

The Journal of Social Encounters

Volume 7
Issue 1 *Extractive Politics, Conflict and
Peacebuilding*

Article 20

2023

Review of Social Defense

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Recommended Citation

McCarthy, Eli (2023) "Review of Social Defense," *The Journal of Social Encounters*: Vol. 7: Iss. 1, 284-286.
Available at: https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/social_encounters/vol7/iss1/20

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***Social Defense* by Jørgen Johansen and Brian Martin. Sparsnäs, Sweden: Irene Publishing, 2019. 174 pages. ISBN 978-91-88061-37-9**

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Creative, courageous nonviolent resistance is breaking out around the world, even as wars and large-scale violent conflict remain a challenge, along with increasing militarization in the U.S. and many parts of Europe. This book offers us a contemporary analysis of a critical practice to help break these cycles of violence by leaning into nonviolent civilian-based defense, i.e., “social defense.” The authors describe social defense as “nonviolent community resistance to repression and aggression, as an alternative to military forces” (13). The goal of the book is to describe the basic elements of this practice.

The flow of the book includes a lot of examples of practices, cases, and key ideas. The chapters unfold by addressing key problems with military systems, historical episodes of nonviolent resistance to invasions and to military coups. twenty key research-based strategic ideas for social defense, impact of recent technological and social developments, the connections of social movements with social defense, practical steps to promote social defense, and responses to key questions about social defense.

The chapter on historical cases of social defense is quite illuminating and I think a critical contribution to the present academic and political ethos. They summarize the cases of Czechoslovakia 1968 and Germany 1923 as cases of nonviolent resistance to invasion and occupation. They also discuss cases of nonviolent resistance to coups in Germany 1920, France-Algeria 1961, and the Soviet Union 1991. For example, with the French and Belgian occupation in Germany 1923, the railway workers largely refused cooperation by removing signal plans, sabotaging tracks or engines, and running trains into unoccupied territories. Boycotts followed when the French were able to run a few trains. The Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 is even more illuminating, especially considering the recent [war in Ukraine](#) (McCarthy, 2022). The military leaders decided not to resist with violence, while a spontaneous civilian, nonviolent resistance erupted. Actions included, strikes, refusing supplies to invading troops, cutting airport services, blocking trains, switching radio signals, removing house numbers to protect leaders, undermining troop loyalty through fraternization, etc. (51-56) This became a critical defense movement that generated key immediate political concessions, and cultivated the community networks and skills for more complete liberation from the Soviets in the 1980’s.

As the authors transition into 20 more general ideas about social defense, one key idea is that such action is about defense of society or community, not necessarily of territory (63). This entails defending practices and institutions that enable cooperative living, i.e., a social system and the positive values underlying that system rather than a territory. They argue that defending values such as respect for life, inclusiveness, and supporting those in need “can reduce the tendency to demonize potential enemies” as well as minimize fear and hatred. This re-humanization is of course critical to breaking dynamics and cycles of violence and building a more sustainable peace.

Another chapter that provides a key contribution is the one linking social movements with social defense. The authors discuss the environmental, labor, youth, faith-based, feminist, business, peace, and global justice movements as the most promising basis for normalizing social defense. One of the key differences between military defense and social defense is the potential higher level of participation in the latter. In turn, the authors argue that one of the most promising ways to move towards social defense is nonviolent social movements with a participatory ethos (126). This participation characteristic is one of the main factors in related [research](#) [covering 1900-2006] that demonstrates nonviolent resistance being 2x's more effective than violent resistance [3x's more effective [from 2007-2019](#)], and at least 10x's more likely to lead to durable democracy (Chenoweth and Stephan, 2011, Chenoweth 2021). This research included assessing campaigns with specific objectives, such as resisting occupation or seeking self-determination.

To unpack this a bit, the more we lean into the work of supporting mass organized, coalitions of nonviolent resistance, the more we cultivate habits that correspond to durable democracies, human dignity, and thus, human flourishing. Such habits can include broader participation, empathy, broad coalition building, re-humanization, creativity, and compassion. By contrast, the more we lean on violent resistance or mass organized campaigns of violence associated with war, the more likely we are to cultivate habits that correspond to less durable democracies and more to authoritarian politics. Such habits include domination, distrust, bitterness, hatred, less empathy, more corruption, domestic violence, generational trauma, and militarization.

Near the end of the book, the authors engage some common questions or concerns about social defense, which also provide a good basis for future research and reflection. Such questions include dealing with 'ruthless enemies,' situations of genocide, the role of military forces in social defense, and the relation of defense to social change. One intriguing point about 'ruthless enemies' is the tendency to describe stakeholders as homogeneous and monolithic with little nuance. This tends to narrow the imagination and tighten the assumptions toward violent dynamics. In contrast, the authors argue that in all such cases not every person significantly involved functions like a "cog in a well-oiled machinery," and thus, a range of resistance options are possible. Another intriguing reflection is how soldiers can participate in unarmed defense, such as rescue, buffer action, expeditionary action [engaging at a distant location], and even invasion to oppose severe repression (153-154). This reminds me of the *Soldiers Without Guns* documentary about the New Zealand military entering unarmed into a civil war zone in Bougainville in the late 1990's (Watson, 2020). The authors of the book raise some important questions and possibilities, yet ultimately, we need to invest more and run more experiments or pilots before we can adequately know the potential and contours of social defense.

Some areas for growth or even further research include the following. Towards the end of the book, the authors briefly explore soldiers engaging in unarmed defense, however, there is little connection to the proven practice of unarmed civilian protection, such as the Nonviolent Peaceforce. I think this could provide supporting evidence and a broader set of strategies to advance social defense more broadly. A second area for growth is more robust ethical reflection on social defense in terms of guiding frameworks or methods. A third area is attention to cultural contexts and the role of indigenous practices in social defense. At times, some critical sections seem a bit brief or underdeveloped, and thus, there is room in future reflection for more depth and nuance.

This book is a pivotal and constructive resource for courses exploring security studies, international relations, justice and peace studies, nonviolent action, social transformation, and peacebuilding. The text is digestible for undergraduates and ground-breaking enough to benefit graduate students as well as scholars. I hope readers of this review will not hesitate to explore this book as a timely, visionary praxis for our present reality.

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Open access text: *Social defence*. Jørgen Johansen and Brian Martin Sparsnäs, Sweden: Irene Publishing, 2019, 174 pages. ISBN 978-91-88061-37-9
<https://www.bmartin.cc/pubs/19sd/19sd.pdf>