NONVIOLENCE AGAINST EXTREME OPPRESSION:

Three Cases Compared-
Norway, Germany, Poland*

by Johan Galtung

Center of International Studies
Princeton University
Princeton, New Jersey 08540

November, 1986

1. The issue: The conditions for successful nonviolence

One argument often heard against nonviolence is its presumed inefficacy when directed against ruthless oppressors. The argument I am going to explore is not of that dogmatic variety, nor of the oppositie dogmatism: that nonviolence will always work. As a social scientist I am interested in knowing conditions under which it works. As a peace researcher, concerned with how to obtain peace with peaceful means, I am interested in expanding the range of conditions under which nonviolence works.

The three cases I have chosen are from Norway during the German Occupation 1940-45; from Germany when nazism was at its height and even in its very center, from Berlin 1943; and from Poland under communist rule, the struggle by Solidarnosc 1980 until today. The three cases are very different but also have some similarities. The other side is governmental, controls the country completely because of its monopoly over the means of violence, not only a ruthless police but also the military and the systems are certainly dictatorial. And nevertheless, as will be shown, nonviolence was not without effect.

2. The Norwegian case. Norwegians who had lived in peace since they were attacked by Sweden in 1814 were largely taken by surprise when the Germans came in 1940. But one group was not surprised at all since they had participated in the plan: Quisling and his party, the Norwegian Nazis--a fascist party, rooted in a countryside threatened by proletarization, strongly anti-communist, harkening back in its mythology to the old Nordic gods and the Viking era--

a period which also witnessed one of the worst invasions to which Russia, so often victim of invasions, had been exposed: the Viking onslaught in the tenth century.[1]

Thus, there were two processes going on in the period 1940-45.

On the one hand, there was the German Military Occupation. Not particularly cruel, the occupation could be described in purely military terms as an effort to obtain a bridgehead for a pincer operation against Britain, or against the Soviet Union. There were also some important commodities at stake: heavy water and food stuffs, in addition to the control of Swedish export of iron ore over Narvik. But the basic reason for the German Occupation was probably to prevent a British occupation which was planned, among other reasons to prevent the German occupation.

On the other hand, there was an effort to nazify Norway. The Germans left this effort by and large to the quislings. And they, of course, changed the Norwegian political structure abolishing democratic institutions, penetrated the judiciary rather successfully since so many of the jurists were their sympathizers And they penetrated the police leaving Norway with a shame never to be erased: "our" police handed Norwegian Jews over to the Germans for extermination; Norway having the lowest percentage in Western Europe of Jews surviving the holocaust.

Then the quislings tried to pick on Norwegian educational institutions, and this is where the resistance came. Norwegian teachers at all levels refused to participate in any type of nazification, and did so entirely nonviolently and at the considerable cost of being rounded up, arrested, sent to concentration camps, mostly in Norway, some in Germany. Something similar happened in Norwegian churches: they did not serve as a vehicle for nazification.

To tell the story in such brief terms is to do violence to the heroism shown by Norwegian teachers and priests. But the basic point can be made: the action was successful.[2] These important vehicles of nazification did not work. Quisling simply had to withdraw, the process was given up. It was an easy task to control broadcasting and the press, to control the schools became impossible.

Let us then look at the more negative aspects.

First, it should be noted that this nonviolent action only referred to the second process mentioned above: the Norwegian effort to nazify other Norwegians. There was no systematic nonviolent action against the German occupation, and the action just referred to had no impact on that occupation. Rather, the Germans tried to limit the eagerness of the quisling party lest so much resistance would be generated in the Norwegian population

that military operations could be endangered. But the German occupation went on to the very end of the war, with spectacular acts of sabotage (such as the heavy water action), and occasional raids and other activities. Basically what happened was interpreted by the Norwegian governments after the world war, and the majority of the population, as a war where Norway had no chance if the United States had not eventually bailed us out--paving the way for the unfortunate Norwegian membership in the NATO Alliance against the Soviet Union, a country with ruthlessness and dictatorial practices, but no proven intention to invade and occupy Western Europe in general, nor Norway in particular.

Second, the resistance against the quisling party was very much a middle class action. The working class in Norway did not do much in terms of nonviolent action during the war: rather, they eagerly sought and found jobs offered by the occupation forces. Important exception to this was the communist resistance movement which certainly was not nonviolent. And others. Some similar points can be made about the upper classes. Even more resourceful, with social networks to rely upon, and materially not deprived (an important factor limiting working class capacity for stronger resistance) they threw in their lot. They were motivated by strong nationalist values, in fact values not that different from those of the quisling party, sharing their anti-communism, eager to show that not only communists resisted the German occupation.

Nevertheless, in spite of the many who participated in the military resistance movement against the Germans it is hard to claim that violence was in any significant sense successful. The success belonged to the organizations that resisted nonviolently like the case just reported but limited to the civilian aspects.

3. The German case. I am dealing here with a very strange case that has passed almost unnoticed. The general dogma about nazism in Germany has been: there was no resistance, partly because most Germans agreed with what went on, partly because the price to be paid for resistance was too high (immediate execution; if not concentration camps with torture and slow death.) Of course, this version of what went on is historically wrong. There was much and even heroic resistance, mainly by German communists and by people belonging to such groups as Jehovah's Witnesses. But over the communist resistance in Germany, just as for the Norwegian case, rests the horrible shadow: it was suspended during the period when the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact of Soviet-German cooperation was operational, from 1939 until Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union 22 June 1941. In other words, the resistance left a bad after-taste of being on behalf of another country rather than on behalf of Germany, not to mention the German people, including the working class.

Nevertheless the nazi onslaught on one group after the other in the German population was more vulnerable, more fragile

than was generally suspected at the time when it happened. Apparently successful the Nazis were actually surprised that there was so little resistance. And when there was resistance, as in the famous case of German bishops protesting the euthanasia Program the program was cancelled, reduced or at least much better hidden. Even weak signs of resistance seem to have been taken quite seriously. Hence, when it was possible for the Nazis to arrest and eliminate communists, trade union leaders, social democrats and then the Jews one basic reason was that nobody protested, or at least not loudly enough.[3]

Why was that? One factor undoubtedly is in German political culture with a tendency to impute to the leadership, the top of the German pyramid, almost super natural power. Hitler understood how to make use of this and surrounded himself not only with brutal power, but also with a mystique partly based on Nordic mythology (one reason why the Germans were light on Norway: Norwegians were supposedly of their own stock, even a higher variety than they themselves!). Thus, when a command came from Hitler, a so-called Führerbefehl, there was an atmosphere of awe, of immediate, unquestioning obedience.[4] The decision to eliminate Jews was seen as a Führerbefehl. And yet there was resistance, and in a very spectacular way.

The Nazis had waited until the end winding up Jews married to German women, suspecting that there might be more pro-

test in this case. But then it happened, they were all arrested at the same time in Berlin 1943. The German spouses immediately organized, and the next morning they were outside the Gestapo demonstrating, shouting to get their husbands back. And they did: thousands were released, An incredible demonstration of the power of even nonviolence in this situation and of the fragility of the nazi terror.[5]

Many of them went into hiding; many of them, unfortunately, did not. And the next time they were arrested to be massacred the Gestapo did not make the same mistake: they were taken one by one in order to forestall any collectively organized protest.

Why was this possible? I think in order to understand this a second factor has to be introduced in addition to the cultural factor above: German social structure. Not necessarily that different from the social structure in most neighboring countries, such as Norway, one might, however, speculate along the following lines. The structure was fragmented, people were torn apart. The capacity for empathy, not to mention sympathy and even solidarity across the many rifts in the structure was low. The Jews were seen as a group apart. They were feared and hated, and Hitler was playing on those emotions--although most people probably had no particular emotions relative to Jews at all before these feelings were whipped up by the Nazis.

Hence, the only group that protested were those who evidently had empathy, sympathy and solidarity, as evidenced by the fact that they had married Jews: the wives, outside Gestapo, that morning, in Berlin. Hence, one might legitimately ask what would have happened if more groups in the German population had been capable of this level of empathy?

4. The Polish case. When the beginning of the trade union movement Solidarność was made in Gdansk August 1980, and a document with 21 articles or demands constituting about the best explanation of what might be meant by democratic socialism (not social democracy, that is also an interesting proposition, but something else) was published, two pillars of Polish society were challenged.[6] The first was, of course, the Polish Communist Party which certainly was not democratic but rhetorically committed to socialism, only rather afraid of taking that idea seriously. And the second was the Polish Roman Catholic Church which certainly was not socialist, and although rhetorically committed to democracy perhaps had some limitations also where that idea is concerned. Hence, Solidarność was a movement operating against odds in Polish society. It was finally brought down--in my view--by an unholy alliance of the communist government, the Catholic Church and the Pope--releasing the charismatic leader Wałesa, but also, for all practical purposes, killing any genuine move in society towards the realization of those 21 demands.

This story is, of course, rather well known. Starting as a working class movement it very rapidly gained the support of intellectuals in Warsaw who had played a minor role in the beginning but increasingly joined the bandwagon, to some extent in leading roles--getting out of the positions of observerism and cynicism to which Polish intellectuals are very often addicted. From there it spread to the countryside involving Polish farmers and peasants, and became a national movement of unparalleled proportions. Through a series of demonstrations and actions of various kinds, including court cases, the movement was brought to a stop, at least so far, with the coming into power through a coup of a military government headed by General Jaruzelski, December 1981.

In other words, Solidarność was relatively short-lived. But if continued underground in a spectacular defiance of Polish authorities, with an enormous amount of publications and actions, for all practical purposes bringing Poland into a state of anarchy, some kind of "withering away of the state", but not exactly in the way predicted and prescribed by marxist theory. As one example may serve a story told by a friend of mine, a journalist quenching his thirst in a bar in Warsaw during the hey day of Solidarność, trying to get a taxi back to the hotel. There was no taxi, but the barman was able to order a wagon from the fire brigade instead, a suitable arrangement when anarchy is law.

The stalemate continues: Solidarność is illegal, the government is illegimate. Neither has been able to impose its will

on the other. So the time has come to draw at least some preliminary conclusions and the way I shall do it is by asking three questions:

-- Was and is the action by Solidarność nonviolent?
-- Was and is the action by Solidarność gandhian nonviolence?
-- Would it have been more effective if in addition to being nonviolent it had also been gandhian?

My answer to the first one would be yes, to the second question no, and to the third question maybe.

Gandhi was a strange mixture of politician and saint. His ways of fighting nonviolently, what he called satyagraha, clinging to truth, were certainly inspired by his metaphysical beliefs in the unity-of-man. But at the same time there was much of the politician, simple, down-to-earth common sense of how you proceed in politics, in him. More particularly, there were five rules that I have selected from an effort to systematize Gandhi's way of fighting into 53 rules in my forthcoming book Gandhi Today,[7] and I would like to contrast them with what happened in the struggle in Poland.

First, there is the very basic idea of keeping contact with the other side. There certainly were negotiations between

Solidarność and the communist party, and there seems to be no doubt whatsoever that there was deceit on the side of the latter. So, Solidarność broke the contact. The "dialogue", if that is the word, was discontinued. This was later used as one excuse by the communist party when they claimed that Solidarność was an unreliable partner for political struggle. Solidarność, on their side, seems to feel that they were the legitimate representatives of the Polish people, not the communist party. The latter may be true, but in that case a philosophical rather than a political truth.

Second, one of Gandhi's rules was that you shall stick to the goal once it is formulated. Do not expand your goal--if you do so during the struggle you make yourself unpredictable, and the other side has no way of knowing where this is going to end. The task is not only to win, but to arrive at a solution accepted by both parties, and that may take time. When the goal originally formulated has been obtained and accepted then a next step may come in the campaign, for new and wider goals--but only then. Nonviolence, like traditional cures for diseases with herbs, takes time. The difficult task of constructing a new society cannot be carried out by doing violence to the society through armed conflict; nor, Gandhi would argue, through majority vote.

In the Polish case this rule was certainly not respected. What started out as a struggle for workers' rights, for the organization of the economy and democracy in factories and the

working place in general, became a national movement of liberation, not only from the communist party but also from the Soviet Union. I would certainly not argue that this was not justified and is not still justified. My point is only that the impatience, highly understandable, of Solidarność, may have been counterproductive.

Third, give a role to the other side. Make it clear to them that after the conflict is over they will still be on the scene, not killed, not imprisoned, not socially on the margin. This may be particularly important when the other side is a communist party with its mystique of leading the struggle of the working class towards a new society. There has to be some role.

When I was in Warsaw September 1980, listening to Walesa at some gatherings, he conjured up visions for the audience of court cases that would be launched against the more corrupt representatives of the other side. No doubt he was justified in perceiving them this way. But it is not obvious that in so doing he was able to convince them that his real goal was to change the system, not only to hit his enemies. Gandhi always insisted that the fight should be against the system, against the structure, not against concrete people. They should be won over, in a joint struggle to change the structure. Fight the antagonism, not the antagonist was the formulation chosen by my friend and professor at the University of Oslo, Arne Naess in his works on Gandhi.[8] I think Solidarność failed to make this crystal clear.

They should have been much better in giving a constructive role to the other side, not only in Poland after the transformation, but also in the struggle to obtain that transformation.

Fourth, a nonviolent struggle has to be constructive, not only a display of demonstrations, strikes, or noncooperation and civil disobedience. The way of fighting has to be goal-revealing, a pedagogical exercise not only for the other side and third parties, but also for those struggling, training themselves in life after the struggle. The goal of Solidarność, indeed, was not a society with eternal strike and endless demonstrations, but at times it might have looked like that to the other side. There were intellectuals who are very good at practicing today what they want to obtain tomorrow: a spate of illegal books and papers, all over Poland. But then it may also be argued that from the point of view of the authorities an intellectual writing a book is one more person taken away from the street and concrete struggle, not doing mischief as long as he is collecting material for his footnotes. But it cannot be said that the workers were good at practising, in running--democratically--alternative factories. what they wanted to obtain--at however small a scale--knowing how difficult this would have been.

Fifth, the politician in Gandhi showed up in not being naive. Gandhi expected the other side to hit back, and to hit hard, and the voluntary suffering of his own side would then be a means in

the struggle, changing the hearts of the opponent. Of course Solidarnośc´´ was not naive in the sense that they did not expect a military coup. But their preparation for the coup was to plan for the biggest demonstration in European history, rallying people together over the telephone the moment the coup had become an established fact. The authorities had the very simple counter-measure of paralyzing the telephone network, and Solidarnośc´´ did not have a sufficiently efficient parallel communication system. The result was a very timid response, partly because of the machinery of violence provided not only by the military but also by the horrible Polish security police (to a large extent recruited from orphans with loyalties to nobody but the state)--and partly because Solidarnośc´´ was outmaneuvered.

Conclusion: a success in making it evident to the whole world, not only to the Poles, how illegitimate the present regime is from the point of view of the population. But not a success if the criterion is a real transformation of the Polish society. Of course, one may object that this would have been impossible given the big neighbor to the east, the Soviet Union. I am not so absolutely convinced about this. Actually, it may also be argued that the five rules just mentioned might have made co-existence with the Soviet Union more, not less easy. But that is certainly a contentious issue, and not one to be explored here.

5. Concluding remarks. Three cases, mixed conclusions. The cases certainly show that nonviolence is meaningful, important and at least partly successful even under very harsh conditions. And they invite some important speculations. What if the populations had been better prepared? Imagine that in the Norwegian case not only the middle classes but also the lower and upper classes had been mobilized in a nonviolent, highly assertive liberating action--what could they have obtained? Difficult to say. Possibly more internal democracy and freedom although it is hard to imagine that they would have been able to get rid of the German military occupation.

And then the German case: what if not only those married to Jews but the whole German population had had sufficient empathy and not only with the Jews but with the victims of nazism in general? One should not rule out completely the possibility that nazism might have been stopped at a very early stage, if millions had poured into the streets, gone on general strike, shown their utter contempt for this horrendous philosophy and practice.

And what about the Polish case: imagine that contact had been kept, that they had stuck to the original goal, that they had given a role to the other side, that actions had been more constructive, more goal revealing and that the whole population had been better prepared for counter-attacks. Maybe we would have had

a different Poland today? Not to be ruled out, but the answer is not obvious. The answer is, as indicated above, maybe.

In short, as any social scientist would have said from the very beginning: there are cultural and structural factors affecting the outcome, even the possibility of launching a non-violent action. We know something about these factors, not enough. If we knew more and the population was better trained, better educated one might surmise that better results could have been obtained. It is not quite obvious, however: in that case the other side, the oppressive, violent side, might also have been better prepared. There is a dialectic in this relationship not to be overlooked.

But the basic conclusion remains, that we are facing a possible revolution in our entire conceptualization of power. And I would like to add some remarks on this in a macro-historical perspective.

Think back, for a moment, to feudal Europe where cultural, economic, political and military power were all in the hands of the Prince. Then came a process which so far has lasted about 300 years of wresting this power monopoly away from the Prince, towards the people. In the cultural power we got separation of state and church, or at least the church more in the background, and an increasing tendency towards freedom of expression.

In the realm of economic power we got free enterprise and the market system, although remonopolization came as, private or state, big capital. In the field of political power we got democracy, although remonopolization took place in the form of the rule of experts and bureaucrats.

But what happened to the monopoly on military power? Still in the hands of the successor to the Prince, the state, leaving very little space for the population faced with the oppressive potential of the modern state. Moreover, this also spins over into foreign policy which by and large has remained the preserve of the state, as it was in the feudal days.

I think it is in this perspective we have to see the movement for nonviolence as one great effort to continue the work of vesting more power with people. And since that power is never given, the people have to take it themselves, paving the ground for a new social contract between leaders and willing followers, instead of an old social "contract" we know only too well: a relationship between oppressor and oppressed. The partially democratized countries of Western Europe and North America lie somewhere in between. It is going to be a long struggle. The outcome is uncertain. But nothing less than this is the historical task of the peace movement in general, and the nonviolence movement in particular. And in that perspective there is much to learn from these three cases even if the outcome proved to be ambiguous.

N O T E S

* Paper prepared for the conference on Nonviolent Political Struggle, Arab Thought Forum, Amman, Jordan, 15-17 November 1986

[1] For an interesting discussion of this little known phenomenon see Arthur Koestler, **The Thirteenth Tribe**, chapter 1, where the Viking onslaught on Russia in the ninth century - to a large extent based onArab sources.

[2] The best analysis of the Norwegian teachers' action is made by Gene Sharp.

[3] We are reminded of the famous statement made by Martin Niemmoeller:

> When the Nazis came to fetch the communists
> I kept silent; I was not a communist.
> As they imprisoned the social democrats
> I kept silent; I was not a social democrat.
> When they fetched the trade union people
> I did not protest; I was not in the trade union.
> When they fetched me
> there was no longer anybody
> who could protest.

From Gottesdienst, Ostermontag 1976, Kaiserslautern-Siegelbach.

[4] See Johan Galtung, **Hitlerism, Stalinism, Reaganism: Three Variations on a Theme by Orwell**, Oslo, 1984; Alicante, 1985; Baden-Baden 1987, chapter 2 on "Hitlerism" for an exploration of this theme.

[5] See **Berliner Morgenpost**, 3 March 1984 - 41 years later.

[6] See Johan Galtung, "Poland August-September 1980: Is a Socialist Revolution Under State Capitalism Possible?", ch. 9 in **Essays in Peace Research**, Vol. VI, Ejlers, Copenhagen, 1987.

[7] Chapter 2, Italian edition Abele, Torino, 1987; German edition Peter Hammer Verlag, Wuppertal 1987.

[8] Arne Naess, **Gandhi and Group Conflict**, Oslo, Universitetsforlaget, 1971.