

Getting Started in Pacifism: The Practical Why, The Practical How

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WHY DOES PEACEWORK MAKE PRACTICAL SENSE? The great triumph of peace in our own generation is the dismantling of European communism over the years 1987–1991, in a sequence of events that most Western observers as recently as 1985 would have dismissed as a Hollywood fantasy. Today’s Eastern European peace did not come from guns, uniforms, or the expensive overflight displays of jet fighters we have lately been seeing in Toronto. Its roots lay, rather, in the fearless expression of dissenting political opinion by ordinary citizens, massing in the streets by their hundreds of thousands.

This European story I know in part from the inside, having been an Estonian-exile volunteer for a tiny diaspora organization, the ‘Relief Centre for Estonian Prisoners of Conscience in the USSR’. (I was born in exile in Canada in 1953. My gainful daytime employment over the period of this volunteering, from around 1986 until the 1991 dismantling of the USSR, was successively in Singapore, the United States, and Canada.) My half-sister in Tartu, back home in Estonia, was for her part among the marching, singing—and ultimately triumphant—hundreds of thousands.

Analysis of our European experience reveals that it owed little to the actions of the Western military, who may indeed have been ill-informed regarding political realities on the ground. Here is a telling illustration. When, shortly before the 1987 February 24 Tallinn pro-independence demonstrations at the Tammsaare monument, I took the precaution of phoning the USA State Department, the lady who processed my call went so far as to ask, in her good-natured fumbling, ‘How do you spell “Tammsaare”?’ And I believe she was no mere clerical assistant but a professional analyst at the fully appropriate regional “desk” within that sprawling Washington bureau!

There is still a tendency in some circles to attribute glasnost and perestroika to the ruinously expensive military spending forced on the USSR by President Ronald Reagan in Washington and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in London, as a flow-on from America’s gigantic “Star Wars” initiative. Here I can only say that from the street perspective, as far as I can today make it out—I am happy to be corrected, if need be, by competent foreign-affairs specialists—the roots of glasnost and perestroika lay elsewhere. The real roots, as far as I can make out, lay in an occasionally faltering, but in the end adequately clear, perception within First Secretary Mikhael

S. Gorbachev's Kremlin that the Communist Party of the USSR had reached a dead end. I recall here the prophetic words of a Polish social scientist, Kolakowski, whom I heard at Oxford in the academic year 1974–1975: already back then, the greying Kolakowski electrified us, his youthful audience, with the pronouncement that communism had ceased to be credible in the Soviet bloc, even—this was crucial—within the bloc's own ruling strata.

If the peaceful dismantling of communism in our own generation demonstrates the practicality of pacifism, then the futility and ruin of war is, by contrast, demonstrated in the experience of the previous generation, in other words of my parents and aunts and uncles and family friends, between 1939 and 1945.

I hope I will be believed when I write here that my Dad, my Mum, my two Grandmas, my additional close relatives, and the people they knew saw every conceivable thing, in the very proportions and scale of today's Iraq, right down to the hand hanging in a tree in Dresden (hands come off in the moments of "shock and awe", when the people in the planes drop the bombs onto the terrorized streets), right down to the human genitals in the Red soldier's lunch pail at the battlefield near starving Leningrad.

Canadian experiences of war are coloured by happy images from the 1944–1945 liberation of the Netherlands. But here I plead with you to consider, for a moment, the contrasting position in the east of Europe, where the war served only to consolidate Stalin's system for a further ruinous forty-five years. I plead with you also to consider one of the lessons of the Holocaust, namely, that all the forces of the D-Day armada were powerless to save the six million gassed and shot in Hitler's death camps. Those camps, too, are part of the bitter legacy I and my family carry with us, twenty-four hours a day, every day of the year until we die: although my family and immediate family friends were touched comparatively lightly by their various ill-judged involvements with the Dritte Reich, I know easily twenty or thirty people who for their part had a degree of social intimacy, from the 1950s right into the 1980s, with a sometime Dritte Reich concentration-camp officer. And, switching for a moment from the European to the Far-Eastern theatre, I plead with you to consider the plight of China (and Tibet), labouring to this day under a Stalinist system assisted in its rise to power by the World War II Pacific

operations.

War is the most far-reaching form of terrorism known to humanity. War is the specific terrorism that begets and nurtures, even to the third and fifth and seventh human generation, the other terrorisms tormenting us. What were Hitler and Stalin if not the bitter double fruit of World War I, the so-called “Great War”, the so-called “war to end all wars”? What is the Middle Eastern situation now—with the Iraqi dead explicitly admitted by President George W. Bush to number in excess of thirty thousand, with the Iraqi dead estimated by peer-reviewed medical writers in *The Lancet* many months ago to run already into six figures, and with Iran for its part now said to call for Israel to be “wiped off the map”, in English words that are a mistranslation of the significantly less bellicose Persian original—what is this tangled twenty-first-century Middle Eastern situation if not, once again, the toxic residue of World War I, of that “war to end all wars”?

And if we see nuclear weapons detonated in this decade, whether by governments or by lone guerrillas, what will such detonations be if not the next stage in a militaristic perversion of science first unveiled by Harry Truman’s incineration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki? What clearer demonstration than those 1945 nukes, with their looming twenty-first century sequelae, can there be of the eternal truth, already evident to Sophocles and Euripides, and to the politically dissident Hebrew prophets (the Solzhenitsyns of their own day), that violence spawns larger and cleverer forms of violence?

WE ARE THUS LED TO CONSIDER WHAT PEACEWORK we can ourselves now undertake. Symbols do matter, though they merely hint at the inward essence of our situation. We already make a contribution by refusing to wear the colour of blood on our clothing on November 11, displaying in place of the government’s blood-red poppy a white peace sign.

But to reach the essence, we have to realize that peace starts from within, in our ideas and emotions. We will not have peace until we are able to contemplate our soldiers with an accurate and clear-eyed sympathy, without preaching, without condemnation, even in the midst of our clear-eyed rejection of the politicians whom the

soldiers are so inappropriately sworn to obey.

One way to begin this task of contemplation is to listen, sympathetically and carefully (as I have indeed done, at Toronto's Catholic Worker dinner table) to some of the American military deserters now in Canada. Our job is to understand how for a young American, military training presents itself as the only way out of a hopeless socioeconomic situation, as the only realistic route to an affordable university education. Specifically, we must recall how in the United States, your university degree, if it is not funded by the military, is liable to cost you tens of thousands of dollars a year in tuition alone.

Although conditions are not so dire in Canada, we must consider the Canadian soldier's position sympathetically, too—recalling on the one hand the struggle for a professional education, on the other hand the glow of an uncritical patriotism continually pushed at our impressionable young adults by television, by the endless torrent of military coffee-table books at Indigo, by the militarized displays at the Canadian National Exhibition, and by the pomp at our expensive new war memorials. It is these two forces jointly, we must recall, that induce young Canadians to join our own forces, and we must continually recall that we would have been likely to have done the same had we been in their precise, unhappy, circumstances. Our job is not to condemn but to understand.

What, in the most general terms, is our proper attitude to the soldiery, be they Americans in 2004 Abu Ghraib or Americans in 1944 Normandy, be they contemporary Israelis or contemporary Hezbollah, be they contemporary Canadians or contemporary Taliban? I answer a little obliquely, with an anecdote. You will find the message of the anecdote I am about to relate unexpected, cheerful, almost humorous. You will find it a message of hope.

My late maternal grandmother, Ekaterina Ranne, born in Estonia in 1892, was as a young wife brought in the most immediate and physical sense face to face with one of the first great terrors of our time. The year was, I suspect, 1918 or 1919 or 1920. Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, having assumed power in the Petrograd putsch of 1917 November 6, was now seeking to consolidate his Bolshevik despotism through civil war. Grandma was at the time in a village in Ukraine with her young husband, seeking to escape famine.

For a while, her village of temporary refuge was in the hands of

Mensheviks. Then something happened—I presume that some guys fired guns at some other bunch of guys—and the village changed hands. A soldier, one of the incoming Bolsheviks, who must by now have become accustomed to the idea of shooting people for politics, banged on Grandma’s door. ‘Woman,’ he said, ‘our army is feeding. Give us spoons.’ To this Grandma said, ‘Spoons? What do you mean, spoons? The only spoons we have in this house are silver coffee spoons, and we are not handing those out to Bolsheviks.’ The gun-toter apologized, as of course he had to apologize, and he went on to the next house.

The anecdote has been told in our family as an illustration of our dear Grandma’s very occasional naiveté. But I, for my part, say that she saw things the way the Dorothy Days and the Mahatma Gandhis of this world do, and as we indeed *must* see them if the cycle of violence is to be ended in the Middle East and Afghanistan even as the massed citizenry (supported as they were by the pragmatic de facto pacifism of Gorbachev, and still more significantly by the pacifist vision of a Polish Pope) successfully ended it in 1980s Eastern Europe. For Grandma, and also for that poor Bolshevik soldier with whom Grandma in her vulnerability successfully pleaded or reasoned, people count for more than politics.

Grandma’s viewpoint, perhaps in a particular way her openness and vulnerability, carried her safely through the Russian civil war. It carried her also through the still more terrible trials of World War II, which saw Estonia occupied both by Soviets and by Nazis.

What in the end happened to Grandma, you ask? She lived a long, happy, productive life, greatly enjoying her decades in Canadian exile, departing this world in 1992 half a year short of her hundredth birthday.

There is a message for us all in this. It is, as I say, a message of hope. I no more have answers to our current problems—Afghanistan, Iran, Hamas, Hezbollah—than Grandma had answers to Lenin. But I know that answers exist somewhere, and I know that when those answers are found, they will be deeper, subtler, than the easy pseudo-answers that come with uniforms and guns. I’m going to keep looking until I find those answers, and so are you!