Afterword: Nonviolence and the Theory of War

The dream of a war to end war, the myth of Armageddon (the last battle), the vision of the lion lying down with the lamb—all these point toward an age definitively peaceful, a distant age that lies across some unknown time-break, without armed struggle and systematic killing. It will not come, so we have been told, until the forces of evil have been decisively defeated and mankind freed forever from the lust for conquest and domination. In our myths and visions, the end of war is also the end of secular history. Those of us trapped within that history, who see no end to it, have no choice but to fight on, defending the values to which we are committed, unless or until some alternative means of defense can be found. The only alternative is nonviolent defense, “war without weapons,” as it has been called by its advocates, who seek to adjust our dreams to our realities. They claim that we can uphold the values of communal life and liberty without fighting and killing, and this claim raises important questions (secular and practical questions) about the theory of war and the argument for justice. To treat them as they deserve would require another book; I can offer only a brief essay, a partial and tentative analysis of the ways in which nonviolence relates, first, to the doctrine of aggression, and then to the rules of war.

Nonviolent defense differs from conventional strategies in that it concedes the overrunning of the country that is being defended.
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It establishes no obstacles capable of stopping a military advance or preventing a military occupation. "Although minor delaying actions against the incursions of foreign troops and functionaries may be possible," writes Gene Sharp, "civilian defense... does not attempt to halt such entry, and cannot successfully do so." That is a radical concession, and I don't think that any government has ever made it willingly. Nonviolence has been practiced (in the face of an invasion) only after violence, or the threat of violence, has failed. Then its protagonists aim to deny the victorious army the fruits of its victory through a systematic policy of civilian resistance and noncooperation: they call upon the conquered people to make themselves un Governable. I want to stress that it is not war but civilian resistance that has usually been regarded as a last resort, because war holds out at least the possibility of avoiding the occupation that evokes or requires the resistance. But we might reverse this ordering were we to decide that resistance is as likely to end the occupation as military action is to prevent it, and at a much lower cost in human lives. There is as yet no evidence that that proposition is true, "no cases in which... civilian defense has caused an invader to withdraw." But no nonviolent struggle has ever been undertaken by a people trained in advance in its methods and prepared (as soldiers are in the case of war) to accept its costs. So it might be true; and if it is, we should have to regard aggression very differently from the way we do at present.

It might be said that nonviolence abandons aggressive war simply by virtue of the refusal to engage the aggressor militarily. Invasion is not morally coercive in the ways I described in Chapter 4, men and women cannot be forced to fight, if they have come to believe that they can defend their country in some other way, without killing and being killed. And if there really is some other way, at least potentially effective, then the aggressor cannot be charged with forcing them to fight. Nonviolence de-escalates the conflict and diminishes its criminality. By adopting the methods of disobedience, noncooperation, boycott, and general strike, the citizens of the invaded country transform aggressive war into a political struggle. They treat the aggressor in effect as a domestic tyrant or usurper, and they turn his soldiers into policemen. If the invader accepts this role, and if he responds to the resistance he encounters with curfews, fines, jail sentences, and nothing more, the prospect is opened up of a long-term struggle, not without its difficulties and painfulness for civilians, but far less destructive than even a short war, and winnable (we are assuming) by those same civilians. Allied states would have no reason to intervene militarily in such a struggle; which is a good thing, since if they too were committed to nonviolent defense, they would have no means of intervening. But they could bring moral and perhaps also economic pressure to bear against the invaders.

This, then, would be the position of the invaders: they would hold the country they had "attacked," could establish military bases wherever they pleased, and enjoy whatever strategic benefits these yielded them (vis-à-vis other countries, presumably). But their logistics problems would be severe, for unless they brought along their own personnel, they could not depend upon the local transportation or communication systems. And since they could hardly bring along an entire workforce, they would have great difficulty exploiting the natural resources and the industrial productivity of the invaded country. Hence the economic costs of the occupation would be high. The political costs might well be higher. Everywhere their soldiers would encounter sullen, resentful, withdrawn, and noncooperative civilians. Though these civilians would never take up arms, they would rally, demonstrate, and strike; and the soldiers would have to respond, coercively, like the hated instruments of a tyrannical regime. Their military élan might well fade, their morale erode, under the strains of civilian hostility and of an on-going struggle in which they never experienced the release of an open fight. Eventually, perhaps, the occupation would become untenable, and the invaders would simply leave; they would have won and then lost a "war without weapons."

This is an attractive, even though it is not a millennial, picture. Indeed, it is attractive precisely because it is not millennial, but conceivable in the world we know. It is only just conceivable, however; for the success I have described is possible only if the invaders are committed to the war convention—and they won't always be committed. While nonviolence by itself replaces aggressive war with political struggle, it cannot by itself determine the means of struggle. The invading army can always adopt the common methods of domestic tyrants, which go well beyond curfews, fines, and jail sentences; and its leaders, though they are soldiers, may well be tempted to do that for the sake of a quick "victory." Tyrants will not, of course, lay siege to their own cities or bomb or bombard them; nor will invaders who encounter no armed opposition. But there are other, probably more efficient, ways of terrorizing a people.
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whose country one controls, and of breaking their resistance. In his "Reflections on Gandhi," George Orwell points out the importance of exemplary leadership and wide publicity in a nonviolent campaign and wonders whether such a campaign would even be possible in a totalitarian state. "It is difficult to see how Gandhi's methods could be applied in a country where opponents of the regime disappear in the middle of the night and are never heard from again." Nor would civilian resistance work well against invaders who sent out squads of soldiers to kill civilian leaders, who arrested and tortured suspects, established concentration camps, and exiled large numbers of people from areas where the resistance was strong to distant and desolate parts of the country. Nonviolent defense is no defense at all against tyrants or conquerors ready to adopt such measures. Gandhi demonstrated this truth, I think, by the perverse advice he gave to the Jews of Germany: that they should commit suicide rather than fight back against Nazi tyranny.8

Here nonviolence, under extreme conditions, collapses into violence directed at oneself rather than at one's murderers, though why it should take that direction I cannot understand. If one faces an enemy like the Nazis, and if armed resistance is impossible, it is virtually certain that the men and women of the occupied country—those who have been marked out for survival, at any rate, and perhaps even those who have been marked out for death—will yield to their new masters and obey their decrees. The country will grow silent. Resistance will be a matter of individual heroism or of the heroism of small groups, but not of collective struggle.

The success of nonviolent resistance requires that soldiers (or their officers or political leaders) refuse at some early point, before civilian endurance is exhausted, to carry out or support a terrorist policy. As in guerrilla war, the strategy is to force the invading army to bear the onus of civilian deaths. But here the onus is to be made especially clear (especially unbearable) by the dramatic absence of any armed struggle in which civilians might be collusive. They will be hostile, certainly, but no soldiers will die at their hands or at the hands of partisans who have their secret support. And yet, if their resistance is to be broken decisively and quickly, the soldiers will have to be prepared to kill them. Since they are not always prepared to do that, or since their officers are not always sure that they will do it again and again, as might be necessary, civilian defense has had a certain limited effectiveness—not in expelling an invading army, but in preventing the attainment of particular goals set by its leaders. As Liddell Hart has argued, however, these effects have only been possible against opponents whose code of morality was fundamentally similar to that of the civilian defenders, and whose ruthlessness was thereby restrained. It is very doubtful whether non-violent resistance would have availed against a Tartar conqueror in the past, or against a Stalin in more recent times. The only impression it seems to have made on Hitler was to excite his impulse to trample on what, to his mind, was contemptible weakness—although there is evidence that it did embarrass many of his generals, brought up in a better code . . .

If one could count on that "better code" and look forward to a nonviolent test of wills—civilian solidarity against military discipline—there would, I think, be no reason to fight: political struggle is better than fighting, even when victory is uncertain. For victory in war is also uncertain; and here it might be said, as it cannot easily be said in the case of war, that the citizens of the occupied country will win if they deserve to win. As in the domestic struggle against tyranny (so long as the struggle doesn't degenerate into massacre), we judge them by their capacity for self-help, that is, by their collective determination to defend their liberty.

When one cannot count on the moral code, nonviolence is either a disguised form of surrender or a minimalist way of upholding communal values after a military defeat. I don't want to underestimate the importance of the second of these. Though civilian resistance evokes no moral recognition among the invading soldiers, it can still be important for its practitioners. It expresses the communal will to survive; and though the expression is brief, as in Czechoslovakia in 1968, it is likely to be long remembered.9 The heroism of civilians is even more heartening than that of soldiers. On the other hand, one should not expect much more from civilians confronted with a terrorist or potentially terrorist army than brief or sporadic resistance. It is easy to say that "Non-violent action is not a course for cowards. It requires the ability and determination to sustain the battle whatever the price in suffering . . ." But this sort of exhortation is no more attractive than that of a general telling his soldiers to fight to the last man. Indeed, I prefer the exhortation of the general, since he at least addresses himself to a limited number of men, not to an entire population. The case is similar with guerrilla war, which has this advantage over
civilians resistance: it recapitulates the military situation where only
a relatively few people are asked "to sustain the battle"—though
the others will suffer too, as we have seen, unless the opposing army
fights in accordance with the war convention.

The comparison with guerrilla war is worth pursuing further.
In an armed insurrection, the coercing and killing of civilians by
enemy soldiers has the effect of mobilizing other civilians and
bringing them into the insurgent camp. The indiscriminate vio-
ience of their opponents is one of the major sources of guerrilla
recruitment. Nonviolent resistance, on the other hand, is possible
on a significant scale only if civilians are already mobilized and
prepared to act together. The resistance is simply the physical
expression of that mobilization, directly, in the streets, or indi-
rectly, through economic slowdowns and political passivity. Now
the coercion and killing of civilians is likely to break the solidarity
of the resistance, spreading terror through the country and eventu-
ally producing a dulled acquiescence. At the same time, it may
demoralize the soldiers who are called upon to do what appears
to them—if it appears to them—indecent work, and it may under-
cut support for the occupation among the friends and relatives of
those soldiers. Guerrilla war can produce a similar demoralization,
but the effect is compounded by the fear soldiers must feel in the
face of the hostile men and women among whom they are forced
to fight (and die). In the case of nonviolent defense, there will be
no fear; there will only be disgust and shame. The success of the
defense is entirely dependent upon the moral convictions and
sensibilities of the enemy soldiers.

Nonviolent defense depends upon noncombattant immunity.
For this reason, it is no service to the cause to ridicule the rules of
war or to insist (as Tolstoy did) that violence is always and neces-
sarily unrestrained. When one wages a "war without weapons," one
appeals for restraint from men with weapons. It is not likely that
these men, soldiers subject to military discipline, are going to be
converted to the creed of nonviolence. Nor is it critical to the
success of the "war" that they be converted, but only that they
be held to their own putative standards. The appeal that is made
to them takes this form: "You cannot shoot at me, because I
am not shooting at you; nor am I going to shoot at you. I am
your enemy and will remain so as long as you occupy my country.
But I am a noncombattant enemy, and you must coerce and con-
trol me, if you can, without violence." The appeal simply restates
the argument about civilian rights and soldierly duties that under-