



introduction to Randle, Civil Resistance, 1994

introduction

from Michael Randle, *Civil Resistance* (Fontana), 1994

When tens of thousands of people took to the streets of Manila in the Philippines in February 1986 and succeeded in overthrowing the corrupt oligarchy of Ferdinand Marcos, a new term entered the vocabulary of political discourse: People Power.

It was chiefly the term that was new. Mass civil resistance aimed at achieving a variety of political and social objectives became a significant force during the 19th century. It played in some cases a crucial role in struggles against colonial rule, dictatorship, coups and foreign occupation in the present century. Nevertheless the events in Manila caught the public imagination in a special sense, perhaps because of the dramatic confrontation between the army on the one side supporting dictatorial rule, and unarmed civilians on the other insisting on democratic political change.

No one in 1986 expected, or could have predicted, that within a few years people power would be largely responsible for the transformation of the world's political geography and the pattern of international relations. Yet such is the case. Future historians may well regard the revolutions in Eastern Europe in 1989 among the major turning points in human history, comparable in importance to the Russian revolution of 1917, and the French Revolution of 1789. Not only did they end Soviet domination in the region, they removed once and for all the political underpinnings of the Cold War. In large measure too, they contributed to the final collapse of the Leninist model of communism in the Soviet Union itself and the break up of the Soviet State.

Soviet developments began with the coming to power of Gorbachev in 1985. Gorbachev's initial aim was reform within a continuing marxist-leninist political and social order. His importance as the facilitator of change can hardly be exaggerated, but it was the overthrow of the old regimes in Eastern Europe, and the pressures which this set off within the Soviet Union, that turned a programme of reform into a thoroughgoing revolution.

Clearly there has been a negative side to these developments. As with the collapse of any empire, the dissolution of the Soviet state and sphere of influence has brought new tensions and instabilities. The most tragic and menacing development has been the war and atrocities in former Yugoslavia. There is also, at the time of writing, a state of undeclared civil war between the neighbouring states of Armenia and Azerbaijan, and the threat of further violence both within and between a number of former Soviet republics. Some of the autonomous regions within the Russian republics and elsewhere, have also begun to demand independence, threatening the further splintering of the old Union. Rocketing prices, unemployment, increasing homelessness are some of the problems confronting the former communist states, and as yet there is no consensus as to what kind of alternative social and political system is now required.

Hardly less momentous in its political implications than the collapse of autocratic communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe has been the disintegration of the apartheid system in South Africa, and the prospect of majority rule in the near future. Though it was not achieved without bloodshed (most tragically in the clashes between the Zulu based Inkatha movement and supporters of the African National Congress), civil resistance, coupled with international pressure, was central to the struggle. The demonstrations and riots in the black townships threatened general disorder, while the strikes and threatened strikes by COSATU (the Congress of South African Trade Unions) reminded the white population and government of their ultimate dependence on black labour. The opposition of the churches to apartheid, and the active involvement of leading churchmen such as Desmond Tutu and Alan Boesak, added to the moral stature of the anti-apartheid campaign and helped to undermine the entrenched prejudices of the majority of the white population.

Elsewhere in the 'Third World' civil resistance has contributed significantly to the retreat of dictatorships and right-wing military regimes - in Chile, for example and in much of Central and South America, in the Philippines,



mentioned earlier, in Thailand, and in South Korea. True there have also been setbacks and failures, most notably in China. Thus it is important to try to analyse the conditions in which civil resistance is likely to succeed at any given moment, and the tactics and strategy that could help to make it more effective.

The end of the Cold War has opened up the possibility of major arms reductions and the realisation within a reasonable time span of global nuclear disarmament. But while there have been welcome international agreements to reduce both conventional and nuclear forces, the competition to sell strategic weapons continues, even to despotic regimes in the Middle East where war is a constant threat. At the nuclear level, even when the new agreement on strategic arms reductions comes into force, it will leave the US and Russia with the capacity to destroy each other - and much of the rest of the world - several times over. There is now a real opportunity to realise the dream of global nuclear disarmament. But if it is not seized, nuclear proliferation seems unavoidable. Civil resistance by the Western peace movements, and by human rights and peace movements in the East, helped to bring about the end of the division of Europe and the Cold War. It may be necessary again to pressure governments to seize the opportunities which now exist.

Civil resistance has been seen by some of its adherents as providing - at least potentially - an alternative to war and military defence. It has been used increasingly as a means of struggle against injustice, oppression and foreign domination where in the past a war of liberation would have seemed the only option. To that extent at least, it has shown that it can be a 'functional equivalent of war'. Moreover in Czechoslovakia in 1968, mass civil resistance was used - with at least partial success - to oppose the invasion of Soviet and Warsaw Pact forces and demand the reinstatement of the legitimate government.

So far no state has thought it advisable to rely solely for defence on the capability of its citizens to resist invasion and occupation, or coups d'etat, by nonviolent means. Sweden, however, after successive studies, adopted it in 1986 as a complementary strategy. Others have given serious consideration to it in this capacity, most recently the former Soviet Baltic Republics.

The potential of civil resistance as a form of alternative defence merits particular attention at a time when international war has become so destructive, and when there is a debate going on about the re-structuring of global security in the post-Cold War era. Nuclear disarmament, and the drastically reduced levels of conventional armament which one assumes must accompany it, would also require an evaluation of alternative ways of preventing and solving conflict - but also, where conflict is unavoidable, of conducting it. The potential of 'defence by civil resistance' or 'civilian defence' is considered in some detail in Chapters 5 and 6.

The book traces the development of civil resistance, as an idea and as a social phenomenon, from its beginnings in the early 19th century to the present day. It is not a history of civil resistance as such - that would be beyond the scope of a work of this length; rather it draws upon that history to show how civil resistance has developed, and to consider the role it might play in the future.

Although the main focus is on civil resistance in relation to macro politics and strategy, we should not overlook its contribution to the politics of everyday life. Thus since the post-war resurgence of civil resistance in Western Europe and the United States, a wide range of groups and campaigns have resorted to it, from the homeless who have squatted empty houses, to women who have blocked busy roads to enforce their demand for pedestrian crossings. Nor indeed is there a sharp dividing line between the political and social struggles of everyday life and the broader struggles for emancipation. At both levels, the issue is how people are to take greater control over their lives. Indeed, it may well be that the eventual political outcome in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet republics, and in other countries which have recently ousted dictatorial governments, will hinge on how successfully the formalities of parliamentary democracy are matched by genuine democratic control at the grass roots. Civil resistance does not guarantee such control. It is a crucial weapon in the hands of those seeking to achieve it.

Civil resistance is a topic of outstanding social and political importance. I hope the present book in sketching its development and analysing some of the issues it raises will contribute to a better understanding of its mode of operation and its potential for shaping a freer and most equitable society and international system.

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