Nonviolence and Peace Movements: Crash Course World History 228

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Hi, I'm John Green, this is Crash Course: World History and today we are going to talk about something we haven't discussed much here at Crash Course. Peace. Peaceful, non-violent protest.

Mr. Green! Mr. Green! Finally an episode where no one gets killed.

Mmmm. Ehhh. Some people are gonna get killed, Me From the Past. Sadly, peaceful, nonviolent protest is often just peaceful on the one side.

So we've talked a lot about war this year on Crash Course, how it shaped civilizations and nation states. And it's easy to assume that humans are kind of naturally violent and prone to fighting. And in recent human history, especially during the 20th century, we got scarily good at waging war, right? There were, of course, the two World Wars but there were also many other very destructive smaller wars and we can't forget that there were also genocides.

But one of the most remarkable and often unnoticed aspects of the 20th century is the incredible number of peace, non violence, and anti-war movements. Like, we know about Gandhi, but what makes the 20th century unique in history is that Gandhi wasn't unique. There was actually a surprisingly large number of peace and nonviolence movements that were occurring around the world. So in this episode, we're going to talk a little bit about the nonviolent heavy hitters, like Martin Luther King and Gandhi. I guess I should say, the heavy "non-hitters" because, you know, they were nonviolent. But they were, by no means, the only ones.

So by 1900, Europeans pretty much dominated the world, even though there had been relative peace in Europe since 1871, Europeans, using new weapons, had unleashed an incredible amount of violence everywhere else on the planet. They had colonized most of Africa, Asia, and the Pacific. Americans had also expanded across the continental United States, and were making eyes at the Caribbean and Asia. And I want to be clear that this conquest and colonization was consistently violent. But some people were beginning to question the very idea of violence itself. Like in his 1894 book, The Kingdom of God is Within You, Leo Tolstoy, who knew a little bit about War and Peace, explored how Jesus's message to quote "turn the other cheek" was the basis for a life of nonviolence.

He argued that governments and individuals needed to give up violence if they believed themselves to be true Christians, and Tolstoy also saw nonviolence as a solution to ending colonialism. In 1908, Tolstoy wrote "A Letter to a Hindu" to Mohandas Gandhi, and in the letter, he explained that Indians needed to confront British imperialism with love and nonviolence. Gandhi not only read that letter, he also published it in his South African newspaper "Indian Opinion" in 1909. And Tolstoy's ideas in this correspondence with Gandhi marked the beginnings of an informal dialogue between the advocates of nonviolence from around the world that spanned the 20th century.

And Tolstoy wasn't the only influence on Mohandas K. Gandhi, he'd grown up in the Gujarat region of India where there's a sizable Jain community. And through the Jain monks Gandhi was exposed to the idea of Ahimsa: non-violence or non-injury to life. He also read widely including western writers like John Ruskin, and Henry David Thoreau.

So after his return to India from South Africa in 1915, Gandhi began to distill his thinking related to non-violence into a more explicit philosophy. In his 1929 autobiography "The Story of my Experiments with Truth", Gandhi wrote about how his belief in Ahimsa could be the basis for Indian resistance to British rule. So for Gandhi non-violence was both a way of life, and a tool for gaining Indian self-rule. He saw Western civilization as violent and exploitative. That's ridiculous. I know the Eurocentrists are gonna get mad at me for saying that but it is true, a smidge violent and exploitative at times. That said, well done with like market-based innovation and the Mona Lisa and etc. OK let's move on.

Gandhi believed that Indians could reject that lifestyle and replace it with a nonviolent one. And Gandhi also believed that Indians could bring about an end to British rule through a combination of Ahimsa and Satyagraha, a word often translated as adherence to truth.

All right, let's go to the Thought Bubble.

These interconnected ideas of Ahimsa and Satyagraha are best seen in the Salt March of 1930. So, since the mid 19th century, the British had placed taxes on salt, and since salt, in addition to making food more delicious is necessary to live, Gandhi saw these laws as a perfect example of how British despotism affected all Indians. Gandhi announced that he and a small group planned to march from his home in Ahmedabad to the coast in order to harvest salt. The march took almost two months and quickly gathered media attention from around the world and the British Raj in India was forced to choose between arresting Gandhi for breaking a British law or else allowing him to break the law because he was harvesting salt illegally. Millions of Indians were inspired by Gandhi's challenge to British rule and began their own protests against the salt law. As civil disobedience spread across India, the British began to arrest people and the international media focused even more on the protests and popular opinion began to see British rule as unjust. By refusing to meet violent British rule with violence of his own and highlighting the injustice of British rule, Gandhi was able to use nonviolence as an effective tool in undermining the colonial regime.

Thanks Thought Bubble. So as previously noted, Gandhi's use of nonviolence is very well known but it wasn't unique. Throughout the early 20th century nationalist movements in colonies throughout Africa and Asia also adopted nonviolence. Like one of the first nationalist leaders to advocate for nonviolence resistance to Imperialism was Phan Chu Trinh. Just as the Vietnamese independence movement was developing in the first decade of the nineteen hundreds. Phan began to question the violent methods advocated by other nationalist. Like he spoke out against the violent uprisings that were occurring in many parts of Vietnam. He also resisted requesting help from Japan in the Vietnamese Independence struggle because of the Japanese's militarism.

In 1919, Egyptians protested against British rule by going on strike, and boycotting British goods, and organizing demonstrations across the country. Those protests went on for months and eventually in 1922 the British granted independence to Egypt. Although some key areas, including the Suez Canal, did remain under British control. And even as nonviolence became a tactic associated with anti-imperial movements in Africa and Asia it was also becoming entrenched in the peace movement that developed in response to World War One. When war broke out in the fall of 1914 there were lots of protests in the United States, which had yet to enter the war. A number of young activists met to discuss how to stop it and how to prevent the United States from entering it. This group included AJ Musty and Kirby Page and Dorothy Day, all of whom would go on to become important figures in the Peace Movement in the United States. They also helped found the Fellowship of Reconciliation or (FOR), which advocated on behalf of conscientious objectors and encouraged nonviolent alternatives to conflict. And then after the war ended many of these America peace activists began to expand their horizons and they saw connections between nonviolence and antiwar movements and nonviolence in the anti-imperial struggle.

There was, for instance, Richard Gregg, a young activist who had been involved in the anti-war movement in the United States, who

traveled to India in 1925. He spent four years in India studying with Gandhi including seven months living at Gandhi's ashram in Gujarat. And then when he returned to the US, Gregg wrote the very influential book The Power of Nonviolence in which he described how nonviolence would remake the world.

I mention this to get across the idea that this was truly an international movement that involved cultural exchange that went both west to east and east to west. And this idea of nonviolent resistance was also very compelling to artists. During the Spanish Civil War the nationalist forces of General Franco heavily bombed the Basque village of Guernica and after reading about the destruction of the village, the Spanish artist Pablo Picasso who was working on a commissioned mural for the Spanish Republic abandoned the mural and began painting Guernica to draw attention to the horrors that war inflicts upon innocent civilians. The painting became one of the most famous of the 20th century and it remains a powerful antiwar symbol. There were even nonviolent protests against the Nazis. Like in 1943 the German Gestapo arrested about 1800 Jewish men who were married to non-Jewish women. And as those men were being held in an office building, their wives gathered together on the street. Armed German Gestapo agents attempted to disperse them with threats of firing into the crowd and a stand off between the unarmed women and the armed Gestapo went on for a week. Instead of firing on the women, Joseph Gerbils, the Nazi party director in Berlin, ultimately decided to back down and he released the men. The so called Rosenstrasse protest was the only successful public protest against Nazi policies in Germany but it wasn't the only protest.

And then we have the Civil Rights Movement in the United States which brought together many of the different strains of nonviolent resistance in the 20th century. Like during World War II, civil rights pioneer Bayard Rustin met AJ Musty and other members of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, and they spent much of the war protesting racial discrimination in the armed forces but at the same time Rustin was also becoming increasingly aware of the injustice of the British colonialism in India and Africa and began to protest that as well. And we see this global cross-fertilization of nonviolent ideas again in 1948 when Rustin traveled to India, where he met with many of Gandhi's associates -- Gandhi had been killed in January of that year -- and learned about the role of nonviolent protest against the British. And in the following decade, Rustin would teach Martin Luther King Jr about Gandhi's tactics, so he could use them in protesting against racial segregation in the United States. King himself traveled to India in 1959 to learn more about nonviolence. And before leaving he explained that he was quote "more convinced than ever before that the method of nonviolent resistance is the most potent weapon available to oppressed people in their struggle for justice and human dignity."

And the principles of nonviolence would come to shape the strategies used for the remainder of the Civil Rights Movement. Nonviolent resistance was also an important protest tactic during the Cold War. Alexander Dubcek, the Czech Communist Party's first secretary, began a series of reforms to communist rule in Czechoslovakia in January 1968 that would become known as the Prague Spring. And the Soviet Union was like no no no no no no no we don't like democratic reforms or Spring. So they sent in troops to destabilize Dubcek's government and in response to that invasion, civilians quickly took to the streets in support of Dubcek and to resist the invasion. Most people resisted through a variety of nonviolent means, including deliberately giving wrong directions to Soviet tanks, forming human blockades across bridges, and distributing protest materials. Secret radio stations were set up to broadcast calls for nonviolent resistance across the country. And the protest continued on for the rest of 1968. In January of 1969, two Czech students burned themselves to death in a Prague square to protest the Soviet occupation and as the tensions between the protesters and the Soviets escalated, the Soviets began a violent crackdown. By the summer of 1969 they'd brought the demonstrations to an end.

Historians took note of all of this stuff, like historian Gene Sharp published his multi volume Politics of Nonviolent Action which was reportedly read by a lot of the original protesters in the Arab Spring of 2011, which reminds us that nonviolent resistance movements advocating for and in some cases achieving political change are not just part of history, they are also part of the world in which we live today. Ideas about nonviolence that began with Leo Tolstoy at the beginning of the 20th century are still very much with us.

And I think it is good important to remind ourselves of two things. First, that Tolstoy's most famous book is called War and Peace. And secondly, that the 20th century while it featured intensely destructive wars, was by many measures the least violent century ever.

Wars are traumatic and they have relatively straightforward narratives that allow us to focus on human dramas and all of that stuff is appealing to historians. But really the nonviolent struggles against oppression in the 20th century have been just as dramatic and especially in the second half of the 20th century they have born fruit and not just in the US and India. When the news focuses just on death and destruction it can be hard to remember that more people are living under peaceful regimes than ever before and that, at least between nations, inequality and injustice are diminishing. Nonviolent resistance doesn't always work and the governments that emerge form these movements aren't always good governments. The stories, as usual, are complicated. So the next time we think about the 20th century merely as a century of war and genocide and nuclear weapons we need to remind ourselves that it was also a century in which hundreds of millions of people emerged from poverty and fewer people died as a result of violence. Thanks for watching. I'll see you next week.

Crash Course is filmed here in the Chad and Stacey Emigholz studios in Indianapolis and it's made possible by our Subbable subscribers. Thank you so much for watching and as we say in my home town, don't forget to be awesome.