

Civil Disobedience Across Contexts: Gandhi's Methods and Eastern European Resistance Movements _____

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Abstract

This paper looks at how civil disobedience was practised by Mahatma Gandhi and how the non-violence strategy paralleled or influenced twentieth-century peaceful revolutions in Eastern Europe, such as the Solidarity Movement in Poland, the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia, and the Peaceful Revolution in East Germany.

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In a qualitative historical-comparative design, the study uses the primary sources of Gandhi, movement documents and secondary sources of academic literature to determine strategic similarities and differences between selected resistance movements by employing a structured case study approach. The study shows many conceptual and strategic parallels, especially in the realms of nonviolent discipline, mass civilian mobilisation, withdrawal of consent from oppressive authority and building alternative democratic institutions. Gene Sharp's theory of non-violent action emerges as a critical intellectual bridge between Eastern European dissident practice and the Gandhian theory. Although based on three cases and mainly secondary sources, pertinent to in authoritarian contexts as a historically proven way to achieve democratic transition that can be characterised as disciplined nonviolent resistance. This paper seeks to fill the research void by exploring the topic of civil disobedience practiced by Gandhi in relation to the experiences of Eastern Europe by using a comparative analysis approach.

Keywords: Civil disobedience, Satyagraha, nonviolent resistance, Eastern Europe, democratic transition, Gandhi

Introduction

In the contemporary world, the question of how ordinary citizens can oppose unjust authority without resorting to violence remains one of the most pressing issues in political life. However, throughout history, nonviolent conflict has been one of the most effective tools that the people of a nation have at their disposal to effect change in political systems—from the Arab Spring to the protests in Asia, Africa and Latin America, nonviolent resistance has repeatedly shown itself to be amongst the most consequential forces for political change available to civilian populations (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011). The tradition is led by no one more than Mahatma Gandhi, whose philosophy and practice of civil disobedience revolutionised the world's understanding of the relationship between those who hold power and those who are subject to it (Ahmed, 2019).

The idea of Satyagraha was first propounded by Gandhi in South Africa and subsequently tested and improved in the struggle for India's independence from the British Raj (Jahanbegloo, 2016). What Gandhi taught was that as a disciplined, non-violent, and organised campaigns, an unarmed populace can have even entrenched authority brought to its knees (Brown, 1989). These were not just some brilliant strategies, but they were imperative. They embraced a different perspective on power, legitimacy, and mutual obligations among citizens in the event of injustice (Gandhi, 1909; Gianolla, 2025). Some of the seeds for the Satyagraha philosophy had already been sown by Thoreau's earlier writings on

civil disobedience, which gave Satyagraha a legacy that could be traced back from nineteenth-century New England to twentieth-century India (Reddy, 2024).

Decades later, the Eastern Europeans created their own exceptional tale in this narrative. The Solidarity movement started in 1980 in Poland, in the shipyards of Gdansk, uniting millions of workers and intellectuals to provide an unflagging, nonviolent opposition to the communist regime that came to an end in 1989 (Bartkowski, 2013). In Czechoslovakia, students, artists, and ordinary people peacefully toppled forty years of authoritarian government in just a few weeks in November of 1989 (Glenn, 1999). In East Germany, the number of people taking part in a Leipzig demonstration on Monday evening rose from a few hundred to hundreds of thousands, and in the end the Berlin Wall fell without organised violence from either side (Roberts & Garton Ash, 2009). In combination, they represent one of the most extraordinary peaceful democratic changes in modern history and have some remarkable strategic and structural similarities with Gandhian civil disobedience (Betts, 2019; Sharp, 1993).

But these two traditions have been almost entirely viewed in isolation in their regional, disciplinary literatures (Thurber, 2021). Their comparative relationships still have not been explored to an adequate degree, and there is a real knowledge gap in nonviolent activism and in democracy transition (Chenoweth et al., 2017). This paper asks directly: how far did Gandhian principles of civil disobedience influence or parallel the movements of the resistance in Eastern Europe in the twentieth century? The paper then proceeds as follows: literature review, methodology, substantive analysis, discussion, limitations and conclusion.

Literature Review

Gandhi's Philosophy of Civil Disobedience

The importance of Gandhi's contribution to modern political thinking is difficult to overstate. The philosophy of nonviolent resistance was not an overnight phenomenon but a slow development, building from personal experience and deep moral conviction, as well as from intellectual interactions with people from other continents and faith traditions. Satyagraha, which translated from Sanskrit means 'truth-force' or 'soul-force', was at the very heart of Gandhi's philosophy and principles, developed during his period of activism in South Africa from 1893 to 1914 (Jahanbegloo, 2016; Singh, 2025). Satyagraha was a method of protest and more. It was a whole philosophy, a moral and strategic imperative for any who faced an unjust power (Gianolla, 2025). Satyagraha, according to Gandhi, was a willingness to endure injury but not inflict it; that is, a willingness to absorb harm oneself in the belief that voluntary suffering could transform opponents rather than simply defeat them (Gandhi, 1909).

The idea of non-violence (ahimsa) was closely linked with Satyagraha. Ahimsa was no mere absence of physical violence in the eyes of Gandhi. It called for a total rejection of force, hate and dehumanisation in all aspects of political life (Bondurant, 1958). That's the difference between what Gandhi did and what was called passive resistance; he rejected the term as being too weak. For him, non-violence was an active, moral discipline, more courageous and disciplined than any armed struggle (Parel, 2006). His moral authority gave an ethical hue to Gandhian activism, which turned out to be very successful in discrediting colonialism not only in India but also among foreign observers (Ahmed, 2019).

Intellectual influences of this concept include its link to Henry David Thoreau's 1849 essay on civil disobedience, which Gandhi came across in his imprisonment in Johannesburg in 1906 (Reddy, 2024). Gandhi openly admitted the debt, calling the essay profoundly to have influenced his own thoughts. Thoreau's main point that people are not merely permitted but morally obliged to resist laws that conflict with their moral beliefs served as a solid starting point for Gandhi to establish Satyagraha as a group-centred political practice (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2007). This was how a practice that developed in nineteenth-century New England evolved into the intellectual framework to support a mass movement that contributed to the downfall of the British Empire (Reddy, 2024).

Gandhi's ideals came to the forefront in the historic campaigns of the Indian Independence Movement. The Non-Cooperation Movement of 1920-1922 organised the Indian masses in withdrawal from the British colonial institutions such as courts, schools, and government jobs, which was one of the earliest mass Satyagraha movements (Mantena, 2012). The Salt March of 1930 demonstrated to the world how one act of symbolic defiance could inspire a nation and expose the moral weakness of the colonial system (Brown 1989; Oak, 2022). These campaigns left behind the templates for nonviolent political mobilisation that would echo far beyond India's borders.

Theoretical Framework of Nonviolent Resistance

Gene Sharp was the scholar who over the years transformed Gandhian practice into a systematic, transferable framework and who provided activists and scholars with a thorough vocabulary with which to understand how non-violent movements function. Sharp collected approximately two hundred strategies for non-violent resistance, which are classified in three categories: protest and persuasion, non-cooperation and intervention (Sharp, 1993). His major theoretical contribution was to demonstrate that political power, no matter how menacing it might seem, is exercised through consent and co-operation of the people it governs. Revoke it in an orderly fashion, and even the most oppressive regime shows signs of breaking apart (Sharp, 1993). This is the essence of Gandhian philosophy, too, and Sharp's scheme provided the analytical precision that allowed it to be used outside India.

Perhaps the strongest empirical support for this model is from Chenoweth and Stephan (2011), who conducted a study of the success of nonviolent and violent campaigns between 1900 and 2006 and concluded that nonviolent campaigns were more than twice as likely to succeed as violent ones. Based on a sample of 323 campaigns, their study undermined the notion that force is the best way to achieve political transformation, and hence proved that nonviolence was a better strategy compared to violence, which was more of a choice (Chenoweth, 2021). Later, Chenoweth, Perkosi, and Kang (2017) added more detail, demonstrating that movements that succeeded in remaining disciplined and nonviolent in the face of state violence were more likely to be resilient and to be successful than those that splintered or resorted to violence.

Political philosophy has also seriously considered civil disobedience as a form of political action that is worthy of study. According to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (2007), it is a conscious, public, nonviolent and conscientious violation of law perpetrated to effect policy or legislation change. The characteristic that makes civil disobedience different from common violations of law lies in the fact that it includes non-violent, public, ethical and communicative actions — qualities that are seen in Gandhian and Eastern European civil disobedience movements. (Rawls, 1971; Thurber, 2021).

Eastern European Resistance — Historical Context

These resistance movements that reshaped most of the eastern part of the 20th century were not spontaneous uprisings. It took years of individuals underground publishing networks operating secretly under state surveillance, a proliferation of samizdat publications, religious opposition, and fragmented labour strikes to establish the groundwork for what would come to pass in 1989 (Betts, 2019; Ekiert, 1991).

The most long-lasting and structured of these movements was the Solidarity Movement in Poland. Solidarity emerged in August 1980 from a sit-in strike at the Gdańsk shipyard and was quickly transformed from being a trade union into a wide-ranging social movement that included workers, intellectuals, students and the Catholic Church and eventually had an estimated membership of 10 million (Bartkowski, 2013). The one special attribute was its most defining quality — an unwavering commitment to nonviolent discipline, which it continued to enforce despite the government's martial law in December 1981 (Laba, 1991; Goodwyn, 1991). Perhaps more importantly, Solidarity did not merely resist — it built. Independent newspapers, underground schools, and autonomous coalitions developed a parallel civic society which anticipated the democratic order the movement was fighting for in a surprisingly Gandhi-like way (Bartkowski, 2013; Roberts & Garton Ash, 2009).

But the same kind of reasoning is effective at impossibly high velocities as it was during the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia. It started with a student demonstration on 17 November 1989 and within a few days grew into mass protests, general strikes and the establishment of the Civic Forum led by Václav Havel (Wheaton & Kavan, 1992; Glenn, 1999). Throughout the movement, it remained peaceful – despite the early police violence – perfectly encapsulated by its well-known name (Betts, 2019). In the same way, Leipzig in eastern Germany, as well, began its movement with just a few hundred people on the first Monday in the city, turning by the end of a few weeks into an estimated three hundred thousand participants and only triggering the collapse of the Berlin Wall in the end of November 9th without organised violence from either side (Democratic Change in Central and Eastern Europe, European Parliament, 2014).

Viewed collectively, these movements share a striking uniformity in their forms, and they all employed the following five shared features: continuous nonviolent discipline, wide civilian support, deliberate institution building, calculated withdrawal of consent, development of moral legitimacy in the eyes of the domestic public, and the creation of moral legitimacy on the international stage (Ekiert & Kubik, 1998; Thurber, 2021; Sharp, 1993). These common elements provide a basis for the comparative analysis that follows.

Research Gap

Though there is considerable scholarship on Gandhi and the various types of resistance movements in Eastern Europe, there is little literature in which Gandhi and the traditions of resistance in Eastern Europe are directly linked. Gandhi has been generally studied in the context of anti-colonial nationalism, and the 1989 revolutions in Eastern Europe have been mostly read through the prism of Cold War geopolitics and democratic transition theory (Thurber, 2021; O'Donnell & Schmitter, 1986). The result leads to a notable void – a lack of systematic comparison that would explore the question of common logic behind both Gandhian ideas and Eastern European approaches, as well as the role played by Sharp's model in connecting these two schools of thought (Sharp, 1993; Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011). This paper directly tackles that gap and places both traditions in a common framework of nonviolent resistance and democratic transition.

Methodology

The research design adopted in this paper is a qualitative historical-comparative research design because it is appropriate for the study that aims to find structural patterns and strategic similarities in different phenomena that come from

different geographical and historical backgrounds. This study does not rely on the collection of fresh empirical data by survey or fieldwork but rather draws on historical evidence, theoretical scholarship and primary source material to develop a rigorous comparison between the Gandhian civil disobedience and resistance movements in Eastern Europe. The methodology traces back its history to political science, sociology, and history studies and is very suitable for following the development and transmission of ideas, methods, and politics.

The case study framework is the key analytical approach used. Three resistance movements from Eastern Europe have been chosen to be compared: the Polish Solidarity Movement (1980–1989), the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia (1989) and the Peaceful Revolution in East Germany (1989). The selection of each case was based on certain commonalities, such as: All three involve long-term efforts at non-violent opposition to a type of government characterised by authoritarianism in communist countries. Each event marked a political shift without involving organised violence. There is enough research material available on all three to conduct an in-depth study. As a whole, they provide a useful and manageable window of nonviolent resistance in Eastern Europe and enable interesting cross-case comparisons without compromising analysis.

There are two types of sources used in the study. Gandhi's own writings, most notably *Hind Swaraj* (1909), an elaboration that is both the most systematic assertion of his political philosophy and his criticism of colonial modernity, are primary sources. A selection of supporting material consists of Gandhi's correspondence, speeches and records of major events like the Salt March of 1930 and the Non-Cooperation Movement of 1920-1922. Primary sources for the Eastern European cases are movement documents, public statements, and published speeches and writings of important figures like Václav Havel and Lech Wałęsa from digital archives such as the Wilson Center Digital Archive. Secondary sources constitute the bulk, with peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly monographs, and historical studies from political science, sociology, comparative politics, and historical analyses. Sharp's theoretical orientation on non-violent action, the empirical work of Chenoweth and Stephan on civil resistance, and the historical scholarship of Bartkowski, Roberts and Garton Ash on the movements in Eastern Europe are some of the more important ones.

A comparative framework is used in two phases. The first one focuses upon identifying the core principles and strategic features of Gandhian civil disobedience by close reading of primary and secondary sources. The second uses these characteristics as analytical frameworks to be applied to the three cases of Eastern European traditions as a way to identify similarities and variations in the traditions compared.

There are certain limitations which must be acknowledged upfront. The use of secondary sources ensures that the information presented is an interpretation of the literature rather than pure archive research. There are three good cases

presented, but they don't really reflect Eastern European resistance. This problem of "category projection" has been addressed and managed, but not eliminated. In the light of the above, the method employed in this study is still suitable and adequate to achieve the comparative purposes.

Gandhi's Methods — Core Principles

Satyagraha — Truth Force

Gandhi coined the term Satyagraha by combining the Sanskrit words for truth (satya) and force or firmness (agraha), deliberately rejecting the phrase passive resistance as both inaccurate and misleading; he did not like the term passive resistance, as it was wrong and misleading (Gandhi, 1909). Satyagraha was more than a protest technique. It was a philosophy, a political strategy and a way of life that required the participants not only to abstain from violence but also demanded that they transform themselves morally in the service of collective liberation (Gianolla, 2025). For Gandhi, Satyagraha was not about the weapon or the numbers but about the strength of truth and the courage to suffer in its defence. In this model, political power stemmed not from violent capability but from moral power, which was developed through principled, disciplined, and selfless resistance to injustice (Jahanbegloo, 2016).

The practice of Satyagraha required a lot of sacrifice from those who took to it. Gandhi believed that his followers, who were called "satyagrahis" meaning those who practised Satyagraha, should behave in a nonviolent manner in the face of the most severe repression and that imprisonment, hardship, and self-giving were not only tactics but also signs of a just cause (Brown, 1989). This was not naive idealism. Gandhi understood that any resort to violence by his followers would provide the colonial authorities with justification to suppress the movement, weaken the movement's moral standing, and drive away the public sympathy on which large-scale political campaigns relied (Ahmed, 2019). The Salt March of 1930—a march to the sea by thousands of people led by Gandhi—illustrated how Satyagraha would be practiced if done to its fullest potential, thereby garnering worldwide attention while at the same time redefining the ethical aspect of India's struggle for independence (Oak, 2022).

Ahimsa — Nonviolence

Satyagraha and Ahimsa were inseparable in Gandhi's thinking. The term "Ahimsa", which is typically translated as "nonviolence", was actually broader than the mere avoidance of physical harm. It called for a total repudiation across every dimension of human and political life of the practices of coercion, hatred and

dehumanisation (Bondurant, 1958). Gandhi was influenced by the ideas of the Hindu, Jain and Buddhist communities and turned what had historically been a personal spiritual discipline into a collective political instrument of considerable strategic sophistication (Parel, 2006). The moral standing which Ahimsa lent to Gandhian movements was proved highly effective at eroding the legitimacy of the colonial rule in India as well as in the eyes of international observers watching from afar (Mantena, 2012).

Ahimsa was also strategized by Gandhi. When a struggle remains committed to nonviolence despite repression from the state, an interesting development occurs: The violent response of the state rebounds against itself. In later years Sharp (1993) would characterise this as political jiu-jitsu; the oppressor's brutality rebounds, damaging its own legitimacy while strengthening the moral standing of those it attacks. Each act of suffering accepted without retaliation – beatings, incarceration, economic destitution – is simultaneously an act of political communication, making visible to domestic and international audiences the fundamental injustice of the authority being resisted (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011). For Gandhi, suffering was not a negative by-product of struggle. It was a political instrument; it could do what negotiation and argument alone could not (Gianolla, 2025).

Non-Cooperation

Satyagraha and Ahimsa were the ideological bases behind them, while non-cooperation was the application of these principles within practical politics. The rationale was quite straight forward; any regime or system of power, no matter how much strength it possesses, rests upon cooperation and submission from those who are being governed. Take away this cooperation in an organized form, and the very basis of a system of power starts falling apart (Sharp, 1993). In this regard, the Non-Cooperation Movement of 1920–1922 was an instance where millions of Indians stopped using British judicial machinery, British institutions, British education, and British products and thus disrupted the functioning of the colonial regime through mass organized non-cooperation (Mantena, 2012).

Their strategies were varied, including the boycotting of British products, industrial strikes, the renouncing of colonial honours and titles, the removal of children from colonial schools, and the withholding of some taxes (Brown, 1989). The one common goal was to systematically withdraw the consent and cooperation of the colonial system that required them to function every day (Gandhi, 1909). This concept that the withdrawal of consent itself is political power proved to be among Gandhi's most lasting legacies to the study and execution of resistance, one which would echo strongly in movements unrelated to colonial India not only in time but also in geographical space (Roberts & Garton Ash, 2009).

Constructive Programme

The least celebrated dimension of Gandhi's political strategy may also have been the most far-sighted. Gandhi also kept up the campaign of active resistance, and at the same time he spoke of the need to create the social, economic and political fabric of a free India. Gandhi (1909) called this work the Constructive Programme and continued to promote it, while the campaign of active resistance was ongoing. His reasoning was clear-headed: if the people did not have the means of organisation, a lack of civic culture, and alternative institutions to govern themselves, there would be no point in removing colonial authority (Jahanbegloo, 2016). The programme, thus, involved the promotion of village industries and hand-spinning as expressions of economic self-reliance, the formation of schools independent of colonial rule, working to end untouchability and developing local self-governing bodies capable of functioning independently of British administration (Mantena, 2012).

This dimension of Gandhi's strategy matters enormously for the comparative analysis that is central to this paper. In the East European context, the construction of alternative institutions — independent newspapers, underground universities, parallel trade unions, and civic coalitions was also very much needed to establish the organisational framework in which democratic change was possible (Bartkowski, 2013). Gandhi's insistence that resistance movements must build the world they are fighting for, not merely tear down the one they oppose is a strategic principle that echoes through the ages — not just in India (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011; Sharp, 1993). The empirical evidence supports this — movements that pair active resistance with institution building consistently achieve greater long-term success in consolidating democratic transition than those focused on opposition alone (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011).

Eastern European Resistance Movements

Poland's Solidarity Movement (1980–1989)

The Solidarity movement in Poland was not a grand ideological project. The beginning was with workers. Back in August 1980, workers of the Lenin Shipyard in Gdańsk their immediate demands were practical: the establishment of independent trade unions, free from the control of the communist party; higher wages; and dignity at work. What ensued was far from what anyone had expected. In a matter of weeks, a formally recognised independent trade union had emerged that, at one time, recruited as many as ten million members, or almost one-quarter

of the entire population of Poland, one of the largest mass movements of European history (Laba, 1991; Bartkowski, 2013).

But what made Solidarity different from previous episodes of Polish worker unrest was the disciplined practice of a non-violent approach: not as a model, but as a calculated tactical decision. Its leaders were aware that if the movement resorted to violence, the regime would have justification to crack down on the movement with military force and, at the same time, cost the movement the international goodwill it partly depended upon (Roberts & Garton Ash, 2009). That commitment faced its hardest test in December 1981, when the government imposed martial law and arrested thousands of activists and pushed the movement into the shadows. Solidarity survived. It survived the tough years to come in a network of underground communication, organisation and quiet resistance (Bernhard, 1993).

The significance of Solidarity for this paper is its simultaneous efforts to build alternative institutions, which complement the campaign of resistance. The movement owned newspapers, publishing houses and radio stations. It established underground educational networks and flying universities operating entirely outside state control. It created self-governing organisations at the workplace and community level, which in actual practice illustrated the power of civil society in Poland (Bartkowski, 2013). There is much in common with Gandhi's Constructive Programme: both traditions believed that a movement must build the society it is fighting for, not merely dismantle the one it opposes (Sharp, 1993).

The Catholic Church was also an essential structure in the Solidarity movement, providing meeting spaces, communication networks and even offering a moral authority of its own which the communist apparatus was not willing to challenge straightforwardly (Roberts & Garton Ash, 2009). The election of the Polish Cardinal Karol Wojtyła as Pope John Paul II in 1978, followed by his visit in 1979 to Poland, had already demonstrated the strength of Catholic identity as a means of civic mobilisation, one that Solidarity would not have been able to create on its own (Bartkowski, 2013; Betts, 2019).

Czechoslovakia's Velvet Revolution (1989)

Where Solidarity had illustrated the power of non-violent resistance in wearing away at authoritarian control in a process spanning several years, the Velvet Revolution was proof that such actions could be successful within days. Everything kicked off on November 17, 1989, when riot police broke up a student demonstration in Prague after violently suppressing a march in the Czech capital (Glenn, 1999). The oppressive way that the police responded was utterly counterproductive. Instead of silencing opposition, it sparked it transforming a student protest into a nationwide demand for democratic change (Wheaton & Kavan, 1992; Saxonberg, 2001).

Václav Havel, a playwright, essayist and veteran dissident, united the fragmented opposition under a single organisational banner — Civic Forum (Glenn, 1999). The establishment of Civic Forum was one of the most important organizational steps that provided the movement with the opportunity to turn street demonstrations into concrete political results. Within just three days from when any actions began, some five hundred thousand people had gathered in Wenceslas Square in Prague (Glenn, 1999).

Havel's leadership possessed all the characteristics that Gandhi would have recognised: the quality of personal integrity giving him authority and moral force, the ability to face up to maximum pressure while seeking a dialogue, and insistence on nonviolence, which he never gave up (Wheaton & Kavan, 1992). Six weeks after the first march of the students, the Communist Party had lost its control and a new government had taken place, and Havel was now president of Czechoslovakia. This entire transformation had been achieved entirely without organised violence (Glenn, 1999; Betts, 2019).

East Germany's Peaceful Revolution (1989)

East Germany's path followed the same broad logic but in its own distinct way. Its slogan was the 'Monday Demonstrations' in the city of Leipzig, which started in autumn 1989 with a gathering of a few hundred people outside St Nicholas Church and grew to an estimated three hundred thousand in just a few weeks; a cascade of participation that illustrated perfectly how nonviolent momentum builds when structural conditions are right (Democratic Change in Central and Eastern Europe, European Parliament, 2014).

The Protestant church was involved in East Germany on a level much like the Catholic Church played in Poland. Long before mass mobilisation took place, The Peace Prayer meetings held at St. Nicholas' Church had been serving as a meeting place for the opposition which was dispersed for several years, thus creating the connections necessary for mass protests (Democratic Change in Central and Eastern Europe, European Parliament, 2014). Protected institutional space proved to be a huge factor.

Perhaps the greatest example of nonviolent power in the 20th century was the collapse of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989, when the wall fell not through force but through popular and peaceful protest and because the regime had lost confidence in its own strength (Ekiert, 1991; Betts, 2019). The citizens who broke through the Wall with their bare hands, without having to face the state security forces, made the Gandhian wisdom that moral power and civilian solidarity are more lasting forces of political action than violence come true (Sharp, 1993; Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011).

Common Patterns Across Movements

Seen in combination, the strategic profiles of these three movements are remarkably similar to one another. All three were sustained by wide-ranging participation that was trans-class, inter-generational, and trans-professional, supporting the view put forward by Chenoweth and Stephan (2011) that breadth of participation was one of the most important factors in determining whether or not nonviolent struggles succeeded. All three kept nonviolent discipline despite the threat and occasional use of repression, demonstrating the presence of leaders who knew that moral authority could be lost all too quickly (Roberts & Garton Ash, 2009; Thurber, 2021). All three built alternative civil society structures that gave the process of mass mobilization organizational support and longevity (Bartkowski, 2013; Laba, 1991). And in both Poland and East Germany, religious organizations provided protected venues for civil society activity which even the authorities dared not destroy. But above all else, each of these movements triumphed without violence – through the sheer power of moral authority, the ability to delegitimize authoritarian rule in the minds of their fellow citizens and the outside world (Sharp, 1993; Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011; Betts, 2019).

Comparative Analysis

The following analysis is structured around four analytical criteria drawn from the nonviolent resistance literature: nonviolent discipline, withdrawal of consent, institution building, and mass civilian participation (Sharp, 1993; Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011). The approach to these three Eastern European cases and the Gandhian movement are applied consistently in the sections below.

TABLE 1: Compares the application of analytical criteria to the Gandhian movement of civil disobedience and the Eastern European resistance movements.

Criterion	Gandhi	Poland (Solidarity)	Czechoslovakia	East Germany
Nonviolent discipline	Satyagraha	Maintained through martial law	Despite police violence on Nov. 17	Throughout Monday demonstrations
Withdrawal of consent	Non-Cooperation Movement	General strikes, boycotts	General strike Nov. 27	Mass non-participation
Institution-building	Constructive Programme	Underground press, flying universities	Civic Forum	Church-based networks
Mass participation	Salt March, INC mobilisation	~10 million members	500,000 in Wenceslas Square	300,000 in Leipzig

Parallels Between Gandhian Methods and Eastern European Resistance

Comparing Gandhian civil disobedience with Eastern European resistance across such different geographical, cultural and historical contexts is not a forced analogy. The similarities are structural and substantive and lead to the conclusions that Sharp (1993) drew: that there are common features of how civilian populations resist authoritarian power or regime that are applicable across all political settings in which they are tested.

The most basic similarity is between Satyagraha and nonviolent discipline practised during the nine years of Poland's Solidarity Movement. Gandhi insisted that Satyagrahis behave absolutely non-violently, even when provoked, aware that even one mistake would give the colonial government a reason to suppress them and deny their movement the moral legitimacy that gave it any political power (Gandhi, 1909). The same was also concluded by Solidarity's leadership. During the course of the martial law and mass arrests in 1981, it maintained its non-violent approach, as calculating that any turn to violence would legitimise the regime's use of force and alienate the international support the movement could not afford to lose (Bartkowski, 2013). The agreement was clear: nonviolent discipline was not a moral luxury but a strategic necessity (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011; Roberts & Garton Ash, 2009).

Even the parallels between the non-cooperation movements led by Gandhi and the strikes and boycotts organized by the Poles and Czechoslovakians are equally evident. Gandhi's movement of non-cooperation in the period between 1920 and 1922 revealed the effects of the withholding of civilian consent to the functioning of the colonial government without the necessity of using violence (Brown, 1989). During the following years, Poles were able to cripple major sectors of the communist economy through their labor strikes. Moreover, the Czechoslovakian general strike organized on November 27th, 1989, gave a finishing blow to the communist regime which forced it to concede its own dissolution (Glenn, 1999; Ekiert & Kubik, 1998).

Solidarity's institution-building strategy finds perhaps its most direct Eastern European echo in Gandhi's Constructive Programme. As Gandhi said, resistance movements had to create the democratic alternatives they sought, rather than simply tear down existing structures, and Solidarity did just that: it built independent newspapers, underground universities, parallel trade union structures, and self-governing coalitions that functioned as a genuine alternative civil society alongside and against the communist state (Bartkowski, 2013; Bondurant, 1958). The convergence here goes deeper than surface resemblance. It implies a common strategic logic, namely, one of nonviolence that endures and succeeds through the things they create, not just the things they oppose.

The Velvet Revolution of Eastern Europe is the most dramatic expression of the concept of Ahimsa, and, in six weeks, it brought a complete change of political

power in the country, without a single death to be blamed on the resistance (Glenn, 1999; Betts, 2019). The assertion by Gandhi that non-violent behavior would lead to moral authority that could surpass armed authoritarianism through its strength was proved right when the fast transition to democracy by Czechoslovakia was seen not as a result of conflict but through moral strength of non-violent public participation (Gianolla, 2025; Wheaton & Kavan, 1992). The last parallel is that the Monday Demonstrations in Leipzig followed the ‘cascade’ of Gandhi’s Salt March, both of which started off as symbols of disobedience and grew within weeks into a mass national movement (Democratic Change in Central and Eastern Europe, European Parliament, 2014; Oak, 2022).

Key Similarities

The exact similarities outlined above have four major structural similarities between both traditions. First, there is a situation where the question of moral legitimacy stands out in the front, whereas the application of physical force occurs behind. Neither Gandhi nor the resistive movements of the Eastern Europeans were capable of gaining victory through armed confrontation since their opposition was much more powerful militarily. However, Both sought to reveal the injustices of the regimes to a point where legitimacy became increasingly untenable (Sharp, 1993; Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011; Thurber, 2021).

The second commonality is the withdrawal of consent. Both these approaches were based on the same principle, which was that no political authority, regardless of its strength, could survive without cooperation from the population it controls (Sharp, 1993; Gandhi, 1909). However, as such cooperation gets progressively withdrawn through boycotts, strikes, or replacement with massive civil disobedience, the very foundation of an authoritarian regime comes to be shaken (Brown, 1989; Roberts & Garton Ash, 2009). The third commonality between them is high levels of popular participation, which Chenoweth and Stephan (2011) identify as one of the strongest predictors of success in nonviolent campaigns, and which were consistently seen in the Gandhian movement and the Eastern European experience. The fourth, and possibly the most important feature shared by both these examples of strategic nonviolent resistance is nonviolent discipline, understood as the systematic pursuit of nonviolence through organised and coerced efforts (Bartkowski, 2013; Schock, 2005).

Key Differences

Honest comparison must consider the differences as well. The primary one relates to the fundamentally religious basis of Gandhian nonviolent resistance compared with the primarily secular nature of Eastern European struggles, which were based on the principle of national sovereignty and a commitment to democracy

and economic equality (Betts, 2019; Roberts & Garton Ash, 2009). The difference between Satyagraha and Gandhian moral leadership and that which informed the Eastern European movements can be clearly traced in terms of their religious and spiritual underpinning, which derived from Hinduism, Jainism, and Christianity (Gianolla, 2025; Jahanbegloo, 2016).

The conditions of struggle in both cases were also quite dissimilar. Whereas Gandhian resistance was directed against colonial power that could only exist due to Indian compliance, Eastern European protests were directed at the communist regimes sustained not just by ideological justification but also Soviet economic management and military protection (Thurber, 2021; Ekiert & Kubik, 1998; Zunes, 1999). Moreover, the geopolitical climate during the Cold War, along with the change in Soviet policy under Gorbachev, provided enabling conditions for Eastern Europeans that had no precedent in India at the time of Gandhi's resistance (Betts, 2019; Democratic Change in Central and Eastern Europe, European Parliament, 2014).

In addition to these differences, there is a variation in terms of what could be called enabling factors, for the success of resistance movements in Eastern Europe which do not have a parallel in Gandhi's context, in terms of their structure and geopolitics. Transitions were further accelerated by the fragmentation of the communist party elites and international diplomatic pressure. The alternative explanations offered above do not render the Gandhian parallels found in this paper invalid, but they do imply that there was a broader enabling environment in which nonviolent civilian resistance thrived. That is, these movements were effective because of both disciplined civilian agency and favourable structural conditions, in line with Chenoweth and Stephan's (2011) observations that the effectiveness of nonviolent campaigns rests on strategic moves and structural opportunities.

Was Gandhi Directly Influential?

Questioning the existence of any form of direct influence on its face presents an intellectually honest challenge and requires an equally intellectually honest answer. The potential influence of Gandhi in terms of him being the direct inspiration for Eastern Europeans seems possible but not fully evidenced. His reputation certainly would have been well-known in Poland, Czechoslovakia, or East Germany at this time, yet no documented study of Gandhism as a strategic concept in Eastern Europe can be found (Roberts & Garton Ash, 2009; Thurber, 2021).

On the other hand, the role of Gene Sharp as the vehicle for transmitting Gandhi's ideas to Eastern Europe is much more firmly grounded in evidence. Indeed, having consciously constructed his theory of nonviolent action as a generalization of Gandhian strategies and concepts, Sharp had his work studied in Eastern Europe, thus providing a theoretical basis to guide practical actions

of people who likely never heard of Gandhi directly (Sharp, 1993; Ackerman & Duvall, 2000).

The most convincing explanation is not one of direct transfer but rather of convergent logic. The logic common to both approaches is the same understanding that nonviolent civilian resistance creates political power through withdrawal of consent, development of alternative institutions, maintenance of legitimacy, and broadening the base of civil society (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011; Sharp, 1993; Ackerman & Duvall, 2000). However, the convergent logic indicates something beyond either approach separately, a broader theory of civilian power whose effectiveness was first illustrated by Gandhi and then reaffirmed in Eastern Europe under conditions Gandhi could never have envisaged (Gianolla, 2025; Jahanbegloo, 2016).

Discussion

What the Comparison Reveals

The analysis in the preceding sections leads to several important conclusions, with implications far greater than for the specific examples analyzed herein. The most significant is the suggestion of a potentially transferable model of strategic and organizational principles, which might be referred to as a recurring logic of nonviolent resistance; namely, principles of success that have proven themselves across drastically varying political, cultural, and historical environments (Sharp, 1993; Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011). Principles of nonviolent discipline, mass civilian action, withdrawal of consent, institutional creation...appear consistently across the cases examined, suggesting something consistent about the operation of civilian power across these cases (Thurber, 2021; Gianolla, 2025).

Nonviolent discipline is the factor that is most consistent and consequential in all the movements studied. Gandhi did not view it merely as a matter of moral luxury but as the strategic foundation on which everything else depended – without it, the movement lost the moral ground it had built, the regime found a justification to engage in repression, and the population's sympathy was lost, depriving it of the support that was necessary for mobilisation on a large scale (Bartkowski, 2013; Roberts & Garton Ash, 2009). Movements in Eastern Europe came to a similar conclusion. Solidarity maintained its nonviolent commitment throughout martial law and mass incarceration. Regardless of how many acts of aggression the police committed on the first day of the Velvet Revolution, the revolution continued unabated. The citizens of Leipzig continued to embrace it despite fluctuating rumors, and the uncertainty regarding the response of the regime remained unresolved for the following several weeks. The empirical evidence is consistent with what these movements did: according to Chenoweth and Stephan

(2011), campaigns that adhered to nonviolence discipline were substantially more successful not due to the intrinsic virtue of nonviolence, but because they created the necessary conditions for success. This pattern was evident across the Polish, Czechoslovakian, and East German cases (Betts, 2019; Glenn, 1999).

The other shared principle is that of institution building. What Gandhi did with his Constructive Programme and what Solidarity did with their civic networks is the same thing—break down the authority and at the same time build something that will take its place. (Gandhi, 1909; Bartkowski, 2013). Such organizations, which simultaneously build and resist, have a much higher potential to continue their efforts, maintain their mobilization capacity, and achieve political changes than those who merely resist (Sharp, 1993; Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011). The third insight, from the philosophical perspective, seems to be the most essential one, namely, the confirmation that moral authority represents a kind of political power in such different historical conditions. If a movement continues its actions and remains committed to nonviolence while facing the state's violent behavior, it achieves a result: it undermines the cohesion of elites and turns their supporters into opponents and attracts those passive segments of population, which used to support the status quo (Gianolla, 2025; Schock, 2005).

Implications for Democratic Transition Theory

Implications of the findings of the research for studies on democracy transition are considerable. In comparative political literature prior to the second half of the twentieth century, the process of transitions of power from authoritarian governments was largely conceived in terms of elite bargaining and negotiation among government elites, military forces, and opposition parties, wherein mass civil society engagement, if any, was merely a secondary or supportive element (Thurber, 2021; Betts, 2019). Contradictory to this perception, the empirical evidence presented in this study suggests that in reality, organised civilian nonviolent resistance plays a central role in the democratic transition, exerting pressures, creating moral leverage and building capabilities for the negotiation process of the regime's self-destruction (Roberts & Garton Ash, 2009; Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011).

The empirical work of Chenoweth and Stephan (2011), therefore, constitutes the quantitative foundation of this thesis, showing that, during the years from 1900 until 2006, nonviolent campaigns were twice as successful as violent ones. The insight provided by the qualitative analysis conducted in this study, on the other hand, adds to this knowledge by illuminating how these nonviolent processes are able to achieve democracy. The revolution that took place in Eastern Europe during the year 1989, which saw nonviolent civilian resistance topple highly institutionalized autocracies without the need for force, may very well be seen as one of the strongest collective validations of this model in recent times (Opp et al.,

1995; Ekiert, 1991). Contextualizing this phenomenon in terms of Gandhian civil disobedience, in turn, would shed light on the intellectual tradition and strategic approach underlying this process (Sharp, 1993; Stephan & Chenoweth, 2008).

Contemporary Relevance

These lessons learned from this comparison seem to hold water in light of modern-day situations. As far as the problem of resisting the authorities goes, no era has posed such questions more relevantly than the one that we currently live in. This is because many nations throughout the world have experienced similar scenarios of the reversal of democracy, limited civic spaces, and authoritarian regimes (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011; Thurber, 2021). It is based on the realities of this history that one can speak about strategic optimism, rather than naive optimism.

The finding that participation breadth remains one of the most significant determinants of nonviolent success indicates that building movements, creating coalitions and expanding civic participation on socio-economic and generational grounds cannot be thought of as something preliminary but part of the fight itself (Chenoweth et al., 2017; Mahoney & Rueschemeyer, 2003; McAdam et al., 2001). The message coming from both Gandhi and Solidarity concerning alternative institution building should be taken more seriously. Those movements that combine resistance and institutional building (alternative media, civic education networks, self-organised communities, etc.) have a better chance of succeeding and establishing democracy than just purely protesting movements (Gandhi, 1909; Sharp, 1993; Nepstad, 2015).

This does not constitute an assurance. Non-violent resistance is not guaranteed to work automatically. The effectiveness of non-violent action hinges upon civilian involvement, non-violent behavior on their part, international players who may sympathize with their cause, and disunity in the regime that is under challenge (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011; Thurber, 2021). Situations characterized by high levels of violence by state agencies, complete international isolation, or unity amongst elites create complications that cannot be addressed by any strategy (Roberts & Garton Ash, 2009; Sharp, 1993). These are limitations that need to be considered. Where the scholarly consensus is clear is that organized non-violent resistance is the most effective tool civilians can employ.

Limitations

Several key limitations in the current study need to be pointed out. In particular, the spatial scope of the comparative approach adopted herein has deliberately been confined to three Eastern European cases – Poland, Czechoslovakia and East Germany – whose choice is both warranted by an analytical context and relevant

for understanding nonviolent resistance, but hardly represents the complexity of such experience in other Eastern European or Central Asian countries. Hence, the results obtained should only be viewed as indicative of nonviolent resistance dynamics in the selected case studies, with more comparative work needed to explore other national settings (Betts, 2019; Thurber, 2021).

The second limitation of this work lies in the fact that the research is carried out entirely using secondary sources. This means that the analysis is performed through the filter of interpretation of previous scholars, as opposed to being performed directly on raw primary archival data. Primary documentary sources pertaining to the resistance movement in Eastern Europe – specifically those of an internal organizational character, including communications and planning documents – are only partly available to researchers who do not have access to specialized archives. Translation difficulties also arise because of documents written in Polish, Czech, and German.

Third and finally, any comparative examination of nonviolent campaigns runs the risk of romanticising such movements – seeing too much unity of purpose, self-discipline, and planning where, in fact, there was none (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011; Thurber, 2021). While this essay has endeavoured to be as analytic and historical as it can be, and highlight both similarities and differences between these examples, it may be impossible to fully avoid this danger, and readers should keep this in mind.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to investigate the degree to which the principles of the Gandhian concept of civil disobedience were reflected and echoed in the revolutionary activities of the twentieth-century East European nations, especially in the Solidarity movement in Poland, the Velvet revolution in Czechoslovakia, and the Peaceful revolution in East Germany. The comparative analysis reveals that these parallels are not merely superficial but reflect a shared underlying logic, namely the same basic comprehension of how the power of civil nonviolence functions.

There are three main results. First, the commonality that can be seen across all three Eastern European movements is the presence of meaningful and consistent parallels with the essential elements of the Gandhian model of civil disobedience, namely Satyagraha, Ahimsa, non-cooperation, and the Constructive Program, pointing toward broadly applicable principles of effective nonviolent action regardless of the particular culture and history in which it is practiced. Second, Gene Sharp's conceptual framework becomes the important intellectual link through which the ideas of Gandhi became accessible for implementation among

the activists of the Eastern European states despite any potential lack of direct contact with Gandhi's philosophy. Finally, the revolutions of 1989 provide a particularly strong example of what was shown by Gandhi's logic, i.e., disciplined and non-violent resistance on the part of the civilians can serve as an effective route to democratic transformation.

The question in the beginning was: How can the connection between Gandhian civil disobedience and the resistance of those from Eastern Europe be understood? The answer is convergence and not direct influence. Two traditions, two different intellectual and political lines, appear to have converged on a central insight on how ordinary individuals can defy an unjust authority without resorting to violence.

The academic significance of this research can be found in comparing the two streams of ideas in one frame instead of analyzing them separately – showing what is discovered through putting them in the same context of nonviolent protest and democratization. From another perspective, the findings show something much more profound – that people in their moral convictions and organizational capabilities along with withdrawing consent can make changes which cannot be made through armed struggle. This might be the greatest contribution by Gandhi into political thought: not merely a set of methods, but rather an indication that truth and nonviolence, in combination with knowledge and discipline, can constitute a form of power that rivals or surpasses violence.

Comparison models should be extended beyond just Gandhi's campaigns into other situations like the Arab Spring, colour revolutions in former Soviet Union republics, and the new democratic revolutions in Asia and Africa to further develop the theory proposed above. Civil disobedience across cultures has not been adequately explored and this essay hopes to contribute to its study to some extent.

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