"We Have Bare Hands" Nonviolent Social Movements in the Soviet Block

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"We Have Bare Hands"¹: Nonviolent Social Movements in the Soviet Bloc

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We live in an age in which humans have developed the capacity to destroy life on earth but also in which an unprecedented elaboration of nonviolent action, theory, and philosophy has taken place (Kurtz 1995; Sharp 1973). In the most dramatic example of this development nonviolent social movements contributed to the transformation of the former USSR between 1988 and 1991.² Those nonviolent insurrections were probably not sufficient conditions for the collapse of the Soviet empire and the end of the Cold War, but may well have been necessary. Indeed, it is hard to imagine any armed insurgency against the Soviet bloc having been successful in the late 1980s. Surely any attempt by an armed group to confront any of the Central and East European countries, let alone the Soviet Union itself, would no doubt have been immediately crushed by overwhelming military force. Nonviolent insurrection, however, was not so easily countered by the state; in fact, efforts to suppress nonviolent demonstrations by force backfired on officials and led to increased support for the dissidents, a dynamic we are calling the “paradox of repression.”

A comprehensive treatment of the revolutions in Eastern Europe cannot be provided here, but we will provide a brief overview and an analysis of the salience of nonviolent methods to the success of the Soviet revolutions. Empires rise and fall; what is unique about this case is the nature of its demise: The Soviet empire was defeated not by foreign invaders or a military coup, but rather by a series of nonviolent populist insurrections. The 1988–91 revolutions were a culmination of an awakening in which citizens became increasingly vocal in expressing their grievances and insisting on governmental reforms. As the threat of armed intervention by Soviet troops in Warsaw Pact countries declined, communist regimes made more and more concessions to popular citizens’ groups, finally consenting to free elections that predictably ousted the ruling elites. In this chapter, we contend that one cannot understand the transformation of revolutions without considering both the role of nonviolent social movements in them and the broader history of nonviolent resistance worldwide in recent decades. We will discuss three particularly important features of nonviolent social movements: parallel institutions, nonviolent methods, and the paradox of repression.

Nonviolent Action and Nonviolent Social Movements

Nonviolent action has been used in conflicts for centuries, but it has been most widely used in the twentieth century. The strategic use of nonviolent action that Mohandas K. Gandhi exemplified has been diffused globally by scholars and activists. His nonviolent techniques in the India Freedom movement contributed to the withdrawal of the British Empire from India and dealt a blow to the entire colonial system. His principled yet highly strategic use of nonviolent methods became the model for disenfranchised groups around the world, employing nonviolent methods to resist corrupt political regimes. Gene Sharp’s (1973) three-volume systematization of strategic nonviolent action, The Politics of Nonviolent Action, has served as a guide for activists everywhere, including those in the Soviet bloc.

The overview that follows uses data from “on the ground” accounts in Central and Eastern Europe and the USSR, such as reports by journalists, activists, and other eye-witnesses who provide narratives of the resistance and the context in which resistance occurred.³ We have incorporated biographical and autobiographical materials that provide an inside view on the revolutions. This approach is, of course, a tentative compromise in lieu of the sort of intensive multinational study that involves interviews with activists and governmental officials, as well as research in movement and official archives.

The Revolutions

Poland

The political transformations in Central and Eastern European unfolded one after another in the late 1980s. The momentum began in Poland, where Solidarity, the trade union opposition party, had been gathering strength for several years. Pope John Paul II’s visit to his homeland of Poland in 1979 is widely considered a critical turning point in that country’s transformation. The Pope’s visit drew enormous crowds, and inspired the people toward greater self-determination. Only one year later, workers went on strike at the Lenin Shipyards in Gdansk, and an electrician named Lech Walesa
formed a committee of workers and intellectuals who challenged the government on a range of issues. As a result of the negotiations, Solidarity was allowed to organize legally.

In December 1981, however, General Wojciech Jaruzelski declared martial law and arrested Solidarity leaders. Solidarity supporters held large demonstrations protesting the state of martial law, and after one year of internment, Walesa was released and martial law was suspended though many restrictions remained. Workers across the nation went on strike again in April and May, 1988. Solidarity struggled to manage the second wave of strikes in August, and as a result, was able to pressure the government into negotiations and regain their legal status (Stokes 1993). The Central Committee of the communist Polish United Workers’ Party (PUWP) accepted Solidarity’s proposals for political pluralism, and on February 6, 1989, the “Round Table Talks” opened between the PUWP, Solidarity, and other parties and civic organizations. These negotiations led to constitutional adjustments, a new system of government, the formation of a coalition government, and the election of Lech Walesa to the post of president in December 1990.

**Hungary**

Almost simultaneously, Hungary was experiencing its own transformation. Like Poland, reform within the communist apparatus accounted for substantial progress toward Hungary’s transition to democracy. However, as in Poland and all of the other Soviet bloc countries, the communist reformers found themselves outpaced by the forces of opposition. Reformers such as Károly Grosz and Imre Pozsgay were trying to steer Hungary to economic and political safety without entirely ejecting the Communist Party. While they worked to control the reform process, opposition groups were organizing and mobilizing. On March 15, 100,000 Hungarians carried out a powerful symbolic march passing six historical locations that referred to previous Hungarian revolutions (Stokes 1993).

Then, on June 16, 1989, a more powerful and symbolic celebration was held to commemorate the death of Imre Nagy, a Hungarian communist prime minister who had supported the revolution in 1956. Shortly after the 1988 strikes in Poland, Hungarian demonstrators commemorating the death of Nagy were violently dispersed by police despite the recent moves toward pluralism that had been allowed by Károly Grosz’s administration. The government had agreed to allow Nagy’s relatives to rebury his remains and those of his revolutionary associates. By agreeing to Nagy’s political rehabilitation, the Communist Party hoped to benefit from the popular energy that was generated through the affair. In the event, opposition leaders took the opportunity to speak out boldly against the status quo, and the funeral turned out to be a critical turning point in the efforts to transform Hungary. Viktor Orban, a representative of the Young Democrats even compared Nagy’s funeral to Pope John Paul II’s first pilgrimage to Poland (Garton Ash 1990: 55).

Negotiations similar to Poland’s Round Table began three days before Nagy’s funeral. The meetings consisted of leaders from a collection of opposition groups organized as the Opposition Round Table with leaders of the communist Hungarian Socialist Worker’s Party. The negotiations led to a set of proposed constitutional amendments that were passed by Hungary’s parliament on October 18, 1989. In these amendments, Hungary became “an independent, democratic legal state in which the values of bourgeois democracy and democratic socialism prevail in equal measures. All power belongs to the people, which they exercise directly and through the elected representatives of popular sovereignty” (quoted in Stokes 1993: 135). When the new parliament was elected, the communists, both reformers and hard-liners, faded poorly, leaving the opposition leaders to take the helm of Hungary’s new republic.

**East Germany**

Changes occurring in Hungary had a critical effect on the precipitous transformations underway in the German Democratic Republic (GDR). The decision to dismantle Hungary’s border fences in May 1989 facilitated the exodus of East Germans to the West. At first, refugees collected on Hungary’s border with Austria, and on September 11, when Hungarian authorities opened the border, 10,000 crossed in one day. Young East Germans were, in effect, voting with their feet and attempting to emigrate by the thousands. By the end of October, 50,000 East Germans had left for the west via Hungary, Prague, or Warsaw (Garton Ash 1990: 66). Once Czechoslovakia closed its border with Hungary, refugees began packing the West German embassy in Prague. On two occasions, October 1 and October 4–5, the East German government allowed trains of refugees (approximately 16,500 in total) to pass from Czechoslovakia through East Germany into West Germany. On the second occasion, additional trains transported 800 refugees west from the West German embassy in Budapest. Thousands of East Germans lined the route, and many tried to get on the trains (Darnton 1991: 69; *New York Times* 1991: 156–8). The permission for passage was an attempt to placate East Germans and ensure the success of the events celebrating the fortieth anniversary of the German Democratic Republic on October 6. However, to Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, who attended the celebration, it was clear that East Germany was out of control (Gorbachev 1995).

The sizable demonstrations which were held across East Germany forced many in the regime to recognize the seriousness of the situation. East German communist leader Erich Honecker, for his part, seemed oblivious
to the need for reform and ordered a "Chinese solution" for the demonstrations that were being held in Leipzig. For weeks, demonstrators had been congregating on Karl-Marx Platz on Mondays after "prayers for peace" at the Church of St. Nicholas; by the time Honecker ordered that the demonstrators be attacked, their numbers had grown to 70,000 (Garton Ash 1991: 67). Fortunately, Kurt Masur, the director of the local orchestra; Bend-Lutz Lange, a cabaret artist; and, a priest named Peter Zimmerman joined three local party leaders in appealing for nonviolence. The appeal was broadcast in churches and over loudspeakers, and the police action was canceled (Darnton 1991: 98–9; Garton Ash 1991: 68).  

Honecker resigned on October 18 leaving Egon Krenz to take his place as the leader of the Communist Party. Still, no less than 500,000 people demonstrated in East Berlin on November 4, and demonstrations were being held in other cities such as Dresden (New York Times 1991: 171) and, two days later, 500,000 people attended the weekly Leipzig demonstration. The growing demonstrations culminated in a "nonviolent explosion" (Garton Ash 1991: 68) on November 9 as East German authorities agreed to let a few people pass through the Berlin Wall (Darnton 1991). The trickle became a flood, and, without any preparation by the East German government, the Berlin Wall became redundant. The Communist Party's Central Committee immediately responded with a program intended to address citizens' now obvious concerns. The prologue to the program read, "A revolutionary people's movement has brought into motion a process of great change. The renewal of society is on the agenda" (New York Times 1991: 175). Apparently, the GDR's program of renewal was not sufficient. Less than one year later, on October 3, 1990, Germany became a reunified nation.  

Czechoslovakia  

The political transformations that occurred in East Germany and Czechoslovakia were the most precipitous among the East European nations. They were more dramatic, rapid, and could more easily be referred to as "revolutions" or, in the case of Czechoslovakia, the "velvet revolution." The Czech opposition, noting that nonviolent resistance against communist regimes had been successful in Poland after ten years, in Hungary after ten months, and in East Germany after ten weeks, thought perhaps it would take Czechoslovakia "only ten days" (Garton Ash, 1990: 78). They were not far from being correct.  

On November 17, 1989, a group of students in Prague gathered to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the death of Jan Opletal, a student who had been murdered by the Nazis. After the ceremony, they marched to Wenceslas Square where they were met by security forces. The students offered flowers to the police and held their hands in the air while reciting "We have bare hands," but the police still moved against the students without discretion, using their truncheons. As Garton Ash (1990: 80) puts it, "This was the spark that set Czechoslovakia alight."  

This phase of popular unrest was initiated by students, but its momentum was picked up by other activist organizations, especially Charter 77, a group of artists and long-time dissidents (Kriesova 1993). Civic Forum was established on November 20 from several dissident groups, and it assumed leadership of the resistance movement from its headquarters in the Magic Lantern Theater in Prague. After one week of continuous demonstrations by hundreds of thousands of people in Prague and negotiations between Civic Forum and the Communist Party, the Politburo and the party's Central Committee resigned. The following day, a Saturday, over 500,000 people gathered near the Letna football stadium for the largest rally yet held. Also, on Monday, November 27, a two-hour general strike was carried out. Only 23 days had passed since the students' demonstrations, when President Husak had sworn in a new federal government, and when he had resigned (Garton Ash 1990). Vaclav Havel, the peoples' conscience and inspiration, was installed as the new president of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic on December 29, 1989.  

Romania  

Romania constituted a radical departure from the predominantly violence-free revolutions in other Soviet bloc countries, in that armed force played a significant role in the downfall of the communist regime. There were still some important nonviolent components, however.  

Historically, President Nicolae Ceausescu had ruled by means of harsh and effective security forces, and he did not hesitate to use those forces against his own citizenry as the notion of change reached Romania. On December 17, 1989, 97 peaceful demonstrators protesting the forced relocation of a reformist ethnic Hungarian minister were killed in Timisoara. Two days later, as demonstrations continued, a massive general strike was carried out that brought Timisoara to a standstill (Stokes 1993: 163). One week later, as more demonstrators honored the deaths of their fellow citizens, the security forces and army opened fire on a crowd of 100,000 people. One hundred and sixty people were killed (New York Times 1991: 333). However, soon after the Timisoara massacre, the regular army defected to the defense of the citizens and fighting ensued with the Securitate, Ceausescu's highly trained security force (Stokes 1993: 163–4). On December 23, Ceausescu and his wife were captured and immediately tried by the newly formed National Salvation Front government. They were convicted of genocide and executed in front of a firing squad on Christmas Day. The fighting diminished once the Ceausescus were killed, and a Council of National Salvation took over as the new government.
It is noteworthy that Romania was economically and politically more isolated than other Central and Eastern European nations. As a result, Ceaușescu may have felt less pressure from outside forces, such as Gorbachev's encouragement toward reforms (New York Times 1991: 229; Stokes 1991: 160). Additionally, the Romanian regime probably felt less pressure from the West and had been isolated from the diffusion of nonviolent methodology that had occurred in other European nations. Consequently, there was a great deal of bloodshed before Ceaușescu was ousted.

The Baltic States

The Baltic States of Lithuania, Estonia, and Latvia represent a unique approach to reform among the Soviet bloc nations. As opposed to civil opposition groups, the national governments within these countries served as the instruments of opposition against Soviet control and influence. Unlike other Central and Eastern European nations, where dissidents led organizations into negotiations with Communist Party leaders, the state apparatus in the Baltics resolved to secede from the USSR. Lithuania led the way with a parliamentary council declaring on August 21, 1989 that the Soviet annexation of Lithuania in 1940 was void. Two days later, 2 million people joined hands in Lithuania, Estonia, and Latvia to signal their desire for their respective sovereignties. The Lithuanian parliament continued to express its intentions to Moscow through political channels and set about undermining the Communist Party's monopoly by legalizing rival political parties. Estonia made a similar move on December 7 in striking Article Six of its constitution which had ensured the privileged position of the Communist Party in national politics (New York Times 1991: 314).

As Lithuania seemed intent on secession, Gorbachev was equally concerned that the USSR should not disintegrate like its East European satellites. In January 1990, he traveled through Lithuania in an attempt to persuade Lithuanians to remain within the Soviet Union. Two months later, Gorbachev resorted to placing pressure on Lithuania by demanding that $33 billion be paid in the event that the Baltic country seceded. The Lithuanian parliament did in fact vote unanimously to declare its independence on March 11, 1990, and Gorbachev responded by sending paratroopers and tanks into Lithuania and placing an embargo on oil and other supplies. Under pressure, the new Lithuanian government eventually suspended all laws that had been instituted since the secession and postponed its independence. However, the government later renewed its declaration of independence, and Estonia and Latvia followed Lithuania's lead, declaring independence respectively on August 20 and 21, 1991.

Despite the fact that parliaments were the primary political actors in the Baltic States' efforts to secede from the Soviet Union, there were also instances of mass nonviolent action. There was the early "joining of hands" in each of the Baltic states. One day before Gorbachev visited Lithuania, "tens of thousands" of Lithuanians gathered in Vilnius chanting "Freedom." "Speaker after speaker acknowledged that one goal of the demonstration, which was called by the popular political organization Sajudis, was to show through the Soviet and foreign press that an overwhelming majority of Lithuanians support the call for independence" (Oleszczuk 1990: 351). Like the political transitions across Eastern Europe, change proceeded from "above" and "below" in Lithuania.

USSR

The wave of dissent that swept Central and Eastern Europe culminated in the fall of the central Communist Party system in the USSR. Gorbachev, though he had clearly deferred to popular desires for independence in Central and Eastern Europe, was not prepared for the same to occur in the USSR. He intended instead that perestroika and glasnost run their course leading to a reformed communist system. The leadership of the politically privileged Communist Party would carry out a new Marxism that Gorbachev called "humane socialism" (New York Times 1991: 262).

However, it became apparent that, like their Baltic neighbors, Soviet citizens in Russia desired changes in their own government. Nationalist movements were similarly developing in Moldavia, Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Tadjikistan. In some of these regions, such as Armenia and Azerbaijan, ethnic violence was breaking out (Smith 1990: 295). Against this background of increasing entropy, 50,000 or more people demonstrated in Moscow on February 25, 1990 to express their disappointment in Gorbachev and the Communist Party and to promote pro-democracy candidates for the Russian parliament. According to news reports, the authorities attempted to suppress the rally by threatening bloodshed, and the Russian Orthodox Church requested that people stay in their homes (New York Times 1991: 375).

Over the course of one year, a rift widened between the central Soviet government and the national Russian government. Gorbachev was provided additional emergency powers by the Soviet parliament and was elected as head of the Communist Party. At the same time, Boris Yeltsin assumed the presidency of Russia and left the Communist Party soon after the Russian parliament declared that its laws took priority over Soviet laws. The Russian parliament even went so far as to refuse to pay its usual share of the Soviet budget. The rift between Russia and the Soviet government expressed itself most blatantly during the coup attempt launched on Monday, August 19, 1991 by the hardline "State Committee for the State of Emergency" (New York Times 1991: 520).

During the coup, Gorbachev was removed from power and placed under house arrest while the new self-proclaimed leadership moved troops into
Moscow, banned protest meetings and closed independent newspapers. Yeltsin immediately opposed the putchists. Addressing a crowd from atop an armored vehicle, he called for a general strike to be held the following day at which he addressed a crowd of 20,000, while another 2,000 people had gathered at Leningrad’s city hall where they were addressed by Mayor Sobchak. By evening in Moscow, 25,000 people had arrived at the Russian Government building, and many began building barricades and pledging to remain in defense of the parliament building (New York Times 1991: 517–25). Citizens created a ring around the building while government leaders inside prepared for battle with the Soviet troops that were not already defecting to the people. At one point in the middle of the day, more than 30,000 people had gathered outside the parliament building. Yeltsin instructed the crowd: “The military has become a weapon in the hands of the putchists. Therefore, we should also support the military and maintain order and discipline in contact with them” (New York Times 1991: 532). Some violence did occur during the second night of the coup when molotov cocktails were thrown at military vehicles, and three people were killed by armored carrier movements.

During the third day of the coup, the State Committee for the State of Emergency relented, and the coup collapsed. Gorbachev returned to Mos- cow congratulating Yeltsin and those who engaged in the nonviolent resistance for their success. The coup leaders had found it impossible to carry out their plans for a new Soviet government because popular resistance had been widespread in Moscow and Leningrad and military units had deserted to the point that the coup leaders could not rally the political or logistical resources necessary to meet their goals.

Nonviolent Action

A comprehensive catalog of nonviolent action in the former Soviet bloc is beyond the scope of the current chapter, but several key features were particularly salient. First, it is important to recognize that most of the nonviolent action was not spontaneous, but it was cultivated and promoted outside the state with the help of what activists and scholars call “parallel institutions” in the civil society: cultural institutions, civic organizations, and the church. Second, the resistance usually took the form of nonviolent protest, though there were some instances of nonviolent non-cooperation such as strikes. Third, what we are calling the “paradox of repression” was the primary conflict dynamic that made nonviolent action successful in the Soviet bloc. Some communist leaders recognized the folly of suppressing citizens through physical force while others carried out repressive measures and found that they only fueled the determination of opposition activists. We will begin by addressing parallel institutions since their development tends to precede nonviolent action and the paradox of repression.

Parallel institutions

Successful social movements generally develop an infrastructure that serves to recruit, train, encourage, and mobilize activists. Regardless of the types of methods used in opposing a central government, movement activists construct alternative or autonomous “spaces” in which opposition frames and strategies can be disseminated. In each of the Soviet bloc countries, nonviolent resistance operated from alternative spaces, notably the Church, the Academy, the cultural community, and the media.

The creation and utilization of public space is not, of course, entirely unique to nonviolent action, but it is crucial, especially if one acknowledges that ideas are important for the motivation and cohesion of any resistance (Weigel 1992; Snow et al.). Nonviolent resistance is no exception. In fact, effective education in the principles of nonviolent action is important because of the discipline that nonviolent action requires. Parallel institutions preserve not only a spirit of resistance but ideologies that complement nonviolent action.

The Church

The Church has often played a crucial role in nurturing courage and a spirit of resistance by providing time and space in which nonviolent resistance can be planned and carried out, due to the fact that it possesses vast institutional resources, cultural capital, and a Polish pope (Weigel 1992). Indeed, it was the only major institution in civil society to which the communist state was initially forced to grant some autonomy. In Poland, thousands of Catholic catechetical centers were established, in which as Weigel (1992: 113) claims, “many of those [Solidarity] consciences were first found, and the final revolution gestated”. Other Polish programs included “Oasis” summer camps for families which later became the “Light and Life” movement that promoted the nonviolent principle of living “as if” Poland were truly free. Three hundred thousand Polish youth took part in the movement from the mid-1970s to the late 1980s.

Father Jerzy Popieluszko, who was martyred by the state for his dissidence, had already served as a chaplain to the striking workers of Warsaw when he began a monthly “Mass for the Fatherland.” During these services, the priest spoke openly about human rights and nonviolent resistance. His homilies attracted Poles by the thousands, and he continually reminded the nation that it would have to decide whether or not to live “as if” it were free. When Popieluszko was killed by state security officers, mourners occupied his church by the thousands for ten days.

In East Germany, most resistance emerged from the Protestant church (New York Times 1991: 226). For Protestant Slovaksians, the most common type of protest was pilgrimage. Five hundred thousand people went on pilgrimages in 1988, and one particular pilgrimage to Levoca involved 100,000 people (New York Times 1991: 312).
Cultural and Academic Institutions. These also played a critical role in the development of nonviolent social movements. In Czechoslovakia, the “Velvet Revolution” began when students used school buildings and resources to organize demonstrations and disseminate information about the “massacre” that police perpetrated against demonstrators on November 17, 1989. Once Civic Forum picked up the momentum initiated by the students, the artistic community in Czechoslovakia volunteered time and a wide range of resources (Garton Ash 1990; Stokes 1993). For instance, Vaclav Havel and other dissidents led their nonviolent campaign from the basement of a local theater called “The Magic Lantern.” Other theater owners offered their spaces as forums for debate and showed videos of the violent suppression of students. Similarly, the Polish Student Theater played an important role in the early stages of the development of an opposition movement in Poland (Goldfarb 1980).

A similar phenomenon occurred in the East German city of Leipzig, where discussions and demonstrations were conducted in various nongovernmental public spaces as Robert Darnton (1991: 100) observes:

> The Gewandhaus, the opera, and the university surrounding Karl Marx Platz, where the demonstrations begin, constitute a new public space in opposition to the actual town hall, farther down the ring of boulevards. Together with the churches, they represent the only institutions around which public life can form. In a system where the Party has monopolized power, politics has taken refuge in the sphere of culture, and legitimacy has shifted to the intellectuals — ministers, musicians, actors, writers, and professors, or at least a few dissident professors in the lower ranks of the faculty.

Darnton expresses the way in which alternative institutions may parallel official ones. The opera house and the university took on some of the functions of the town hall; the parallel institutions thus oppose official structures and may even make them redundant.

Media. Finally, one can hardly overestimate the importance of the media to the success of nonviolent resistance in the Soviet bloc; indeed they constitute a structural element crucial to the success of the insurrections. An assortment of media sources were used as parallel institutions to disseminate new ideology that contradicted the conventional communist Rhetoric. For decades, the Communist regimes strove to maintain strict control over the media, both the institutional and the underground media. Yet, despite the censorship policies, there were some sources of critical journalism that managed to survive alongside the legal communist ones. Over the years, the Polish Catholic church’s press Tygodnik Powszechny (Universal Weekly) and the Catholic intellectual month Znak (Sign) managed to publish high-quality material that reflected the Polish situation in a fair and critical light despite harassment by the State (Monticone 1986; Weigel 1992).

In other countries, underground or samizdat materials made their way into the hands of citizens and encouraged ideological shifts that undergirded nonviolent action. In Hungary Laszlo Rajk, who operated a “samizdat boutique” in his apartment, supplied intellectual dissidents with unofficial literature (Stokes 1993: 89). Over many years, these sorts of activities educated future dissidents and provided coherence to the movements that later confronted communist regimes.

Gorbachev’s glasnost policies and modern media technology meant that oppositional material could finally be found not only in underground sources, but through officially sanctioned media outlets. As censorship was relaxed in the name of “openness,” newspapers offered critical analyses that resonated strongly with their readers. Garton Ash (1990) describes Czechoslovakian enthusiasm for the new journalism: “At six o’clock in the morning on Wenceslas Square you saw a line of hundreds of people waiting patiently in the freezing mist. They were waiting to buy a copy of the Socialist Party newspaper, Svobodne Slovo (The Free Word), which was the first to carry accurate reports of the demonstrations and Forum statements (Garton Ash 1990: 91). Other newspapers such as Lidova Demokracie (People’s Democracy) and Mlada Fronta (Young Front) followed (Kriseova 1993); the more citizens learned about the state of their political circumstances and the opposition, the less their fear inhibited them.

Television technology proved to be at least as effective as print media. A picture truly is worth a thousand words, and both opposition and communist leaders knew it. According to Jacek Kuron, during the Polish Round Table negotiations, one party leader said, “We’ll give you the Zomo (riot police) before we give you the TV.” ‘And he’s quite right,’ commented Kuron, ‘I’d much rather have the TV’” (Garton Ash 1990: 26). As it turned out, after the Round Table talks, Solidarity was allowed one half-hour of weekly television broadcast time, one hour of weekly radio time, a daily national newspaper, and a regional weekly newspaper (New York Times 1991: 33).

Images broadcast on television and radio provided citizens and activists with current information on the political situations in their respective countries and the potentials of nonviolent protest. Television broadcasts of Imre Nagy’s funeral electrified Hungary, and as Garton Ash (1990: 15) points out, the movement was conducted in the media as much as on the streets. In Romania, even the brief image of citizens waving their fists at Ceausescu and his wife were enough to awaken the population at large (Stokes 1993: 165).

Neighboring countries also learned from each other’s experiences through television; East Germans learned of the Polish and Hungarian situations from daily West German television broadcasts (Garton Ash 1990: 66). Most East Germans only learned of their own Neues Forum (New Forum) when the GDR denounced the organization and West German media reported the story (New York Times 1991: 168). In each of these instances, the media or other parallel institutions provided ideological,
material, or informational resources that aided the mobilization of citizens to effective nonviolent action.

Nonviolent Protest

Perhaps the most popular and well-known form of nonviolent action is nonviolent protest. Methods that fall into this category are used to alter the opinion of an opponent or a third party about the bases of conflict such as actionists’ grievances (Sharp 1973). The collective expression of popular will can be powerfully persuasive, especially when opponents interpret the protest as symbolic of a real withdrawal of consent. The effect is maximized when activists incorporate creative variations of protest that directly address the issues at hand and resonate with opponents. The use of nonviolent protest was widespread in Central and Eastern Europe and the USSR, and many rallies incorporated the use of creative conflict symbols to communicate a frame alignment between the movements, goals and widespread grievances in civil society. The fact that agents of the state sometimes responded violently partially testifies to the effectiveness of the method. We will return to the issue of repression later, but first let us demonstrate some of the ways in which citizens adapted nonviolent protest to their needs.

Hungary

The official funeral of Imre Nagy in Budapest, Hungary on June 16, 1989 was an effective symbolic event that raised national awareness of the potential for opposition. Nagy was a communist politician who served twice as Hungary’s premier in the 1950s and provoked Russian military intervention when he introduced liberal policies and weakened Hungary’s ties with other Warsaw Pact nations (Garton Ash 1990). He was consequently hanged on June 16, 1956, but his official state funeral was not held until 33 years later. Two hundred and fifty thousand people attended the ceremony in 1989. Despite attempts by the Communist Party to co-opt the event, popular opposition was expressed through speeches from the podium and through the creative use of symbols by those in attendance. As in 1956, insurgents cut out the hammer and sickle from their flags, leaving holes in their centers. Opposition leaders spoke in open criticism of communist leaders in attendance while the event was carried live on national television (Garton Ash 1990; New York Times 1991: 133–136).

East Germany

Citizens in East Germany attended massive rallies in the country’s major cities. During the summer and autumn months of 1989, people gathered weekly on Mondays at Karl-Marx Platz in Leipzig, East Germany following “prayers for peace” in the nearby Church of St. Nicholas. The demonstrations were initially small and were often violently dispersed by the police, but by October, the protestors’ numbers had mushroomed to approximately 20,000 people. On the day after Gorbachev left East Germany, having attended the GDR’s fortieth anniversary celebrations, 50,000–70,000 people attended the demonstration on Karl-Marx Platz. Garton Ash (1990: 67) describes the event as a critical turning point in the East German revolution: “They sang the Internationale and demanded the legalization of the recently founded ‘citizens’ initiative’, New Forum. The police were baffled, and in places peacefully overwhelmed.” After speeches, the demonstrators walked through the city carrying candles and banners. The demonstrations grew even larger as the Communist Party’s crisis worsened, and by November 6, 500,000 people were attending the weekly demonstration (Darnton 1991).

Czechoslovakia

Some of the most dramatic protests were conducted in Czechoslovakia. Petition signing campaigns grew into regular public demonstrations, often in Wenceslas Square, where thousands of Czechoslovaksians listened to addresses by Vaclav Havel and other opposition leaders. The rallies were highly charged events, and many observers have commented on the way in which the crowds developed a collective voice that often spoke in unison and answered those addressing the crowd (Kriseova 1993; New York Times 1991: 305).

The crowd answered the speakers, talked back to them. Often I wondered where the genius of the crowd was located, who led it, and who thought up its slogans. Was there one person who was the first to shout a slogan, and then the others joined in; or did these words and sentences arise in many minds simultaneously? Perhaps there was some kind of higher direction the crowd was listening to, instructions that were simultaneously whispered into thousands and hundreds of thousands of ears. It was a miracle; I can offer no explanations. (Kriseova 1993: 250)

Regardless of who organized the collective voice, it apparently left a significant impression on observers and contributed to a collective effervescence (Durkheim [1912] 1965: 241–2) and the perception that supernatural powers were at work (Garton Ash 1990: 128; Kriseova 1993). The effect aided citizens in overcoming their fear of retaliation by authorities. One can imagine that the authorities observed such protests with a certain awe. When communist prime minister Ladislav Adamec addressed cheering crowds at the Letna playing fields in Czechoslovakia, they soon turned
against him with protests of "Too late, too late!" when he began reverting to the old communist rhetoric (Kriseova 1993). Nonviolent protests such as this one were a form of public discourse with authorities, and the collective voice carried substantial political power, what Havel (1990) calls "the power of the powerless."

Other examples of symbolic protest include the stopping of clock hands positioned at five minutes before midnight as a sign that "time is up for the Communist Party" in Czechoslovakia (New York Times 1991: 256). Many of these nonviolent protests were highly effective at communicating popular grievances. However, protest was not the only nonviolent method used in the Soviet bloc.

**Nonviolent Non-cooperation & Nonviolent Intervention**

Sharp (1973) specifies two main methods besides nonviolent protest and persuasion: nonviolent non-cooperation and nonviolent intervention, methods less common than protest in the Soviet bloc, but significant elements in the resistance. In noncooperation, activists intentionally withdraw their usual cooperation with a regime (Sharp 1973: 183), resulting in a breach in the normal operation of day to day life; the classic example is the strike.

One might argue that workers' strikes and the creation of the opposition party, Solidarity, marked the beginning of the end for communists in Poland. In Czechoslovakia, Romania, and Russia protesters successfully orchestrated general strikes. Massive nonviolent noncooperation occurred in East Germany when thousands of young, skilled East Germans fled across Hungary's border with Austria or took refuge in West German embassies. East Germany hemorrhaged, losing citizens who otherwise contributed significantly to the routine operation of the country. In Lithuania, it was the parliament who planned to use noncooperation strategically in the event that the Soviet army overran the country. In an extraordinary resolution, the parliament declared that "In the event a regime of active occupation is introduced, citizens of the Republic of Lithuania are asked to adhere to principles of disobedience, non-violent resistance, and political and social non-cooperation as the primary means of struggle for independence" (quoted in Roberts 1991: 29). Lithuanians were not forced to carry out the campaign, perhaps because the declaration itself served as a deterrent to the deployment of Soviet troops. Still, it is noteworthy that a state government opted to promote nonviolent methods as opposed to violent methods such as guerrilla actions.

**Paradox of Repression**

One of the core dynamics of nonviolent action lies in the paradox of repression: in an asymmetrical conflict, when the opponent representing the status quo uses force (psychological, physical, economic, or otherwise) to repress its nonviolent opponents, the repression often ironically weakens the regime's authority and strengthens the opposition. Public opinion is likely to turn against the repressive regime. Paradoxically, the more the regime applies force, the more citizens and third parties are likely to become disaffected, sometimes to such an extreme that the regime disintegrates from internal dissent. Sharp's (1973) notion of nonviolent action as a form of "political jiu-jitsu" is an example of how the paradox of repression works. Like the techniques of many martial arts, employing the paradox of repression causes an oppressor's use of force to rebound and become counterproductive.

The paradox of repression was perhaps the defining element of nonviolent conflict in the Soviet bloc revolts, partly because Gorbachev understood its importance. In order for his perestroika and glasnost programs to be successful, he could not afford to sacrifice any portion of the Soviet system's popular legitimacy. Gorbachev intended to rally the support of citizens, to motivate them toward carrying out the sort of work and
sacrifices required to pull the Soviet economy out of its slump, thus renewing faith in the Communist Party and the Soviet system. Gorbachev's reforms required popular support, and he knew that repression of Soviet bloc citizens would delegitimize the regime.

There is also reason to believe that other communist leaders experienced a sense of revulsion toward the prospect of repression. Perhaps a turning point in the opposition to the Soviet regime was an incident in Tbilisi, Georgia, when troops opened fire on peaceful demonstrators. Public opposition to the action was swift and negative. When military force was finally used in Moscow by communist authorities attempting to unseat Gorbachev in a coup, the very few deaths that did occur triggered a local and global reaction.

One explanation for the coup's collapse was shared both by Prime Minister Valentin Pavlov, one of the participants, and by Alexander Yakovlev. Both said that the Emergency Committee's most stupid mistake was deploying troops and tanks in Moscow. Without that, the resistance would have been much less focused and the overall impression much more one of business as usual, and of course there would not have been the deaths of three young men on the night of August 20, which horrified the country, the world, and probably even the plotters themselves (Palazhenko 1997: 314–15). The emergency committee's military strategy had backfired horribly and crippled their coup.

East German leaders experienced the same bind when Erich Honecker deemed a "Chinese solution" to the massive protests in Leipzig and East Berlin. Pressured by the hemorrhage of emigration and the obvious level of popular discontent, Honecker decided that the country's youth had to be restrained; extreme means would be used against the protesters just as Chinese forces had opened fire on demonstrators in Tiananmen Square. Some of Honecker's advisors saw the futility in such a strategy, however; Erich Mielke, the tough 82-year-old security chief reportedly told Mr. Honecker, "Erich, we can't beat up hundreds of thousands of people" (New York Times 1991: 219). Given the choice of supporting a cruelly oppressive regime or nonviolent demonstrators, several members of the Politburo began to express sympathies with the latter. The issue of repression in Leipzig was a final step toward Erich Honecker's resignation.

The violent actions of police towards student protesters in Prague on November 17, 1989 provide an excellent example of the paradox of repression. Students had organized a demonstration to commemorate the death of Jan Opletal, a Czech student martyred by the Nazis. After the program, 1,500 of the students marched toward Wenceslas square where riot police in Narodni Avenue confronted the students who were singing, handing out flowers, and carrying candles. The police moved against the demonstrators with tear gas, truncheons, and attack dogs (Garton Ash 1990: 80; Kriesova 1993: 245). The next day, activists in the cultural community began organizing and Civic Forum took over the momentum that had been initiated by the students. The effectiveness of nonviolent action and repression in Narodni Avenue can be attributed to the fact that many people witnessed the event. The attack of the riot police was caught on videotape, and the footage was duplicated and shown in Prague Theaters. Students even carried the tapes out into rural areas attempting to gather support for the resistance being conducted in Prague (Kriesova 1993). In this way, the paradox of repression was magnified as greater numbers of people witnessed, and in a sense experienced, the repression from a distance.

One particular manifestation of the paradox of repression occurs when military personnel become disaffected with serving as instruments or tools of repression (Sharp 1973). When military personnel are ordered to move against nonviolent demonstrators, they may find the psychological costs of repression too great and may refuse to carry out orders against popular opposition. On August 20, 1991, for example, the coup leaders in Moscow ordered a unit of troops to storm the Russian parliament building where citizens had gathered for its defense. The soldiers simply refused to follow the orders, and Gorbachev subsequently referred to them as heroes (Palazhenko 1997: 314). After deaths in Vilnius and Riga, Soviet commanders in the Baltics also declared that they would not give orders to shoot citizens. Likewise, deaths in Tbilisi provoked military commanders to insist that the army should not be used as a domestic police force (Reddaway 1993). These examples demonstrate the centrality of the paradox of repression to the Soviet bloc revolutions. Nonviolent action was successful in part because communist authorities were profoundly affected by the potential repercussions of repression.

The Relevance of Nonviolent Action

In the course of presenting preliminary drafts of this chapter at professional meetings, we have found that some scholars de-emphasize the relevance of nonviolent action in the Soviet bloc, arguing instead that economic and political crises precipitated the transitions to democracy and free market economies. According to this thesis, the Soviet systems were self-limiting and their failures bred discontent not only among the general populace but also among the elites. Elites encouraged reforms when they saw the writing on the wall warning that the Soviet system was inefficient to the point of collapse. By participating in semi-controlled transitions elites could position themselves favorably in the new market economies. They might thus retain their positions of leadership and reap the benefits of power (Misztal 1993). When nonintervention policies were put into effect, with Gorbachev making it clear that Soviet troops would not be used to prop up communist regimes, progressive leaders seized the opportunity and reforms proliferated.
According to this line of argument, activists in opposition groups sensed the same opportunities and organized nonviolent protests ensued, but their actions were secondary causes of reform. Some scholars thus suggest that the combination of political and economic crises plus the willingness of communist leaders to pursue radical reforms makes popular nonviolent action increasingly irrelevant.

We agree with Adam Roberts’ (1991: 31) assertion that “There can be no pretense that civil resistance alone and in splendid isolation brought about the dramatic changes... The best overall explanation of the process is probably to be found in words attributed to Napoleon: ‘All Empires die of indigestion.’” Gorbachev, addressing the Communist Party Central Committee, identified a similar Soviet problem:

Where there is delay in dealing with overripe problems, excesses are inevitable. What is taking place in socialist countries is the logical outcome of a certain stage of development which makes the peoples of these countries aware of the need for change. This is the result of internal development, the result of choice by peoples themselves... We proceed from the fact that any nation has the right to decide its fate itself, including the choice of a system, ways, the pace and methods of its development (New York Times 1991: 320).

Gorbachev attributes changes to both system problems and popular will. Certainly, economic and political malaise contributed heavily to the environment in which the sweeping changes of the late 1980s occurred (Miszal 1993). However, it is also difficult to discount the role of nonviolent action as a catalyst that accelerated changes (Reddaway 1993). We believe that a combination of Soviet reforms led by Gorbachev and effective nonviolent action precipitated the rapid disintegration of the Soviet bloc.

In fact, there was change proceeding from “above” and “below.” Some communist elites promoted reform policies which allowed the growth of popular opposition which in turn precipitated further reform. Garon Ash (1990: 14) has accordingly called the transitions in the Soviet bloc “refolutions”:

Even in Poland and Hungary, what was happening could still hardly be described as a revolution. It was in fact, a mixture of reform and revolution. At the time, I called it ‘refolution.’ There was a strong and essential element of change ‘from above’, led by an enlightened minority in the still ruling communist parties. But there was also a vital element of popular pressure ‘from below.’ In Hungary, there was rather more of the former, in Poland of the latter, yet in both countries the story was that of an interaction between the two.

The fall of Soviet regimes was the result of an interaction between state-level reforms and popular resistance. Often, the lion’s share of credit falls to Gorbachev and his policies of perestroika and glasnost. However, we would like to preserve a place for popular nonviolent action and its important contribution to the fall of communist regimes.

The argument that nonviolent social movements did not play a significant role suffers from at least three deficiencies. First, it fails to see nonviolent opposition as a long-term project that extends decades into the past. The 1989 revolutions did not erupt spontaneously but were the result of decades of unrest, during which mobilized movements fueled by the bold acts of dissidents, led to the cultivation of a robust civil society throughout the Soviet bloc. Second, it fails to acknowledge the global nature of nonviolent action and nonviolent movements, especially given modern media technology. Vaclav Havel appreciated both of these notions:

And we ask: Where did young people who had never known another system get their longing for truth, their love of freedom, their political imagination, their civic courage and civic responsibility? How did their parents, precisely the generation thought to have been lost, join them? How is it possible that so many people immediately understood what to do and that none of them needed any advice or instructions?... Naturally we too had to pay for our present-day freedom. Many of our citizens died in prison in the 1960s. Many were executed. Thousands of human lives were destroyed. Hundreds of thousands of talented people were driven abroad... Those who fought against totalitarianism during the war were also persecuted... Nobody who paid in one way or another for our freedom could be forgotten... But we should also not forget that other nations paid an even harsher price for their present freedom, and paid indirectly for ours as well. All human suffering concerns each human being... Without changes in the Soviet Union, Poland, Hungary and the German Democratic Republic, what happened here could hardly have taken place, and certainly not in such a calm and peaceful way. (Havel 1990: 279)

Traditions of opposition, however small, were maintained in various Central and Eastern European countries by intellectuals and activists. Many who led opposition at the end of the 1980s had honed their skills in political, union, peace, nuclear, and environmental movements in the 1970s and early 1980s (Morton and Landy 1988; New York Times 1991: 168; Smith 1990: 12).

Third, the skeptics’ view of nonviolent action often assumes that successful nonviolent action is the kind that coerces the opponent into submission, whereas the preferable outcome within nonviolent theory is the conversion of the opponent. Part of the subtle power of nonviolent resistance is that it facilitates efforts to persuade opponents to accommodate activists. Sometimes opponents’ world views are even altered. Victory does not require that the opponent be taken away kicking and screaming; compromise and accommodation may also be acceptable. In the Soviet bloc, flexibility on the part of communist leaders often reflected the ability of popular movements to persuade and coerce leaders toward reform.
One central theme of this book is the diffusion of nonviolent methods across time and space. Indeed an historical perspective is essential because nonviolent resistance in Central and Eastern Europe began long before 1988 (Roberts 1991: 34). Resistance had been offered on various occasions and was often firmly put down. While these historical repressions are often viewed as unqualified failures, they have served a purpose through the paradox of repression. The suppression of opposition movements by Soviet forces left a mark on the collective memories of Central and Eastern European societies. The limited “failures” of earlier nonviolent action in Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Hungary thus became symbols around which contemporary protest in the 1980s was constructed.

In Czechoslovakia, for example, the protest of Jan Palach became highly relevant to nonviolent protest 20 years after his death. Palach was a young philosophy student at Prague University when Russian tanks were sent into Czechoslovakia as a response to the Prague Spring. In protest over the invasion, Palach martyred himself by self-immolation on January 16, 1969. He died three days later and more than half a million people attended his funeral in Prague while additional memorial services were held across the country (Sharp 1973). Twenty years after Palach’s protests, civic organizations arranged demonstrations to commemorate his death. The police insisted that the crowd disperse and charged with truncheons. Eda Kriseova (1993: 235), described the importance of the event:

The proud authorities would not allow people to honor the memory of a dead man, and by this they had done more to revive his memory than Havel could have if he had spoken, and perhaps more than a new human torch could have done, if one had been lit. Face to face with truncheons, people felt even closer to Jan Palach, who had intended his death to be a warning against this kind of violence. As if by a miracle, the years all merged together.

Whether or not Palach’s protest was purely nonviolent is debatable, but the paradox of repression is clearly in effect and his death precipitated nonviolent protest. Hungary’s posthumous tribute to Nagy and other dissidents of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, demonstrates the historical link between 1989 and earlier nonviolent protest was not used in historical isolation.

Nonviolent demonstrations were often powerful because they drew on traditions of opposition. Even when historical opposition was violent, contemporary movements were able to capitalize on the paradox of repression for their nonviolent protests. Visions of Jan Palach’s self-immolation and Nagy’s execution during periods of Soviet intervention were revived in the public conscience and used with effect in the 1980s. The tradition of opposition on which nonviolent action relies is much broader than one might expect by looking only at the nonviolent action that was temporally proximate to the fall of communist regimes.

The Pope’s visit to Poland in 1979 occurred over ten years before the Polish United Worker’s Party dissolved, but his tour of the country set the stage for the revolutions that followed. One decade before the Communist Party disbanded, Karol Wojtyła made his first official pilgrimage to Poland as Pope John Paul II. He delivered 32 sermons to 13 million Poles and laid the groundwork for resistance and eventually the formation of Solidarity (Weigel 1992: 131, 133). The Pope boldly criticized communism and prepared the people to make choices about opposition: “The real danger for both sides – for the Church and for the other side, call it what you will – is the man who does not take a risk and accept a challenge, who does not listen to his deepest convictions, to his inner truth, but who only wants to fit somehow, to float in conformity, moving from left to right as the wind blows” (Weigel 1992: 132). These papal masses were in themselves an act of nonviolent protest, since communist governments across Central and Eastern Europe were openly hostile to religious institutions.

At the Pope’s most acclaimed appearance, on the first day of his visit in Warsaw’s Victory Square, thousands of Polish citizens attended and repeatedly interrupted the Pope’s sermon, chanting “We want God!” The Pope was reported to reply “People are preaching with me” (Weigel 1992: 132). Adam Michnik called the pilgrimage a “national plebiscite” and Bogdan Szaikowski, a political scientist, referred to it as “a psychological earthquake, an opportunity for mass political catharsis.” Garton Ash (1990: 133) saw the Pope’s first pilgrimage as a turning point: “Here for the first time, we saw that massive, sustained, yet supremely peaceful and self-disciplined manifestation of social unity, the gentle crowd against the Party-state.” Thus, Pope John Paul II’s pilgrimage provided a unique context in which Polish citizens could express their discontent with the communist regime.

Before the Pope’s pilgrimage, Cardinal Wyszyński’s nine-year Great Novena beginning in 1966 served as an exercise in religious solidarity in the midst of a “secular” socialist state. The portrait of the Black Madonna visited every parish in the country and was received with “tens” and the program developed into a nonviolent competition with the communist leadership. In the final year, Cardinal Wyszyński himself made pilgrimage around the country where he was greeted each time by “tens and hundreds of thousands.” The state countered with a forged book of the Cardinal’s sermons. The Church and the state also engaged in a symbolic battle of banners. The Catholic authorities had decided to hang banners in the nation’s streets to celebrate the approaching millennium of the Church. The state responded to each successive banner with its own banner (Weigel 1992). After the Pope’s pilgrimage, his mantle was taken up by Father Jerzy Popieluszko, other resistance priests, and the intellectual left.

In order to appreciate the full effect of nonviolent opposition in the latter half of the 1980s, one must recognize that nonviolent opposition had been
the writing on the wall for many years in Central and Eastern European countries, particularly in those among the first to move away from communism. Gorbachev and Krenz both recognized the powerful relationship between the historical withdrawal of consent in East Germany and the current manifestations that were being expressed through nonviolent protest: “We agreed that it would be naive to reduce the political crisis in his country to the developments of the past few months: in reality, the problems had been accumulating for years... Mass exodus to 'the West', a growing tide of demonstrations, civil disobedience, and open threats against the authorities threatened a peaceful settlement of the crisis” (Gorbachev 1995: 526). In summary, nonviolent resistance was not confined to the latter years of the Soviet bloc, it had been wearing away at the hegemony of communist regimes while at the same time developing a history of resistance that served as a foundation during the final revolutions.

Space

Nonviolent protests outside of the Soviet bloc contributed to the revolutions within, and those within Central and Eastern Europe contributed to one another. Certainly Gorbachev’s decision not to send in troops to crush insurgencies encouraged those who were already flooding out of East Germany, those who would participate in rallies in Czechoslovakia and Romania, and reforming politicians in the Baltic States. However, nonviolent action in non-Soviet countries not only facilitated nonviolent movements in Eastern Europe but also helped to produce Soviet nonintervention policies. Gorbachev’s positive encounters with students in China profoundly affected his reaction to China’s suppression of demonstrators. During the height of the student protest in Tiananmen Square, Gorbachev visited China and intentionally sought contact with the Chinese dissident Jiang Zemin. On one occasion, his motorcade came across a student demonstration:

We stopped, got out of our cars, and shook hands. The demonstrators maintained perfect order and themselves organized a living corridor, through which we calmly drove with our guard behind us. In short, our diverse contacts with Chinese youth confirmed for me that I had acted correctly in deciding not to postpone my visit to China, even though some of our comrades had wondered whether the student demonstrations in Beijing might not interfere with its successful conduct.

On June 4, 1989, army and police forces entered Tiananmen Square to remove student demonstrators who had been protesting nonviolently for seven weeks. Gorbachev issued a statement of regret that “combined noninterference...with a sincere interest in the stable development...along the path of reform and openness with civil peace and non-violence” (Gorbachev 1995: 493).

According to Yan Jia Qi (1992), former head of the Beijing Academy of Political Sciences, it was ironically the Tiananmen massacre that made it possible for insurgents to be successful in the Soviet bloc, because it demonstrated to Gorbachev the moral and political problems of using brutal repression to put down popular protests. On October 25, 1989, Gennady Gerasimov, a foreign ministry spokesman, announced that the Soviet Union did not have the right to interfere in the political affairs of Central and Eastern European countries. He explained that the policy was reminiscent of Frank Sinatra’s song “I Did it My Way.” The Soviet bloc countries would be allowed to do it their way.

Shortly before the announcement of the “Sinatra Doctrine,” Gorbachev visited East Germany where citizens were expressing their desire to go their own way as well. As with his visit to China, Gorbachev encountered activists and demonstrators when he attended events commemorating the fortieth anniversary of the GDR in early October 1989. Erich Honecker, the long-time Communist leader of East Germany, had invited Gorbachev to the ceremonies, and while he was there, East German citizens appealed to him for help in reforming their situation. Gorbachev narrates his experience and thoughts in his memoirs:

I left Berlin with mixed feelings. The image of that enormous stream of humanity, the thousands of German boys and girls — healthy, strong, welcoming, thirsting for changes — had made an impression on me that instilled hope and optimism. But there was something else, too. In my memory there remained the cautious, concentrated faces of the SED leadership each of whom, it seemed, was preparing to make his decision...I returned to Moscow in a state of alarm. The country reminded me of an overheated boiler with the lid tightly closed. The danger was there for everyone to see, and subsequent events vindicated my premonitions. The crisis reached its breaking point only two weeks later...Thank God, the new East German leadership had the courage and enough common sense to refrain from trying to quench the popular unrest in blood. I believe that the Soviet position had also contributed to this; the East German leaders realized that Soviet troops would not leave their barracks under any circumstances (1995: 526).

Not only did the Tiananmen movement affect Gorbachev, his response facilitated further nonviolent action throughout the Soviet bloc in the following months.

Additional research is needed into the broader diffusion of nonviolent techniques over time and space; nonviolent movements around the world influenced political culture in the Soviet bloc long before the 1989 revolutions. For example, Soviet news agencies loved to broadcast footage of the American civil rights movement as a form of anti-American propaganda. Ironically, the broadcasts may have educated their own activists in the potential of nonviolent protest and other techniques.
Conversion and coercion

Sometimes, the effectiveness of nonviolent action is downplayed on the grounds that Communist leaders were simply “giving in.” Some think nonviolent action is only effective when it is obvious that communist leaders were clearly forced from power once they simply had no more options. However, it is important to realize that nonviolent action can produce multiple results, including what Sharp (1973) calls conversion, accommodation, and nonviolent coercion. In conversion, an opponent’s will is transformed such that the opponent desires to meet the requests of the nonviolent activist. Accommodation, a combination of conversion and coercion, occurs when the opponent’s will is not entirely transformed, but the opponent is compelled to grant concessions. Nonviolent coercion results when a regime’s ability to function is sufficiently crippled by the withdrawal of consent that the regime is forced to concede by default.

Coercion, was rarely the final result of nonviolent action in the Soviet bloc. Nicolae Ceaușescu was clearly coerced, even to the point of execution, but the means of his removal were considerably more violent than in any of the other East European countries. His regime was finally swept away only after intense fighting between Ceaușescu’s security forces and army units. Certainly, there were individual incidents in which communist leaders felt constrained by nonviolent techniques. As we have already noted, repression was, at times, simply not an option due to the mere volume of nonviolent demonstrators or the unwillingness of military and police commanders to carry out orders. Overall though, none of the regimes, outside of Ceaușescu’s, were suddenly dragged away kicking and screaming, but perhaps only grumbling.

Conversion was also rare. Most communist regimes were replaced through democratic elections, and their high-ranking leaders were forced to resign. However, the Baltic state governments remained intact because government officials themselves acted as agents of the people in opposition to the central government in Moscow. In Poland, Jaruzelski, a prominent leader, remained in office, though his election was sanctioned by Solidarity. When Jaruzelski resigned as president to make way for Walesa, he expressed his conversion offering public apologies for decisions he had made over the years (New York Times 1991: 510–11).

Instead of pure conversion or coercion, most of the communist regimes in the Soviet bloc made a series of accommodations in the form of increasing political freedoms and negotiations that eventually eroded their ability to maintain their ascendancy. It might appear that communist leaders were simply “giving in” when, instead, their actions were a chain of partly coerced concessions offered to civic opposition organizations such as Solidarity, Civic Forum, and New Forum. Thus, Gorbachev intended that the Communist Party retain authority in Soviet life, but the accommodations he made in terms of glasnost and the Sinatra Doctrine eventually led to the disintegration of the USSR from above and below.

A willingness by regimes to offer concessions in the face of nonviolent action does not necessarily diminish the effectiveness of the action. To measure the success of nonviolent action only in terms of coercion would mean discounting a key element of nonviolent action. Such a move would, as this book suggests, be a mistake. Accommodation and even conversion can be a direct result of nonviolent action. For other communist leaders, nonviolent protest was the political writing on the wall, and many such leaders should be given credit for recognizing the importance of the people’s voices. In summary, the effectiveness of nonviolent action can be varied, subtle, and elusive, and should not be dismissed too hastily.

Conclusion

The Soviet bloc revolutions that culminated in 1989 and 1990 were extraordinary, primarily nonviolent transitions, a fact that is especially notable given that they occurred within the jurisdiction of one of the world’s greatest military superpowers. Once communist regimes at the periphery began to collapse, very little time passed before the core, in Moscow, was also faltering. There was considerable variation between the national revolutions across a number of dimensions (political, economic, geographical, historical, civic, religious), but in other ways they were also remarkably similar and interconnected.

The presence of nonviolent social movements was one of the common denominators shared by each country. Social movements developed their own particular histories and programs of action, but they also shared features such as their strategies. First, nonviolent social movements developed within institutions such as the Christian Church, cultural organizations, and various media that provided resources for the development and dissemination of nonviolent philosophy and strategies. This resource mobilization was fundamental to the execution of nonviolent action.

Second, nonviolent protest involving large crowds was the most common form of nonviolent actions, and protesters often used creative and thought-provoking conflict symbols to communicate their will. In other instances, insurgents employed nonviolent non-cooperation and nonviolent intervention to draw the attention of authorities and pressure them to make concessions. Third, these methods were largely successful as a function of the paradox of repression. Nonviolent social movements took advantage of the principle whereby regimes’ attempts at repression backfired, magnifying popular discontent, delegitimizing the regime, and further mobilizing opposition movements.

In this chapter, we have contended that nonviolent social movements were a highly significant factor (among others) in the demise of communist regimes. Some scholars of the revolutions claim that the movements were relatively insignificant and isolated events when compared with problems
in the political and economic systems. Before one dismisses nonviolent social movements as isolated events, however, one should consider them within their broader historical and geographical contexts. Popular protest seems to have appeared almost spontaneously at the end of the 1980s, but movements that were active between 1988 and 1991 drew upon traditions of nonviolent opposition that extended decades into the past.

We have also argued that nonviolent action, properly understood, was effective in persuading and coercing communist elites. Many communist authorities were compelled to accommodate the oppositions’ demands in the face of massive nonviolent protests. Some concessions were made grudgingly. Others were granted willingly by communist leaders who saw in the protests the massive withdrawal of consent and the inevitability of change.

To summarize, the nonviolent revolutions in the Soviet bloc are another expression of the proliferation of nonviolent social movements in this century. We have identified fundamental features of nonviolent struggle while, at the same time, appreciating the diversity of circumstances in which the revolutions occurred and the forms the revolutions assumed. Our goal has been to provide a general account of the Soviet bloc revolutions in hopes of provoking further research into the dynamics and execution of nonviolent action. These revolutions provide a wealth of case studies, and more specific inquiries will help to clear up debates about the relevance of nonviolent action in facilitating peaceful social change.

Notes

1 Czechoslovakian students chanted “We have bare hands” during the pivotal demonstration on November 17, 1989 that marked the beginning of the “Velvet Revolution.”

2 We will be paying particular attention to Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Romania, the Baltic States, and Russia.

3 The compilation of New York Times (1991) articles assembled in The Collapse of Communism have been especially useful. This book will be cited throughout this chapter as (New York Times 1991).

4 Grosz replaced Janos Kadar, who, while still clinging to the ascendency of the Communist Party, had instituted some economic reforms and allowed reformers to develop (Stokes 1993).

5 On May 24, 1998, the Hungarian Civic Party won the most seats in parliamentary elections, making Victor Orbán the new prime minister.

6 Other accounts suggest that Egon Krenz took the initiative in canceling the police operation (New York Times) or that Masur and his colleagues contacted Krenz (Anderson 1990).

7 Ironically, New Forum, the opposition organization that received the lion’s share of popular support, never intended the reunification of Germany. Instead, they envisioned a reformed socialist East Germany.

8 The defense of opposition buildings in Russia and Romania are instances in which mixed methods were used. Defenders of the Russian parliament building had a limited number of small firearms and molotov cocktails. Free Romanian Television’s Studio 4 was being protected by army personnel.

9 For another analysis of nonviolent action in the Soviet bloc, see Adam Roberts’s “Civil Resistance in the East European and Soviet Revolutions.”

10 Vaclav Havel’s authorized biographer.

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