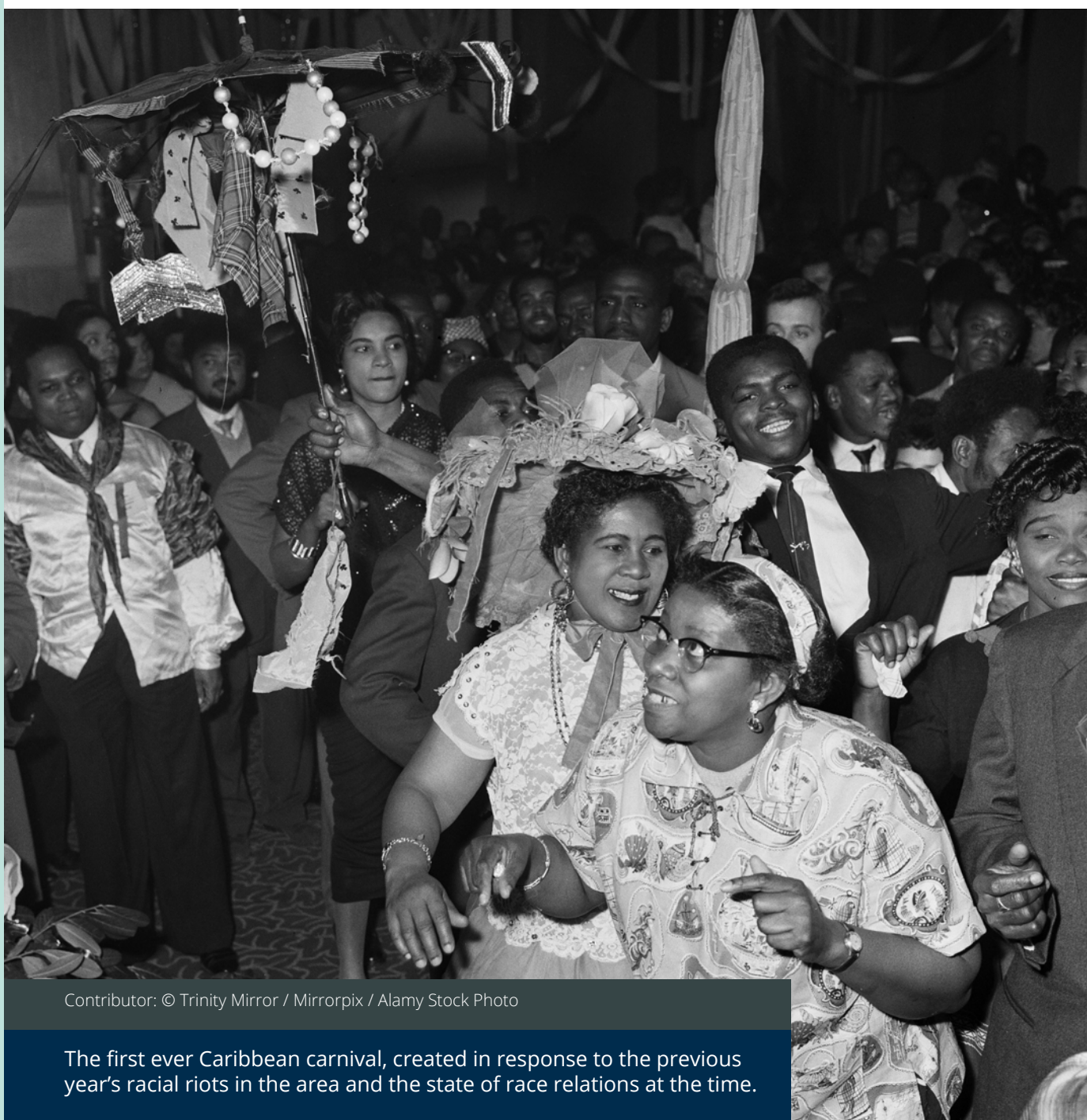
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Caribbean Carnival 1959

The first carnival took place at St Pancras Town Hall, Kings Cross on 30 January 1959. The carnival was meant as a celebration of Caribbean culture. It included music, dancing, a beauty contest and a host of famous performers, such as Cleo Laine. There was jazz, calypso, a steel band and the carnival was full of colour and fun. The event was broadcast on the BBC and was a huge success.

Claudia used the money raised from the event to help pay the fines of both black and white young people who were victims of the violence during the Notting Hill riots.

The event was such a huge success, that it was repeated every year at venues across London. The carnival was all about giving the black community a voice – Claudia said without this they were “lambs to the slaughter”.



Contributor: © Trinity Mirror / Mirrorpix / Alamy Stock Photo

The first ever Caribbean carnival, created in response to the previous year's racial riots in the area and the state of race relations at the time.

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Claudia's legacy

Claudia passed away in December 1964. Her health had never really recovered from the tuberculosis she had as a young woman. She is buried in Highgate Cemetery next to her hero, Karl Marx.

She left a powerful legacy. She was one of the first major black, female civil rights campaigners in Britain. Her achievement in founding the *West Indian Gazette* is still celebrated by the National Union of Journalists today. She has been commemorated by lectures, documentaries, blue plaques and stamps.

Perhaps her biggest legacy though is the Notting Hill Carnival. This annual street carnival in Notting Hill now attracts over 2.5 million people a year. It was built on the Caribbean Carnival Claudia had created. The Notting Hill Carnival now lasts over two days and is one of the world's largest street festivals. It continues to be a celebration of black and Caribbean culture.

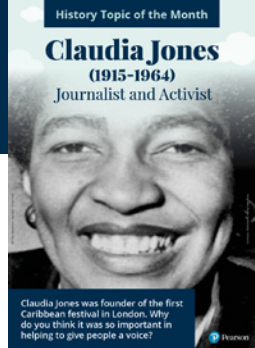
But it is only one part of the huge legacy Claudia Jones left. She helped the black community in this country find a voice and celebrate their culture and heritage. She fought to improve the lives of ordinary people and asked for nothing in return.



Contributor: © Miles Davies / Alamy Stock Photo

Crowds at Notting Hill Carnival 2012

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Discussion points

- Racism was a constant in the lives of black people in Britain and America. How do you think people's lives were affected when they faced unfairness and persecution in everything from finding a place to live to finding a job?
- Why do you think America saw Claudia Jones as such a danger?
- Claudia said about the Statue of Liberty that "her back is turned squarely on the USA. It's no wonder, considering what she would have to look upon. She would weep, if she had to look [at it]." What do you think Claudia meant by this?
- The 'Windrush generation' began to arrive in Britain from 1948. What else can you find out about the impact of the 'Windrush generation' on Britain?
- The *West Indian Gazette* was a newspaper that served the black community. How do you think black people were able to find out about news in their community, from events to major news stories, before the Gazette was published?
- The Notting Hill riots in 1958 were one of the most shocking moments of racial violence in British history. What else can you find out about these riots?
- Why do you think having a carnival that celebrated Caribbean culture was so important in helping to give people a voice?
- Why do you think the Notting Hill Carnival has become such a major event in London?

About the author

Alistair Nunn, Pearson's Product Manager for Humanities Teaching and Learning resources created this worksheet using various sources including **Pearson's GCSE (9-1) Edexcel History Migrants in Britain c800-present Student Book** by Rosemary Rees, Tony Warner, Joshua Garry and series editor Angela Leonard publishing in September 2021 as well as the websites included below.

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Videos



[Claudia Jones: A Woman Of Our Times](#)

[blackhistorywalks: Claudia Jones](#)

Articles



[Claudia Jones' rebel heart](#)

[The Forgotten Legacy of Claudia Jones: a Black Communist Radical Feminist](#)

[Black history legacies: Claudia Jones](#)

[Claudia Jones: Brief life of an intersectional activist: 1915-1964](#)

[Claudia Jones's transnational radicalism](#)

[How a Trinidadian Communist Invented London's Biggest Party](#)

[Notting Hill Carnival: the early years](#)

[The politics of partying](#)

[Windrush Stories](#)

References



[GCSE \(9-1\) Edexcel History Migrants in Britain c800-present Student Book](#) by Rosemary Rees, Tony Warner, Joshua Garry and series editor Angela Leonard, September 2021

Take a look at [Pearson's Diversity and Inclusion in History](#) webpages for more great content.