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Mahatma Gandhi's Attitude Towards War

Bart de Ligt

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At the Congress of War Resisters, held in Lyons, August 1931, Tolstoy's last secretary, Valentin Bulgakov spoke of the "great experience" gained by India in its struggle against England. Not without reason did he express admiration for the role Gandhi played in this struggle. But Bulgakov tended to attribute to the Mahatma an attitude that was consistently hostile to any sort of violence, an attitude which, according to Gandhi himself, does not correspond with the facts.

In *Le Semeur* of October 15th, 1931, Bulgakov also declared that the correspondence which Vladimir Tchertkov and I have had with the Indian leader, regarding Gandhi's attitude during the Boer War, the Zulu-Natal War and the World War, concerns only "a few ill-advised declarations" of Gandhi, "purely accidental" and remaining "without effect; Gandhi's actions demonstrating that he in no way approves of cooperation with violence."

One wonders how it is that such a clear-sighted and sincere man as Bulgakov is not able to grasp what Gandhi himself has written in regard to his own past. In his *Autobiography*, Gandhi declares that

through his work with the Red Cross he participated in the English Army during the Boer War although he knew that the Boers were in the right, and in the Zulu War, although in the latter stages he understood very well that here there was no longer a war, but a veritable man hunt. Without doubt, Gandhi endeavored, as a member of the Red Cross, to relieve the sufferings of the unfortunate blacks in particular, but, as he declared in *Young India*, 8 September 1928, he recognized that participating in the work of the Red Cross was nothing else but participating in war. As to 1914, Gandhi declares as well in his *Autobiography* that he had joined the Red Cross because he felt that it was the duty of the Hindus to participate in the defense of the British Empire. The principal reason why Gandhi took part, on three different occasions, in British wars and was even induced to participate in the war conference of the Viceroy of India and to carry out a recruiting campaign among his compatriots in 1918, was the hope of seeing his loyalty and that of India to the British Empire in time of danger rewarded by the gift of dominion status.

During the reception given in Gandhi's honor at Lausanne, I asked the Hindu leader this simple question: "What would you do if an eventually free India were to enter into a war?" And Gandhi replied that he was convinced that, if India freed herself by non-violent means, she would never more go to war. If, however, contrary to all his dreams, an eventually free India should go to war, he hoped – with divine assistance – to have the strength to rise up against his government and to stand in the way of violent resistance.

Deeply moved by the fatal consequences of the World War, Gandhi seemed to consider it his chief duty to indicate to his hearers how methods of direct non-violent action could be employed by the Western nations in order to free themselves from the scourge of armaments and war. At Paris, and at Lausanne, at Geneva, he insisted repeatedly on the effect which non-cooperation, boycott and other non-violent means could have in this struggle. At the

same time, he emphasized that non-violent resistance ought to be based upon a profound conviction, upon faith, so to speak, and that one should be able to bring to it a courage superior to that of the soldier. In this resistance, men and women, old and young, can all work together, Gandhi even emphasizing what might be done by women and youths. Resistance, however, is not possible unless one has the courage to break with the modern state, which rests essentially upon violence and which, without militarism and without war preparation, could not exist, all modern civilization being based on the exploitation of oppressed classes and races. That is why Gandhi thinks that the struggle for world peace ought to coincide with the struggle for the liberation of the colored races and the struggle for social justice.

Gandhi does not believe that Professor Einstein's proposal to raise as soon as possible to two per cent the number of those who would refuse military service would be sufficient to upset the whole military organization. In the first place, it does not seem to him right that, while war and militarism are symptoms of the mentality of a whole nation, the full weight of the struggle should fall upon a very small percentage of the entire population. It should not be forgotten that young men are enrolled only because compulsory military service exists. But the most profound cause of war does not reside in compulsory military service, but in the fact that the whole of modern society is, in principle, built upon violence. Although Gandhi may have all possible respect for an individual's refusal to do military service, he does not think that one has the right to leave the struggle against war in the hands of a few. On the other hand, he maintains, by drawing special attention to the refusal of military service, one gives the impression that the struggle against war can be put off until the last moment. It remains, however, to be seen whether, during an eventual mobilization, the single act of refusing service would really be sufficient to render fighting and bloodshed impossible.

To put into effective practice methods of non-cooperation, boycott, collective refusal of tax payment, etc., there must be moral preparation and a systematic education of the great masses of the people. What has been achieved non-violently in India was preceded by a decade of continuous propaganda. People must become conscious of the extraordinary moral forces at their disposal. Each participant in non-violent resistance should undergo an internal regeneration; he must understand that armaments, compulsory military service and even war are only relatively superficial symptoms of a very deeply rooted moral disorder, of capitalist-imperialist mentality which must be vanquished and overcome in one's own conscience. The more closely men approach this aim, the better they will be able to break the power of the modern state by depriving it of all collaboration.

Although Gandhi formerly participated in war by joining the Red Cross, recently, at Geneva, he deplored the fact that this institution was still subordinate to the military system, and condemned it for this as much as Tolstoy did and for the same reason. According to Gandhi's new attitude, the Red Cross should cease to recognize and tolerate the crime of war. Instead of preparing especially to do good work during the bloody combat, it ought to do everything to abolish war. Instead of talking exclusively about saving the wounded in time of war, and of restoring war-devastated regions, why not get ready to heal and to prevent all the ills of humanity, since millions of men are injuring themselves daily through their own folly, and innumerable homes are destroyed through the immoral conduct of those who inhabit them? If, as it is sincerely to be hoped, the Mahatma will persevere in this attitude, even under circumstances in which he would have to sacrifice immense national interests, and, if necessary, the political independence of his own people, he will have acted in the interests of the international anti-militarist movement and in the interests of the future of humanity.

Yet there are still some problems to face in connection with Gandhi's attitude. The same Gandhi who, at Lausanne and Geneva,

to victory. It has been gained in such an exemplary manner that it ought to inspire all nations to adopt non-violent methods, even for their national defense."

A statement such as the foregoing is, in my opinion, the *minimum* that all war resisters have the right to demand from the great Oriental leader, since he has come to give a lesson in anti-militarist morality to the Western nations. If, inspired by his great love of truth, Gandhi realizes the consequences resulting from his own theses as set forth at Lausanne and Geneva, it is certain that he will come more and more to the point of view of the revolutionary anti-militarists.

advised the Swiss people and all Western nations suffering beneath the burden of armaments and threat of war, to renounce violent national defense and to free themselves from all armaments by practicing direct non-violent action, demanded for India, at the Round Table Conference in London, "control over her own defense forces and over her external affairs." And he declared, "Defense, that is its army, is to a nation the very essence of its existence, and if a nation's defense is controlled by an outside agency, no matter how friendly it is, then that nation is certainly not responsibly governed. This is what our English teachers have taught us…. Hence I am here very respectfully to claim, on behalf of the Congress, complete control over the army, over the defense forces and over external affairs."

Gandhi considers the army in India at present as an army of occupation. Whether it is composed of Indians or Europeans does not alter its character in any way. The armed force in India today is there, as Gandhi declared, "for the defense of British interests and for avoiding or resisting foreign aggression… it is an army intended to suppress rebellion against constituted authority." An India really free could not support such an institution. Even if the British troops stayed in India, they would no longer have to protect British citizens, who would then be foreigners in that country, but would be there "to protect India against foreign aggression, even against internal insurrection, as if they were defending and serving their own countrymen." At London, Gandhi declared: "It should be the proud privilege and the proud duty of Great Britain now to initiate us in the mysteries of conducting our own defense. Having clipped our wings, it is their duty to give us wings whereby we can fly, even as they fly. That is really my ambition, and, therefore, I say, I would wait till eternity if I cannot get control of defense." In view of the contradiction which exists between what Gandhi asked for in London for his own people and what in Switzerland he advised others to do, one might apply to the Mahatma the biblical words: "Physician, heal thyself."

Of course, when Gandhi speaks at public meetings in Europe and replies to questions on present-day subjects of vital interest, he does not need to consider the exigencies of the Indian Congress, which he had to represent at the Round Table Conference. Gandhi has always two ways of looking at things. In the first place, he is struggling, along with the Congress, whose first delegate he was at London, for the political freedom of India, and so, identifies himself completely with the desiderata of the Congress. In the second place, as an adherent of a religion and ethics having universal and humanitarian goals, he might go much further than the Congress and his nation in general. That is why, on the one hand, he hopes that India, by increasingly practicing non-violent methods, will, once she has gained her independence, rise to the point where she will no longer have recourse to war; whereas, on the other hand, he declares that, if an eventually free India should go to war, he hopes to receive, from God Himself, the strength to go against his own government and to refuse to participate in violent measures of national defense.

This attitude, however, presents a fundamental contradiction, the consequence of which might very well be that if an eventually free India were to go to war for one cause or another, Gandhi, in spite of his better intentions, or at least a great many of his partisans, would enlist in the Indian army with the same enthusiasm as Gandhi himself showed when he enlisted for three British wars.

Here, a tactical error leads to fatal consequences. Gandhi's non-violence is in flagrant contradiction to the Indian bourgeois State which the Congress is engaged in building, but Gandhi nevertheless acknowledges that between the demands of the Congress and those of his own doctrine there is a certain agreement; both insist upon India's complete liberation, national independence, and, as Gandhi puts it, the right for India even to do wrong if it appears to her right. Gandhi has admitted that in an eventually free India he may be obliged to set himself against his own people, because that people may, according to the Mahatma, deviate from the right path. However, in order to attain that state of purely formal liberty,

Gandhi has identified himself too much with the Congress, and is thus fulfilling ambiguous functions, which often force him to support dangerous social and political tendencies which he ought, on the contrary, to fight against continuously if he is to remain true to his own principles.

All those who are fighting for social revolution, without, however, being in favor of the dictatorial and military measures still practiced by the great majority of those who are endeavoring to create a more humane society, can understand the difficulties in the midst of which Gandhi is battling. Like them, from what can be called a negative point of view, he is the firm ally of all those who are fighting to destroy an oppressive yoke, but from several other angles, his real object and his means of combat differ greatly from those of his fellow combatants.

Even concerning the question of national defense, Gandhi could have avoided any ambiguity and rendered great services in the struggle against any kind of war, if, at the Round Table Conference, in claiming for his country complete liberty, he had not joined forces with those who hope to profit from India's eventual armaments and wars, but had simply demanded for India the right to organize its own national defense forces as it thought best. Thus he would have, from the beginning, avoided any responsibility concerning India's eventual armaments and any resulting disastrous consequences. He could even have declared to the Round Table Conference: "I claim for India full right to defend herself as she thinks best, but I assure you that I myself, who feel responsible, not only for India's future, but for the future of all mankind, shall do all in my power to prevent India from following the deplorable example of England and other Western nations in arming herself with the means of physical and murderous combat. I am sacrificing myself for the future of a people, which shall fulfill its vocation in the world only if, even in the most dangerous circumstances, it employs solely those non-violent methods, which have already enabled me to come among you at this conference. This is a first step