

Chapter 8

Countering attack

A population, even one using no violence itself, is vulnerable to attack using conventional, biological, chemical, nuclear and other weapons. A well-designed system for nonviolent struggle therefore must also incorporate civil defence, namely protection against military attack. There is a large literature on civil defence, especially against nuclear attack. This can include fallout shelters, stockpiles of preserved food, emergency plans, drills, backup systems for electricity and water supply, etc. In only a few countries, notably Sweden and Switzerland, is civil defence planning carried out in a systematic and comprehensive fashion, for example to the extent of having some factories underground to survive attack. Most civil defence planning is carried out by governments; in few countries today is there much popular participation in planning or genuine enthusiasm for civil defence preparations.

In wartime, civil defence measures are taken most seriously. Most civilians are willing to use air raid shelters and to observe blackouts. In a society organised for nonviolent struggle, some such measures also make sense. However, many peace activists have been hostile to civil defence preparations—especially planning to survive nuclear attack—because they are part of a wider military mobilisation of society. The logic goes like this: a government may be more willing to threaten or launch a nuclear attack if the country's population is protected by civil defence and able to survive a counterattack; therefore, civil defence preparations should be opposed since they make the likelihood of nuclear war greater. In short, civil defence preparations by an armed state can be provocative and increase the possibility of war.

The situation is quite different for a society that renounces the means for warfare. Civil defence preparations then are clearly only a means for increasing survival in the face of attack, not for preparing for war. As noted in chapter 6, using self-reliant systems is a highly effective way to increase the chances of survival. Adding civil defence to self-reliance in energy, water, agriculture and the like makes a lot of sense.

There is another aspect to the peace movement's hostility to civil defence: it undercuts the common belief in the movement and the wider society that nuclear war is not survivable. In peace movement circles it has long been an article of faith that global nuclear war would mean at least the destruction of "civilisation" and possibly the extermination of the human species. On the other hand, most civil defence and military planners believe that nuclear war—while being a major and perhaps unprecedented disaster—could be waged without killing the majority of the world's population or destroying the capacity of societies to continue functioning. My own view is that the civil defence and military planners are probably right. Peace movement exaggerations of the consequences of nuclear war may serve to make people more worried in the short term, but can actually be paralysing and certainly make it more difficult to mobilise people for the long-term struggles to build alternatives to the military system. Needless to say, these views are controversial.¹ My main point here is that supporters of nonviolent struggle should be willing to consider taking and adapting ideas from the field of civil defence without being put off by its usual associations with military planning.

As noted before, most civil defence planning is undertaken by governments. Furthermore, it is designed against “foreign” aggression. What is really needed for nonviolent struggle is defence against any aggressor, including the government itself. It should be no surprise that governments do not spend much time helping their populations develop the means to resist and survive the government’s own repressive acts. Nor is there much study of this. There is much to learn from people’s improvised resistance to attack.

The best study I know of this sort is Barton Meyers’s article “Defense against aerial attack in El Salvador,”² which gives many specific insights. To survive bombing from El Salvador’s air force, both civilians and guerrillas developed and used a range of methods. No sophisticated warning systems were available, so people had to develop their own skills in detecting and identifying aircraft. When spotter planes were seen, people froze in place so they wouldn’t be seen; any moving target was subject to attack. When the spotter plane changed course, people would seek shelter, sometimes setting off a firecracker to warn others.

Concealment was widely used. Leafy trees were grown next to houses to hide them. Houses that were partly destroyed were left unrepaired to hide the fact that they were still being lived in. At the sound of aircraft, fires were quickly doused; alternatively, underground ovens were used with long tunnels to absorb smoke. Radio transmissions were not used by guerrillas to avoid being intercepted. Peasants wore dark clothing to avoid detection. They grew crops whose colour was not readily noticeable from the air and crops that were hidden by other plants.

Shelters were built and disguised. Natural features, such as forests and ravines, were also used for shelter. Guerrillas built extensive tunnel systems. In areas subject to frequent attack, shelter drills were carried out. When the government army invaded following air attack,

guerrillas often would lead an evacuation of the population, returning later.

The guerrillas, in the face of heavy air attack, dispersed their forces to groups of 4 to 15 fighters spread out over hundreds of meters. Larger units would have been more vulnerable to air power. The dispersed fighters were concentrated only for attacks or briefly at night. Another tactic was to deploy the guerrillas very near to government troops, where aerial attack might harm the government’s own soldiers.

As well as methods of surviving attack, other techniques of struggle were used, such as broadcasting reports of deaths or injuries of civilians due to air attack. Such human rights appeals were highly effective, and would be even more so in the context of a purely nonviolent resistance.

There is a great need for many more studies like that of Meyers, as well as a need to circulate the findings to people who can use them. Unfortunately, the contemporary field of disaster studies has neglected the study of war as a disaster. One factor behind this may be that most war disasters occur in poor countries whereas disaster studies are largely carried out in the rich countries which sponsor and provide weapons for these wars.³

As well as knowing how to respond to aerial attack, there are many other areas in need of investigation, including firearms, landmines, biological agents, chemical weapons and nuclear weapons. A first step would be to provide basic technical information that is accessible to nonspecialists and which can be used to provide a realistic assessment of dangers and possibly to expose uses of the weapons.⁴

Yet another entire field is “repression technology,” which includes instruments of restraint, intimidation, torture and surveillance, ranging from plastic bullets, chemicals such as mace, leg irons, thumbscrews, drugs for causing trauma, assassination rifles, batons, electroshock equipment, telephone taps, vehicle identification, and execution chambers. There is a large industry devoted to producing and

selling such technologies, yet very little in the way of analysis.

Repression technologies can be used by police as well as military personnel. While some of these technologies are designed to kill, others are intended to hurt or restrain people without killing them. These are referred to as “nonlethal weapons.”⁵ Some of these nonlethal weapons are designed to disable lethal weapons and their support systems, such as bugs to put in fuel to eat away linings, hydrogen embrittlement of weapons, antitraction technologies, supercaustics, combustion modifiers and computer viruses. These could be used, in principle, as part of nonviolent sabotage. However, the larger category of nonlethal weapons is aimed at personnel and are designed for riot control or counterinsurgency.

The term “nonlethal” can be misleading, since these weapons can kill on occasion, such as when rubber bullets enter the brain through an eye or when chemical sprays trigger a fatal allergic reaction. The term “nonlethal” serves a political function, suggesting that the weapons are a more peaceful alternative to lethal ones. In practice, nonlethal weapons typically serve as a supplement to lethal ones, especially in circumstances when deaths would boomerang on the side causing them. For these reasons, the term “repression technologies” is frequently more appropriate.

Steve Wright, a leading authority on repression technologies, believes there is considerable insight to be gained about how to respond to them, for example by contacting people who have been sprayed by riot control chemicals and finding out practical ways of avoiding or minimising the effects.⁶ For example, he suggested that

The scientific material on riot agents often includes advice on decontamination which could be applied. There is also the work on IRA [Irish Republican Army] countermeasures which contains a vast store of possible technology which could be used without their violent ethos. This includes material on interception of signal intelligence material using adapted black and white televi-

sions; blocking of surveillance devices using field animals; detection of helicopters and SAS squads using stolen NATO infra-red binoculars; etc.⁷

Yet there has been almost no systematic effort devoted to investigating such techniques. Information about responses remains fragmented and dispersed. Then there is the wider task of opposing these technologies at a political and economic level, by exposing their effects and uses and organising to stop them. Only a relatively few researchers and activists have taken up this vital task.⁸

When an aggressor is seen to use violence against a population that has no weapons, public outrage is likely to be enormous. Hence, attacks on civilians are often disguised or denied. This points to the need for systems to monitor, record and disseminate information showing where the attack comes from and what the consequences are. (This is similar to the medical issue of detecting and verifying torture.) It may be—contrary to my arguments above—that not seeking protection may be more effective in exposing the unscrupulousness of the attackers. But how many people should be willing to risk or sacrifice their lives in such an endeavour?⁹ Does it make sense to refuse protection when the attacks come from high-altitude bombers whose crews can’t even see their human targets? Perhaps measures to protect against attack could be available to those who want to use them, while volunteers take more heroic stands. More examination is needed of this challenging issue.

Another important topic is the effect of repression, including torture, on those who are not direct victims. When fear is induced, this can weaken nonviolent struggle. Further investigation is needed into how to overcome the psychological effects of repression, including the potential role of technology in achieving this.¹⁰

Notes

1. See Brian Martin, "Critique of nuclear extinction," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 19, No. 4, 1982, pp. 288-300; Brian Martin, "How the peace movement should be preparing for nuclear war," *Bulletin of Peace Proposals*, Vol. 13, No. 2, 1982, pp. 149-159 (revised versions of these articles appear in Brian Martin, *Uprooting War* (London: Freedom Press, 1984), chapters 15 and 16); Brian Martin, "Politics after a nuclear crisis," *Journal of Libertarian Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 2, Fall 1990, pp. 69-78. See also Michael Curry, "Beyond nuclear winter: on the limitations of science in political debate," *Antipode*, Vol. 18, No. 3, 1986, pp. 244-267; Barry Richards, "Civil defence and psychic defence," *Radical Science* 15, 1984, pp. 85-97.

2. Barton Meyers, "Defense against aerial attack in El Salvador," *Journal of Political and Military Sociology*, Vol. 22, Winter 1994, pp. 327-342. I thank Mary Cawte for pointing out this reference.

3. Barton Meyers, "Disaster study of war," *Disasters*, Vol. 15, No. 4, December 1991, pp. 318-330.

4. Examples of useful sources of this sort are Christopher T. Carey, "Defense against the poor man's nuclear bomb: biological protection and decontamination," *American Survival Guide*, Vol. 20, No. 6, June 1998, pp. 32-33, 58-59 and 68; Hugh D. Crone, *Banning Chemical Weapons: The Scientific Background* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

5. John B. Alexander, *Future War: Non-Lethal Weapons in Twenty-First-Century Warfare* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999); Malcolm Dando, *A New Form of Warfare: The Rise of Non-Lethal Weapons* (London: Brassey's, 1996); Nick Lewer and Steven Schofield, *Non-Lethal Weapons: A Fatal Attraction? Military Strategies and Technologies for 21st-Century Conflict* (London: Zed Books, 1997); David A. Morehouse, *Nonlethal Weapons: War Without Death* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1996).

6. Steve Wright, letter to Brian Martin, 29 March 1994.

7. Steve Wright, letter to Brian Martin, 17 September 1993.

8. Steve Wright, "The new technologies of political repression: a new case for arms control?" *Philosophy and Social Action*, Vol. 17, Nos. 3-4, July-December 1991, p. 31-62; Steve Wright, *An*

Appraisal of Technologies for Political Control (Luxembourg: European Parliament, 1998). The Campaign Against Arms Trade, among others, has targeted the repression trade. See for example "Campaigner's guide to the internal repression trade," *Peace News*, March 1996, pp. 7-10.

9. The dilemmas involved when nonviolent resisters "accept casualties" are dealt with by Gene Keyes, "Heavy casualties and nonviolent defense," *Philosophy and Social Action*, Vol. 17, Nos. 3-4, July-December 1991, pp. 75-88.

10. I thank Andreas Speck for this point.