# CHAPTER XXI

DESCENT INTO WAR

J awaharlalNehru was president of the Congress for 1936

and 1937 — an unusual honour and a heavy burden. But he him¬

self admitted that Gandhi was ‘the permanent Super-President’

of Congress. It obeyed him. Thanks to Gandhi’s suggestion, for

instance, the twenty-five thousand persons who attended the

Haripura annual convention in February 1938 were fed with

hand-pounded rice, hand-ground flour, cow’s (not buffalo’s)

milk and cow’s butter; of course everybody wore khadi. In poli¬

tics or out of politics, Gandhi could, by virtue of his hold on the

people and on most Congress leaders, dictate the actions and veto

the decisions of Congress if he wished.

Only after Gandhi gave his consent did Congress participate

in the elections to the provincial and central legislatures held

early in 1937, under the new British constitution, the Act of India

of 1935. ‘The boycott of the legislatures, let me tell you,’ Gandhi

explained in Harijan of May 1st, 1937, ‘ 1S not an eternal principle

like that of truth and non-violence.’

Congress swept the elections in six of India’s eleven provinces

(Bombay, Madras, United Provinces, Bihar, Central Provinces

and Orissa), was the largest single party in Assam, Bengal and the

North-west Frontier Province, but obtained a very small minority

of the votes in Sind and the Punjab.

Should the Congress accept office in the provinces where it had

won a majority? In March 1937, on the advice of Gandhi, it

decided in the affirmative on the understanding, however, that

the British governors of the provinces would not interfere, and in

the hope of using office to organize the country for independence.

The total Congress membership rose from 3,102,113 at the

beginning of 1938, to 4,478,720 at the beginning of 1939. But

Gandhi, never impressed by mere numbers, warned the party of

being corrupted by power and office-seekers. He saw ‘decay’

setting in, and confessed that he could not undertake civil dis¬

obedience because, ‘though there is non-violence enough among

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the masses, there is not enough among those who have to organize

the masses’.

This reflected his disappointment with Congress leacjers. When,

therefore, the convention of 1939 elected Subhas Chandra Bose as

president of Congress — he was president too in 1938, and rode

to that session in an ancient vehicle drawn by fifty-one bulls —

Gandhi stepped in and forced Bose to resign. Bose openly advo¬

cated violence and dreamed of an armed revolt against Britain.

He was dynamic and popular and threatened to seize control of

Congress from the Vallabhbhai Patel machine.

Gandhi also condemned the Congress provincial governments for

using force during strikes and religious riots. As the 1930 decade

advanced, Gandhi became more uncompromising in his pacifism.

But neither Nehru, nor Bose, nor Maulana Abul Kalam Azad,

the outstanding Moslem leader of Congress, was a pacifist. Of all

India’s prominent nationalists, the only one who earned the title

of‘Gandhi’ was Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, known to the country

as ‘The Frontier Gandhi’. He is a Pathan from the wild, legendary

north-west frontier region near the Khyber inhabited by the unruly

Afridis, Wazirs and other mountain tribes; the British subsidized

but never subdued them. Ghaffar Khan is six feet four, with a fine,

perfectly oval head and a powerful muscular body. Grey-black

stubble covers his head and face. He was sixty when I saw

him in Devadas’s home in New Delhi in 1942; his dark, pene¬

trating, flashing eyes were those of a young man of thirty. His

father and he were rich, but he renounced wealth to follow the

Mahatma. He lives in a village (when he is not in jail) and lives

like the villagers. He wears a long, blue-grey blouse and very

wide-seat trousers made of homespun. His feet are bare. His

feet are beautifully moulded and his big hands are almost white.

After he shook hands he touched his hand to his heart. As Gandhi

was of the soil and sand of India, Ghaffar Khan is of its rocks and

crags and raging torrents. The hot blood of sharpshooting, trigger-

happy mountaineers courses in his veins but he has adopted the

philosophy of complete non-violence and so have the thousands

of brother Pathans whom he organized as the Khudai Khidmatgar

or Servants of God.

Millions obeyed Gandhi, myriads adored him, multitudes

accounted themselves his followers, only a handful did as lie did.

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He knew it. The knowledge did not diminish his volcanic energy

or break his steel will. On the contrary; as he watched the dark¬

ness advance during the 1930s across China, Abyssinia, Spain,

Czechoslovakia and above all Germany, his zeal for pure pacifism

grew. ‘My faith is brightest in the midst of impenetrable darkness,’

he said on February 6th, 1939. He saw the second World War

approaching.

In 1921, he had written that ‘under independence too I would

not hesitate to advise those who would bear arms to do so and

fight for the country’. In 1928, answering the Frenchman the Rev.

B. de Ligt, Tolstoy’s friend Chertkov and other European paci¬

fists who criticized him for supporting the two South African wars

and the first World War, Gandhi declared, ‘I did participate in

the three acts of war. I could not, it would be madness for me to,

sever my connection with the society to which I belong.’

It would have been normal for Gandhi to be a pacifist from the

very beginning of his public career.- But basic attitudes rarely

came to Gandhi through cogitation. The absolute pacifism at

which he arrived in the mid-1930s was partly the result of his less

hopeful relationship towards the British Empire in which he had

believed earlier. But chiefly, Gandhi’s pacifism came out of his

own inner development.

Once, when Gandhi was in prison, a scorpion stung a fellow

prisoner; Gandhi sucked out the poison, A leper named Parchure

Sastri, who was a Sanskrit scholar, asked to be admitted to

Sevagram Ashram. Some members objected; they feared infec¬

tion. Gandhi not only admitted him; he gave him massage . . .

In March 1939 Gandhi undertook a fast unto death on behalf

of the civil liberties of the people of Rajkot, where he had gone to

school as a boy. The doctors sought to dissuade the Mahatma.

He showed symptoms of myocarditis, an inflammation or harden¬

ing of the muscles of the heart.

But it was a Gandhian principle to subordinate the flesh to the

spirit. When moral considerations made an act imperative, the

body had no veto. If the flesh was weak it suffered or even died;

it could not say no.

This was the source of Gandhi’s pacifism. In the past, he had

fought in the wars. He had allowed sympathy for Britain and duty

to a country to guide him. Nor had he risen above Indian

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Nationalism. Morality did not yet completely command him.

However, by the time the second World War approached, he

had achieved more complete detachment. Also, he said, ‘I was

not so disconsolate before [between 1914 and 1918] as I am today.’

He envisaged the second war as a ‘greater horror’ than the first;

‘the greater horror would prevent me from becoming the self-

appointed recruiting sergeant that I had become during the last

war’.

He had little hope of persauding others. But whereas in the past

he had resisted all proddings from abroad and pleaded that he

could not carry non-violence to the West while India remained

violent, he advised the Abyssinians in 1935 not to fight.

‘If the Abyssinians had adopted the attitude of non-violence of

the strong,’ Gandhi said, ‘that is, the non-violence which breaks

to pieces but never bends, Mussolini would have had no interest

in Abyssinia. Thus if they had simply said: “You are welcome to

reduce us to dust and ashes, but you will not find one Abyssinian

ready to co-operate with you,” what could Mussolini have done?

He did not want a desert ... If the Abyssinians had retired from

the field and allowed themselves to be slaughtered, their seeming

inactivity would have been much more effective though not for

the moment visible. Hitler and Mussolini on the one hand and

Stalin on the other are able to show the immediate effectiveness

of violence. But it is as transitory as that of Genghis Khan’s

slaughter.’

The tragedy of Czechoslovakia and of Germany’s Jews touched

him even more deeply. ‘The peace of Europe gained at Munich’,

where Chamberlain and Daladier betrayed Czechoslovakia to

Hitler in September 1938, Gandhi wrote, ‘is a triumph of violence;

it is also a defeat . . . England and France . . . quailed before the

combined violence of Germany and Italy. But what have Ger¬

many and Italy gained? Have they added anything to the moral

wealth of mankind?’ These words make more sense today than

on October 8th, 1938, when they were published in Harijan. ‘The

war is only postponed,’ Gandhi continued prophetically. ‘During

the breathing time, I present the way of non-violence for accep¬

tance by the Czechs. They do not yet know what is in store for

them. They can lose nothing by trying the way of non-violence.

The fate of Republican Spain is hanging in the balance. So is that

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of China. If in the end they all lose, they will do So not because

their cause is not just ... I suggest that, if it is brave, as it is, to

die as a man fighting against odds, it is braver still to refuse to

fight and yet to refuse to yield to the usurper. . . .’

While touring with Ghaffar Khan in October 1938, among the

Pathans of the frontier, Gandhi wrote a Harijan article entitled

‘If I were a Czech’. ‘Democracy dreads to spill blood,’ he said.

‘The philosophy for which the two dictators stand calls it

cowardice to shrink from carnage . . . Science of war leads one to

dictatorship pure and simple. Science of non-violence can alone

lead one to pure democracy . . . Russia is out of the picture just

now. Russia has a dictator who dreams of peace and thinks he

will wade to it through a sea of blood. . . .

‘It was necessary to give this introduction to what I want to

say to the Czechs and through them to all those nationalities

which are called “small” or “weak”. I want to speak to the

Czechs because their plight moved me to the point of physical and

mental distress.’ His advice was: ‘Refuse to obey Hitler’s will

and perish unarmed in the attempt. In so doing, though I lose

the body, I save my soul, that is, my honour.’

Usually, the pacifist says, ‘It is evil to kill.’ He therefore ab¬

stains from war. He is answered by those who say, ‘I’d rather kill

than be killed.’ To which, Gandhi replied, ‘No, I’d rather be

killed.’

‘Man may and should shed his own blood for establishing what

he considers to be his “right”,’ Gandhi wrote in Harijan. ‘He may

not shed the blood of his opponent who disputes his “right”.’

In December 1938 the International Missionary Conference

took place at Tambaram, near Madras, and when it was over,

Christian clergymen, including Dr. John R. Mott, Reverend

William Paton, secretary of the International Missionary Coun¬

cil, Reverend Leslie B. Moss, secretary of the Conference

of Missionary Societies of North America, and many others sat

at Gandhi’s feet in his ashram in Sevagram. Pyarelal Nayyar

took notes. Soon they were cross-examining him on his formula

for the Czechs. ‘You do not know Hitler and Mussolini,’ one

missionary said. ‘They are incapable of any moral response.

They have no conscience, and they have made themselves im¬

pervious to world opinion. Would it not be playing into the hands

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of these dictators if, for instance, the Czechs, following your advice,

confronted them with non-violence?’

‘Your argument,’ Gandhi objected, ‘presupposes that the

dictators like Mussolini and Hitler are beyond redemption.’

Discussions of a similar and even more challenging character

were provoked by Gandhi’s counsel to the Jews.

Gandhi wrote in Harijan , November nth, 1938:

‘My sympathies are all with the Jews. They have been the un¬

touchables of Christianity . . . A Jewish friend has sent me a book

called The Jewish Contribution to Civilization , by Cecil Roth. It

gives a record of what the Jews have done to enrich the world’s

literature, art, music, drama, science, medicine, agriculture, etc.

. . . the German persecution of the Jews seems to have no parallel

in history. The tyrants of old never went so mad as Hitler seems

to have done. If there ever could be a justifiable war in the name

of and for humanity, war against Germany to prevent the wanton

persecution of a whole race would be completely justified. But I

do not believe in any war. . . .

‘Can the Jews resist this organized and shameless persecution?

. . . If I were a Jew and were born in Germany and earned my

livelihood there, I would claim Germany as my home even as the

tallest gentile German might, and challenge him to shoot me or

cast me in the dungeon . . . And for doing this I should not wait

for the fellow Jews to join me in civil resistance, but would have

confidence that in the end the rest were bound to follow my

example. If one Jew or all the Jews were to accept the prescrip¬

tion here offered, he or they cannot be worse off than now . . .

The calculated violence of Hitler may even result in a general

massacre of the Jews by way of his first answer to the declaration

of such hostilities. But if the Jewish mind could be prepared for

voluntary sacrifice, even the massacre I have imagined could be

turned into a day of thanksgiving that Jehovah had wrought

deliverance of the race even at the hands of a tyrant. For to the

God-fearing, death has no terror. ...

‘The Jews of Germany can offer Satyagraha under infinitely

better auspices than the Indians of South Africa. The Jews are a

compact, homogeneous community in Germany. They are far

more gifted than the Indians of South Africa. And they have

organized world opinion behind them. I am convinced that if

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someone with courage and vision can arise among them to lead

them in non-violent action, the winter of their despair can in the

twinkling of an eye be turned into the summer of hope. And what

has today become a degrading man hunt can be turned into a

calm and determined stand offered by unarmed men and women

possessing the strength of suffering given to them by Jehovah . . .

The German Jews will score a lasting victory over the German

gentiles in the sense that they will have converted the latter to an

appreciation of human dignity.’

The Nazi press assaulted Gandhi savagely for these words. It

threatened reprisals against India. T should rank myself a

coward,’ he replied, £ if for fear of my country or myself or Indo-

German relations being harmed, I hesitated to give what I felt

in the innermost recesses of my heart to be one hundred per cent

sound advice.’

The missionaries questioned him closely on his statements about

the Jews. ‘To be truly non-violent,’ he said, ‘I must love [my

adversary] and pray for him even when he hits me.’ The Jews

should pray for Hitler. ‘If even one Jew acted thus, he would

save his self-respect and leave an example which, if it became

infectious, would save the whole of Jewry and leave a rich heritage

to mankind besides.’

Herman Kallenbach was living in Sevagram Ashram at the

time. ‘He has an intellectual belief in non-violence,’ Gandhi

remarked, ‘but he says he cannot pray for Hitler ... I do not

quarrel with him over his anger. He wants to be non-violent,

but the sufferings of his fellow Jews are too much fpf him to bear.

What is true of him is true of thousands of Jews who have no

thought even of “loving the enemy”. With them, as with millions,

“revenge is sweet, to forgive is divine”.’ There were few divine

Jews or Christians or Hindus. Only one little Hindu and very

few of his friends were capable of divine forgiveness.

Jewish Frontier , a New York magazine, riddled Gandhi’s pro¬

posal in March 1939, and sent him a copy. He quoted at length

from the attack. ‘I did not entertain the hope . . . that the Jews

would be at once converted to my view,’ Gandhi replied. ‘I

should have been satisfied if even one Jew had been fully con¬

vinced and converted ... It is highly probable that, as the [Jewish

Frontier ] writer says, “A Jewish Gandhi in Germany, should one

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arise, could function for about five minutes and would be promptly

taken to the guillotine.’\* But that does not disprove my case or

shake my belief in the efficacy of non-violence. I can conceive the

necessity of the immolation of hundreds, if not thousands, to

appease the hunger of dictators . .. Sufferers need not see the result

during their lifetime . . . The method of violence gives no greater

guarantee than that of non-violence . . .’ Millions sacrifice them¬

selves in war without any guarantee that the world will be better

as a result or even that the enemy will be defeated. Yet who does

not fiercely resent the suggestion that anybody should die in

deliberate non-violent sacrifice?

I mentioned the subject to Gandhi in 1946 when Hitler was

dead. ‘Hitler,’ Gandhi said, ‘killed five million Jews. It is the'

greatest crime of our time. But the Jews should have offered them¬

selves to the butcher’s knife. They should have thrown themselves

into the sea from cliffs ... It would have aroused the world and

the people of Germany ... As it is they succumbed anyway in

their millions.’

Gandhi in 1938 and 1939 was seeking a moral substitute for the

impending war. He knew his ideas would be rejected. But he

had to express them.

In December 1938 Mr. Takaoka, a member of the Japanese

Parliament, came to Sevagram. He deliberately avoided the

subject of the Sino-Japanese war; he asked how unity could be

achieved between India and Japan.

‘It can be possible,’ Gandhi replied harshly, ‘if Japan ceases to

throw its greedy eyes on India.’

Takaoka requested a message for the Japanese party which

advocated Asia for the Asiatics. ‘I do not subscribe to the doctrine

of Asia for the Asiatics if it is meant as an anti-European com¬

bination,’ Gandhi affirmed. (Pyarelal published the interview in

the December 24th, 1938, Harijan.) ‘How can we have Asia for the

Asiatics unless we are content to let Asia remain a frog in the well?...’

' A lady cabled from London to Gandhi on August 24th, the day

after the Stalin-Hitler pact was signed. ‘Please act. World await¬

ing lead:’ The war was a week off. Another woman wirelessed

from England, ‘Urge you consider immediate expression of your

unshakable faith in reason not force to rulers and all peoples.\*

Similar urgent messages poured into Sevagram.

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It was too late. On September ist, 1939, the Nazi Army invaded

Poland.

Sunday, September 3rd, 1939, 11 a.m.; British churches were

filled; the British government declared war on Germany. I spent

that afternoon in the country outside Paris. At 5 p.m. a lone plane

flew overhead. The radio announced that France had gone to

war. We drove back to town. Women stood in the streets of little

towns gazing morosely into nowhere, into the bleak future. Some

bit their fingernails. Our car paused for a long line of farm horses

requisitioned by the army — heavy, well-groomed, powerful

horses. A farmer put his arm around the neck of his horse, put

his cheek against its head, and talked into its ear. The horse

shook its head up and down. They were saying goodbye. Before

it was over in 1945, more than thirty million persons in all parts

of the world said goodbye to life. More than thirty million dead

men, women and children; more than a hundred million wounded,

hurt and incapacitated; millions of homes smashed; atom bombs

dropped on two cities; hopes destroyed; ideals soured; moral

values questioned.

‘We have too many men of science, too few men of God,’

General Omar N. Bradley, Chief of Staff, United States Army,

said in Boston on November 10th, 1948. ‘We have grasped the

mystery of the atom and rejected the Sermon on the Mount . . .

The world has achieved brilliance without wisdom, power without

conscience. Ours is a world of nuclear giants and ethical infants.

We know more about war than we know about peace, more about

killing than we know about living.’

Gandhi rejected the atom and grasped the Sermon on the

Mount. He was a nuclear infant and an ethical giant. He knew

nothing about killing and much about living in the twentieth

century.

Only those who have no doubts can reject Gandhi completely.

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