

Preventing Genocide: the Role of Nonviolence

George Wolfe
Coordinator of Outreach Programs
Center for Peace and Conflict Studies
Ball State University

Genocide is one of the most difficult issues for peace activists to address. Many people who are ardent pacifists will make an exception to their anti-war stance if they know genocide is occurring. Whether we are trying to prevent or stop genocide, intervention is necessary. But what kind of intervention: political, diplomatic, economic, military, educational? Should the intervention emerge from within a country's sovereign borders, or should it be imposed by an external power? And what role can *nonviolence* play in stopping or preventing genocide? To answer this last question, I will first explain what is meant by nonviolence.

The term nonviolence comes from the Sanskrit word *ahimsa* and refers to action that does no harm and is intended to show reverence and respect for life. It is important that the word *action* be emphasized. Nonviolence is not complacency or inaction, or giving into corrupt leaders to appease them. Ever since Henry Thoreau penned his essay "On the Duty of Civil Disobedience," nonviolence has come to mean resistance through which we provide the friction to stop the machinery of government or other institution that is propagating injustice. Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King took it a step further, applying it as a form of fighting. When workers went on strike during the labor movement, they were fighting for the right to unionize, for the forty-hour workweek, for workman's compensation, overtime pay, and better working conditions. When students held sit-ins at restaurants during the U.S. Civil Rights Movement, they were fighting discrimination. When women suffragists picketed the White House and were arrested, they were fighting for the right to vote. When people boycotted California grapes in the 1960's, they were fighting for the rights of migrant workers.

Gandhi coined the term *satyagraha* (literally "clinging to the truth") to designate action whereby a person allows oneself to become a sacrificial victim of

an injustice in order to call public attention to the need for reform. Rosa Parks was publicly arrested and taken to jail when she refused to give up her seat in the front of a bus in Montgomery, Alabama. In doing so, she performed an act of satyagraha.

Peace educator Michael Nagler, in his book *The Search for a Nonviolent Future*, explains that nonviolence can be *obstructive* or *constructive*.¹ It is obstructive when activists resist injustice and refuse to cooperate with evil. It is constructive when they work to build collaborative relationships, cooperating with that which promotes the greater good. Prior to and during WW II, individuals and organizations operating underground, offered resistance to Nazi efforts to rounding up Jewish citizens. The Danish resistance movement helped over 7000 Jews escape the Nazis by smuggling them out of the country to Sweden. Many citizens across Europe hid Jewish families in their homes. Efforts were also made to save Jewish children. I have a personal friend who was saved from the holocaust by a French Roman Catholic family who hid her during the Nazi occupation of France. In addition, Dutch resisters provided counter-intelligence to allied forces.

During the era of the Vietnam War, nonviolent activism was viewed as being anti-military. This was mostly because 18 to 20 year old men, who at that time were not allowed to vote, were being drafted into the military to fight in a war that was increasingly unpopular. Today, this assumption that nonviolence and the military are opposed to one another must be re-examined. In times of genocide, such as was the case during the Nazi Holocaust, grass roots nonviolent activists and military personnel found themselves fighting the same enemy.

Whether obstructive or constructive, nonviolence demands that we take risks. We may risk public humiliation, losing our job, incarceration, even physical harm. Suffragist Alice Paul and Polish Solidarity leader Lech Walesa were imprisoned; Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King fell prey to assassins. But taking such risk is what makes nonviolence a spiritual growth experience. We deny ourselves, our own comfort and self-centered ambition, and take up a cause that is greater than ourselves, not knowing where our efforts will lead.

Several years ago a colleague and I were driving through the Ball State campus. Nearby, we saw that a fight had broken out between two students. I told my

friend to stop the car, since we needed to break up the fight. As I ran toward the students, I asked two onlookers to seize the aggressor and pull the students apart. The two students then separated, and I positioned myself between them. Now these students were large husky fellows. They could have easily forced me out of the way. But for some reason, they stayed apart, even as one of them tried his best to get around me. I spoke some words, asking them to cool down and talk about it later. Finally the provocateur gave up, got in his car and drove off.

This is what the Unitarian minister Adin Ballou referred to as “uninjurious benevolent physical force;” that is, restraining or otherwise preventing a person from doing harm to others or to him or herself. ⁱⁱ“We are allowed to physically engage a person as long as we remain free from any intention on our own part of causing harm. If we stand by and do not act when we could have intervened, our inaction could actually facilitate the harm that would occur. When it comes to preventing or stopping genocide, one can argue that by not taking action, one is causing harm by virtue of one's complacency.

One can extend this reasoning to conclude that in times of genocide, taking military action to destroy weapons systems or establish a no-fly zone to prevent the massacre of civilians is justified as long as the intention is to protect, respect and maintain reverence for life.

Unfortunately, military action, even with the best intentions, is invariably sloppy and problematic. Too often, the underlying motivation for taking military action is rooted in corporate economic interests and in preserving access to natural resources rather than in stopping genocide. Military action usually leads to an escalation of the conflict and the killing of civilians. There is also the risk that a powerful government could use the principle of the *Responsibility to Protect* passed by the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, not to prevent genocide, but as an excuse to wage war for the purpose of expanding political power. For these reasons, it is by far preferable to prevent genocide rather than to allow it to begin and then have to stop it. We can gain insight into how genocide can be prevented by understanding the broader definition of violence that is taught in Peace Education classes.

Initially, most people think of violence as action intended to cause physical harm. This definition of *physical violence* is certainly self-explanatory. Many times we forget, however, that violence can be solely of a psychological nature.

Psychological violence is present when a person is experiencing emotional hostility, threats, intimidation, name-calling, verbal abuse, or forms of passive aggression. This type of violence is the easiest to participate in and the most difficult to restrict because intimidation, name-calling and verbal abuse are usually protected as free speech.

Another type of violence is known as *structural violence*. This occurs when a political, social, or economic structure disenfranchises a certain group of people and fails to meet their basic needs, denying them adequate housing, health care, employment and educational opportunities. Poverty is perhaps the most devastating form of structural violence.

Although historically, genocides have grown out of unique socio-political circumstances, there are underlying preconditions, many of which are present as a result of psychological and structural violence. Some examples of these underlying preconditions are:

1. Political power struggles within governments;
2. Ideological fanaticism and demonizing a target group of people;
3. Religious and ethnic hatred and discrimination;
4. Poverty;
5. Economic crises or the lack of economic upward mobility;
6. Labor unrest and poor working conditions;
7. The lack of equal educational and employment opportunities.

When considering these preconditions for genocide, it becomes clear that preventing genocide through nonviolence requires multinational, multidisciplinary efforts. These efforts should involve a combination of assertive diplomacy, governmental cooperation, economic sanctions, grassroots civilian resistance and, in cases where the civilian population is too beaten down to apply nonviolent strategies and organize civil disobedience campaigns, international peacekeepers. In addition, it demands that every developed country look further than its own self-

centered economic and defense postures to define its interests. It should be in every developed country's interest to recognize and address these underlying preconditions of genocide no matter where they exist.

Finally, if we are to expect authoritarian dictators in the Middle East and elsewhere to voluntarily step aside and allow democracy to take root, the international community and the citizens of the country desiring reform must be prepared to offer some form of conditional asylum. The trial and possible execution of former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak is an unfortunate development and will merely serve as a warning to other despots in the region to hold fast. Rather than respond to the demands to relinquish control, they will be motivated to dig in their heels and cling to power at all costs, making violent revolution inevitable. How can we expect President Bashar al-Assad of Syria to step aside when he sees what is happening to Hosni Mubarak?

The example for reform the Arab states should look to is the nation of South Africa, which began transitioning from Apartheid to an inclusive democratic rule beginning in 1994. Its newly elected leader, President Nelson Mandela, a man who had been imprisoned for 27 years by the Apartheid government, knew there was a great risk that his country could degenerate into ethnic violence. Rather than seek prosecution and revenge, he and Bishop Desmond Tutu convinced the citizens of South Africa to embark on a radical new course: the path of forgiveness and reconciliation. By forgiving those who had condemned him as a political prisoner, Mandela set an example no one who had suffered less than him could stand against. He convinced South Africans to tell their stories of human rights abuses and then move beyond hostilities to end division and suspicion. Mandela's calm and persuasive leadership enabled his country to avoid a bloody civil war.

We must understand that we cannot kill evil. Trying to do so merely strengthens the resolve of supporters and enables their cause to live on. The preferred strategy is to marginalize corrupt leaders by minimizing their influence. This is done by giving those who agree to relinquish power conditional political asylum, resisting the desire for revenge, entering into a process of forgiveness and reconciliation, and building coalitions with moderate voices who are entering the political arena.

Justice served through civil war is not justice done given the suffering and hardship that is delivered onto the civilian population and the refugee crisis that inevitably results.

In summary, nonviolence is not inaction or complacency; rather, it is a form of fighting that respects life and makes injustice visible. Nonviolence can be both obstructive, resisting injustice, and constructive, building cooperative, collaborative relationships that support the greater good. During times of genocide, nonviolent activists and military personnel may find themselves fighting the same enemy. It is a mistake to believe that military action makes grass roots nonviolence irrelevant. But relying on military intervention is problematic. Setting in place an international peacekeeping force when the grass roots civilian population is too weak to apply nonviolent strategies and organize civil disobedience campaigns is preferable to unilateral or multilateral military action.

Violence can be physical, psychological and structural. History teaches that various forms of psychological and structural violence are the pre-conditions for genocide. Preventing genocide demands that every developed country look further than its own self-centered economic and defense postures to define its interests, cooperatively striving to alleviate poverty and the various manifestations of structural violence that plague the underdeveloped world.

George Wolfe is the Coordinator of Outreach Programs for the Ball State University Center for Peace and Conflict Studies where he served as Director from 2002 to 2006. He is also a trained mediator and the author of *The Spiritual Power of Nonviolence: Interfaith Understanding for a Future Without War*.

ⁱ Nagler, Michael N. *The Search for a Nonviolent Future: A Promise of Peace for Ourselves, Our Families, and Our World*. Navato, Ca. ; New World Library, 2004.

ⁱⁱ Ballou, Adin. *Christian Non-Resistance, in All Its Important Bearings, Illustrated and Defended*. London: Charles Giplin, 1948.