

Social Defence and Soviet Military Power



Alex P. Schmid, in collaboration with Ellen Berenda and Luuk Zonneveld, *Social Defence and Soviet Military Power: An Inquiry into the Relevance of an Alternative Defence Concept* (Leiden: Center for the Study of Social Conflict, State University of Leiden, September 1985), 469 pages, price 60 Dutch guilders (about A\$41).

Only a few governments have given even passing attention to social defence, namely defence based on nonviolent action such as strikes, boycotts, demonstrations and parallel government. It is appropriate that the Netherlands government is one of them, since the Netherlands was one of the few countries occupied by Nazi Germany in which significant nonviolent (as well as violent) resistance occurred.

In 1982 the Netherlands government commissioned a report on social defence from the State University of Leiden. *Social Defence and Soviet Military Power* is the result. Its conclusion is that social defence would not be a viable method to oppose a Soviet invasion, the threat considered most likely in Western Europe. The main author Alex Schmid does see social defence as a possible addition to military defence.

Most previous critiques of social defence have been superficial and not backed by detailed study. This book does not fit this pattern. It contains a wealth of historical material and analysis, and a carefully argued conclusion. It is perhaps the most significant argument against social defence yet produced. Yet it is not beyond criticism itself, as I will outline later.

The book contains four parts. The first is a short survey of concepts of nonviolence and social defence. The second is major study of Soviet military interventions and nuclear threats since 1945, including conflicts within the Soviet bloc, conflicts between the Soviet Union and the West, and Soviet involvement in Third World conflicts. A short section describes implications for social defence.

The third part presents four East European case studies: Lithuanian resistance against the Soviet re-occupation (1944 to about 1952), East Germany 1953, Hungary 1956 and Czechoslovakia 1968. In each case, the events are compared with ten 'conditions' for social defence to infer whether social defence would have been more successful than the resistance that actually occurred.

The final part of the book looks at social defence as part of a more comprehensive defence system, examines Sweden's psychological defence, and presents the resource mobilization perspective (which social scientists use to analyse social struggles) as an alternative to the social defence perspective.

Schmid's basic conclusion is that social defence would not work against a Soviet invasion, because the Soviet government is mostly immune to persuasion, publicity and economic pressures. As he puts it, "the Soviet military power instrument cannot be balanced by economic noncooperation and cultural persuasion alone as the USSR is economically invulnerable and culturally impenetrable" (p. 209).

The most valuable part of the book for nonviolent activists, is its analysis of 'model struggles', such as the nonviolent resistance of the Czechoslovak people to the 1968 Soviet invasion. Schmid points out that the Soviets had never planned to use violence themselves, so the limited success of the resistance was essentially one of (civilian) nonviolence opposing (military) nonviolence.

The important point made is that the outcome of many struggles, whether violent or nonviolent, depends only in a limited fashion on the methods used and the strength of the resistance. At least as important is the wider configuration of

power internationally. For example, the Lithuanian partisans never had much of a chance unless the West came to their support. This was only likely in the context of World War Three, which is what many of them hoped for; with the conclusion of the Korean war their remaining hopes, and illusions about Western support, were dashed.

Proponents of social defence have long used historical examples to show that their ideas are not purely speculative. The toppling of the Kapp Putsch in Germany in 1920, the German resistance in the Ruhr in 1923, the Norwegian and Dutch resistance to the Nazi occupation, the collapse of the Algerian Generals' Revolt in 1961, Czechoslovakia 1968: these examples are frequently raised in discussions of social defence. Their advantage is that they show the potential for nonviolent resistance. The danger is that they become idealised as flawless examples. Schmid through his analysis has shown that such examples are much more complex than often presented.

While *Social Defence and Soviet Military Power* provides some salutary lessons for supporters of social defence, its own assumptions are open to criticism. Schmid assumes that social defence is national defence, that social defence has no offensive capacity, that social defence must substitute for all the strengths of military 'defence' (without examining the inherent drawbacks of military methods), and that social defence would be implemented simply by switching defence methods leaving other aspects of society unchanged. In so far as these assumptions are made by proponents of social defence, then they do need examination.

First, Schmid assumes that social defence is national defence, and this would occur in one country (the Netherlands) without accompanying changes in other coun-

tries. In this situation, it is not surprising that the Soviet military threat would remain a potent one. An alternative is to see the introduction of social defence as part of a process that transcends national boundaries.

An analogy can be made with the antinuclear power movement. Arguably, stopping nuclear power in one country wouldn't be effective, since dangers would still exist from nuclear power plants in other countries. Therefore this argument would continue - it makes more sense to include a variety of energy sources into an energy system, including nuclear power. This argument ignores the power of example and of cooperation across national boundaries, including the Soviet Union. Without the antinuclear power movement, the accidents at Three Mile Island and Chernobyl would not have provided any opportunity for challenge or change.

Second, Schmid assumes that social defence is without offensive capacity. Essentially, the social defence system sits waiting for some aggressor to invade or take over before being stimulated into action. But social defence does not have to be restricted to this reactive mode. It is quite possible to organise offensive non-violent actions, such as radio broadcasts, visits by activists, boycotts and nonviolent intervention (by peace brigades).

The emphasis in the study is on Soviet military power. The Soviet Government is portrayed as a monolithic entity, almost impervious to any concerns except maintenance and expansion of its own power. While this captures certain elements of Soviet political economy, it ignores the potential for studying weaknesses in state socialism. There are opposition groups in the Soviet Union, and there are divisions along lines of ethnic background, occupation and privilege. Furthermore, there are contradictions inherent in Soviet political and economic organisation, such as the difficulty of generating worker enthusiasm for centrally planned economic targets.

A social defence system designed to withstand Soviet threats would need to study these weaknesses in great depth. It would have a greater chance of applying pressure for participation and freedom within the Soviet Union than the present approach of military threats, which only

helps to force popular support by the Soviet people for their government.

A third assumption made by Schmid is that social defence must substitute for all the strengths of military 'defence'. Specifically, social defence is expected to withstand a potential Soviet invasion just as well as military defence. In short, military defence is seen as superior because it can include everything that social defence does, plus military methods.

Schmid makes little mention of the failures of military approaches, nor of strengths of social defence not possible using violent methods. That military methods failed in Lithuania is grudgingly admitted in the course of the argument that social defence would have failed. The dangers of military coups, attacks on civil liberties, militarisation of the economy, and weapons of mass destruction are not sheeted home to military approaches, but are rather accepted as parts of the present world order. The argument that military approaches may foreclose options by fostering military buildups elsewhere is not dealt with.

For example, Schmid points out that social defence provides no defence against nuclear attack; he thinks a nuclear deterrent is essential. But of course, this ignores the fact that possessing nuclear weapons is precisely what is most likely to make one a nuclear target and to stimulate the 'enemy' towards building ever more nuclear weapons.

Schmid says, "any across-the-board claim for social defence as a patent solution to contemporary national security problems must be rejected as irresponsible idealism for the time being" (p. 208). Personally I haven't heard anyone make such a sweeping claim. In any case, it would be just as accurate to say (dropping the "national" out of the quote) the same about military 'defence': "any across-the-board claim for military defence as a patent solution to contemporary security problems must be rejected as irresponsible idealism for the time being". Schmid doesn't make this point.

A fourth assumption made by Schmid is that social defence would be introduced without other significant changes in society. Yet the vulnerability of a society to attack or takeover depends on more than just formal 'defence' measures. For ex-

ample, a decentralised energy system using renewable fuels is less vulnerable than an energy system based on large plants and imported technology. A society which systematically opposes racism, sexism and large inequalities in wealth is less vulnerable than one split along these lines. Factories controlled by workers are less vulnerable than ones controlled by owners or bureaucrats.

Schmid does not portray social defence as being part of a wider process of social change towards more equal participation. In this, Schmid follows many writers on social defence who present it as a sort of 'social fix', a pragmatic alternative to the present system. But social defence does not have to be an isolated change. Indeed, Schmid's critique can be read as a powerful reason why it is very unlikely to be so.

The study does contain a somber picture of Soviet military power, and the case studies are valuable summaries. It is a valuable counter to the tendency to blame the West and capitalism for every aspect of war and oppression. Yet the focus on the Soviet Union is excessive and unbalanced. It needs to be complemented by an account demonstrating the threat to 'peace and freedom' from the West, such as Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman's *The Political Economy of Human Rights*.

To have such a critical study is actually testimony to the increasing importance of social defence, in thinking and writing about war and peace. Previously social defence could simply be ignored or laughed at. With the continuing failure of other approaches to counter militarism and repression, attention has turned to social defence as one way which confronts the roots of the problem. Yet if social defence is simply promoted as a 'social fix', as is so often done, it is vulnerable to the criticisms that Schmid so ably spells out.

Ironically, one of the strongest grassroots movements promoting social defence is found in the Netherlands, Schmid's study has not noticeably dampened their activities. As usual, the activists can proceed while the scholars argue about whether what the activists do is really worthwhile, or even possible.

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