

Peace Lessons

By [David Swanson](#)

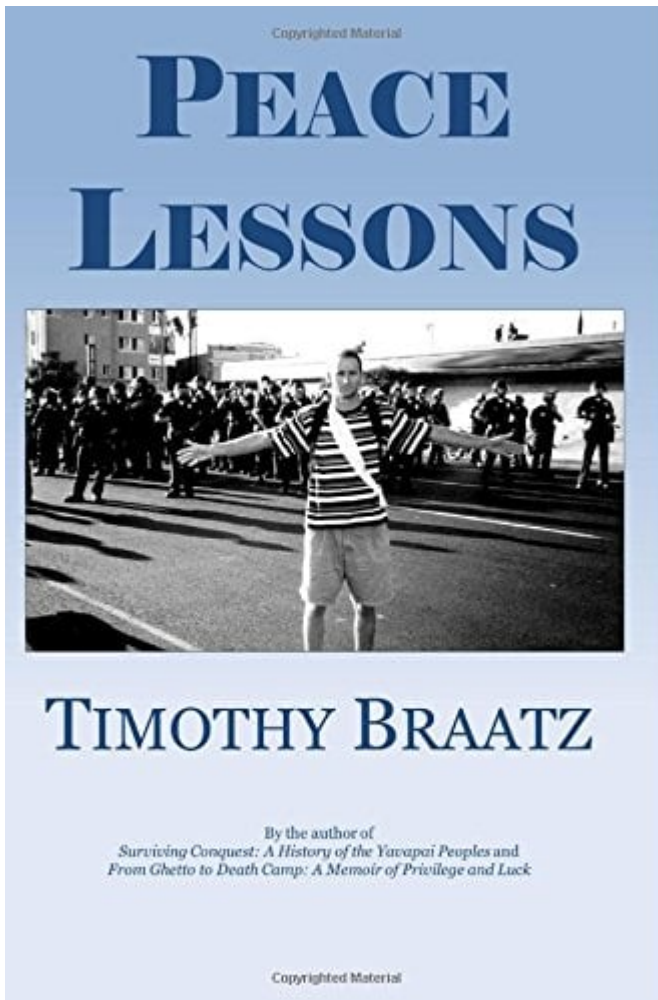
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[World Beyond War](#)

Theme: [History](#), [US NATO War Agenda](#)

I just read what may be the best introduction to peace studies I've ever seen. It's called *Peace Lessons*, and is a new book by Timothy Braatz. It's not too fast or too slow, neither obscure nor boring. It does not drive the reader away from activism toward meditation and "inner peace," but begins with and maintains a focus on activism and effective strategy for revolutionary change in the world on the scale that is needed. As you may be gathering, I've read some similar books about which I had major complaints.

No doubt there are many more, similar books I haven't read, and no doubt most of them cover the basic concepts of direct, structural, and cultural violence and nonviolence. No doubt many of them review the 20th century history of nonviolent overthrows of dictators. No doubt the U.S. civil rights movement is a common theme, especially among U.S. authors. Braatz's book covers this and other familiar territory so well I was never tempted to set it down. He gives some of the best answers available to the usual questions from the dominant war-based culture, as well: "Would you shoot a crazed gunman to save your grandma?" "What about Hitler?"



Braatz introduces basic concepts with crystal clarity, and then proceeds to illuminate them with a discussion of the battle of Little Bighorn from a peace perspective. The book is worth acquiring for this alone, or for the similarly insightful discussion of John Brown's use of nonviolent strategies in combination with his use of violence. Brown established a constructive project, a cooperative interracial non-patriarchal community. Brown had concluded that only the death of white men could awaken Northerners to the evil of slavery, prior to his failure to flee Harper's Ferry. Read Braatz on Brown's Quaker roots before assuming you understand his complexity.

A summary of Braatz on the "But what about Hitler?" question might go something like this. When Hitler first asphyxiated mentally ill Germans, a few prominent voices raised in opposition led to the cancellation of that program, known as T4. When most of the German population was displeased by the Crystal Night attacks on Jews, those tactics were abandoned. When non-Jewish wives of Jewish men began demonstrating in Berlin to demand their release, and others joined in the demonstrations, those men and their children were released. What might a larger, better planned nonviolent resistance campaign have accomplished? It was never attempted, but it is not hard to imagine. A general strike had reversed a rightwing coup in Germany in 1920. German nonviolence had ended a French occupation in the Ruhr region in the 1920s, and nonviolence would later remove a ruthless dictator from power in East Germany in 1989. In addition, nonviolence proved moderately successful against the Nazis in Denmark and Norway with little planning, coordination, strategy, or discipline. In Finland, Denmark, Italy, and especially Bulgaria, and to a lesser extent elsewhere, non-Jews successfully resisted German orders to kill Jews. And what if the Jews in Germany had understood the danger and nonviolently resisted, magically managing to use techniques developed and understood in the decades that followed, and the Nazis had begun to slaughter them in the public streets rather than in distant camps? Would

millions have been saved by the reaction of the general public? We cannot know because it wasn't tried.

I might add, from a complementary perspective: Six months after Pearl Harbor, in the auditorium of the Union Methodist Church in Manhattan, the executive secretary of the War Resisters League Abraham Kaufman argued that the United States needed to negotiate with Hitler. To those who argued that you couldn't negotiate with Hitler, he explained that the Allies were already negotiating with Hitler over prisoners of war and the sending of food to Greece. For years to come, peace activists would argue that negotiating a peace without loss or victory would still save the Jews and save the world from the wars that would follow the current one. Their proposal was not tried, millions died in the Nazis' camps, and the wars that followed that one have not ended.

But belief in the inevitability of war can end. One can easily understand, as Braatz notes, how wiser behavior in the 1920s and 1930s would have avoided World War II.

Braatz's history of post-World War II nonviolent action is well done, including his analysis of how the end of the Cold War allowed successes in the Philippines and Poland to spark a trend that earlier successes had not. I do think that the discussion of Gene Sharp and the color revolutions could have benefitted from some critical consideration of the role played by the U.S. government — something done well in *Ukraine: Zbig's Grand Chessboard and How the West Was Checkmated*. But after initially labeling several actions successes, Braatz does later get around to qualifying that label. In fact, he is very critical of most nonviolent successes as insufficiently correcting structural and cultural violence, effecting only superficial change by overthrowing leaders.

He's also quite critical of the U.S. civil rights movement, not in a childishly arrogant sense of looking down on any participants, but as a strategist hunting for lost opportunities and lessons going forward. Lost opportunities, he thinks, include the March on Washington and a couple of different moments in the Selma campaign, including the moment when King turned the march around on the bridge.

This book would make a terrific series of discussions in a course on possibilities for peace. As such a course, however, I think it lacks — as virtually the entire academic discipline of peace studies lacks — a substantial analysis of the problem of twenty-first century U.S. wars and global militarism — where this unprecedented war machine is, what drives it, and how to undo it. Braatz does, however, offer the idea that many of us had at the time and some (such as Kathy Kelly) acted on: What if in the lead up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq a huge peace army including famous figures from the West and around the world had made its way to Baghdad as human shields?

We could use that now in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, Ukraine, Iran, and various parts of Africa and Asia. Libya three four years ago was a stellar opportunity for such an action. Will the war machine present a better one, with sufficient warning? Will we be ready to act on it?

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