

Wendt, Simon: *The Spirit and the Shotgun. Armed Resistance and the Struggle for Civil Rights*. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida 2007. ISBN: 978-0-8130-3018-0; 279 S.

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Simon Wendt's „The Spirit and the Shotgun: Armed Resistance and the Struggle for Civil Rights“ greatly extends our knowledge of an often neglected aspect of the civil rights movement, showing that armed resistance served not as the anti-thesis but as an important auxiliary of non-violent protest in the South during the height of the civil rights struggle.

The book's first chapter offers a well conceived survey of the American South's racial history, stressing how violence served as a means of racial control for centuries and how lynching was used as „a particular assault on black males and black 'manhood'“ (p. 11). While there had always been advocates of black self-defence, organized armed resistance was rare before the 1940s, since it usually provoked even more white violence and was generally viewed as counterproductive. But as a result of World War II, the parameters of American race relations were fundamentally changed, which set the stage for the modern civil rights movement. Following the Gandhian principle of „Satyagraha“ non-violent resistance as advocated by Martin Luther King soon became the movement's most successful tool and earned it international fame during the 1950s and 1960s. At the same time, as Wendt shows, armed self-defence groups also played an important role in promoting the black freedom struggle. Reacting to attacks by white racists on movement leaders, armed neighbours and friends as well as organized black self-defence groups moved to protect these leaders and their homes in an unobtrusive, but effective manner. The necessity to maintain the sympathy and financial support from white liberals caused civil rights activists to generally downplay the role of armed self-defence; a process which often led to tension within and between different groups of the movements.

The next three chapters of the book en-

gage in a thorough analysis of armed self-defence groups in Alabama, Louisiana and Mississippi. Wendt convincingly demonstrates how the un-named, but very well organized black defence group founded by the Korean War veteran Joseph Mallisham in Tuscaloosa, AL, in 1964 was able to successfully repel Ku Klux Klan attacks, and protect the activities of the non-violent Tuscaloosa Citizens for Action Committee (TCAC). Being not only the leader of a secret, paramilitary armed black defence squad, but also the official chairman of the TCAC membership committee, Mallisham embodied the symbiosis of non-violent direct action and armed black militancy, which in the author's view was decisive for the success of the civil rights movement in Tuscaloosa. The Deacons for Defence and Justice, founded in Bogalusa, LA, in 1964, who in contrast to the low-profile Mallisham group gained nationwide notoriety after their repeated shoot-outs with hooded attackers, also closely cooperated with non-violent groups, such as the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). While many of the pacifist CORE-members had initially objected to accepting armed protection, the continued vicious attacks on civil rights workers caused most of them, including national director James Farmer, to gratefully welcome the Deacons' help. Moreover, as Wendt argues, the Deacons represented the kind of indigenous leadership that CORE hoped to nurture among local blacks in the South. While established civil rights leaders such as Martin Luther King and Roy Wilkins denounced the group for its open use of (defensive) violence, Farmer and other leaders embraced this pragmatic approach of connecting tactical non-violence with armed protection. In Mississippi, where black farming communities formed a number of informal defence groups between 1963 and 1965, the situation was very similar to Louisiana. The brutalization by white racists increasingly eroded the faith of civil rights workers in non-violence as a philosophy of life. Thus, as a result of the savage white violence and several brutal murders during the Freedom Summer Project of 1964 most members of the Students Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) working in Mississippi accepted armed protection by others,

and a number of field activists actually armed themselves.

The two final chapters focus on the rise of Black Power and a new kind of armed black militancy outside of the South after 1966. The author points out how different factors, such as white backlash against the civil rights legislation of 1964 and 1965, lacking support of the Democratic Party leadership, the Vietnam War as well as the African Independence Movement all contributed to the radicalization of SNCC and CORE. This led to increasing tension with the older, more conservative civil rights groups, such as King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) or the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Embracing the idea of Black Power CORE and SNCC eventually became all black organizations in 1967, which signified the final breakdown of the civil rights coalition and the movement's demise. At the same time, Black Power advocates and revolutionary black separatists started to become organized outside of the South, for example, the Medgar Evers Rifle Club in Cleveland, Ohio, the Black Panther Party, Ron Karenga's US-organization, the Republic of New Africa, or the Black Liberation Front. Wendt stresses that these new forms of black militancy differed substantially from those of the older southern armed self-defence groups. While the latter still believed in non-violence as an effective strategy to be supported, the former despised it as weak and emasculating. Seeing self-defence as the very anti-thesis of non-violence they backed their belief with a fusion of black nationalism, Marxism, Maoism and Frantz Fanon's theories of violence as a liberating tool of anti-colonialism. However, within most of these groups, armed resistance became mainly a symbol of defiance that served to affirm an ideal militant black manhood, rather than really promoting legislative, social or economic change. Also, most of their leaders were either unaware of or didn't care about the fact that in their effort to re-establish male pride and self-respect they were appropriating and reproducing dominant notions of masculinity and patriarchal privilege based on the subordination and exploitation of women. As the author's analysis clearly shows, the black nationalists' fixation

on male identity, as reflected in their extremely militant rhetoric (e.g. advocating guerrilla warfare against the U.S. government), proved rather counterproductive in the long run, especially in the case of the Black Panthers. Thus Wendt concludes, „In the southern freedom struggle, shotguns had worked in tandem with the spirit of non-violent protest. During the Black Power era, the gun, which was no longer offset by this spirit, became a detrimental force that sapped much of the movement's energy and contributed to its eventual demise.“ (p. 199)

„The Spirit and the Shotgun“ presents a most valuable, impeccable piece of scholarship. It is based on outstanding, up-to-date research, including not only an extensive analysis of the relevant secondary literature but also an impressive array of materials from archival collections including many interviews with civil rights activists, black militants and other witnesses of the movement. Thus the author is able to illustrate his points with many well-chosen examples and quotations making the text exceptionally enjoyable and compelling to read.¹ If there is one thing to be desired, it would have been a more systematic discussion of the gender issue. While Wendt does comment briefly on the role of black women in the Mississippi movement in chapter four and points out the reactionary strain of male chauvinism within Black Power and Black Nationalism in chapter six, his comments here lack the analytical depth shown in other parts of the book.² Also, Gloria Richardson, who is mentioned a few times in passing at the end of the study, may have deser-

¹ Three possible additions to Wendt's excellent bibliography could be: Scharenberg, Albert, *Schwarzer Nationalismus in den USA: Das Malcolm X-Revival*. Münster 1998; Peniel, Joseph E. (Hrsg.), *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era*. New York 2006 and Austin, Algernon, *Race, Black Nationalism, and Afrocentrism in the Twentieth Century*, New York 2006.

² Studies providing valuable insights in this matter are, for example: Giddings, Paula, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America*, New York 1984; Robnett, Belinda, *How Long? How Long? African American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights*, New York u.a. 1997; Ling, Peter; Monteith, Sharon (Hrsg.), *Gender and the Civil Rights Movement*. New Brunswick, New Jersey 2004 and Collins, Patricia Hill, *From Black Power to Hip Hop: Racism, Nationalism, and Feminism*, Philadelphia 2006.

ved more attention, especially since the media – quite contrary to the pattern described by Wendt – portrayed her in a blatant embellishment of facts as THE „gun-toting“ heroine of armed resistance in Cambridge, Maryland³. A comprehensive examination of the role of women in armed-self-defence thus remains a challenge for future research. But this does not detract from the fact that „The Spirit and the Shotgun“ is a groundbreaking study that will be of great benefit to students as well as scholars of African American history; it should be placed on every reading list on the history of civil rights.

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³ Cf. Walker, Jenny, „The „Gun-Toting“ Gloria Richardson: Black Violence in Cambridge, Maryland“, in Ling and Monteith (2004), 169-185.