Social defence: concept to conquer world war

*By BRIAN MARTIN **

A MAJOR conventional war could kill tens of millions of people, and a major nuclear war could kill hundreds of millions. Nobody wants such a war. Indeed, nearly everyone is in favour of peace, at least in principle.

But military races continue unabated. The problem with disarmament is the "enemy". How could we defend ourselves without the military?

One answer to this question is social defence. Briefly, social defence is non-violent community resistance to aggression, using means such as strikes, boycotts, demonstrations non-co-operation, sit-ins and setting up alternative government.

In August 1968, Soviet military forces suddenly invaded Czechoslovakia. The Czechoslovak military forces made no attempt at resistance. But the Czechoslovak people and their leaders were united in their opposition to the aggression, and spontaneously opposed the invasion with non-violent methods. Short strikes were called. Rallies were held. Street signs and numbers were removed. People talked to the Soviet soldiers, and influenced them so much that replacements had to be brought in. The clandestine radio co-ordinated the non-violent resistance.

The Soviet Government had hoped to install a sympathetic puppet regime very quickly, but the non-violent resistance thwarted this. Although the non-violent resistance could not overcome Soviet control, it made the whole world aware of the illegitimacy of the invasion, and severely weakened the alignment of Western communist parties to the Soviet Union. It is doubtful that military resistance could have achieved half as much, and certainly not with such a small loss of life.

Non-violent resistance has been used for centuries to oppose aggression and repression. Perhaps the most well-known organised practical use of non-violent direct action was under the inspiration of Mohandas Gandhi, first in South Africa and then in India in the 1920s and 1930s against British imperial rule. For example, in 1930 Gandhi led a march to the sea followed by the making of salt in violation of the British salt monopoly. This symbolic action mobilised the Indian masses against British rule. More than 60,000 people were gaoled as a result of disobedience activities.

But it was not until 1958, with the publication of Sir Stephen King-Hall's book 'Defence in the Nuclear Age', that a full presentation of non-violent resistance as a viable alternative to military defence was given. Since then a number of other important studies have been made, including 'The Strategy of Civilian Defence' edited by Adam Roberts, 'War Without Weapons' by Anders Boserup and Andrew Mack, and the epic 'The Politics of Non-violent Action' by Gene Sharp.

How might social defence work against an invader? Protests and marches could be organised. Factories and other production useful to the enemy could be disabled, perhaps by destruction of key components that could not be easily duplicated. Computer programmers, telephone switchboard operators and typists could refuse to do anything useful for the invaders. Teachers could refuse to teach any new doctrines. Shopkeepers could refuse service to enemy soldiers. At the same time, soldiers could be treated with consideration as individuals rather than representatives of the enemy government. If any atrocities were committed by the invaders, first-hand accounts could be communicated, by channels made secure in advance, to people around the world, including those in the invading country. These and many other forms of resistance would be a strong disincentive for any attack, and would reduce the advantages of an occupation considerably.

Social defence is *not* passive resistance and it is *not* pacifism. It is the use of non-violent *action* in a co-ordinated and strategically informed way both as a deterrent to organised aggression and as a defence should aggression occur.

Pre-planned and prepared social defence has never been tested. Its potential is suggested by the Czechoslovak resistance and by other historical examples such as the resistance to the Nazi occupation in Norway, Denmark and the Netherlands. In one case, in 1943 in Berlin, a number of Jews had been arrested by the Nazis for deportation. Their non-Jewish wives protested in the streets, and eventually as a result their husbands were released. Non-violent resistance has also had some success in Soviet prison camps, such as at Vorkuta in 1953.

Social defence is different from military defence in several fundamental ways. First, as its name indicates, social defence is a defence of the social fabric, rather than of a particular territory. Resistance does not end when territory is occupied by the enemy.

Second, social defence is based on the assumption that the power of any regime depends on the acquiescence or support from the bulk of the population, rather than the power emanating from the rulers. If support is withdrawn from the rulers, then even the most ruthless regime will collapse. The 1978-79 Iranian revolution — whatever one may think of its subsequent development — succeeded largely through non-violent means

against one of the most heavily armed and ruthless police states in the world.

Third, social defence requires the participation or sympathy of a large faction of the defending populace. Military defence, by contrast, depends heavily on a professional minority. Because of the political solidarity required for social defence to succeed, it may be considered the non-violent analogue of guerilla warfare.

Fourth, social defence guards against the problem of military forces being used against the people they are supposed to defend. One of the key dangers of military forces is military dictatorship, which has become more and more common around the globe. The non-violent methods of social defence can be used against a military takeover just as they can be used against an invading force. The Kapp Putsch in Germany in 1920 and the Algerian Generals' Revolt in France and Algeria in 1961, both of which collapsed due to widespread non-violent resistance, are examples of this. Social defence solves the problem of 'Who guards the guardians?'

Fifth, social defence provides methods for social struggles for freedom, justice and equality. One of the important causes of war and violent revolution is inequitable political and economic structures. Any alternative to war must provide means for people to oppose and transform these structures. The methods of social defence are ideally suited for this purpose, and have often been used in the past to oppose slavery, racism, sexism and oppression of workers. Conversely, the methods of social defence are quite unsuited for aggressive purposes or for enforcing oppressive policies.

Sixth, social defence is non-violent. Because of this, it is harder for opponents to justify their own violence. Indeed, any heavy use of violence by the attacker tends to create ever stronger sympathy for the non-violent defenders among uncommitted people. Non-violent resistance is thus a form of political jiu-jitsu.

Because it is non-violent, social defence does not encounter the problem of whether the ends justify the means. Using non-violent methods to oppose aggression is entirely compatible with the goal of a world without war.

Indians demonstrating passive resistance, a form of social defence perfected by Mohandas Gandhi in the 1920s and 1930s in South Africa and in India.

Social defence also has a number of features in common with military defence. It requires courage and commitment, and ultimately a willingness to die in certain circumstances. Also just like military defence, social defence is not guaranteed to succeed. And just like military defence, social defence is not likely to succeed without planning, preparation and training.

Military defence can succeed sometimes, but the cost historically has been a sequence of ever more devastating wars. One possible alternative to this pattern is social defence. The direction to take then would not be disarmament but *trans* armament: the switch from violent to non-violent means for resisting aggression.

Social defence has not been studied or tried enough to determine all its strengths and weaknesses. But it does seem sufficiently promising to warrant much more investigation and testing.

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