Article: "Nonviolent Power in the Twentieth Century"
Author: Peter Ackerman; Jack DuVall
Issue: Jun. 2000
Journal: ***PS: Political Science & Politics***

This journal is published by the American Political Science Association. All rights reserved.

APSA is posting this article for public view on its website. APSA journals are fully accessible to APSA members and institutional subscribers. To view the table of contents or abstracts from this or any of APSA's journals, please go to the website of our publisher Cambridge University Press (http://journals.cambridge.org).

This article may only be used for personal, non-commercial, or limited classroom use. For permissions for all other uses of this article should be directed to Cambridge University Press at permissions@cup.org .

Nonviolent Power in the Twentieth Century

by
Peter Ackerman,
Tufts University
Jack DuVall,
Mars Hill

One Friday night in December 1981, Lech Walesa and other leaders of Solidarity were arrested after meeting in Gdansk. For sixteen months, their free trade union movement had shaken the foundation of communist power in Poland by occupying factories and staging strikes. Now, martial law had been imposed, and Solidarity was looking down the gun barrel of defeat. But when he was taken away, Walesa challenged his captors. "At this moment, you lost," he told them. "We are arrested, but you have driven a nail into your communist coffin . . . . You'll come back to us on your knees" (1998).

If violence is power, and if repression has no answer, then Walesa's words were foolish. But he knew that Solidarity had already defined the course of the conflict by depriving the regime of the Polish people's consent. When the state had run out of ways to coerce their compliance, it would have to come to terms. Seven years later, General Wojciech Jaruzelski, the leader who had jailed Walesa, invited him and other Solidarity leaders to join roundtable talks that led to elections and the formation of a new government. In 1990, Walesa, a shipyard electrician only ten years before, became president of Poland. He had never fired a shot, nor had any one in Solidarity. But he and his followers threw back the shroud of authoritarian power and gave freedom to every Pole.

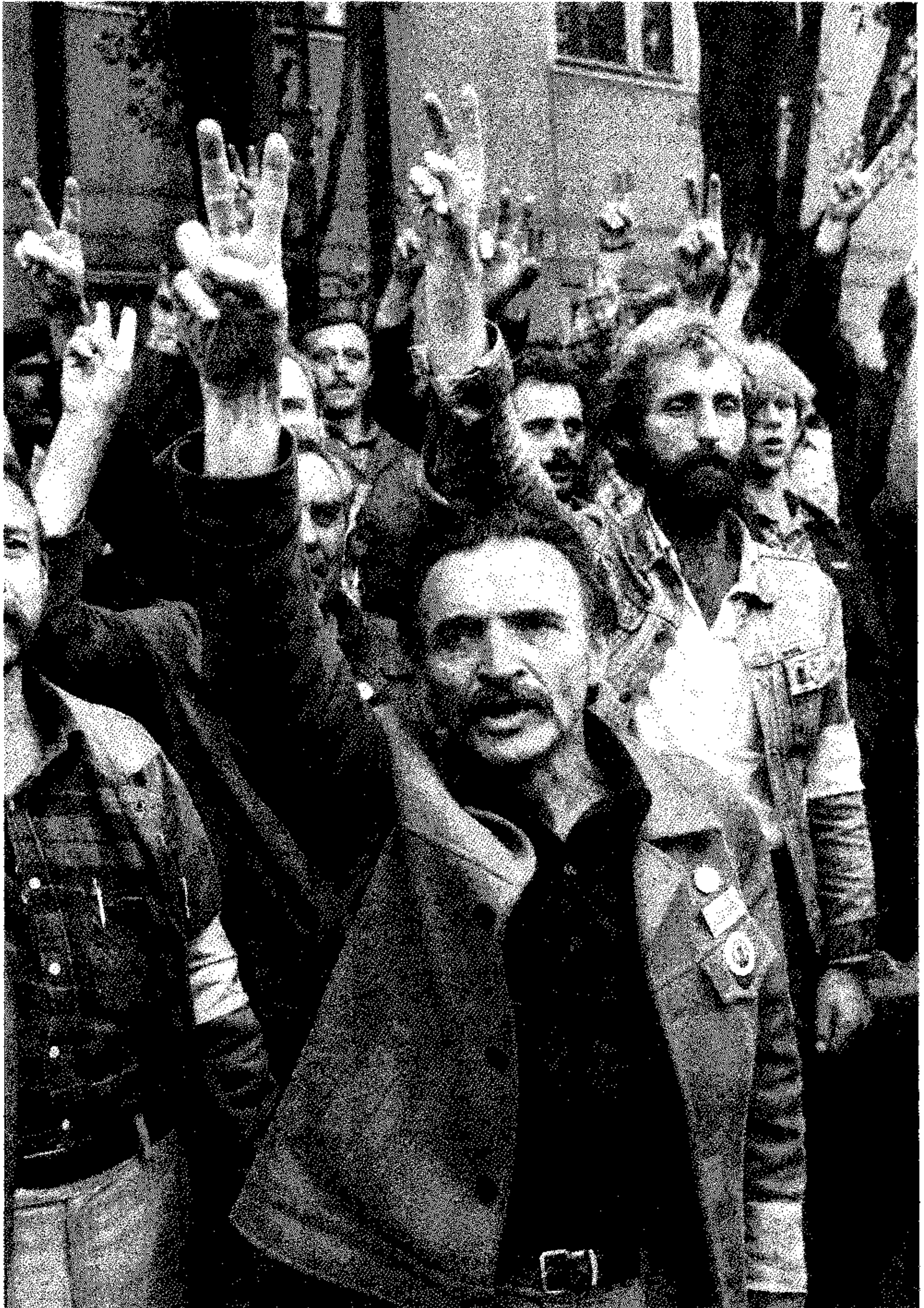
A Force More Powerful is about popular movements battling entrenched regimes or military forces with weapons very different from guns and bullets. In each of the conflicts covered by the series, strikes, boycotts, or other disruptive actions were used as sanctions, as aggressive measures to constrain or punish opponents, and to win concessions. Protests such as petitions, parades, walk-outs, and demonstrations roused public support for the resisters. Forms of noncooperation such as boycotts, resignations, and civil disobedience helped subvert the operations of government. And direct intervention such as sit-ins, nonviolent sabotage, and blockades frustrated many rulers' will to subjugate the people (Ackerman and Kruegler 1994, 6).

The historical results were massive: Tyrants were toppled, governments were overthrown, occupying armies were impeded, and political systems that withheld human rights were shattered. Entire societies were transformed, suddenly or gradually, by people using nonviolent resistance to destroy their opponents' capacity to control events. How this happened, and the ideas lying at the root of nonviolent action, are the heart of this documentary television series and its companion book.

In 1936, Gandhi was visited by a well-known African-American minister and his wife, who asked him at one point whether nonviolent resistance was "a form of direct action." He replied vigorously, "It is not one form, it is the only form . . . . It is the greatest and the activist force in the world . . . . It is a force which is more positive than electricity, and more powerful than even ether" (Jack 1994, 313-16). It was as if Gandhi conceived of it, not as the product of beliefs, but as a kind of science, with laws to be applied and effects that could be predicted.

Few who relied on nonviolent sanctions in the twentieth century did so because of a principled attachment to nonviolence. Some simply lacked access to arms; others had recently seen a violent insurrection fail with devastating results for life and property. But, wanting passionately to take down the rulers or the laws that held them in subjection, they chose different kinds of weapons with which to fight.

The leaders who opted for nonviolent weapons often learned from earlier



Poland. Polish workers demonstrate at the Gdansk shipyard. Photo by Erazm Ciolek

experience. Gandhi was inspired by strikes and marches in Russia in 1905. The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and other African-American leaders traveled to India to study Gandhi's tactics. When Chileans organized against the dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet in the 1980s, and Filipinos organized against Ferdinand Marcos, they were influenced by Richard Attenborough's motion picture *Gandhi*. The experience of these and the other nonviolent resisters in our stories teach many lessons.

- The use of nonviolent sanctions has been far more frequent than usually supposed and has not been limited by the type of regime being opposed or by place or time.
- There is no correlation between the degree of violence faced by nonviolent resisters and the likelihood of their success. Some who faced the most violent opponents were the most successful.
- A movement's ability to thrive degenerates when its participants use violence, because once a regime is attacked with deadly force, repres sion intensifies.
- Mobilizing and maintaining a popular move ment geared to nonviolent action go hand in hand with forming a civil society and sustaining democracy.

News coverage of mass nonviolent action has left the impression that "people power" comes from the size or energy of crowds who agitate in city streets. While physically confronting an opponent is often necessary, the true rhythm of nonviolent action is less spontaneous than it is strategic. Shouting slogans and putting flowers in gun barrels may heighten resisters' enthusiasm but cannot separate a government from its means of control.

The greatest misconception about conflict in our century is that violence is always the ultimate form of power, that no other method of advancing a just cause or defeating injustice can surpass it. But Indians, Danes, Poles, South Africans, Chileans, African Americans, and many others have proved, in the words of Gene Sharp, that "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" (1994, 18).

Nonviolent power, and the democratic potential, are therefore naturally linked. "When . . . the Romans spoke of the *civitas* as their form of government," the political philosopher Hannah Arendt observed, "they had in mind a concept of power and law whose essence did not rely on the command-obedience relationship," and the leaders of the great eighteenth-century political revolutions in America and Europe resurrected this concept in establishing republics, "where the rule of law, resting on the power of the people, would put an end to the rule of man over man. . . ." (1972, 139). In the twentieth century, that began to be a worldwide reality, thanks in great part to the history-making nonviolent movements that *A Force More Powerful* chronicles.

References

Ackerman, Peter, and Christopher Kruegler. 1994. *Strategic Nonviolent Conflict: The Dynamics of People Power in the Twentieth Century.* Westport, CT: Praeger.

Arendt, Hannah. 1972. *Crises of the Republic.* San Diego: Harcourt Brace.

Jack, Homer. 1994. *The Gandhi Reader.* New York: Grove Press.

Sharp, Gene. 1994. "The Role of Power in Nonviolent Struggle." *Monograph Series, No. 3.* Cambridge, MA: The Albert Einstein Institution.

Walesa, Lech. 1998. Videotaped interview by Tom Weidlinger. Gdansk, September 28. *A Force More Powerful.* Alexandria, VA: York Zimmer Inc. and WETA.