DEP Deportate, esuli, profughe
Rivista telematica di studi sulla memoria femminile

End War, Build Peace

by

Ray Acheson[*]

Abstract: Russia's war in Ukraine has been devastating, with cities and civilians being targeted with missiles and rockets, rampant sexual and gender-based violence, and a humanitarian catastrophe unfolding. The threat of nuclear war, the billions of dollars being promised to militarism, racist border crossing restrictions, and the ongoing climate crisis are intertwined with the horrific violence in Ukraine. This situation has arisen because of many complex factors that have been compounded and enabled by capitalism and militarism. Weapons and war cannot offer a solution. To confront these converging crises, war and war profiteering must end, nuclear weapons must be abolished, and we must confront the patriarchal world of war that has been deliberately constructed at the expense of peace, justice, and survival. A people-centred peace process, with equitable and meaningful participation of all those affected, is imperative. De-escalation, demilitarisation, and disarmament are crucial to preventing this war-and the next.

A history of violence

Behind this current crisis lies a history of militarised and economic violence. Both Russia and the United States are settler colonial states, forging their countries by expanding their "frontiers" and killing and repressing Indigenous populations. Both engage in imperialist actions outside of their now-established borders, interfering, through military and economic action, in countries they deem to be within their "spheres of influence". Both use aggression and forced economic ties to guide their conduct in international relations, and both deal with domestic inequality, poverty, and resistance through policing and punishment.

The governments of both countries critique each other for the same type of behaviour. Russia criticises US imperialism, yet invades and occupies its neighbours, bombs civilians, and engages in cyber-attacks against critical infrastructure that

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harm ordinary people. The United States criticises Russia as an autocracy yet overthrows democratically elected governments if they threaten US interests, builds military bases and engages in wars and military operations in hundreds of countries around the world, and spends billions of dollars a year on militarism while so many of its citizens live without health care, housing, or food security.

Both countries have built up their militaries, military alliances, and nuclear arsenals to challenge the other. The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO)'s expansion eastward is about constraining Russia, just like Russia's invasion of countries to the west are about constraining NATO. Ukraine, in this context, is a pawn being used by both sides.

There is plenty of blame to go around when it comes to the current crisis and the historical moments that have led us here. All parties involved have contributed actively to this situation; arguing that one side or the other has been "provoked" only serves to obscure the reality that each of the countries involved have together, deliberately, built a militarised, capitalist world order that exclusively serves the interests of the war profiteers and the political and economic elite.

Militarised world order and the abstraction of harm

What is happening right now over Ukraine is bigger than Ukraine. Tectonic shifts in global geopolitics are taking place and Ukraine is but one field of "play" for the heavily militarised states. Gamesmanship between the United States and China is on the rise; proxy wars, occupations and aggression, and military and economic pressure is occurring throughout the world; extraction primarily by the global north and exploitation of the so-called global south is rampant, exacerbating and accelerating poverty and inequalities and environmental devastation; militarism and military spending is on the rise globally. Approaching the situation in Ukraine without recognising this larger context is like applying a band-aid to a global hemorrhage. It is a piece of a much bigger puzzle: of a world order dictated and dominated by the militarised elite.

This is a world order that sees war as a legitimate means to an end. It celebrates militarised masculinities, empowering the culture of militarism and violence as brave and noble pursuits, while rendering invisible the gendered and racialised harms of militarism. It is a world order that uses a technostrategic language to sanitise the image of war. Think tanks and politicians, media, and war gamers act as if countries are chess pieces and people are numbers on a page.

Instead of seeing these people as individuals, whose lives have value and meaning, who are part of families and communities, the number crunchers calculate "acceptable loss" and risks of "collateral damage," and look the other way as the bodies pile up. Also unaccounted for is the disruption to daily life – the interruption of education, of food production, of supply chains; the destruction of hospitals, homes, markets, water and sanitation facilitations, and all of the other critical infrastructure that people rely on to survive. These numbers don't account for the psychological terror of living in conflict, of hearing bombs dropped or drones hovering overhead, of being afraid to leave your house, of watching loved ones die.

These figures also don't consider the environmental impacts of war, the toxic or explosive remnants of weapons, the damage to land and water and animals. The conflict in Ukraine has already involved severe environmental impacts, including pollution from military sites and material, as well as from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas, radiation risks from fighting at the Chernobyl and Zaporizhzhia nuclear power facilities, groundwater contamination, and more (see for example Eoghan Darbyshire and Doug Weir 2022).

These humanitarian and environmental impacts should be at the forefront of all policy making decisions. Yet they are completely ignored by those talking in board rooms in capital cities far from where the harm will be felt, deciding what choices to make for the sake of "geopolitical strategy" or "balance of power".

There are many corporate interests behind the festering conflict, including in relation to weapons production and sale, pipelines and "energy security", and access to "natural resources", with profits to be made at the expense of human lives as well as the protection of the planet. In the midst of a climate emergency, in which capitalist extraction and exploitation has decimated biodiversity, ecosystems, and land, water, and air, the governments of NATO members and Russia continue to use fossil fuels. They refuse to embrace a degrowth economy that would drawdown the use of energy, especially in the global north, and prioritise the creation of systems of care and equality for people and planet.

Just five days into Putin's attack on Ukraine, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (2022) released its latest report, finding that human-induced climate breakdown is accelerating rapidly. "The scientific evidence is unequivocal: climate change is a threat to human wellbeing and the health of the planet. Any further delay in concerted global action will miss a brief and rapidly closing window to secure a liveable future," said Hans-Otto Pörtner, co-chair of one of the Panel's working groups.

And then there are nuclear bombs

In addition to the existential crisis of climate change, we also face a grave threat to a livable future from nuclear weapons. The geopolitical gamesmanship underway in relation to Ukraine runs the serious risk of global mass destruction.

At the outset of his invasion of Ukraine, Russian President Vladimir Putin declared that other countries "will face consequences greater than any you have faced in history" if they intervened (Dave Lawler 2022). A few days later, he ordered Russian nuclear forces to be put on a heightened alert status (Yuras Karmanau, Jim Heintz, Vladimir Isachenkov, and Dasha Litvinova 2022). Former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev later outlined possible scenarios for the use of nuclear weapons and Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu said that maintaining "readiness of strategic nuclear forces" remains a priority (Natalie Colarossi 2022). A Russian government spokesperson later said that Russia would only consider the use of nuclear weapons if there was an "existential threat" to Russia (Brendan Cole 2022), but Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov warned NATO countries not to underestimate the risks of nuclear conflict over Ukraine if it escalates a proxy war with Russia (Reuters 2022).

The words and actions of Putin and other Russian officials have elevated the risks and dangers of nuclear war back into mainstream consciousness. But the threat of nuclear weapons is not limited to the Russian government. Eight other governments – those of China, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, France, India, Israel, Pakistan, the United Kingdom and the United States – also possess nuclear weapons, and US nuclear bombs are stored on the territory of five other North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) members – Belgium, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, and Turkey.

These weapons are not remnants of a past Cold War – they are actively deployed right now, ready to be used. Each of the nuclear-armed States has been investing billions in the "modernisation" and expansion of their nuclear arsenals, preparing not for nuclear disarmament but for nuclear Armageddon. Each maintains doctrines and policies for the use of nuclear weapons. And some politicians and military officials within these countries apparently believe that nuclear war *can* be fought – and won (see for example Alan Kaptanoglu and Stewart Prager 2022). This is an incredibly dangerous message to be sending to those responsible for the potential destruction of the world, but one that benefits the military-industrial complex.

The technostrategic-speak of "tactical nuclear weapons"

There have been many demands for NATO to impose a "no-fly zone" over Ukraine to end Russia's airstrikes against Ukrainian cities, with little regard for the fact that this could very well lead to the use of nuclear weapons by Russia or all-out nuclear war. Instead, some politicians and commentators suggested that a no-fly zone is worth the risk of Russia using what are misleadingly called "tactical" nuclear weapons (see for example Ethan Barton and Isabelle McDonnell 2022). Others escalated the rhetoric of potential nuclear war, arguing that Putin is "irrational" and likely to use them, or that the Russian government sees a nuclear exchange as a "viable strategy" (see for example Max Fisher 2022).

In this apparent attempt to either push for or at least normalise the prospect of nuclear war, much of the focus is on the type of nuclear weapon that Putin is "expected" to use. *The New York Times* describes tactical nuclear weapons as "smaller bombs", "lesser nuclear arms", "less destructive by nature", "much less destructive", and having "variable explosive yields that could be dialed up or down depending on the military situation" (William J. Broad 2022). Even while acknowledging that one of these weapons, if detonated in Midtown Manhattan, would kill or injure half a million people, the *Times* suggests that the use of these weapons is "perhaps less frightening and more thinkable". The article says the billions of dollars that the Obama administration spent on nuclear weapons went towards "improving" US tactical nuclear weapons and turning them into "smart bombs" that "gave war planners the freedom to lower the weapons' variable explosive force", would have a "high degree of precision", and would lower "the risk of collateral damage and civilian casualties".

Thus, even in an article warning that tactical nuclear weapons could lead to lowering the threshold for their use, it takes up significant space and employs a

range of euphemisms to suggest that these weapons would cause less destruction if used.

Focusing on the details of the size or type of bomb, warns Russian nuclear forces expert Pavel Podvig (2022), misses an important point: "That bringing nuclear weapons into this conflict, in whatever shape or form, ought to be unacceptable, deplorable, and criminal". Nuclear war-gaming distracts from this message, he argues, shifting the discussion in the direction of what weapon could be used and how "effective" it could be. "What it does is it normalizes nuclear weapons, making it look like this is all about cost and benefit, political calculation, or military utility". These discussions condition people into believing that all this is somehow normal. "Let's keep the message simple", Podvig urges. "Even the thought of involving nuclear weapons in this conflict should be considered unacceptable".

The reality of nuclear violence

Measured in terms of destructive force and capacity to kill, there is nothing small about any nuclear weapon. Russian tactical nuclear weapons have an estimated yield of 10 to 100 kilotons (Hans M. Kristensen and Matt Korda 2021). The yield reflects the amount of energy released when a nuclear weapon explodes. One kiloton has an explosive force equivalent to that of 1,000 metric tons of TNT. The bomb detonated by the United States over Hiroshima in 1945 was estimated to be about 15 kilotons; the one over Nagasaki was 22 kilotons. Approximately 140,000 people died from the bomb in Hiroshima and 70,000 in Nagasaki by the end of 1945. Many more died after from radiation and burns.

The experience of a nuclear weapon detonation says even more than the numbers. Setsuko Thurlow (2014), who was 13 years old at the time of the Hiroshima bombing, witnessed her city "blinded by the flash, flattened by the hurricane-like blast, burned in the heat of 4,000 degrees Celsius and contaminated by the radiation of one atomic bomb". She has described the experience in vivid detail through first-hand testimony:

> A bright summer morning turned to dark twilight, with smoke and dust rising in the mushroom cloud, dead and injured covering the ground, begging desperately for water and receiving no medical care at all. The spreading firestorm and the foul stench of burned flesh filled the air. Miraculously, I was rescued from the rubble of a collapsed building, about 1.8 kilometres from ground zero. Most of my classmates in the same room were burned alive. I can still hear their voices calling their mothers and God for help. As I escaped with two other surviving girls, we saw a procession of ghostly figures slowly shuffling from the centre of the city. Grotesquely wounded people, whose clothes were tattered, or who were made naked by the blast. They were bleeding, burned, blackened, and swollen. Parts of their bodies were missing, flesh and skin hanging from their bones, some with their eyeballs hanging in their hands, and some with their stomachs burst open, with their intestines hanging out. Within that single flash of light, my beloved Hiroshima became a place of desolation, with heaps of rubble, skeletons and blackened corpses everywhere. Of a population of 360,000 – largely non-combatant women, children, and elderly – most became victims of the indiscriminate massacre of the atomic bombing.

This is the immediate reality of nuclear weapons. There are also long-term, intergenerational effects. Cancer rates among survivors skyrocketed in the years after

the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings. Women were particularly affected by the radiation, and pregnant women experienced higher rates of miscarriage and impaired growth (see for example Gender + Radiation Impact Project).

Every single nuclear bomb is designed to melt flesh, burn cities, decimate plants and animals, and unleash radioactive poison that lasts for generations. Whether the alleged experts call them strategic or tactical, big or small, the experience of the detonation of even a single nuclear bomb will be catastrophic (see for example Beatrice Fihn 2013). Just as it was for those in Hiroshima and Nagasaki; just as it was for everyone whose lands and waters were tested upon in Australia (Tilman Ruff and Dimity Hawkins 2020), Kazakhstan (Togzhan, Kassenova 2022), Kiribati (Matthew Brey Bolton 2018), Marshall Islands (Susanne Rust 2019), Moruroa (Sébastien Philippe and Tomas Statius 2021), United States (Kyle Mizokami 2018), and many more locations. And there is perhaps forever the trauma and moral injury – individual, social, political, and cultural.

The madness of MAD

The horrific violence described above is from one nuclear bomb. But the core nuclear policy of all nuclear-armed states – so-called "nuclear deterrence" – is that it relies on the idea of "mutually assured destruction" (MAD). The strategic plans for the use of nuclear weapons envision nuclear exchange. The theory is that because such an exchange could end up destroying the entire planet, no one would dare to use them. This is alleged to have maintained "global peace and security" and "geostrategic stability" since the end of World War II.

Except, as we are seeing right now, nuclear weapons have not prevented war. They are actively facilitating Russia's war on Ukraine. And Ukraine is not the first proxy war fought between the nuclear-armed States. For the last seventy years, the United States and Soviet Union/Russia have been battling for supremacy primarily using the bodies of people from other countries. In many of these wars, as in Ukraine, rather than fight each other directly, one nuclear-armed State would arm those resisting the other nuclear-armed State. While deterrence theorists try to argue that the situation in Ukraine shows the validity of their myths – that nuclear weapons are deterring NATO from imposing a no-fly zone or declaring war with Russia – the reality is that nuclear weapons have only made a horrific war even more dangerous. The solution to this war is not escalation. It is creating space for, and enabling an environment for, dialogue and negotiation. But nuclear weapons stand in the way of peace talks because they are positioned in military doctrines as even more violent options to try to "win" a war. And in this attempt to "win", there lies the possibility of nuclear war.

That same *Times* piece that talks about "small nuclear bombs" goes on to acknowledge that the use of such weapons could well lead to nuclear war. A simulation devised by Princeton University's Program on Science and Global Security starts with Moscow launching a nuclear weapon; NATO responds with a small strike, and the ensuing war yields more than 90 million casualties in its first few hours (Alex Wellerstein, Tamara Patton, Moritz Kütt, and Alex Glaser 2019). Millions more would die in the months to come. Our health care systems, already

overwhelmed by two years of a global pandemic, will collapse (Alicia Sanders-Zakre, Michaela de Verdier, and Josefin Lind 2022). The climate crisis will be exponentially exacerbated; there could be a disastrous decline in food production and a global famine that might kill most of humanity.

As the 1980s film *War Games* prophetically declared, "The only winning move is not to play". Former US and Soviet leaders Reagan and Gorbachev acknowledged in 1985 that a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought (Joint Soviet-United States Statement 1985). This was recently reaffirmed by five nuclear-armed States (Joint Statement of the Leaders of the Five Nuclear-Weapon States 2022). Reagan and Gorbachev also agreed "that any conflict between the USSR and the US could have catastrophic consequences"; thus, "they emphasized the importance of preventing any war between them, whether nuclear or conventional" and said that they would "not seek to achieve military superiority".

Yet the nuclear-armed States still seek "military superiority" and sustain a system in which the use of nuclear weapons is possible. The very existence of nuclear weapons makes their use possible. As long as these weapons exist, there is a risk that they will be detonated. As long as they exist, they will be used to threaten and intimidate. As long as they exist, they will continue to harm people where they are made and where they have been tested and produced – primarily on and near Indigenous nations and communities of colour. As long as they exist, they will extract billions of dollars towards their maintenance, modernisation, and deployment, when that money is so desperately needed to provide for the well-being of people and the planet, now endangered also by climate change.

A continuum of violence

The normalisation of nuclear weapons is also part of the larger, historical project of normalising war.

In his book *The Doomsday Machine*, whistleblower and former military analyst Daniel Ellsberg (2017) explains that nuclear weapon policies grew out of the justifications for bombing cities and civilians during World War II. The willingness, and even desire, to incinerate civilians and destroy civilian infrastructure as part of the war resulted in the practices of firebombing and blanketing wide areas with explosive violence. This approach characterised the latter part of the war, with major civilian centres being deliberately targeted by allied forces long before the US detonated nuclear bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This history provides a disturbing story of how practices previously held abhorrent become normalised during conflict. How what was once held as anathema to "civilised behaviour" becomes entrenched in doctrine and strategy.

The war in Ukraine is not unique in terms of suffering caused. War is always hell. In particular, the bombing of towns and cities causes horrific harm. As Putin's war in Ukraine is showing again, the effects of the use of explosive weapons in populated areas are indiscriminate, with a staggering proportion of death and injuries inflicted on civilians. The explosive blast and fragmentation kill and injure people in the area where they detonate, and damage objects, buildings, and infrastructure. Victims and survivors of explosive weapons can face long-term chal-

lenges of disability, psychological harm, and social and economic exclusion. Destruction of infrastructure vital to the civilian population, including water and sanitation, housing, schools, and hospitals, deprives civilians of access to basic necessities and results in a pattern of wider, long-term suffering.

The potential use of nuclear weapons is an extension of the explosive violence we're already seeing in Ukraine, Syria, Yemen, Ethiopia, and elsewhere, and that we already saw in Iraq and Afghanistan, among others. The focus on a potential nuclear war also risks distracting from the lived reality of suffering from "conventional war" going on right now.

The persistence of patriarchy

This mindset – that scores can be settled by bombing homes and hospitals, or that power can be asserted by threatening to wipe out the entire planet – is deeply patriarchal. It is based on an understanding of dominance and violence as the best ways to control and coerce others into bending to your will.

Patriarchy is reflected in every aspect of the war in Ukraine, from the conscription of men and the celebration of the warrior, to the horrific sexual-and gender-based violence being inflicted upon women, LGBTQ+ people, and children, and even to the targeting of civilians and civilian objects. The bombardment of civilian centres is a "deeply gendered strategy with no 'military advantage' other than to demonstrate the failure on the part of the Ukrainian State to protect and thereby to emasculate its leadership," argue feminist international legal experts Louise Arimatsu and Christine Chinkin (2022).

The possession of and threat to use nuclear weapons is also profoundly gendered, with rhetoric of the nuclear-armed states consistently focused on the size of their arsenals, the vitality of their bombs, their worry of impotence if disarmed, and their dismissal of "emotions" of those concerned with the humanitarian impacts of nuclear weapons (see for example Carol Cohn 1987, 2018; Carol Cohn, Felicity Ruby, and Sara Ruddick 2005; Ray Acheson 2021).

The patriarchy employs technostrategic language to talk about nuclear bombs, as described above, and sanitised language to talk about war – "surgical strikes", "collateral damage", "smart bombs". This patriarchal approach, which discounts and refuses to engage in discussions about the physical, legal, moral, and emotional consequences of weapons and war, has for decades effectively precluded the development of "credible" alternative narratives promoting peace and non-violence. But there are ways to confront and challenge this patriarchal perspective, and the systems of violence it upholds.

Untying the knot of war

In a letter to US President Kennedy during the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev (1962) eloquently described the "knot of war", that their two countries had created, and warned of the risk that they might pull the knot so tight "that even he who tied it will not have the strength to untie it". Sixty years later, that knot has been pulled tighter than ever.

Recognising the failure of the leaders of nuclear-armed States to "untie the knot" – that they cannot or will not take the necessary steps to eliminate or even reduce the risks generated by their nuclear arsenals – the vast majority of countries have revolted. They joined forces with activists in the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) to revitalise a narrative about nuclear weapons in which the catastrophic humanitarian and environmental consequences of the use of these weapons is front and centre. Governments primarily of the global south together with ICAN developed a new international agreement banning nuclear weapons.

On 7 July 2017, 122 Governments voted to adopt the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). After receiving the necessary fifty national ratifications, it entered into force on 22 January 2021. This development presents a very significant challenge to nuclear weapons and to the nuclear war machines of the allegedly most "powerful" countries in the world.

The TPNW shows what the world can do in the face of grave injustice and incredible risk. The countries and the activists leading the way in this initiative understood the urgency of dismantling the system of massive nuclear violence that their neighbours and allies have built up. These non-nuclear-armed actors conceived of a role for themselves in this history, of helping to "untie the knot" by working to change the legal, political, economic, and social landscape in which nuclear weapons exist.

The imperative of nuclear abolition

We now need the nuclear-armed States to engage. The solution to the crisis of nuclear weapons is simple: the elimination of nuclear weapons. The only thing that makes it complicated are the capitalist and political interests involved in perpetuating nuclear violence. As with the climate crisis, where we know the solutions to walk us back from the cliff – ending the use of fossil fuels, degrowth in relation to energy use and consumption, etc. – we know the solution to the nuclear crisis. The solution is nuclear disarmament. We already have the TPNW, which provides the legal framework for the prohibition and elimination of nuclear weapons. We know, from a technical perspective, how to dismantle a nuclear weapon, how to irreversibly and verifiably destroy bombers and missiles and warheads.

Yet as with the solutions to the climate crisis, we are told that nuclear disarmament is a utopian dream, something that only naïve people demand. We are told that nuclear weapons keep the peace and prevent war. But nuclear-armed States have been warring with each other for decades through proxy conflicts; nuclear weapons have caused harm everywhere they have been used, tested, and produced; and we are now staring into the precipice of a potential nuclear war being launched by one of the two largest nuclear-armed States.

We are told that nuclear disarmament is impossible, that "you can't put the nuclear genie back in the bottle". But, of course, we can take things apart. We can dismantle and destroy them, and bolster the legal, political, and economic incentives against possessing nuclear weapons.

We are told that nuclear disarmament is a bad idea because in the future an "irrational actor" might violate international law and norms and build a nuclear bomb. This cannot be the reason we allow a handful of States to possess thousands of nuclear weapons today. "Irrationality" is here and now, in the policies and practices of all of the nuclear-armed States that believe their fantasies of deterrence can proceed uncontested forever.

All of these arguments have nothing to do with what's actually possible. We have been taught these arguments, and to ridicule the idea of disarmament, because there are vested interests in the maintenance of the fantasy of nuclear deterrence. Private companies, especially those with political entanglements, make nuclear weapons. They profit from building devices of mass destruction. In many cases, these are the same companies profiteering off war in general they also build bullets, bombs, tanks, and aircraft. And in some cases, they are also the same companies profiting from militarising borders, to ensure that people fleeing wars (that their weapons facilitated) and climate change have no escape.

The grand narratives of "geostrategic stability" and "mutually assured destruction" and other such phrases generated by the nuclear-industrial complex are meant to be intimidating, smart-sounding phrases to help manufacture confidence in and consent for what is in reality a policy for the mass murder of civilians and the possible destruction of the entire planet. The nuclear-armed States and several of their allies, including those in NATO, have gone out of their way for years to try to smash any opposition to or stigmatisation of nuclear weapons, to prevent the prohibition of nuclear weapons, and to compel the elimination of these weapons of mass destruction. Now that we are at the nuclear precipice, will their position change?

Disarming and demilitarising

But the knot is not just nuclear. Nuclear weapons are just the tip of vast systems of militarised violence that have been built through more than a century of war. It all must be undone.

This must include ending the practice of using cities as battlefields. It is a violation of international humanitarian law, yet multiple perpetrators continue to bomb and shell civilians. The Irish Government is leading a diplomatic process for a declaration that would see States make commitments against the use of explosive weapons in populated areas, to enhance protection of civilians and compliance with international law. Ending the bombing of towns and cities would alleviate much of the immediate and long-term human suffering in armed conflict.

Yet even as many Governments condemn Russia's bombing and shelling of Ukrainian hospitals, homes, and school, some are trying to water down the draft political declaration's commitments, to ensure they do not have to change any of their own policies or practices leading to grave civilian harm. The United States, United Kingdom, Israel, Turkey, Canada, the Republic of Korea, and a few other States are actively opposing the creation of strong commitments to prevent the use of explosive weapons in populated areas or to address the reverberating or indirect

and long-lasting impacts of destroying and damaging civilian infrastructure (see for example Ray Acheson 2022).

Many other Governments, however, as well as international organisations and civil society, are pushing for a strong declaration that will help save lives and prevent suffering. Along with the prohibitions of landmines, cluster munitions, and nuclear weapons, and ongoing work on preventing autonomous weapons, the work to stop explosive violence is part of a larger project of humanitarian disarmament. Collectively, these efforts help lay the groundwork for dialing back the international arms trade, weapons production, and war profiteering. The reduction of military budgets, the redirection of funds to meeting social and planetary needs, and a turn in international relations from war to diplomacy, solidarity, and care is imperative for our survival. To this end, all countries should reduce their military spending immediately, and agree to phased reductions through the implementation of Article 26 of the UN Charter, the mandate for which should be taken from the UN Security Council and given to the UN General Assembly.

All countries should join the TPNW and work urgently for the timebound elimination of all nuclear weapons. Through the treaty's provisions for disarmament, the elimination of nuclear weapons could be pursued through verifiable process and achieved within a decade (Moritz Kütt and Zia Mian 2019). The process of nuclear weapon abolition could provide a foundational path to broader changes in the world order. Eliminating nuclear weapons would help establish a new cooperative paradigm in international relations and free up resources help address the climate crisis. It would also help generate momentum for broader disarmament and demilitarisation and redirection of money and human ingenuity towards meeting human and planetary needs.

Instead of maintaining opposing military alliances, all parties should engage in building a common, demilitarised security strategy that places cooperation and the collective fulfilment of the needs of people and planet in the forefront of all policies and actions. NATO, for example, should be disbanded and non-militarised, non-divisive alliances for peace and cooperation should be built instead, with international solidarity as its guiding principle (see for example Ian Davis 2022).

In this moment, in relation to Ukraine, we must put the lives of civilians and care for the planet above perceived military, political, and economic interests. To this end, a people-centred peace process is imperative. In the Ukraine context, the Ukrainian Pacificist Movement (2022) has called for "open, inclusive and comprehensive negotiations on peace and disarmament in the format of a public dialogue between all state and non-state parties to the conflict with the participation of pro-peace civil society actors."

This type of inclusive process, a process that is not driven or dominated by those who created the crisis in the first place, must be applied to other contexts. We know that more inclusive processes lead to more stable peace, yet time after time, only men with guns dictate the terms of "peace". These solutions invariably lead to the imposition of neoliberal economic policies, gender and racial oppressions and inequalities, and endless militarisation.

Retrenchment of militarism

Many antinuclear and antiwar organisers, in this moment, are feeling despair. Not just because we are looking at a serious threat of the use of nuclear weapons and potential nuclear war, not just because yet another war is causing horrific human suffering, all of which is devastating. But the despair also comes because we know all too well what the mainstream reaction will be from the nuclear-armed States, and the other heavily militarised countries, and their think tank, academic, and industry cronies. It will be to double down on nuclear weapons. It will be to walk back arms control. It will be to invest billions more into the "modernisation" of weapons and militaries, even after spending billions on these projects already. It will likely be to invest more in new systems of violence, including autonomous weapons and cyber warfare.

We can see this already from Germany's announcement about investing a hundred billion euros into its military, from Finland and Sweden clamouring to join NATO, from the skyrocketing stock dividends of the major weapon contractors. Looking at this militarised crisis, the Governments that have already invested so much in weapons and war will want to keep on this track. As if they'd only had more militarism, they could have prevented this conflict. As if it wasn't militarism itself – and the impunity for militarism, such as the US invasions and occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, Israel's occupation and apartheid in Palestine, Russia's bombing of Syria and imperialist expansionism, NATO's aggression, etc. – that led to this crisis in the first place.

The world spends more than two trillion dollars a year on militarism (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute 2022). The United States dominates the charts, followed by mostly western countries, which are also major arms exporters. The world is awash with weapons. People have suffered the impacts of war non-stop since World War II. The horrific attacks against civilians and civilian infrastructure we have seen the last few days in Ukraine have been preceded by the devastation and deliberate targeting of civilians in Viet Nam, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Palestine, Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Yemen – the list goes on. The kind of imperialist expansion and illegal occupation based on "spheres of influence" at play with Russia's war have already devasted countless Latin American, Middle Eastern, Southeast Asian, and African countries.

All of this has been primarily about protecting economic interests of the most militarised countries in the world. It has facilitated the extraction of resources and labour, the exploitation of humans, animals, land, and water. As wealth for a few is extracted through war and violence, people everywhere suffer, including in militarised countries launching these wars. The United States spends more than $750 billion a year on weapons and war while health care, education, jobs, housing, food security, and general well-being flounder. The profound harm caused by militarism occurs on both sides of the gun.

Further, this militarism and violence has reinforced systems of white supremacy and racism, criminalising those on the receiving end of the violence as terrorists or potential militants; criminalising people from the countries suffering from war or economic exploitation – or who just look like people who might be from those

countries – with border restrictions, surveillance, harassment, incarceration, detention, deportation.

This racism is on full display with the reaction to refugees from Ukraine right now, with Ukrainian citizens being welcomed into neighbouring countries while people of colour living in Ukraine are being blocked from fleeing the war (see for example Nadine White 2022). Not to mention that Fortress Europe has spent billions on keeping out refugees and asylum seekers from North Africa and the Middle East and facilitates their drowning at sea or detention in horrific conditions. White supremacy also informs the shock many white people seem to be having at seeing war in a European country, in which commentators express disbelief that this could happen on a "civilised" continent (see for example Jairo I. Fúnez 2022).

Work on in despair

Despair is a natural reaction to what seems like an overwhelming "way of the world". We know that militarism begets violence and the endless of cycle of death and destruction is constantly perpetuated by so many political leaders and the military-industrial complex.

But despair should not be our only reaction. Resolve, inspiration, hope, and action – these are urgently needed, especially amongst those of us not grappling the immediacy of survival in this moment. Right now, people in Ukraine are opposing the Russian invasion, including through non-violent resistance, with people confronting tanks and soldiers in the street. Russians are taking to the streets to protest their government's actions, even in the face of detention and incarceration. People around the world are protesting the war and calling for peace, disarmament, de-escalation. Peace groups, antiwar organisers, and disarmament activists are working to mobilise Governments to end this conflict and to prevent its escalation through further militarisation. There are hundreds of petitions, statements, webinars, direct actions, calls to elected officials, advocacy at the United Nations, and more. Humanitarian organisations and ordinary people are working to provide for refugees and displaced people.

Ending this war is crucial. Preventing the next is vital. But to do so, we need to recognise that war is also ongoing around the world, with primarily Black and brown lives on the line. Our opposition to war cannot be limited to Ukraine, it must be about all war. Solidarity for the harm and violence caused by war means acknowledging that this harm and violence is not limited to one place or one situation but is systemic and structural. War is the manifestation of a global, violent political economy that treats some human life as meaningful and most as not, that treats profits as more important than people or planet.

War, capitalism, racism, colonialism, border imperialism, the carceral system, the climate crisis—these are all intimately connected and have been built by many Governments over many years. And so while we oppose the war in Ukraine, true solidarity means opposing war everywhere, and confronting the aspects of our world that lead to, facilitate, and perpetuate war.

Instead of investing in militarism as a response to this war, we need the opposite. We need to reduce military budgets. We need to dismantle the weapons we

have and not build new ones. We need to instead use financial resources and human ingenuity for disarmament, for providing for people everywhere – education, housing, food security, and overall care and well-being – and for confronting the climate crisis. We can find hope in those organising locally, nationally, and globally for these things already. We can find hope in those Governments and people that reject militarism, that see the answer lies not in more weapons but in collective and cooperative approaches to the problems that the capitalist, extractivist, militarised world order has created. We need to double down not on militarism but the value of international law, created painstakingly for generations; the refusals and denouncements of war; the nonviolent resistance and protest; the mutual aid projects.

Abolition for transformation

The old ways of doing things have proven, over and over again, that they do not work. We need a new vision of global peace, grounded in the intersectional experiences of people and the needs of the entire planet. Creating and achieving that vision requires changing who is invited to the table: out with the ruling elites, who are bound to personal interests and gains, and in with everyone who stands to lose from conflict. Land and water protectors, feminists, antinuclear activists, those organising for demilitarisation, equality, and care must lead the work for peace, not the people who profit from conflict. We need a paradigm shift in international relations, stemming from this kind of people-centred peace process. We need to alter the relations between United States and Russia, but more broadly we need to dismantle the militarised global order, militarised conceptions of security, and the dominance of the military-industrial complex over world affairs. The hegemony of colonial-corporate extractivism must also be transformed – for the climate, for relations with First Nations, for the protection of land, water, air, and animals.

An abolitionist framing is useful for cultivating such transformation. Instead of investing in weapons and preparing for war, we must be investing instead of care for people and planet. Abolition is a tool to build a world that works for all, instead of just a few. The abolition of war, globally, requires disarmament and arms control, systems for demilitarisation and reduction of military spending. But it also requires building structures for peace, solidarity, cooperation, and nonviolence to flourish. It means replacing weapons with renewable energy, war with diplomacy, capitalism with a redistributive feminist political economy that is centered on equality, social justice, degrowth and ecological sustainability.

Unlearning the necessity of violence is essential to exploring what could be built in its place. This means turning on its head so much of what we are taught about what's necessary for safety and security in our world. It means learning to reject violence as a solution to all problems, interrogating and challenging systems of power that assert they exist to protect while instead they persecute and oppress. Understanding and responding to the "bigger picture" doesn't mean we each as individuals need to solve every piece of it. But it does mean we need to recognise and support each other's efforts and reflect in our own work the analysis and organising of various movements and projects for peace. The sum of our whole is

greater than our parts, and going up again the machine of capitalist violence can feel immense – unless we break it down and rebuild something else, together.

The value of being "unrealistic"

The abolition of nuclear weapons, of war, of borders, of all the structures of State violence that we can see clearly at play in this conflict is at the core of the demand for real, lasting, paradigm-shifting change that we need in the world. It can feel like vast, overwhelming, and inconceivable. But most change is inconceivable until we achieve it. Even in the midst of crisis, we need to plant the seeds for peace. If the broader context of what led to war is not addressed, if the *process to achieve peace* itself is not feminist, does not put human and planetary well-being at its centre, then we will be find ourselves right back here again as we have so many times before. Many will say that doing anything other than sending more weapons or bolstering global militarism is "unrealistic" as a response to this crisis. But it is the credibility of the militarists that must be put in question in this moment, not those working to build the structures and culture for peace, cooperation, and well-being.

Everyone who has ever tried to do anything progressive throughout all of history has been accused of being unrealistic. The only reason change has ever been occurred in the world is because people ignored those criticisms and kept working. Change is not bestowed upon us by benevolent leaders. Change is compelled, by people. Being "unrealistic" means being on the front line of change. It means helping to alter what people conceive of as unrealistic, who they see as credible to speak or act on an issue. And ultimately, it means helping to dismantle the systems of harm and oppression and building something better.

In November 1940, during World War II, French philosopher Albert Camus wrote, "We can despair of existence, for we have no power over it, but not of history, where the individual can do everything. It is individuals who are killing us today. Why should not individuals manage to give the world peace? We must simply begin without thinking of such grandiose aims" (Maria Popova 2014). Hope, then, is not necessarily about us as individuals being able to achieve the abolition of all forms of violence, but about the ability of us as a collective – including future generations – to drive forward the changes we need to bring peace, justice, and well-being to humankind and all relations with whom we share our lives on this planet. We can either accept and succumb to the violence, or we can work to abolish the systems and structures that enable it.

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