

H-Net Reviews

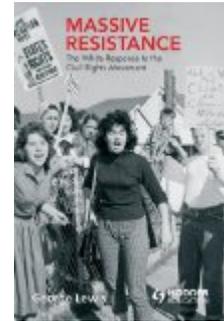
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

George Lewis. *Massive Resistance: The White Response to the Civil Rights Movement*. New York and London: Oxford University Press, 2006. x + 254 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-340-90022-2.

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The Organized Chaos of Massive Resistance

In February of 1956, Senator Harry Byrd of Virginia first coined the phrase “massive resistance.” While this phrase is wrought with meaning, Byrd was leading a call for the South’s whites to resist actions of the federal government in regard to the blossoming civil rights movement. The first historical work to tackle the subject was Numan V. Bartley’s *The Rise of Massive Resistance: Race and Politics in the South during the 1950s*. Since the publication of this seminal work in 1969, historians have debated the meaning of the term “massive resistance.” Despite this debate, there have not been many book-length studies on the massive resistance movement and the people involved. According to George Lewis, “While many have pored over the origins of King’s use of ‘passive resistance’, the origins of Byrd’s use of ‘massive resistance’ have been virtually ignored” (p. 4). Countless books on the origins of the civil rights movement have been published, but there is a lack of interest in segregationists, thus they are only briefly mentioned in passing in these works.

Lewis sought to change this with his 2006 study on the white response to the movement. Whites who embodied the massive resistance movement have been largely left out of the civil rights equation, and when they are included they are often misunderstood. Lewis notes, “If these segregationists or ‘massive resisters’ receive any historical analysis at all, it is most often to portray them in passing as monolithic, one dimensional reactionaries possessing little guile and even less intel-

ligence in their attempts to cling on to their segregated way of life” (p. 4). Massive resisters were not a monolithic whole. Rather they varied state by state, community by community, and sometimes within the same group. The movement was never very organized or uniform and was “an unruly and protean beast” (p. 8). Being so disorganized helped the massive resisters, as pro-civil rights supporters “must at times have felt as though they were up against the multi-headed Hydra that had once faced Hercules. Its proponents developed a wide array of ploys, tactics, mechanisms, and arguments in defense of the southern status quo” (p. 8). Whether forming citizens’ councils, signing the Southern Manifesto, or using intimidation or physical violence, white southerners employed every method they could to maintain their segregated way of life. The multifaceted layers of the massive resistance movement extend beyond the methods employed to the people as well. While most historians see the movement as a top-down elite phenomenon, this is not the case for Lewis. The majority of the people who considered themselves massive resisters were local people organized at the grassroots level.

For Lewis, the era of massive resistance has three distinct phases, each phase corresponding to a chapter in the book. The first chapter titled “Brown and Its Aftermath, 1954-1956” covers the response to the famous ruling of the Supreme Court. This was a period of confusion for the massive resistance movement as southern politicians could not organize effectively against *Brown*. It was out

of this confusion that grassroots organizations, like the various citizens' councils, operated. "The first period was indeed sparked off by the Brown decision," but, according to Lewis, "rather than signaling the arrival of a prefabricated massive resistance movement, the months immediately following the Supreme Court's decision on schools highlighted the discrepancies that existed between political and grassroots approaches to maintaining segregation. During these months, segregationists' political representatives appeared bereft of tangible ideas and curiously reserved in their denunciations of Brown, with the result that it was locally organized groups and societies which began to bring much needed momentum to the cause" (p. 25). Time and again, the South's representatives tried to come up with plans to block the implementation of *Brown* to no avail. This led a group of white Mississippians in the town of Indianola to create the first citizens' council. The momentum of the massive resistance movement then shifted to the local level as cities and towns across the South created their own citizens' councils.

The second phase of massive resistance was ushered in with the signing of the Southern Manifesto. From 1956 to 1960, resisters were by and large on the offensive, with segregationists setting the tone for resistance and defining its character and many of its parameters. During this period, segregationists used a wide array of tactics to combat the growing civil rights movement. This era of massive resistance developed during the height of the Cold War, and southerners used this to their advantage painting the civil rights movement as a hotbed of communism. The movement also appealed to white southerners' roots from 1956 to 1960 by mounting a campaign against the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Southern governors did what they could to maintain the status quo. The height of this resistance is seen in the actions taken by Governor Orval Faubus of Arkansas during the situation at Central High in 1957. All the while, citizens' council groups throughout the South ratcheted up their efforts at terrorizing African Americans on a day to day basis.

By the end of 1960, the civil rights movement was in full swing as were efforts by the federal government to eliminate Jim Crow laws from the South. Essentially, segregationists had to change their methods as "the third period, from 1960-1965, followed setbacks at the hands of federal forces, in the federal courts, and in the face of a tactically astute civil rights movement" (p. 25). This is a far cry from the offensive nature of the massive resistance movement in the previous period. Rather than set-

ting the agenda, segregationists "now increasingly found themselves in the position of having to respond to the initiatives of their opponents" (p. 131). This was the time of sit-ins and freedom rides and southerners had to react accordingly. While the massive resistance movement was in a long decline during this period, the violence was still very real. Two southern universities were a part of this violence, as riots broke out at Ole Miss and the University of Alabama when black students were admitted. It was at Alabama during this period that Governor George Wallace made his famous stand in the schoolhouse door. Alabama was also the site of many pivotal events of the civil rights movement. Birmingham, in particular, was a hotbed of activity, and this led to the rise of one of the South's most notorious segregationists, Eugene "Bull" Connor. Connor was the quintessential massive resister during this period, using attack dogs and water hoses to deter the civil rights march in his city.

While the massive resistance movement was in a long decline by 1965, it never really died, according to Lewis. The movement adapted once again playing to the growing conservatism in the country as a whole. In the last chapter, "The Confederate Chameleon," Lewis describes how the massive resistance movement achieved this feat. "The keenest of the South's segregationists chose not to rest on their laurels," Lewis writes. "Instead, they displayed a remarkable, chameleon like ability to adapt and react to their new surroundings" (p. 172). This was particularly the case after the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Now instead of limiting the votes of African Americans, white southerners "altered their tack from seeking to limit the number of blacks taking part in elections to altering the structure of those elections so as to minimize the effect that such numbers could have on their outcome" (p. 172). This was achieved through voter dilution schemes and the like.

Resistance after 1965 shifted to focus on individual rights, allowing them to take race out of the mix and enter into an overall era of conservatism. "Where individual massive resisters had once sought to air the collective grievances of the segregationist South," Lewis notes, "now segregationists collectively resorted to defending their rights as individuals. That growing emphasis on individual rights allowed segregationists to reposition themselves in the national consciousness and, to some extent, to reinvent themselves. Where once they had been viewed as massive resisters and thus as peculiarly southern, they were now able to place themselves squarely within the national parameters of the growing conservative movement in US politics" (p. 180). While

resistance as such was essentially dead by this point, by placing themselves within the conservative movement, resisters continued their efforts.

Overall, Lewis's book is a valuable tool for any student of the civil rights movement. Lewis paints a portrait of an often misunderstood group that has largely been ignored. While in places it is a bit overwhelming in its information, the book is well organized and presents

the reader with an accurate picture of the white segregationist South. It was not a monolithic whole as some have argued. On the contrary, it was a highly unorganized movement with many different layers and intricacies. Lewis knows his subject well and conveys it in a way that is easy to understand. The book is a much-needed addition to the litany of works on the civil rights movement that will help put earlier works, like that of Bartley, in a new perspective.

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