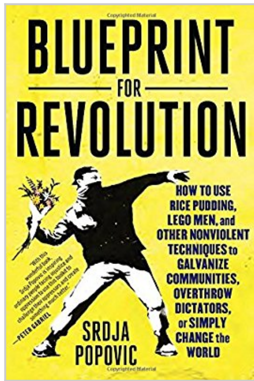


# Blueprint for Revolution: How to Use Rice Pudding, Lego Men, and Other Nonviolent Techniques to Galvanize Communities, Overthrow Dictators, or Simply Change the World

*By Srdja Popovic, Matthew Miller*

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**An urgent and accessible handbook for peaceful protesters, activists, and community organizers—anyone trying to defend their rights, hold their government accountable, or change the world**

*Blueprint for Revolution* will teach you how to
• make oppression backfire by playing your opponents' strongest card against them
• identify the "almighty pillars of power" in order to shift the balance of control
• dream big, but start small: learn how to pick battles you can win
• listen to what people actually care about in order to incorporate their needs into your revolutionary vision
• master the art of compromise to bring together even the most disparate groups
• recognize your allies and view your enemies as potential partners
• use humor to make yourself heard, defuse potentially violent situations, and "laugh your way to victory"

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"The title is no exaggeration. Otpor's methods . . . have been adopted by democracy movements around the world. The Egyptian opposition used them to topple Hosni Mubarak. In Lebanon, the Serbs helped the Cedar Revolution extricate the country from Syrian control. In Maldives, their methods were the key to overthrowing a dictator who had held power for thirty years. In many other countries, people have used what Canvas teaches to accomplish other political goals, such as fighting corruption or protecting the environment."—***The New York Times***

"A clear, well-constructed, and easily applicable set of principles for any David

facing any Goliath (sans slingshot, of course) . . . By the end of *Blueprint,* the idea that a punch is no match for a punch line feels like anything but a joke."—***The Boston Globe***

"An entertaining primer on the theory and practice of peaceful protest."—***The Guardian***

"With this wonderful book, Srdja Popovic is inspiring ordinary people facing injustice and oppression to use this tool kit to challenge their oppressors and create something much better. When I was growing up, we dreamed that young people could bring down those who misused their power and create a more just and democratic society. For Srdja Popovic, living in Belgrade in 1998, this same dream was potentially a much more dangerous idea. But with an extraordinarily courageous group of students that formed Otpor!, Srdja used imagination, invention, cunning, and lots of humor to create a movement that not only succeeded in toppling the brutal dictator Slobodan Miloševi? but has become a blueprint for nonviolent revolution around the world. Srdja rules!"—**Peter Gabriel**

"*Blueprint for Revolution* is not only a spirited guide to changing the world but a breakthrough in the annals of advice for those who seek justice and democracy. It asks (and not heavy-handedly): As long as you want to change the world, why not do it joyfully? It's not just funny. It's seriously funny. No joke."—**Todd Gitlin, author of *The Sixties* and *Occupy Nation***

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## Editorial Review

Review
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About the Author
**Srdja Popovic** is a Serbian political activist and executive director of the Centre for Applied Nonviolent Action and Strategies (CANVAS). He was a leader of the student movement Otpor!, which helped topple Serbian president Slobodan Miloševi?. He has taught at the Harvard Kennedy School, NYU, and the University of Colorado, among others. He lives in Belgrade.

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Chapter I

It Can Never Happen Here

My beautiful city of Belgrade probably isn't on your list of the top ten places to visit before you die. Some neighborhoods can be rough, and we Serbs have a reputation for being troublemakers, which is why we named a major street after Gavrilo Princip, the man accused of setting World War I in motion, and another after his band of revolutionaries. And then there's the memory of our former dictator Slobodan Milose?vic´,

the maniac who introduced “ethnic cleansing” to the world, started four disastrous wars with his neighbors in the 1990s, and brought on a slew of NATO bombings that ravaged the city. But none of that mattered to a group of fifteen Egyptians who visited Belgrade in June 2009. That’s because they weren’t looking for a relaxing summer getaway. They were coming to plan a revolution.

Given their particular agenda, the first place I wanted to show them is the last place I would have recommended to any other visitor: Republic Square. To get an idea of what this dirty and misshapen part of town looks like, imagine that someone took Times Square, made it much smaller, sucked out all the energy, removed the neon, and left only the traffic and the grime. The Egyptians, however, didn’t mind it at all—they were hoping to bring down their own dictator, Hosni Mubarak, and for them Republic Square wasn’t just a tourist trap but ground zero for a nonviolent movement that was started by a bunch of ordinary youngsters and grew into a massive political force that did the unthinkable and toppled Milose?vic´. I was part of that movement’s leadership, and my Egyptian friends came to visit hoping that there was something they could learn from us Serbs.

I led the group to a quiet corner, far away from the bustling cafés with their overworked waiters, and began my short talk. Once upon a time, I told them, pointing at the clusters of luxury shops—Armani, Burberry, Max Mara—that dotted Republic Square, Serbia’s inflation was so bad that the price for two pounds of potatoes skyrocketed from four thousand dinars to seventeen billion in just one year. If that wasn’t enough, we were also at war with neighboring Croatia. And if you tried to speak out against the disastrous policies that led our economy to collapse and our security to wither away, you were arrested and beaten or worse. In 1992, I was a freshman biology student, and the future for us young Serbs looked very, very bleak.

“Yeah,” one of the Egyptians responded with a laugh, “we know how that feels!”

The Egyptians continued to nod in understanding as I went on with my story. Faced with Milose?vic´’s terrors, I told them, the natural response, at least at first, was apathy. After all, my friends and I were not the type of people who could even imagine one day starting a movement. We weren’t aspiring politicians. We were college kids, and we shared the same passions as college kids all over the world: staying up late, drinking a lot, and trying to get a date. If you’d asked me back in those days what could get me out of the house and out to Republic Square, I wouldn’t have said a protest—I would have said a rock concert.

From my spot on the square’s sidelines, I tried to explain to my Egyptian friends why I loved Rimtutituki, a band whose musical-sounding name, freely translated, means “I put a dick in you,” hoping that the three or four women in the group who were wearing the hijab, the traditional headdress of observant Muslim women, wouldn’t be too mortified. In 1992, the band was the coolest thing in town, a bunch of rowdy guys who played fast guitars and were known for their rowdy lyrics. When they announced a rare free concert, my friends and I all promptly skipped class and filed into Republic Square to see our idols in action.

What happened next shocked us. Rather than give another of their fun-filled performances, the members of Rimtutituki rode into the square on the top of a flatbed truck, looking more like conquering generals than punk musicians. Then, with their truck driving around in circles, they sang a selection of their best-known songs, the words making such declarations as “If I shoot, then I won’t have time to fuck” and “There is no brain under the helmet.” You didn’t have to be a genius to understand what was going on: with the war still raging, Belgrade was filled with soldiers and tanks en route to the front, and here were the boys in the punk band mocking all this militarism, speaking out against the war, advocating a normal and happy life. And this in a dictatorship, where spitting out such slogans in public could get you in a lot of trouble.

As I ran after the truck, cheering on my favorite musicians, I had a series of epiphanies. I understood that

activism didn't have to be boring; in fact, it was probably more effective in the form of a cool punk show than as a stodgy demonstration. I understood that it was possible, even under the most seemingly dire conditions, to get people to care. And I understood that when enough people cared, and enough of them got together to do something about it, change was imminent. Of course, I didn't really understand any of these things, at least not yet. It would take me years to think through the feelings I had that afternoon in Republic Square, to make sense of my insights and convert them to actions. But once I'd witnessed the possibility of successful and attractive nonviolent action, it was impossible to go back to my previous state of apathy. My friends and I now felt we had to do something to bring down Milose?vic´.

And Milose?vic´, to his credit, worked very hard to give us plenty of reasons to be furious. In 1996, he refused to accept the results of the parliamentary elections that would have unseated many of his goons and replaced them with members of the opposition, and when activists took to the streets to demonstrate, they were crushed by Milose?vic´'s police. In 1998, Milose?vic´ moved closer to total dictatorship, announcing that his government would now have complete control over all the affairs, academic and administrative alike, of Serbia's six universities. It was more than my friends and I were willing to put up with. Getting together in our small, smoky Belgrade apartments, we decided to start a movement.

We called it OTPOR, which means "resistance," and we gave it a logo, a cool-looking black fist that was a riff on a potent symbol of social change that has served everyone from the partisans who fought against the Nazis in occupied Yugoslavia during World War II to the Black Panthers in the 1960s. For OTPOR's fist, we used a design that my best friend, Duda Petrovic, had scribbled on a scrap of paper in the hopes of impressing one of the girls from the movement. It was edgy, and it was perfect.

All this talk of logos may sound shallow, I told my Egyptian friends, but branding was important to us. Just as people all over the world see the red-and-white swoosh and instantly recognize Coca-Cola, we wanted Serbs to have a visual image they could associate with our movement. Besides, at that time we realized only too well that even if we begged all of our friends and family members to come out and support our movement, we probably couldn't get more than thirty people to show up at a march. We could, however, spray-paint three hundred clenched fists in one evening, and one morning early in November the citizens of Belgrade woke up to discover that Republic Square had been covered by graffiti fists. At the time, when everyone was terrified of Milose?vic´, this gave people the sense that something large and well-organized was lurking just beneath the surface.

And, soon enough, it was.

Seeing the fist and the word "resistance" plastered everywhere, young people naturally wanted to know more about this new, hip thing. They wanted to join it. To weed out the poseurs, the flakes, and, worst of all, the potential police informants, we gave them a sort of test: to prove they were serious, they themselves had to go out and spray-paint the fist in selected locations. Before too long, we had not only covered the city with our symbol but also recruited a small group of committed people who were ready to believe regime change was possible.

Once we had recruited this core group, it was time to make some crucial decisions about what kind of a movement we wanted to be. The first thing that was obvious to us was that we were going to be a strictly nonviolent movement, not only because we believed—strongly—in peaceful resolutions, but because trying to use force against a guy who had tens of thousands of policemen, hundreds of thousands of soldiers, and God knows how many thugs at his disposal seemed to us like a very bad idea. We could never outpunch Milose?vic´; but we could try to build a movement so strong and so popular that he'd have no choice but to succumb to it, accept an open and free election, and be promptly defeated.

The other crucial decision we made was that OTPOR wouldn't be a movement centered on charismatic leaders. This, in part, was a practical consideration: as soon as we got big, we realized, the police would tear into us with all their might, and a movement without easily identifiable people in charge would be harder for the authorities to take down in one swoop. Arrest any one of us, went the logic, and fifteen others would take his or her place. But in order to hide in plain sight, we had to be sneaky. We needed to spark a series of small and creative confrontations with the regime. We wanted to capture that Rimtutituki moment, that special and hopeful feeling that resistance was not futile and that victory was within reach.

Pointing across to the far corner of the plaza, I asked the Egyptians to look at the squat and deserted shopping complex from the 1980s just beyond the taxi stand that was completely sheathed in black glass. That spot was where Milose?vic´'s security services had arrested me on December 15, 1998. It was a freezing cold morning. OTPOR had been in existence for three months, and we'd gathered enough supporters and enough clout to stage a small protest down the road from Republic Square. I never got there. As I made my way to the meeting point, a few police officers jumped me and dragged me off to a piss-soaked jail cell just a few minutes' walk away, where they had their fun beating me to a pulp for what seemed like an eternity. Luckily, the thick layers of sweaters I was wearing cushioned some of the blows from their heavy boots. Eventually, the police let me go, but only after one of the cops shoved his gun into my mouth and told me he wished we were in Iraq so that he could just kill me right there.

The Egyptians perked up. This talk of beatings and guns reminded them of home, of Mubarak's notoriously thuggish security forces. At least we Serbs had lived through similar stuff. One of the Egyptians was an intellectual, with a slim build and wire-framed glasses. Mubarak's secret police had a special animosity toward students, and you could tell by the man's response that he must have had similar interactions with the cops. Looking directly at him, then, I continued telling the story of OTPOR's rise, and of how something unexpected started happening the more popular we became: the harder the police tried to scare us away from Republic Square, the more we kept coming back.

With OTPOR's brand stronger than ever, our little demonstrations became the hottest parties in town; if you weren't there, you might as well have kissed your social life goodbye. And none were cooler, naturally, than those who managed to get themselves arrested—being hauled off to jail meant you were daring and fearless, which, of course, meant you were sexy. Within weeks, even the nerdiest kids in town, the sort who wore pocket protectors and prided themselves on bringing their own graphing calculators to school, were being shoved into police cars one evening and scoring dates with the most attractive women in their class the next.

At this point in the story, I could sense my Egyptian friends' silent skepticism, and so I stopped and asked the bespectacled intellectual if the same dynamic was true back home. Without hesitating, he said it wasn't. In Cairo, he told me, speaking with authority, nobody would ever want to be on the wrong side of Mubarak's secret police. He had a point: even Milose?vic´'s most brutal enforcer behaved like the tooth fairy compared to the guards in Mubarak's jails. But there was a universal principle at work in Republic Square that I wanted to share, and it really didn't have too much to do with whose secret police were nastier. What I wanted my Egyptian friends to understand was far more simple, and much more radical: I wanted them to understand comedy.

It's common for people launching nonviolent movements to cite Gandhi, say, or Martin Luther King, Jr., as their inspiration, but those guys, for all their many, many virtues, simply weren't that hilarious. If you're hoping to get a mass movement going within a very short span of time in the age of the Internet and other distractions, humor is a key strategy. And so, walking slowly through Republic Square, I told the Egyptians about how OTPOR used a lot of street theater. We didn't do anything too political, because politics is boring, and we wanted everything to be fun and, more important, funny. In the early days of OTPOR, I said, laughter

was our greatest weapon against the regime. Milose?vic´'s dictatorship, after all, was fueled by fear: fear of our neighbors, fear of surveillance, fear of the police, fear of everything. But during our time of fear, we Serbs learned that fear is best fought with laughter, and if you don't believe me, then try to think of the best way to reassure a friend who is about to be wheeled into an operating room for major surgery. If you act serious and concerned, his anxiety will spike. But if you crack a joke, suddenly he will relax, and maybe even smile. The same principle is true when it comes to movements.

How, then, to make something as harrowing as life under a despot funny? That's the best part of starting a movement. Like our heroes, Monty Python, my friends and I put our heads together and struggled to come up with good, catchy bits of activism that would have the desired effect.

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