

Look at the history of your country and you will find episodes of nonviolent action: demonstrations, strikes, boycotts, or other forms of popular non-cooperation. The causes will vary—for the rights of workers and peasants, freedom for slaves, the right to vote for women or people without property, for racial equality, for gender equality, for freedom from occupation. In short, the causes encompass a range of forms of injustice and domination. However, not until the twentieth century—and in particular the campaigns of Mohandas Gandhi in South Africa and India—did movements discuss nonviolent action as a conscious strategy for social transformation.

Gandhi was convinced that nonviolence had a particular power, both in its effect on the people who undertook action and on those at whom the action was directed. He saw that social solidarity can overcome efforts to dominate, exploit, or otherwise oppress a population. He also believed that it was not enough just to oppose an adversary, blaming them for everything, but that people must look at their own responsibilities and behaviour. Freedom and justice are not just to be demanded but to be practised and to be the basis on which a movement constructs itself. Gandhi wrote streams of articles developing his ideas about nonviolence. He was not the first to observe that those who rule depend on the cooperation of those they rule, but he made this central to his strategies of civil resistance: 'the first principle of nonviolence', he once wrote, 'is non-cooperation with everything humiliating'. Gandhi was not the most systematic thinker about nonviolence—he preferred to talk about his experience as 'experiments with Truth'—but he insisted on certain fundamentals. One was the need for campaigns to maintain a nonviolent discipline. Another was the central importance of constructive activity addressing problems among the population (for more, see '[Constructive Programme](#)'). For Gandhi in the context of colonised India, this constructive programme expanded to include reducing inter-religious hostility, tackling discrimination along gender or caste lines, countering illiteracy and ignorance on sanitation, and promoting self-sufficiency in food and clothing production.

Most participants in the campaigns Gandhi initiated shared only some of his principles; they were prepared to use nonviolence to free India from British colonialism, but few had Gandhi's utter commitment to nonviolence as a way of life. Indeed, most conventional political leaders gave only symbolic importance to the constructive programme. This pattern has frequently been repeated: nonviolent action has been effective when used by broad movements where most participants accept nonviolence in practical terms as the appropriate strategy for their situation but only a minority express a philosophical commitment. The example of the Indian independence struggle had a huge influence on subsequent movements against colonialism, especially in Africa; people in a wide range of contexts began to study what makes nonviolence effective and how it can be used even more successfully. Sixty years after Gandhi's death, nonviolent activists are still 'experimenting with truth', and a field studying what makes nonviolence effective has grown.

What Works Where

The style of nonviolence varies a lot according to context. Since the term 'people power' was coined when the Marcos regime in the Philippines was brought down in 1986, and especially since the downfall of Milošević in Serbia in 2000, some observers have talked of an 'action template', meaning popular nonviolent action overthrowing a corrupt and authoritarian regime that was attempting to win elections by fraud. Of course, there are similarities between the downfall of Milošević and 'people power' episodes elsewhere. Indeed, some of the Serbs who used nonviolence so creatively against Milošević have now become involved in training other movements. However, in each situation, the movements have to do their own analysis of what is appropriate and what will work.

Many people are sceptical about the power of nonviolence against entrenched and brutal regimes. In such

situations any resistance is likely to be difficult. Nonviolence does not offer a 'quick fix' in these situations—and neither does armed struggle. Some idealistic movements have turned to armed struggle only to find themselves increasingly separated from the population, depending on extortion and kidnapping to maintain themselves, and in short, degenerating into armed bands. Nonviolence aims to work differently. By expanding the social spaces that a movement can occupy, and by giving voice to what the regime requires should not be said, processes of fundamental change can be set in motion. Nonviolent action in the face of torture, 'disappearances', and death squads in various parts of Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s aimed to rebuild a social solidarity that could overcome fear.

In the former Soviet bloc, many were cautious about resistance, not wishing to provoke repression or Soviet military intervention. In 1970, four strikers in Gdansk, Poland, were shot dead; so when Solidarnosc was formed in 1980, Gdansk strikers avoided street confrontations, locking themselves inside their shipyard instead. They aspired to a different society, but now limited their demands to an essential first step: the recognition of free trade unions. It was a limited objective behind which all Polish workers could unite. Polish intellectuals described this as 'the self-limiting revolution'. Despite such caution, Solidarnosc's mobilising power scared the regime into imposing martial law and imprisoning many activists. But within a few years, the time came to go beyond these self-imposed limits, to make other demands, and to risk more provocative forms of nonviolent action, not just in Poland but throughout the Soviet bloc.

Most readers of this Handbook live in societies that have more 'freedom of speech' than under Soviet Communism or Latin American military dictatorships, but where activists complain of social 'apathy' that occurs as the public is bombarded with images trying to get us to buy more. Violence in our societies is most likely to be hidden away or accepted as 'the status quo', the way things are; it includes the many forms of state violence right up to weapons of mass destruction, the violence of social deprivation and environmental devastation, and the violence of remote puppetmasters pulling strings across the globe.

In these situations, social movements have a wide choice of actions, and boundaries that are continually changing—actions that broke new ground yesterday have become merely routine today. Even the disruptive has become contained.

The Role of Pacifists

We in the WRI embrace nonviolence as a matter of principle. We recognise that this commitment makes us a minority and requires us to work with people who do not necessarily share our pacifist principles. We want to look beyond rhetoric or short-term shock tactics to develop forms of active nonviolence that challenge systems of oppression and seek to construct alternatives. This means defining goals that make sense to a spectrum of people broader than just pacifists or antimilitarists as well as using methods and forms of organisation that are attractive to people who do not necessarily have a pacifist philosophy.

Because pacifists refuse to resort to violence to achieve our goals, we need to invest our creative energy in trying to develop nonviolent alternatives. Historically, pacifists have played a vital, innovative role in social movements, developing nonviolent methods of action both at the level of tactics and in forms of organising. For instance, the first U.S. 'freedom rides' against racial segregation in the 1940s were a pacifist initiative, as was the British nonviolent direct action against weapons in the 1950s. The creative use of nonviolence of these groups opened spaces for a much more widespread use of nonviolence by the mass movements that followed. Later came the introduction of nonviolence training, initially preparing people for the kind of violence that they might meet in nonviolent protests. Subsequently nonviolence training has played an essential role in promoting more participatory forms of movement organisation.

Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. became such towering figures within their own movements that some people have the impression that successful nonviolence depends on 'charismatic' leadership. For us in WRI, however, nonviolent action is a source of social empowerment that strengthens the capacities of all

participants without depending on superhuman leaders. Therefore we have advocated more participatory forms of [decision-making, promoted adopting forms of organisation based on affinity groups](#), and expanded [nonviolence training](#) to include tools for participatory strategy assessment and development.

Organising

Sometimes, it seems that nonviolence just happens, that thousands of people converge to do something. But usually this takes organisation, especially if the action is not simply reacting to some event publicised in all the mass media but a step in a campaign, an effort to set an agenda for social change. The image from outside might be of a more or less unified set of people. However, closer in, you see that the movement consists of various networks that each reach out through particular constituencies, of distinct organisations with their own themes and emphases, of several inter-connected campaigns taking up aspects of an issue. Nonviolent attitudes, methods of organisation, and forms of action strengthen the ability of these diverse elements to act in concert and to win new supporters.

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