

Nonviolent movement

[Politics](#), [Civil Rights](#)



There is a wide-spread conception in the theory of nation-building that violence is an ultimate way to express disagreement and overcome injustice as well as fight a dictatorship. But the last century has proven the fallaciousness of this conception. Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela and Dalai Lama and many others have shown that nonviolence can be more powerful force in defeating oppressive rulers and laws. Their lives and actions are examples how oppressors or unjust legislation may be defied by the force of word and soul rather than by the force of weapons. Gene Sharp summarizes the effectiveness of nonviolent actions with such words: “ nonviolent action is possible, and is capable of wielding great power even against ruthless rulers and military regimes, because it attacks the most vulnerable characteristic of all hierarchical institutions and governments: dependence on the governed” (p. 18).

Nonviolent action is an application of a very simple truth: people do not always do what they are told to do, and sometimes they do that which has been forbidden. When people refuse their cooperation, withhold their help, and persist in their disobedience and defiance, they do this to deny their opponents the basic human assistance and cooperation which any government or hierarchical system requires. If they do this collectively through their established independent social institutions or newly improvised groupings for a sufficient period of time, the power of that government will weaken and potentially dissolve.

The world history has witnessed the cases when nonviolent means have been chosen over violence for religious or ethical reasons. In some cases, even when pragmatic political considerations were dominant in the choice of

nonviolent struggle, the movement has taken on certain religious or ethical overtones. This was the case in the campaigns of the Indian National Congress for independence from Britain in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s. Those struggles, often under Gandhi's leadership, and also the civil rights campaigns in the 1950s and 1960s in the Deep South of the United States, under the leadership of Martin Luther King, Jr., are very important.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, better known as Mahatma Gandhi, is the first name that comes to mind when one speaks of nonviolence in the 20th century. His charisma and his action not only had a profound effect on India's modern history, but also provided firm basis for all future nonviolent struggles in the world. Gandhi's political philosophy revolved around three key concepts: satyagraha (non-violence), sawaraj (home rule), and sarvodaya (welfare of all). Whereas satyagraha was essentially a tactic of achieving political ends by non-violent means, sawaraj and sarvodaya sought to encourage ideas of individual and collective improvement and regeneration. Such regeneration, Gandhi insisted, was necessary if India was to rediscover her enduring historical and religious self and throw off British rule. (Andrews, 1949)

Perhaps Gandhi's best-known act of civil disobedience, known as the second satyagraha ('hold fast to the truth') was Salt March that was taking place in 1930 from 12 March to 6 April. It expressed increasing frustration by Congress at its own impotence and, specifically, the British refusal to grant Dominion status to India. Gandhi chose the hated salt tax as the object of his campaign. At the time, the Indian government maintained a monopoly over the manufacture of salt, an essential basic commodity which was thus

heavily taxed. Those using their own salt, e. g. if they were living close to the sea, were subject to heavy punishment.

The 61-year-old Mahatma started the 240-mile-long march from Sabarmati to the coastal town of Dandi together with seventy-eight of his followers. He was joined by thousands along the way, in a march that received vast international and national attention. When the protesters marched on to a government salt depot, he was arrested, as were between 60, 000 and 90, 000 other Indians in subsequent months, as well as the entire Congress leadership. Gandhi was released and called off the campaign in March 1931 following the Gandhi-Irwin Pact, which allowed Gandhi to participate in the second Round Table Conference, and symbolically permitted the production of salt for domestic consumption.

From the 1920s to early 1940s, he led a series of passive resistance campaigns in pursuit of Swaraj, which redefined the character of Indian nationalism. He sought tolerance between Hindus and Muslims and the eradication of caste untouchability. In January 1948 he was assassinated by a Hindu fanatic for his pro-Muslim sympathies. Gandhi's insistence that means were more important than the ends distinguished him from other great political leaders of the twentieth century.

Since his death Gandhi has become the source of inspiration for non-violent political movements such as the Civil Rights Movement in the USA. Desmond Tutu in the article *A Force More Powerful a Century of Nonviolent Conflict* rightfully points out: " The leaders who opted for nonviolent weapons often learned from resistance movements of the past. Indian nationalist leader Mohandas Gandhi was inspired by the Russian Revolution of 1905. The Rev.

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Martin Luther King, Jr. and other African American leaders traveled to India to study Gandhi's tactics." (Tutu, 2000) Non-cooperation was a major tactic employed by Gandhi when he felt the state had become immoral or unjust. In the King movement, such action was called boycott, the most effective nonviolent tactic employed in the movement to abolish discrimination in public transportation in Montgomery, Alabama.

The justification for such action lies in the fact that rejection is as much of an action as acceptance. Thus, King, like Gandhi, while emphasizing the necessity of courage, utilized the boycott to achieve rejection of unjust laws regulating public transportation and public lunch counters. The net effect of the various expressions of the nonviolent protest, especially the boycott, strike, demonstration and jail, was to draw one's opponent off balance, hoping thereby to change his mind. (Smith, p. 58) Nonviolence, therefore, was not a sign of weakness or of a lack of courage. Quite the contrary, King believed that only the strong and courageous person could be nonviolent. He advised persons not to get involved in the civil rights struggle unless they had the strength and the courage to stand before people full of hate and to break the cycle of violence by refusing to retaliate.

King just as Gandhi emphasized the need to prepare for action. The Civil Rights Movement initiated by Martin Luther King, Jr. succeeded in mobilizing massive nonviolent direct action. Innovative tactics included economic boycotts, beginning with the yearlong boycott of a bus company in Montgomery, Alabama, begun in December 1955 and led by Martin Luther King, Jr.; sit-in demonstrations; and mass marches, including a massive mobilization of whites and blacks in the August 1963 March on Washington,

which culminated in King's "I have a dream" speech, and protest marches led by King that met with police violence in Selma, Alabama, in January 1965.

The goal of these protests was to overthrow the entire system of racial segregation and to empower African Americans by seizing the franchise. Participants of the Civil Rights Movement were often beaten and brutalized by southern law enforcement officials, and thousands were arrested and jailed for their protest activities. Some leaders and participants were killed.

Nevertheless, an endless stream of highly visible confrontations in the streets, which contrasted the brutality and the inhumanity of the white segregationists with the dignity and resolve of black protesters, made the cause of black civil rights the major issue in the United States for over a decade during the 1950s and 1960s. The nation and its leaders were forced to decide publicly whether to grant African Americans their citizenship rights or to side with white segregationists who advocated racial superiority and the undemocratic subjugation of black people.

In conclusion it would be relevant to provide a brief revision of the similarity and differences the detection of which was purpose of this analysis. The parallels between Gandhi and Martin Luther King are self-evident. This preliminary look at Gandhi and King's activity gives us the understanding that nonviolent movement cannot be limited by time frames or specific location. It rather needs a leader with strong character, resilience and ability to persuade people. The two leaders preferred nonviolence at a time when their people were being oppressed. Both struggled against the yoke of white oppression. Like Gandhi, King valued the power of nonviolent political action

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in keeping with the spirit of Gandhi's satyagraha. King's role in organizing the Montgomery bus boycott enabled him to emerge as the creator of a strategy of civil disobedience that earned for the civil-rights movement in the United States unprecedented media coverage, new forms of public recognition, and greater access to political power.

Though both agreed that nonviolence is successful tactics on condition that every individual is committed to truth and justice, Gandhi tended to lay stress upon the necessity of personal suffering when participating in nonviolent movement, an attitude that to some extent was less aggressive than King's emphasis on self-sacrifice. Moreover, Gandhi claimed that to achieve the goal through nonviolence one needs patience and non-cooperation and King believed that it is a certain degree of confrontation that is necessary to accomplish change. One more difference between Gandhi and King lies in the paradigm of their activity.

While Gandhi was concerned about social injustice suffered by Indian people, King's concerns bore upon racial discrimination of African Americans in the USA. And probably the most striking difference is the result of their struggle. While Martin Luther King's ideas after his death were followed through by his followers and found an echo in common American's heart, Gandhi was criticized that his tactics unnecessarily delayed the departure of the British, precipitated the partition of India, and led to the Hinduization of Congress because of his over-emphasis on religion. Few of Gandhi's ideas were put into practice by independent India.

While both of them deserve respect and admiration, it is possible to recognize that their approaches to the practice of nonviolence later grew strong one as <https://assignbuster.com/nonviolent-movement/>

opposition, the other as protest. Gandhi and King help us to believe that peaceful resolution of a conflict will live up to its promise.

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