

CLASSICAL BOOK REVIEW

**Bart de Ligt: The Conquest of Violence:
An Essay on War and Revolution**

George Routledge & Sons 1937; Pluto Press 1989

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Bart de Ligt was a Dutch pacifist and revolutionary socialist who lived from 1883 to 1938. The son of a pastor, de Ligt became extremely active in the European peace and revolutionary socialist movements. He was noted for his excellent and energetic activist efforts, especially in bringing together different movements to form a coordinated campaign.

De Ligt began his career as a pastor in the Netherlands Reformed Church, and became committed to Christian socialism. With the advent of World War I in 1914, he began speaking against war and conscription, as a result of which he was banned from parts of the Netherlands and served 15 days in prison. He continued his anti-war activism and eventually left the church. For health reasons, he moved to Switzerland, where he spent most of his time. He travelled regularly to the Netherlands and elsewhere in Europe to give lectures and teach courses, and met or corresponded with leading figures including Einstein, Gandhi, Nehru and Aldous Huxley. For 20 years after the end of World War I, he was an indefatigable organiser, speaker and writer. For more on de Ligt's life, see Dungan et al. (1988).

De Ligt was committed both to nonviolence and to revolutionary socialism, which is otherwise known as anarchist-communism, social anarchism or libertarian socialism. It is the kind of socialism based on workers organising work collectively without bosses or a state. He drew on the example of nonviolent struggles as the method for change and on a belief in the need to challenge ruling groups of all types, including governments and capitalists.

His major work was *Vrede als Daad* (Peace as Action), documenting the history of direct action against war. It was published in two large

volumes, in Dutch, in 1931 and 1933, and later in French. There is no English translation.

The focus here is on a shorter book, *The Conquest of Violence*. It was first published in Dutch in 1934, with a revised and enlarged version published in French the next year. In 1937, further revised and enlarged, an English edition was published. De Ligt died the following year, apparently in part due to exhaustion from his continual travel, talks and efforts to organise against war.

It is useful to remember that in the 1930s, world politics looked exceedingly grim. European imperialism was at its height. Britain had colonies across the globe, and France had numerous colonies, especially in Africa. The Dutch government was also a major imperialist power, with Indonesia as its prize possession. The Japanese regime was expansionist, launching a vicious war to take over parts of China. The fascist Italian government led by Mussolini attempted to conquer Ethiopia. The German government was rearming in preparation for war. In this context, to remain a committed pacifist and social revolutionary was an act of faith.

The book

The Conquest of Violence shows its origins as a patchwork of different writings. Much of the book reads as a polemic against militarism and its supports among churches, industry and governments. It is a product of its time, when militarism was rampant and a war was looming.

Early chapters include a devastating tirade against violence, a survey of war in history (in which de Ligt includes the benefits of war), an attack on imperialism, a critique of "bourgeois pacifism" (which refers to government attempts to prevent war) and a lucid discussion of the problems with revolutionary violence.

De Ligt often relies on long quotes from various authors, mostly those whose views he shares. Among those whose works he discusses and quotes with admiration are Isaak Steinberg, Clara Meijer-Wichmann, Henrietta Roland Holst and Miss M. P. Willcocks. *The Conquest of Violence* draws on a supportive intellectual culture.

The book comes into its own in Chapter VI, “The effectiveness of the non-violent struggle,” which contains a listing of numerous nonviolent campaigns, many of which are forgotten today, unmentioned even in contemporary writings on nonviolent action. De Ligt gives special attention to a few cases, for example a struggle in Western Samoa against the New Zealand government (pp. 147–153). Contemporary readers might well begin *The Conquest of Violence* with this long chapter.

De Ligt’s commitment to nonviolence and opposition to the military was strong and uncompromising. He reports his criticisms of Gandhi’s political opportunism; for example, in 1918 Gandhi recruited for the British army (Paxton, 2017).

Following chapters on nonviolent action, de Ligt addresses the role of violence in revolution, a theme that recurs throughout the book. His view is encapsulated in this passage:

For the social revolution means nothing if it is not a battle for humanity against all that is inhuman and unworthy of man. That is why we have always asserted that the more there is of real revolution, the less there is of violence: the more of violence, the less of revolution. At the very most, violence may be a secondary help in the course of a revolutionary movement. (p. 162)

The remaining chapters address a miscellany of topics that were current in the 1930s, including the Soviet Union, the war in Spain, military recruiting, the League of Nations, and defending against German and Japanese aggression.

In “Armed defence against Hitler?” de Ligt addresses the immediate issue of responding to an invasion of the Netherlands by Nazi Germany. He argues that military defence was bound to be unsuccessful and, even if it could be militarily effective, it would turn the Dutch people into militarists like those they were defending against. He instead recommends letting German troops to occupy the country and then using nonviolent methods to convert and resist them. In this advice, de Ligt provided a rudimentary picture of what later was articulated as social defence or civilian-based defence. In arguing that a key role in the defence is the “Dutch spirit” and Dutch traditions, he anticipated the central idea of Stephen King-Hall’s 1958 book *Defence in the Nuclear Age*. King-Hall,

in presenting a more developed picture of social defence, said the central thing to be defended was the British way of life.

In another chapter, titled “The Japanese danger,” de Ligt discusses the threat of the expansionist Japanese military to Indonesia, at the time a Dutch colony. De Ligt says the Dutch government should turn Indonesia over to the Indonesians, and only provide assistance — nonviolent, of course — if requested, as a free and equal partner in opposing aggression.

De Ligt calls for action by the masses against all rulers. To halt the progression towards war, or to halt wars in progress, he calls for the proletariat to act, with attention to some specifics, such as transport workers:

As very often happens when the workers are called upon to fulfil their historic mission and prevent collective murder, it is upon the transport workers that the duty falls first and foremost: for, by the nature of their function, they hold the keys of heaven and hell and can open or shut the hellish gates of war as they choose. (p. 261)

Few workers ever heard de Ligt’s call to action, much less heeded it. Nevertheless, it is a pity that he did not live long enough to hear about the waterside workers in Port Kembla, Australia, who refused to load pig iron destined for Japan because it would contribute to the Japanese war effort in China. Late in 1938, the workers, supported by the local community, put up a long struggle against both the Australian government, which favoured appeasement of Japanese militarism, and the local iron and steel company (White, 1979). This example of workers’ resistance to militarism continues to be celebrated in Wollongong today.

The Conquest of Violence includes a long appendix, “Plan of campaign against all war and all preparation for war,” which de Ligt presented at the 1934 conference of War Resisters’ International. This amazing document lists dozens of actions to be taken by a variety of groups. For example, as the first entry it includes “Refusal of military service” with subcategories of conscript, soldier or sailor, reservist, and citizen called to arms for (1) manoeuvres, (2) strike-breaking or (3) dealing with political conflicts. Then comes refusal of non-combatant military service, refusal to be involved in war-related manufacturing, banking and other services, and refusal to pay taxes. For each one of a long list of occupations and

roles — for example scientist, parent, teacher, journalist, politician and artist — de Ligt lists two main tasks: refusing to support war or national defence in any way, and promoting ideas of nonviolence and the making of a free and harmonious society. De Ligt's plan then includes collective action by a host of different groups to "prevent war and all preparation for war." A prime recommendation was "propaganda" for this goal. (The word propaganda in the 1930s was less pejorative and, in today's terms, might be called information campaigning or public education.) Collective actions include both "theoretical" tasks, such as propaganda, and practical tasks such as organising direct action movements against conscription, organising "peace crusades" (walks lasting weeks or months through several countries), and a general strike. So far, the suggested actions are to be taken in peacetime, to prevent war and preparation for war. A second half of the document addresses actions to be taken in wartime.

An anarchist perspective

De Ligt was both a pacifist and a revolutionary socialist. He opposed ruling classes, including capitalists and imperialists of all varieties. In the European tradition this orientation puts him in the camp of the anarchist movement, on the nonviolent wing. He was familiar with the works of classical anarchist thinkers such as Bakunin and Kropotkin, though these are not often cited in *The Conquest of Violence*.

De Ligt saw ruling classes as a central problem. In chapter 3, "Violence and the bourgeoisie," he refers to the "bourgeois revolutions," such as the French revolution, as serving a new ruling class — capitalists — that soon incorporated the old ruling classes, namely the clergy and nobility. Most of the chapter is about imperialism. He praises "Redskins," especially the Iroquois in North America, for having developed ways of living peacefully:

At the time of the White invasions, the Iroquois had already got beyond the war stage. This tribe which, in the social field, had organized itself in the freest possible manner according to the methods of self-government, had created a juridico-social unity through all their vast territory, in collaboration with the Mohawks, as far back as the fifteenth century,

not to mention the maintenance of a general peace unknown to the Christian Europe of that time. (p. 42)

De Ligt opposed fascism as a particularly toxic political system, providing a useful and insightful definition: "Fascism, that is, a politico-economic state where the ruling class of each country behaves towards its own people as for several centuries it has behaved to the colonial peoples under its heel" (p. 74).

He argued that governments were the problem, and the treaties they entered into were useless. He saw war as both obsolete and disastrous.

De Ligt recognised the emancipatory features of the Russian revolution, during which workers and soldiers managed their own affairs in what were soviets in the original sense. He condemned the invasion of the fledgling Soviet Union by militaries from eight countries, an invasion that contributed to the militarisation of the revolution and the rise of a dictatorial state. De Ligt's condemnation of the Soviet government was fierce and uncompromising: unlike many Western socialists of the 1930s, he had no illusions about the nature of Soviet socialism, calling it a form of capitalism.

Overall, de Ligt's rejection of anti-Semitism, militarism, imperialism, capitalism, fascism and Bolshevism has stood the test of time remarkably well, especially considering the support for these ideologies during the 1930s. This may reflect the durability of a pacifist-anarchist perspective.

De Ligt put his hope in action by the masses, especially the working class, though he was disappointed by the lack of action. *The Conquest of Violence* comes across as far too optimistic about the willingness of working people to oppose violence and to resist the calls to patriotism.

Implications today

Though *The Conquest of Violence* was written over 80 years ago, it remains possible to learn from it. Reading about nonviolent struggles from the point of view of the 1930s is valuable, providing a reminder that this option has been clearly visible, for those who care to recognise it, for well over a century.

More deeply, de Ligt shows the need for a clear-headed vision of revolutionary nonviolence. Much current research on civil resistance

addresses action taken within current social structures. Overthrowing dictators is worthwhile, of course, but does not address the underlying system of states and militaries, so the same problems of repression, war and genocide recur. De Ligt called for socialist revolution, with socialism in the sense of people collectively managing their own affairs for the benefit of all, which is quite different from state socialism. This remains a revolutionary idea that I believe needs to be higher on the agenda of scholars and activists. Those with less sympathy for this viewpoint may find de Ligt's analysis and call to action less relevant today.

The Conquest of Violence makes it apparent that some of the major obstacles to social transformation remain much the same. One of them is trust in official channels such as disarmament negotiations. Too many people leave matters to governments, though, as de Ligt argued, they will never disarm unless there is mass pressure. De Ligt argued that the League of Nations, set up after World War I to adjudicate disputes between governments, was totally ineffectual.

However, it remains just as difficult today as it was in the 1930s to mobilise large numbers of people against war preparations and war. It remains just as visionary today to imagine defending against a foreign invasion by letting the invaders enter the country and then using a variety of methods of nonviolent resistance to oppose them.

In the Netherlands in the 1930s, de Ligt saw the need to oppose at least two systems of domination: Nazi invaders and the Dutch capitalist ruling class, which at the time was also an imperialistic power. To this he added Bolshevism as a possible third system of domination to be opposed. Today, the same systems of domination, in transmogrified form, continue and need to be opposed. De Ligt's commitment to revolutionary pacifism in the 1930s, on the eve of World War II, can serve as a model for today's campaigners:

So instead of waiting till the last moment, why not begin to mobilize at once against not only war but mobilization for war itself? Why not fight at once, by non-co-operation, civil disobedience, boycott, both individual and collective, all preparations for war, so as to make it — this obsolete method of settling political conflicts and regulating the affairs of the nations — impossible once and for all? (p. 264)

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