

# Nonviolent Defence

– A Primer –

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Canadian Coalition for  
Nonviolent Defence

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Coalition canadienne pour  
la défense non violente

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7	Success	This final section explores what we mean by success, how we define effectiveness, and the long-term vision of “trans-armament.”

## 1. Introduction

*Nonviolent defence* is about the use of nonviolent action to defend a country from military invasion. Rooted in the history of nonviolent resistance, it seeks to address the root problem behind war – people’s need for security. If people believed they could defend themselves from military invasion nonviolently, they would see less need to maintain an army. If such perceptions spread across societies, the public support for militarization and war would decline.

Much has been written on nonviolent resistance (*more broadly*) and nonviolent defence (*more specifically*). Beginning with Gandhi, activists, theorists, and political scientists have focused on the use of nonviolent resistance to pursue justice, democratize societies, and defend against invasions. This short primer depends on their pioneering work, while also developing short, readable summaries of their most relevant contributions.

In this short primer you will find basic definitions of key terms, a short history of nonviolent resistance, select case studies, a sampler of methods of nonviolent action and theoretical explanations (“mechanisms”) of how these actions contributed to their intended outcomes. We hope you learn something, and we expect you will come away with many, many questions. Most of all we hope you leave this guide with an expanded sense of possibility, of the opportunities for making peace that history has afforded us.

## 2. Definitions

This guide will use a set of terms in describing the nature and importance of nonviolent defence. Here we provide some key definitions.

1. *Strategic Nonviolence*. The use of nonviolent action to achieve specific purposes, often political. Specifically, the strategic use of *exclusively* nonviolent actions - as opposed to strategies that include both violent and nonviolent action. In the literature, this is sometimes called "civil resistance." We use the term here in contrast to moral pacifism.
2. *Moral Pacifism*. Moral pacifism is the belief that to use or threaten lethal violence is unethical. This is distinct from strategic nonviolence, which chooses nonviolent action for strategic reasons. One can be a moral pacifist and not believe in strategic nonviolence. Likewise, one can believe in strategic nonviolence and not be a moral pacifist.
3. *Lethal Violence*. While violence is not the only kind of harm that can be inflicted on another person, we define lethal violence here as specifically harm to another person's life. i.e. killing, murder.
4. *Nonviolent Action*. In the literature, nonviolent action identifies a broad range of methods or tactics that can be used to help achieve purposes without the use of lethal violence (including the threats of such violence). These methods can include protest, social pressure, economic pressure (such as strikes and boycotts), as well as various kinds of noncooperation.
5. *Strategic Thinking*. Is about (a) evaluating (b) the best method (c) out of various options available, (d) to achieve a particular end goal (e) given limited resources. In the case of *strategic nonviolence*, it's the judgement that a certain set of nonviolent tactics ("nonviolent action") are best suited to achieve a given outcome.

6. *Strategy*. A strategy is the plan of proposed actions, in sequence, that is the result of strategic thinking. Also called the *plan*.
7. *Purposes*. Purposes are the end goals that people are trying to achieve, including political goals. These can include changing a law or policy (at minimum), changing a regime (at maximum), or defending against or deterring a military invasion. Purposes aren't necessarily moral, as people can use nonviolent action to pursue unethical goals.
8. *Mechanisms (nonviolent action)*. Mechanisms of nonviolent action are the reasons why nonviolent action can be effective, specifically the process or chain of intermediate steps that explains *how* one thing leads to another. *Example*: how a general strike would lead, or contribute to, the toppling of a dictator.
9. *Nonviolent Coercion*. Nonviolent coercion refers to the kind of pressure exerted upon an individual and group that can change their behaviours against their wills, without the use of violence. Nonviolent coercion is one of the mechanisms behind nonviolent action. *Note* – It's important to identify nonviolent coercion as a mechanism because people often assume that nonviolent works primarily through persuading and converting the opponent.
10. *Nonviolent Defence*. Nonviolent defence is a kind of nonviolent resistance, the use of nonviolent action to defend against or deter a military invasion by a foreign government. In the literature, this was earlier called "civilian-based defence" or "unarmed civilian defence" to highlight that the defence was in the hands of citizens, not professional soldiers, and was done without recourse to violence.

### 3. Histories

Here, we examine the histories of strategic nonviolence, the scholarship of nonviolent resistance, and nonviolent defence. These three histories are intertwined, but it's also helpful to understand their distinct histories. These also are intentionally “short summaries,” and not meant to be exhaustive.

#### 3.1. Strategic Nonviolence.

Throughout history, people have resisted various kinds of injustice in nonviolent ways – both in spontaneous and in planned ways. Nonviolent action has sometimes been mixed with violent resistance. Throughout history, nonviolent action has both succeeded and it has failed. Almost all of the methods of nonviolent action identified by Gene Sharpe, Michael Beer, and others (see below), used frequently in highly successful, modern movements, have had ancient roots going back centuries or millennia.

In other words, Gandhi did not invent nonviolent action. Many of the methods of nonviolent action long preceded Gandhi. What Gandhi did help pioneer was a *political* strategy of *exclusive* nonviolent action – i.e. strategic nonviolence. Exclusive nonviolence had existed as a moral belief (pacifism), but not as a political strategy. Nonviolent methods, on the other hand, had been used by political movements before, but often mixed with violent methods. The idea of *exclusive nonviolence* was new.

Gandhi's novel synthesis helped inspire a new hope – what if we solve major, intractable political conflicts without the use of violence? What if achieving justice, democratizing societies, and more could be achieved by the disciplined and strategic application of nonviolent methods? The 20<sup>th</sup> century saw literally hundreds, if not thousands, of nonviolent movements attempting this very thing (six of which will be explored below). While many failed, still more succeeded. In their magisterial study *Why Civil Resistance Works* (2011), Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan examined over 300 regime change attempts between 1900-2006 and compared the use of nonviolent resistance to violent attempts. They found that while only about half of nonviolent attempts succeeded (53% success rate), they were still twice as successful as violent attempts (26% success rate). So, strategic nonviolence is not magic. But it's proved a powerful political tool to make the world a better place.

### 3.2 Research on Strategic Nonviolence.

What Newton was to physics and Freud to psychology, Gene Sharp (1928-2018) was to the study of strategic nonviolence. Gandhi may have invented (more-or-less) the practice, but Sharp turned it into a serious field of scholarly inquiry. Much of the literature on nonviolent resistance before Sharp's magisterial *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* (1973) was non-scholarly in nature, philosophical and practical explorations on the possibilities of nonviolence. After Sharp (1) the research expanded, (2) evidence came in about the effects of nonviolent action, (3) theoretical explanations developed to explain the mechanisms, and, importantly, (4) people began applying the insights in real-life situations.

Almost right away, movements for justice and democracy began to use and apply Sharp's scholarship. In the Baltic independence struggle of the late 1980s, officials and movement leaders studied and adapted Sharp's ideas. In the 1990s, his work was used in Myanmar, in Serbia, by the colour revolutions of both Georgia (*Rose Revolution*, 2003) and Ukraine (*Orange Revolution*, 2004), and later by leaders in the Arab Spring. These experiences in turn fed back into the research – as kinds of “real world laboratories” - as Sharp and others (including the *Albert Einstein Institution* and *Centre for Study of Nonviolent Conflict*) studied their successes and failures, developing new insights into how strategic nonviolence can be even more effective.

By the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, research on strategic nonviolence reached new maturity with the publication of *Why Civil Resistance Works* (2011). As mentioned above, that book compared hundreds of campaigns over the 20<sup>th</sup> century, demonstrating the relative effectiveness of strategic nonviolence and the conditions for its success. New insights were developed, including the famous 3.5% rule – the finding that no mass movement relying on nonviolent resistance has failed to achieve its goals once it has secured participation from 3.5% of its population. Just as scientific advances in physics, chemistry, and biology enabled breathtaking new technology, so too has the study of strategic nonviolence opened up a world of possibilities unimaginable in the past. As counter-intuitive as it may sound, humanity in the third decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has never been so equipped for nonviolent action as we are today.

### **3.3 Nonviolent Defence.**

The early success of strategic nonviolence made it possible to imagine nonviolent defence. Gandhi began to advocate for the possibility in 1931, through editorials, speeches, and conferences. In the 1930s, other pacifist writers developed similar proposals, inspired by India's nonviolent resistance. These early explorations were mostly critiques of how military defence could be wasteful and counterproductive. At the same time, they usually only hinted at the possibility of a nonviolent alternative without developing it in-depth. Hence, outside of international pacifist networks, the idea wasn't taken seriously.

Nonviolent defence began to emerge as a serious policy proposal in the 1950s. The invention of the nuclear bomb changed war forever. The threat of mutual assured destruction in the early Cold War convinced many that a militarist business-as-usual approach was no longer a viable option. Radical and realistic alternatives must be found. By the late 1960s and early 1970s, nonviolent defence was being discussed by both academics and policymakers, especially in western Europe. In this period, the governments of Norway, Sweden, and Denmark all explored research on the subject. Meanwhile, major academic conferences were held throughout the 1980s.

The 1980s saw successful nonviolent resistance to Soviet domination in Eastern Europe (i.e. Poland, Hungary, the Baltic States). Once again, many of these movements were spontaneous in nature, growing out of political necessity - military resistance against the Soviets would have failed. After the lived experience of the power of nonviolence, Lithuania became the first country in the world to integrate nonviolent defence into their policy. While Lithuania still has an army, they also train their population in the use of strategic nonviolence if faced with invasion or homegrown authoritarianism. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, nonviolent defence has lost its Cold War era urgency. Yet as the real need for security continues to fuel wars, nonviolent defence remains a realistic if radical alternative to the status quo.

## **4. Case Studies.**

Here, we look at six case studies of the use of strategic nonviolence against either an internal, authoritarian regime or an external invader. These short summaries give an explanation of what happened and list some of the tactics and strategies used. Given their brevity, they are of course not exhaustive. Nor were they all fully successful, although much can be learned from them either way.

### **4.1 Case Study #1 - Indian Independence Movement**

The Indian independence movement was a prolonged struggle to end British colonial rule, spanning roughly from the mid-19th century to 1947. While early resistance included local uprisings and elite petitions, the movement gained national coherence with the founding of the Indian National Congress in 1885. Over the following decades, it evolved into a mass movement involving millions across religious, linguistic, and class lines. After a series of major civil resistance campaigns and increasing political pressure, India achieved independence from Britain on August 15, 1947.

A *defining* feature of the Indian independence movement—particularly from the 1920s onward—was its strategic use of nonviolent resistance. Nonviolence in India was not passive; it was strategic, large-scale, and deliberately confrontational. Gandhi and his allies used nonviolence as a way to mobilize the masses, undermine British authority, and draw global attention to India's demand for self-rule.

#### **Top Three Nonviolent Methods Used:**

- **Mass Civil Disobedience Campaigns**
  - Refusal to obey colonial laws (e.g., the Salt March in 1930, protesting the British salt monopoly).
  - Widely coordinated acts of law-breaking to overwhelm colonial enforcement.
- **Boycotts of British Goods and Institutions**
  - Including foreign cloth, British-run schools, and courts.
- **Noncooperation Movements**
  - Mass resignation from government posts, pressure on collaborators, and refusal to pay taxes.
  - Designed to paralyze the functioning of British rule.

## 4.2 Case Study #2 - Filipinos Overthrow Marcos

Ferdinand Marcos ruled the Philippines from 1965 to 1986, clinging to power by declaring martial law, repressing dissent, and rigging elections. After opposition leader Benigno Aquino was assassinated upon returning from exile in 1983, the regime's legitimacy began to crumble. Grief over Aquino's death turned into mass protest. His widow, Corazon Aquino, became the symbol of the growing nonviolent resistance, which used yellow as its unifying colour and mobilized mass mourning, creative civil disobedience, and weekly confetti drops. Business elites, students, nuns, and opposition politicians joined forces through a coalition called UNIDO. As the economic crisis deepened, and with international attention mounting, Marcos was pressured into calling snap elections in 1986.

Aquino ran against him and likely won, but Marcos falsely claimed victory. In response, millions rallied behind Corazon. Religious groups, especially Radio Veritas and the Catholic Church, played a crucial role in organizing peaceful mass resistance. When military defectors barricaded themselves at Camp Crame, civilians formed human shields around them, blocking attacks by Marcos's forces. Soldiers defected en masse, while demonstrators won over troops with prayers, hugs, and yellow ribbons. On February 25, 1986, Corazon Aquino was sworn in as president and Marcos fled into exile.

### Top Three Nonviolent Methods Used:

- **Mass Civil Disobedience** (e.g. boycotts of pro-Marcos banks, media, and businesses)
- **Symbolic Mourning and Yellow Movement** (e.g. confetti drops, yellow ribbons, vigils)
- **Nonviolent Intervention to Prevent Military Violence** (e.g. human barricades at Camp Crame)

### 4.3 Case Study #3 - Czechoslovakia 1968

In early 1968, Czechoslovakia experienced a reform movement known as the Prague Spring, initiated after Alexander Dubcek replaced the hard-line Communist Party leader. The reforms aimed to introduce limited political liberalization, including increased freedom of expression and organization, challenging the orthodox Soviet control over the satellite state. The movement gained momentum but alarmed the Soviet Union and its allies, who viewed the reforms as a threat to Communist hegemony. In August 1968, Warsaw Pact troops invaded Czechoslovakia to suppress the reforms, leading to a swift military occupation and the removal of Dubcek from power. Despite the overwhelming force of the invasion, resistance emerged immediately, signaling popular rejection of foreign domination and repression.

Nonviolent mobilization played a crucial role in Czechoslovak resistance, even under heavy military occupation. Civilians engaged in peaceful protests such as human blockades in front of tanks, widespread graffiti and signage condemning the invasion, and public demonstrations of solidarity with reform leaders. Radio broadcasts, leaflets, and underground newspapers spread messages of passive resistance, organized information networks, and coordinated actions such as strikes and work slowdowns. Even as isolated violent incidents occurred, the movement emphasized nonviolent tactics to avoid provoking harsher crackdowns. Symbolic acts like singing the national anthem, fraternizing with Soviet soldiers, and mass petitions underscored the population's unity. Despite the eventual suppression and reversal of reforms, these nonviolent efforts maintained popular morale and international attention for months after the invasion.

#### **Key Nonviolent Methods and Strategies:**

- **Human blockades and public demonstrations:** Physically obstructing Soviet forces and openly protesting occupation despite the risk of violence.
- **Radio and underground media networks:** Using clandestine broadcasts, leaflets, and newspapers to spread information, coordinate resistance, and maintain social solidarity.
- **Symbolic acts of solidarity and civil disobedience:** Singing national songs, displaying portraits of reform leaders, graffiti art, petitions, and strikes to express opposition and sustain morale.

#### **4.4 Case Study #4 - Serbians Overthrow Milosevic**

Between 1989 and 2000, Slobodan Milosevic ruled Serbia through nationalism, war, and repression, leading the country into conflict, economic collapse, and international isolation. After NATO's 1999 bombing failed to remove him, a new movement—**Otpor**—emerged, led by youth activists who rejected both violence and traditional politics. Otpor's goal was simple: remove Milosevic through mass mobilization, elections, and democratic reform.

Otpor used strategic nonviolence to weaken the regime's legitimacy and organize nationwide resistance. They relied on humour, satire, and a black fist logo to spread their message and reduce fear. Their campaigns encouraged massive voter turnout in the September 2000 elections. When Milosevic tried to falsify the outcome, Otpor coordinated general strikes, student walkouts, and citywide shutdowns. Protesters occupied media stations, miners went on strike, and even police units defected. On October 5, hundreds of thousands gathered in Belgrade; two days later, Milosevic resigned. Serbia transitioned to democracy, and Otpor became a global model for nonviolent resistance.

##### **Top Three Nonviolent Methods Used:**

- **Humorous and Symbolic Protest** (e.g. street theater, parody slogans).
- **Mass Voter Mobilization and Unity Campaigns** (e.g. uniting 18 opposition parties behind one candidate).
- **Strikes and Civil Disobedience** (e.g. coal miner strikes, city shutdowns, occupation of public buildings).

#### 4.5 Case Study #5 - Liberians End A Civil-War

In the midst of Liberia's brutal second civil war (2000–2003), social worker Leymah Gbowee mobilized Christian and Muslim women in a broad, grassroots peace movement. Facing atrocities from both government forces led by Charles Taylor and rebel groups, the women united across religious and ethnic lines to demand an end to violence. Their efforts pressured warring factions to participate in peace talks, contributed to Taylor's resignation and exile, and helped usher in a transitional government and democratic elections that resulted in the continent's first elected female president, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf.

The movement's core strength lay in its innovative use of nonviolent mobilization. Women gathered publicly in symbolic white clothing, organizing daily sit-ins, prayer vigils, and song, centered at the fish market visible from the president's residence. They employed a sex strike to leverage influence over male combatants, and staged high-profile nonviolent actions like sit-ins and blockades in Liberia and Ghana to maintain pressure on combatants and negotiators. Their persistence and unity across religious divisions gave the movement moral authority that challenged violent power structures and attracted international attention and support.

##### **Key Nonviolent Methods and Strategies:**

- **Interfaith public gatherings and prayer vigils:** Unified Christian and Muslim women in daily peaceful protests to build solidarity and visibility.
- **Sex strike:** A strategic withholding of intimacy aimed at motivating men to seek peace.
- **Sit-ins and blockades:** Nonviolent direct actions at rebel hotels and peace negotiations to pressure leaders into participating in and reaching a settlement.

#### 4.6 Case Study #6 - Danish Resistance to Nazis

In 1940, as World War II unfolded, Denmark declared neutrality and cut its military forces, yet it was quickly invaded by Nazi Germany. King Christian chose to submit to German demands to avoid widespread bloodshed, allowing German troops to occupy the country while Denmark retained nominal sovereignty. During the occupation, Danish citizens developed a strong sense of national identity and resistance, starting with a 17-year-old's "Ten Commandments for Danes" that encouraged sabotage and non-cooperation with the Nazis.

Over time, cultural expressions of unity, such as mass singing events and underground anti-Nazi publications, spread widely. In 1943, despite a German ultimatum demanding severe restrictions and curfews, Denmark's government refused, leading to full German military control. In response, Danes organized widespread strikes, acts of sabotage, and most notably, a massive, coordinated effort to protect Jewish citizens by hiding them and transporting most to safety in Sweden. The Danish Freedom Council emerged as a key resistance organizer, representing a temporary government and rallying national nonviolent opposition until liberation in 1945.

Strategic nonviolence in Denmark played a critical role in maintaining Danish sovereignty and protecting vulnerable populations without escalating to armed conflict, which would have likely resulted in severe German repression. Nonviolent resistance united Danes across social groups through cultural defiance, strikes, and civil disobedience that disrupted German control and resource extraction. The resistance's emphasis on symbolic actions—mass singing, underground press, symbolic badges—and practical resistance—work stoppages, sabotage, —demonstrated a coordinated strategy to assert national dignity and obstruct Nazi goals while minimizing casualties.

This approach preserved Denmark's national identity and government structures, protected the Jewish population from deportation, and reduced the Nazi regime's capacity to fully exploit Danish resources, all achieved through broad-based, nonviolent popular mobilization. In total, **approximately 120 Danish Jews** died during the Holocaust. Denmark's Jewish community has one of the highest rates of survival for any German-occupied European country.

## Global Nonviolent Action Database - Case Studies Links

<i>Case Study</i>	<i>Nonviolent Database Link</i>
Indian Independence Movement (two links)	<a href="#">Indians campaign for independence (Salt Satyagraha), 1930-1931   Global Nonviolent Action Database</a>  <a href="#">Indians campaign for full independence (Quit India Campaign), 1942-1943   Global Nonviolent Action Database</a>
Philippines / Marcos (1980s)	<a href="#">Filipinos campaign to overthrow dictator (People Power), 1983-1986   Global Nonviolent Action Database</a>
Czechoslovakia & USSR (1968)	<a href="#">Czechoslovak resistance to Soviet occupation, 1968   Global Nonviolent Action Database</a>
Serbia / Opor	<a href="https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/content/serbians-overthrow-milosevic-bulldozer-revolution-2000">https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/content/serbians-overthrow-milosevic-bulldozer-revolution-2000</a>
Danish Resistance to Nazis	<a href="#">Danish citizens resist the Nazis, 1940-1945   Global Nonviolent Action Database</a>
Liberian Women End a Civil War (2003)	<a href="https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/index.php/content/liberian-women-act-end-civil-war-2003">https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/index.php/content/liberian-women-act-end-civil-war-2003</a>

## 5. Methods

What is a method of nonviolent action? Simply put, a method of nonviolent action is any intentional action a movement takes to help achieve their goals without relying on violence.

In the last century, many movements that have used strategic nonviolence have relied on a similar repertoire of tactics. Whether seeking to change laws, overthrow dictators, or defend against invasions, movements have relied on such practices as group singing, refusal to obey laws, boycotts, hunger strikes, and more.

In this section, we explore various ways scholars have classified methods of nonviolent action and briefly introduce six representative methods. Out of over three hundred identified different methods of nonviolent action, the six we focus on only give a hint of the breadth of possible action. We hope that both the organizational frameworks and specific methods identified are helpful to you in your learning about nonviolent action.

### 5.1. Ways to Categorize

Two leading scholars have created frameworks to organize and explain the different kinds of nonviolent action. Gene Sharp pioneered this work in his *The Politics of Nonviolent Action: The Methods of Nonviolent Action* (1973) where he organized 198 methods of nonviolent action in the following six categories:

1	<i>Protest and Persuasion.</i>	Symbolic actions to express views and sway opinion.
2	<i>Social Noncooperation.</i>	Refusal to participate in normal social life
3	<i>Economic Noncooperation – Strikes.</i>	Workers withdrawing their labour power.
4	<i>Economic Noncooperation – Boycotts.</i>	Various kinds of “not buying it.”
5	<i>Political Noncooperation.</i>	Rejecting or refusing to comply with political authority.
6	<i>Nonviolent Intervention.</i>	Directly disrupting the status quo through new actions.

In *Civil Resistance Tactics in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (2021), Micheal Beer catalogues over 340 different methods of nonviolent action. Besides expanding Sharp’s list extensively, Beer also suggests a new way of categorizing these methods:

1	<i>Protest</i>	Communication to criticize or coerce.
2	<i>Appeal</i>	Communication to reward or persuade.
3	<i>Noncooperation.</i>	Refusing expected behaviour (strikes, boycotts).
4	<i>Refraining.</i>	Stopping action to reward or persuade (i.e. suspending a strike)
5	<i>Disruptive Intervention.</i>	Direct action that confronts another party in order to stop or change their behaviour ( <i>example</i> : blockade).
6	<i>Creative Intervention.</i>	Direct action that builds alternative institutions or initiates new behaviours.

Beer organizes his six categories in the following way:

	<i>Confrontational</i>	<i>Constructive</i>
<i>Saying</i>	[1] Protest	[2] Appeal
<i>Not Doing</i>	[3] Noncooperation	[4] Refraining
<i>Doing / Creating</i>	[5] Disruptive Intervention	[6] Creative Intervention

Why focus on ways to categorize methods? It helps with learning. A 1969 study found that, when asked to recall a list of 112 words, participants remembered *almost twice as many* when grouped into categories (e.g. trees, flowers, tools) versus presented randomly. When “oak,” “rose,” and “daisy” were grouped under “plants,” recall was much higher than when they were scattered. So, we presented ways to categorize nonviolent methods as a tool to help you to learn and understand them more easily.

## 5.2. Six Sample Methods

Here we present a list of six sample methods of nonviolent action (out of more than three hundred actions). Some of these are specific methods, others are more general categories. We chose these methods for three reasons. First, we chose these methods because they were used in the case studies above. Second, we chose these methods because they can help expand our understanding of the breadth of nonviolent methods

available. Finally, all six methods lead us naturally to ask: *how does method x, y, or z actually help us achieve our goals?* Questions that will be addressed in our final section.

### **5.2.1. Method #1 – Strikes**

We know what strikes are. Groups of people refuse to work, gaining leverage over those who need the work. Some kinds of strikes we could participate in include:

1. Industry-specific strikes.
2. Symbolic strikes - strikes that have symbolic values, although they lack teeth.
3. General strikes - where all workers go on strike.

### **5.2.2. Method #2 – Boycotts**

This is where consumers refuse to buy. We've seen this a bunch in Canada & the US recently. The Indian independence movement used it, as did the movements to overthrow Marcos, Milosevic, and Danish resistance to the Nazis.

### **5.2.3. Method #3 – Symbols**

This is an interesting category of actions, and used in every single one of our campaigns. This is the use of flags, slogans, and symbolic colours. Even singing the national anthem. Maybe we think that doing something symbolic isn't doing anything. But each of our six campaigns shows the opposite.

### **5.2.4. Method #4 – Blockades**

Nonviolent blockades have played key roles in many of our campaigns. In the Indian independence movement, Gandhi's Salt March culminated in mass nonviolent blockades of salt factories, while Liberian women blockaded peace talks by physically surrounding negotiators until they reached a settlement. Similar tactics were seen in the Philippines against Marcos, where protesters used sit-ins and human barricades to prevent military movement.

### **5.2.5. Method #5 – Communications**

All the resistance movements used communications strategically to build solidarity, coordinate actions, and counter regime narratives. The Indian independence movement

used newspapers and speeches to mobilize mass participation, while Danish and Czechoslovak resistors relied heavily on underground leaflets and radio broadcasts to maintain morale and organize civil disobedience.

#### **5.2.6. Method #6 – Coalitions of the Divided**

Whether uniting Muslim or Christian women in Liberia, Hindus and Muslims in colonial India, Catholics and communists in the Philippines, bickering political parties or simply whole societies – no nonviolent movement succeeded without a high degree of unity, especially among the divided. The opposite of “divide and conquer” is “unite and free yourself.”

#### **5.2.7. Method #7 – Pressure on Collaborators**

In every movement, there was danger that some people would collaborate with invaders/oppressors. In both India and Denmark, collaborators faced social sanction. Gandhi warned that as we pressure collaborators to do the right thing, we must never hate them.

## **6. Mechanisms**

What are the mechanisms of nonviolent actions? By mechanisms, we mean the underlying reasons why nonviolent methods work. “Mechanisms” are explanations. They are answers to the question “How does it work?”

Mechanisms, it is important to point out, are grounded in theories of how the world works. Just as photosynthesis explains how plants grow and gravity explains why objects fall, mechanisms explain how nonviolent tactics achieve their goals. Part of the point of the scholarship of strategic nonviolence is to test these theories, as a way to advance the knowledge and practice of nonviolent resistance.

Mechanisms are best when they map cause-and-effect in detail. Specifically, when they identify the process or chain of intermediate steps that explains *how* one thing leads to another. For example, how a general strike would lead to the toppling of a dictator.

In this section, we list several key theories or mechanisms behind nonviolent action. These can help explain why some of the methods listed above were helpful in the six case studies we explored, and how they may apply in our context.

### **6.1. Core Idea #1 – The Consent Theory of Power.**

The core theory behind strategic nonviolence is that all power relies on consent. Every ruler relies for their power on the obedience of the ruled. This is as true for parents and teachers as it is for factory owners and dictators. If this is the case, then a withdrawal of consent can erode the power of the ruler.

### **6.2. Core Idea #2 – A Little Disobedience Goes a Long Way**

The second core idea is that you don’t need to withdraw all of the obedience a ruler needs to remove them from power. You only need to withdraw some of it, and this gives you leverage for negotiation and change.

### **6.3. Mechanism #1 – All Power is Limited**

If it is true that power depends on consent, this also means all power is limited. Parents, teachers, factory owners, and dictators may be powerful – but none is all-powerful. They are limited by the amount of obedience or consent they can secure. They are also limited by how they secure this obedience, their sources of power.

A key implication here is that believing rulers have unlimited authority can become a *self-fulfilling prophecy* as people do not disobey, falsely believing they are powerless. Thus a key task of a nonviolent movement is helping people understand that, even when powerful, no ruler is all-powerful and no movement is powerless.

#### **6.4. Mechanism #2 – Various Sources of Power**

Sources of power are the diverse ways that people in power gain and sustain other people's obedience. The idea is that nonviolent action can be designed to deprive a ruler of their sources of obedience. These sources include legitimacy, resources, retainers, and fear.

1. *Legitimacy*. Legitimacy is the perceived right of a ruler to rule, i.e. their authority.
2. *Resources*. Resources are the materials or assets that a ruler has access to, that the ruled might need or want.
3. *Retainers*. Retainers are the in-betweens, between ruled and rulers, who help a regime function (i.e. police, bureaucrats, etc).
4. *Fear*. Finally, fear is the ability of a ruler to punish and sanction, the fear of which induces people to obey.

#### **6.5. Mechanism #3 – Various Reasons for Obedience**

People obey or consent to rulers for various reasons. The idea is that nonviolent action can be targeted based on the reasons people obey, and if done effectively people can withdraw their support for a ruler. Some of the reasons people obey include:

1. *Moral Duty*. People may feel it's their duty to obey a ruler or authority figure.
2. *Habit*. People may simply be in the habit of obeying, and habits are hard to break.
3. *Lack of Confidence*. People may lack confidence in their ability to disobey, or in their capacity to judge when it's best to do so.

4. *Fear of Punishment.* People may obey because they are afraid. This can include fear of physical punishment, loss of material resources, or even loss of friends.
5. *Desire for Reward.* People may obey because they get something they want, maybe more money or social prestige.
6. *Indifference.* People may obey because they just don't care enough to do otherwise.

#### **6.6. Mechanism #4 – Limits to Sanctions**

This is a specific application of Mechanism #1 (“All power is limited”). It suggests a few ideas about sanctions, highlighting the limits of threats and punishments.

1. *Never Just Sanctions.* No ruler relies on sanctions (i.e. penalties, punishments) alone. There is no government or power structure in history that has relied on threats or sanctions alone to secure people's consent. There are always other sources of power, even if they are hidden from view.
2. *Sanctions Need Retainers.* All rulers depend on retainers to actually make sanctions work. That is, they need police and soldiers to enforce threats. Rulers need to retain legitimacy among retainers to effectively threaten sanctions. Many regimes have collapsed when police or soldiers defect.
3. *Sanctions Have Limits.* There are only so many police, so many jail cells, so much time that courts have. No government could arrest 5% of their population. There are just practical limits.
4. *Sanctions Can Backfire.* Since people don't like to be punished and can find the punishments of others distasteful, the amount of punishment and repression needs to be kept within certain moral limits. If governments punish too much – for example - they can lose some of their legitimacy, which can cause more people to disobey.

#### **6.7. Mechanism #5 - Moral Jiu-jitsu & Violence Backfire**

Moral jiu-jitsu explains how a resistance movement using nonviolent discipline can use the violent repression by a regime against that regime. If authorities respond with violence against a strictly nonviolent movement, their behaviour looks unjust, cruel, and illegitimate to both the public and even supporters of the regime. If the movement doesn't fight back violently, it can use the opponent's aggression to gain sympathy, support, and moral legitimacy. This can weaken the opponent's power (as they lose

legitimacy, they also lose obedience) and attract more people to the resistance, making the movement appear morally stronger.

It's like in jiu-jitsu: instead of meeting force with force, you use the opponent's energy against them. In nonviolent action, the "energy" is the opponent's aggression, and the "leverage" is public perception and moral authority.

The opposite of moral jiu-jitsu is how a regime can use violent resistance to justify repression. The violence of a resistance movement can help consolidate a regime's base (people unite to protect against violence), justify a regime's use of repressive violence (at least to some), and decrease the chances of security defections.

### **6.8. Mechanism #6 – Conversion & Coercion**

Conversion indicates how nonviolence (especially the suffering of nonviolent resistance and the courage of resisters) can lead to winning hearts and minds. Nonviolent movements can win new recruits, win public sympathy, and even convince police and soldiers to defect. While those with power rarely convert, these other conversions are a key mechanism to how nonviolent action can be effective.

But it's not just conversion. It's also coercion. Nonviolent action succeeds because it stops some people from doing what they want to do. The coercion is nonviolent, as it doesn't force people by threatening violence. But force people it does – through strikes, boycotts, nonviolent barricades, etc.

## 7. Defining Success & The Long Term Vision

We can conclude this primer by thinking about what success and effectiveness mean in both the short-term and in the long-term. It's important to pause here and be clear on how we define and measure success and what the long-term goals of nonviolent defence would look like.

### 7.1. Defining Success

The most frequently asked question about strategic nonviolence is probably "But is it effective?" It is worth unpacking this question. It's not as simple as it seems.

First of all, the word "effective" begs the question: effective at *what*? When asking about effectiveness, it is necessary to be specific about what goals we are talking about. It's also worth noting that, if we are honest, we never usually have just one goal. In our personal and collective lives we often have multiple goals, goals we struggle to balance and integrate. On top of that, we only accept choosing between goals when we are forced to do so.

In the case of nonviolent defence, the most obvious goals include to defend a country against an invasion or even to deter (i.e. prevent) an invasion in the first place. But why defend against an invasion? What are the goals behind this goal? We can list some of those goals to include: safeguarding democracy, security from violence, etc.

Defending against an invasion is not the only goal, of course. We want, at least in a moral society, to reduce the casualties on the other side. We don't want - or at least we shouldn't want! - to defend ourselves in a way that inflicts maximum violence on the other party. So, if we can defend ourselves and do so in a way that minimizes the damage we do on the enemy – isn't that better than achieving defence but destroying the other?

Finally, asking "is it *effective*?" is often also implicitly asking "how *effective* is it compared to options A, B, C?" In the case of nonviolent defence, the question is how do nonviolent strategies compare to violent strategies in defending against an invasion. Which are better at meeting all our goals?

## **7.2. A Long-Term Goal - Trans-armament**

A key long-term goal of adopting a nonviolent defence policy is what scholars have sometimes called “trans-armament.” Trans-armament is the long-term transition away from one defence system to another at a global level, in this case the transition from military defence systems to nonviolent defence systems.

Trans-armament is the structural opposite of an arms race. In an arms race, countries race each other to build up weapons systems. In trans-armament, the adoption of a nonviolent defence system in one country inspires neighbouring countries to adopt as well, in an upward spiral of nonviolence.

The logic is war can be drastically reduced, if not abolished, if societies adopt and prepare for a credible, civilian-based defence system capable of deterring and defeating aggression. The premise is that war, and military preparations for war, persist because people see no viable alternative for defence. People are unwilling to abandon armed defence capabilities when they feel threatened. War functions as the ultimate sanction, providing a sense of power and security in crises.

Nonviolent, civilian-based defence can be developed into a systematic national policy. With training, planning, and widespread participation, resistance can be more effective. Each societal sector (e.g. media, education, clergy) can play a distinct defensive role. The goal is to make a country ungovernable by invaders through mass noncooperation.

States can begin by adding nonviolent defence to existing military strategies before full transarmament. Smaller or militarily weaker nations are well-positioned to lead the transition. Success would allow gradual demilitarization without sacrificing defence capacity. Adopting this model could shift international norms and reduce war’s appeal. Once demonstrated, effective civilian defence can delegitimize the need for militarism. Aggressors would lose both strategic and moral justification for war. Societies could increasingly choose defence without violence, undermining war as policy.