

Recovering Nonviolent History: Civil Resistance in Liberation Struggles

Edited by Maciej J. Bartkowski

Recovering Nonviolent History is one of the best books I have read on this subject in decades. It is so well documented with cases and so superbly interpreted with fresh theory that I wish it could be on the best-seller list.

It tells us how people are learning nonviolent resistance through the rise of social movements and collective identities. It reveals how nonviolent action has worked effectively using different strategies around the world for a long time. Notably, the book recovers new historical cases of civil resistance in addition to the already impressive database of 106 mass-based struggles against dictatorship, occupation, and self-determination that occurred between 1900 and 2006, thus encouraging further scholarly research.

In this book you will find cases of nonviolent resistance from Sub-Saharan Africa (Ghana, Zambia, Mozambique), North Africa and the Middle East (Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Palestine) Asia and Oceania (Burma, Bangladesh, West Papua), Europe (Hungary, Poland, Kosovo), and the Americas (Cuba and the United States.)

The cases are written in a clear fashion; anyone can understand these stories and feel the unexpected power of people. The reader will learn a lot about nonviolent resistance in the past and what these movements portend for the future.

Maciej Bartkowski argues that the Great Man theory of change is not true. Significant changes in opposition against oppression do not require a charismatic leader like Gandhi. Some of the citizen movements in this book did have good leaders (e.g. Hungary, Zambia, Ghana, and Egypt) but others were virtually leaderless and still made significant changes.

severyn bruyn 4/6/13 5:36 PM
Formatted: Indent: First line: 0.38"

The author makes a special point. Nonviolent resistance calls for interdisciplinary studies. In a time when universities have segregated their disciplines in departments where faculty do not talk to one another, these social movements call for collaboration. Such disciplines include sociology, political science, economics, psychology, anthropology history, and more. These resistance movements are multi-causal and can have an impact on many institutions in the whole society. They affect self-identity, government policies, and can impact on a whole way of life.

An interesting fact: Nonviolent struggles for self-determination have been escalating in recent times. The author points to statistical data on this augmentation. I have been aware of the increase in nonviolent movements in the last century but I never had scientific data.

In the 20th century alone collective movements began not only under the leadership of Gandhi in India but Kagawa in Japan, Danilo Dolci in Sicily, Lanzo del Vasto in France, Mairead Corrigan and Betty Williams in Ireland, Thich Nhat Hanh and Cao Ngoc Phong in Vietnam, Dom Helder Camara in Brazil, Vinoba Bhava in India, Martin Luther King, Jr., Cesar Chavez, David Dellinger, and Dorothy Day in the United States, and more. These movements have produced a widespread awareness of the effectiveness of nonviolent resistance around the world.ⁱ

Bartknowski sees a “paradigm shift” in the way we understand nonviolent struggles in nation-states. He sees the importance of small acts of resistance aligned with “institution building,” how “collective identities initiate fundamental changes.” Alternative institution building is based upon associations of people, not states. Civil associations are becoming the ground for self-governance in society. My own studies support the author’s outlook. This growth in civil associations has been part of the evolution of society for centuries.ⁱⁱ

He does not take the traditional focus of historians on structures, military power and mechanisms of coercion but instead recognizes that the force shaping nations rests in the purposeful

and defiant action of an unarmed citizenry. He does not see a tight military state as the basis for explaining the inability of people to make changes. He does not view the state as a top down, centralized machine, rather, as a diffused and fragile power where the voluntary action of ordinary people makes change happen. The latent power of people becomes evident with the gradual withdrawal of consent and the accumulation of citizens in disobedience. Important changes are made by the autonomous “agency” of people. The independent actions of ordinary persons make a difference. And it happens under many different kinds of oppressive structures.

The author points to studies on the greater “efficacy” of nonviolent campaigns in contrast to violent ones. The rate of success of civil resistance campaigns is more than two and a half times higher than the rate of its failures and more than twice as successful as their armed counterparts. Similarly, Gene Sharp – the founder of cross-national studies on citizen resistance – once told me he found fewer people die in nonviolent struggles for independence than in violent struggles. I hope that more research can be done on such “efficacy.” It might convince people of their own power to save human lives.

The use of nonviolent resistance has been taking place well before Gandhi was born. People throughout history have been relying on nonviolent methods of struggle. In certain times, citizens have realized the benefits of nonviolent resistance as opposed to the terrible consequences of armed struggle. The recognition of these benefits of nonviolent struggle is increasing around the world.

In one chapter, Lee Smithey points out how nonviolent struggles can be “integrative” and community making – a theme that goes across various empirical chapters. These case studies show how people overcome their ethnic, religious, and racial differences in nonviolent struggles. New “collective identities” rise above and beyond class and racial differences.

People in most cases are not fighting as pacifists. They are just ordinary citizens who see a wrong and become concerned and then angry enough to stand up for their rights. They are not in the same category as great religious founders like Buddha or Jesus who taught about compassion for humanity. Citizens are not preaching about “loving your enemies.” They are regular people who see a “wrong” and want to set it right.

Successful resisters have not rationalized their action on their pacifism or their religion. The 10,000 teachers of Norway who stopped Hitler from putting Nazi textbooks in their schools did not see themselves as pacifists. Some died in concentration camps under terrible conditions but by seeing the effectiveness of nonviolent tactics they were able to win. Hitler and Quisling lost.

The citizens of Guatemala were not pacifists when they overthrew Ubico, the tyrannous dictator in the 1940s who admired Hitler. The resistance movement began when faculty in universities were losing liberties and marched in protest. This protest led to a buildup of collective identity and sympathy across the country. One teacher in a march to the capital was killed by the government and became a martyr. The resistance spread throughout the country and it finally resulted in an entire “economic shutdown” of the nation. Ubico had to give up his power. He went away to Mexico to buy a farm and live by himself.

This book is about the hidden history of nonviolent struggles in society. Historians ignore these cases of nonviolence, preferring by tradition to write about kings, emperors, and presidents and the elite. They ignore what the underclass is doing to make change happen. This prejudice of historians to write about the elite then leads to the loss of society’s collective memory. The invisibility of small movements in history impacts adversely on theories of social change by social scientists.

I hope that social scientists will buy this book about “recovering history.” It adds to our collective memory and understanding of what has actually been happening to bring about the formation and development of nations.

Severyn Bruyn
Professor Emeritus
Boston College

ⁱ Severyn Bruyn and Paula Rayman, eds., *Nonviolent Action and Social Change*, Irvington Publishers, New York, 1979).

ⁱⁱ Severyn Bruyn, *A Civil Economy* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2003); *A Civil Republic* (Kumerian Press, 2005).