Gandhi's Concept of Nonviolence in International Relations

Emily Cohen

Gandhi was a brilliant man, a persuasive leader, and a humanitarian, passionately dedicated to his cause. Though much discussion of Gandhi since his death has focused on his efforts to free India from British rule, it is important to realize that Gandhi's philosophy extended far beyond national borders, inspiring movements around the world. This essay will deal with many facets of Gandhi's philosophies. First, it will discuss his unique concept of nonviolence, *Satyagraha*, and its applicability to the realm of international society. Next, it will discuss Gandhi's views on war and peace, and his criticisms of contemporary methods of achieving peace. Finally, it will discuss his blueprint for durable peace in the world and argue the relevance and influence of Gandhism in various settings in the past century and present today.

Satyagraha – Gandhi's Concept of Nonviolence

"An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind" - Gandhi

We must begin with a brief examination of Gandhi's life and the influences that shaped him early on, leading to the creation of his ideas of nonviolence. When Gandhi was nineteen years old, he moved to London, England to study law. He maintained his devotion to his Hindu ideals, living a modest, economical existence, and remaining a stalwart vegetarian. Gandhi proved early on in life to be a passionate and deeply principled individual. However, his activism as we know it truly began when he moved to apartheid South Africa in 1893, to provide legal assistance to an Indian businessman.[1] South Africa at this time was rife with racial prejudice; both the African and the Indian populations were living under oppressive conditions. Struck by the desperate situation of these people, Gandhi resolved to stay and fight against the unjust system of apartheid.[2] What began as a simple one-year stay turned into a twenty-year odyssey, where Gandhi's unique concepts of nonviolent resistance were developed and put into practice for the first time. The techniques Gandhi used in South Africa proved to be methods of resistance that he would advocate for the rest of his life. [3]

What is the true meaning of Gandhi's concept of 'nonviolence'? Nonviolence for Gandhi was far more than simply refusing to use arms or violence against an enemy – Gandhi's concept of nonviolence is expressed through the principle of *Satyagraha*, a term he used to represent a complex principle of commitment to nonviolence.[4] The birth of this unique term took place in South Africa shortly after the first major act of civil disobedience led by Gandhi. On September 11, 1906 in Johannesberg, at a packed meeting, thousands of Indians took an oath refusing to submit to the "Indian Registration Ordinance", a humiliating law forcing all Indians over the age of eight to carry a registration form displaying their fingerprints as identification at all times.[5] Commentators termed this mass disobedience "passive resistance", but Gandhi resented the "passive" implications of this term. He asked members of his journal, *Indian Opinion*, to come up with another term, and the expression *Satyagraha* was decided upon. This term meant,

literally translated, "soul force" or "truth force".[6] For Gandhi, it signified a principled and courageous form of nonviolent resistance or, as one scholar has put it, "the mighty power of the undaunted human spirit against the power of weapons or money."[7]

However, Satyagraha is more than a simple definition. It is a principle with multiple dimensions, and we must examine its relation to the concepts of power, action, bravery and spirituality. To Gandhi, *Satyagraha* was a moral and effective way for the oppressed to seek justice. He purported that violence can only be quelled by nonviolence or resistance, and that retaliatory violence were never the answer. *Satyagraha* worked as a form of resistance because it was not an attempt to seek *power* over another; rather it is an attempt to *influence* others. It operated as a dialogue, and genuinely sought to achieve reconciliation between contesting parties. *Satyagraha* rests on the theory that a government only has power as long as its people "consent either consciously or unconsciously to be governed"[8]. Therefore, the way to create political change is to not cooperate with the system "by withdrawing all the voluntary assistance possible and refusing all its so-called benefits."[9]

It is important to note that Gandhi did not view nonviolence, expressed through *Satyagraha*, as a passive or cowardly action.[10] Much of Gandhi's philosophical inspiration came from the Bhagwad Gita, an ancient Hindu text, and as Gandhi was keen to quote, the Gita states "he who gives up action fails."[11] Gandhi clearly articulated the *active* component of *Satyagraha* by stating:

> I do justify entire non-violence and consider it possible in relations between man and man and nations and nations, but it is not a resignation from all real fighting against wickedness. On the contrary, the non-violence of my conception is a more active and more real fighting against wickedness than retaliation, whose very nature is to increase wickedness.[12]

Further, Gandhi argued that it is far more difficult to practice *Satyagraha* than simply to retaliate. It takes great bravery to be willing to suffer and sacrifice oneself for a cause, rather than violently fighting back. Gandhi viewed fear as the greatest evil, as it impedes people from embracing the ideals of nonviolence. Indeed, Gandhi thought "justice could be secured by following one's bounden duty to be fearless, by adhering to what one holds to be the truth."[13] As well, to practice *Satyagraha* one must learn to treat an enemy with kindness, and to return evil with love, which Gandhi recognized as being extremely difficult. As he states: "experience has taught me that civility is the most difficult part of *Satyagraha*. Civility does not here mean the mere outward gentleness of speech cultivated for the occasion, but an inborn gentleness and desire to do the opponent good."[14] With all the challenges *Satyagraha* presents, and the great courage and self-discipline it requires, one may ask how Gandhi realistically expected people to adopt it on a massive scale. The answer lies in the final component of *Satyagraha*: an integral part of this principle is a spiritual rebirth and a commitment to seeking truth. *Satyagraha* requires personal revolution on an individual level and it is only through following one's own vision of truth and detaching oneself from extraneous emotions that one can commit to a path of nonviolence.[15] This detachment is laid out in the Bagwad Gita, which urges that one must go on working without expecting, longing for, or being attached to the fruits of one's work. Gandhi made a direct connection between these sentiments and his cause, when he stated: "I deduce the

principle of *Satyagraha* (nonviolent resistance) from this: he who is free from such attachment will not kill the enemy but rather sacrifice himself."[16]

War, Criticism and Contradiction

"War, with all its glorification of brute force is essentially a degrading thing. It demoralizes those who are trained for it. It brutalizes men of naturally gentle character. It outrages every beautiful canon of morality. Its path of glory is foul with passion and lust, and red with blood of murder. This is not the pathway to our goal." - Gandhi

Now that we have discussed in detail the basic premises of Gandhi's concept of *Satyagraha*, we can discuss the implications of this philosophy of nonviolence in the realm of international relations, especially in terms of war and peace. Gandhi, like a Realist, was primarily concerned with war in the international system. In fact, he "looked upon the problem of War as the most important problem which faced the contemporary world"[17]. Further, Gandhi didn't accept distinctions between "just" and "unjust wars" – in his mind every war was unjust. As alluded to earlier, Gandhi was firmly of the opinion that "war is not a morally legitimate means of achieving anything permanent".[18] War was never a just means to attempt to create peace or to achieve a so-called noble goal. This contrasts the Marxist view that "every war should be judged by the historical ends it serves and that certain wars are justified insofar as they destroy extremely pernicious and reactionary institutions".[19] For Gandhi the ends never justified the means, and war was always an immoral means.

Gandhi took a broad approach in examining war. He insisted on examining and attacking the root causes of war and, in fact, stated: "all activities for stopping war must prove fruitless so long as the causes of war are not understood and radically dealt with"[20] And what are these causes he is referring to? Gandhi considered a world system built on inequality, racism and exploitation to be the cause of war. He saw the manifestation of this exploitation in the form of imperialism, and viewed imperialism and greed as two of the greatest enemies of peace.[21] As Gandhi states "there can be no living harmony between races and nations unless the main cause is removed, namely exploitation of the weak by the strong."[22] Not surprisingly, Gandhi's prescription for peace rests on attacking these root causes of war, not simply applying temporary remedies to a conflict. He strongly argued that peace is not just the absence of war; it is "the elimination or destruction of all kinds and forms of tyranny."[23] Further, peace is never the end in itself; it is "a means to a nobler goal - that of a just world order".[24] Yet, to eliminate greed and create equality in the world, the Marxist idea of banishing private property is not enough. For Gandhi the road to peace requires a spiritual revolution, harking back to the ideals of aloofness at the heart of *Satyagraha*. He contends that "to banish war we have to do more. We have to eradicate possessiveness and greed and lust and egotism from our own hearts."[25]

Gandhi was highly critical of the ability of peace treaties and international institutions to create peace. He saw many peace treaties as being punitive and vindictive. Peace created under these terms could not be sustained. As an example he pointed to the Treaty of Versailles, which punished Germany severely. Gandhi contended that the vindictive nature of this treaty actually led to WWII.[26] Just as peace treaties are often signed out of fear and distrust, Gandhi also perceived world organizations as being built upon a foundation of suspicion and fear of other nations. In Gandhi's mind, to actually contribute to a lasting peace, an international body must be

"the manifestation of the natural urge of nations towards peace,"[27] it should not simply be created to protect one's interests, or to end a war. Gandhi's other main contention about international institutions was that they simply perpetuated an unjust world order and served the interests of a minority of powerful states. Gandhi criticized the League of Nations for wielding no real power and merely acting as a tool of Britain and France. As well, Gandhi was cynical of the Kellogg-Briand Pact of 1928. Signatories renounced war as an instrument of national policy, but Gandhi noted that they still continued to exploit and colonize nations around the world.[28] In his mind, it was ridiculous to renounce war, yet at the same time perpetuate a system that makes war inevitable.

Gandhi was also critical of Pacifist and anti-conscription movements' approaches to achieving peace. In light of his conception of the causes of war, and the path to true peace, it is easy to understand his discontent. His problems with the Pacifist movement arise on two levels: one, on the issues they addressed, and two, on their mode of expression. Gandhi viewed the Pacifist movement as limited simply to an antiwar posture, based on the assumption that, by boycotting wars, they would be contributing to world peace.[29] Gandhi however viewed this as narrow-minded and criticized Pacifists for not attacking the real problem – an unjust, oppressive world order that caused war. On a second level, Gandhi went as far as to question the Pacifist movement's commitment to the ideals of nonviolence. Gandhi perceived that many pacifists supported pacifism in a half-hearted way. They did so "with the mental reservation that when pacifism fails, arms might be used. With them, it was not nonviolence, but arms that were the ultimate sanctions."[30] This is not the full spiritual commitment to nonviolence required by *Satyagraha*. Gandhi further criticizes the lack of action by many pacifists and those opposed to conscription. As alluded to in the first part of this essay, nonviolence for Gandhi was not simply being passive; it was an active form of disobedience. As Gandhi states: "Refusal of military service is much more superficial than non-cooperation with the whole system that supports the state."[31]

These criticisms lead us to a deeper appreciation of Gandhi's principle of nonviolence. His criticism of pacifists shows us just how opposed he was to nonviolent resistance, when this was not accompanied by some sort of courageous action. These views touch on perhaps one of the most controversial aspects of Gandhi's philosophy. Though Gandhi appeared to be a staunch believer of nonviolent action, he did actually condone violence in some specific cases during his lifetime. He in fact stated in an article he published in 1920 entitled "*The Doctrine of the Sword*" that, "I do believe that where there is only choice between cowardice and violence I would advise violence."[32] According to one scholar, this statement seems to suggest that, in Gandhi's complex rationale, "courage took precedence over fear, and violence over cowardice; justice became more than mere abstention from violence, and courage went far beyond mere participation in war."[33]

If we look for further evidence of Gandhi's disdain for passivity and inaction, we find many examples where he seems to grudgingly accept violence as a last resort. Gandhi purported that those who are not trained in *Satyagraha* may use violence in self-defense, rather than simply submitting meekly. However, the person committing violence still has a responsibility - he must strive to evolve himself and others to a state where violence is no longer necessary.[34] Gandhi articulated this idea when he stated "he who is not equal to that duty, he who has no power of

resisting war, he who is not qualified to resist war, may take part in war, and yet whole-heartedly must try to free himself, his nation and the world from war."[35] Further, Gandhi made it clear during World War II that although he still believed war to be wholly wrong, he felt that the Allied countries were fighting for a just cause, and therefore he would offer them his moral help and blessing. Around this same time, he also stated that he would "risk violence a thousand times than risk the emasculation of a whole race". [36]

Blueprint for a Durable World Peace

"Not to believe in the possibility of permanent peace is to disbelieve in the Godliness of human nature" - Gandhi

Although Gandhi was critical of the pacifist movement and of the international institutions of his time, he did believe that peace was possible. He believed that humanity's urge for peace is innate and insatiable, and that humans have the potential to achieve peace. Gandhi was confident that "we can certainly realize our full destiny and dignity only if we educate and train ourselves to be able to refrain from retaliation."[37] The peace that Gandhi aspired to create was a durable peace that would weather the ages. This peace must address the root causes of war and would be firmly based on the nonviolent principles of *Satyagraha*. For Gandhi the road to world peace began with a free India, and proceeded to include an attitude of internationalism, or even the promotion of a world government, and the absolute necessity of total worldwide disarmament.

Gandhi led a nonviolent campaign for the freedom of India not solely on the grounds of ceasing the oppression of the Indian people, but also because he believed that a free India would be a first step towards world peace. The freedom of the oppressed was essential to Gandhi and thus his "whole life became…a fight, a totally nonviolent fight, against imperialism, for that was in his thinking the only way to peace".[38] For true peace to be possible, imperialism must end, and there must be a world system based on equality. But how could the oppressed be convinced to free themselves from their colonial powers without using violence? The answer, Gandhi was convinced, lay in India. If India could free itself through *Satyagraha*, it would serve as an example that nonviolent means of resistance are effective and would inspire others to fight nonviolently against imperialism. It was Gandhi's hope that "a free India would be a haven of nonviolence and a beacon for peace in the world,"[39] setting the stage for peaceful revolution and eventually a just world order. Clearly the civil rights movement in the United States, which will be discussed in more detail in the latter section of this essay, is an example of a group of individuals using Gandhian principles as the basis for peaceful protest.[40]

In addition to India becoming free and becoming a model of nonviolence, Gandhi prescribed three other important concepts in his blueprint for durable peace: internationalism, world government and disarmament. For Gandhi, nationalism was an essential prerequisite of internationalism. Gandhi considered it essential for countries to be self-sufficient, a concept he termed *Swadeshi*, before they could be equal and productive players in the international scene.[41] Nationalism was not narrow or exclusive in Gandhi's mind, nor inherently dangerous. It was greed and selfishness that caused nationalism to get out of hand and threaten international cooperation. In Gandhi's world, healthy nationalism was essential in creating a spirit of

international understanding. Gandhi was not concerned that internationalism would threaten national identity, for he believed true internationalism only functions if nations maintain their individuality while working together.[42]

The second component for peace was a world government, preceded by a world federation. The federation would be based on voluntary interdependence. The first step to further integration would be the freedom of exploited nations and once this was accomplished with India leading the way, a World State could replace the federation. The World State "takes its place in which all the states of the world are free and equal... no state has its military."[43] It would be composed of one central governing body, and while it retained no permanent army, if required, it would have a police force during the transition period to complete the nonviolent evolution towards the World State.

The final component of his idealistic vision of world peace was total disarmament of all nations. Nations are armed out of fear and mistrust of each other. They would have to dispel this fear and discard their defensive persona. Gandhi realized that it would be difficult to start the process of disarmament and therefore argued that unilateral disarmament was necessary even if others do not follow. Gandhi was adamant in stating that, for the survival of the human race, nations must disarm even without the promise of reciprocity by other nations: "if even one great nation were unconditionally to perform the supreme act of renunciation, many of us would see in our lifetime visible peace established on earth."[44]

In conclusion, for Gandhi a durable lasting peace could be built on a foundation of courage, nonviolence, initiative and trust. He believed a free India could lead the way to a just and equitable world system, where war would be obsolete.

Relevance of Gandhism

"Gandhi may die, but Gandhism will live for ever" - Gandhi

Though Gandhi died more than fifty years ago, his philosophical legacy lives on. He has influenced political thought in many ways, from dependency theory to conflict resolution.[45] Gandhian thought, during his lifetime and after his death, has served as an inspiration to nonviolent movements around the world, notably the civil rights movement in the United States. Furthermore, many of his ideas are relevant to specific issues facing international society today, such as the issue of self-determination and the evolving nature of international organizations.

Martin Luther King Jr.'s movement of civil disobedience in the United States, during the second half of the 20th century, was an excellent example of the successful application of Gandhian principles. Gandhi himself pointed out that the plight of African Americans had not been eased through violent conflict. Although slavery had been legally abolished after a long and bloody war, African Americans still lacked many basic rights. Gandhi offered prophetic advice, that King heeded: "There is no other way than the way of nonviolence – a way however, not of the weak and ignorant but of the strong and wise".[46] Gandhi's techniques and successes in South Africa and India made a profound impact upon King and he used the methods of *Satyagraha* as a template for fighting inequality in the United States.[47] King fused Gandhism and Christianity as

the ideological basis of his struggle, as he stated, "nonviolent resistance had emerged as the technique of the movement, while love stood as the regulating ideal. In other words, Christ furnished the spirit and motivation, while Gandhi furnished the method."[48] Yet more than just using nonviolence rhetoric as a method to achieve an end, King remained true to the spirit of Gandhi's philosophy and insisted that nonviolence must be a way of life, not simply a weapon for desperate times.[49] The success of nonviolent resistance in the civil rights movement proved the universality of Gandhism and silenced critics who contended that it was not universally applicable.[50]

The second area of contemporary relevance of Gandhi's views deals with self-determination. One of Gandhi's greatest philosophical contributions was his conceptual fusion of peace and freedom.[51] For Gandhi, violence was not the path to freedom. In fact, Gandhi believed that quite the opposite was true: "the attainment of freedom must be in exact proportion to the attainment of nonviolence by that nation."[52] This notion has important implications for the current world. The last century has seen the painful process of decolonization, when many national movements of self-determination were often accompanied by bloodshed.[53] This leads us to question whether freedom for an oppressed people can come without the devastating cost of violence, or whether peace and freedom are mutually exclusive. In the Middle East, the Palestinians and the Israelis are examples of groups that have and continue to employ violent means in their fight for national self-determination. In Canada, the *Front de la Libération de Québec (FLQ)* resorted to kidnapping and murder during the 1970s in their battle for Québec separation. What would Gandhi tell these groups? Gandhi's answer would most likely emphasize the supremacy of nonviolence as a form of resistance. He would contend that not only is it possible for people to free themselves without violence, but that a strong campaign of courageous nonviolence is the most effective means to attain freedom as the Indian case has proven. This lesson has deep implications for revolutionary movements around the world, and gives us hope that, perhaps, through the employment of Gandhian principles, we can achieve a just world, without the devastating cost of violence.

Finally we must examine the relevance of Gandhi's thought with respect to international organizations. Gandhi would likely be very critical of the United Nations (U.N.) in its present form today. He was a strong opponent of any international institution that perpetuated an unjust world order and inherent inequality. One could argue that the U.N., notably the Security Council and the right of veto of its five permanent members (the United States, China, Russia, France and Britain), only protects the national interests of powerful countries. Therefore, it ceases to be a force for justice in the world. Gandhi was skeptical of the ability of any world organization, built on such a foundation of inequality, to create peace in the world.[54] Indeed, the reality is that the world system today still consists of stark inequalities between nations, which perhaps contribute to the impotence of the U.N. or any international organization in eradicating all cases of war. Gandhi might also be very critical of the newly developing International Criminal Court (I.C.C.). Due to the fact that its success rests on state cooperation, Gandhi would be concerned with the I.C.C.'s ability to implement objective judgements effectively in a world where some states wield substantially more power than others. If a powerful state, such as the United States chose not to sign and ratify the treaty or to sign and ratify the treaty but not to respect the I.C.C.'s decisions, what power does the I.C.C. have to enforce its judgements?

Conclusion

As we can see, Gandhi's concept of *Satyagraha* is relevant not only to India and South Africa, but to the world over. Gandhi believed that peace was entirely possible, and could only be achieved through nonviolent means. Gandhi's philosophy did not die when he was assassinated. His legacy lives on, and his ideas still inspire movements and spark debates. With respect to some of the greatest questions facing the realm of international relations today, such as the implications of self-determination, and the questionable effectiveness of international institutions in addressing inequalities among nations, Gandhi's philosophy provides a challenging perspective.

Notes

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[6] Alexander, Horace. Gandhi through Western Eyes. India: Asia Publishing House, 1969.10-15.

[7] Ibid, 12.

[8] Sharp, Gene. The Politics of Nonviolent Action. USA: Extending Horizons Books, 1973. 84

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid, 87.

[11] Puri, Rashimi-Sudha. Gandhi on War and Peace. United States of America: Praeger Publishers, 1987. 21

[12] Ibid, 178.

[13] Ibid, 8.

[14] Alexander, Horace. Gandhi through Western Eyes. India: Asia Publishing House, 1969. 31

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[16] Puri, Rashimi-Sudha. Gandhi on War and Peace. United States of America: Praeger Publishers, 1987. 19

[17] Ibid, ix.

[18] Ibid, 18.

[19] Ibid.

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[22] Puri, Rashimi-Sudha. Gandhi on War and Peace. United States of America: Praeger Publishers, 1987. 176.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid, 165.

[25] Ibid, 176.

[26] Alexander, Horace. Gandhi through Western Eyes. India: Asia Publishing House, 1969.

[27] Puri, Rashimi-Sudha. Gandhi on War and Peace. United States of America: Praeger Publishers, 1987. 173.

[28] Ibid, 170.

[29] Ibid, 171-178.

[30] Ibid, 175.

[31] Ibid, 76.

[32] Murti, V.V. Ramana. Relevance of Gandhism. India: Harold Laski Institute, 1969. 6

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[49] Ibid, 26.
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