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Civilian-Based Defence Put to the Test Current Issues and Practical Challenges

Documentation of an Online-Conference,
September 6-7, 2024



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This paper documents an international online conference on social or civilian-based defence, held on the 6th and 7th of September, 2024. Under the title "Civilian-Based Defence Put to the Test. Current Issues and Practical Challenges" the up to 70 participants discussed the concept of social defence and the need to adapt it to the current challenges. The majority of the speakers from many different countries, from Australia to France, from Sweden to the State of Spain, from the U.S. to Germany handed in their contributions to be documented in this paper.

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Editor: Christine Schweitzer

Photo: Outside the Pentagon, 1967. A line of youth protesting the Vietnam War stand before a line of military police. A protester offers a flower to a military policeman. By: U.S. Army, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=1111279>

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social-defence@lists.wehrhaftohnewaffen.de

It is public and everyone is free to register here:

<https://wehrhaftohnewaffen.maadix.org/mailman/postorius/lists/>

Contents

Introduction

David Scheuing & Christine Schweitzer	4
Social defence – State of the Art	
Brian Martin	10
Reflecting on My Personal Development Regarding Social defence: From “Against Wars” to Searching for Alternatives	
Jørgen Johansen	14
Social Contexts	
Karen Kennedy	18
Civilian-Based Defence, Mutual Aid and Activist Collective Care: Learnings from Sudan	
Julia Kramer	26
The Evolution and Dynamics of Ukrainian Civil Resistance: Key Trends 2024	
Filip Daza Sierra	33
Learning From the “Guardias” Integral Security as a Response to Multiple Phenomena of Violence in Colombia	
María Cárdenas Alfonso	35
Social Defence Under Fire. Serious Questions and Answers	
Martin Arnold	41
Under Which Conditions Would a “Civilian Based Defence” Be Feasible?	
François Marchand	44
Questioning the Warist Orthodoxy: Pacifist Critical Reflections on Russia's Invasion of Ukraine	
Alexandre Christoyannopoulos	47
Civilian Based Defence: Conceptual insights from the conflict surrounding the occupation of the Ruhr in 1923	
Barbara Müller	62
The Shanti Sena Perspective on Civilian-based Defence Today: Explorative Reflections	
Kevin Kaisig	67
Subversive Human Love: Towards Needs Oriented Systemic Conflict Transformation	
Anne Dietrich	73
Cultivating a Society to Sustain a Robust Nonviolent Social Defence Praxis	
Eli McCarthy	77
Relationship-building As Defence: Rethinking Civilian-based and Military Approaches	
Molly Wallace	81
Civil Resistance and Autonomous Defence	
Wilhelm Nolte und Hans-Heinrich Nolte	89
Nonviolent Campaigns and Violent Flanks: the More Violence, the Less Success	
Jan Stehn	95
Conclusions and Outlook	
Christine Schweitzer	100

Social defence – State of the Art

Brian Martin



I'm going to give an overview of social defence, starting with some basics and going from there.

To start, consider the very idea of social defence. During World War I, the famous mathematician and philosopher Bertrand Russell wrote an article, "War and non-resistance"² that is probably as good an origin as any other. The point here is that the initial idea is important.

What do we call it? There are several terms for it, and they all mean basically the same thing. I prefer "social defence". Each term in English has somewhat different associations. They all involve "defence".

- Civilian defence
- Civilian-based defence
- Social defence
- Defence by civil resistance

Here are the **core features** of social defence, though there are possible variations and modifications of each one:

- No military
- Resistance by nonviolent action
- Popular participation

Social defence has always been linked with nonviolent action, also known as civil resistance, satyagraha and people power. Successes and innovations in nonviolent campaigns show what is possible in social defence. There's one big difference. Since the first major nonviolent campaigns in the 1800s, there have been thousands of others, but there are no examples of a community systematically adopting a social defence system.

There is an important difference between nonviolent action and social defence, in relation to changing or maintaining society. However, this isn't a rigid difference, as there are exceptions. Given that social defence is about resisting assaults on a society, this raises the question of what it is that's being defended. It's more about values than territory.

Nonviolent action is about promoting (beneficial) change.

Social defence is about resisting (harmful) change.

How does it work?

The methods of social defence are pretty much the methods of nonviolent action, as famously catalogued by Gene Sharp. In this sense, social defence can be considered an *application* of nonviolent action. However, there are two important additions.

One is "maintaining society", which means continuing functions like agriculture, industry, communications, relationships and everything else that nurtures a community of people living together. The second is "international support", which might better be called building and maintaining connections with individuals and groups outside the community defending itself, especially with individuals and groups from places from which threats might arise.

- Persuasion
- Protests
- Obstruction (e.g., strikes, boycotts)
- Maintaining society
- International support

Historical Examples

There are only two good examples of coordinated nonviolent resistance against military invasions: the Ruhrkampf in Germany in 1923 and the resistance to the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. There are also several examples of nonviolent resistance to coups: to the Kapp Putsch in Germany in 1920, to the Algerian generals who attempted to take power in

² <https://www.bmartin.cc/pubs/19sd/refs/Russell1915.pdf>.

Algeria-France in 1961, and to the attempted coup in the Soviet Union in 1991. In the following, I'll use Czechoslovakia 1968 to illustrate features of social defence. The invasion by half a million Soviet and other Warsaw Pact countries in August 1968 was against a reform movement in Czechoslovakia, so-called "socialism with a human face", which was a threat to the authoritarian Soviet version of socialism.

How is it organized?

Social defence can be spontaneous or planned. In Czechoslovakia it was spontaneous. The Czechoslovak military decided it could only resist for a few days, and therefore did not attempt armed resistance at all. Instead, people initiated a potent resistance without arms. It is reasonable to presume that a well-prepared system of social defence would be more effective than a spontaneous one, just as a well-trained army is likely to be more effective than spontaneous armed resistance.

Social defence can be organised on national, local and global scales. Nearly all writing on social defence assumes that it is national defence, but this is not a requirement. The Czechoslovak resistance was national. It received no support from other countries. A global system would involve preparations in many parts of the world with arrangements to support any community under attack.

At the organisational level, there are several possible models of social defence. It could involve a fully professional force, in essence an army of nonviolent activists. This is not the usual idea. More commonly, most participants are not paid or otherwise rewarded; they are volunteers. There are other examples of volunteers undertaking life-saving service. In Australia, many fire-fighters and surf lifesavers are volunteers. There is also the possibility of a small number of professionals coordinating a largely volunteer operation. One disadvantage of having professionals as leaders is that they may be targeted by attackers, being imprisoned, killed or coerced by threats to their families. The same vulnerability is present for volunteer leadership. The greatest resilience comes with a network organisation in which no individual is crucial, in the sense that others can step in if needed.

Social defence is often proposed as a replacement for military defence. The process to do this is called transarmament. Just get rid of the military and introduce social defence in its place, and everything else can stay the same. A different perspective is that introducing social defence can involve, perhaps even *must* involve, major changes in the way society is organised, in the political and economic system. For example, workers can take action against an aggressor by shutting down production or making different products. This means workers need the capacity to act without the direction of bosses, who might be arrested, killed or co-opted by the aggressor. Empowering workers to autonomously take decisions is a challenge to the usual power structure in workplaces. This is just one example of how building the capacity for social defence has implications for the way society is organised.

How is it introduced?

In Czechoslovakia in 1968, the nonviolent resistance to the Soviet-led invasion developed spontaneously, without advance preparation. Another route to social defence is that it is introduced by the government, on its own initiative. A third path is citizens putting pressure on the government. A fourth is creating the capacity for social defence through a range of initiatives, for example training in nonviolent action, small-scale renewable energy systems, workers' control and communication systems resilient against takeover. A fifth path is a cascading process of introducing major social changes, possibly through the nonviolent overthrow of repressive governments.

- Spontaneous
- Government-led
- Citizen pressure
- Building an alternative
- Revolutionary change

Social defence is utopian, in the sense that it is an idea very far from realisation. The reason for this is the entrenched power of the military system embedded in the political and economic system through what is commonly called the military-industrial complex (which is tightly tied to the political system), widespread beliefs that violence will always triumph against unarmed opponents, continual alarms about foreign enemies, economic inequality (which reduces people's commitments to society as it exists, and hence their willingness to defend it), widespread reliance on professionals (doctors, lawyers, engineers – and soldiers), and people's attachment to their country (which fosters an us-and-them mentality turning foreigners into potential competitors or threats).

- Military-industrial complex
- Beliefs about violence
- Fear-mongering
- Inequality
- Professionalization
- Nationalism

The usual assumption is that promoting social defence involves convincing people (including politicians) that it's a good idea, and when people are convinced they will act to bring about change. Another process is that changes will induce people to think in different ways. For example, when people are involved in groups with members from different parts of the world, they may be less nationalistic and more open to taking action against aggression in other parts of the world.

History of the concept

Stephen King-Hall's book *Defence in the Nuclear Age* was published in 1958.³ He is pictured on the left. Anders Boserup (above) and Andrew Mack (right) wrote *War Without Weapons*, published in 1974.⁴ These are two of many contributions by scholars and advocates in the 1950s, 60s and 70s. Nearly all of them were men, white westerners. Despite this demographic limitation, there is much to be learned from studies from this period.

The peak of activity to promote social defence was in the 1980s. Not coincidentally, this was also the time of massive mobilisations against nuclear war. There were initiatives in many countries. Antonino Drago in Italy and Lineke Schakenbos in the Netherlands are among a great number of individuals who played important roles in organising to promote social defence. The history of these efforts remains to be written.

After the end of the Cold War in 1989, peace activism declined and so did interest in social defence, though actually there were some important contributions.

Possible changes to the concept needed now

Introducing a social defence system potentially involves changes throughout society. They include learning about methods of resistance, training in how to use them, designing technological systems so they support resistance, learning skills useful for resisters (learning foreign languages, learning how to be persuasive, learning to avoid using violence, learning how to deal with propaganda, etc.), making plans and running defence drills (by analogy with fire drills), designing communication systems, finding ways for everyone to participate, and adopting political and economic policies that support resistance. Putting all these together amounts to a drastic reconfiguration of thinking, capabilities and systems.

To summarise, there are many potential aspects to social defence. Some of the most important are nonviolence, collective decision-making, preparation, training and international networking.

Principles are fine, but they need to be applied, and there are innumerable ways to do this. Organic farming, for example, reduces dependence on artificial fertilisers and pesticides, and thus makes a community less dependent on industrial inputs that might be destroyed or controlled by an aggressor. Citizens' juries are a participatory form of decision-making, giving ordinary citizens experience in deliberation and increasing commitment to society.

Conclusion

If we think of social defence as progressing through several overlapping stages, from having

³ <https://www.bmartin.cc/pubs/19sd/refs/King-Hall1958/index.html>

⁴ <https://www.bmartin.cc/pubs/19sd/refs/Boserup-Mack1974.pdf>

the idea to being introduced, it seems that we are still in early stages, mainly the idea and research stages, with limited success in promotion and little progress towards introduction. If the idea emerged during World War I, with Bertrand Russell as an exemplary advocate, what does the future hold? In an era with the continual threat of nuclear war, who or what will lead the way to social defence?

For my writings on social defence, see <https://www.bmartin.cc/pubs/sd.html>. I'm always happy to discuss ideas.

Contact me at bmartin@uow.edu.au

Dr. Brian Martin (born 1947) is emeritus professor of social sciences at the University of Wollongong, Australia. He is the author of 23 books and hundreds of articles on nonviolent action, dissent, scientific controversies, tactics against injustice, and other topics.