

NONVIOLENT RESISTANCE

A PHILOSOPHICAL INTRODUCTION

TODD MAY



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Todd May

polity

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Preface and Acknowledgments

I began thinking seriously about nonviolence roughly four years before the event that appears on the cover of this book. In January 1985 I joined the River City Nonviolent Resistance Campaign. At my first meeting, there were only two other people there. One of them, Molly Rush, had become famous – infamous to some – as a member of the Plowshares Eight. Along with the Berrigan brothers and several others, in September 1980 Molly entered a weapons facility, damaged nuclear warhead cones, and poured blood on the files there to protest against the Carter Administration’s adoption of a “first-strike” policy. That was a policy that allowed the USA to strike first with nuclear weapons, rather than only using them for retaliation. Molly remains the most steadfast proponent of nonviolent resistance I have met. Liane Norman was an organizer, teacher, and writer about nonviolence, who introduced me to a number of texts (including several of hers) that allowed me to study aspects of nonviolence.

That first night we began planning a campaign of protest in the lobby of Westinghouse Electric Company headquarters, which is located in Pittsburgh where I was living. The reason we targeted Westinghouse did not have to do with their production of home appliances. Rather, it concerned their deep involvement in nuclear weapons production. (Later in the campaign, one executive told us that while only about a quarter of Westinghouse’s resources were invested in weapons production, nearly half their profit came from it.) The nature of the protest was that it would take place over two weeks.

Each day someone would walk into the lobby of the headquarters, hold up a sign protesting Westinghouse's nuclear involvement, and wait to be arrested. And, by the way, both Liane and Molly were going to be out of town during the first part of the protests, so could I oversee it?

Thus was I plunged into the world of nonviolent resistance. I have since participated in nonviolent campaigns of various sorts to protest against US involvement in Central America, apartheid in South Africa, the Israeli occupation of Palestine, the treatment of labor and labor unions, racism, and the oppression of gays, lesbians, and transsexuals. In recent years my involvement has slackened, mostly due to the difficulty of organizing in the area in which I live. Writing has gradually taken over from organizing, not without some regret. However, until now I have never written anything extended on nonviolence.

The opportunity arose when I was contacted by Polity's Louise Knight. A fellow academic, Brad Evans, had constructed a website (which is still going strong) called historiesofviolence.com. The goal of the website is to reflect on the character of violence in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. Brad asked me to contribute a talk to the website, and I requested to talk on nonviolence rather than violence. The reason for this is that we academics are often very good at critique, but less enthusiastic about framing alternatives. We are past masters at diagnosing what is wrong with a political, economic, or social arrangement, but tend to shy away from asking how it might be addressed. There is perhaps a good reason for this: academics should not be in the business of prescribing for others how to engage in their struggles. However, that precept does not preclude all kinds of reflective activity. My talk was geared toward developing a broad understanding of the role nonviolence has played in many recent struggles against oppression.

After viewing the talk, Louise was kind enough to invite me to submit a proposal for a book on nonviolence to Polity. When she contacted me I realized that although I had spent years in and around nonviolent struggle and even more years studying philosophy, I had never brought the two together. This book is an attempt to rectify that. There is much that has been written about nonviolence, and recent years have

seen a minor explosion of literature on the topic from new histories to sociological studies to journal discussions. Some of that literature will be brought to bear in these pages, although I hasten to add that I am not an expert in the vast field of peace studies research. Philosophical reflection on nonviolence, however, has been sparse. (Reflection on violence has been less sparse, as Chapter 2 shows, but neither has it been a central concern of recent philosophy.) What I hope to have contributed here is a first extended philosophical attempt to think about the character of nonviolence, and especially campaigns of nonviolent resistance. My hope is not that this will fill a gap in the philosophical literature, but instead that it will open discussion on an area that is as neglected as it is urgent to think about. With luck, better minds than mine will extend and correct what I have written here in order to develop a rigorous and sustained reflection on what nonviolence is and what prospects it presents for future political engagement.

Between the evening I met Molly and Liane and now, many people have taught me about nonviolent resistance. Their names would fill a chapter of this book. However, I would especially like to thank my long-time friends and fellow activists Mark Lance and Jules Lobel. Moreover, my wife Kathleen has taught me much in this area. Her nonviolent instincts are surer than mine. (I will suggest no more in this direction than that I once earned the nickname Sugar Ray, not for any pugilistic skills – of which I possess none – but for a lapse in nonviolent discipline during a particularly tense political standoff.) More recently, my colleagues Candice Delmas and Chris Grau helped me think more clearly about how to approach the issue of violence, and hence of nonviolence.

I would like to acknowledge Lexington Press for permission to reprint several pages from my article “Kant via Rancière: From Ethics to Anarchism,” which appeared in *How Not To Be Governed*, edited by Jimmy Klausen and James Martel.

This book is dedicated to all those whose names have not entered the history books but who have given their time, their bodies, their energy, and sometimes their lives in nonviolent resistance to one or another of the oppressions that have afflicted so many through history, and that continue to plague us today.

1

Vignettes of Nonviolence

In the capital, Tallinn, of the small country of Estonia, there is a large band shell. It can accommodate tens of thousands of people. The band shell can be seen from the top of the castle in Tallinn's Old Town, a complex that was spared the ravages of much of the destruction of World War II. Nestled in the hills outside the center of Tallinn, it is important for Estonians, since singing is part of their culture. Even during the Soviet occupation from 1945 to 1991, Estonians gathered every five years for a festival of song that drew large parts of the country's million-plus population. In fact, the band shell itself was constructed in 1960, during the height of the Soviet occupation. However, on the night of June 11, 1988, the role of song in Estonian life became much more than an expression of Estonian culture. It emerged instead as one of the primary weapons against the Soviet occupation itself.¹

Earlier that evening, a concert had taken place in the Town Hall Square as part of Tallin's annual "Old Town Days" festival. Since daylight lasts late into the night during the short Estonian summer, those who attended the concert were not ready to call it quits after the music ended. Instead, thousands of them walked the several miles to the grounds of the band shell and began to sing. This in itself would be unremarkable. However, the next night the crowds grew to nearly 100,000 – almost ten per cent of Estonia's population. Moreover, several people – punk rock musicians – displayed the blue,

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black, and white Estonian national flag, which was banned under the Soviets. And, as one author describes it, “a man on a motorcycle, rock drummer Paap Kõlar, whipped around the perimeter of the amphitheater, moving like an apparition, as the Estonian colors that he carried fluttered above him. The crowd roared. For some young people, this was the first time they had seen their old national flag in public.”²

For six successive night Estonians gathered at the band shell to sing. Hundreds of thousands of them showed up every night to what was later to be called the “Singing Revolution.” Among the most important of their songs was one, based on a nineteenth-century poem and put to music by the composer Gustav Ernesaks, whose English translation is “Land of My Fathers, Land that I Love.” It was first performed at the song festival of 1947, its nationalist lyrics somehow escaping the Soviet censors. This is a bit puzzling, since the song laments, “Envy makes strangers slander you / You are still alive in my heart.” Over the years, it became the unofficial national anthem of Estonia. Although the Soviets tolerated it, they sought to change the lyrics to be more in accordance with the official “proletarian” orientation of the occupation. However, its lyrics and its significance remained for the Estonian people. Once, in 1969, during the centennial anniversary of the first singing festival in the university town of Tartu, the Soviet authorities decided to ban the song. However, after demanding that it be played, the concert attendees sang it themselves, over and over. Played at every song festival, “Land of My Fathers, Land that I Love” became the centerpiece of Estonian national expression.

The protests in the summer of 1988 did not wane with the dimming of the “White Nights” of summer. On September 10, organized by the resistance group the Popular Front, a singing protest drew 300,000 people, nearly a third of the country’s entire population. By this time, the protest movement was in full sway. Speakers at the event railed against the Soviet occupation and asserted the national history of Estonia. At a time when Mikhail Gorbachev was allowing for *glasnost* – openness – the Estonian people were recovering their history and their country through their voices.

In the summer of 1989, one of the most remarkable protests in the history of the Soviet occupation occurred. On

August 23, across the three Baltic republics of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, a human chain of two million hand-holders gathered across 450 miles to protest against their collective occupation. The chain was timed to coincide with the fiftieth anniversary of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, the secret agreement between Hitler and Stalin that divided Eastern Europe into spheres of influence, giving the Baltic States and Finland to the Soviet Union. (The Pact itself was, of course, violated by Hitler when he invaded the Soviet Union.)

In Estonia, resistance to Soviet rule continued. Early in 1990, an alternative Estonian government was created, one that reflected a variety of different parties that had been organizing against the occupation. This alternative government began working on issues of statehood and citizenship in an envisioned independent Estonian polity, in competition with the daily administration emanating from Moscow.

However, as this unfolded, there was resistance not only from the Soviets but from within Estonia itself. Over the course of the occupation, the Soviet Union had adopted a policy of moving ethnic Russians into Estonia, and by the late 1980s they constituted a large percent of the Estonian population, and perhaps half of the population of the capital city of Tallinn. These Russians, far from looking forward to Estonian independence, saw it as a threat. The reason for this – and it is a source of continuing tension in Estonia – is that the Estonian movement did not so much want to *declare* independence as to *restore* it. This means that legal citizenship would only be available to legal descendants of the Estonians who were citizens before the Soviet occupation, effectively excluding the ethnic Russians who were currently living there.

In their turn, then, ethnic Russians began to create their own organizations to counter those developed by ethnic Estonians. In May 1990 the Supreme Council of the alternative Estonian government, in a move that inverted that of the Soviets, declared the hammer-and-sickle flag illegal. This move was publicly criticized by Gorbachev, which in turn prompted the Russian organization, Interfront, to protest in front of the Estonian parliament. The demonstration turned aggressive, with the protestors storming the gates of the building and re-planting the hammer-and-sickle. In response, the head of the parliament, Edgar Savisaar, got on the radio

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and announced the siege to the wider Estonian population. Thousands of Estonians soon turned up at the site, surrounding the Russians, who were unable to enter the parliament building and were now trapped in the courtyard of the complex.

At this point, it seemed impossible that violence could be avoided. The Interfront protestors had sought to overthrow the Estonian alternative government and replace it with the hated symbols – and reality – of Soviet rule. And they were now caught without any avenue of escape in the courtyard of the building they had sought, in an echo of Soviet rule, to occupy. However, at this moment a remarkable thing happened. Rather than attacking Interfront, the Estonians cleared a path to let them exit peacefully. As they moved through the human corridor that had been cleared for them, although the Estonian crowd shouted at them, none of the Interfront members were touched.

This, of course, was not the end of Soviet rule. The crowning moment came in August, 1991. At that moment in Russia, Soviet hard-liners had temporarily taken control of the government and removed Gorbachev as head of state. On August 20, the Estonian parliament declared independence. This declaration was rejected by the Soviets, who then moved tanks toward Tallinn. In particular, it sought to take over the television tower in order to coordinate its re-occupation and deliver instructions to the population. Realizing this, hundreds of Estonians rushed to surround the tower. Inside were two Estonian police officers. As the Soviet troops threatened to break into the tower, one of the policemen, Jüri Joost, threatened to release Freon from the fire extinguisher system. This would have killed everyone inside the tower, not only the troops but the policemen as well. Remarkably, while the Soviet troops were deciding how to respond to the threat, the coup in Moscow collapsed and the Soviet troops withdrew. Soon after, the new – or, more accurately, renewed – Estonian state was admitted to the United Nations.

The independence movement that finally liberated Estonia from Soviet rule was achieved without violence, even though there were moments that could have tipped the scales toward violent resistance. There were many reasons for this, having to do with the historical character of the Estonian people

– for example, the importance of song in their repertoire of protest – to the specific dynamics of the situation as it unfolded in Estonia and the Soviet Union generally. It was also due to the patient organizing of several organizations that were developed in the 1987–8 period. Among those organizations were the Popular Front and the Estonian National Independence Party (which led one of the first open protests against the Soviet occupation in 1987), but also, and as important, the Estonian Heritage Society. Among the most important tasks for the Estonian people was a recognition of their own history, one that had been silenced throughout the Soviet occupation. This was particularly important for Estonia, since its history is one of occupation by foreign countries. Before the Russians there were the Germans, and before them the Swedes. In fact, until 1991 Estonia was an independent country only between the two World Wars. As significant as political resistance was to its liberation was the task of forming a sense of Estonia as a polity in its own right. The Heritage Society thus became a central player in the Estonian independence movement.

These organizations were often at work behind the scenes in the Singing Revolution and in interaction with the spontaneous events that were unfolding. It would be a mistake to assume too romantically that it was simply the singing that gained Estonian independence. In fact, an Estonian friend of mine, looking back on the events of that period, commented that, “it was just people singing, but suddenly, it was no longer *just* singing, if you see what I mean.”³

In addition to the organizations and mass protests that were formed during the period leading to independence, there were events of resistance preceding those of the 1987–91 period. We have already seen that, throughout the history of the Soviet occupation, the song “Land of My Fathers, Land that I Love” was a touchstone of resistance, and that the refusal of the Soviet censors to allow it to be sung in 1969 elicited mass resistance among those attending that year’s festival. In late 1986 and early 1987, Estonian scientists and students demonstrated against phosphate mining off the shores of Estonia in what became known as the “phosphate war.” During the history of the occupation, the Soviets had engaged in exploiting Estonia’s resources in environmentally

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degrading ways. Phosphate mining is a particularly egregious form of such degradation, allowing phosphates to seep into the ground water. It also served to bring in thousands of ethnic Russians as mine workers. The resistance to such mining, before the outbreak of the central events of independence, was successful in forcing the Soviets to cut back on plans to increase the mining of phosphates.

In fact, resistance to the occupation can be traced back to the beginning of the occupation itself. Guerilla fighters, who became known as the Forest Brothers because they would camp in Estonia's many forests, fought against the Soviet invasion of Estonia as they had fought against the Germans in World War II. Eventually, they were decimated, although one of them, August Sabe, survived until 1978 when he was betrayed by a Soviet agent. When he was discovered, he leapt into a river and killed himself.

The more recent history of Estonian resistance, however, those series of events that led to independence, were not the product of violent resistance. Grounded in patient organizing and song, they appealed to the national traditions of Estonia in order to garner the sustained support of the Estonian people – at one moment nearly a third of them – in order to keep alive the history and desires that the Soviets sought to suppress. Further, the use of those traditions was successful not only in re-creating the Estonian nation but also in preventing the kind of violence that would have offered excuses at particular junctures for further Soviet incursion. Finally, and most importantly, by staying within the boundaries of nonviolent activity, the Estonian people crafted a project of national liberation that expressed a dignity that can stand as a benchmark for its further development as a nation.

*

The beginning of the end of the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos can be given a specific date: August 21, 1983.⁴ On that day, opposition leader Benigno “Ninoy” Aquino stepped off the plane in which he had returned to Manila after three years in exile and was promptly shot dead.

Aquino, the most prominent figure in Filipino resistance to Marcos, espoused nonviolent resistance to the Marcos

regime. He had not always done so. After Marcos' declaration of martial law in September 1972, Aquino was arrested and spent the next seven years in detention in a Filipino prison. In 1980 he was sentenced to death, but the discovery of a heart condition led to his release for medical treatment in the United States after intervention on his behalf by the US State Department. While in exile in the USA, Aquino aligned himself with the A6LM movement – the April 6 Liberation Movement. Named after the day in 1978 when Filipinos, to protest against one of Marcos' fraudulent elections, banged pots and pans throughout the night, the A6LM favored bombings and assassinations as means of resistance. These bombings, however, failed to spark a popular revolt, and gradually Aquino began to reconsider his approach. He had become familiar with Gandhi's writings on nonviolence in prison, and a viewing of the film *Gandhi*, which details (a bit romantically) the successful Indian struggle against British occupation, became a turning point for him. In fact, before returning to meet his fate in Manila, Aquino announced that he sought to "join the ranks of those struggling to restore our rights and freedoms through nonviolence."⁵ This was, of course, not to be.

Aquino and the A6LM movement were not the only opposition to the Marcos regime. Since the late 1960s, violent resistance movements stemming from both communist and Muslim quarters sought to overthrow his presidency. In fact, it was those movements that provided the excuse for Marcos to declare martial law in September, 1972 and to enjoy the support of the USA and much of the international business community throughout the course of the next fourteen years. However, not all of the opposition to Marcos was rooted in violence. The Catholic Church, particularly under the leadership of Cardinal Jaime Sin, opposed the Marcos regime but denounced violence. Cardinal Sin would play a major role in the events that unfolded after Aquino's assassination. There was also electoral opposition to the dictatorship, but it was weakened by internal divisions and the ongoing fraud that characterized elections under the Marcos regime.

Closer to the date of Aquino's return, the business community began to press Marcos for reforms. His increasing association with corruption led to worries about economic

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instability. Moreover, the military was developing fissures in response to his penchant for promoting personal friends and allies rather than military professionals to important military posts. This, plus pressure from the USA for a patina of reform, motivated Marcos to declare the lifting of martial law in early 1981 – over nine years after its initial declaration. The lifting of martial law, however, did not result in any changes in power or in the regime's human rights record.

Everything changed, however, in late August of 1983. The murder of an internationally known opposition leader who urged nonviolent change could not be covered up in the eyes of Filipinos or the international community. Two million people turned out for his funeral procession. That single event crystallized the character of the Marcos regime and led to the events that would result, three years later, in his ousting from office.

One of the initial responses actually came from the business community. In September 1983, part of the Filipino business community organized what would become weekly demonstrations against the regime in Manila. Later that month, anti-Marcos demonstrations emerged that at times turned violent. Capital flight began to affect the stability of the regime. However, one of the most important sources of resistance came from an unexpected quarter: Aquino's erstwhile less public wife, Corazón "Cory" Aquino. In the wake of her husband's murder, she became a central figure in the Filipino resistance movement and eventually the first female president of a country in Asia.

Among the most important internal divisions among the various forces opposing the Marcos regime was the disagreement about whether to participate in elections. The elections were, of course, fraudulent. However, if the fraudulence could be exposed, then, some argued, that would further weaken the regime's legitimacy, not only at home but also abroad. In particular, it might raise a challenge to US support, which seemed unwavering during the administration of Ronald Reagan, because of Marcos' uncompromising anti-communism. The 1984 elections for the National Assembly, coming over a year after the assassination of Benito Aquino, provided a test case for the effectiveness of this strategy. While the communist-oriented groups decided to boycott

the election, several of the more liberal groups, including Cory Aquino's, opted to participate. The results of the election gave 30 percent of the seats to the opposition, with Marcos' party retaining 70 percent, down from the previous 90 percent.

The key player in this election, however, was not the opposition but a group called the National Movement of Citizens for a Free Election, or NAMFREL. NAMFREL was an election-monitoring group that was originally formed by the Central Intelligence Agency in the early 1950s and was revived in 1983 by a coalition of businesspeople, professionals, religious groups, and others. Their goal was to provide an independent monitoring of elections in competition with the government-approved agency. In the 1984 elections, they turned out 200,000 volunteers. Moreover, in those districts where they were able to monitor the vote, the opposition was declared to have won over 60 percent of the vote. NAMFREL, then, provided two services to the opposition. First, it kept an independent eye on the electoral process. Second, it gave hope to the opposition that there was enough grassroots support to sustain the strategy of electoral participation.

Such participation was not the only element of opposition strategy. In addition to rallies and continued violent resistance, there were a series of strikes – *welgang bayan*, or “people's strikes” – organized by the leftist groups that were not participating in the electoral process. These strikes were enormously effective, often involving large sectors of the economic community. “By the end of 1984, transportation strikes paralyzed areas of metropolitan Manila and Central Luzon, as well as southern cities, such as Davao, Butuan, Cagayan de Oro, Bacolod, and Cebu. In December 1984 a *welgang bayan* in Bataan shut down approximately 80 percent of transportation in the entire province.”⁶ For Marcos, the combination of opposition tactics, in addition to capital flight, was threatening to undermine his ability to hold on to power.

The next presidential elections were scheduled for 1987 but, seeing the erosion of his authority, Marcos decided to call for early elections, in February 1986. Early elections would not only prop up his failing status, they would also prevent the opposition from having time to organize. It was

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a tactical mistake on his part. Much of the opposition rallied around Corazón Aquino as the opposition candidate, and their campaign was well organized and run. The campaign culminated in a rally three days before the election that drew over a million people. By election day, it was evident that Marcos could not win without massive fraud, which he then engaged in. NAMFREL declared Aquino's UNIDO (United Democratic Action Organization) the winner in the 70 percent of provinces where they were allowed to operate, but Marcos' own group gave him the victory. However, there was dissent even within his own organization: after seeing elections discrepancies, over thirty technicians from the government-controlled monitoring group walked out on the process.

The day after the election, a million and a half people rallied in Manila's Luneta Park to protest against the election results. Aquino addressed the rally. "If Goliath refuses to yield," she announced, "we shall escalate. I am not calling for violent revolution. This is not the time for that. I always indicated that now is the way of nonviolent struggle for justice. This means active resistance to evil by peaceful means."⁷

This nonviolent struggle, involving boycotts, rallies, defections from Marcos' government, bank withdrawals, and other means, culminated a mere two weeks after the election. The final crisis began on February 22. It was centered on the Filipino military. Juan Ponce Enrile, a former member of Marcos' military inner circle, had been planning a coup to overthrow the dictator in 1985. However, in the wake of Marcos' surprise announcement of elections, they scrapped their plans, hoping that the election itself might end his rule. (Enrile's motives were not entirely altruistic. He was bitter at being passed over for heading the military when Marcos declared martial law in 1972, and had been plotting since then.) Enrile knew that in the chaos after the election he might be a target for assassination, and several of his compatriots confirmed this on the 22nd. So he took his 400 troops and occupied the defense ministry headquarters in Manila. From there he called the current head of the Filipino military, Fidel Ramos, to inform him of what he had done and to ask for his support. Ramos offered his support and