

Gene Sharp  
***Making Europe Unconquerable:  
The Potential of Civilian-based Deterrence  
and Defense***

Reviewer: Brian Martin

Most anarchists have been anti-militarists. After all, the military is the ultimate force behind the power of the state. But what about alternatives to the military? There are some who believe a harmonious society can be created which needs no means of organized struggle. For those pursuing an active alternative to the military there are two basic strands compatible with self-management, corresponding to the violent and nonviolent orientations within anarchism.

The violent alternative is guerrilla or partisan warfare: warfare of and by the people. In previous eras many guerrilla struggles were not so very different from conventional warfare: anyone who could use a rifle could participate, in principle. With the introduction of increasingly sophisticated war technologies, it is impossible for "conventional warfare" to be "people's warfare." Nuclear weapons are weapons for elites. In practice, the degree of participation even in guerrilla warfare is often not that great, as the frontline fighting is reserved mainly for young fit men. The booklet *Towards a Citizens' Militia: Anarchist Alternatives to NATO and the Warsaw Pact* (Cienfuegos Press, 1979), essentially a manual for urban guerrillas, is one of the few anarchist contributions toward this alternative.

The other self-managing option is social defense, also called nonviolent defense, civilian defense or civilian-based defense. This is the nonviolent analog to guerrilla warfare. It is based on methods such as strikes, boycotts, demonstrations, and setting up parallel government.

The idea of social defense draws on a long history of nonviolent struggle, such as the Gandhian campaigns in India. As a systematic alternative to the military, the idea of social defense dates only from the late 1950s and 1960s with the work

of a number of researchers, including Stephen King-Hall, Theodore Ebert, Johan Galtung and Adam Roberts.

Gene Sharp has long been a leading figure in scholarly work on nonviolent action. His 1973 book, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*, is widely recognized as the central reference in the whole area. Two more recent books—*Social Power and Political Freedom* and *Gandhi as a Political Strategist*—draw on his writings dating from the 1950s. There is a close relationship between nonviolent action and social defense: social defense is essentially the organized application of nonviolent action as an alternative to military defense and deterrence. Although Sharp has treated social defense—or civilian-based defense, his preferred term—in a number of his essays, he had not systematically discussed social defense at substantial length until *Making Europe Unconquerable*. For that reason alone the book will receive widespread attention.

In *Making Europe Unconquerable* Sharp, in his usual fashion, covers the basics in a measured and careful way. He discusses some of the problems of conventional defense and argues the need for innovative thinking, meaning civilian-based defense. He discusses several "classic" examples of nonviolent resistance to invasion or military coup, such as the German resistance to the French occupation of the Ruhr in 1923. After these preliminaries, Sharp covers the various aspects of civilian-based defense: how an economy would switch to it, how it can be used to prevent attack, how it can be used to counter invaders and to defeat them.

Nominally, *Making Europe Unconquerable* is concerned with the defense of Western Europe. But Sharp gives little attention to the details of the European political scene—such as the role of Eurocommunism—or the specifics of transforming European militaries to civilian-based defense. There is not even a mention of the U.S. government's pressure on West European countries to take cruise missiles. His main focus is on a potential Soviet invasion of Western Europe.

My perception is that the book is written much more for Americans than for Europeans. This does not really matter, since the main value of the book is in presenting the idea of civilian-based defense to a general readership.

Sharp's writings are excellent for helping people question some of the assumptions underlying present systems of violence. Quite a number of friends of mine have commented on the important insights they have gained from reading his works. Sharp's writings are an incredibly valuable resource for nonviolent activists. They provide a wonderful information source and scholarly foundation for those arguing the case for nonviolent alternatives.

That said, it is still possible to have reservations about the political perspective espoused by Sharp. Anarchists will find plenty to object to. Sharp essentially sees civilian-based defense as a reform that will be adopted by governments once they realize how counterproductive their own policies are. He assumes the continued

existence of states. He does not develop the argument that military forces are used by elite groups to maintain their control. There is little mention of the role of economic self-reliance or workers' control in nonviolent resistance. He does not see the introduction of social defense requiring any prior social transformation. The basic shortcoming is Sharp's lack of any analysis of the institutional roots of war, such as the state, bureaucracy, capitalism and patriarchy. He assumes instead that the reason for present policies is that government planners lack knowledge or awareness.

This is all quite compatible with Sharp's aim of convincing people in the government and military. He does not look to the peace movement to promote social defense. Sharp is not so very different from many other writers on social defense who have oriented their arguments to governments. But he is more resolutely in the government-oriented mold than most other leading figures in the area.

Sharp in person is quite open in his antagonism to the linking of social defense to particular belief systems such as socialism, feminism or anarchism. In his writings this only comes through in a muted way: "Persons and groups which...claim that a particular doctrine or 'ism' is tied to civilian-based defense should be treated with caution" (p. 64). Sharp sees social defense as an alternative defense option that should be evaluated pragmatically rather than ethically. Politically minded activists will be justified in rejecting his claim that social defense is better advanced by research and policy studies than by social action.

In my opinion, there is more political insight about social defense in the writings of Johan Galtung or in *War Without Weapons* by Anders Boserup and Andrew Mack. But Sharp's works, including *Making Europe Unconquerable*, are vitally important. In spite of his personal dislike of ideological approaches to social problems, Sharp's writings are valuable tools for those who want to promote social defense as part of a wider struggle for a just and egalitarian society. Ⓐ

***Making Europe Unconquerable: The Potential of Civilian-based Deterrence and Defense* by Gene Sharp. 263 pp. Cambridge, MA: Ballinger, 1985. \$14.95 paper.**