

Dialogue and Debate

The Nazis and nonviolence

Brian Martin

Michael C. Stratford argues that nonviolent national defence is unlikely to be effective against ruthless regimes such as Nazi Germany¹. Stratford has provided a valuable service in undertaking an examination of this issue. I agree with him that occasionally too much weight has been put on some of the successes of nonviolent action against the Nazis, such as the resistance of the Norwegian teachers.

On the other hand, I think Stratford's own conclusions are much too sweeping. In his examination of the Nazi example he had made a number of assumptions about politics and nonviolent action which are questionable. It is my aim here to spell out some of these assumptions.

Assumption 1: violence 'succeeded' against the Nazis. Stratford's critique of nonviolence against the Nazis is built on an implicit comparison with violence against the Nazis, which is widely regarded as having been successful in some sense. Nazi Germany was defeated in World War Two, after all. In terms of Stratford's argument, the Nazis were a ruthless opponent, and only violence would work against them in a period less than decades.

This assumption can be questioned on several grounds. It can be argued that the war by Western governments was against German military and political expansion, not against the ruthless system of fascism per se. National violence (military force) has not regularly been used to attack fascist regimes. The Allies in World War Two did not carry the war to Iberia to topple the fascist regimes there. Nor has Western military strength been used against the numerous dictatorial 'sub-fascist' regimes around the world; instead, it frequently has been used to prop up such regimes². Stratford's logic could just as well lead to the opposite conclusion that *violent* national defence is ineffective against ruthless regimes.

Nor did Western governments intervene against Nazi Germany because of Nazi genocidal policies. There is ample historical evidence that easy opportunities to disrupt death camp operations were passed over by the Allied governments³. The policy was explicitly one of winning the war first and stopping genocidal killing afterwards. The Allies minimised any association of their cause with that of the Jews.

Furthermore, there are plenty of other examples where genocide has been permitted to proceed with no military intervention by 'non-ruthless' governments. The Turkish government's extermination of the Armenians in 1919, Stalin's purges in the 1930s and the Cambodian exterminations from 1975-1979 are major examples where systems of 'violent national defence' stood by and let killings of genocidal proportions proceed. In the Cambodian case, the Vietnamese invasion in 1979, which stopped the killings, was widely condemned by Western governments. The record of governments in opposing genocide has been pathetic⁴. Should not a whole list of failures be chalked up against 'violent national defence'?

(Stratford says regarding Cambodia, "it does not seem that nonviolent resistance could have stopped these fanatics". This focus distracts from the importance of 'violent defence' — the Indochinese war — in laying the basis for the killings.)

It is also worth remembering that the Nazi extermination of the Jews and other stigmatised groups did not begin until after the war began. In effect, the war provided a brutalising environment conducive to the killings as well as a cover for them. So it is arguable that much of the blame for Nazi genocide can be attributed to the war itself⁵, and in turn to the systems of 'violent national defence' which are often acclaimed as having stopped the Nazis.

Another reason to doubt that violence 'succeeded' in the Nazi case is post-war militarisation. World War Two helped entrench in Western societies a 'permanent war economy' — with persistent high expenditure on military forces and technological development — which had only intermittently existed before. Nuclear weapons are one feature of today's technically sophisticated military systems. If World War Two speeded up the nuclearisation of the world, should not this be counted against any merits of 'violent national defence'?

Assumption 2: nonviolent defence and violent defence are to be judged by different criteria. Stratford is quick to judge nonviolent defence ineffective if it seems unable to work against a particular ruthless opponent, namely the Nazis. But he does not apply the same criterion to violence defence. For example, as Gene Sharp points out⁶, the failure of nuclear deterrence is far worse than the failure of nonviolent deterrence.

The use of different criteria to judge nonviolence and violence is a regular feature of debates on these issues. A single failure is used to reject nonviolence; repeated failures are never enough to reject violence.

Violence against violence has failed numerous times. Is violence a failure because it didn't work for hundreds of years against the Roman empire? Is Western violent defence a failure because it cannot stop a Soviet nuclear missile? Is violent defence a failure because it has so often been turned inward against the people being 'defended', in the form of military dictatorship? Is violent defence a failure because at least one side loses in most wars?

The double standards used to reject nonviolent methods are so pervasive that it seems to me that many people must feel a psychological need to reject nonviolence, even if that rejection has little logical basis. Perhaps this is because violent defence is part of the 'the way things are', and therefore people assume that it must be the right thing to do.

To my way of thinking, any method of defence cannot be judged by its success or failure on a single case, nor even on a type of case. The full ramifications of a defence mode must be examined.

Stratford doesn't examine the numerous harmful social impacts of violent methods, which include militarisation of society, economic costs, infringements of democracy, encouragement of male violence and domination and, not least, stimulation and justification for militarisation in other societies. Nonviolent methods minimise these major social impacts (except perhaps economic cost).

Assumption 3: nonviolent national defence is a straightforward replacement of violent national defence. Stratford assumes that nonviolent national defence must take the place of the military and perform precisely the same tasks — and concludes that it probably isn't 'up to the job'.

The trouble with this line of argument is that it builds in all the assumptions associated with the present world political order, which in turn are premised on the existence of military forces.

A standard definition of the state is a set of social institutions founded on a monopoly of what is claimed to be legitimate force within a territory. The present division of the world into states (usually categorised as countries) is built around their use of military forces and police to quell external and internal enemies of the state. Many of the state-based military forces are organised into larger scale groupings, namely the military blocs.

Stratford asks for a nonviolent defence to take over from a violent defence in an overall system of international relations which is based on monopolies over violence. No wonder nonviolence looks a poor option.

Ruthless regimes such as Nazi Germany do not arise in a vacuum. They are able to be genocidal precisely because there is available a state apparatus which extracts resources from the society (through taxes, for example) to support it, military forces used to 'defend' the state and enforce if necessary the extraction of resources, and scientific and technological resources mobilised for use by the state. Sitting around the world are numerous state-military systems. Often they are benevolent, as in most liberal democracies most of the time. But should they face crisis or be 'taken over' by 'ruthless' rulers, they can be used for aggression and oppression. It is circular to argue that 'violent national defence' is necessary to protect against ruthless regimes if ruthless regimes are a predictable if only occasional outcome of those very same systems of 'violent national defence' being advocated.

Part of the assumption here is that nonviolent defence has to be *national* defence. This is a dangerous assumption, since it incorporates the picture of the present world order built around national monopolies on violence⁷. The success of a movement for nonviolent alternatives might be in terms of a dissolution of states rather than reform within them.

One of the features of 'violent national defence' is that it is not used only for defence, but more often than not either for attack or oppression. Although in wars both sides often claim to be 'defending', in practice the politics and technology of military attack and defence greatly overlap.

But the capability of military forces to *attack* is forgotten when comparison is made with nonviolent methods, which are assumed to be entirely defensive. (This is why I put 'violent national defence' in quotes.) Once again a double

standard is used against nonviolent methods. It is assumed that the only thing they can do is deter or defend. Usually the image is of nonviolent defenders simply waiting for an enemy to invade.

True, nonviolent methods by definition cannot be used for *military* attack. But what about nonviolent attack? Nonviolent methods certainly can be used to challenge oppressive and militaristic regimes.

Back to nonviolence against the Nazis. It is often forgotten that many Germans were ardent supporters of the Nazis, and many people in other countries, especially in the 1930s, were admirers as well. If nonviolent defence is to work against an 'enemy', it is widely agreed that it is important there is a united opposition. One of the reasons the Nazis were able to build up their repressive apparatus is that relatively few people were willing to take a stand against them. According to Helen Fein, the best predictor of the victimisation of Jews in countries controlled by the Nazis is the level of pre-war anti-Semitism⁸. Ironically, it is especially those who lauded military methods who were especially favourable towards the Nazis, while the often castigated peace movement opposed them.

In the 1930s, there were no organised actions by other governments to undermine the Nazi regime using nonviolent means. Stephen King-Hall gives a telling account of how he tried futilely as late as 1939 to drum up British government support for a campaign to undermine the German people's support for Hitler⁹. There has been no further study on this issue, so it remains a possibility that concerted nonviolent *attack* from around the world might well have undermined the Nazi regime.

People on the left have long pointed to the illicit measures taken by Western governments to topple other governments, such as in Iran in 1954, Chile in 1973 and currently Nicaragua. Many of the measures taken are nonviolent, such as diplomatic steps, withdrawing investment, funding opposition groups and making vehement public statements. Such measures could just as well be taken against repressive regimes, though governments do this only inconsistently.

I agree here with Stratford that there is more hope in keeping Nazi-like groups out of power than in stopping their excesses in the event of war. That conclusion applies for violent as well as for nonviolent methods.

One last facet of the third assumption is that conversion to nonviolent defence is assumed to be one-sided. It is imagined that one country converts to nonviolent defence, while 'enemies' remain the same as before, some of them being 'ruthless'. But much more likely is a process of conversion in which steps towards nonviolent alternatives are made simultaneously in several countries. For example, the conversion process in one society could be dependent on the nonviolent toppling of potential aggressor regimes. The picture of social defence and social attack as a process rather than a technical fix avoids many of the dilemmas associated with 'defence against ruthless opponents'.

Michael Stratford is right that the Nazi case is a difficult one for supporters of nonviolence. But his assumptions make the case even more difficult than it need be. To the question, "Can nonviolent defence be effective if the

opponent is ruthless?", I think the best answer is, we don't know. But the same answer applies to the question, "Can military defence be effective if the opponent is ruthless?" Perhaps a better question is, "What 'defence system' — violent or nonviolent — stimulates the creation of ruthless regimes?"

Nonviolence is not guaranteed to be successful. But it may be the only hope in a technological age when the logic of violence is the logic of mass extermination.

1. Michael C. Stratford, 'Can nonviolent national defence be effective if the opponent is ruthless?: the Nazi case', *Social Alternatives*, vol. 6, no. 2, April 1987, pp. 49-57.
2. Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman, *The Political Economy of Human Rights* (Boston: South End Books, 1979).
3. Martin Gilbert, *Auschwitz and the Allies* (London: Michael Joseph, 1981).

4. Leo Kuper, *Genocide* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981).
5. Adam Roberts, 'The use of civil resistance in international relations', in Philip P. Wiener and John Fisher (eds.), *Violence and Aggression in the History of Ideas* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1985), pp. 113-132 (see p. 124); Gene Sharp, *Making Europe Unconquerable* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Ballinger, 1985), pp. 135-137.
6. Gene Sharp, 'Deterrence and defence by nonviolent sanctions', *Social Alternatives*, vol. 6, no. 2, April 1987, pp. 9-18.
7. Brian Martin, *Uprooting War* (London: Freedom Press, 1984).
8. Helen Fein, *Accounting for Genocide* (New York: Free Press, 1979).
9. Stephen King-Hall, *Total Victory* (London: Faber and Faber, 1941), pp. 209-211, 283-304; Stephen King-Hall, *Defence in the Nuclear Age* (London: Gollancz, 1958), pp. 126-128.

Defending Nonviolent Defence

Ralph Summy

Although I guest-edited the previous issue of *Social Alternatives*, there was one article — that of Michael Stratford — whose conclusion I want to dispute. He examines whether the thesis of Raymond Aron and Michael Walzer that nonviolent defence is ineffective against ruthless and unscrupulous invaders is valid in the case of Nazi Germany and the occupied countries. His finding: "although nonviolent resistance to Nazi occupation produced some limited achievements, notably in Denmark and Norway, and was important for national morale and identity in these countries and the Netherlands, there is little to indicate that these occupations could have been ended by nonviolent means alone, or mainly by nonviolent means." From this finding he then draws the general inference "that there is more hope in striving to keep Nazi-like groups and individuals from seizing control of governments in the first place than in trying to remove them by nonviolent methods". Thus he basically comes down in support of the Aron-Walzer thesis.

In my view this thesis is flawed on a number of grounds, but I shall take up only my main criticism at this time. The counter-argument begins with a model of how power is exercised. It is contended that power is not something that can be imposed from above, but is instead a relationship formed by the *granting* of power from below. And what has been granted can just as surely be withdrawn. Thus the power of any ruler, whether we are talking about a democratically elected official or a tyrant who has seized office, is extremely fragile. His/her power depends on the consent or compliance of the ruled. If the relationship breaks down, the ruler is left with no one to rule.

This is simple basic theory. The only occasion when the ruler's position is not problematic is when no dependency relationship exists with the subject class. Whilst such a situation will never occur in absolute form, it comes close to prevailing in cases of genocide, imposed migration, and lodgement of forces in remote areas. This is when nonviolent resistance is least apt to be effective because the theoretical basis of nonviolence has been weakened.

However, in other cases of occupation and oppression — that is, in most cases where the dependency relationship does exist — the key factor is *not* the brutality or any other action of the regime, but how the people respond to their oppression. To evaluate whether a nonviolent action will be successful, one should first ask questions about the resisters, since they hold the initiative. The key factors then become an amalgamation of qualities displayed by the nonviolent actionists who are operating in a particular political context. Among the qualities to be examined are: the morale within the movement, its size and unity, planning and organisation, training and discipline, communications network, self-sufficiency, and people's determination, their understanding of nonviolent theory and willingness to make sacrifices. Such factors are not formulated in a political vacuum, but they do owe more to determinants under the control of the nonviolent resisters than to any forces of an external kind. (All this, of course, assumes that the oppressed are aware of their condition and seek their liberation).

If the nonviolent leadership should choose inappropriate strategy and tactics, then the campaign is likely to fail, but the decision has rested with the nonviolent camp, not the brutal tyrant. It behooves the nonviolent leadership, at all times, to refrain from taking action until the 'objective' conditions are suitable for an effective campaign. If they are not, it is the part both of wisdom and morality not to resort to nonviolent action. Unless the leadership considers the wider historical trends and contingencies militating for or against the achievement of the movement's goals, it may prove impossible to build within the movement those very qualities necessary for success. However, to recognise that nonviolent struggle is conditioned by the larger environment and that strategy and tactics should reflect this fact, does not mean that any one or combination of external factors precludes nonviolent success.

The external factor of an enemy's extreme ruthlessness, under certain circumstances, may actually create a condition of political ju-jitsu. Instead of crushing a

nonviolent resistance, it may strengthen the resolve of the actionists, lead to their greater solidarity, increase their willingness to engage in acts of self sacrifice, and bring into the fray on their side some of the third parties.

Politics, it should be obvious, is a highly complex human activity. It does not lend itself to the extraction of a single measurable variable around which a general rule can be constructed. A single variable may be shown to have been decisive in a particular situation, but the question arises, will there be repeated in the future an exact congruence of the other variables, and will the isolated single variable manifest the same nature and intensity. The odds against such an occurrence would seem to be astronomical, since political outcomes evolve from a long train of sequential and interacting variables, some independent and some dependent.

To try to pinpoint one variable as universally decisive is to elevate politics to a predictive science and deny historical events their uniqueness.

Nevertheless, political decisions can be and are based on reasonable expectations when as many variables as possible are taken into account and when the analysis is theoretically sound. It is at this level of *theory* that the advantage goes to the proponent of nonviolence over the tyrant. As long as s/he remains indispensable to meeting the tyrant's needs and mounts a campaign severing the relationship, then victory is theoretically assured. The hard work comes in seizing the initiative and building into a movement those qualities (morale, unity, persistence, etc) that can overcome the tyrant's monopoly of violence, including acts of severe brutality.
