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Nonviolence Meets Direct Action: A Transnational Encounter of the Interwar Years

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In the first decades of the twentieth century, the concept of “direct action” emerged as a major presence in radical politics. In the years following World War I, opponents of war and militarism reshaped that concept. They insisted upon its nonviolent character, they specified how direct action might be used to oppose war, they distinguished direct action from Bolshevism and social democracy, they imagined direct action as a key contributor to a future nonviolent revolution, and they drew upon contemporary struggles from the Ruhr, to Samoa, to India to justify their political claims. The radicals who shared these debates were linked by an energetic transnational network, spanning the War Resisters’ International and the International Antimilitarist Bureau. This article recovers this network, traces the key intellectual contributions, and argues for their significance. It aims to contribute to the intellectual histories of direct action and of nonviolence and to draw attention to previously submerged debates of the radical interwar left.

The interwar period witnessed a fundamental but little-acknowledged reshaping of radical political thought. The concept of “direct action” had gained currency in the first decade and a half of the twentieth century; it was now reconsidered and rethought. A small group of radicals—tied to new organizations, the War Resisters’ International and the International Antimilitarist Bureau—refined the meaning of “direct action,” to more explicitly emphasize its relation to nonviolence. They self-consciously embraced nonviolent action as a means of revolutionary change. They refined the repertoire of nonviolent political performance to sharpen the possibility of its use against war and militarism. And they carefully distinguished their political approach from reformist social democracy, Bolshevism, and a syndicalism that remained mostly ambivalent about violence.

This rethinking would coalesce after World War II in the explicit promulgation of a politics of “nonviolent direct action.” But the origins of this new concept in interwar debates have not been fully recognized. The more familiar landmarks of prewar syndicalism and postwar Gandhian nonviolence have overshadowed radical intellectual thought that lies beyond these boundaries. This article seeks to identify this relatively overlooked field of discussion, to explain its emergence, to outline its key insights, and to argue for its historical significance.

Why have these intellectual developments been overlooked? First, as has been widely argued, concepts drawn from anarchist thought have attracted comparatively little attention. Anarchist theory has often been dismissed as “theoretically nugatory,” or as incoherent.¹ Even historians of anarchism and syndicalism have tended sometimes to downplay the importance of key ideas.² Many have shown surprisingly little interest in the theoretical significance of “direct action,” treating it rather as a “spontaneous” and “pragmatic” orientation, and explicitly contrasting “theory” with “action.”³

This is not to suggest that the concept of “direct action” has been completely neglected, of course. A range of recent political theory has affirmed the centrality of “direct action” as a “core concept” of anarchism and a central element of “anarchist political language.”⁴ The works of the key theorists who first propagated the concept remain in circulation; they have attracted an exegetical, critical, and historical literature.⁵ The concept has even been acknowledged, however briefly, in the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* entry on “Anarchism.”⁶

Attempts to define the concept and to chronicle its invention have, however, not yet extended to an equal concern with its subsequent transformations. Studies of syndicalism and of anarchism have largely concentrated on the years just before World War I or immediately afterward.⁷ Influential accounts of anarchist theory have suggested that the concept of “direct action” faded into the background in the years after

¹Paul McLaughlin, *Anarchism and Authority: A Philosophical Introduction to Classical Anarchism* (Aldershot, 2016), 13; Carissa Honeywell, “Bridging the Gaps,” in Ruth Kinna, ed., *The Continuum Companion to Anarchism* (New York, 2012), 111–39, at 112.

²As argued in Sean Scalmer, “Direct Action: The Invention of a Transnational Concept,” *International Review of Social History* 68/3 (2023), 357–87, at 358. For examples see Paul Mazcaj, *The Action française and Revolutionary Syndicalism* (Chapel Hill, 1979), 9; Jeremy Jennings, *Syndicalism in France: A Study of Ideas* (Houndmills, 1990), 44.

³Scalmer, “Direct Action,” 359. For examples see Bob Holton, *British Syndicalism 1900–1914: Myths and Realities* (London, 1976), 22; F. F. Ridley, *Revolutionary Syndicalism in France: The Direct Action of Its Time* (Cambridge, 1970), 97. Pragmatic: Kenneth H. Tucker Jr, *French Revolutionary Syndicalism and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, 1996), 21–2; Zeev Sternhell, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology* (Princeton, 1995), 153. Contrast with theory and action: Ridley, *Revolutionary Syndicalism in France*, 97; Barbara Mitchell, *The Practical Revolutionaries: A New Interpretation of the French Anarchosyndicalists* (New York, 1987), 11; Jean Maitron, *Le mouvement anarchiste en France*, vol. 1, *Des origines à 1914* (Paris, 1975), 321.

⁴Benjamin Franks, Nathan Jun, and Leonard Williams, eds., *Anarchism: A Conceptual Analysis* (New York, 2018), includes “direct action” as one of the core concepts of the ideology. Uri Gordon, *Anarchy Alive! Anti-authoritarian Politics from Practice to Theory* (London, 2008), 4, describes direct action as a central theme of “anarchist political language.”

⁵Note Constance Bantman’s impressive analysis of pivotal theorist Émile Pouget, for example, in “The Militant Go-Between: Émile Pouget’s Transnational Propaganda (1880–1914),” *Labour History Review* 74/3 (2009), 274–87. The broader invention of the concept and the role of key theorists are analysed in Scalmer, “Direct Action.”

⁶Peter Christian Ludz, “Anarchie, Anarchismus, Anarchist,” in Otto Bruner, Werner Conze, and Reinhart Koselleck, eds., *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, vol. 1 (Stuttgart, 1972), 49–109, at 107.

⁷Probably the most influential study is Marcel van der Linden and Wayne Thorpe, “The Rise and Fall of Revolutionary Syndicalism,” in Van der Linden and Thorpe, eds., *Revolutionary Syndicalism: An International Perspective* (Aldershot, 1990), 1–24. This identifies the peak of “greatest vitality” for syndicalism in the period “immediately preceding and following the First World War” (ibid., 4), and the assembled

World War I,⁸ or have argued that a fundamental break separates the anarchist movements of the early twentieth century from the years after World War II.⁹ Reflecting these judgments, there has been no attempt to trace the genealogy of “direct action” across the interwar years.

Histories of nonviolent action between the wars, for their part, have been dominated by the gigantic presence of Mohandas Gandhi and his stunning transnational impact. This has been expressed in many rich investigations of Gandhi’s thought.¹⁰ It has also included close and detailed studies of “Gandhians of the West” from the peace movement and the African American movement for democracy and justice.¹¹ Such attention to Gandhi and to Gandhians has been necessary and valuable. But it has sometimes obscured the work of radical intellectuals less than deferential to the Mahatma, who drew more directly from radical political traditions associated with labor and with anarchism.

Histories of the peace movement and of its key ideas have emphasized the import of Gandhian thought to the interwar development of a more assertive and radical campaign, but have not always granted equivalent attention to the contribution of socialist and anarchist traditions.¹² Some studies of antimilitarism after World War I have entirely overlooked the presence of a radical stream of explicitly nonviolent and revolutionary antimilitarism.¹³ Others have presented champions of revolutionary nonviolence in Europe as admirers or popularizers of Gandhi, rather than as significant intellectuals in their own right.¹⁴

chapters largely focus on the peak years. Constance Bantman observes that the “bulk” of studies of transnational anarchism (a field that encompasses research on syndicalism) focus on “the last decades of the long nineteenth century.” Constance Bantman, “Anarchist Transnationalism,” in Marcel van der Linden, ed., *The Cambridge History of Socialism*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, 2023), 599–620, at 600.

⁸ Ludz, “Anarchie, Anarchismus, Anarchist,” 107.

⁹ E.g. Gordon, *Anarchy Alive!*, 5; George Woodcock, *Anarchism* (Toronto, 2022), 410; Gerald Runkle, *Anarchism Old and New* (New York, 1972), 13.

¹⁰ For example, Faisal Devji, *The Impossible Indian: Gandhi and the Temptation of Violence* (Cambridge, MA, 2012); Eijiro Hazama, “Unravelling the Myth of Gandhian Non-violence: Why Did Gandhi Connect His Principle of *Satyāgraha* with the ‘Hindu’ Notion of *Ahimsa*?”, *Modern Intellectual History* 20 (2023), 116–40; Debjani Ganguly and John Docker, eds., *Rethinking Gandhi and Non-violent Relationality: Global Perspectives* (Abingdon, 2007);

¹¹ E.g. Sean Scalmer, *Gandhi in the West: The Mahatma and the Rise of Radical Protest* (Cambridge, 2011); Nico Slate, *Colored Cosmopolitanism: The Shared Struggle for Freedom in the United States and India* (Cambridge, MA, 2012); Joseph Kip Kosek, *Acts of Conscience: Christian Nonviolence and Modern American Democracy* (New York, 2009); Sudarshan Kapur, *Raising Up a Prophet: The African American Encounter with Gandhi* (Boston, 1992).

¹² E.g. David Cortright, *Peace: A History of Movements and Ideas* (Cambridge, 2008), 74; Devi Prasad, *War Is a Crime against Humanity: The Story of War Resisters’ International* (London, 2005), 121, 123.

¹³ E.g. Norman Ingram, *The Politics of Dissent: Pacifism in France, 1919–39* (Oxford, 1991), 121, 129, identifies an “integral pacifism” that “occasionally espoused violence,” but not an equally militant and nonviolent current. This conceptualization is reproduced in Michael Clinton, “European Peace Movements since 1914,” in Charles F. Howlett, Christian Peterson, Deborah Buffton, and David L. Hostetter, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Peace History* (Oxford, 2022), 313–33, at 320–21.

¹⁴ Admirer: Martin Ceadel, *Thinking about Peace and War* (Oxford, 1987), 149–50; reworking Gandhian nonviolence: Peter Brock and Nigel Young, *Pacifism in the Twentieth Century* (Syracuse, 1990), 116; popularizer: Peter Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible: A History of Anarchism* (Oakland, 2010), 427.

Such oversight is not universal, of course, and some significant historical research has already identified the presence of interwar debates around “direct action,” “nonviolence,” and “pacifism” that went beyond Gandhi.¹⁵ There have also been a few studies of some of the key individuals who contributed to these debates.¹⁶ Over recent years the work of significant theoretical contributors to war and postwar discussion has been reproduced: Gustav Landauer, Bertrand Russell, Bart de Ligt, Pierre Ramus.¹⁷ This article seeks to build on this scholarship. But it deepens the investigation beyond individuals to more fully consider networks, semantic fields and conceptual change.

In the pages that follow I have four specific goals: to reconstruct the key actors and the network that reshaped the concept of “direct action” in the interwar years, to trace the principal intellectual transformations, to recover the importance of this largely unacknowledged contribution to radical political thought, and to thereby contribute to wider histories of “direct action” and of “nonviolence.”

Methodologically, the research reflects a now long-standing recognition that the intellectual history of politics is best advanced not through the reverential discussion of a canon of great works, but rather through the reconstruction of debates, political languages, and concepts.¹⁸ It forms part of a larger project, funded by the Gerda Henkel Stiftung, to trace the history of the concept of “direct action” in global political argument, from the nineteenth century to the present. The project follows the methods pioneered by Reinhart Koselleck’s “Begriffsgeschichte” in its attention to both

¹⁵For example, Guido Grünewald, “War Resisters in Weimar Germany,” in Peter Brock and Thomas P. Socknat, eds., *Challenge to Mars: Essays on Pacifism from 1918 to 1945* (Toronto, 1999), 67–88, esp. 69–72; Helmut Donat, “Die radikalpazifistische Richtung in der Deutschen Friedensgesellschaft (1918–1933),” in Karl Holl and Wolfram Wette, eds., *Pazifismus in der Weimarer Republik* (Paderborn, 1981), 27–45; Scott Bennett, *Radical Pacifism: The War Resisters League and Gandhian Nonviolence in America, 1915–1963* (Syracuse, 2003), also looks beyond, notwithstanding the title and framing.

¹⁶For studies of important individuals see Scott H. Bennett, “Radical Pacifism and the General Strike against War: Jessie Wallace Hughan, the Founding of the War Resisters League, and the Socialist Origins of Secular Radical Pacifism in America,” *Peace and Change* 26/3 (2001), 352–73; Herman Noordegraaf, “The Anarchopacifism of Bart de Ligt,” in Brock and Socknat, *Challenge to Mars*, 89–100, esp. 89–98; Peter van den Dungen, “Bart de Ligt, Aldous Huxley and ‘The Conquest of Violence,’” in Peter van den Dungen, Herman Noordegraaf, and Wim Robben, *Bart de Ligt (1883–1938): Peace Activist and Peace Researcher* (Zwolle, 1990). The legacy of Gustav Landauer’s work is also somewhat relevant here, though he was murdered by a right-wing paramilitary in Munich in May 1919 and therefore did not participate directly in interwar debates. His relevant contributions are discussed in Christian Bartolf and Dominique Miething, “Gustav Landauer and the Revolutionary Principle of Non-violent Non-cooperation,” in Gaard Kets and James Muldoon, eds., *The German Revolution and Political Theory* (Cham, 2019), 215–35.

¹⁷See, for example, Collectif désobéissances libertaires, eds., *Antimilitaristes anarchistes non-violents: Barthélemy de Ligt (1883–1938), Pierre Ramus (1882–1942)* (Lyon, 2019); Gustav Landauer, *Gustav Landauer. Revolution and Other Writings: A Political Reader*, ed. Gabriel Kuhn (Oakland, 2010); Richard A. Rempel et al., eds., *Bertrand Russell: Pacifism and Revolution, 1916–18* (London and New York, 1995).

¹⁸The so-called Cambridge school is most associated with attention to debates, contexts, and political languages rather than individual texts. See, most famously, Quentin Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas,” *History and Theory* 8 (1969), 3–53; and J. G. A. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce, and History* (Cambridge, 1985). A focus on concepts is embodied in Otto Brunner, Werner Conze, and Reinhart Koselleck, *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Historisches Lexicon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, 8 vols. (Stuttgart, 1972–93). The underlying approach is explained and justified in Reinhart Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing, History, Spacing, Concepts* (Stanford, 2002).

“semasiology” (the study of the various meanings of a given term) and “onomasiology” (the various designations of a term).¹⁹ Its source base includes pamphlets, journals, newspapers, and organizational records in the major European languages. Not simply an examination of discourse, it seeks to place political debates in the context of global political conflicts, transnational connections, and institutional pressures. It gives special attention to processes of translation and of transnational political exchange.²⁰

The article is organized into four sections. First, I examine the shifting context of revolutionary political debates in the first two decades of the twentieth century. I specify the first attempts to explicitly formulate the concept of “direct action.” I then further trace how the outbreak of war in 1914 and the revolutionary conflicts that followed drove many supporters of direct action to wrestle more overtly with the relationships of direct action, violence, and revolution.

In a second section, I trace the emergence of new transnational networks and institutions through which postwar radicals sought to battle against militarism and war. These antimilitarist and war-resistance networks provided the seedbed for a reimagination of direct-action politics to better reflect new circumstances, pressures, and aspirations.

A third section of the article reconstructs the ways in which interwar radicals rethought the concept of direct action. In a final section, I explore the intellectual and political import of such revision. I argue that the rise of nonviolent direct action in the years after World War II did not simply reflect the global influence of Gandhi and Gandhians—as is usually emphasized—but also owed much to the rethinking pioneered by war-resisters more directly connected to traditions of anarchism, socialism, and working-class politics.

Context: the concept of “direct action” and the question of “violence”

In the decades that straddled the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, the concept of “direct action” emerged as a central element of radical thought. Though its precise meaning was highly contested, the concept was typically used in three overlapping ways: categorical, performative, and strategic.²¹ Used categorically, it established a broad distinction between political action that worked through the state (especially parliaments and elections) and political action that was

¹⁹ Reinhart Koselleck, “Introduction and Prefaces to the ‘Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe,’” *Contributions to the History of Concepts* 6/1 (2011), 1–37.

²⁰ The initial focus on national traditions and single languages in these approaches is noted in Terence Ball, “Conceptual History and the History of Political Thought,” in Iain Hampsher-Monk, Karin Tilmans, and Frank van Vree, eds., *History of Concepts: Comparative Perspectives* (Amsterdam, 1998), 78. For growing attention to cultural exchange and problems around transnational and global intellectual history see, for example, Melvin Richter, “More than a Two-Way Traffic: Analyzing, Translating and Comparing Political Concepts from Other Cultures,” *Contributions to the History of Concepts* 1/1 (March 2005), 7–20; Margrit Pernau, “Whither Conceptual History? From National to Entangled Histories,” *Contributions to the History of Concepts* 7/1 (2012), 1–11; Samuel Moyn and Andrew Sartori, eds., *Global Intellectual History* (New York, 2013). Recent research that traces an “insurgent geography” of revolutionary thought and action to locate previously unappreciated transnational relationships and actors is Tim Harper, *Underground Asia: Global Revolutionaries and the Assault on Empire* (Cambridge, MA, 2021).

²¹ A conceptualization outlined and illustrated in Scalmer, “Direct Action.”

undertaken without “any intermediary” and “without the intervention of representatives.”²² Used performatively, it specified a repertoire of contention centered around the strike, the boycott, and sabotage.²³ Used strategically, it offered a means of vaulting the familiar binary between “reform” and “revolution,” for it argued that direct, day-to-day struggles could sharpen class antagonism and identity (a process likened to “revolutionary gymnastics”), leading eventually to a general strike and to a full-scale revolutionary transformation.²⁴

First specified in France by radicals grouped around the *Confédération générale du travail* (CGT), this assemblage was soon widely promoted and eagerly embraced by radicals across several continents. In Italy, Errico Malatesta’s *L’Agitazione* almost immediately endorsed the French CGT’s advocacy of the strike, the boycott, and sabotage,²⁵ as did the Argentinian anarchist journal *La Protesta Humana*.²⁶ The *Federación Obrera Argentina* passed motions endorsing the boycott and sabotage as early as 1902,²⁷ and Argentinian radicals in turn influenced labor activists across Latin America,²⁸ the first Brazilian Workers’ Congress in Rio, 1906, also declared its support for direct action.²⁹

In Germany, the anarchist journal *Der Revolutionär* and its offshoot (originally published as a supplement), *Die direkte Aktion*, celebrated apparent breakthroughs in events in France. At a conference of unionists in Berlin in 1904, disillusioned social democrat Dr Raphael Friedeberg pushed for “direct action” as a means of inspiring a “truly free and revolutionary spirit.”³⁰ His views were outlined in greater depth in an

²²Without intermediaries: “Direct Action,” *Industrial Worker*, 7 May 1910. See also “The Labor Movement in France,” *Industrial Worker*, 11 July 1912; Selig Schulberg, “Experience Develops New Ideas,” *Industrial Worker*, 21 Nov. 1912. Contrasting with electoral struggles: P. Kropotkin, “Le arrêt et l’issue,” *Les Temps Nouveaux*, 7 Sept. 1895; contrasting with legislation: “Direct Action versus Legislation,” *Freedom*, Nov. 1908; with parliamentary action: Christian Cornélissen, “Politische und ökonomische Macht,” *Der Revolutionär*, 7 Nov. 1908.

²³For influential accounts of this repertoire see Émile Pouget, *L’action directe et autres écrits syndicalistes* (1903–1910) (Marseille, 2010), which includes *Le Syndicat* (1904) and *Le parti du travail* (1905). See also Pouget, *La Confédération générale du travail* (Paris, 1908), which contains a chapter on tactics that discusses strike, boycott, and sabotage, and Georges Yvetot, *A.B.C. Syndicaliste* (1908), available at <https://fr.theanarchistlibrary.org/library/georges-yvetot-l-abc-syndicaliste> (last accessed 23 June 2023), Ch. 5.

²⁴Émile Pouget, “Réformes et Parlementarisme,” *L’action directe* 4 (Oct. 1903), 57; Pouget, *La Confédération générale du travail*, 6.

²⁵As noted in Davide Turcato, “The 1896 London Congress: Epilogue or Prologue?,” in David Berry and Constance Bantman, eds., *New Perspective on Anarchism, Labour and Syndicalism* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 2010), 110–25, at 122.

²⁶E.g. “Congreso Obrero en Francia,” *La Protesta Humana*, 21 Nov. 1897; P. Delesalle, “Congreso Obrero en Francia: Algunas Consideraciones,” *La Protesta Humana*, 28 Nov. 1897.

²⁷“El Congreso Obrero,” *La Protesta Humana*, 24 May 1902; S. Fanny Simon, “Anarchism and Anarcho-syndicalism in South America,” *Hispanic American Historical Review* 26/1 (1946), 38–59, at 40.

²⁸Michael Schmidt, *Cartography of Revolutionary Anarchism* (Minneapolis, 2013), 47, 53.

²⁹“The 1st Brazilian Workers’ Congress, Rio, April 1906”: Paulo Sérgio Pinheiro and Michael M. Hall, eds., *A Classe Operária no Brasil: Documentos (1889 a 1930)*, vol. 1 (São Paulo, 1979), 47, 51. C. Batalha, “Revolutionary Syndicalism and Reformism in Rio de Janeiro’s Labour Movement (1906–1920),” *International Review of Social History* 62 (2017), 75–103, at 79, 81.

³⁰Resolution of the Conference of German Unions, July 1904, Berlin, put by Friedeberg, in *La grève générale et le socialisme*, ed. Hubert Lagardelle (Paris: E. Cornély, 1905), 288. See also “Querelles d’allemands,” *Journal des débats politiques et littéraires*, 18 Sept. 1905.

influential pamphlet, *Parlamentarismus und Generalstreik* (1904), and supported and elaborated in several further publications, among them two works by Jewish anarchists (writing under pseudonyms): *Die direkte Aktion* (1907) by Arnold Roller (Siegfried Nacht) and *Generalstreik und direkte Aktion im proletarischen Klassenkampfe* (1910) by Pierre Ramus (Rudolf Großmann).

British unionist Tom Mann promoted the doctrine in Australia, South Africa, and the United Kingdom.³¹ And in the United States, members of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), along with local anarchists, published a series of pamphlets dedicated to the credo, including William Trautmann's *Direct Action and Sabotage* (1912), Voltairine de Cleyre's *Direct Action* (1912), and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn's *Sabotage: The Conscious Withdrawal of the Workers' Industrial Efficiency* (1916). The IWW's propaganda and activism had a genuinely global impact across the Americas, Australasia, Africa, and the Nordic countries.³² It also influenced Japanese radical journalist Kōtoku Shūsui, who praised the "general strike," enacted boycotts, and contended, "There is no other course but to depend on the 'direct action' of the workers."³³

The concept of "direct action" was further diffused beyond the formal labor movement, and especially tied to campaigns against militarism and war. Gustave Hervé, editor of *La guerre sociale* and France's most notorious opponent of militarism, was also one of the nation's most outspoken promoters of direct action.³⁴ Leader of the CGT Georges Yvetot listed "antimilitarism" as a key expression of "direct action" in his influential pamphlet *A.B.C. syndicaliste*. And in the years before World War I, antimilitarism in France developed into a genuinely mass movement.³⁵

Still, the relationship of the new credo to violence was at first ambiguous and contested. Many French direct-actionists had in earlier decades championed the necessity of violent struggle, though they were, by the beginning of the twentieth century, moving towards a less bellicose position.³⁶ Leading advocates of direct action largely presented the strategy as neither necessarily violent nor pacific.³⁷ This was consistent with the broader viewpoints of several influential anarchists. Peter Kropotkin, for example, emphasized the possibility of political change without violence and

³¹Tom Mann, "The Way to Win," *International Socialist Review* 10/3 (1909), 220–26, at 223; "The Transport Workers' Strike in England," *International Socialist Review* 12/6 (1911), 351–5, at 355.

³²Peter Cole, David Struthers, and Kenyon Zimmer, eds., *Wobblies of the World: A Global History* (London, 2017).

³³F. G. Notehelfer, *Kōtoku Shūsui: Portrait of a Japanese Radical* (Cambridge, 1971), 112, 125, 135, 137, 141.

³⁴See Michael B. Loughlin, *From Revolutionary Theatre to Reactionary Litanies: Gustave Hervé (1871–1944) at the Extremes of the Third French Republic* (New York, 2016).

³⁵See Paul D. Miller, *From Revolutionaries to Citizens: Antimilitarism in France, 1870–1914* (Durham, NC, 2002).

³⁶Alexander Sedlmaier, "The Consuming Visions of Late Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Anarchists: Actualising Political Violence Transnationally," *European Review of History* 14/3 (2007), 283–300, at 294.

³⁷E.g. Victor Griffuelhes, "Confédération générale du travail," *Le mouvement socialiste* 7/138 (June–July 1904), 160.

deprecated the pursuit of vengeful attacks, but ultimately reserved to radicals the right of violent self-defense.³⁸

What might this mean in practice? Some notable interventions lent towards the possibility of victory without violence. Symptomatically, *Comment nous ferons la révolution* (1909), Émile Pouget and Émile Pataud's utopian tract, imagined a future revolution as the outcome of a series of essentially nonviolent interventions: a strike (in the building industry, met by police repression), sabotage, a general strike, the seizure of workplaces (defended against police attacks by "nonresistance"), trade union organization of production, and the use of the boycott against "parasites and exploiters."³⁹ The language of "nonresistance" had been propagated by Leo Tolstoy, mostly famously in his statement of absolute commitment to nonviolence, *The Kingdom of God Is within You*. A "Tolstoyan" movement mobilized across the continents, often crisscrossing with anarchist and socialist campaigns. Anarchists such as Gustav Landauer drew upon Tolstoy in the early twentieth century to affirm a commitment to nonviolent political means.⁴⁰

Others were more inclined to embrace the necessity of terror and violence. Siegfried Nacht's influential pamphlet *Die direkte Aktion* foresaw the possibility of "economic and social terror" as a means of frightening the bourgeoisie into acceptance of workers' demands.⁴¹ Contributors to the anarchist press in Germany at this time likewise linked together the practices of "economic terror" and "direct action."⁴² The June 1907 issue of the German journal *Die direkte Aktion* even contained a long and approbatory discussion of the 1887 text *Manuel de dynamiteur*.⁴³ And a 1908 account of a strike in Warsaw published in the *Bulletin de l'Internationale anarchiste* explicitly equated "direct action" with "bombs and dynamite."⁴⁴

Opponents of direct action seized upon these associations. They relentlessly identified the concept—and especially its manifestation in "sabotage"—with the work of

³⁸For a discussion of Kropotkin see Ruth Kinna, *Kropotkin: Reviewing the Classical Anarchist Tradition* (Edinburgh, 2022), 55, 60, 90, 160 on violence; Jim MacLaughlin, *Kropotkin and the Anarchist Intellectual Tradition* (London, 2016), 109–11; Elizabeth Frazer and Kimberly Hutchings, "Anarchist Ambivalence: Politics and Violence in the Thought of Bakunin, Tolstoy and Kropotkin," *European Journal of Political Theory* 18/2 (2019), 259–80.

³⁹I cite here the English edition: Émile Pataud and Émile Pouget, *Syndicalism and the Co-operative Commonwealth: How We Shall Bring About the Revolution*, with a Foreword by Tom Mann (Oxford, 1913).

⁴⁰On Tolstoy and nonresistance see Leo Tolstoy, *The Kingdom of God Is within You* (New York, 1961); Tolstoy, *Writings on Civil Disobedience and Nonviolence* (Philadelphia, 1987); Alexandre Christoyannopoulos, *Christian Anarchism: A Political Commentary on the Gospel* (Exeter, 2011). On the Tolstoyan movement see Charlotte Alston, *Tolstoy and His Disciples: The History of a Radical International Movement* (London, 2013). Landauer cites Tolstoy as a precursor and affirms nonviolent revolution in "Anarchic Thoughts on Anarchism" (1901), in Landauer, *Gustav Landauer*, 84–91, at 86–7.

⁴¹An entire section of the pamphlet is entitled "Der revolutionäre Streik: Der ökonomische und der soziale Terror." See Siegfried Nacht, *Die direkte Aktion*, at <https://anarchistischebibliothek.org/library/arnold-roller-die-direkte-aktion>.

⁴²E.g. M. Kaufer, "Internationale Rundschau: Uebersicht über die französische Presse," *Der Revolutionär*, 7 Dec. 1909. See also "Russische Sprache," *Der Revolutionär*, 6 July 1907.

⁴³"Buchbesprechung," *Die direkte Aktion*, 22 June 1907.

⁴⁴N.a., "Russia: The Movement in Poland," *Bulletin de l'Internationale anarchiste* 2 (29 Feb. 1908), 7.

the “bomb-thrower,” the “dagger-wielder,”⁴⁵ and the rioter.⁴⁶ Anti-syndicalist legislation in France and the United States depicted the practice as a form of violence, crime, and terrorism. In this way, the concepts of “violence” and “direct action” were increasingly identified in the public mind,⁴⁷ even if the reality was more complex and conditional.

The outbreak of war and its cataclysmic aftermath complicated the matter further, confounding expectations and raising new and troubling questions. The movement against militarism failed miserably. Leading advocates of direct action and of internationalism—among them Gustav Hervé—emerged as principal cheerleaders of a national war effort. A socialist revolution did not develop simply from the “revolutionary gymnastics” of day-to-day class conflict, but amidst the horrors of seemingly unending mass slaughter. It did not break out in Paris—the heretofore capital of revolution—but in famously backward Russia. Its triumph did not rest primarily on the repertoire of direct action—strikes, boycotts, sabotage—but on the violent seizure of state power.

What did this mean for the strategy of “direct action”? In a letter to the American IWW in January 1920, the president of the new Communist International, Grigory Zinoviev, outlined the challenge. Zinoviev agreed with the familiar syndicalist contention that the “Capitalist State must be attacked by DIRECT ACTION,” but insisted further that such direct action could not terminate merely with the launching of a general strike. “History indicates clearly that the General Strike is not enough,” Zinoviev explained. “Communists go farther”: “they add that it must turn into ARMED INSURRECTION.”⁴⁸

The argument for armed force was bolstered by the apparent success of the Bolshevik Revolution and certainly by the armed opposition it inspired. As Enzo Traverso has persuasively argued, in the years after 1917 the ideal of revolution was widely recast in military terms, so that a “military paradigm of revolution” spread across the globe.⁴⁹ It was a worldview shared across the political spectrum. Opponents of Bolshevism on the far right notoriously embraced the ideal of violence, most notably in Mussolini’s Italy and Hitler’s Germany.⁵⁰

In this situation, a previous ambivalence was increasingly deemed unsustainable. Proponents of direct action admitted the need to clarify their views on the use of

⁴⁵Victor L. Berger cited in “Socialists Pick Debs,” *Washington Post*, 18 May 1912. A point made in relation to “direct action” more generally in *International Socialist Review*, Feb. 1912, 505.

⁴⁶J. R. Macdonald cited in “The Madness of Syndicalism,” *Geelong Advertiser*, 18 July 1912, reproduced from the *Daily Chronicle* (United Kingdom).

⁴⁷A situation noted in Jacques Julliard, *Autonomie ouvrière: Études sur le syndicalisme d'action directe* (Paris, 1988), 50–51.

⁴⁸G. Zinoviev, “The Communist Internationale to the I.W.W.,” in Guido Baracchi and Percy Laidler, *To the I.W.W., A Special Message from the Communist International* (Melbourne, 1920), available at www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/sections/australia/iww/open-letter.htm.

⁴⁹Enzo Traverso, *Revolution: An Intellectual History* (London, 2021), 403.

⁵⁰See, for example, Jack J. Roth, *The Cult of Violence: Sorel and the Sorelians* (Berkeley, 1980); and Roberta Suzzi Valli, “The Myth of Squadismo in the Fascist Regime,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 35/2 (2000), 131–50.

political violence.⁵¹ Debates on “violence” became more pointed and vigorous. Some erstwhile devotees of peace came to believe that violence was an unfortunate necessity.⁵² Others more strenuously defined violence as a handmaiden of “dominance” and “constriction,” and as the antinomy of genuine socialism.⁵³ Some declared their partial opposition to violence, though not in a “Tolstoyan sense”; others declared that they were Tolstoyans.⁵⁴ Though the outcome of these debates was far from settled, the need for rethinking was widely agreed.

A transnational reconsideration: antimilitarist and war-resistance networks and connections

The process of reconsideration was shared by several overlapping transnational networks. One web connecting direct-actionists was the international syndicalist movement. Unionists and union bodies committed to the principles of “direct action” had gathered in an international congress in London in 1913, and had shared their news and strategies in an international newsletter. Though battered and marginalized by the years of war,⁵⁵ they renewed their ties in the years after the great conflagration of 1914–18. Assembling in Berlin in 1920 and again in 1922, they founded an International Workers’ Association and agreed on key principles of “revolutionary unionism,” restated and clarified at subsequent international gatherings.⁵⁶

Consistent with prewar consensus, these principles included support for “the method of direct action” and specified its “methods” as “strikes,” “boycotts,” and “sabotage,” culminating in its “highest expression”: “the general strike.” They restated opposition to “militarism in every form.” But the assembled syndicalists did not repudiate violence as a means of political struggle. On the contrary, they declared an expectation that the “decisive struggles” for a “communist future” would “not occur without conflict,” and that “violence” was a necessary “means of defence” in the struggle for the “factories and fields.”⁵⁷ Radical trade unionists at other international gatherings of the early 1920s similarly affirmed that they could not “reject violence as a means of struggle” whilever the capitalist class remained willing to use the power of the state in defense of privilege.⁵⁸

⁵¹ A necessity emphasized in F.B., “Organisierte Gewalt oder wirtschaftliche Kampfmittel,” *Der Syndikalist* 2/28 (n.d. [1920]), 1–2.

⁵² A development mourned in “Address by Lord Ponsonby,” *War Resister* 36 (Sept. 1934), 11.

⁵³ N.a., “Diktatur oder Freiheit?,” *Erkenntnis und Befreiung* 3/35 (Dec. 1918–9 Jan. 1919), 6.

⁵⁴ An exchange reputedly between Rudolf Rocker and Pierre Ramus, as reported in Pierre Ramus, “Diktatur u. Gewalt auf dem Geheimkongress des internationalen Anarchismus,” *Erkenntnis und Befreiung* 4/8 (1922), 1–3.

⁵⁵ As noted in “Konferenz der Syndikalist,” *Der Syndikalist* 4 (4 Jan. 1919), 1.

⁵⁶ On the earlier gathering: “Bericht über die Internationale syndikalistische Vorkonferenz gehalten zu Berlin vom 16. bis 21. Dezember 1920,” *Der Syndikalist* 5/51–2 (1920), 1–2.

⁵⁷ “Declaration of the Principles of Revolutionary Syndicalism,” in Wayne Thorpe, *The Workers Themselves! Revolutionary Syndicalism and International Labour, 1913–1923* (Amsterdam, 1989), 324.

⁵⁸ See, for example, the resolutions presented on behalf of Dutch syndicalists at the Third International Anti-militarist Congress, the Hague, 1921, as reported in “Der dritte Internationale Antimilitaristen-Kongress im Haag,” *Erkenntnis und Befreiung* 3/20 (12–23 April 1921), 4.

While syndicalist organizations therefore widened the repertoire of direct action to more explicitly include revolutionary violence, other direct-actionists, more fully committed to peace, helped to construct a new web of transnational relationships. In the ruins of postwar Europe, radicals forged two new organizations: an International Antimilitarist Bureau and a War Resisters' International. Both grew out of gatherings of antimilitarists held in the Netherlands in the early 1920s. Though they expressed distinct emphases, and eventually separated, they shared a common opposition to war and to militarism, as well as a joint commitment to the possibilities of direct action.

An International Antimilitarist Association had been formed in Amsterdam in 1904, and though it fell into decline, its political memory, its affiliates, and its fellow travelers provided the basis of a postwar revival. That organization had been led by Dutch pastor and socialist Ferdinand Domela Nieuwenhuis, and a circle around Nieuwenhuis also took the initiative in reestablishing connections and in rethinking antimilitarist politics in the postbellum years. At the end of 1918, Dutch activists issued a call to some five hundred groups and individuals, reflecting fears that a "new war" was "already again in preparation" and that urgent efforts were necessary to make the antimilitarist movement as "general as possible."⁵⁹

The seventy replies must have provided some encouragement, and a congress in August 1920 drew delegates not just from the Netherlands but also from Belgium, Denmark, and Germany. Dutch delegates took the lead in drafting a set of principles prior to the assembly, and these reflected a militant spirit, strongly tinged with anarchism and socialism. The gathering repudiated "bourgeois pacifism," and linked the scourge of "militarism" to a capitalist order now apparently in its "imperialist phase." Antimilitarism was said to imply "anticapitalism"; working-class action was privileged as the central means of war resistance, and special emphasis was granted to the general strike and the mass refusal of military service.⁶⁰

The August gathering agreed to form an International Antimilitarist Bureau (IAMB) to coordinate future activities. It was to be based in Holland, and it took the lead in planning a further congress for early 1921. This drew delegates from nine countries to The Hague, along with local pacifists, anarchists, syndicalists, and feminists.⁶¹ It was succeeded by still larger gatherings in Berlin in early 1923 and The Hague in mid-1924.⁶² Its chair and guiding spirit, the erudite and questing former pastor and Christian socialist Bart de Ligt, was soon using the organization's platform to speak at further international gatherings of anarchists and syndicalists and at the world peace congress. Notable delegate from Austria Pierre Ramus, the editor of *Erkenntnis und Befreiung* and leader of the Viennese Bund herrschaftloser Sozialisten, undertook a propaganda

⁵⁹"Aufruf der Internationalen antimilitaristischen Vereinigung der Niederlande an die gesamte Internationale der Befreiung," *Erkenntnis und Befreiung* 3 (25 Dec. 1918–9 Jan. 1919), 3; "Die 'Internationale Antimilitaristen-Vereinigung' an die Antimilitaristen aller Länder!," *Erkenntnis und Befreiung* 2/5 (28 Dec. 1919–3 Jan. 1920), 1–2.

⁶⁰"Die antimilitaristische Internationale," *Erkenntnis und Befreiung* 2/41 (5–11 Sept. 1920), 1–2.

⁶¹"Der dritte Internationale Antimilitaristes-Kongress im Haag," *Erkenntnis und Befreiung* 3/20 (17–23 April 1921), 4.

⁶²Olgar Misar, "Nie wieder Krieg!—Aktion," *Erkenntnis und Befreiung* 5/1 (1923), 3–4; *Guerre à la guerre: Rapport de la démonstration antimilitariste révolutionnaire à La Haye, le 27 Juillet 1924* (De Bilt, 1924).

tour across Germany. The bureau's secretary, Josef Giesen, developed an energetic correspondence with antimilitarists across several continents. By 1922 the bureau claimed the affiliation of organizations whose membership summed eighty thousand. By 1924 its affiliates spanned fourteen countries, and it commanded the further allegiance of individuals in four additional territories.⁶³

The IAMB quickly took the initiative in organizing international protests against military service, and in support of political refugees.⁶⁴ But it was more significant as a medium of connection. The organization's leadership presented the bureau as "wholly an outcome of anarchist and anarcho-syndicalist thinking."⁶⁵ Beleaguered and marginalized in most lands, this was a political community enriched and encouraged by the exchange of news and the sharing of struggles across the globe. The IAMB's secretary compiled and distributed accounts of affiliate activities, and these were sometimes republished in local journals and newsletters.⁶⁶

A source of connection, the bureau was also an arena of debate. Across the early and mid-1920s, its conferences hosted lively discussions between what the secretary called "absolutists"—"against all violence"—and fellow opponents of militarism who nonetheless maintained that violence was justified in "certain circumstances."⁶⁷ United in their belief that "direct action" offered the most powerful response to militarism, members were divided by the strength of their commitment to nonviolence and their faith in its political capacities.⁶⁸ The intellectual frictions within a mostly shared worldview helped to generate new and radical insights.

Another newly formed organization, the War Resisters' International (WRI), provided additional connections and a still broader community. Also emerging from a postwar gathering in the Netherlands—in Bilthoven in 1921—it was originally called Paco (the Esperanto word for "peace"). But in the aftermath of poorly planned second gathering at the end of 1922, leading members agreed to transfer the organization's base to the United Kingdom. At the same time, they clarified the institution's purpose in a new language of "war resistance." Operating under the name War Resisters' International, the network grew rapidly over the mid-1920s.⁶⁹ By 1923 it had affiliates

⁶³Josef Giesen, "Jahresbericht des Sekretariats des internationalen antimilitaristen-Büros," *Erkenntnis und Befreiung* 4/49 (1922), 2–4; and *Guerre à la guerre*, 23.

⁶⁴Josef Giesen, "Jahresbericht des Sekretariats des internationalen antimilitaristen-Büros," *Erkenntnis und Befreiung* 4/49 (1922), 2–4.

⁶⁵J. Giesen, "Summary of the Three Yearly Reports," in I.A.M.B., *International Antimilitary Bureau* (Blauwkapel, 1925), 5–14, at 12.

⁶⁶E.g. "Offizielle Mitteilungen des Internationalen antimilitaristischen Büros," *Der Syndikalist* 4/25 (1922), 7–8; "Mitteilungen des IAMB für die angeschlossenen Organisationen und Personen," *Der Syndikalist* 4/29 (1922), 7; "Offizielle Mitteilungen des Internationalen antimilitaristischen Büros," *Der Syndikalist* 4/32 (1922), 5–6.

⁶⁷Josef Giesen, cited in "Konferenz des Internationalen anti-militaristischen Büro," *Der Syndikalist* 5/5 (1923), 2–3.

⁶⁸Note that leading "Absolutist" H. Runham Brown emphasized cooperation around "direct action" even as he criticized the politics of some IAMB members in "Rundschau des Internat. Antimilitarist. Büros am Jahreschluß," *Erkenntnis und Befreiung* 6/52 (1924), 1–3.

⁶⁹Prasad, *War Is a Crime against Humanity*, 89, 93, 101.

in sixteen countries and a bulletin published in five languages,⁷⁰ while the office was receiving an average of forty letters every week.⁷¹ Its 1928 conference in Sonntagsberg, Austria, attracted 150 delegates from eighteen countries.⁷² By 1934, the equivalent gathering drew representatives from thirty-one countries to Digswell Park, England.⁷³

Wartime resistance to conscription had been strongest and most overt in Britain, and British resisters played an outsized role in the developing network. One of the British affiliates, the No More War Movement, had grown by the turn to the 1930s to some 130 branches.⁷⁴ British activists argued that those in “other lands” looked towards their example for “help” and “leadership.”⁷⁵ Resisters in Europe agreed that the English were “our teachers” and the “pioneers of our ideal.”⁷⁶ In the few years after the WRI’s relocation to England, more than two hundred visitors from its central office left for the Continent: attending meetings as delegates and mixing with comrades from other lands.⁷⁷ H. Runham Brown, the WRI’s formidable secretary, became a key figure in the developing movement.

Much of the WRI’s British leadership had been imprisoned during World War I for refusal to fight. The organization’s affiliates were pledged to resist any future war. There was much common ground with the IAMB. The WRI aimed for a “new social order” in which the “root causes of war” had been extirpated.⁷⁸ It identified “the present system of production”—for “private profit”—as a prime cause of conflict.⁷⁹ Runham Brown explicitly expressed a willingness “to assist in any properly organised general strike to prevent war” and further pledged a continuing interest in “direct action.”⁸⁰ The official history of the WRI comments that the organization had “nonviolent socio-political revolution on its agenda” from “its very foundation.”⁸¹ This continued across the 1920s. Pierre Ramus advanced several proposals for the use of the “general strike” and “sabotage” at the WRI’s 1925 conference.⁸² The topic of “War Resistance and Revolution” formed a principal theme of its 1928 conference.⁸³

But notwithstanding these commitments and interests, the war-resistance network was not an undiluted product of anarchist and syndicalist tradition. Its most

⁷⁰“Declaration,” *Bulletin, War Resisters’ International* 2 (Nov. 1923), 1.

⁷¹“Foreword,” *Bulletin, War Resisters’ International* 8 (March 1925), 3.

⁷²Martha Steinitz, “International Conference on the Sonntagsberg,” *War Resister* 21 (Oct. 1928), 4.

⁷³H. Runham Brown, “The W.R.I. Conference at Digswell Park, England, July, 1934,” *War Resister* 36 (Sept. 1934), 3.

⁷⁴“Practical Achievements,” *War Resister* 27 (Winter 1930–31), 18.

⁷⁵*What Are War Resisters?* (London, 1924), 3.

⁷⁶“Germany’s Revolutionary Pacifists,” *War Resister* 18 (Nov. 1927), 15.

⁷⁷*What Are War Resisters?*, 4–5.

⁷⁸H. Runham Brown, “Russia,” *Bulletin, War Resisters’ International* 4 (March 1924), 1–2.

⁷⁹“Statement of Principles,” *War Resister* 16 (May 1927), 4–5.

⁸⁰H. Runham Brown, “The Work of the International,” in *War Resisters’ International, War Resisters of the World* (Enfield, 1925), 13–18, at 13, paraphrased in “Rundschau des Internat. Antimilitarist. Büros am Jahrschluß,” 3.

⁸¹Prasad, *War Is a Crime against Humanity*, 118.

⁸²See, for example, “Cooperation of War Resisters with Political Movements,” in *War Resisters’ International, War Resisters of the World*, 77–8, at 77.

⁸³Martha Steinitz, “International Conference on the Sonntagsberg,” *War Resister* 21 (Oct. 1928), 4.

prominent British leaders included Members of Parliament Wilfred Wellock and Fenner Brockway. Its formal publications imagined the network as providing “a place” for the “socialist” and the “anarchist,” the “Hindu” and the “Christian,” the “politician” and the “industrial revolutionary.”⁸⁴ Christian pacifists loomed especially large.⁸⁵ References to “salvation” and the “inmost soul” punctuated influential addresses;⁸⁶ observers noted the preponderance of the “intellectual” and “bourgeois-ethical” elements at WRI gatherings, as compared with the more “proletarian” character of the IAMB.⁸⁷

Reflecting these influences, the WRI was more unreservedly committed to non-violence than the IAMB, and its statement of principles denied that violence might be used to “preserve order, defend our home, or liberate the proletariat.”⁸⁸ The influence of religion probably also strengthened a conviction that political forces were but one element of a bellicose world. In his address to the inaugural WRI conference in July 1925, Runham Brown argued that personal transformation was also necessary to win a world of peace: “The power of nonviolence and non-cooperation is not enough. It must be reinforced by the power of love for humanity.”⁸⁹ It is therefore perhaps unsurprising that, though at first allied, the WRI and the IAMB had formally separated by 1924.⁹⁰ But they continued to cooperate even after the formal separation, and many direct-actionists remained very active across both institutions. This meant that the most radical strain of the postwar peace movement was highly connected across national boundaries, enlivened by diverse and sometimes conflicting perspectives, but propelled by a shared interest in the possibilities of “direct action.”

These were conditions that fostered a rich and significant rethinking: an important chapter in radical intellectual history.

Rethinking direct action: the import of nonviolence

The growing networks of war resistance and antimilitarism provided new venues of exchange and debate: the WRI journal *War Resister* and the many important journals of affiliates, especially *No More War* and *Die Friedenswarte*; the book-length publications of the WRI and the IAMB; periodic international conferences. Bart de Ligt and Pierre Ramus were the most prominent intellectuals in this network and both repeatedly composed pamphlets and plans in the lead-up to or the aftermath of key international gatherings.⁹¹ The War Resisters’ network also sponsored and promoted a major

⁸⁴“Foreword,” *Bulletin, War Resisters’ International* 8 (March 1925), 2–3.

⁸⁵On the survival of “religious” pacifism and the collapse of “secular” pacifism after 1914: A. J. Muste, *Pacifism after the War* (London, n.d. [1943?]), 3.

⁸⁶E.g. an address by George Lansbury, republished as “A Lansbury Sermon,” *No More War* 1/3 (April 1922), 2.

⁸⁷P.R., “Eindrücke vom 2. Kongreß der Internationale der Kriegsdienstgegner,” *Erkenntnis und Befreiung* 7/30 (1925), 3.

⁸⁸Statement of Principles cited in Prasad, *War Is a Crime against Humanity*, 99.

⁸⁹H. Runham Brown, cited in Prasad, *War Is a Crime against Humanity*, 98.

⁹⁰“Rundschau des Internat. Antimilitarist. Büros am Jahresschluß.”

⁹¹E.g. “Proposals Crowded Out from the Sessions” (presented by Pierre Ramus), in War Resisters’ International, *War Resisters of the World*, 76–7; Pierre Ramus, *Millitarismus, Kommunismus und*

anthology of radical thought, Franz Kobler's *Gewalt und Gewaltlosigkeit: Handbuch des aktiven Pazifismus* (1928).⁹²

The radical intellectuals contributing to these debates strongly affirmed the importance and strategic value of "direct action," thereby maintaining the concept's currency in a period in which it was increasingly marginalized from the labor movement, reformist or communist.⁹³ They reprinted prewar debates on these matters.⁹⁴ They pioneered the use of new synonyms to describe this political tradition, such as "social-economic tactics" or "socioeconomic means."⁹⁵ And they broadened the reach of the concept beyond labor's campaigns, arguing explicitly that it was central to antiwar politics. Bart de Ligt and Franz Kobler put it baldly: "Active pacifism is direct action."⁹⁶

This was not simply a rhetorical enlargement, for opponents of war also gave considerable thought to how direct action might be used to promote the way of peace. The performative core of the direct-action repertoire had long been acknowledged as the strike, the boycott, and sabotage. In the years before World War I, antimilitarists had planned to initiate a general strike at the moment of mobilization. But the strategy had failed to arrest the catastrophe of 1914 and later campaigners recognized that it was also likely insufficient to deal with any future military conflict.

Postbellum activists reasoned that the production of armaments in the years before the outbreak of hostilities was perhaps more significant than the call to rally to the colors.⁹⁷ They therefore campaigned zealously for the prohibition of arms manufacture.⁹⁸ They appealed to workers to "stigmatize" or ostracize those implicated in war preparations.⁹⁹ They urged the use of boycotts against the provision of war materials.¹⁰⁰ They sought to enrol an "army of Conscientious Objectors" through the promotion of mass declarations to refuse any future war service.¹⁰¹ They organized simultaneous

Antimilitarisms (Erdigen am Rhein, 1921); Bart de Ligt's "Plan of Campaign against all War and Preparation for War," presented at WRI Conference, 1924. See H. Runham Brown, "The W.R.I. Conference at Digswell Park, England, July, 1934," *War Resister* 36 (Sept. 1934), 5.

⁹²Franz Kobler, ed., *Gewalt und Gewaltlosigkeit: Handbuch des aktiven Pazifismus. Im Auftrage der Internationale Der Kriegsdienstgegner* (Zurich und Leipzig, 1928).

⁹³E.g. P.R., "Direkte Aktion ist Verwicklungung," *Erkenntnis und Befreiung* 2/27 (30 May–5 June 1920), 1–2.

⁹⁴E.g. "Parliamentarismus oder direkte Aktion?," *Der Syndikalist* 41 (n.d. [1919]), 1; Pierre Ramus, "Die direkte Aktion als Vorbereitungswerk für die zukünftige freie Gesellschaft," *Der Syndikalist*, 43 (n.d. [1919]), 3.

⁹⁵E.g. P.R. "Das mächtigste Mittel," *Erkenntnis und Befreiung* 2/35 (25–31 July 1920), 1–2; Pierre Ramus, "Militarisme, communisme et antimilitarisme," in Collectif désobéissances libertaires, *Antimilitaristes anarchistes non-violents: Barthélemy de Ligt (1883–1938) Pierre Ramus (1882–1942)* (Lyon, 2019), 90–93, at 92.

⁹⁶Frank Kobler and B. de Ligt, "Über die Taktik des aktiven Pacifismus," in Kobler, *Gewalt und Gewaltlosigkeit*, 346–59, at 347.

⁹⁷E.g. Barthélemy de Ligt, *Contre la guerre nouvelle* (Paris, 1928), 105.

⁹⁸"Call on Governments to Disband Armies, Navies and Air Force" (British Section of War Resisters' International), *Bulletin, War Resisters' International* 7 (Dec. 1924), 10.

⁹⁹"Methods of Effective Resistance to Modern Warfare," in War Resisters' International, *War Resisters of the World*, 76.

¹⁰⁰E.g. De Ligt, *Contre la guerre nouvelle*, 177–8.

¹⁰¹Arthur Ponsonby, "The Only Sure Method of Ending War," *No More War* 4/4 (May 1925), 5.

demonstrations for peace across the borders of nations.¹⁰² They threatened “organised sabotage.”¹⁰³ And they reimagined the general strike against war as a more decentralized and grassroots practice, not dependent on the decisions of potentially unreliable leaders.¹⁰⁴ The strategic plotting of a direct-action campaign against war reached its apogee with Bart de Ligt’s “Plan of Campaign against All War and All Preparation for War.” Presented at the War Resisters’ International Conference in 1934, and highly influential in the years afterwards, its complex elements spanned more than fifteen pages.¹⁰⁵

But it was not simply that direct action might be applied to the problems of war and militarism. Postwar peace activists also came to identify direct action as an essentially nonviolent practice. Whereas antebellum direct-actionists had been ambivalent on the matter, and many syndicalists continued to insist on the likely necessity of revolutionary violence, radicals allied with the WRI and the IAMB increasingly asserted the unity of direct action and nonviolence. Key propagandists contrasted “direct action” with the “seizure of political power by force of arms” or opposed “economic action” to the tools of the “barricade,” the “machine gun,” and “organized violence.”¹⁰⁶ They depicted the general strike as a higher “moral form of struggle” due to its distance from the “weapons of murder.”¹⁰⁷ They emphasized that “direct action” does not signify “murder and manslaughter,” but rather a “cultural act” of the “highest moral virtue.”¹⁰⁸

These arguments were sometimes strengthened by reference to history. The chair of the IAMB, the indefatigable and polylingual Bart de Ligt, undertook an immense labor of historical recovery, searching the record of many civilizations for examples of nonviolent direct action. The results of his exhausting efforts were published in two volumes in Dutch as *Vrede als Deed* (Peace as Deed), and then in French in 1934 as *La paix créatrice: Histoire des principes et des tactiques de l'action directe contre la guerre* (1934). Though not translated into English before his untimely death, de Ligt’s volumes nonetheless exerted a substantial transnational impact. One notable review published in German welcomed his efforts as providing “for the first time” a “systematic history of all direct action against war”: an “abundance of materials” previously unknown, now recovered and organized “with precision.”¹⁰⁹ The geographical and cultural range of the

¹⁰² See “All about the Demonstrations,” *No More War* 1/6 (July 1922), 1.

¹⁰³ George Schulze-Moring, “The German Peace Movement,” *War Resister* 20 (May 1928), 5; De Ligt, *Contre la guerre nouvelle*, 177–8.

¹⁰⁴ *Guerre à la Guerre*, 21–3.

¹⁰⁵ The plan is an appendix in Bart de Ligt, *The Conquest of Violence: An Essay on War and Revolution* (New York, 1972), 269–85. Its influence is discussed in Peter van den Dungen, “Bart de Ligt (1883–1938): Non-violent Anarcho-pacifist,” available at www.satyagrahafoundation.org/bart-de-ligt-1883-1938-non-violent-anarcho-pacifist.

¹⁰⁶ Fritz Oerter, “Reaktion und Revolution,” *Der Syndikalist* 3/38 (1921), 2; R.R., “Politische oder wirtschaftliche Aktion,” *Der Syndikalist* 19 (19 April 1919), 1–2. Wilhelm Kartes, “Organisierte Gewalt oder wirtschaftliche Kampfmittel,” *Der Syndikalist* 2/32 (n.d. [1920]), 2.

¹⁰⁷ “Frigor,” “An den 13. Kongreß der F.A.U.D. (Syndikalistinnen),” *Der Syndikalist* 3/39 (1921), 1–2.

¹⁰⁸ J. C. Björklund, cited in “Der dritte Internationale Antimilitaristes-Kongreß im Haag,” *Erkenntnis und Befreiung* 3/23 (8–14 May 1921), 4.

¹⁰⁹ Hans Wehberg, review originally published in *Friedenswarte*, cited in Hem Day, *Barthelemy de Ligt: L'homme et l'oeuvre* (Paris and Brussels, 1960), 9.

volumes established that nonviolent direct action was a shared lineage of a common humanity. They provided the campaign with a “history” and a “tradition,”¹¹⁰ thereby reinforcing claims that direct action could be applied without violence and with some prospect of success.

The first advocates of the concept of direct action had insisted that the strike, the boycott, and sabotage were not just tools of collective mobilization; they were also presented as levers of revolutionary change. Antimilitarist radicals continued after World War I to insist on the necessity of revolution and the centrality of direct-action methods. But they deepened these arguments by reflecting on the dangers of violent revolution and on the necessity of a nonviolent path to social transformation.

Violence was characterized as the midwife of a purely “political” revolution, antimilitarists claimed, that would leave unequal social relationships largely undisturbed. It was not a neutral tool of politics, but the bearer of a distinctive “logic.”¹¹¹ In its destructive force loomed a threat to the creative unfolding of the revolutionary process.¹¹² In its terrifying application could be discerned principles antipathetic to a free and equal society: domination, hierarchy, obedience.¹¹³ Critics of violent revolution pointed to the malign impact of the Jacobin Terror and the Soviet dictatorship.¹¹⁴ They concluded that “revolutionary militancy” offered no salvation.¹¹⁵ On the contrary, Bart de Ligt argued, the more violence a revolution required, the less value it really possessed.¹¹⁶

Just as a “political revolution” required violence, a “social revolution” was said to rest on the tools of “nonviolence.”¹¹⁷ Workers could apply “economic means” that reflected the “spirit of solidarity”: the repertoire of direct action.¹¹⁸ They could wrest control of the weapons used to maintain “domination” and “exploitation” and destroy them.¹¹⁹ This was a form of struggle that offered greater likelihood of immediate success than the way of the gun, for the brutal force of the violent counterrevolution in Germany and in Italy had demonstrated the right’s more formidable military resources.¹²⁰ It also allowed radicals to confront and overcome the evil of violence itself,¹²¹ and thereby to explore a new paradigm of political change. This was not simply an effort to pursue

¹¹⁰Van den Dungen, “Bart de Ligt (1883–1938).”

¹¹¹“Sind Waffen Schutz- und Verteidigungsmittel für das Proletariat?”, *Erkenntnis und Befreiung* 5/8 (1923), 1.

¹¹²P.R., “Syndikalismus und Gewaltlosigkeit,” *Erkenntnis und Befreiung* 2/44 (26 Sept.–2 Oct. 1920), 3.

¹¹³F. Oerter, “Gewalt und Gewaltlosigkeit,” *Der Syndikalist* 2/30 (1920), 1; Wilhelm Kartes, “Organisierte Gewalt oder wirtschaftliche Kampfmittel,” *Der Syndikalist* 2/32 (1920), 2.

¹¹⁴“Wie soll eine Revolution aussehen?”, *Der Syndikalist* 2/38 (1920), 1; Ramus, *Militarismus, Kommunismus und Antimilitarismus*, 11.

¹¹⁵Motion presented by Pierre Ramus, “Class, Civil War, Communism, and Fascism,” in War Resisters’ International, *War Resisters of the World*, 76–7.

¹¹⁶Bart de Ligt, *Anarchismus und Revolution* (Berlin, 1922), 11.

¹¹⁷“Was ist und will der Bund herrschaftsloser Sozialisten?”, *Erkenntnis und Befreiung* 4/16 (1922), 2.

¹¹⁸Fritz Oerter, “Gewalt oder Solidarität,” *Der Syndikalist* 2/11 (1920), 1; “Anarchistische Methoden gegen Mordfaschismus!”, *Erkenntnis und Befreiung* 7/24 (1925), 1–2.

¹¹⁹P.R., “Syndikalismus und Gewaltlosigkeit,” *Erkenntnis und Befreiung* 2/44 (26 Sept.–2 Oct. 1920), 3.

¹²⁰Karl Roche, “An den Schandpfahl!”, *Der Syndikalist* 25 (31 May 1919), 1–2; Pierre Ramus, “Der Triumphator des Gewaltprinzips,” *Erkenntnis und Befreiung* 4/45 (1922), 1.

¹²¹F. Oerter, “Gewalt und Gewaltlosigkeit,” *Der Syndikalist* 2/30 (1920), 1.

“revolution,” wrote Bart de Ligt, but a more fundamental rethinking of the guiding premises of left-wing politics: a fight to win “the revolution of the revolution.”¹²²

To the eyes of posterity, conscious of the terrible victories of violent political forces across the 1920s and in the decades afterwards, these visions of nonviolent revolution can at first seem hopelessly abstract and dangerously utopian. But the postwar advocates of direct action were oblivious neither to the dangers of fascism nor to the difficulties of enacting sabotage and the general strike. On the contrary, they were alive to the fragility of peace, sensitive to the unfolding of campaigns across the world, and vigorous in their efforts to adjust to shifting circumstance. Their arguments for nonviolent direct action were based partly on the failures of social democracy or communism to win peace or meet the fascist menace. They were also encouraged by a series of episodes—now often forgotten—in which direct action was used to safeguard human life and advance the struggle for justice.

In the aftermath of World War I, with the British state apparently preparing to attack Soviet Russia, a boycott and a threatened general strike by British unions helped to stymie aggressive government plans.¹²³ In Germany, the Kapp putsch launched against the fledgling Weimar Republic in March 1920 was successfully resisted through a general strike; its devotees claimed these events as evidence that “economic power” might triumph even without the support of “gun violence.”¹²⁴ Just a few years later, in 1923, the occupation of the Ruhr by French and Belgian troops was equally met by a campaign of “passive resistance” strongly promoted by the I.A.M.B.¹²⁵ The disruption of French and Belgian plans was embraced by *Der Syndikalist* as a “beautiful proof” of long-held arguments for the efficacy of direct action.¹²⁶ Pierre Ramus, editor of *Erkenntnis und Befreiung*, likewise cited these events as a demonstration of the potential of nonviolent methods to make a “social revolution.”¹²⁷

These were but the most celebrated episodes in a broader lineage. Invalided war veterans staged “direct-action” nonviolent protests in Austria.¹²⁸ Trade unions undertook boycotts against a repressive government in Hungary,¹²⁹ and launched a large and nonviolent general strike in Britain in 1926.¹³⁰ In Western Samoa, the so-called Mau rebellion—a self-consciously nonviolent and disciplined campaign for self-government—was hailed by the leaders of the WRI as a further proof of “The Effectiveness of Non-Violence”; the WRI even published a dedicated pamphlet on the movement’s significance.¹³¹ In the wider public and in the chronicles of revolutionary

¹²² De Ligt, *Anarchismus und Revolution*, 35.

¹²³ “Success of War Resistance,” *No More War* 1/11 (Dec. 1922), 3. See also William Mellor, *Direct Action* (London, 1920), 44, 152–6.

¹²⁴ F.R., “Der Triumph des Generalstreiks,” *Erkenntnis und Befreiung* 2/18 (28 March–3 April 1920), 1.

¹²⁵ “Ruhr Manifesto of the I.A.M.B., as published in ‘No More War’ February 1923,” in I.A.M.B., *International Antimilitary Bureau*, 45–6.

¹²⁶ “Militarismus und Revolution,” *Der Syndikalist* 5/7 (1923), 2.

¹²⁷ Pierre Ramus, “Der Sieg eines Prinzips,” *Erkenntnis und Befreiung* 5/41 (1923), 2–3.

¹²⁸ “Direkte Aktion,” *Erkenntnis und Befreiung* 34 (7–14 Sept. 1919), 3.

¹²⁹ “Die Gewalt der Gewaltlosigkeit,” *Erkenntnis und Befreiung* 2/30 (20–26 June 1920), 4.

¹³⁰ HRB, “The General Strike in Britain,” *War Resister* 12 (June 1926), 2.

¹³¹ “The Effectiveness of Non-violence,” *War Resister* 37 (Spring 1935), 20; H. Runham Brown, *Western Samoa: Imprisonment, Deportation and Shooting* (Enfield, 1930).

political history, most of these episodes have attracted little attention. The claims made by war resisters for their success might not always bear scrutiny.¹³² For the postwar pioneers of nonviolence, however, they glittered as shining exemplars of a new means of imagining and enacting revolutionary change.

The figure of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi loomed still larger. Gandhi's non-violent campaigns in South Africa and India gained increasing attention in the West over the postwar years, driven partly by the size and collective power of the movements he inspired; partly by the drama and skill of his political choreography; partly by fascination with his personality and deportment; partly by the novelty, profusion, and cogency of his writings; and partly by the growing development of global news companies. Religiously inclined pacifists were especially attracted to the Mahatma, assimilating him to a lineage of spiritual leaders that encompassed the Buddha, Christ, and St Francis of Assisi. Many African American intellectuals shared this religious emphasis, but others stressed also Gandhi's status as a "colored leader opposed to white oppression."¹³³ But these approaches did not exhaust Western interest. Although their sustained engagement has been granted comparatively less attention, European enthusiasts for direct action and antimilitarism working in an anarchist and socialist tradition also examined and debated Gandhi's political experiments.

The journals of the War Resisters' International and its affiliates offered detailed reports of Gandhian struggles from the early 1920s, well before the celebrated "salt satyagraha."¹³⁴ So did the European syndicalist movement.¹³⁵ The *Handbuch des aktiven Pazifismus* (1928) sponsored by the WRI included a chapter by Gandhi on "The Theory and Practice of Passive Resistance" and a further chapter by British war resister Wilfred Wellock on "Mahatma Gandhi and the Satyagraha Movement." The handbook also contained advertisements for several of Gandhi's own publications, including the journal *Young India* and *Gandhi in Südafrika* (presumably the publication known in English as *Satyagraha in South Africa*).¹³⁶ German radicals even published a dedicated volume on Gandhi's political campaigns in 1930.¹³⁷ German war resisters lectured on

¹³²For example, the nonviolent and radical credentials of the "passive-resistance" movement in the Ruhr are certainly open to question, as is its success. Conan Fischer, *The Ruhr Crisis, 1923–1924* (Oxford, 2003), 291, persuasively finds that the overall passive-resistance campaign involved great suffering but eventual "failure" and "traumatic aftermath." Conversely, Barbara Müller, *Passiver Widerstand im Ruhrkampf: Eine Fallstudie zur gewaltlosen zwischenstaatlichen Konfliktaustragung und ihren Erfolgsbedingungen* (Münster, 1995), emphasizes the success of the struggle, though as a form of nonviolent resistance to invasion rather than "revolution" as such. On the more general tendency of proponents of nonviolence to acclaim the success of past experiments, even at the cost of accuracy, see M. J. Sørensen, "Glorifications and Simplifications in Case Studies of Danish WWII Nonviolent Resistance," *Journal of Resistance Studies* 3/1 (2017), 99–137.

¹³³Slate, *Colored Cosmopolitanism*, 94.

¹³⁴E.g. "The Gospel of Gandhi: Indian Leader's Way to Liberty without Bloodshed," *No More War* 1/4 (May 1922), 5.

¹³⁵E.g. "Soziale Aussichten der Gandhi-bewegung," *Der Syndikalist* 4/38 (1922), 7; and "Soziale Aussichten der Gandhi-bewegung II," *Der Syndikalist* 4/39 (1922), 6–7.

¹³⁶Kobler, *Gewalt und Gewaltlosigkeit*, advertisement at 389.

¹³⁷Fritz Diettrich, ed., *Die Gandhi-Revolution* (Dresden, 1930).

Gandhi and promoted his significance.¹³⁸ And Gandhi's example was cited at successive conferences of the War Resisters' International.¹³⁹

Western enthusiasts for direct action brought distinctive perspectives to Gandhi's entrancing political career. Less often preoccupied with Gandhi's racial identity or place in a pantheon of spiritual greatness, they focused intently on the character and meaning of his political techniques. They elevated Gandhi's methods as "the most important point" in any appraisal of his politics,¹⁴⁰ and offered their assessment in articles such as "The Efficacy of Non-violence: Ghandi's Experiment in India."¹⁴¹ They promoted the significance of Gandhian campaigns: of "decisive importance," "an immense step forward in the struggle of mankind."¹⁴² Whereas religious pacifists were often content with vague sketches of the Mahatma's commitment to "love" and "peace," direct-actionists reproduced the pledges of his salt satyagrahis and highlighted his opposition to parliamentarism.¹⁴³ Whereas the religious-minded tended to genuflect to Gandhi, rather than to critically engage with his politics, direct-actionists such as Bart de Ligt directly corresponded with the Mahatma, and took him to task for apparent political errors.¹⁴⁴ Whereas many religious pacifists equated Gandhi's politics with "non-resistance" (and hence apparent passivity) direct-actionists underlined its "active" and committed character.¹⁴⁵

The differences are starkest when considering Gandhi's perceived relationship to the concept of "revolution." Religious pacifists largely skirted the question of social or political transformation, and depicted Gandhi primarily as a moral exemplar or else a prophet of reconciliation. Communists, for their part, depicted the Mahatma as a dangerous reactionary, holding back the tides of political change while working to support the domestic bourgeoisie.¹⁴⁶ Only direct-actionists consistently identified Gandhi as an important contributor to the revolutionary tradition. German war resisters appraised the Indian leaders' campaigns under the collective title *Die Gandhi-Revolution*, while Americans of the War Resisters' League contemplated "Gandhi and the Pacifist Revolution."¹⁴⁷

¹³⁸ E.g. "The Bund der Kriegsdienstgegner," *War Resister* 25 (Winter 1930), 20; "The Activity of the German Movement," War Resisters' International, *War Resisters of the World*, 63–4.

¹³⁹ E.g. War Resisters International, *War Resisters in Many Lands: An Account of the Movement in Twenty-One Countries and a Report of the International Conference held on the Sonntagsberg, Austria, July, 1928* (Enfield, 1928), 36; War Resisters' International, *War Resisters in Many Lands*, 19, 58.

¹⁴⁰ Oskar Ewald, "Gandhi, der Politiker des Geistes," in Diettrich, *Die Gandhi-Revolution*, 27–49, at 30.

¹⁴¹ "The Efficacy of Non-violence: Ghandi's Experiment in India," *No More War* 3/11 (Dec. 1924), 3.

¹⁴² Horace G. Alexander, "India and World Peace," *No More War* new series, 1/3 (March 1935), 20; "Satyagraha," *War Resister* 29 (Summer 1931), 19.

¹⁴³ "Satyagraha"; Pierre Ramus, "Ein Pyrrhussieg über Gandhi," *Erkenntnis und Befreiung* 7/22 (1925), 2–3.

¹⁴⁴ See Christian Bartolf, ed., *The Breath of My Life: The Correspondence of Mahatma Gandhi (India) and Bart de Ligt (Holland) on War and Peace* (Berlin, 2000). De Ligt notes his annoyance at Western worship of Gandhi at 63.

¹⁴⁵ "Foreword," *War Resister* 12 (June 1926), 3, cites Gandhi on this matter. On interpreting Gandhi as a "nonresistant": Scalmer, *Gandhi in the West*, 81–2.

¹⁴⁶ On communist attacks: B. R. Nanda, *Gandhi and His Critics* (Delhi, 1994), Ch. 15, esp. 131.

¹⁴⁷ "Gandhi and the Pacifist Revolution" was the title of a theme at a War Resisters League (USA) Congress in New Jersey in May 1931. See "A Remarkable Conference," *War Resister* 29 (Summer 1931), 22.

This was more than a semantic difference, for direct-actionists meditated on Gandhi's example as part of a quest to rethink "revolution" as a spiritual rather than purely material process. Early Western discussion of Gandhi's politics underlined its strongly spiritual dimensions, and sometimes sought to pair the Mahatma with Leo Tolstoy.¹⁴⁸ Franz Kobler's contribution to the *Handbuch des activen Pacifizismus* emphasized how "poor" and "pale" the Western movement appeared alongside the "spiritual" elements of Gandhian struggles: the spinning wheel, the fast, the ashram.¹⁴⁹ Fenner Brockway, chair of the War Resisters' International, described the salt satyagraha not simply as a successful example of mass politics, but more as an "astounding revolution of spiritual strength."¹⁵⁰ In *Contre la nouvelle guerre* (1928), Bart de Ligt reminded readers how the "spiritual nobility" of Gandhi's campaign had left "adversaries far behind," raised up Gandhi's concept of "soul force" as the keynote of his own politics, and even claimed to find an allied concept in the Dutch notion of "geestelijke weerbaarheid."¹⁵¹ Through these and other efforts, direct-actionists drew upon Gandhi's campaign to criticize dominant Western traditions and to magnify the possibility of another way. Direct-actionists were therefore far from passive receivers or mere admirers of a message from India. On the contrary, they creatively engaged with Gandhi's experiments in satyagraha, using Gandhi in their efforts to broaden how a nonviolent "revolution" might be understood and enacted.

The significance of interwar debates

In the years after World War II, the concept of "nonviolent direct action" became a significant presence in radical politics. In the United States, civil rights activists self-consciously used "non-violent direct action" to challenge racial segregation.¹⁵² In the United Kingdom, a Direct Action Committee against Nuclear War staged radical protests against nuclear weaponry. A campaigning literature around direct action and nonviolence helped to sustain these efforts. It also influenced a broader efflorescence of social movements: for gender equality, for environmental protection, and against war in Vietnam.¹⁵³

The young leaders and strategists of these struggles formed part of a generation that mostly entered political activity from the 1940s or early 1950s: April Carter and Michael Randle in the UK; Bayard Rustin, Bill Sutherland, James Farmer, and George Houser in the USA, among others. Their pioneering activism was invariably

¹⁴⁸ Spiritual: e.g. "Literary Activity of Our French Comrades," *Bulletin, War Resisters International* 6 (Sept. 1924), 6. Tolstoy comparison: "Mittelungen des Internationalen Antimilitaristen-Büros gegen Krieg und Reaktion," *Erkenntnis und Befreiung* 3/41 (1921), 1–3. The Tolstoy comparison is understandable, for Gandhi corresponded with the Russian author and recommended his works.

¹⁴⁹ Franz Kobler, "Ausdruck und Symbolik der Gewaltlosigkeit," in Kobler, *Gewalt und Gewaltlosigkeit*, 319–24, at 322.

¹⁵⁰ A. Fenner Brockway, "India," *War Resister* 27 (Winter 1930–31), 3–4.

¹⁵¹ De Ligt, *Contre la nouvelle guerre*, 171 (paraphrasing the German pacifist Hélène Stöcker), 110.

¹⁵² J. Peck, *Cracking the Color Line: Non-violent Direct Action Methods of Eliminating Racial Discrimination* (New York, 1959).

¹⁵³ The Direct Action Committee and the broader influence of Gandhian nonviolence on the left is discussed in Scalmer, *Gandhi in the West*, Chs. 6, 7.

framed by Gandhian example. At the first postwar conference of the War Resisters' International, participants gathered to listen to a rudimentary recording of Gandhi's voice.¹⁵⁴ The succeeding WRI conference was held in India, and inspired by the quest to demonstrate the "applicability" of "Gandhiji's teaching" to "world politics."¹⁵⁵ The first postwar British experiments with nonviolent protest were called Operation Gandhi; American leaders described their own breakthrough campaigns as contributions to a "post-Gandhian" practice of "non-violence."¹⁵⁶

By the mid-1950s, Gandhi's intellectual preeminence was so commanding that the import of other influences began to drift from the memory of radical activists. A. J. Muste, executive director of the American Fellowship of Reconciliation from 1940, had entered pacifist and labor politics in the conflicts of World War I and its aftermath, and had served as a president of the Amalgamated Textile Workers of America and chairman of faculty at the Brookwood Labor College, New York. This was a pedigree that undoubtedly exposed Muste to debates around "direct action" and "nonviolence" across the interwar years. Yet in a 1954 address to the WRI, Muste admitted that it was only upon recently reading the work of Bart de Ligt that he "had realised how closely linked the idea of non-violent revolution was with European pacifist thought and with the tradition of the W.R.I."¹⁵⁷ De Ligt had perished before World War II, in September 1938, and the other outstanding figure in this tradition, Pierre Ramus, died while seeking refuge from fascism in 1942. As these lights went out, so the intellectual and political significance of their contributions had also, apparently, been consigned to darkness.

Subsequent historical work on pacifism has been limited, for peace history remains a minority enthusiasm within both the discipline of history and the field of "peace studies."¹⁵⁸ Students of nonviolent protest have largely focused on Gandhi and Gandhians. The import of anarchist and socialist currents to the theory and practice of nonviolent direct action has only rarely been recognized.¹⁵⁹ Scholars anxious to complicate the Gandhian genealogy have often looked backward—to Tolstoy—rather than sideways to interwar Europe.¹⁶⁰ The transnational form and the conditions of that interwar contribution have not previously attracted detailed historical research.

In recovering rich interwar discussions of "direct action" and "nonviolence," this article has therefore restored a significant, if neglected, chapter in the intellectual history of radical and peace movements. Transnational interwar debates shared within

¹⁵⁴ H. Runham Brown, "War Resistance Is Not Enough," *War Resister* 54 (Autumn 1948), 5.

¹⁵⁵ "World Pacifist Meeting at Santiniketan and Sevagram, India," *War Resister* 56 (Winter 1949), 11.

¹⁵⁶ For Britain: Scalmer, *Gandhi in the West*, Ch. 5. For the USA: Bayard Rustin, "Montgomery, Alabama, U.S.A.," *War Resister* 77 (Fourth Quarter, 1957), 3.

¹⁵⁷ "A. J. Muste's Speech," *War Resister* 66 (Autumn 1954), 3.

¹⁵⁸ A point made in Michael Goode, "The Future of Peace History," in Howlett *et al.*, *The Oxford Handbook of Peace History*, 847–65.

¹⁵⁹ The neglect of anarchism in the discussion of nonviolent action has recently been noted and challenged in Majken Jul Sørensen and Brian Martin, "Beyond Nonviolent Regime Change: Anarchist Insights," *Peace & Change* 49/2 (2024), 124–39.

¹⁶⁰ On discussions of Tolstoy and Gandhi see, for example, Imraan Coovadia, *Revolution and Non-violence in Tolstoy, Gandhi, and Mandela* (Oxford, 2020); Ramin Jahanbegloo, *Introduction to Nonviolence* (Houndmills, 2014).

war resistance and antimilitarist networks helped to ensure that the concept of “direct action” retained currency in an environment in which syndicalism and anarchism were increasingly isolated.¹⁶¹ These debates did not simply revive antebellum assumptions and formulae, but rather disclosed creative and important rethinking: a new emphasis on the nonviolent character of the strike, the boycott, and sabotage; a new field of application, to war production and the threat of war; a new gallery of global proofs and claimed successes, ranging from Samoa, to the Ruhr, to India; a renewed effort to imagine “revolution” outside a military paradigm, and in spiritual, peaceful, and social terms.

The work of the interwar activists who brought together “nonviolence” and “direct action” merits recuperation for its richness and creativity; contemporary anarchists have begun to rediscover and to promote key writings.¹⁶² But its significance lies also in its pivotal contribution to the survival and the reinvention of a major tradition of radical politics. The trajectory, the changing form, and the contemporary significance of “direct action” cannot be understood simply by registering an “invention” of “direct action” at the beginning of the twentieth century and then a “Gandhian moment” half a century later.¹⁶³ The work of interwar radicals sits between these more celebrated episodes. Their efforts helped to maintain the vitality and relevance of an imperiled field of thought and action. Their struggles constitute a crucial chapter in the histories of nonviolence, direct action, and radical political change.

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¹⁶¹This is another illustration of Turcato’s important point that transnational networks helped to sustain the anarchist movement over time (a point he first made in relation to Italian anarchism). Davide Turcato, “Italian Anarchism as a Transnational Movement, 1885–1915,” *International Review of Social History* 52/3 (2007), 407–44.

¹⁶²See, for example, Collectif désobéissances libertaires, *Antimilitaristes anarchistes non-violents*. A project to publish the collected works of Pierre Ramus (in German) issued a first volume in 2018; for a discussion see <https://blog.pmpress.org/2019/07/31/pierre-ramus-collected-works>.

¹⁶³A habit evident in the historical accounts of Gordon, *Anarchy Alive!*, 5; Woodcock cited in Kinna, *Kropotkin*, 22.

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