

Analyse the historical significance of the career of Muhammad Ali

1. Identification and evaluation of sources

This study investigates the question "To what extent is the career of Muhammad Ali historically significant?". To keep the scope of this study manageable, I will focus on his protest for civil rights, his anti-Vietnam stance, his limited and sometimes controversial influence and his actions in later life.

The first source used is *The Soul of a Butterfly*¹ - written by Muhammad Ali as an autobiography with the help of his daughter and produced by Bantam in 2004. This source is relevant to the investigation because it provides information written by Ali himself.

The origin of this source is an autobiography and naturally its purpose is to inform the reader about Ali's life. On this basis it is valuable for an investigation because it provides first hand quotes regarding Ali's views on specific events. However the source is limited: Ali reflects on his life but does not analyse it: he tells us how certain events happened but not how they impacted or changed people's mind-sets. For example he says was a role model "I hoped to inspire others to take control of their lives and live with pride and self-determination"² but there are no examples of his impact on individuals. Furthermore, Ali wrote the book years after the events happened – a commendation to himself when his actions weren't always justifiable and redeems himself in the book. For example he justifies referring to white people as "devils"³, therefore his judgement is not always trustworthy.

The second source is an article entitled "The Importance of Muhammad Ali" by Thomas Hauser⁴ and is a reflection on the life of the famous boxer. It is relevant because it analyses why Ali was important.

The origin of this source is an online article by Thomas Hauser⁵, a respected historian, who specialises in African-American history. Its purpose is to give an analysis of Ali's life and its significance. It is valuable because it summarises Ali's biggest achievements and their historical significance. We can trust it because Hauser is a reputed historian who has written many other articles⁶ and is respected by his peers. He backs up his statements with quotes "this young man had the courage to stand up like no one else"⁷ and dates, for example "On March 6, 1964"⁸. However, his interpretations are subjective - another historian will

¹ Ali, M., 2004. *The Soul Of A Butterfly*. London : Bantam.

² Ali, M., 2004. *The Soul Of A Butterfly*. London : Bantam.

³ Ali, M., 2004. *The Soul Of A Butterfly*. London : Bantam. Page 59

⁴ Hauser, T., Unknown. *The Importance of Muhammad Ali*. [Online] .Available at: www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/civil-rights-movements/essays/importance-muhammad-ali

⁵ Thomas Hauser: Has written over 41 books and many more articles, his most famous being Muhammad Ali: His life and Times, The Lost Legacy of Muhammad Ali, Thomas Hauser on Sports and so on. Boxer Nation , 2016. *Thomas Hauser*. [Online]. Available at: <http://www.boxnation.com/boxing-news-authors/thomas-hauser/>

⁶ See footnote 5.

⁷ Hauser, T., Unknown. *The Importance of Muhammad Ali*. [Online] .Available at: www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/civil-rights-movements/essays/importance-muhammad-ali

⁸ ibid

interpret Ali's significance differently. This article has limitations because it focuses too heavily on his achievements and fails to thoroughly evaluate his controversies and limitations, for example he says "the things that Ali had done right in his life far outweigh the mistakes of his past."⁹

2. Investigation:

"My greatest accomplishments in life were achieved outside the ring, and my greatest privilege in life was becoming a messenger of peace and love"¹⁰. Muhammad Ali was one of the greatest boxers to ever live and will be remembered in the ring as well as out as a man who stood up for his beliefs despite the consequences. This alone makes him historically significant. Boxing gave him the platform he needed to become this messenger and he used this to inspire change and become a role model for the black community. His anti-war stance opened many eyes in the United States. He continued to be this inspirational character throughout his entire life. However, whilst he did achieve much throughout his lifetime his influence was limited and he was extremely controversial. As Ali said himself he "had to be successful in order to get people to listen to the things I had to say"¹¹.

The first way in which he can be judged historically significant is by his actions outside the ring when he became a role model for the black community. After winning the gold medal in the 1960 Olympics, Ali returned home only to be once again shunned because of the colour of his skin, so he threw the medal in the Ohio River "the world should know the truth – it's somewhere at the bottom of the Ohio River"¹². Ali argues that this was the catalyst event that made him become the role model for the black community and "be that hero that showed children that Black is beautiful"¹³. However Remnick argues that Ali simply lost the medal and the story was made up which is confirmed by James Silberman the editor of the story where it was first published: "The story about the Olympic Medal isn't true,"¹⁴. Furthermore, he demonstrated that he was proud to be black and inspired others to be proud of their origins and changed the image white people had. Arthur Ashe said "Ali didn't just change the image that African Americans have of themselves. He opened the eyes of a lot of white people to the potential of African Americans; who we are and what we can be"¹⁵. Jill Nelson says "he also epitomised a lot of black people's emotions at the time, our anger, our sense of entitlement"¹⁶ Despite what Ashe and Nelson say Ali didn't magically change the mentalities of all white Americans – Jimmy Cannon said "Clay upset the natural order of things"¹⁷ and his association with the Nation was a more "pernicious symbol of hate than Schmeling or Nazism"¹⁸.

⁹ ibid

¹⁰ Ali, M., 2004. *The Soul Of A Butterfly*. London : Bantam. Page 209

¹¹ ibid. Page 69.

¹² ibid. Page 41.

¹³ ibid. Page 15.

¹⁴ Remnick, D., 2015. *King of the World*. London : Picador Classic. Pages 89-91.

¹⁵ Hauser, T., Unknown. *The Importance of Muhammad Ali*. [Online] .Available at:

www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/civil-rights-movements/essays/importance-muhammad-ali

¹⁶ Remnick, D., 2015. *King of the World*. London : Picador Classic. Page 212.

¹⁷ Remnick, D., 2015. *King of the World*. London : Picador Classic. Page 157.

¹⁸ Remnick, D., 2015. *King of the World*. London : Picador Classic. Page 210.

The second is when he took a stance against the Vietnam War despite this costing him prime boxing years. Ali's refusal was significant because it attracted media coverage drawing wide attention to his protest. Ali said "I ain't got no quarrel with the Vietcong" which put the whole war into question: "it raised the question of why poor people in the United States were being forced by rich people in the United States to kill poor people in Vietnam"¹⁹. The source is limited: it fails to acknowledge that for others it was a complete dishonour to refuse his country. A woman said to Ali "My son's in Vietnam and you no better than he is. I hope you rot in jail"²⁰, nevertheless he stood by his own beliefs. He lost his titles as champion, his right to fight in the US and in other countries and was sentenced to 5 years in prison with a 10,000 dollar fine²¹. Ali said: "The truth is it was tougher to stand up for my religious beliefs against the United States government and millions of people who turned against me for my decision than it would have been to go to war"²². This is exactly why so many people look up to him and see him as a role model.

The third was when he turned his back on his previously controversial statements and continued to influence and inspire people. Ali was diagnosed with Parkinson's in 1984. At first he let the disease get to him but he later wanted to be an example of how the illness didn't define him "I hope to show people who are suffering from illness of any kind that they don't have to hide or be ashamed"²³. In 1998 he was named a United Nations Messenger of Peace and went to Afghanistan, there he raised awareness of the pressing conditions of the people due to the Taliban²⁴. He attended various Olympic events, notably the Olympics of 1996 and the Special Olympics in 2003 where he met Nelson Mandela²⁵. In 2001 after the attack on the twin towers he spoke out to defend Muslims across the world: "the terrorist attack in the United States of America does not represent Islam"²⁶. People will remember that he always had plenty to say but more importantly he always stood by his beliefs.

Despite being this civil rights and anti-Vietnam role model and being an advocate for Parkinson's and other causes, Ali was nonetheless a very controversial figure who had a limited influence.

His controversy started when he changed his name and joined the Nation of Islam by saying "I became a member, I was fighting for equality and black pride"²⁷. Ali failed to recognise that people contested his decisions because the National of Islam were strongly associated to violent ideals: Jimmy Cannon said they "maimed the bodies of numerous men and ruined

¹⁹ Hauser, T., Unknown. *The Importance of Muhammad Ali*. [Online] .Available at: www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/civil-rights-movements/essays/importance-muhammad-ali

²⁰ Remnick, D., 2015. *King of the World*. London : Picador Classic. Page 291.

²¹ Hauser, T., Unknown. *The Importance of Muhammad Ali*. [Online] .Available at: www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/civil-rights-movements/essays/importance-muhammad-ali

²² Ali, M., 2004. *The Soul Of A Butterfly*. London : Bantam. Page 162.

²³ Ali, M., 2004. *The Soul Of A Butterfly*. London : Bantam. Page 153.

²⁴ Ali, M., 2004. *The Soul Of A Butterfly*. London : Bantam. Page 190

²⁵ Ali, M., 2004. *The Soul Of A Butterfly*. London : Bantam. Page 193.

²⁶ Ali, M., 2004. *The Soul Of A Butterfly*. London : Bantam. Page 188.

²⁷ Ali, M., 2004. *The Soul Of A Butterfly*. London : Bantam. Page 49.

their minds but now, as one of Elijah Muhammad's missionaries, Clay is using it as a weapon of wickedness and attack on the spirit"²⁸. During the time he was associated to the Nation of Islam he changed his name from Cassius Clay to Muhammad Ali and this was very liberating for him, it showed he was rejecting his slave name and the "indignity that was done to my family by slave masters"²⁹. Rather ironically, the original Cassius Clay was actually an abolitionist³⁰.

Moreover, his influence was limited and he took highly contradictory stances. In terms of civil rights other figures of that time achieved more, like Martin Luther King. Although Ali spoke out for what he believed he never fought to change legislation and in some cases his influence did more harm than good. Ali caused damage to Joe Frazier³¹ saying "Joe Frazier is an Uncle Tom"³². He works for the enemy"³³ which was extremely insulting and divisive. Moreover, looking at Louisville today, Ali's hometown, we see that he didn't have a lasting impact, the city remains unofficially segregated and out of all the homicide victims 2/3 are black³⁴. He promoted the black is beautiful ideal yet adhered to ideas spread by Elijah Muhammad, Ali even said "integration is wrong"³⁵. He even called white people "devils"³⁶ which is highly controversial because he wanted equality for black people yet he was ready to openly disrespect all white people. Ali's stance on women was equally controversial, when asked what would happen if a Muslim woman went out with a non-Muslim man, Ali replied "Then she dies"³⁷.

Some say that Muhammad Ali's sporting career was a "catalyst for bringing the issues of racism and war into professional sports"³⁸. It cannot be denied that this is partly true but we must remember that there were others such as Jesse Owen³⁹ in the 1936 Olympics, the Louis-Schmeling match⁴⁰ or even Tommie Smith and John Carlos who did the black power salute at the 1968 Olympics⁴¹.

As we have seen Muhammad Ali is one of the greatest sportsman to have ever lived, he will be remembered. Boxing made him famous but for many people including myself, it was

²⁸ Remnick, D., 2015. *King of the World*. London : Picador Classic. Pages 209-210.

²⁹ Ali, M., 2004. *The Soul Of A Butterfly*. London : Bantam. Page 61.

³⁰ Biography.com Editors, 2016. *Cassius Marcellus Clay Biography*. [Online]. Available at: <http://www.biography.com/people/cassius-marcellus-clay-9250370#synopsis>

³¹ Joe Frazier was another famous black boxer at that time.

³² Uncle Tom: Term used to insinuate being obedient to white people.

³³ Burnton, S., 2011. *Muhammad Ali on Joe Frazier: that's one helluva man and God Bless him*. [Online] Available at: www.theguardian.com/sport/2011/nov/08/muhammad-ali-joe-frazier

³⁴ Lussenhop, J., 2016. *The legacy of segregation in Muhammad Ali's hometown*. [Online] Available at: www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-36472454

³⁵ Remnick, D., 2015. *King of the World*. London : Picador Classic. Page 169.

³⁶ Ali, M., 2004. *The Soul Of A Butterfly*. London : Bantam. Page 59

³⁷ Remnick, D., 2015. *King of the World*. London : Picador Classic. Page 271.

³⁸ Zirin, D., 2004. *The hidden history of Muhammad Ali*. [Online] Available at: <http://www.isreview.org/issues/33/muhammadali.shtml>

³⁹ Jesse Owen competed in the Olympics despite Hitler's objections.

⁴⁰ Boxing match between a white boxer (Schmeling) and one black boxer (Louis) at the height of the Nazi era. Zirin, D., 2004. *The hidden history of Muhammad Ali*. [Online]

Available at: <http://www.isreview.org/issues/33/muhammadali.shtml>

⁴¹ Idem.

outside the ring that his true character was evident. He became a role model for the black community, he lost a huge part of his life with his anti-war stance. His influence was limited and he was very controversial at times, but nevertheless those moments are superseded by his achievements. It is evident that these controversies are the reason that different judgements have been made about Ali but ultimately his achievements outweigh his failures. Will the world ever know anyone as brave, controversial, funny and sportsmanlike as Muhammad Ali?

3. Reflection:

One issue raised by this study is the challenge on selecting and omitting. In this particular study it was difficult to decide which facts and quotes to include - some in Ali's favour, others against him. A historian wants to use information that backs up their arguments. I tackled this issue by making sure that my arguments were varied and supported both sides of Ali: I selected quotes supporting my arguments and included both positive and critical information. I learnt that a historian will select or omit depending on whether the evidence supports their case, but that it's possible and necessary to include arguments supporting both sides. For example we had Jill Nelson versus Jimmy Cannon⁴².

Another issue raised is the challenge of which moments are historically significant. In this study the issue was an interesting one to tackle because Ali has done so much, he made history with his sporting career but also with his actions outside the ring. It was choosing which side of him to focus on that was challenging. I focused on him outside the ring which ultimately cut out a lot of sporting events. I dealt with this by trying to have a range of different events - from civil rights to the situation in Afghanistan. I learnt that this process of selecting which events to include is very subjective and personal so maybe we can't always trust historians' judgments because they decide which events are significant and those that aren't.

The last issue is the way in which every work of history tells us more about the period it was written in than about the period it writes about. This means that through historians work we can tell more about our own period than the period which is being written about. For example his position on the Vietnam War was greatly criticised but is now admired. Especially in the wake of his death it was hard finding articles and sources that focused on his controversies. From this I learnt that it is crucial to get information from original sources and I found Remnick's book very useful for that because it offered original quotes from witnesses that had opposite view. Again, we have Jill Nelson versus Jimmy Cannon, or even young Ali versus older Ali.

4. References

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⁴² See paragraph 3 of the investigation.

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