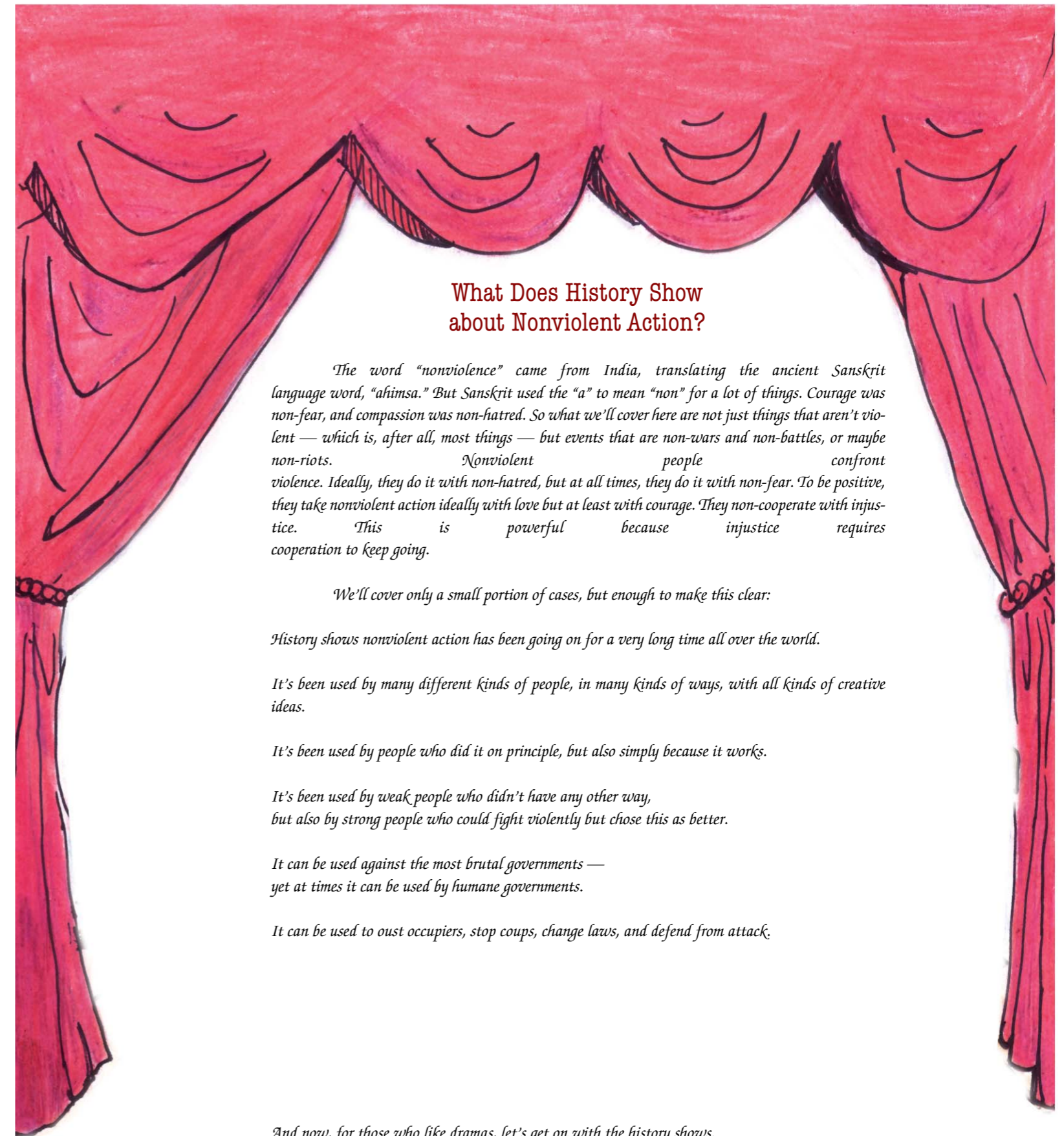


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What Does History Show about Nonviolent Action?

The word "nonviolence" came from India, translating the ancient Sanskrit language word, "ahimsa." But Sanskrit used the "a" to mean "non" for a lot of things. Courage was non-fear, and compassion was non-hatred. So what we'll cover here are not just things that aren't violent — which is, after all, most things — but events that are non-wars and non-battles, or maybe non-riots. Nonviolent people confront violence. Ideally, they do it with non-hatred, but at all times, they do it with non-fear. To be positive, they take nonviolent action ideally with love but at least with courage. They non-cooperate with injustice. This is powerful because injustice requires cooperation to keep going.

We'll cover only a small portion of cases, but enough to make this clear:

History shows nonviolent action has been going on for a very long time all over the world.

It's been used by many different kinds of people, in many kinds of ways, with all kinds of creative ideas.

It's been used by people who did it on principle, but also simply because it works.

It's been used by weak people who didn't have any other way, but also by strong people who could fight violently but chose this as better.

It can be used against the most brutal governments — yet at times it can be used by humane governments.

It can be used to oust occupiers, stop coups, change laws, and defend from attack.

And now, for those who like dramas, let's get on with the history shows.

Roman Workers Get Veto Power (494 B. C.)

In this account, the ancient Roman historian Livy talks about the first time the plebeians, who were the lower-class workers, held a walkout against the patricians, who were the rich upper class. As he begins, consuls are giving trials to debtors who couldn't deal with how high the interest charges were. The "lictor" is a police officer. Livy starts with one man about to be tried:

As he stood silent, and a number of men had closed round him to prevent his being seized, the consuls sent a lictor to him. The lictor was pushed away, and those senators who were with the consuls exclaimed that it was an outrageous insult and rushed down from the tribunal to assist the lictor. The hostility of the crowd was diverted from the lictor, who had simply been prevented from making the arrest, to the senators. The interposition of the consuls finally allayed the conflict. There had, however, been no stones thrown or weapons used. It had resulted in more noise and angry words than personal injury. . .

[After much debate in the Senate, the plebeians] decided, at the instigation of a certain Sicinius, to ignore the consuls and withdraw to the Sacred Mount, which lay on the other side of the Anio, three miles from the City . . . There, without any commander in a regularly entrenched camp, taking nothing with them but the necessaries of life, they quietly maintained themselves for some days, neither receiving nor giving any provocation. A great panic seized the City. Mutual distrust led to a state of universal suspense. Those plebeians who had been left by their comrades in the City feared violence from the patricians; the patricians feared the plebeians who still remained in the City, and could not make up their minds whether they would rather have them go or stay. "How long," it was asked, "would the multitude who had seceded remain quiet? What would happen if a foreign war broke out in the meantime?" They felt that all their hopes rested on concord amongst the citizens, and that this must be restored at any cost . . . Negotiations were then entered upon for a reconciliation. An agreement was arrived at, the terms being that the plebs should have its own magistrates, whose persons were to be inviolable, and who should have the right of affording protection against the consuls. And further, no patrician should be allowed to hold that office.

Livy's History of Rome 2.29-2.33



This was called the first Secession, in 494 B. C. There was another 50 years later, and a third one in 297 B. C. Rights that were established and re-established included the right to have a Tribune that could say "Veto," which means, "I forbid." That meant patricians couldn't pass laws that the plebeians couldn't stand. They also got to pass resolutions called "plebiscitas," from which we got our modern word, plebiscite.

Throughout the centuries, this method of massive withdrawal would be used several times. During the 19th century in the United States, for example, 6,000 people who were disgusted at their own Methodist Church's squelching of their anti-slavery actions left and founded a new denomination. In just a year and a half this grew to 15,000 people, including hundreds of brave souls who faced violence in the South. In the North, the Methodist Church did give its abolitionist members more freedom to act in order to avoid more walk-outs.

Ancient Hebrews (around 1000-400 B. C.)

In the ancient world, it was common for kings to think they could do whatever cruel things they pleased. They brutally conquered and punished and made people stay poor. In ancient Judea and Israel, the prophets thought differently. There are standards of behavior that are what they are, not what the king wants them to be. These are principles of justice everyone must follow.

This was an important idea for nonviolent action. It unites everybody that participates in it. It gives them a way to appeal to the consciences of the people whose behavior they are trying to change.

There were also the kind of symbolic protests that would become much more common later, as protesters use pictures to make their points. Jeremiah, for example, was frequently jailed for speaking out, but he kept doing it anyway. He took a clay jar and gathered elders and priests. Their violence was so awful that they were making fiery human sacrifices of children to the gods Baal and Molech. Jeremiah denounced them and dashed the jar down, shattering it to pieces, to show how dangerous their behavior was (Jeremiah, chapter 19). Yet when his prediction of disaster came true and the Babylonians were about to conquer Judah and carry people off to exile, he deliberately bought a farm as a sign of hope that they would be returning (Jeremiah, chapter 35). His symbols were not just protests, but proclaimed an expectation for future peace.

For the most part, the prophets didn't make the changes they were hoping for in their own times. But their writings and stories are still around and read every day by millions of people. They also gave us a lot of the images that we still use today for ideals about peace. One common image comes from two different prophets, and so was probably a common idea in Jerusalem at the time: "They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore." (Micah 4:3 and Isaiah 2:4) The painting on this page is by Elias Hicks, who did a large number of such paintings on "The Peaceable Kingdom," based on the vision of Isaiah 11:6-9.

