

Bartkowski, Maciej; Nonviolent Civilian Defense to Counter Russian Hybrid Warfare

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<http://www.advanced.jhu.edu/nonviolent>*

Normally, violence and nonviolence are seen as separate modes of action. However, they can be used along with each other, as a form of “hybrid warfare.” When used for aggressive purposes, this poses a novel challenge to advocates of nonviolent action.

This topic is addressed by Maciej Bartkowski in his valuable study of Russian hybrid warfare. In pursuing its war against Ukraine, in the Crimea and the Donbas region in eastern Ukraine, the Russian government has used a variety of techniques, including troops in disguise, propaganda, and civilians supported by the state. The civilians engage in sit-ins, occupations and protective accompaniment of troops. The government has learned that Ukrainian troops are reluctant to attack civilians and, if they do, their actions can be used to justify Russian military intervention. Many Ukrainian troops have defected or deserted.

This 27-page paper is valuable enough for its account of Russian hybrid warfare. It goes beyond this by offering a response: civilian-based defence, which involves organised actions by civilians to resist aggression, including ostracism of invading troops, documenting of attacks, sabotaging equipment and ensuring social support systems (food, shelter, etc.), all the while refraining from using violence. If nonviolent defenders are attacked, this undermines the credibility of the attackers, leading to defections and an erosion of popular support for aggression.

Bartkowski provides an informed review of the literature on nonviolent civilian defence, which can also be called social defence or defence by civil resistance, among other names. Just as importantly, he reviews initiatives in the Baltic states of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia, which adopted policies in support of civilian defence prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union. He notes that the subsequent incorporation of these states into NATO undermined commitment to civilian defence.

From Bartkowski's perspective, nonviolent defence is an obvious alternative to military defence in circumstances such as the Crimean struggle, yet it has been almost entirely overlooked by Western strategic planners. This is despite the wide recognition of nonviolent strategies for challenging repressive regimes.

The paper is especially good in providing concrete examples of Russian hybrid warfare methods and of nonviolent actions and planning, including Danish resistance to the Nazis and recent initiatives for nonviolent defence in Lithuania. It is well written and referenced.

While Bartkowski presents a strong case for supporting nonviolent civilian defence, and gives many examples of what governments could do, he does not examine strategies for activists to move in this direction in the face of the continuing lack of interest by most governments. It can be argued that because nonviolent defence empowers the citizenry, it is a threat to government power, so leaders are more comfortable in continuing to rely on military methods. In other words, they intuitively make judgements about modes of defence less on the basis of effectiveness and more on the basis of compatibility with existing power structures. Therefore, moves towards nonviolent alternatives may have to come from grassroots movements.

Despite a lack of attention to strategy, this paper deserves to be read for its insightful analysis of Russian hybrid warfare — which may be a model for the future — and for showing the value of organised nonviolent action as a way of resisting it. The topics Bartkowski addresses deserve more attention from resistance scholars and activists.

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