Brian Martin, *Social Defence, Social Change*
(London: Freedom Press, 1993)

2
Some basics

Defining social defence

Social defence is nonviolent community resistance to aggression as an alternative to military defence. It is based on widespread protest, persuasion, noncooperation and intervention in order to oppose military aggression or political repression. It uses methods such as boycotts, acts of disobedience, strikes, demonstrations and setting up alternative institutions.

Defining something is a political act, and so it is worthwhile looking at this definition of social defence as "nonviolent community resistance to aggression as an alternative to military defence." This definition says that the resistance is *community* resistance—not *national* resistance, which is the usual focus for military defence and for much thinking and writing about social defence. My view is that the focus should be on communities defending themselves and each other. Sometimes the communities will be nations, but often not.

Some activists prefer to define social defence as "nonviolent community resistance to aggression or oppression," thereby including defence against military aggression, defence against government oppression of local communities, and defence against male violence against women. Social defence, in this view, should be seen as nonviolent defence of the vital features of society—including human rights, local autonomy, and participation—against all oppressive forces.

I agree with the sentiments behind this broader orientation. But I think it is better to *define* social defence as an alternative to

military defence and then to make links between this idea of social defence and other struggles against oppression. With the broader definition, social defence becomes almost the same as any community-based nonviolent action. This can lose the focus on the problems with military defence.

Of course, there is a very close connection between social defence and nonviolent action: social defence is based on the use of nonviolent action. Social defence means that the functions of the military are eliminated or replaced (or, at the very least, supplemented). There can be lots of nonviolent action in a community but, if the military is still present, there is the potential for waging war and carrying out repression.

Social defence is one of several different names that all mean about the same thing. The main ones are social defence, nonviolent defence, civilian-based defence and civilian defence. The different names do have different connotations. The expression "civilian-based defence" usually refers to nonviolent defence operating under direction of a government, whereas the expression "social defence" often refers to nonviolent defence based on grassroots initiatives.

Years ago, social defence was sometimes called "passive resistance." This gives the misleading impression that nonviolence is passive. The core of social defence is nonviolent *action*, and this includes strikes, fraternisation and setting up alternative institutions. There are also offensive measures to be taken, such as communications to undermine international and domestic support for the aggression. Social defence does *not* mean just sitting there and accepting whatever the aggressor inflicts.

"Social defence" and the main alternative terms include the word "defence." Ironically, this gives too narrow a view of what can be involved. The problem stems from the euphemism "military defence." Military forces are designed for war. Government departments of war changed their names to departments of defence in order to avoid the association with killing and destruction. "Defence" sounds much friendlier than war, the military or even "the army."

Nonviolence has the opposite problem: to many people it sounds weak. Social *defence* sounds purely defensive. That's why it's sometimes useful to talk of social *offence*.

Problems with military defence

War. Military forces can be used to attack as well as to defend. The weapons of modern war are designed for killing and injuring vast numbers of people, and also can devastate the environment. As long as armies and armaments are present, there is a possibility that they will be used. There are numerous wars occurring around the world today, causing enormous destruction and suffering. There is a continuing possibility of the extensive use of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons as well as increasingly deadly "conventional" weapons.

Since the development of planes and missiles, *everyone*—civilians as well as soldiers—is on the front line in a war. Social defence provides a way for *everyone* to take responsibility for defence, unlike military methods.

Arms races. Military methods often provoke others to use military methods, and they thus encourage the very threat they are intended to defend against. They create a climate of fear and also a belief that resolving conflict requires one side to dominate the other.

If a community relies on social defence and cannot launch a violent attack, then aggressors will find it harder to justify their reliance on violence. It is more difficult to convince soldiers of the justice of their government's war if they are attacking an unarmed opponent. Since social defence contains no military capability, nuclear attack and aerial bombardment become pointless and harder to justify.

Military repression. One of the greatest threats to freedom and democracy in many countries today is military forces. If military forces take over, who will stop them? Who guards the guardians?

With social defence, this problem does not arise, since social defence is based on popular participation and so removes the dependence on a professional defence force. The nonviolent methods used against a foreign aggressor can also be used against local military forces that try to take power.

Reduced democracy. Military forces are based on hierarchy and obedience. They train people to kill on command. This is contrary to the equality, questioning, mutual respect and dialogue that help promote a democratic society. The influence of military systems

often inhibits or thwarts greater participation in the rest of society.

Social defence is much more compatible with a society based on equality and wide political participation.

Methods used in social defence

Gene Sharp, the leading researcher on nonviolent action, has identified 198 different *types* of nonviolent action and given examples of each one.[1] Sharp divides the methods of nonviolent action into three categories: symbolic actions, noncooperation, and intervention and alternative institutions.

Symbolic actions include:
formal statements (speeches, letters, petitions);
slogans, leaflets, banners;
rallies, protest marches, vigils, pickets;
wearing of symbols of opposition (such as the paper clips worn by Norwegian civilians during the Nazi occupation);
meetings, teach-ins.

Noncooperation includes:
social boycott, stay-at-home;
boycotts by consumers, workers, traders; embargoes;
strikes, bans, working-to-rule, reporting "sick";
refusal to pay tax or debts, withdrawal of bank deposits;
boycotts of government institutions;
disobedience, evasions and delays;
mock incapability ("misunderstandings," "mistakes").

Intervention and alternative institutions include:
fasts;
sit-ins, nonviolent obstruction and occupation;
destruction of information and records;
establishment of parallel institutions for government, media, transport, welfare, health and education.

---

[1] Gene Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* (Boston: Porter Sargent, 1973).

How does nonviolence work?

Social defence is based on the principle that no regime—whether a democracy or military dictatorship—can survive without the passive support or nonresistance of a large fraction of the population. In other words, all societies are built on consent, cooperation and obedience. Social defence is designed to systematically disrupt this consent, cooperation and obedience and replace it by noncooperation and disobedience.

If, in a business corporation or a government body, large numbers of the workers refuse to carry out instructions, set up their own communications systems and mobilise supporters from the outside, the top officials can do little about it.

This idea applies to military forces themselves. If only a few soldiers refuse orders, they can be arrested or shot: discipline can be maintained. But if large numbers refuse to cooperate, an army cannot function. This occurred during the Algerian Generals' Revolt (see below), in the collapse of the Russian army during World War I, during the Iranian Revolution (see below) and on many other occasions.

Actually, there are a lot of problems with the idea that regimes depend on consent that can be withdrawn. It doesn't take into account the complex ways in which power is exercised through social institutions such as bureaucracies, markets in goods and labour, patriarchy and the media. In most societies, it is no simple matter to "withdraw consent," because often there is no obvious "ruler" but rather a variety of complicated systems of social control. Nevertheless, although political theorists may turn up their noses at the consent theory of power, it is an excellent tool for community activists.[2]

How the idea of social defence developed

The idea of nonviolent resistance to aggression can be traced to a number of writers, including Henry David Thoreau, Leo Tolstoy, Elihu Burritt (a Christian pacifist), William James and Bertrand Russell. The campaigns led by Gandhi in South Africa and India

---

[2] Brian Martin, "Gene Sharp's theory of power," *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 26, no. 2, 1989, pp. 213-222.

were important in developing the idea of a nonviolent alternative to war. Gandhi himself began advocating defence by nonviolent resistance in the 1930s. A number of writers were inspired by Gandhi and developed his ideas. In the 1930s, advocates of a nonviolent substitute for war included Richard Gregg, Bart de Ligt, Kenneth Boulding, Jessie Wallace Hughan and Krishnalal Shridharani.

Perhaps the first fully-fledged description of a national social defence system was that by Stephen King-Hall, a British writer and former naval officer, in his book *Defence in the Nuclear Age* published in 1958. King-Hall thought that British parliamentary democracy could be better defended from communism if the military were abolished and replaced by organised nonviolent resistance. King-Hall's treatment moved social defence onto the agenda as a pragmatic rather than just a moral alternative.

Shortly after this, the idea of social defence was developed by various researchers including Theodor Ebert in West Germany, Johan Galtung in Norway, Adam Roberts in Britain and Gene Sharp in the United States. These and other researchers have investigated past examples of nonviolent action, analysed the social conditions favourable for the implementation and success of social defence, and explored the possibilities for nonviolent action against invasions and coups.

Some members of peace groups, mainly in Europe, argued the case for social defence in the 1960s and 1970s. But in those decades social defence mostly remained at the level of argument: little or no practical action to mobilise communities for nonviolent resistance occurred. (One exception was the simulation on Grindstone Island in Canada in 1965, in which a group of Quakers role-played a military takeover and nonviolent resistance to it. The report on this exercise provides a number of valuable lessons.[3]) Also in the 1960s and 1970s, a few European governments evinced a limited interest in social defence by sponsoring studies.

In the 1980s there was increased interest in social defence. This was mainly due to the worldwide resurgence of the peace movement

---

[3] Theodore Olson and Gordon Christiansen, *Thirty-one Hours: The Grindstone Experiment* (Toronto: Canadian Friends Service Committee, 1966).

and the consequent grappling by many people with the question, "If we disarm, how will we defend ourselves?" The prior studies and interest in social defence enabled it to be put on the list of "alternative defence policies."

A very important factor in the increased interest in social defence was the increasing numbers of people involved in nonviolent action. Nonviolent action has a long and inspiring history, but systematic preparation for this form of social action is relatively recent. It has been inspired especially by writings and sharing of skills from the Movement for a New Society in the United States and implemented in a major way in environmental campaigns in Europe, North America and Australia since the 1970s, especially against nuclear power.

Social defence is a well recognised option within peace movements in many countries, though there are major exceptions such as the United States. Many conscientious objectors have supported and spread the idea. There are some political parties in Europe, notably the German Greens, that have put social defence on their platforms. Nevertheless, social defence is still seen as an unorthodox and radical option even by many within the peace movement, and it is little known among the general public.

Historical examples

Illustrations from history can show how nonviolent action works and suggest the potential for social defence. Nevertheless, there are a number of reservations which are worth remembering.

Historical examples do not prove the case for social defence—or anything else. For every example of effective nonviolent action, another example could be provided of ineffective nonviolent action. Historical examples are like tools in a box. They can be useful for hammering points home, but if you try to build a grand edifice, someone else may be able to bring it tumbling down.

In many historical examples, nonviolent action was largely spontaneous. There was little preparation, no training and little planning. Therefore, these are not examples of an operational social defence system. They might be described as "spontaneous" or "ad hoc" social defence.

On the other hand, there is no need to be overly defensive about the examples. For every failure of nonviolent action, there is a failure of violent action (usually with far more horrendous consequences). It is useful to regularly make comparisons with historical examples of the use of violent action to put things in perspective.

The writing of history always involves interpretation and, therefore, value judgements. Some writers who favour the use of nonviolent action, such as Gene Sharp, present certain historical episodes in a different light than writers who assume that state power or class struggle or whatever is the crucial issue. This only serves to emphasise the point that historical examples are like tools in a box. Different people pick different tools and use them for different purposes, whether to show the potential power of nonviolence or the necessity of warfare.

Coups

Coups are often overlooked in the usual comparisons between having military forces and having none. Military regimes are, arguably, just as serious a problem as warfare itself. In such cases, militaries obviously are a cause rather than a solution to the problem.

Germany, 1920

On 13 March 1920 in Berlin, there was a putsch (military takeover) led by General von Lüttwitz. The extreme right-wing Dr Wolfgang Kapp became Chancellor. Commanders of the German army refused to support the elected government and took no action against the putsch. It was left to the people to take action.

Germany's Weimar republic had been set up after the country's defeat in World War I. The government in 1920 was led by President Friedrich Ebert. In the wake of the coup, the government fled from Berlin to Stuttgart, from which it encouraged resistance by noncooperation.

When the Kappists took over two pro-government newspapers, all Berlin printers went on strike. The Ebert government called for a general strike throughout Germany. Support for the strike was overwhelming, especially in Berlin, and included groups from most political and religious orientations.

Opposition by civil servants was also crucial in opposing the coup. Officials in government bureaucracies refused to head government departments under Kapp.

Noncooperation ran deep. Bank officials refused to honour cheques presented by Kappists unless they were signed by appropriate government officials. But not one such official would sign. Typists were not available to type proclamations for the Kappists.

Kapp foolishly alternated between making concessions and attempting crackdowns, neither of which produced support. As his weakness became more obvious, opposition increased. Some military units and the security police declared their support for the legal government. After only four days, Kapp resigned and fled. With the collapse of the putsch, the Ebert government could once again rely on the loyalty of the army.[4]

Comment

The Kapp putsch is an excellent example because of the many types of nonviolent action used. Especially important is the crucial role of legitimacy for any government. People usually think of a military regime as inevitably getting its way, but in practice it only does so when people routinely obey. Bank officials refusing to cash cheques is a wonderful example of the ordinary nature of much noncooperation.

The historical context is important in understanding the putsch. The Weimar republic was an attempt at setting up parliamentary democracy in the most difficult of situations. Not only was the economy in tatters, but there was serious opposition from both the right and left. There had nearly been a revolution in Germany in the aftermath of the war. The Ebert government could rely on the army, a bastion of conservatism, to oppose left-wing insurgency. On the other hand, the army generally did not oppose threats to the republic from the right, and most military leaders sat on the sidelines during the Kapp putsch. In the provinces, there was military action against the coup, but in Berlin popular action was necessary to defeat the putsch precisely because the army did nothing.

---

[4] D. J. Goodspeed, *The Conspirators: A Study of the Coup d'État* (London: Macmillan, 1962).

Another element in the story of the putsch is the role of armed workers' groups in several parts of Germany. This left-wing armed struggle was an attempt at social revolution rather than just opposition to the coup. After the defeat of the putschists, the Ebert government used the army to smash the workers' opposition—including the general strike in Berlin, which was still continuing. General von Seeckt, who declined to oppose the coup, had no hesitation in using force against the workers.

It should also be remembered that the Weimar republic was followed by the Third Reich, in a transition that largely occurred through legal channels, including elections. The issue of the rise of the Nazis to power is a complex one. It is worth noting here that the Weimar republic regularly resorted to article 48 in its constitution, which essentially was a provision for martial law, in order to stop threats, especially from the left. This meant government repression of civil liberties, backed by the military. Clearly, there was no policy to develop the capacity of the population to use direct action to protect freedom and democracy (not to mention the overthrow of capitalism). The Kapp putsch triggered spontaneous mass nonviolent resistance, but this had no lasting consequences.

Algeria, 1961

Until 1962, Algeria was a colony of France. Beginning in 1954, an armed independence struggle was waged by Algerian nationalists against French settlers who were supported by French military forces. In April 1961, Charles de Gaulle, head of the French government, indicated that he was prepared to negotiate with the Algerian nationalists.

Leading sections of the French military in Algeria, who were strongly opposed to Algerian independence, staged a coup on 21-22 April 1961 in the city of Algiers. They were initially very successful, encountering little open resistance from loyal sections of the military. There was a possibility of a parallel putsch in France, or an invasion by French forces from Algeria.

Resistance to the coup developed rapidly. Trade unions and political parties called a one-hour general strike, and ten million workers joined. After some delay, de Gaulle, in a broadcast on 23 April, called for noncooperation with the coup by both civilians and troops. Although the rebel generals controlled the Algerian

media, French broadcasts were picked up by many French soldiers in Algeria on their transistor radios.

In Algeria, many soldiers refused to cooperate with the coup. Many pilots flew their transport planes or fighters out of Algeria. Others faked mechanical problems. Many soldiers just stayed in their barracks. Others caused inefficiency in administration and communications.

After four days the coup disintegrated. Not a single shot had been fired at supporters of the coup.[5]

Comment

The special value of the example of the Algerian Generals' revolt is the many methods of noncooperation used by soldiers in Algeria. This is a good example to use when talking with military personnel! They, possibly more than anyone else, need to know of the power of noncooperation and of their responsibility to consider resisting rather than obeying orders.

It should be noted that the revolt and nonviolent resistance to it came towards the end of the long and bloody war for Algerian independence. The Algerian independence movement used ruthless methods, as did the French colonial army. As many as a million people were killed in the struggle. It might be asked whether a nonviolent liberation struggle could have achieved independence with less loss of life. One key point is that the French army could be relied upon to fight the Algerian nationalists—if they didn't, they would be killed. The limited loyalty of the French conscripts, and their low level of support for the war, was indicated by their noncooperation during the revolt. Arguably, the liberation struggle didn't make full use of potential dissent within the French army because of the polarising violence of the war.

Invasions

The usual justification for having military forces is to stop an invasion by another state's military forces. Therefore it is essential for advocates of social defence to give examples of what to do about invasions.

---

[5] Adam Roberts, "Civil resistance to military coups," *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 12, 1975, pp. 19-36.

The Ruhr, 1923

The Versailles treaty at the end of World War I required that Germany pay reparations to the victorious governments. Due to disastrous economic conditions, Germany defaulted on payments. In response, in January 1923 French and Belgian troops occupied the Ruhr, a region of Germany bordering France and Belgium. By this action, the French government also hoped to keep Germany weak economically and militarily.

Germany was unable to mount military resistance due to its small army and collapsing economy. The German government called instead for noncooperation. This struggle was called the *Ruhrkampf*.

There were many varieties of noncooperation carried out by employers, trade unionists, government workers and many others. There were rallies, strikes and boycotts. Railway workers refused to cooperate, and were dismissed. A French company was brought in to operate the railways, but the departing German workers sabotaged the equipment. The few trains that ran were boycotted. There was also resistance from civil servants, shopkeepers, trade unions and the press.

French authorities enacted severe penalties, with many fines, arrests, detentions, deportations, long prison sentences, confiscations, beatings, forced labour and shootings.

Some groups engaged in violent resistance, carrying out sabotage that led to deaths. This led to severe reprisals by the occupiers, undermined the unity of the resistance and weakened international support for it.

On 26 September 1923 the resistance was called off unconditionally by the German government. The German economy virtually collapsed in massive inflation partly caused by the printing of money to fund the resistance. But there were potent effects on the other side too. French public opinion was outraged by the brutality of the occupation, and this contributed to the fall of the French government in 1924.

Economically too, the occupation failed to achieve the extraction of resources for which it was originally designed. A revised

schedule of reparations was arranged by an international commission. Occupation forces were withdrawn by June 1925.[6]

Comment

This is a good example to answer the question, "what if the enemy just occupied part of the country?" It is also a good illustration of how severe repression by an occupier can be counterproductive. Of course, France in 1923 was a "democratic" country, so that public opinion could exert considerable pressure. On the other hand, this was just five years after the 1914-1918 bloodletting of the western front, during which Germans were depicted in propaganda as cruel and inhuman huns. No doubt the nonviolence of the resistance contributed to the development of sympathy among the French public.

Czechoslovakia, 1968

In the 1960s, a number of reforms were made in Czechoslovakia which reduced the repressive aspects of communist rule. These moves—so-called "socialism with a human face"—were strongly supported by the Czechoslovak people, but bitterly opposed by the Soviet government.

On 20-21 August 1968, a military invasion of Czechoslovakia was launched by hundreds of thousands of troops from the Soviet Union and four other Warsaw Pact countries, with the expectation of installing a pro-Soviet government within a few days. Military resistance would have been bloody and futile, so the Czechoslovak government instructed the army not to resist the invasion.

The Czechoslovak people, from the political leadership to the workforce, united in spontaneous nonviolent resistance to the occupation. Noncooperation with the invaders was practised at all levels: by the president, by army officers, by shopkeepers, by farmers and even by secret police. People sat in front of tanks. Streets signs and house numbers were removed, and false information given out. People talked with the Soviet troops—who had been told they were invading to stop a capitalist takeover—and

---

[6] Wolfgang Sternstein, "The Ruhrkampf of 1923: economic problems of civilian defence," in Adam Roberts (ed.), *The Strategy of Civilian Defence: Non-violent Resistance to Aggression* (London: Faber and Faber, 1967), pp. 106-135.

undermined their loyalty so rapidly that many had to be rotated out of the country within a matter of days.

Underground newspapers were published. Radio and television were broadcast (from changing locations), providing news and greatly helping the resistance. The announcers called strikes, gave tactical instruction on street confrontations, requested rail workers to slow the transport of Soviet equipment, cautioned against rumours and counselled nonviolence.

The nonviolent nature of the resistance undermined Soviet propaganda justifying the invasion. All acts of violence against the invaders received heavy Soviet media coverage. Indeed, some violent incidents apparently were staged by Soviet forces to discredit the resistance.

Due to the unified civilian resistance and to the demoralisation of Soviet troops, Soviet leaders offered reforms and other concessions. The Czechoslovak leaders, held in Moscow, were isolated from the resistance and were ignorant of the dynamics of nonviolent action. As a result, they did not really understand how effective the resistance was. Under extreme pressure, they made compromises. This demoralised the opposition. As the Czechoslovak position weakened, the Soviet forces consolidated the occupation, removing their "unnecessary" concessions.[7]

Comment

The Czechoslovak example is one of the best examples of nonviolent resistance to invasion because of the wide variety of effective methods used, especially fraternisation and the radio.

It is important to note that military resistance was not even tried. The Czechoslovak military sat on the sidelines, and Western forces likewise did nothing. Czechoslovak soldiers did provide some help to the resistance, for example in maintaining radio broadcasts.

The resistance can be judged a success or a failure depending on which comparison is made. The most active phase of resistance lasted only a week, but a puppet government was not installed until April 1969, eight months later. The resistance was important in causing a massive loss of Soviet credibility around the globe,

---

[7] Philip Windsor and Adam Roberts, *Czechoslovakia 1968: Reform, Repression and Resistance* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1969).

especially in Western communist parties, at a minimal loss of life. Arguably, a violent resistance would not have been so successful in achieving this.

Toppling repressive governments

El Salvador, 1944

Maximiliano Hernández Martínez became the dictator of El Salvador in 1931. Although he introduced some valuable reforms, he ruthlessly crushed political opposition. In 1932, an armed uprising was brutally put down by the military, which executed many thousands of campesinos (small farmers) in reprisal.

Opposition developed in 1943, with leaflets and petitions. The government responded with increased censorship, arrests and other controls.

The opposition was stimulated by US government rhetoric of a fight for freedom and democracy against Nazism. Also important was outrage over constitutional changes allowing Martínez to serve a further six-year term as president.

On 2 April 1944, there was a military revolt, which was repressed harshly. This helped to trigger a nonviolent insurrection. University students took the lead and organised a student strike, which spread to high schools. Over a period of a few weeks, physicians and business people joined the strike, until virtually the entire country was at a standstill, including government offices, banks and railways. This was essentially a stay-at-home strike, which cut most services.

Police shot at some boys, killing one. As a result, large crowds surged onto the streets. On 8 May, Martínez agreed to resign, and he left the country three days later.

The military was not used against the insurrection. The unreliability of the soldiers had been shown by the 2 April revolt. The officer corps, which was loyal to Martínez, did not risk using the army against the population.

While the nonviolent action of the people was enough to bring down Martínez, it was not effective in ensuring a transition to a nonrepressive society. There was a military coup later in 1944. The

years since have seen continued oppression of El Salvadoran people.[8]

Comment

This example is useful to counter the widespread perception that Latin American politics consists of right-wing military dictatorships, sometimes confronted by left-wing guerrillas. In Guatemala a few weeks later in 1944, stimulated by the example of El Salvador, the government was also toppled by nonviolent insurrection. In addition to these two cases, between 1931 and 1961 nine other Latin American presidents were ousted by nonviolent insurrection.

The case of El Salvador is also useful in illustrating that even in a police state there are opportunities for effective nonviolent resistance, although of course at a risk. A seemingly simple leaflet can be a very significant form of defiance. Wider noncooperation can be triggered by the process of open resistance, via strikes and further leaflets. If nothing is done by the government, others are emboldened to join in; repressive steps, on the other hand, can cause outrage and an expansion of resistance.

The limitation of the example is the poor outcome. There was no strategic plan behind the resistance: individuals and groups acted to bring down Martínez, but there was little thought about how to make the process lead to a stable and less repressive society.

This case illustrates the importance of making a link between nonviolent resistance to repression and a "positive programme" to create alternative institutions. Being *against* repression is not enough—action *for* a different system is also necessary.

Iran, 1978-1979

Iran under the Shah was an incredibly repressive state. The secret police were pervasive, and torture was used routinely to terrorise the population. Income from oil was used to finance a giant military machine. In addition, the Iranian government was actively supported by the United States government and was not opposed by the Soviet Union, Israel and most Arab states. Yet this

---

[8] Patricia Parkman, *Nonviolent Insurrection in El Salvador: The Fall of Maximiliano Hernández Martínez* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1988).

seemingly impregnable regime was overthrown without arms. There was horrific violence, almost all of it against unarmed opponents of the government.

The regime was riddled with corruption and out of touch with the needs of the people. Many groups opposed the Shah, from communists to Islamic fundamentalists.

Protest escalated in 1978. Troops opened fire on a crowd, killing several people. A mourning procession, held in Islamic tradition 40 days after the deaths, turned into a political protest, and troops were used again. Each time people were killed, this became a trigger for further protest 40 days later. Gradually more secular opponents joined the processions and religious demonstrations.

There were also massive strikes and go-slows in factories. Oil and power workers, crucial to the economy, were key participants. Eventually the economy ground to a halt, although food continued to be delivered.

The government was unable to stem the tide of opposition. The Shah vacillated between concessions that were unconvincing and repression that alienated more of the population. The Shah had created such a fawning entourage that he received no realistic advice. (Becoming a megalomaniac, out of touch with the people, is an occupational hazard for dictators.)

Martial law was declared in September 1978, but the cycle of demonstrations, killings of demonstrators and increased opposition continued. Strikes and closure of shops spread until the economy was in collapse.

The spiritual leader of the Islamic resistance, Ayatollah Khomeini, was in exile. Cassette tapes of Khomeini's speeches were smuggled into the country and distributed through the bazaars, which were key centres for opposition sentiment. Khomeini made calls for soldiers and police to desert.

Eventually the troops refused to obey and instead joined the revolution. The Shah fled the country and Khomeini became the new head of state.

Unfortunately, this revolution carried out without arms did not lead to a nonviolent society. The secular dictatorship of the Shah was replaced by a theocratic dictatorship which, after solidifying its power, was just as ruthless as its predecessor in stamping out dissent. Furthermore, the Islamic Republic waged a bloody war

with Iraq for most of a decade, leading to many more deaths than those that occurred under the Shah.[9]

Comment

The Iranian example is an outstanding one for showing that unarmed resistance can work against the most repressive regime. It is a risky example because of the widespread loathing of the Islamic Republic in the West. (This loathing may be well deserved, but it is partly due to a systematic campaign of vilification by Western governments, supported by news media. The repressive regime of the Shah was a key element in Western military planning, so its abuses of human rights were largely ignored.)

If you are able to make the distinction between the nonviolent methods used in the revolution and the repressive regime that came to power after the revolution, then this is a useful example. After all, military forces were not used to undermine the Shah: they were supporting his rule. There were some left-wing guerrilla opponents of the Shah, but they were small in number, infiltrated by state agents, and served to justify government repression. It was the power of the people that won the day.

The opposition was not entirely nonviolent. As well as demonstrations, strikes, go-slows and closure of businesses, there were many riots, often triggered by shootings by soldiers. The key point is that armed struggle against the Shah played almost no role.

It is worth noting that the loyalty of the regime's troops is a key to revolution, whether violent or nonviolent. The nonviolence of the opposition helped undermine the loyalty of the troops.

Some might argue that tens of thousands of people killed is a high price to pay. But this is a relatively small figure compared to many revolutions won by guerrilla struggle.

The Iranian Revolution can also be used to make the point that nonviolent action, as a tool, does not guarantee creation of a nonviolent society. As in the case of El Salvador, it is crucial that nonviolent action against repression be linked with action to create nonviolent social institutions.

---

[9] David H. Albert (ed.), *Tell the American People: Perspectives on the Iranian Revolution* (Philadelphia: Movement for a New Society, 1980); Fereydoun Hoveyda, *The Fall of the Shah* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980).

Severe repression

What about ruthless invaders who just keep killing people at the least hint of resistance? What can be done to stop a programme of total extermination? How can social defence possibly work against repressive regimes?

Real-life dictatorships are not as all-powerful as might be imagined. Under the brutal military regimes in Argentina and Chile, many individuals continued to openly express opposition in the workplace, in public protests and in the media. Protests have shaken the harsh regimes in South Korea and Burma. If nonviolent resistance could be prepared for and expanded, then dictatorships would be difficult to sustain.

For example, consider the courageous stand of publisher Jacobo Timerman in Argentina, who maintained his newspaper's open resistance until he was arrested and tortured. An international campaign led to his release and he wrote about his experiences in a powerful book. His efforts were among those that contributed to the collapse of the generals' regime in the country.[10] Such examples show how the withdrawal of consent can undermine even a ruthless dictatorship.

My friend Ralph Summy argues that the question "What about severe repression?" is the wrong one. Ruthlessness—namely, the psychology of the ruler—is not the key factor.

The real question is how to make sure that the ruler is dependent in some way on the nonviolent resisters. This might be economic dependence; it could be the influence of family members who know people in the resistance; or it could be a sense of ethnic or cultural identity. If there is a dependency relationship, then the ruler will encounter great obstacles if severe repression is used. But if there isn't some direct or indirect connection between the two sides, then even a fairly benevolent ruler may do really nasty things. Dependency, not attitude, is the key.[11]

---

[10] Jacobo Timerman, *Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number*, translated from the Spanish by Toby Talbot (New York: Vintage, 1982).
[11] Johan Galtung, *Nonviolence and Israel/Palestine* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Institute for Peace, 1989).

International support is important too, since there are many opportunities for nonviolent resistance to repressive regimes from people on the outside. Later chapters argue the importance of social *offence*.

The methods and tactics used in social defence need to be specially chosen if repression is harsh. More use can be made of quiet "mistakes" in carrying out tasks and "misunderstandings" of orders. Preparation in advance is crucial for things such as shutting down factories, protecting dissidents, providing food and shelter for survival, maintaining communications and exposing repression to the world. When support for the resistance becomes widespread, open defiance becomes possible.

Gene Keyes, a social defence researcher, provides a more uncomfortable response to the question about severe repression. He notes that it is seldom easy to stop a ruthless invader or ruler, whether using violence or not. Military planners routinely anticipate thousands or millions of casualties in opposing the enemy, most obviously in the case of waging a nuclear war. Social defence planning, says Keyes, therefore must also prepare for heavy casualties. If people are not willing to make the sacrifice, then perhaps they should think again about whether resistance is worth the cost.[12]

The question of whether a social defence should be prepared to "accept" heavy casualties is a fundamental challenge, and has hardly been discussed. Of course, advocates of military methods seldom discuss this either—Herman Kahn did so in his book *On Thermonuclear War* and caused an uproar—but have implicitly "agreed" to "accept" heavy casualties. The issue of heavy casualties *seems* more acute for social defence than military defence. One reason is that people misunderstand nonviolence to mean no violence at all.

---

[12] Gene Keyes, "Heavy casualties and nonviolent defense," *Philosophy and Social Action*, vol. 17, nos. 3-4, July-December 1991, pp. 75-88.

Nonviolence against the Nazis?

Supporters of nonviolence frequently are asked, "What about the Nazis?" This question assumes that the experience of Nazi Germany is a refutation of nonviolence. Well, what about them?

To begin, it is important to realise that throughout most of the Third Reich the Nazi regime relied on support, in many cases ardent support, from a significant fraction of the German people. Many people in other countries were admirers of the Nazis as well. Supporters of military methods tended to be especially favourable to them.

Nevertheless, throughout the rule of the Nazis, there *was* a German opposition to Hitler. This internal opposition was not fostered by the Allies, nor has it been given sufficient credit by postwar writers.[13]

Nonviolence against the Nazis was only tried occasionally and unsystematically. There was effective nonviolent resistance in several countries, including Norway, Denmark and the Netherlands. In Germany itself, on several occasions public protest led to changes in policies, as when in 1941 church leaders publicly condemned Hitler's programme of "mercy killing" of institutionalised people with disabilities and when in 1943 protests by non-Jewish wives of arrested Jewish men led to their release. When there was active resistance to Nazi genocides, especially by political and church leaders in occupied countries, many fewer people were killed. According to Helen Fein, a leading scholar on genocide, "German instigation and organization of extermination usually succeeded because of the lack of counterauthorities resisting their plans, not because of their repression of such resistance."[14]

There was no concerted attempt from *outside* Germany to undermine the Nazis using nonviolent methods. 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 Hitler.[15] There has been no fur-

---

[13] Hans Rothfels, *The German Opposition to Hitler* (London: Oswald Wolff, 1961).
[14] Helen Fein, *Accounting for Genocide: National Responses and Jewish Victimization during the Holocaust* (New York: Free Press, 1979), p. 90.
[15] Stephen King-Hall, *Total Victory* (London: Faber and Faber, 1941), appendix 3.

ther study on this issue, so it remains a possibility that concerted nonviolent attack from around the world could have undermined or restrained the Nazi regime.

The case of the Nazis should not be removed from its historical context. It is unfair to set up a worst case—the rise of a ruthless regime and its solidification of power—and *then* expect nonviolence to be a solution. Social defence, before it can be fairly assessed, needs its own process of development and solidification. Nevertheless, if advocates of social defence use historical examples that they choose, they need to be able to respond to examples chosen by others.

If nonviolence didn't succeed against the Nazis, neither did violence. The normal assumption underlying the Nazi example is that only violence—namely the Allied war effort—would have worked against the Nazis in a period less than decades.

The war by Western governments was against German military and political expansion, not against the ruthless system of fascism alone. The Allies in World War II did not attempt to topple the fascist regimes in Spain and Portugal. After the war, the Allies allowed or encouraged many fascists to obtain positions of power.[16] Numerous Nazi war criminals were employed by US spy agencies.[17] Essentially, the war was about power politics, not justice and freedom. Western military strength has not been used against numerous dictatorial regimes around the world, but instead has frequently been used to prop them up.[18]

Nazi genocidal politics were *not* the reason why Western governments waged war against Nazi Germany. There is ample historical evidence that easy opportunities to disrupt death camp operations were passed over by the Allied governments. The policy was explicitly to win the war first and stop genocidal killing afterwards. The Allies minimised any association of their cause with that of the Jews.[19]

---

[16] Tom Bower, *Blind Eye to Murder: Britain, America and the Purging of Nazi Germany—A Pledge Betrayed* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1981).
[17] Christopher Simpson, *Blowback: America's Recruitment of Nazis and its Effects on the Cold War* (New York: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1988).
[18] Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman, *The Political Economy of Human Rights* (Boston: South End Press, 1979).
[19] Martin Gilbert, *Auschwitz and the Allies* (London: Michael Joseph, 1981).

Indeed, genocide has often been permitted to proceed with no military intervention by "non-ruthless" governments. The Turkish government's extermination of the Armenians in 1915, Stalin's purges in the 1930s and the Cambodian exterminations from 1975 to 1979 are major examples where military forces in other countries stood by and did nothing. Of course, the killings were carried out by, or with the support of, the militaries in the countries where they occurred.[20]

Finally, several commentators have pointed out 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. Much of the blame for Nazi genocide can be attributed to the war itself.

Conclusion

In this chapter I've raised some of the basic issues about social defence, partly through recounting and commenting on historical examples. There are, of course, many other questions that people raise about social defence. It is not my aim here to make a comprehensive case for social defence. Besides, for most people, arguments alone are insufficient. Personal experiences are a necessary part of understanding how it might work.

Instead, I assume that social defence is worth investigating and developing further, in a variety of ways and in a number of different directions. As part of this process, in the following chapters I outline a radical agenda for social defence.

---

[20] Leo Kuper, *Genocide* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981).