Learning about 'Nonviolent' Struggle: Lessons from Steven Huxley

The struggle by the Finnish people against imposition of controls by the Russian Empire from 1899 to 1905 is commonly cited as an excellent example of nonviolent struggle. But is it really that straightforward? Not according to Steven Huxley in his book *Constitutionalist Insurgency in Finland.*[1]

The Finnish story seems straightforward. In 1899 the Tsar issued a manifesto claiming the right to enact laws, on issues affecting Russian interests, without the consent of the Finnish Diet. (In 1809 Finland, previously a dependency of Sweden, became a Grand Duchy in the Russian Empire, with a considerable degree of autonomy.) A programme of Russification was initiated. In 1900, Russian was designated the official language. In 1901, a decree disbanded the Finnish army and demanded conscription of Finns into the Russian army.

The response was a mobilisation of resistance in Finland, with meetings, journals, petitions and noncooperation. The attempt to conscript Finns failed due to a boycott. Thus nonviolence proved effective against Russian oppression. This, at least, is the usual story. Huxley's book shows that the full picture is much more complex.

Constitutionalist Insurgency in Finland is filled with provocative insights for both supporters and critics of nonviolent action. My aim here is to draw on a few of Huxley's points to raise issues for today's nonviolent activists.

But first a few comments on the book generally. It includes a detailed analysis of many aspects of the Finnish Constitutionalist insurgency. For example, it analyses the views of leading thinkers, the arguments presented at the time for and against the insurgency, and the nature of Finnish society. Yet if you are looking for a convenient account of the struggle, you would be better advised to consult an encyclopaedia.[2] Huxley assumes a familiarity with the basic events of Finnish history. Rather than presenting a history, he is presenting a sophisticated argument within a particular historical context.

As a result, the book has several levels. The most obvious material is the historical events. But they are not presented in a systematic fashion; rather, they appear as they are useful for Huxley's wider analysis. (A table of dates and events would have been a very useful addition to the book.)

A second level or dimension to the book is Huxley's argument about the Finnish struggle: *"Around the turn of the twentieth century, the Finnish Constitutionalists developed one of the most ideologically and technically sophisticated and successful versions of European passive resistance and nonmilitary struggle"* (p. 253). The dynamics of the struggle are elucidated in some detail.

Yet, doesn't this sound just like what we are used to calling nonviolent action? Indeed. But Huxley aims to show that calling the Finnish resistance a case study of 'nonviolent action' is inappropriate. As a long prelude to the Finnish case study, he analyses ideas about nonviolence and passive resistance. As Huxley discusses the Finnish case, he adds many arguments about modern nonviolence theory.

A final level to the book is a continual critique of historical interpretations. The Finnish case, like many other accounts of nonviolent action, has been turned into a myth, both by today's writers and also by those participating in the Finnish struggle. Whenever Huxley recounts the views of some participant or historian, he invariably accompanies this with a critical assessment of biases, social interests and contrary interpretations.

All of this results in a considerable conceptual complexity to the book. It contrasts greatly with the more familiar accounts of nonviolent struggles which are stories with inspiring messages and, frequently, happy endings.[3] Huxley has a much more complex and challenging message and he forces the reader to work much harder to decipher it.

Let me now turn to some reflections on Huxley's arguments.

The relevance of historical examples

Huxley's analysis of the Finnish resistance clearly shows that the struggle was much more complex than the usual idea of valiant defenders of freedom opposing a ruthless oppressor.

Finland had long had a dependent relation to the Russian Empire (and also to Sweden). What happened beginning in 1899 was an increased pressure to integrate the society into the Empire. This was not a military invasion or ruthless oppression. The means used by the Tsar included edicts and granting more power to the governor general of Finland. The struggle was social and political, not military.

Yet the Finnish case is commonly cited by proponents of nonviolent struggle. Huxley thinks that it is illegitimate to extrapolate from the Finnish struggle to the conclusion that nonviolent methods could be used to replace military defence.

Let it be clear: Huxley does not reject civilian-based defence outright. He merely says the Finnish struggle does not provide a good precedent for it. In his words, *"Apparently it is an entirely vain endeavour to try to extrapolate from his-*

torical cases or derive from theoretical construction a form of defensive power politics which if adopted by a community which has renounced the use of organized violence would render it inviolable or even less violable than military defense" (p. 265).

Huxley also discusses, briefly, the American struggle for independence, and reaches the same conclusion. Some scholars have argued that the struggles from 1765-1775 operated as a nonviolent defence system.[4] Huxley accepts that the American colonists mobilised socially, politically and economically against social, political and economic oppression, but says that this should not be seen as a substitute for war. Certainly the colonists did not conceive of their methods as a replacement for military struggle.

For me, the important point is that drawing lessons from historical examples is likely to be contentious at best and more often plain misleading. In giving talks about social defence, I commonly use examples such as the 1920 Kapp Putsch, the Ruhrkampf of 1923, the 1961 Algerian Generals' Revolt and the 1968 Czechoslovak resistance to the Soviet invasion. Yet, I now ask myself, how often do I 'forget' to mention the important qualification that such examples do not show the viability of social defence, but only that nonviolent methods have been taken up, with more or less success, in specified historical circumstances?

Of course, misuse of history is commonplace. How often do we hear that World War Two shows that violence was necessary to stop Hitler or that the absence of nuclear war since 1945 shows the success of nuclear deterrence? But just because supporters of military methods routinely use mythical history as propaganda is no excuse for critics doing the same. It hardly makes sense to try to create a more nonviolent society on the basis of misleading ideas about past struggles.

What is Huxley's alternative? Does he think that military defence is essential, or only that one should not draw unjustified arguments from history? This is not clear from his book. Some might dismiss his criticisms as being purely negative. In my view, this would be unwise.

Another way forward is to note that Huxley's critique applies only to the idea that civilian-based defence provides a functional alternative to military defence. This view is most prominently advocated by Gene Sharp.[5] It means that civilian-based defence must be evaluated by the same criteria as military defence: a tough test indeed.

But the idea of a seeking a functional alternative to military defence can itself be criticised. To speak of a 'functional alternative' implies that society will carry on much the same, with the main change being military methods replaced by nonviolent methods. A different approach is to see the change from military to nonviolent methods as part of a wider change in society, towards greater participation, justice and equality. Military systems are hierarchical and based on command and obedience, the antithesis of democracy. Participation is largely limited to young fit men (though war technology is changing this somewhat). Social defence permits a much more democratic style and much greater participation. These features of social defence have value in themselves and not just as a basis for pragmatic success.

Unfortunately, Huxley does not address these issues directly. But, no doubt, he would again caution against generalisations, as the following points reveal.

Nonviolent action doesn't automatically support a just cause

The struggle between Russia and Finland was nonviolent on both sides. Of course, the overwhelming military might lay with Russia. But Finland was not high among the concerns of the Empire, which was confronted with a variety of challenges. The Constitutionalist insurgency that Huxley analyses was, as the name suggests, a question of formal status. The Russian ruler tried to impose controls on Finland that, in some interpretations, had legal sanction; Finnish resisters tried to maintain the de facto independence of Finland, justifying it with their own interpretation of constitutional matters. The struggle, then, was a nonviolent struggle between a regime and part of its empire.

Supporters of nonviolent action commonly refer to the Finnish resistance as nonviolent. But they do not refer to the Russian government's actions as nonviolent. Why not? Because, from today's vantage point, it is common to identify Russia as an oppressive imperialist power and Finland as a valiant nation seeking independence. There is an unstated assumption that nonviolence is in support of a just cause. Huxley makes this point well:

"All notions of 'nonviolence' within the Gandhian paradigm clearly come under the concepts of just struggle, resistance and defense, as do forms of violent resistance when taken up for liberation against oppression or violation. In spite of his assertions to the contrary Sharp's work, like that of others working in the Gandhian paradigm, remains a study of 'good' 'nonviolence,' in which only cases of struggle against oppression and injustice are examined. The Finnish 'case' is an excellent example: The original Russian nationalist 'attack' on the assertive Finnish nationalist mobilization can, from the Russian point of view, be seen as a kind of resistance to Finnish threats to imperial security. In spite of the fact that for many years this 'resistance' included no physical violence those working in the Gandhian paradigm would never dream of calling it 'nonviolent action." (p. 20).

The same point could be made about much oppression around the world today which is imposed through economic or social mechanisms. An example is the international economic system in which poor people in poor countries are impoverished through the operation of production and trade policies. Although the large banks and multinational corporations operate almost entirely without violence, those using the concept of nonviolent action seldom refer to execution of policies that enrich the wealthy and exploit the poor as 'nonviolent action'.[6]

The result is a lot of sloppy thinking among activists, who believe that certain kinds of actions are 'nonviolent' when

they use them but are not when used for the wrong purposes. It would make much more sense to be more precise about the term 'nonviolence', and use it according to a clear definition without the hidden assumption that it supports a good cause.

Nonviolence may be helpful, desirable - some would say essential - for creation of a better world. But nonviolence - in the sense of not causing direct physical harm - does not automatically support a good cause. It can be used for maintain oppression and exploitation or the protection of privilege.

This places a heavier burden on nonviolent activists than is usually recognised. They need to examine their goals as well as their methods. For example, nonviolent action to protect forests sounds fine, but does it protect an environment for the middle class at the expense of the interests of workers?[7] Do the actions of workers and forest industries count as nonviolence (ignoring the occasional violent outbursts)? What about the power of the state (backed ultimately by force), which sometimes is used against environmentalists but sometimes used to protect forests? I raise these questions simply to make the point that activists need to deal openly with difficult questions of right and wrong. Just because they use nonviolent methods doesn't automatically put them in the right.

Nonviolent action is not necessarily participatory

The Finnish resistance described itself as a national movement, defending a democratic political system against imperialist oppression. Actually, the Constitutionalists were drawn from the upper strata of Finnish society and were struggling to defend a society of limited participation. The institution of representative democracy, the Finnish Diet, had no representation from the masses at all. It was constituted out of four Estates: the Nobility, the Clergy, the Burghers and the Peasants. The Peasant Estate came from those owning land. Huxley notes that *"In 1870 the Estates represented only about 1.5% of the population of over 1,750,000 people"* (p. 83).

The Constitutionalists, in presenting their struggle as one supported by the rank and file, were on weak ground, and Russian officials knew it. Because of the need to build a wider base of support - and the Russian tactic of appealing to the Finnish masses - the struggle had a certain democratising impact. Even so, the basic approach of the Constitutionalists was to 'educate' the masses in their national identity and the need for passive resistance to Russian impositions, rather than to democratise the institutions of Finnish society. In essence, the resistance was a defence of elite Finnish interests against imperial and elite Russian interests.

This is quite different from a people's struggle, which is the usual picture imagined by today's nonviolent activists. The discrepancy should provide a warning to avoid misrepresentation of current struggles. It is common for leaders of both sides in a struggle to claim that they represent the sentiments of the mass of the people. Huxley is critical of the commonly held view that "the action in which 'nonviolent' power is employed is somehow automatically democratic" (p. 23).

How much do most of us really know about the class structure of the intifada in Palestine, Solidarity in Poland or 'people power' in the Philippines? In-depth studies of these and other struggles might well reveal a complexity glossed over in usual accounts. We may still support these struggles. The point is that care should be taken in presenting a nonviolent struggle as one by the entire population.

In countries occupied by Nazi Germany during World War Two, only a very tiny fraction of the population was active in resistance in the years before liberation was imminent.[8] Similarly, in most model conflicts using nonviolent action, leadership is provided by a small fraction of the people.

It is certainly true that nonviolent struggle offers greater *possibilities* for participation than military methods. Women, children, the elderly and the disabled can participate in nonviolent action. But possibility is not always actuality. Activists need to be constantly aware of imbalances in participation, and that their struggle may be serving the interests of a particular segment of society.

The struggle over ideas is crucial

Throughout the course of the Finnish struggle, the Constitutionalists waged a battle of ideas. They appealed to a mythical golden past of Finnish autonomy and democracy; they expounded on the injustice of the Russian initiatives; they challenged the dominant Lutheran idea that people should give absolute obedience to government authority; they expounded the principles of passive resistance. All of this was a crucial part of the struggle.

Huxley: *"It must be emphasized that noncooperation, disobedience and nonrecognition were the basic practical principles of passive resistance. But to be effective in practice they had to be combined with incessant moral warfare. In fact the manipulation of the moral and ideological environment is a central part of a great many conflicts throughout history"* (p. 168).

Modern-day activists certainly pay attention to the struggle over ideas. Media releases, leaflets, articles and talks are standard parts of any group's repertoire. The planning of direct actions normally involves careful consideration of media coverage.

Yet, at the same time, most activists believe that their position would be widely accepted if only people really knew what was happening - if only they knew about the serious consequences of the destruction of rainforests or about the activities of repressive governments. Activists believe that justice is on their side.

Huxley's account suggests something more complicated. Justice is not something that exists in some pure form simply waiting to be recognised. Rather, people's very ideas about justice are the result of a struggle over ideas. The side that is able to 'persuade' - with this 'persuasion' involving both words and actions - most effectively is more likely to be the one that, in the aftermath of struggle, is seen to have justice on its side. Among Europeans, it used to be thought

part of the order of things that kings ruled by divine right and that some humans would be slaves. In the struggles to change these entrenched systems, both ideas and direct actions have been crucial.

The importance of ideas is shown by the intense discussions of which words to use to describe the struggle itself. During the Finnish resistance, the term 'active resistance' referred to violent resistance. Then, as now, 'passive resistance' suggested passivity, which was not what was intended. Huxley notes that, in order to overcome this, resisters *"were forced to use clumsy phrases like 'passive active resistance,' which meant that resistance was to be carried out actively, but without violence"* (pp. 174-175).

For the same reason, Gandhi took the initiative of trying to replace the term 'passive resistance' with 'nonviolent action'. The language of 'nonviolent action' is the one most widely used today.

The use of certain language reflects one's political position. Huxley suggests that the language of the leaders of the Finnish resistance reflected their elite position and reluctance to mobilise the masses towards greater democracy: *"maybe the Finnish Constitutionalists' retention of 'passive' and their zealous adherence to the upper class rhetoric of justice indicated their unwillingness to go beyond a certain border, not merely in relation to Russia but, perhaps more importantly, in relation to the Finnish people"* (p. 175).

Huxley is clearly unhappy with one outcome of the struggle over ideas, namely the common use of the term 'nonviolent action'. He takes pains to point out how, in Europe of the last century, 'passive resistance' had a fairly precise and recognised meaning. He notes that the term was replaced by 'nonviolent action' for political reasons. As noted before, Huxley shows how 'nonviolent action' is used by its proponents to refer only to actions that are considered 'good'. He is also critical of the way that 'nonviolent action' is used to describe events from different cultures and times with the assumption that a common dynamic is involved in each one. As he puts it, *"It may also be deemed arbitrary and misleading to compare other so-called 'cases' of 'nonviolent' struggle to one another. Doubtlessly such comparisons may lead to an erroneous, or over-simplistic, association of historical events"* (p. 18).

As much as I sympathise with Huxley's concerns here, I think that his challenge to the common use of 'nonviolent action' is likely to fall on deaf ears. A more detailed and careful terminology, which Huxley would like to see, can be useful for historical studies, but serviceable language is also required for day-to-day struggles. Huxley could not be expected to provide an alternative vocabulary for this, since language grows out of use rather than external imposition. But, without any suggestions for how even to proceed towards developing a more precise and effective language for 'nonviolent struggles', his critique lacks a positive dimension.

Conclusion

The above points build on a few themes from Huxley's book. He also explores such fascinating issues as the ideology and influence of the Old Finnish Party, which advocated compliance with Russian impositions; the influence of interpretations of the Hungarian resistance of 1850-1967 on the Finnish struggle; the way that a study of the term 'passive resistance' by different writers at different times can be used to study the tradition of Finnish resistance; the close connection between violent and nonviolent struggle;[9] the limited influence of the pacifist ideas of Leo Tolstoy; and limitations of the consent theory of power.

Constitutionalist Insurgency in Finland provides an opportunity to examine some of the conceptual underpinnings of the nonviolent 'project':

- the assumption that selected historical examples provide an unambiguous message about a concept of 'nonviolent action' that applies unchanged across cultures and eras;
- the assumption that those who use nonviolent action are on the side of justice;
- the assumption that nonviolent action is inherently participatory;
- the assumption that if people just knew the truth, they would support the peace movement, environmental movement, etc.

If these assumptions are questioned, what are the implications for day-to-day action? That is something that Huxley does not address. But it is something that activists would be unwise to ignore.

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Footnotes:

1. Steven Duncan Huxley, Constitutionalist Insurgency in Finland: Finnish "Passive Resistance" against Russification as a Case of Nonmilitary Struggle in the European Resistance Tradition (Helsinki: Finnish Historical Society, 1990).

2. The Encyclopaedia Britannica is okay. Much more detail is provided by the Great Soviet Encyclopaedia, with its own set of biases.

3. See for example Robert Cooney and Helen Michalowski (eds.), *The Power of the People: Active Nonviolence in the United States* (Culver City, CA: The Power of the People Publishing Project, 1977); Dick Scott, *Ask that Mountain: The Story of Parihaka* (Auckland: Heinemann/Southern Cross, 1975).

4. Walter H. Conser, Jr., Ronald M. McCarthy, David J. Toscano and Gene Sharp (eds.), *Resistance, Politics, and the American Struggle for Independence, 1765-1775* (Boulder: Lynne Riener, 1986)

5. Gene Sharp, *Making Europe Unconquerable: The Potential of Civilian-Based Deterrence and Defense* (Cambridge, MA: Ballinger, 1985).

6. Johan Galtung tried to solve this problem by introducing the term 'structural violence' to refer to oppression, exploitation and suffering caused by the routine consequences of economic and political structures. Unfortunately, the concept of structural violence adds to the conceptual confusion associated with the term 'violence' itself.

7. Useful insights on this are provided by Ian Watson, *Fighting over the Forests* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1990).

8. Werner Rings, *Life with the Enemy: Collaboration and Resistance in Hitler's Europe 1939-1945*, translated by J. Maxwell Brownjohn (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1982).

9. Huxley: "[Charles] Tilly's work poses a serious challenge to any conceptualization of conflict in terms of a violent/'nonviolent' action dichotomy. Violent action is very rarely a separate form of action, but rather an epiphenomenon of forms of conflict which may or may not lead to violence" (p. 32).

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