

# **“Peaceful Revolutionary Heroes”: Non-Violence, Revolution, and Opposition in Cold War Peripheries**

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## Abstract

The ascendance of a norm of non-violent protest or “civil resistance” against a government or occupying force may, at first, seem self-evident. As modern states have come to attain overwhelming military and policing powers over their populations, the idea of using violent means to oppose a regime seems ineffective, at best, and dangerous, at worst. Yet, the near total embrace of and insistence on non-violence should not be considered a foregone conclusion. They must be examined historically so as to understand how people across time and space have supported what was fundamentally a radical ideology of resistance to inequality, colonialism, and political repression.

This project centers on the question of how non-violence became a norm for resistance and struggle. It focuses on the potential entanglement of two processes of transformation: the Black American freedom struggle and the regime changes in East Central Europe in 1989, that are inexorably linked to non-violence or peaceful transition. It considers how the “other” transatlantic relationship, between Black Americans and eastern Europeans during the Cold War, shaped opposition politics in East Central Europe. This project places a special emphasis on the intellectual roots, social organization, and tactical methods of non-violent political opposition and peace movements in Hungary from approximately 1947 to 1990. It will also pay special attention to how the socialist ideal of revolutionary action changed over time, as the needs of socialist states changed. These changes then required a reformulation of what type of behavior fit into the framework of communist and anti-communist revolutionary activity, but also a reformulation of masculinized heroism that butted heads with older tropes of the muscular industrial worker and the defiant freedom fighter.

## Introduction

In a 1964 interview that Martin Luther King, Jr. gave to *BZ* during his visit to Berlin, published under the title, “Er Waffnen ist Gewaltlösigkeit” [His weapon is nonviolence], he told the interviewer that he was very interested in the problem of divided Germany. MLK said he had thought extensively about the possibility of using nonviolence to overthrow the East German government, but ultimately concluded “Aber die Verhältnisse liegen hier so ganz anders.” [But the situation here is so different]. Earlier, in 1956 and again in 1961, MLK addressed events in East Central Europe in a letter and an interview in connection with civil disobedience and why law breaking was necessary, despite criticisms, often from allies of the broader civil rights movement. His answer highlighted some of the fundamental issues that stand at the core of this study: who gets to use violence and in what context is it necessary to deploy? But perhaps more vitally: how did non-violence as both tactic and philosophy come to be stripped of its fundamentally radical and revolutionary potential? The goal of this project is to investigate this larger question through the entangled history of eastern European opposition and peace movements with Black Americans’ engagement with freedom struggles and the socialist movement abroad.

One of the broader aims of my research is to understand how knowledge about “the situation” faced by Europeans living in socialist states was produced in the United States. This will lay a vital foundation for how and why a particular memory of regime change in the 1980s and 1990s was crystallized in the “West.” This memory is focused on non-violent opposition movements like Solidarity (Poland) and not on the Romanian Revolution or the wars in southeastern Europe that lasted for nearly a decade. The materials held by the Rockefeller Archive Center, including the Rockefeller Foundation records, but especially the Ford Foundation records, are vital to this project. Foundations played an important role in supporting knowledge production in both the European postwar socialist space and regarding the conditions facing Black Americans. During my research stipend period, I focused mostly on foundation activities related to eastern Europe in the first decade after 1945.

## Historical Context

While non-violent forms of resistance such as boycotts have existed for a long time, the concept of non-violence became radicalized at the turn of the twentieth century when Mohandas Gandhi articulated his vision for Indian independence in the 1909 work, *Hind Swaraj*.<sup>1</sup> The pamphlet appeared just a year after Georges Sorel's *Réflexions sur la violence*, but arrived at very different conclusions from his French counter-part.<sup>2</sup> Gandhi offered what he regarded as an alternative to traditional Western understandings of the relationship between power and violence shaped by the nature of colonial rule in India. By redefining violence as more than physical brutality, Gandhi showed that nonviolent resistance was powerful as a:

[way] of self-creation-the opening of new spaces in which a variety of discourses challenging oppressive 'normalcy' can flourish.... [N]onviolent direct action is not a counterproductive enterprise tainted with the same pathologies of modern disciplinary power, but the most effective way of frustrating unaccountable power networks through the transformation of popular obedience.<sup>3</sup>

Gandhi's advocacy of nonviolence and non-cooperation was tied to the historical and political context in which he operated. His position depended on the status of Indians as subordinated, marginalized, and racialized subjects in the British Empire, and therefore reflected the political reality of India.

Yet, both Gandhi and Sorel viewed Western "liberal" society as interested mainly in giving the state a monopoly on violence, rather than eradicating violence altogether. Both responded to a particular vision of state-building and political modernization that had been developing in Europe for more than a century. They both rejected the idea that the state, and by extension, a rising middle class, had an exclusive right to the legitimate use of violence; Gandhi - because Western rule was inherently foreign and corrupted the souls of Indians, Sorel - because parliamentary democracy was corrupted.<sup>4</sup> They therefore saw the need to remove the legitimacy of these governments through the challenge of the state's monopoly on force. For Gandhi, this meant challenging the Raj with "truth force" which he

believed would destabilize a government that only knew how to respond to violence. For Sorel, this meant the proletariat's appropriation of violence from the bourgeois government of France that attempted to pacify the proletariat in order to fortify its own claims to power.

After Gandhi, probably the most famous theorist and practitioner of non-violent political action was Martin Luther King, Jr., who deployed it as both a strategy and ideology during the United States Civil Rights Movement (CRM). The popular memory of the movement in the United States lionizes King and Gandhi, but it has also erased the radicalism of this approach to mass politics.<sup>5</sup> Non-violent "direct action" was deployed with the understanding that it would most probably spark violence, and would require, as King wrote in his "Letter from Birmingham Jail," "[presenting] our very bodies as a means of laying our case before the conscience of the local and national community."<sup>6</sup> Far from a well-accepted political strategy, non-violence was regarded by many as a radical, indeed *extreme* position. Its practitioners were labeled as "rabble rousers" who broke laws and eschewed incremental change through negotiation. It also frequently precipitated violence by the state, which was understood by proponents as a possible outcome that would likely bring about the desired result more quickly.<sup>7</sup> Thus, non-violence and violence were entangled with each other, and the success of non-violence in large part depended on the use of violence.

Although primarily associated with the almost apotheosized figures of Gandhi and King, non-violence played an important role in postwar Western European social movements against racism and the Vietnam War, for women's right, and in the Eastern Bloc, supporting protests for democratic reform.<sup>8</sup> These non-violent protests took place during the same period that radical groups on both the right and left (Irish Republican Army, Rote Armee Fraktion, *Golpe Borghese*) committed acts of political violence such as kidnappings, bombings, hijackings, etc. that have received a great deal of attention due to their radical and revolutionary nature.<sup>9</sup> Non-violence and violence were part of a common toolkit of protest and insurgency that provoked a strong response by the state, by the populace, and among the international community. Both were strategies, used at different moments, for different ends. Yet, it was non-violence that has become the preferred—or perhaps compulsory—mode of legitimate political protest. This

was the case even among Eastern Bloc regimes, which worked to promote a different ideology of political mobilization that would shift away from the socialist revolutionary tradition of liberationist/insurgent (read: violent) struggle and promote a more bureaucratized, orderly population. The goal was to change an imperfect system through small, incremental reforms, not full-scale systemic transformation. This “long-term, patient, regular activism,” it was believed, would culminate in “responsible revolution” that would occur within a well-consolidated social and political order.<sup>10</sup>

By the late 1960s, Western and Eastern European leaders were fearful of the exportation of anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist violence from the “third world” into Europe and of the activities of radical nationalist and anti-imperialist liberationist groups. They came to embrace a common ethos that sought the marginalization of discourses and practices of violence with the common aim of ensuring security and stability in Europe. For both blocs, the legitimacy of their states, domestically and internationally, was at stake. How governments reacted to protest, in more or less repressive and violent ways, had the potential to undermine the foundations of democracy and socialism, laying bare the capacity and willingness of governments to deploy violence against their own populations. The moral, political, and diplomatic crises these actions sparked resonated across the globe, and contributed to the convergence of the European socialist and capitalist spheres. Both increasingly sought to channel people into playing by a common set of rules, thereby redefining radical non-violent direct action as a form, in many ways the only, legitimate form of protest. All other forms of violent protest and resistance, now associated with people of color, were delegitimized, often as terrorism.<sup>11</sup>

## Research Questions

This study is driven by a set of questions related to the history of non-violence and violence and its ascendance as a norm of social movement organizing. However, the goal of my investigation in the records of both the Ford Foundation and the

Rockefeller Foundation centered on one core question that will ground the larger investigation: How were those engaged in the Black Freedom Struggle connected—or not—to oppositional struggles against the state in East Central Europe at roughly the same time? To answer this question, however, it is necessary to systematically investigate how and what types of knowledge were produced about East Central Europe in the early Cold War period.

The popular narrative of Soviet interest in the Black Freedom Struggle has been to dismiss it as primarily instrumental and deployed merely as anti-American propaganda. Many people in socialist countries may have been jaded about the value of information appearing in party-state media outlets. Yet, this explanation does not provide insight as to how people received news about the developments that defined the “classical” CRM or how they interpreted it in a broader geopolitical narrative that began before the Cold War. Stories about systemic and violent racism in the U.S. may have been instrumentalized by socialist governments in party newspapers, but they were hardly invented from thin air.<sup>12</sup> And furthermore, the dominant focus on state level anti-racism in the Soviet Union does not show how ethics of racial and economic justice and ideals of democracy were defined and redefined by local populations, which had their own recent histories of deadly ethnic violence and legal discrimination with which to contend. In other words, thus far, scholarship has focused on Soviet anti-racism from above, but has not generally explored anti-racism from below. Nor has there been much scholarly attention paid to the relationship between African Americans and other socialist spaces in Europe outside of the USSR or the GDR, though scholarship on “second” and “third” world connections is quickly developing.<sup>13</sup>

The larger question that the collections at the Rockefeller Archive Center are able to help answer is how knowledge about eastern Europe was created in the United States in the post-1948 period, that is, after the establishment of the people’s democracies? East central European communist regimes, as we can see from Martin Luther King, Jr.’s comments above, were not simply an extension of the Soviet Union, and thus a zone of liberation. For most Americans, these were uncritically conceived as “Captive Nations,” in which the people had become “cog[s] in the wheel to advance a particular ideology....”<sup>14</sup>

## Collections

The lack of neutrality regarding information about the CRM seeping into socialist states closely mirrors the lack of neutrality about eastern European socialist countries that has informed American popular and scholarly narratives about the region and about socialism and/or communism, from the late 1940s until the present day. The Ford Foundation and Rockefeller Foundation both played important roles in institutionalizing this knowledge in specific ways.

Given the explicit policy priorities outlined in Ford Foundation’s 1949 Gaither Report, especially, according to the 1950 annual report, the promotion of world peace and “securing allegiance to the principles of freedom and democracy,” the foundation’s anticommunism was fairly obvious.<sup>15</sup> Yet, the Ford Foundation played a vital, long-term role in the construction of knowledge about the region and the field of Eastern European and Slavic studies in the United States that was fundamentally reflected its larger democratic—thinly veiled anticommunist—and world peace missions. This entailed a variety of moves that were intended to help officials “create the public awareness and understanding necessary for the execution of policy necessary in a democratic system.”<sup>16</sup> The assumption was that a foundation was an appropriate and objective, “nonpartisan and nonpolitical” source of information that could contribute to the formulation of better, more effective policies.<sup>17</sup>

In the roughly ten years after World War II, which is the period I focused on during my research, support from Ford was generally centered on assistance for resettlement of refugees and emigrants, especially intellectuals, professors, and students from East Central Europe, through the auspices of both the Ford Foundation and its offshoot: the East European Fund (FA747). To be clear, the focus was not so much on eastern Europe as a whole, but on the Soviet Union (not the broader “Soviet space”) specifically. Much of the material it collected and the knowledge produced about this region reflected the narrow experiences of either this group of “elites” (a word used by groups like the International Rescue Committee) or Americans with a variety of experiences and expertise related to

Russia. This was not regarded as problematic at the time, but it was based on the assumption that émigré experiences are appropriate stand-ins for local perspectives and there was not much critical reflection on how this particular group's experiences might not be representative of non-elites. While some persons were concerned about the longer-term effects of a “totalitarian” perspective on the integration of émigrés, they were not as reflective concerning how their expectations as Americans might encourage people to tell particular stories or perpetuate certain narratives to garner assistance.

One example was the allocation of five hundred thousand dollars in 1951 for the relocation of professionals from Displaced Persons Camps as part of the Resettlement Campaign for Exiled Intellectuals overseen by the International Rescue Committee. When this grant was publicized, it was framed as a beneficial relocation of an “elite” that would be useful in pursuing the democratic objectives of the United States.<sup>18</sup> The people who would benefit from this assistance were precisely those persons (and their families), who would prove beneficial to the U.S. because of their expertise. However, it was also understood that relocation assistance for émigrés from East Central Europe was not enough. It was also important to shape assistance so as to ensure that the “American dream” became a reality for immigrants who arrived in the United States from “totalitarian” countries and were stuck working more blue-collar jobs.

The failure to prevent recent immigrants from becoming depressed about their plight in the United States had larger consequences as it had the potential to sow disillusionment about American democracy and make them more vulnerable to communism or radical ideologies. It seems to have been widely held that one disgruntled person who returned to Europe from the United States had the potential to turn many more people against the United States. A manifestation of this attitude moved beyond support for refugee settlement and into assistance with helping certain people find white-collar jobs, though not necessarily ones that fully matched their skill sets. For example, with assistance, several persons gained employment as language instructors in certain places where critical language training programs were being established, including the language school for the Department of Defense in Monterey, California.<sup>19</sup> The East European Fund also set its sights on immigrant assimilation programs in major U.S. cities, both

large- and medium-sized metropolitan areas, but the Fund basically stopped functioning by 1955, having generally lost access not only to the geopolitical areas in which it was interested, but also having seen the influx of émigrés dry up.

The 1956 Hungarian Revolution created a new refugee crisis to which both the Ford Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation responded. Around 200,000 people fled the country in the aftermath of the Soviet invasion in November 1956, but in terms of their response, the Rockefeller Foundation and Ford Foundation again focused their attention largely on the educated, and especially university students from Hungary. They provided scholarships and stipends for students to study in the United States and other countries willing to accept and provide spots for Hungarian students in their universities. According to a January 1957 report made by Shepard Stone—produced not even three months after the conclusion of the revolution—concerning the status of Hungarian refugee students and intellectuals in refugee camps in Austria, financial support for Hungarian students was directly linked to concerns that lack of support created fertile ground for communism in camps.<sup>20</sup> In other words, there was fear that the failure of the U.S. and Western European countries to step in and help resettle refugees in a timely manner would enhance the efforts by communists in the camps to “reeducate” those who had just fled a communist regime .

Following the general priority of granting funds to established organs rather than founding brand new institutions, the Ford Foundation called for funds to be transferred to the Congress for Cultural Freedom to assist with the relocation of Hungarian intellectuals to various European countries. However, Stone also called for 50,000 USD to be apportioned for various resettlement activities, including the potential establishment of a “non-political” office for the Union of Free Hungarian Students. It would “develop a pro-Western democratic spirit, among the refugee students in the hope that someday they will return home with a firm commitment to the free nation.”<sup>21</sup> While there is certainly more that could be said about this particular dimension of refugee relief, this document well reflects the inconsistent and unreflective conceptualization of what was properly defined as a “political” activity or organization by the Ford Foundation. From an analytical perspective, the clash between the idea of a “non-political office” that

would develop a “democratic spirit” seems quite obvious. Promoting democracy was political. Yet, the goal of cultivating a pro-democracy attitude appears as non-controversial and necessitates not only the development of certain values but also a geopolitical orientation. To be sure, foundation employees had to maneuver through a minefield of Cold War charities organized on behalf of those “behind the Iron Curtain.” However, the line drawn between more or less political organizations appears quite blurry in the first years of the Cold War.

## Conclusions

Although this research is still in its early stages, the materials at the Rockefeller Archive Center, especially those of the Rockefeller and Ford Foundations, have led me towards a number of tentative findings. One is the paradox of democracy promotion in the guise of a nonpolitical and nonpartisan philanthropy. This helps clarify the full naturalization of democracy, however defined, in American life to the extent that it is considered non-political and, perhaps by extension, *non-revolutionary* in its potential. Though this conclusion must be born out through further research, it provides enormous potential for furthering the aims of the larger project as it explores the deradicalization and perhaps even de-revolutionarization of nonviolent forms of political action.

The records also show that the Ford Foundation, Rockefeller Foundation, and the East European Fund played important roles in institutionalizing a particular vision of “eastern Europe”—both the Soviet Union and the postwar state socialist countries. This vision was relatively homogenous, and based largely on the experiences of 1) the Soviet Union, and 2) prewar intellectuals. These early and dramatic narratives of peoples in newly “captive nations” and a sudden, new interest in people from the Soviet Union, a state which had been in existence for more than three decades, seem to have played an ongoing role in both popular impressions of the region in policy-making circles. They would help disseminate their own particular vision of what life was like in eastern Europe for the rest of the Cold War period and beyond. In particular, their narratives of oppression and

“totalitarianism,” of “captive nations” held under “the yoke” of the Soviet Union, would become tremendously powerful for shaping diplomacy, economic policy, and Cold War memory for generations of Americans. This would have significant consequences, especially in the immediate post-Cold War period, when Americans experts and leaders assumed that the post-socialist states of eastern Europe would, relatively easily, join the “Free World” and free-market capitalism of the late 1980s. The U.S. had changed greatly in the four decades of the Cold War, but many Americans’ ideas about eastern Europe were (and are) stuck in the 1950s, even if the East/West division no longer makes sense.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mohandas K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj and Other Writings*, Anthony Parnell, ed. (Cambridge

UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Mohandas K. Gandhi, “Satyagraha Leaflet #11, May 1, 1919,” *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, ed. Vol. 18.pg. 1; Available at [www.gandhiserve.org/cwmg/cwmg.html](http://www.gandhiserve.org/cwmg/cwmg.html).

<sup>2</sup> Georges Sorel, *Réflexions sur la violence*, trans., T.E. Hume (New York: Peter Smith, 1941).

<sup>3</sup> Manfred Steger, “Searching for Satya through Ahimsa: Gandhi’s Challenge to Western Discourses of Power,” *Constellations* 13 (2006), 341.

<sup>4</sup> Steger, 335.

<sup>5</sup> Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” *The Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (March 2005), 1233–34.

<sup>6</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” April 16, 1963, The Martin Luther King Study and Research Center at Stanford University, accessed 10 November 2016 (<https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/letter-birmingham-jail>); Martin Luther King Jr., “Pilgrimage to Nonviolence,” April 13, 1960, The King Encyclopedia at Stanford University, accessed 10 November 2016 ([http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/documententry/pilgrimage\\_to\\_nonviolence/](http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/documententry/pilgrimage_to_nonviolence/)); Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1932), 253.

<sup>7</sup> King, “Letter from Birmingham Jail.” Gandhi and King both recognized that violence also had the capacity to draw people in mass numbers into a movement.

<sup>8</sup> Padraic Kenney, “Borders Breached: The Transnational in Eastern Europe since Solidarity,” *Journal of Modern European History* 8, no. 2 (2010): 184–87.

<sup>9</sup> The literature on groups like the RAF and the IRA is substantial. For the diversity of methods, see Polymeris Voglis “The Junta Came to Power by the Force of Arms, and Will Only Go by Force of Arms,” *Cultural and Social History*, 8, no. 4 (2011): 551-568 and Donatella della Porta, *Social Movements, Political Violence and the State: A Comparative Analysis of Italy and Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

<sup>10</sup> Péter Apor and James Mark, “Socialism Goes Global: Decolonization and the Making of a New Culture of Internationalism in Socialist Hungary, 1956–1989,” *Journal of Modern History* 87 (December 2015), 866.

<sup>11</sup> Apor and Mark, “Socialism Goes Global,” 884; Jennifer Ruth Hosek, *Sun, Sex, and Socialism: Cuba in the German Imaginary* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012).

<sup>12</sup> See for example Meredith Roman, *Opposing Jim Crow: African Americans and the Soviet Indictment of U.S. Racism, 1928-1937* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2012) or Kate Baldwin’s *Beyond the Color Line*

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and the Iron Curtain: Reading Encounters between Black and Red, 1922–1963 (Raleigh-Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).

<sup>13</sup> Quinn Slobodian, ed., *Comrades of Color: East Germany in the Cold War World* (New York; Oxford: Berhahn Books, 2015).

<sup>14</sup> Ford Foundation, *Report of the Trustees of the Ford Foundation*, September 27, 1950, Detroit, MI: Ford Foundation, 7, accessed January 4, 2019, <https://www.fordfoundation.org/media/2411/1950-annual-report.pdf>.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>16</sup> Ford Foundation, *Report of the Study for the Ford Foundation on Policy and Program* (also known as the Gaither Report) (Detroit, MI: Ford Foundation, 1949).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 67

<sup>18</sup> Editorial, *New York Times*, May 8, 1951, NAR Personal Projects, International Rescue Committee 1950-1956, Folder 916, Box 96, Nelson A. Rockefeller Papers, Rockefeller Archive Center.

<sup>19</sup> American Committee for Émigré Scholars, Writers and Artists, Inc. *Placement Report 1950/51*, East European Fund, Administrative Files, Box 2, Series II: Administrative Files; Subseries II\_A: General Files, Ford Foundation, Rockefeller Archive Center.

<sup>20</sup> Shepard Stone, Hungarian Students and Intellectuals: Report and Recommendations, January 29, 1957, 3, Ford Foundation records, Catalogued Reports, Report 9287-11774, Virtual Vault, Rockefeller Archive Center.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>22</sup> Jan Zielonka, “The Mythology of the East-West Divide,” Eurozine (March 5, 2019), <https://www.eurozine.com/mythology-east-west-divide/>.