

Defiance

by James Buckham (April 2016)

Three historical example of defiance –the most noble of human emotions – and how this is relevant today:

1. The Old Believers:

Here in the west, Russia often appears to be a fairly conservative culture. You probably imagine it as a land of onion-domed churches, folk dances and men paying the bill for dinner, and you wouldn't be too far of the mark.

But today's preference for traditional gender roles and ambivalence to "progressive" values pales in comparison to the levels of resistance to religious change that the group known as the Old Believers displayed in the mid-seventeenth century.

Their story begins in the 1652 when Patriarch Nikon of Moscow got together with some visiting Greek and Ukrainian bishops to discuss aspects of Orthodox worship and ritual. Mortified to discover that he and his countrymen had been getting certain things wrong for the last couple of hundred years, he resolved to bring the Russian church into line with his Eastern Orthodox brethren through changes known as the Nikonian reforms.

These reforms were hardly radical; they included changes such as making the sign of the cross with three fingers rather than two, pronouncing the name "Jesus" a little differently and adding an extra hallelujah to the liturgy. And yet, pleased as he must have been with his work, it's a fair bet that Nikon, knowing his people's attachment to doing things the "right" way, might have foreseen that he would upset a few along the way.

A "few" turned out to be around 10% of Russia's vast population, mostly monks, poor peasants and those living in remote regions far from the centres of power. And "upset" doesn't really do justice to the bloodbath that followed.

The following decades saw a prolonged battle as church and state attempted to force their reforms onto the populous, and the equally resolute schismatics held out in bitter defiance.

The stories are remarkable in themselves. Solovokii Monastery in Russia's far north was besieged for eight years by government forces after the monks rejected the command to cross themselves with three fingers. The attackers finally burst through the defences in 1676, cutting down all but fourteen of the hundreds of remaining inhabitants.

In an even more grisly episode, troops dispatched in 1679 to quell rebels holed up in their hermitage by the Berezorka River arrived to find nothing but ash and bone. Seventeen-hundred men, women and children had decided to burn themselves to death rather than submit to the anti-Christ. This was not unusual. It is estimated that twenty-thousand deaths by self-immolation had occurred by the end of the century.

The next three centuries saw the state grudgingly begin to accept that the Old Believers were not going anywhere soon. Repression gradually subsided, re-appearing from time to time under rulers such as Peter the Great (who did little more than slap a beard tax upon the plucky rebels), Nicholas I, and the Soviets (who did no less than slap them in the gulag).

The Old Believers for their part experienced schism after internal schism, splitting themselves into a bewildering array of sub-sects, from the fairly mainstream *Pomorians* (who in 1738 relented just enough to resume praying for the czar), to the wandering, ascetic *Beguny*, and the self-castrating *Skoptsy*. Many groups have survived, however, and can still be found spread across the world, still bearded, still defiant, still sticking two fingers up at church.

2. The Peasants' Revolt:

In medieval Europe, kings were considered not just earthly rulers, but divinely appointed agents of God. And with armies of bureaucrats, sheriffs and enforcers acting as direct extensions of the royal hand, anyone who planned to challenge this august authority would have needed nerves of steel. Or perhaps a lot of confidence and very little left to lose. Because everyone has their tipping point, even the unwashed, down-trodden rustics who dwelt in southern England at the end of the fourteenth-century.

The causes of the Peasants Revolt have been debated by historians for centuries, and most would agree that it was due in varying parts to the growing economic leverage of the peasantry in the wake of the Black Death, high and perceived

unjust taxation to pay for war against France (that most loved of English Kingly sports) and the increasing organization of skilled workers into guilds and fraternities.

Perhaps more interesting is not the cause or causes, but how close it came to succeeding in its outlandishly progressive aims, and the impassioned and revolutionary way in which it unfolded. It wasn't so much that rebellious peasants were anything new. This was, after all, the golden age of the pitch fork. It was more that the gathered masses defied not only royal authority but the very realities in which society was anchored. From May until November 1381, it must have seemed as though the universe and everything in it had been upended and might never be put right again.

An Archbishop and royal physician were beheaded, their heads paraded around London; the King's mother was apprehended, and although unharmed, was said to have been forced to kiss scruffy peasants for the mirth of the mob; Savoy Palace was sacked, but rather than enrich themselves with the treasures found inside, the upstarts smashed them in the streets as a signal to all that they could not be bought.

Despite many against-the-odds heroics, the Peasants Revolt ultimately failed. Its leaders were killed at a meeting with young King Richard II's entourage, causing the crowd to disperse after promises from the King to address their grievances. It was lies of course. Shortly afterwards the ring leaders were rounded up and slaughtered.

Still, it remains an episode of history which demonstrates the fragility of social orders and the potential for those who occupy humble stations to send ripples through even the most imperious of regimes.

3. F.C. United of Manchester:

"Glazer, wherever you may be, you bought Old Trafford but you can't buy me..."

So goes the refrain of thousands of northern English football fans, and has done for ten years now.

The Glazer in question was the late multi-billionaire American tycoon who in 2005 bought Manchester United FC, the most profitable football club in England,

along with its stadium, Old Trafford.

The acquisition was part of the increasing trend of the commercialization of professional football clubs which began around the end of the last century by international tycoons looking for a savvy, long-term investment. Nothing personal of course. Strictly business.

The problem for many though, is that football clubs are businesses by necessity rather than design. Most originated in the nineteenth and early twentieth century industrial cities of Britain and are the sum of generations of local heroism, passion, and quirky regional tradition.

Fans have generally greeted takeovers with a mixture of optimism and suspicion. Optimism because of the vast sums of money that investors are able to plough into the clubs, suspicion because their beloved teams essentially become playthings of the wealthy, to be to be used or abused as they see fit.

And the role of the super wealthy within the beautiful game has not been the only thing rankling some fans in recent years.

The 1990s saw the football association's elders make a conscious attempt to shift the game to a cleaner, safer, more photogenic and ultimately more profitable state. In came all-seater stadiums, cctv, lucrative satellite and cable tv deals and inflated ticket prices. Out went the terraces, the hooliganism, the gritty atmosphere, but also, many would lament, much of the spirit that made those Saturday afternoons so special.

Still. "Business is business. Money makes the world go round. If the fans don't like takeovers, what are they going to do, start their own club? Hahahahaha." Is what you could almost hear the Glazers thinking as they signed their ownership deeds.

Yes. Exactly that. Was the reply of a certain group of devoted fans.

And so was born F.C United of Manchester. The twenty-first century equivalent of peasants spitting in the eye of a modern day king.

Those involved are worthy of our respect for two reasons:

Firstly, how successful they have been. As a new club they were obliged to start

out on the tenth rung of English football. After ten years they have doggedly clawed their way up to the sixth level, and this season have so far averaged their largest attendances yet, with around three and a half thousand turning up on match days. This success has been internationally recognized and the team recently played the Spanish giants of Benfica in a pre-season friendly.

Secondly, how they have enshrined their pro-fan, anti-business ethos in the heart of the club. These are laid down in their seven core principles which strive to uphold the values of community, participation, democracy and affordability.

F.C. United of Manchester is a revolution to be embraced: a common man's struggle against financial goliaths. It cost no lives, shed no blood, but still managed to show how people power can be harnessed against all expectations to produce something positive and lasting.

Why this is important to you

Defiance is characterised not just as disagreement of one party with another, but by the disparity of power between them. An act of defiance suggests that the weaker party has a lot to lose, that their defiance will be a struggle. As a result, they will usually be motivated by conscience rather than by fear of punishment or hope of reward.

What have you read in the news today? Religious repression? Massive wealth inequality? Another draconian piece of legislation issued by the state with the aim of stripping away your rights? An ordinary person hounded and harassed for expressing what appeared to be a perfectly reasonable point of view? You probably wanted to do something. You probably wanted to defy. Lots of us are feeling that way.

Sometimes it feels like defiance is more than just desirable; it's essential.

Defiance in society

Unfortunately, being a rebel can cause you some major difficulties. We live in a society of systems that, explicitly or implicitly, demand our obedience. Non-compliance comes at a cost.

Well, as we've noted, it wouldn't really be defiance if it didn't.

Most of us in the West today are probably not going to face death at the hands of the church over our beliefs, or being hung drawn and quartered by all the king's men for challenging state power. But that doesn't mean that the effects of defying what is considered by most, particularly the privileged, as *right* and *normal* won't come at a harrowing personal cost.

Clinical psychologist Bruce Levine draws on his own experience as a practitioner to describe the effects of non-conformism on the individual:

Many people with severe anxiety and/or depression are also anti-authoritarians. Often a major pain of their lives that fuels their anxiety and/or depression is fear that their contempt for illegitimate authorities will cause them to be financially and socially marginalized; but they fear that compliance with such illegitimate authorities will cause them existential death.

And so the question becomes more fundamental than simply what is happening in your immediate material world.

You may be able to live with the change to your church ritual; you may be able to live with being taxed that extra bag of grain by the crown; you may even be able to stomach paying eighty-five pounds every Saturday afternoon to sit and watch football matches that aren't what they used to be.

But can you live with yourself?

What causes defiance or obedience?

One theory put forward by psychologists to explain defiance or obedience is the *Situational Explanation*. Specific situational factors influencing behavior include: 1. whether we can see the harm in obeying an action; 2. the status of the authority figure; 3. whether the authority figure takes responsibility for their actions/orders and; 4. whether the individual believes he or she has social support for their defiance or whether the wider community will remain in conformism.

As such, the situational explanation places the ability to defy less in the individual and more in the broader context of social networks, statuses and relationships.

Assets and obstacles to defiance in modern society

Contemporary society is something of a double-edged sword in respect of the four aspects noted above as affecting defiance.

Regarding point two, the democratization of information through video and document sharing and social media and networking have been hugely effective in giving people the ability to undermine the statuses of traditional authority figures. Hypocrisy, corruption, violence and other wrong-doings can be exposed and verified to a degree hitherto unforeseen. Recent upheavals such as the Arab Spring have shown the potency of information sharing through networks.

This dovetails neatly with point one. Just as we can see the harm of the actions of the more powerful, we can also see the harm of the actions of ourselves and so may allow us to act in a way we deem more ethical. Boycotts of states and corporations may be seen as ways in which low-level defiance can be actualized. In turn this may lead to more responsibility being taken by powerful individuals (point three), a development that may not inspire more defiance, but result in less unjust behavior to defy.

Unfortunately, there is a flip side to the social changes of modernity. Unlike seventeenth-century Russian monks or fourteenth-century English peasants, the average westerner no longer lives in the kind of close-knit community which affords its members high levels of social solidarity.

These days we tend to move in and out of large urban areas, frequently far from our nuclear and extended families, in pursuit of higher education, a spouse or an ideal job. We are less likely to attend group worship than in the past. With the shift from an agricultural and industrial economy to a service economy and the growth of higher education and white collar employment, we are more likely to work in offices, where we meet people from a wide range of backgrounds but with whom we are less likely to form strong social bonds due to professional etiquette and a lack of common social/cultural foundation. The decline in mass industry has also led the weakening of unions which for decades had stood as a major counterpoint to the power of central government and business interests.[\[1\]](#)

In such circumstances it is difficult to imagine the kind of grassroots support materializing to make major social defiance possible (football clubs and their fans are a strange phenomenon considering that they manage to unite large

numbers of people across urban areas in a common identity, albeit only for the purpose of a sporting past time).

What should be done?

It's no great puzzle. Defiance today and in the near future will rely on our ability and willingness to put the powerful under as much scrutiny as they like to put us. This means political literacy and self-education to gain an informed understanding of the world and where we fit into it. It means creating and maintaining networks and spaces to share information. Conversely, it also means getting off the computer and spending more time with the people around you and bonding over common interests. To this end, reaffirming familial, local and national culture and values should not be written off as reactionary, chauvinistic behaviour, but rather seen as a necessary method of maintaining the ability to make ethical stands. Acts of defiance stand a good chance of bringing down intense suffering upon those who dare them; the example of the Old Believers shows the capacity for human endurance as long as repression can be borne collectively.

Finally, understand that certain people will go to great lengths to keep their power over others. Beware of false promises. In the aftermath of the Peasants' Revolt, with his dominance reaffirmed, Richard II had these words to those to whom he had promised justice and reform just one month earlier:

'You wretches, detestable on land and sea; you who seek equality with lords are unworthy to live. Give this message to your colleagues: rustics you were, rustics you are still. You will remain in bondage, not as before, but incomparably harsher. For as long as you live we will strive to suppress you, and your misery will be an example in the eyes of posterity. However, we will spare your lives if you remain faithful and loyal. Choose now which course you want to follow'

High stakes indeed.

[\[1\]](#) During the Battle of Orgreave, in which picketing British miners fought

police in a confrontation involving thousands, it was rumoured that squads of officers were bussed in from around the country owing to the authorities' lack of trust in the local constabulary's resolution in dealing with the strikers. This area (South Yorkshire), in which heavy industry and mining were so dominant that everyone had a close friend or family member who worked in the pits and who had for most of the part lived and worked alongside one another for generations, produced a labour movement capable of issuing a serious challenge to central government. Since deindustrialisation, demographic diversification and the growth of the service economy, no similar movement has appeared that has come close in size or effectiveness.

James Buckham is a writer on 20th century history and literature.

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