



introduction - challenge to nonviolence

by Michael Randle

The 1990s opened on a note of optimism. The previous year had seen the overthrow of authoritarian and unpopular communist regimes in Eastern Europe, for the most part as a result of popular nonviolent action. China, it is true, had witnessed the tragedy of the Tiananmen Square massacre in June 1989 and the brutal repression of People Power there, underlining the importance of the wider political context in which struggles of this kind take place, and perhaps also of the strategy and tactics of the resisters. In February 1990 Nelson Mandela was released in South Africa, heralding the end of Apartheid in that country. In August 1991, an attempted coup by hard-line communists in Moscow was thwarted, again by the determined, nonviolent resistance of hundreds of thousands of unarmed citizens. These and other events, coupled with earlier successes during the 1980s including notably the overthrow of the Marcos regime in the Philippines, seem to mark the establishment of strategic nonviolence as a force in international politics and perhaps a way forward out of war and bloodshed.

However, by 1994 when the Nonviolent Action Research Project began, that optimism had been overshadowed by more sinister developments - Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and the subsequent Gulf War, violent clashes within and between former Soviet republics in Central Asia, war, massacre and mass expulsions of populations in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina as Yugoslavia disintegrated, bloody civil wars in Somalia and Sierra Leone, genocide in Rwanda,. These developments, and particularly inter-ethnic¹ conflicts, raised tough issues not only for pacifists and others seeking to develop nonviolent alternatives to war, but for the advocates of non-offensive defence as the basis of an alternative to a security system based on nuclear weapons.²

The challenge was sharpest to the notion of civilian/social defence - at any rate where it was conceived of as the principal, or even the sole, element of a defence and security strategy. The leverage exercised by civil resistance is based essentially on the presumption that governments depend on the cooperation, or at least the compliance, of the population they rule. This clearly holds in parliamentary democracies where civil resistance can complement more conventional methods of political campaigning to combat particular gross injustices or policies that flagrantly violate fundamental human rights. It is less obviously true in dictatorial regimes, yet historical experiences from Iran in 1979, to the Philippines in 1986 to Eastern Europe in 1989 show that if non-cooperation is sufficiently widespread such regimes may prove vulnerable. Finally, in countries under occupation or foreign domination, the foreign power usually depends to a greater or lesser extent of the cooperation of the local population, a fact which Gandhi turned to advantage during India's independence struggle. Even in occupied Europe during World War II, there was a sufficient degree of interdependence for civil resistance to exercise some leverage on the occupying authorities, or Quisling regimes, as various studies have demonstrated.³ Such victories, or partial victories, against foreign occupying powers stimulated investigations into the possibility of basing the defence of a country on systematic preparation for civil resistance.⁴

However, in certain situations there may be no such dependence on the cooperation of the population, or the dependence may be of marginal significance. This would apply in an ethnic conflict where the aim was to eliminate or remove an entire population from a given territory to make way for the rival population, and indeed to any war in which the goal of the aggressor was genocide. (It could apply, too, as critics of civilian defence have pointed out, where the aim of a foreign aggressor was to occupy a part of the national territory for a purely strategic purpose such as establishing a military base.) In these circumstances, the options open to an unarmed resistance are limited. Nonviolent resisters can still appeal to the humanity of the opponent's armed forces and militia, and seek to sow dissension and disaffection amongst them; they can cultivate allies amongst the political opposition or the general population of the opponent; and they can try to enlist support and assistance from the international community at governmental and grassroots level to put pressure on the offending government or party. However, such strategies, where they succeed at all, tend to be slow-acting and unsuitable for dealing with an immediate crisis in which civilians are daily being slaughtered. Only some form of direct intervention has a real chance in such circumstances of having an immediate effect.

Unfortunately, the end of the Cold War has seen a succession of crises which required, or appeared to require, outside military intervention. This is not so much because the pattern of conflicts changed radically in the 1990s as compared to earlier decades in the post-World War II period from one of wars between states to inter-ethnic



conflicts within existing state borders. There were massacres instigated by both Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda and Burundi in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s long before the genocide in Rwanda of 1994, and bloody civil wars occurred in Nigeria, Pakistan/Bangladesh, Angola, Mozambique, Uganda and elsewhere in which millions lost their lives, overwhelmingly amongst the civilian population. (Some of these conflicts, it should be noted, sprang more or less directly from policies pursued during colonial rule, as for example in Rwanda and Burundi; many were directly fomented by one or other superpower, or other outside powers, and overwhelmingly it was the industrialised countries which fuelled the crises by supplying weapons.)

However, several things had changed. First, the wars in former Yugoslavia brought massacre to the heart of Europe for the first time since 1945, and this, in a still Euro-centric world, alarmed Western governments and publics in a way that still more brutal wars elsewhere had failed to do. Second, the end of the Cold War gave the UN and Security Council greater flexibility to act since there was no longer the same likelihood of the veto being exercised in the Security Council. Third, the much reduced level of East/West competition for influence in the 'Third World' meant that the military/strategic rationale for propping up repressive dictatorships no longer applied with the same force - though to be sure there might still be political-economic reasons for wanting to do so. Finally, in the short term at least, the risk of intervention triggering a nuclear war was in most cases slight.

Western liberal opinion became increasingly split over the issue of military intervention from the time of the Gulf War onwards, and this division has extended too to the anti-nuclear and broader peace movement. The dilemmas are evident. To rule out military intervention a-priori would mean doing nothing - or nothing likely to be effective - even while populations are being massacred. However, to make intervention a realistic option in a range of circumstances requires one or more countries to have a major offensive capability - as one saw in the Gulf War. Non-offensive defence simply could not do this job. More seriously, intervention on the scale of the 1991 Gulf War, or the aerial war against Yugoslavia over Kosovo⁵ in 1999, is liable to breach the requirements of discrimination and proportionality that are crucial to the notion of Just War, and sometimes to bring about a disaster comparable to the one it was intended to prevent or bring to an end.⁶ In Iraq, for example, the combination of sanctions, and the wholesale destruction of the infrastructure in the bombing campaigns of 1991 and 1998, has led to a loss of civilian life on an appalling scale. Finally there is the spectre, somewhere down the line, of intervention leading to nuclear war. Prudence dictated that the West did not intervene against Russia in its wars against Chechnya in 1996 and in the renewed war starting in 1999 which still continues at the time of writing. But if NATO had bombed Moscow over Chechnya, as it bombed Belgrade over Kosovo, World War III would almost certainly have begun.

Clearly it was right in this case not to intervene. A considered judgement as to whether a war is likely to succeed in achieving its just aims and not bring about an even greater catastrophe, is a standard, and proper, requirement of Just War principles. Nevertheless the implication that if a state is strong enough it will be immune from intervention is a morally uncomfortable one. It looks like one law for powerful states with nuclear weapons, another for the rest. Moreover, the message it sends to dictators around the world, and indeed to all states with rebellious national minorities, is that if they build up their armed strength and acquire weapons of mass destruction they may be able deter any outside interference.

But the Chechnya episode drives home another important point, namely that there are situations where the demand to 'do something' - meaning to send in the troops in a war-fighting role - simply cannot, or should not, be met. Just as there are situations in which nonviolence is powerless in any immediate sense, so too there are situations, often the same situations, in which military intervention provides no solution either. The best that can be done, assuming all attempts at negotiation and mediation have failed, may be to apply diplomatic and political pressure, and selective sanctions, even in the knowledge that this will not meet the immediate crisis or prevent the death of hundreds or perhaps thousands of unarmed people. The UN sanctions against South Africa, and the grassroots boycott against South African goods, could not prevent the massacres in the townships in the 1970s and 1980s. But they did contribute in the longer term to a successful struggle by the black majority and their allies which brought the system of apartheid to an end. The risks that would have been incurred if outside powers had mounted an invasion of South Africa to end apartheid by force of arms are incalculable - not that such a response was even considered. The case for military intervention to rescue East Timor from Indonesian invasion in 1975 was stronger still since this was a clear case of international aggression, but again it was never canvassed. And here, in any case, there was a simpler alternative, namely for Australia, the US and other governments to withhold their support for, and connivance in, the aggression and their continued support for the Indonesian dictatorship after the event. (East Timor's eventual move to independence in 1999 did of course require an international military presence to curb the activities of pro-Indonesian militias.)

Intervention can take the less coercive form of deploying a peacekeeping force, armed but with instructions to use



weapons only in strict self defence. This can work where there is a peace to be kept, but has proved to be ineffective in face of determined aggression. UN peacekeeping missions in Cyprus and elsewhere have contributed to stability; but in Bosnia-Herzegovina UNPROFOR faced humiliating defeat and was eventually replaced by troops under NATO command who were prepared to take on the Serb forces.

A still less coercive option is the deployment of unarmed peacekeepers. This naturally has a particular attraction for pacifists and can sometimes be effective at least in some degree. The OSCE monitors who were deployed in Kosovo in the autumn of 1998 to oversee the ceasefire could not prevent some outrages taking place, but their presence did have a certain restraining influence. Their departure to make way for NATO's bombing operation, signalled the beginning of a veritable orgy of violence by militia and Serb forces against Albanian civilians. Indeed, if Bosnia underlines the limitations of peacekeeping missions, Kosovo illustrates the disasters that can sometimes follow in the wake of military intervention. Proclaimed as a mission to prevent a humanitarian disaster, it precipitated one. Supposedly fought in defence of ethical principles, it led to NATO forces wrecking havoc on Yugoslavia's civilian infrastructure and causing hundreds, possibly thousands, of civilian deaths. And while it did eventually secure the return of the Albanian refugees driven from their homes, the return has been marked by revenge killings which NATO forces are unable, or unwilling, to prevent and which has resulted in the exodus of most of the Serb population, and the concentration of those who remained in protected enclaves

These, then, were among the issues the Nonviolent Action Research Project sought to confront. At a preliminary meeting in January 1994, one of the members of the core group, the late Walter Stein argued that the nonviolent movement was experiencing a crisis analogous to the one facing NATO and questioned whether nonviolence had a central political role in the post-Cold War world. At a subsequent meeting, the group considered a debate between Dr Lynne Jones and myself on whether or not there should be military intervention in Bosnia.⁷ (See Chapter 1 below). Lynne had been active in the women's Greenham Common campaign in the 1980s and had taken a pacifist stance at that period so her support for intervention marked a radical shift in her thinking. It was indicative too of the reappraisal taking place amongst many within the peace movement who were trying to confront the moral dilemmas which events like the war in Bosnia presented. I have included in this chapter a reply from Lynne in the same issue of *Peace & Democracy* (though it was published after the group meeting) and a subsequent article of mine which acknowledges and considers the dilemmas involved in trying to deal with such situations.

The following chapter records the discussion of a paper by another member of the group, Andrew Rigby, on nonviolent intervention. This again reflects a concern with the challenge posed by events in former-Yugoslavia and elsewhere. In his presentation, Andrew sets out to categorise and assess the forms that nonviolent intervention might take, from groups forming a human barrier between warring parties to people acting in solidarity within their own country, or putting pressure on their government to take action. In a subsequent chapter, Howard Clark analyses the non-cooperation movement in Kosovo and the work of the Balkan Peace Team in the area. (Chapter 10).

The concerns of the group were not, of course, confined to the problems of intervention in areas of crisis. They included also issues such as definition and evaluation of civil resistance, the dynamics of nonviolent action, the justification for civil disobedience in various contexts, and the role of a 'constructive programme' in establishing a society and culture of nonviolence. Chapter 4 deals with the dynamics of nonviolent action as set out in my book *Civil Resistance*⁸ and Chapter 6, a critique by Kate McGuinness from a feminist perspective of Gene Sharp's theory of power - namely that relations of domination are based on consent. For the benefit of those new to the field, I should explain that Gene Sharp was one of the pioneers in developing a theory of nonviolent action⁹ and researching historical examples of it. Everyone working in the field has been influenced by his work, even if some take issue with him on particular points or, indeed, on his general approach. In her paper, Kate McGuinness argues that Gene Sharp's theory of power does not hold in respect of gender relations and she makes a link between her criticism and that of others who have argued that in the realm of politics, too, the particular circumstances, including notably the aims of the oppressor/aggressor, determine whether or not the consent of the oppressed is necessary.

There is a link here too with Howard Clark's analysis of the problems facing the nonviolent resistance in Kosovo at that period - namely that, given the goals of Milošević, it mattered little if the Kosovo Albanians withdrew their cooperation. They largely had, but the Serbian authorities could rule the province without it. And meanwhile the Albanian Kosovans were suffering continued deprivation and discrimination and growing increasingly desperate in face of international complacency. Some elements within the resistance, notably amongst the students, favoured a more radical and challenging style of nonviolent action than the leader, Ibrahim Rugova, was prepared to authorise. This might have focussed world attention more successfully on the growing crisis in Kosovo and possibly led to the



international community putting stronger pressure on Serbia to make concessions. In the event, the nonviolent resistance was upstaged by the Kosovo Liberation Army whose attacks provided Milošević with an excuse to launch full-scale war in Kosovo, and indiscriminate killings, in 1998. This in turn led eventually to NATO's war against Yugoslavia, the withdrawal of Serb forces and the mass exodus of the Serb population from the province. The hope that Kosovo might provide an example of how Milošević's ambitions could be resisted without this leading to war and massacre was dashed.

Chapter 8 records the presentation by April Carter on the topic of Civil Disobedience and Notions of Citizenship, in particular the notion of world citizenship. There are two chapters devoted to a consideration of Mahatma Gandhi, the outstanding practitioner of collective nonviolent action in the twentieth century. Bob Overy's presentation in Chapter 6 considers Gandhi as a political organiser, and argues that there is an indissoluble link between his campaigning methods and his constructive programme for the regeneration of Indian society. Bhikhu Parekh's presentation in Chapter 19 considers the strengths and weaknesses of Gandhi's concept of nonviolence. Bela Bhatia's description and analysis, in Chapter 18, of the Naxalite movement in Bihar, based on two years investigative work walking from village to village, also touches upon the limitations of the present day Gandhian movement in India.

Of the remaining chapters, some provide a descriptive analysis of the work of grassroots organisations or campaigns, whilst others are concerned with particular situations or institutions. On the campaigning or grassroots side, there are presentations and discussions on the environmental group Earth First! (Alex Begg, Chapter 4), on campaigns against US Bases (Lindis Percy, Chapter 7), on community politics in Northern Ireland (Fionnuala O'Connor, Chapter 11), on Trident Ploughshares 2000 (Angie Zelter, Chapter 13), and on the Local Exchange Trading System, LETS (Tariq Shabeer, Chapter 15) – something which may be regarded as an example in a Western context of Gandhi's concept of a constructive programme. Presentations dealing with specific situations or institutions are Richard Norton-Taylor's talk on the Intelligence and Security Services in Britain (Chapter 16), Felicity Arbuthnot's description of the effects on sanctions against Iraq (Chapter 17), and Roberta Bacic's account of the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Chile of which she was a member (Chapter 20).

The discussions recorded in these chapters were informal and free flowing. Participants were encouraged to make their responses and comments in an uninhibited fashion. It is important to stress, therefore, that the views expressed do not necessarily represent the immutable convictions of those concerned. The purpose of this publication is to make the presentations and conversations available to a wider circle, and to promote further discussion of the issues raised.

To end this Introduction, here is the full text of the Statement of Aims adopted by the group in September 1994:

Statement of Aims

Scope and Purpose of Group

To establish a British based forum and network for study, debate and enquiry into nonviolent action: its use for social and political ends within a society or for defence of a state against foreign occupation or coup d'etat, and the contexts and cultures giving rise to nonviolence. The project will promote research into NVA, and endeavour to raise public awareness of its potential. It aims to provide support and recognition to those already working on nonviolent action issues within the academic and educational fields, and to liaise with nonviolent activists. Initially the project will operate through a core group of up to twelve people, meeting regularly in Bradford, drawn mostly from the local region.

Specific Aims

- Re-examine some major conceptual approaches to nonviolent action and develop a set of standards useful in further thinking about nonviolence.
- Define problem areas and topics which need to be addressed.
- Communicate new ideas and practices in nonviolent action to those already interested.
- Promote case studies and particularly offer help and advice to activists seeking to write up their experiences.



- Initiate a public outreach programme relating to nonviolent action.

Immediate: Getting established

- Identify list of topics we wish to address at once.
- Operate a 'study-group' with members writing papers or making presentations on these topics.
- Update our knowledge on the range of research, both nationally and internationally, done on nonviolent action in the last ten years.
- Open up the group to others as a wider seminar' on occasion.
- Invite speakers to address our group.
- Draw up proposals regarding problem areas and priorities for future research.

Intermediate: Outreach

- Organize public talks.
- Publish short pamphlets and papers independently, and/or direct articles to journals.
- Organize a Day-School - inviting researchers and activists.
- Develop links between the project and the Department of Peace Studies at Bradford University, especially with those students already expressing an interest in nonviolent action.

Longterm: Development of outreach and other initiatives

- Organize Symposia, Conferences and other public events.
- Publish more substantial works
- Help intending researchers as they seek for funds.

September 1994

Notes

1. In many instances these were not ethnic conflicts in the strict sense but were based on differences of language, religion or tribe.

2. The outlook has become that much grimmer since this book was prepared for publication with the attack on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon, the subsequent war in Afghanistan, the increasing violence in Israel-Palestine, and the confrontation between India and Pakistan over Kashmir.

3. See for example Jacques Semelin, *Unarmed Against Hitler: Civilian Resistance in Europe, 1939-1943*, Praeger, Westport, Connecticut, 1993. This is a translation from the original French published as *Editions Payot*, 1989.

4. An early example here was Bertrand Russell's essay 'War and Non-Resistance' in the *Atlantic Monthly*, August 1915, in which he suggested that after thorough preparation of the population an attempted German occupation could be successfully resisted with nationwide non-cooperation. Gandhi's campaigns stimulated further interest in the notion in the 1920s and 1930s, but the systematic studies of it did not take place until the late 1950s when the threat of nuclear war prompted many outside the usual pacifist circles to consider alternative approaches to defence.

5. For the Albanian Kosovan population the territory is Kosova, for Serbs it is Kosovo. Since the latter is the term in general use internationally, I have stuck to it except where a particular Albanian Kosovan organization is mentioned.

6. This is true also of the bombing campaign in Afghanistan which was still in progress as this book was being prepared for publication.

7. The articles originally appeared in the US publication *Peace & Democracy* in its summer issues of 1993 and 1994 and were part of wider debate involving other contributors.

8. Michael Randle, *Civil Resistance*, Fontana, London 1994 in the 'Movements & Ideas' series.

9. Sharp's most substantial theoretical work is *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* Porter Sargent, Boston, 1973. Among his other publications are *Gandhi as a Political Strategist*, Porter Sargent, Boston, 1979, and *Social Power and Political Freedom*, Porter Sargent, Boston, 1980. In recent years he has focussed on civil resistance as a



national defence - what he terms 'Civilian-Based Defence'. See especially, [Civilian-Based Defence: A Post-Military Weapons System](#), Princeton University Press, 1990. Sharp is the director of the Albert Einstein Institution in Cambridge, Massachusetts and former director of the Program on Nonviolent Sanctions at the Centre for International Affairs at Harvard University.

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[Return to table of contents for 'challenge to nonviolence'](#) [2]

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