

The Power of Nonviolent Action



– Disregarded History

Norman Kember

This subtitle comes from an article written in 1976 by the leading thinker on nonviolence, Gene Sharp, and the truth of his thesis has not been affected by subsequent events.

National leaders forget that a whole range of historical conflicts have been resolved by nonviolent action so that when confronted by a new dispute between or within nations they act as if violent solutions are the most reliable. This blinkered view derives from the assumption that national prestige rests not on the ability to solve problems peacefully but on a nation's willingness and capacity to fight. Britain's retention of nuclear weapons has no other rationale.

Subversive Action

Governments may also see nonviolent actions as subversive—giving power to the people—although we may remember that nearly all take-over coups have been by the military. There remains the sad fact that nonviolence generally lacks news value and, to be even more cynical, where are the profits to be made from nonviolent actions?

And yet some governments have made serious studies of civilian based nonviolent national defence, although none (apart from Costa Rica) have gone as far as to abolish their military forces. In Switzerland in 1989, 30% of those polled were in favour of closing down their armed forces. The advocate of nonviolent social defence would not understate the risks. In contrast, British army recruiting material never emphasizes the dangers of military service.

It is accepted that nonviolent actions may not be successful in the short term. The events of Tianamen Square are legendary but, although that image of the solitary protester highlighted the true nature of the Chinese system, it did little to change that regime. More recently the world witnessed the failure of the street protests in Burma to change that repressive military government, but it is now widely seen as a pariah regime.

Norman Kember was born in 1931. In Sunday school, he was inspired by the stories of Christians who undertook hazardous missions overseas, and as a student discovered the writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor hung by the Gestapo in April 1945 for his participation in the resistance movement. When he was called to national service in 1952, Kember registered as a conscientious objector after long ethical discussions in the SCM at Exeter University. With his future wife Pat, he joined the Ban the Bomb march to Aldermaston in 1959 and they were both active in CND (Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament) in the 1980s. After retiring as a Professor of biophysics at St Bartholomew's Hospital College of Medicine, Kember became a voluntary worker with Christian peace movements including the Baptist Peace Fellowship, the Catholic peace organisation Pax Christi and the inter-church Fellowship of Reconciliation.

In March 2005 he attended a day's workshop about Christian Peacemaker Teams, who place violence-reduction teams in crisis situations and militarised areas around the world at the invitation of local peace and human rights workers. Kember was challenged to experience CPT at work by joining a short-term delegation. That decision led him to Iraq where he was kidnapped.



Nonviolent ‘Victories’

In order to reinforce my argument, I give a few examples of nonviolent ‘victories’. Some have been inspired by charismatic leaders while others have arisen from ‘grassroots’. Some actions have followed training in conflict resolution techniques but most have developed new methods as they progressed. There, as yet, are no instances of government led nonviolent actions—perhaps covertly the CIA have supported peaceful protest—but experience argues that they are more likely to have supported armed revolt.

1a) Transvaal; 1907-14. Gandhi successfully campaigned with strikes and boycotts for the legal rights of Indians in Transvaal

1b) India; 1918 on. Among many nonviolent campaigns against the British imperial rule, Gandhi reversed the government salt tax laws by a symbolic march (1930) to make sea salt. The British reacted with brutal force against the nonviolent campaigns.

2) England/France; 1915-8. The stand of WWI Conscientious Objectors against threats of execution won the right ‘not to kill’ in the UK.

3) The Ruhr; 1923. German passive resistance forced the withdrawal of occupying forces from the Ruhr.

4) Kashmir; 1938. Abdul Ghaffar Khan mobilised the traditionally fierce Pathans to resist British rule by nonviolent actions.

5) Norway; 1942. Teachers refused to co-operate with the pro-Nazi Quisling regime and, although many endured prison, the teaching of Nazi doctrines in schools was withdrawn.

6) Denmark. In **1943** there was a widespread movement of non co-operation and strikes against

the Nazi occupation. SS troops were sent in but were powerless against the passive resistance. Finally, they were withdrawn.

7) Berlin; 1943. ‘Aryan’ wives of German Jews obtained the release of their husbands from prison by peaceful demonstration.

8) Guatemala; 1944. The regime of General Ubico was overthrown by the peaceful demonstrations of students and other citizens in spite of police brutality.

9) Sicily; 1953. Danilo Dolci organised a strike in reverse to draw attention to destitute people. Villagers provided free labour to built roads and civic amenities in spite of local government opposition.

10) Vorkuta; 1953. About 250,000 political prisoners were held in camps in the Vorkuta region to work in appalling conditions in coal mines. The prisoners went on strike and, in spite of brutal reprisals, stood out until conditions were improved.

11) USA; 1955 on. The campaign for racial justice in the USA started with the bus boycott in Montgomery.

12) The Larzac, France; 1970-80. Demonstrations—including the driving of sheep into Paris—forced the Government to withdraw plans to extend military practice areas over grazing land.

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13) Himalayan foothills; 1973 on. Tree huggers prevented widespread deforestation activities.

14) Argentina; 1977-83. The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, by their silent witness in spite of intimidation, stopped human rights abuses and helped the establishment of democracy.

15) Algomar, Brazil; 1980. Sugar barons appropriated land. The dispossessed returned to grow their own crops, but the plants were pulled up. Public opinion supported the peasants and the government made extensive land grants to them.

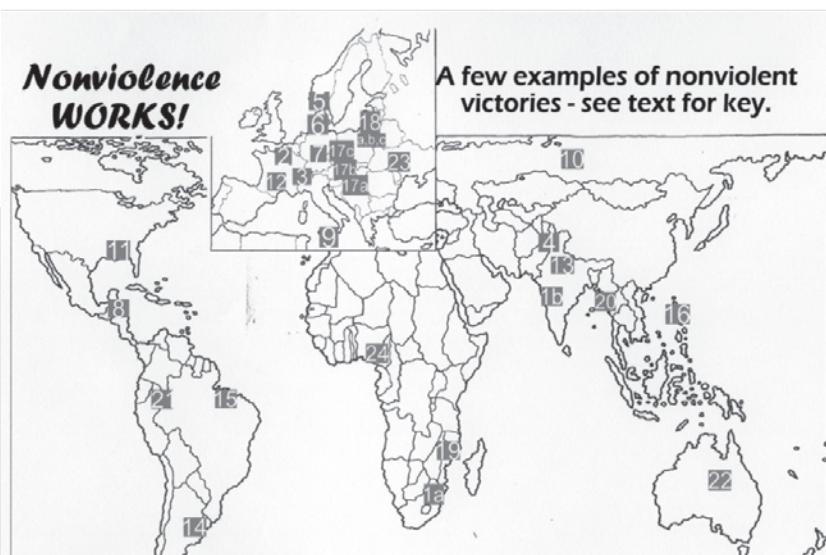
16) Philippines; 1986. In 3 days of breathtaking tension, crowds of civilians in Manila defied and then won round the army, thus bringing about the fall of Marcos.

17a) Hungary; 1980-89. The gradual change from a totalitarian to a democratic government—the Soufflé Revolution (Communism collapsed like a soufflé).

17c) East Germany; 1989. Mass prayer meetings at St Nicholas Church in Leipzig spread across the country and the government was forced out in favour of democratic change. There was no bloodshed.

17b) Czechoslovakia; 1977. Charter 77 for human rights led on to the ‘velvet revolution’ and the restoration of democracy in 1989.

18a,b,c) Baltic Republics; 1988-90. Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia took part in the 600 km human chain that linked the 3 state capitals. When Lithuania declared independence, the Soviets sent in troops and tanks but the people stood firm without resorting to violence and the troops eventually withdrew. In Estonia, vast crowds gathered in Riga to sing



traditional Estonian songs (banned by the USSR)—the ‘singing’ revolution. All 3 states gained independence without resorting to violence.

19) Mozambique; 1989-92. A religious community in Rome was able to broker an agreement between the RENAMO and FRELIMO forces.

20) Thailand; 1991. The Military seized power—prayer and fasting by monks for 7 months gave rise to popular demonstrations such that democratic rule was re-instated in the face of military repression.

21) Peru/Ecuador; 1995-6. An American Conflict Management Team brokered a peaceful solution to a disputed border conflict.

22) Australia; 1988. ‘The Sorry Book’ campaign was an example of one of many nonviolent actions for the rights of the indigenous population.



23) Ukraine; 2004. The people's 'orange' revolution for democracy

24) Nigeria; 2002. 150 village women in Nigeria shut down an oil operation for a week—seeking jobs for their impoverished sons and husbands. They occupied the Escravos pipeline terminal of Chevron Texaco.

These are a selection of some notable examples of nonviolent actions. Other protests have heightened awareness of the dangers, injustices and problems associated with nuclear weapons, road building, GM crops, women's suffrage, hunting with dogs, the arms trade, etc.

An important development of the 20th Century has been the growth of conflict resolution courses that train people in peacemaking in schools, churches, communities and between nations. The Quakers and Mennonites have led this development. Bradford University has a large department of peace studies which attracts

students from all over the world—including officers from the armed forces...

On recollection, nonviolence is the norm. In everyday life in communities—and between nations—disputes are solved without resort to violence. We must remember that **VIOLENCE IS THE EXCEPTION.**

Suggested Reading

Buttry, Daniel. *Christian Peacemaking – from Heritage to Hope.* Judson Press 1994
Open Hands. ed. Barbara Butler, Kevin Mayhew 1998
Ferguson, John. *Give Peace a Chance.* Gooday 1988
Matthews, Dylan. *War Prevention Works – 50 stories of people resolving conflicts.* Oxford Research Group 2001

The Classic Study: *The politics of nonviolent action* Gene Sharp, Porter Sargeant 1973.

Gene Sharp lists nearly 200 techniques of nonviolent action to achieve justice, overthrow oppressors or fight for environmental causes. Thus Jesus' original suggestions of 3 transforming initiatives (turning other cheek, going the extra mile, going naked in court) have been imaginatively multiplied over the years. The philosophy remains the same, i.e. to empower the oppressed, leaving open the possibility of converting the oppressor. Now available as 'Waging nonviolent struggle' Gene Sharp 2005, Porter Sargeant, Boston.

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