Politics and International Relations

Pierre Hassner

Civil Resistance and Power Politics: The Experience of Non-violent Action from Gandhi to the Present

Adam Roberts and Timothy Garton Ash, eds.


Adam Roberts is one of the world’s foremost students of non-violent action, intervention and the use of force. More than 40 years ago he co-authored with the late Philip Windsor an excellent book about Czechoslovakia 1968, in which they examined both Czech non-violent resistance and the more general meaning of the Prague Spring. Timothy Garton Ash, who also spent time in Czechoslovakia during what he called ‘the Magic Lantern Revolution’ of 1989, has never ceased since then to reflect on the specificity of the East European anti-totalitarian revolutions, concluding that their originality consisted in their non-violent character. No two scholars are more qualified to bridge the gap between the so-called idealists, who think that non-violent action will replace the use of force, and the ‘realists’, who deny its political importance and see it, condescendingly, as an illusion based exclusively on religious and moral considerations.

Roberts and Garton Ash succeed in their task magnificently. Seldom has a collective work displayed such coordinated research; seldom has the selection of authors been so successful (all 22 chapters are excellent, even if some are more excellent than others, such as Charles Maier’s essay on East Germany and Stephen Jones’s on Georgia); and seldom have the introductory and concluding essays in an edited work been so effective, in this case in conveying a message of diversity and complexity.

The general question, of course, is whether civil resistance is ever successful. The answer: it depends. Sometimes, as in Ireland, non-violence fails and is replaced by violent action; sometimes the two co-exist, as in South Africa during the struggle against apartheid; sometimes non-violent action is successful by itself, as in the case of the Baltic states, or of the Iranian Revolution against the Shah; and sometimes it is successfully repressed, as at Tianan Men, Myanmar, or in the case of the Iranian revolt against the rigged elections of 2009.

The outcome in such cases has as much to do with the nature, strength and, above all, self-assurance of the power against which non-violent resistance is directed as with the resistance itself. In Mark Kramer’s contribution, ‘The Dialectics of Empire: Soviet Leaders and the Challenge of Civil Resistance in Eastern Europe’, he notes that while Gorbachev was clearly influenced by the experiences of 1956 and 1968, the decisive factor in 1989 was his reluctance or outright unwillingness to use force and, more generally, the doubts of communist elites across Eastern Europe about their own legitimacy. Even in Poland, the only country where the initiative came from below, what Aleksander Smolar calls the ‘self-
limiting revolution’ was met with self-limiting repression. Deng Xiaoping did not have the same scruples as Gorbachev; nor have the Shah’s successors (notably Ayatollah Khamenei and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad) displayed the same hesitations and weaknesses as he did. Nelson Mandela’s victory had much to do with the response of F.W. de Klerk.

Also important are the respective inner compositions of each party, and the external environments in which they operate. In some cases, non-violent leaders and militants are isolated, while in others they are joined by popular masses. In discussions of China, Iran and Myanmar, authors Merle Goldman, Ervand Abrahamian and Christina Fink respectively point out that earlier non-violent revolts went unnoticed or failed because of the isolation of the resistors.

Finally, popular participation as well as government concessions or repression are based on an interplay between national traditions and international influences and context. Goldman shows that the Tiananmen protesters were influenced both by the Confucian tradition of moral warnings to power and by foreign ideas ranging from the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi to Western liberalism. Likewise, the attitudes of post-war US administrations towards the Civil Rights movement were directly linked, as shown by Doug McAdam, to the context of the Cold War, just as Gorbachev’s refusal of violence was linked to his desire to put an end to the arms race. Of course, as Garton Ash points out, this international dimension is linked, for both sides, to modern communications, which favour the theatrical dimension of resistance and which can spread its influence to distant and sometimes unexpected times and places.

One can only conclude with Adam Roberts’s observation, made in his masterful introduction to this indispensable book, that on the one hand ‘civil resistance is a special option for special circumstances’ but on the other that ‘such circumstances occur more frequently, in greater variety and with more connexions with other factors of power, than most pronouncements and writings on politics and international relations have recognized’.

****