



Language

The literature on nonviolent action incorporates a number of distinct strands. One is a specific and developing literature on the potential of using nonviolent methods to resist varying forms of oppression and injustice and prevent or end wars. This literature was initially largely inspired by Gandhi's campaigns, but developed an understanding of what counted as key theoretical contributions from earlier centuries and a sense of a developing history of predominantly nonviolent movements.

Central political and theoretical figures in the evolution of nonviolent practice and thought linked the strategy of nonviolent resistance to strong religious or moral beliefs – notably Tolstoy, Gandhi and Martin Luther King. Early books on nonviolent action also often stressed moral or religious arguments. However, the examples of nonviolent resistance in the early literature – the Hungarian struggle for independence from Austria from 1849-67 for example, or the 1905 revolution in Russia – have often been examples of unarmed resistance adopted for political and strategic reasons and in some cases, as in Russia in 1905, ending in an (abortive) armed uprising. There has therefore been a tension within the literature between a moral case for nonviolent methods and a strategic case. The distinction is not, of course, hard and fast, given the political implications of adopting the moral high ground and the strategic importance for both resisters and oppressors of portraying their opponents as irresponsibly and indiscriminately violent. Indeed, in many political and cultural contexts religious organisations and leaders have been politically influential in resistance, as in the case of the Catholic Church in Poland, the Philippines and (quite often) in Latin America, or of Buddhist monks and nuns in Burma, adding a strong moral dimension to the struggle. Moreover, secular moral commitments can intertwine with political arguments for avoiding resort to violence, as in the debates among East European dissidents in the 1970s and 1980s.

Nevertheless, the tendency since the 1970s, encouraged by the work of Gene Sharp, has been for analysts of unarmed resistance to stress the political and strategic arguments. The increasing sophistication of these debates is indicated by the works under A.1.b. Many books and essays highly relevant to the theory of nonviolent action are usually categorised under quite different headings, such as political philosophy, or sociology. Analysts of nonviolent action have turned to these disciplines, especially in debates about power, justice, obligation and disobedience, and revolution. Some authors do, however, lend themselves especially to incorporation into the canon of writings on nonviolent action, notably Hannah Arendt. One topic on which the tradition of western political thought overlaps most specifically with the literature on nonviolent action – for example in references to Thoreau – is that of civil disobedience. Sub-section 1a draws in particular on broader political and sociological thought to complement specific writings on nonviolent action and unarmed resistance.

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