

# Nonviolent Success

A Review of Gene Sharp's *Waging Nonviolent Struggle*  
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*The cover of the Ukrainian translation of Gene Sharp's Dictatorship to Democracy. With a \$6000 grant from the Albert Einstein Institution, the Ukrainian opposition printed 12,000 copies.*

**Imagine** a country (this may not be difficult) where the regime is corrupt and hypocritical, has seized power illicitly, yet seems firmly entrenched. It strives to keep its people frightened, distracted, and misinformed, but anyone can plainly see economic, ecological, military, health, resource, and social disasters unfolding. Can a small group appeal to the public's interests and ideals, revive hopes, and awaken the people power needed to force crucial changes?

If there is a way to do it, many of the clues to finding it may be contained in this book.

Sharp is a remarkably single-minded and hopeful person. Decades after many people have laid aside whatever youthful idealism they had, Sharp still affirms, "if understood accurately and applied intelligently, wisely, and courageously, this alternative type of struggle... offers great hope for a better future for our

world." Hopefulness tends to vary with temperament. But Gene Sharp's research provides solid evidence and reasoning that can sustain realistic hope for persons of any temperament.

*Waging Nonviolent Struggle* is an indispensable work. It is an up-to-date guide and a gateway to other valuable resources. Clear organization (and a detailed index) make this book "consultable" as well as readable, and at \$14.95 it is very reasonably priced. When it comes to nonviolent struggle, Sharp does not have all the answers; but you can find more of them by starting with his writings than any other way I know.

The hope and energy Sharp's success stories can renew is only one of at least four reasons to read his new book. Another is that it will help us understand world events of recent years: how Slobodan Milosevic was overthrown in Serbia in 2000 by people power (after NATO bombing had failed), and how that success is related to later victories in former Soviet Georgia and Ukraine ñ and perhaps others to come. Third, we encounter facts, ideas, and arguments that can help us argue more persuasively against war with friends, family, acquaintances, and opponents. Finally, we learn methods for defending freedom, thwarting election theft, and struggling toward a better world. Lest we fall victim to naïve optimism, we also learn the pitfalls that have often made past struggles fail.

*Waging Nonviolent Struggle* brings together, in comparatively compact form, many of the arguments and analyses from the vast corpus of Sharp's decades of research. The reader new to Sharp's work will find the gist of it here, with adequate detail, but also guidance for how to pursue many topics in greater depth. Those who have read one or more of Sharp's previous books and feel familiar with his approach will find here no mere restatement, but instead a provocative program for world social improvement enriched by new historical experience and analysis.

In the first of its four parts, Sharp presents, in less than 50 pages, the key ideas from his earlier works, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* (1973) and *Social Power and Political Freedom* (1980): the concept of nonviolent struggle, a theory of political power, a program for replacing political violence by nonviolent struggle, and a vision of how this could make possible the overcoming of four "grave problems:" dictatorship,

genocide, war, and social oppression. This concisely provides the core of Sharp's unique perspective.

The conciseness continues. *Where The Politics of Nonviolent Action* (still in print in paperback) features 300 pages presenting countless examples illustrating 198 methods of nonviolent action, the new book, in contrast, simply lists the methods in sixteen pages, with only a few paragraphs of commentary interspersed. The obvious loss of historical detail here is, however, partly compensated for by *Waging Nonviolent Struggle's* second part.

Making up nearly half the book, Part Two presents twenty-three cases of "Improvised Nonviolent Struggles in the Twentieth Century." Several are well-known "classic" cases: Gandhi's Salt March, the Montgomery bus boycott, Czechoslovakia's 1968 resistance to the Soviet invasion. But the majority focus on events from 1971 onward. Poland's Solidarity in the 1980s, the people power uprising in the Philippines, and Tiananmen Square are, of course, included, but so also are cases from Argentina, Burma, Namibia, and South Africa, and the defeat of the 1991 coup attempt against Gorbachev. A majority of the cases are credited to close colleagues and topic experts, and include short bibliographies permitting them to be used as starting points for student assignments or personal study.

Part Three, "The Dynamics of Nonviolent Struggle," closely parallels the similarly titled final part of *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* (but is compressed from about 370 to about 70 pages). The first chapters' titles are unchanged and self-explanatory: "Laying the Groundwork for Nonviolent Action," "Challenge Brings Repression," and "Solidarity and Discipline to Fight Repression."

The next chapter, "Political Ju-Jitsu" (the surprising shift of power away from the wielders of violence that may occur when they apply it against people maintaining nonviolent discipline), has become "Noncooperation and Political Ju-Jitsu." Sharp now emphasizes that mass noncooperation ñ the withholding of purchasing, or labor, or compliance with orders ñ has the "predominant impact" (404), compared with political ju-jitsu. This shift indirectly responds to the occasional question, "What if the opponent does not behave so repressively as to weaken his power position?" To the extent that the opponent is dependent

on the grievance group, the latter's noncooperation can still be powerful.

Finally, 1973's "Three Ways Success May Be Achieved" have now become four. One way is the "conversion" of the opponent to one's own point of view. However, Sharp avers, "nonviolent struggle almost never succeeds by melting the hearts of opponents" (511). Sometimes, success comes through nonviolent coercion -- when defiance and non-cooperation are so widespread that the opponents are incapable of maintaining or imposing their desired policies. Probably the most common outcome arises through accommodation, where opponents decide to give in to some degree, even though they have neither changed their minds nor lost all other options. The new, fourth mechanism Sharp has added is "disintegration" -- a collapse of the regime's power so complete that "no coherent body remains" (419) that could even acknowledge defeat.

For those well acquainted with Sharp's previous books, the most valuable part of *Waging Nonviolent Struggle* is likely to be Part Four. Together with an appendix on "Preparing a Strategic Estimate for Nonviolent Struggle," it amounts to more than 100 pages devoted to both a broad overview of how nonviolent struggle can be made more effective and applied to major problems of the modern world, and detailed guidelines for analyzing and strategizing for any particular local, national, or global issue. While Sharp has always insisted on the importance of strategy, this book offers more material to aid future struggles.

In 1989, activist writer Brian Martin opined, "Arguably, Sharp has a higher profile among grassroots social activists than any other living political theorist." Whether true or not then, his influence has since been conspicuously rising.

One striking example is conveyed in a footnote to the case account of Latvia, which regained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, despite Gorbachev's rejection of its declaration of independence the year before. In November 1989, a Lithuanian philosopher obtained page proofs of Sharp's *Civilian-Based Defense: A Post-Military Weapons System* (1990) and sent them to the Director General of his country's Department of National Defense, who in turn

sent out 50 photocopies to people across the Soviet Union, including Latvia and Estonia.

The Latvian government commissioned a translation and used it to plan their republic's defense against possible large-scale Soviet attack. As pressure increased, including physical attacks on individuals by Soviet agents, the Popular Front of Latvia announced in December 1990 a program of nonviolent resistance to any coup, military rule, or imposed governor.

As new Soviet forces moved into the Baltics in January, with killings in Lithuania, Latvian leaders mobilized 500,000 civilians to protect their parliament and communications centers. Despite Soviets' killing six Latvians in the following week, the people refrained from a violent response, knowing it would only provide an excuse for larger military intervention.

When hard-liners sought to oust Gorbachev in August 1991 and simultaneously moved troops into Latvia's capital, the recently established "Nonviolent Defense Center" distributed 2000 copies of resistance instructions to Latvia's cities and villages. The hard-liners' coup collapsed in the face of widespread resistance, and two weeks later Latvia achieved full independence. "Nonviolent national defense" and "civil disobedience" were subsequently officially declared part of Latvia's defense program. Nor is this result of a struggle unique: after Thailand's 1992 defeat of a military coup, its 1997 constitution granted citizens "the right to employ nonviolent resistance against future coups d'etat" (paraphrase; 313).

Sharp has spoken of the "mousetrap theory:" invent a better mousetrap and the world will beat a path to your door. Today that process is visibly under way. The number of languages into which at least an article (and often a booklet or book) by Sharp has been translated has doubled (to 32!) over the past two decades and availability of translations on the Web has mushroomed. As I write, the Albert Einstein Institution has announced that Sharp's "From Dictatorship to Democracy," currently available in Arabic, Azeri, Farsi, Serbian, Spanish, and Ukrainian, among others (see [www.aeinstein.org](http://www.aeinstein.org)), is now available for free download in its fourteenth language: Chinese.

Sharp was invited to advise the students in Tiananmen Square, but too late to help them modify their high-risk strategy and tactics (he arrived on the

very eve of the massacre). Years later, a mid-level leader from Tiananmen, reading about nonviolent struggle, exclaimed "Why didn't we know this in 1989?"

The spread of the vital knowledge of nonviolent struggle now proceeds from multiple sources. (It is no one-person show, though a book review cannot survey it.) Georgian regime opponents invited Serbian Otpor ("Resistance") trainers to teach them the lessons from overthrowing Milosevic. The Serbians brought the video documenting their campaign, "Bringing Down a Dictator" (which includes a close-up of the cover of one of Sharp's books they consulted), and later it aired on Georgia's non-government TV network twice; the next week the regime was toppled. Ukrainians read "From Dictatorship to Democracy," and the rest is... not only "history," but the future. The project of dubbing that video into Arabic, French, Russian, Spanish, and Chinese is already in progress (see [www.aforcemorepowerful.org](http://www.aforcemorepowerful.org)).

For the discouraged, the evident hand of the US government in aiding opposition to disfavored regimes (in Georgia and Ukraine, for example) may be "what's wrong with this picture." Realists, however, know the future may improve on the past, and that even largely nefarious US policies may have multiple motives, internal contradictions, and unanticipated consequences.

After defeats in 1970 and 1976, Polish activists refined their strategy and objectives and at the next opportunity, in 1980, launched the process that in a decade changed the map of Europe. How much more will the Chinese know about strategy and objectives the next time historical opportunity knocks on their door? US activists undaunted by defeats since 2000 should ask themselves some big questions -- and study this essential book.