

The Peace Movement and the Ukraine War: Where to Now?

Western States Legal Foundation Commentary

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The attack on Ukraine by the government of Russia and its military forces is an illegal war of aggression and must be strongly condemned. Threats by the Russian government to use nuclear weapons and the confrontation among four nuclear-armed militaries underscores the grave danger posed by this crisis, and the unacceptability of war in an interdependent and fragile global society.

We must have a global peace movement aligned with no states. We admire and support the courage of the people in Russia who have taken up that task, acting nonviolently to oppose their government's illegal war.

There should be immediate and unconditional negotiations to end hostilities, and then to work towards a fair and inclusive common security framework in Europe. But even if a greater catastrophe is avoided, the end of hostilities only will begin the struggle to define a global reality much changed. There will be a campaign by those who hold power in the United States and many of its allies to respond with more arms racing, hardening the confrontation not only with Russia but with China. This will only increase the risk of war among nuclear-armed countries.

We must work harder to develop an independent discourse that can ground an understanding of the forces driving authoritarian nationalisms, resurgent arms racing, and war.

The attack on Ukraine by the government of Russia and its military forces must be condemned.

“War is essentially an evil thing. Its consequences are not confined to the belligerent states alone, but affect the whole world.

To initiate a war of aggression, therefore, is not only an international crime; it is the supreme international crime differing only from other war crimes in that it contains within itself the accumulated evil of the whole.” The International Military Tribunal for Germany, *Judgment of the International Military Tribunal for the Trial of German Major War Criminals: The Nazi Regime in Germany*, (September 30, 1946).¹

Article 6 of the Charter of the International Military Tribunal, the product of an agreement between the United States, France, the United Kingdom, and the Soviet Union, defined “Crimes against Peace” to include the “planning, preparation, initiation or waging of a war of aggression, or a war in violation of international treaties, agreements or assurances...” There can be no doubt that the invasion of Ukraine by the government of Russia is a war of aggression. Its assertion of its right to self-defense is empty. No country has attacked Russia, nor deployed military forces in a way that would give it a reasonable fear of imminent attack.

Russia's government claims that it is acting under Article 51 of the United Nations Charter, defending its nationals and other inhabitants of breakaway regions of Ukraine's East. The Russian

government recognized the authorities there it long as backed as “republics” three days before it launched its war, transparently for the purpose of having those newly minted governments request further military assistance. No UN member state other than Russia recognizes those governments. Further, responding to the effects of the low intensity war in and around Ukraine’s breakaway regions with a massive campaign of bombing, missile attacks, and invasion by tens of thousands of troops with the declared intention of overthrowing Ukraine’s government is utterly disproportionate, bearing no reasonable relationship to “self-defense.” This is so even if one were to assume that the government of Russia bears no share of responsibility for the conflict in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions.

In preparing for and launching its war on Ukraine, the Russian government has violated both the letter and the spirit of the most fundamental provisions of the UN Charter. Article 2 of the Charter prohibits member states from “the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state....” (Article 2, sec.4) It also requires members to “settle their international disputes by peaceful means in such a manner that international peace and security and justice, are not endangered.” (Article 2, Sec. 3). The Charter allows unilateral use of force for self-defense only in the face of actual or imminent armed attack, and requires recourse to the Security Council where there is an armed attack or other threat to peace. (Article 51, Articles 33 and 39.) As stated above, the government of Russia had no reasonable claim to defending against attack, and its invasion of Ukraine was a massively disproportionate response to any of the immediate “threats” it claims to exist. It not only failed to pursue peaceful means to resolve its dispute with Ukraine or to have recourse to the Security Council, it lied to the world and to the Security Council itself, misrepresenting its months-long war preparations as “exercises” and concealing its bellicose intentions right up to the moment it launched its multi-front war against Ukraine.

Finally, the Russian government, first in the leadup to the war and now amidst combat involving bombing attacks and missile launches from both Russia and Belarussian territory, has made statements that only can be interpreted as threats to use nuclear weapons against either Ukraine or any country that might provide support to its defense. Such threats always are dangerous, but all the more so in a high-intensity war in which the nature of missile launches or air attacks could be misinterpreted, and in which disinformation operations, electronic warfare, and cyber attacks create an unprecedented fog of war. These threats are illegal as actions taken pursuant to the waging of the Russian government’s illegal war of aggression. As the International Court of Justice stated unanimously in its 1996 Advisory Opinion on the Legality of the Threat or Use of Nuclear Weapons, “A threat or use of force by means of nuclear weapons that is contrary to Article 2, Paragraph 4 of the United Nations Charter and that fails to meet all the requirements of Article 51, is unlawful.” (Paragraph 105(C)).

The Court also was unanimous in its conclusion that any threat or use of nuclear weapons “should also be compatible with the requirements of the international law applicable to armed conflict, particularly those of the principles and rules of international humanitarian law...” (Paragraph 105(D)). It is difficult to imagine how nuclear weapons could meet such humanitarian law requirements as proportionality and discriminate use to avoid harm to noncombatants and civilian objects and infrastructure in any circumstances, much less in a war on a densely populated continent. Yet in a speech announcing his government’s decision to go to war, Russia’s president

highlighted the power of his military's nuclear arsenal. He then issued a warning to "those who may be tempted to intervene in ongoing events. Whoever tries to hinder us, and even more so to create threats for our country, for our people," said President Putin, "should know that Russia's response will be immediate and will lead you to such consequences that you have never experienced in your history." Three days later he further clarified the nature of his threat by announcing that he was ordering an increase in readiness in Russia's nuclear forces.

Many point to repeated violations of international law such as the U.S.-led aggression against Iraq, as somehow providing justification for the Russian government's war of aggression here. Emphasizing that other states have made war in violation of the UN Charter may score debating points when addressing governments and ruling elites who are guilty of their own transgressions against international law. But from the perspective of the vast majority of Earth's inhabitants, it points towards acceptance of the collapse of an already-threadbare international legal order rather than towards its restoration, and perhaps democratization. It is a recipe for international anarchy, and for rule by force and a spiral downward into barbarism and endless wars.

Many also point to the failure of the U.S. and its European allies to make a place for Russia in an equitable post-Cold War security architecture and to keep commitments not to expand NATO eastward as a key cause of this crisis. These were indeed significant factors, and grave historical errors on the part of the leadership classes of the United States and its European allies.

But there are other, profoundly worrisome elements to the justifications put forward by Russia's government for their decision to launch a full-scale war against Ukraine. Rhetoric from Russia's leadership stirs echoes of the irredentist nationalisms that played a part in sparking the world wars of the 20th century. In a 2021 article, President Putin portrayed Russians and Ukrainians as "one people – a single whole," and "parts of what is essentially the same historical and spiritual space..." (Vladimir Putin, "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians," Presidential Executive Office of Russia, July 12, 2021.) He reiterated these ideas in his February 21 2022 speech announcing recognition of the breakaway republics, calling Ukraine "an inalienable part of our own history, culture, and spiritual space" and detailing Ukraine's prior history as part of the Russian Empire, and then of the Soviet Union. Putin went on to question at length Ukraine's legitimacy as a state. In that speech and in later pronouncements he painted Ukraine's government as Nazis or neo-Nazis in increasingly lurid language, invoking the very archetype of the Evil Enemy in 20th century Russian nationalist narrative— an accusation that since the 2014 overthrow of the Yanukovich government never has been more than a half-truth, and that is even more dubious when thrown at Ukraine's current government.² He asserted an urgent need to act to prevent a "genocide" against Russian speakers residing in Ukraine, an overblown claim for which he offered no evidence. These are the kinds of tropes and stories that those who rule long have used to divide us, to set us against one another, and to mobilize us for war.

None of these claims provide a legal rationale for the violent invasion of a smaller, weaker country by a much larger, nuclear-armed state. History is replete with the loss of wars and the collapse of empires that have resulted in the fragmentation of states and the division of populations who once felt united under common rule. But such grievances, no matter how deeply believed, must not be resolved by the threat or use of force. And there is no historical grievance, no security claim

regardless how legitimate, that can justify a war of aggression. This was, or should have been, one of the main lessons learned from the world wars of the 20th century.

In a Security Council statement following the Russian government's recognition of the two breakaway regions, the ambassador of Kenya offered an eloquent rejoinder to Putin's revanchist claims. He noted that many countries, including most in Africa, were "birthed by the ending of empire," and had borders drawn in "distant colonial metropolises... with no regard for the ancient nations they cleaved apart." As a result, states formed "from empires that have collapsed or retreated have many peoples yearning for integration with peoples in neighboring states." However, he continued, "Kenya rejects such a yearning from being pursued by force. We must complete our recovery from the embers of dead empires in a way that does not plunge us back into new forms of domination and oppression." The ambassador emphasized Kenya's rejection of "irredentism and expansionism on any basis, including racial, ethnic, religious, or cultural factors." And he called not for the abandonment of multilateralism in the face of repeated transgressions by the leading powers but rather for a renewed commitment to it as the path to resolving the crisis by peaceful means. (Statement by Ambassador Martin Kimani of Kenya, During the Security Council Urgent Meeting on the Situation in Ukraine, February 21, 2022.)

No historical grievance or security claim can justify a war of aggression. There must be a world-wide call for immediate termination of hostilities, and for withdrawal of all Russian forces from Ukraine, and a return of those forces to their bases. There should then be a reciprocal pull back of U.S. and other NATO forces deployed further forward in the course of the crisis.

But what then? Some lessons that might be learned amidst the fog of war.

"You cannot talk like sane men around a peace table while the atomic bomb itself is ticking beneath it. Do not treat the atomic bomb as a weapon of offense; do not treat it as an instrument of the police. Treat the bomb for what it is: the visible insanity of a civilization that has ceased to worship life and obey the laws of life." Lewis Mumford, "Gentlemen: You Are Mad!" *The Saturday Review of Literature*, March 2, 1946.³

Even if a greater catastrophe is avoided, the end of hostilities only will begin the struggle to define a global reality much changed. There will be a campaign by those who hold power in the United States and many of its allies to respond with more arms racing, hardening the confrontation not only with Russia but with China. This will only increase the risk of war among nuclear-armed countries. The efforts to sell publics on this already has begun, with media stories about the likely abandonment of Biden Administration plans to slightly moderate the ongoing upgrading of the U.S. nuclear arsenal and NATO countries committing to higher levels of military spending. The main message "Western" publics will be hearing from their governments is that peace comes only through strength, and that the only real currency of strength is military might.

Over against all this, on the terrain of diplomacy we must call on our governments to seek all diplomatic avenues, formal and informal, to immediately stop the fighting. Teetering on the brink of a nuclear war, many of the long-established assumptions of international diplomacy make less and less sense. Four years ago I observed that

“In a time when a leader’s impulsive decision can destroy cities on the other side of the world in less than an hour, some of the diplomatic practices developed in an age when both death and information traveled at the pace of a man on horseback are obsolete. Reducing or ceasing diplomatic relations as an expression of sovereign disapproval when antagonists are armed with nuclear weapons and supersonic means of delivery carries risks that far outweigh any possible gain. In the nuclear age, the first principle of diplomacy should be that adversaries talk directly to each other to the maximum possible extent, and in moments of crisis directly, and unconditionally.”⁴

These considerations seem even more pressing to me now. Further, despite Russia’s grave violations of international law and immediate responsibility for precipitating this crisis, there must be humility on the part of all governments involved. Opportunities for more creative and fruitful diplomacy undoubtedly were missed, not only in the last few months but over decades. One appeal after another from the Russian government to take into account its need for security assurances were ignored, one opportunity after another for diplomacy foregone. Both sides became entrenched in their positions to a degree that proved disastrous. There should be a real effort to find a diplomatic path that is forward looking, seeking a new basis for common security on the European continent. There are profound questions of accountability for starting this war and conducting it. But the leadership classes of all the leading powers here have a great deal of blood on their hands already in this century, and any real and comprehensive accountability likely must await some more fundamental redistribution of political power both among and within states.

This crisis has revealed much, exposing a number of truths already ill-concealed. It has stripped away the last vestiges of civility and good faith in great power politics and diplomacy, and undermined the legitimacy of international institutions in their current form. As the Kenyan ambassador observed, “multilateralism lies on its deathbed tonight. It has been assaulted as it has been by other powerful states in the recent past.” (Statement by Ambassador Martin Kimani of Kenya, During the Security Council Urgent Meeting on the Situation in Ukraine, February 21, 2022.) The Russian ambassador’s lies to the Security Council as his government prepared for war had ample precedent, particularly in U.S. behavior over the last three decades in regard to its own wars. The power disparities among states are reinforced by the institutional structure of the United Nations itself, placing primary responsibility for matters of war and peace in the Security Council, in which each of the most powerful of the world’s nuclear-armed governments hold the individual power to veto.

The great disparities in power among states and the veto combine to coarsen and degrade diplomatic discourse, threatening to empty it entirely of effective content. The veto-wielding great powers are left accountable to no standards whatever, free to lie with impunity, ignore human rights, and to act without regard to law in matters of war and peace. There have been many proposals over the years for democratization of the United Nations, and it is long past time to take them seriously, including proposals for the elimination of the veto in the Security Council.

The current crisis also should have revealed to all of us how much living for generations under the shadow of permanently mobilized, nuclear-armed militaries has numbed our sensibilities regarding what constitutes a “threat” to use military force. The Charter mandates that “the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, or in any other

manner inconsistent with the Purposes of the United Nations.” (Article 2 Section 4). But over half a century under the threat of nuclear war has distorted our perceptions concerning what might constitute a “threat,” making the posturing of immensely powerful military forces, including nuclear weapons, in ways clearly intended to suggest the possibility of their immediate use against a particular adversary seem acceptable, even routine. Yet they remain deadly threats which might in fact spiral towards a catastrophe. However they may be clothed in bland language about “assurance” of allies or “deterrence” of enemies, such threats when made among nuclear-armed antagonists, are backed ultimately by the machinery of annihilation. The language of Article 2 of the UN Charter must somehow be operationalized, in the near term perhaps by more stringent notification requirements regarding military exercises, limits on exercises outside national borders, and in the long term by meaningful recommitment to the work of disarmament.

Nuclear disarmament advocates should learn from this crisis that we must abandon the trope that nuclear weapons are “useless.” From the perspective of the vast majority of humanity they are far worse than useless, the possibility of their use posing an existential threat that no goal or purpose can justify. But nuclear weapons can be useful to ruling elites pursuing high-risk war strategies to serve their own, self-interested ends—ends that go far beyond lining the pockets of military contractors. The course of this crisis has demonstrated this. Russia’s status as a major nuclear power has minimized or “deterred” the support from sympathetic governments that Ukraine has been able to muster for its defense against an assault by Russia’s superior conventional forces. This long has been a primary purpose of the nuclear arsenals of the most powerful states, a little-discussed face of “nuclear deterrence.” As one U.S. military planning document put it, nuclear weapons provide “. . . a credible deterrent umbrella under which conventional forces operate and, if deterrence fails, strike a wide variety of high-value targets with a highly reliable, responsive and lethal nuclear force. . . . Desired effects include: Freedom for U.S. and Allied forces to operate, employ, and engage at will . . .” (United States Air Force, Strategic Planning Directive for Fiscal Years 2006-2023, p.20.).

A second locution that peace and disarmament advocates who reside in nuclear-armed countries must avoid is reference to “our” nuclear weapons. Again, for those of us beyond a privileged and powerful few, these weapons are not “ours.” The decisions everywhere to acquire them were made in secret. Decisions pertaining to their deployment and use continue to be made with little public input or consent, and often with little public knowledge. Identifying and naming whose interests are served by the brandishing of nuclear weapons, who nuclear weapons are useful for, is a key step towards building the movements needed to eliminate them.

Images of the impact of powerful modern weaponry on cities and their inhabitants should remind us yet again that the laws of war as applied by governments are inadequate. They will inevitably fail to provide meaningful protection for noncombatants in a highly urbanized and interdependent global society in which even “conventional” armaments can swiftly destroy vital infrastructure on which millions depend. Humanitarian law is permissive as well as prohibitive, allowing militaries broad discretion to weigh the importance of their military objectives against the harm to civilian lives, property, and infrastructure they believe must be risked to achieve them. And here too, generations without accountability for the uses of armed force by the world’s most powerful militaries has turned the law of war in large part into a public relations exercise, designed

to blunt international criticism and to make their own publics more comfortable with the death and destruction wrought in their name.

The rhetoric from governments on all sides of this conflict also should sharpen our focus on a more foundational flaw in humanitarian law. In time of war, international law allows the belligerent states to view the populations of their adversaries for the most part as at one with their governments. It is this that provides the rationale for acceptance of significant “collateral damage” to civilian lives and objects, rather than applying some higher standard of care, such as the human rights standards for the use of force by police or occupying military forces. This formal stance can also implicitly affirm ideological portrayals of all people residing within the boundary of an adversary as the Enemy, and deserving of slaughter. In the words of General Curtis LeMay, for example, the commander of the U.S. air forces that firebombed Japan,

There are no innocent civilians. It is their government and you are fighting a people, you are not trying to fight an armed force anymore. So it doesn't bother me so much to be killing so-called innocent bystanders.⁵

Both the government that launched this war and the governments who are their antagonists insist that their adversaries are illegitimate authoritarian regimes, ruling over their people through pervasive propaganda and repression. This should remind us that the vast majority of people under any government have little voice in decisions to go to war. In a nuclear armed world, most people have no voice at all. Most of the inhabitants of planet Earth woke up on the 24th of February surprised and shocked that these governments had dragged them to the precipice, and the populations of Russia and Ukraine over the edge. All governments involved in this conflict bear responsibility for protecting the lives and the human rights of all the people, the living human beings, who are or may become victims of it. All actions taken by governments, whether the threat or use of force or the imposition of sanctions, must be considered with the protection of civilian populations everywhere as the first consideration.

For those who reside in the United States and its allies, all this means that we must understand and emphasize that the people of Russia are not our enemy. Thousands of them already have risked arrest opposing their government's war. We must have a new, truly global peace movement, aligned with the governments of no states.

We must work harder to develop an independent discourse that can ground an understanding of the forces driving authoritarian nationalisms, resurgent arms racing, and war.

On the crossroads of empires, the capitalist greed has brought the country into economic servitude, bred multiple Ukraines, and thrown national identities into transmutation. Many generations to come will have to struggle to disarm the seeds of enmity sown by the manufactured myth of the 'Other' within, in one's self, in one's past and memories sacrificed to the empire of capital. Yuliya Yurchenko, Ukraine and the Empire of Capital: From Marketisation to Armed Conflict, 2018.⁶

The U.S. and its allies no doubt bear a large share of responsibility for the fundamental conditions that have led to this crisis. But it's a far more complex picture than many in the peace movement here in the U.S. tend to paint. One of the ironies of the current state of things is that much “left” anti-war discourse invokes the concept of “imperialism,” while largely having

abandoned analysis of its meaning in the current conjuncture. “Imperialism” once was understood as entwined with the broader dynamic of global capitalism, engendering inter-imperial competition and conflict. Yet in much peace movement discourse the term “imperialism” has been reduced to a pejorative devoid of heuristic value, denoting mainly “stuff the U.S. and its allies do that we don’t like.” This is so despite widespread discussion, even in the mainstream, of the resemblance of this conjuncture to the moment before WWI: a time of rising and declining empires, of a world viewed by ruling elites as an economic and political zero-sum global game, of geopolitical gambits pushed by governments always in danger of misjudging both their power relative to one another and the point where an adversary might be pushed beyond their limits, sparking a spiral downward into catastrophic war. And a government does not have to be the most powerful among imperial (or neo-imperial) competitors to pose a profound danger to peace, or to light the fire of war that explodes into a general conflagration. This too is a lesson we should have learned from the disastrous wars of the last century.

Adding to the irony is that the policies and initiatives of the U.S. and its European allies on the economic side played a significant role in shaping the governments that emerged after the Cold War, including in Russia. There is far more to criticize regarding the response of the United States and its allies to the collapse of the Soviet Union than the expansion of NATO. There were alternatives that might have come out of the reform currents in the East combining socialism and democracy in new ways. There might also have been relatively democratic mixed economy welfare states resembling those that emerged in Europe after World War II. These were possible paths if given time and space, or perhaps even supported. But that would have required a vision and politics on the part of the Western elites totally at odds with the peaking of global neoliberalism in the 1990s and after, particularly in conjunction with post-Cold War triumphalism.

Instead, “shock treatment” economics pushed by Western governments and profiteering by Western corporations encouraged the looting of what economic assets remained viable and contributed to the emergence of a brutally competitive economic and political landscape. In the end the United States and its European allies played a significant role in shaping an enemy in their own image, or perhaps the image of their past, authoritarian nationalist capitalisms arising out of the ruins of capitalism’s half-formed Other.

Today, the economic and political elites of all the states involved in this conflict are fully engaged as participants in the competitive dynamics of this phase of global capitalism. The United States sits at the apex of this system and does a great deal to sustain it. But none of its antagonists offer any meaningful alternative to this order of things, rather they are competitors for advantage within it. Western ideologues like to deride what Russia has become as a gas station with a nuclear arsenal. But it is the dynamics of the system as a whole that make economies centered on export of climate-altering fossil fuels viable, and that makes nuclear weapons a short cut to power and a marker in the eyes of ruling elites of prestige rather than barbarism.

None of this suggests that the oligarchies that emerged across the post-Soviet sphere, including in Russia, are worthy of either our admiration or our support. The ruling groups in most of those countries, including both Russia and Ukraine, deployed identity-based nationalisms to a greater or lesser extent to gain power and as part of their strategies of rule. Many have ultra-nationalist factions with significant influence on the policies of their governments—again, including

Russia and Ukraine. These nationalist currents are reinforced by the broader global resurgence of blood and soil nationalisms and by the deeper structural forces driving that resurgence—and also playing a role in driving the conflict between Russia and Ukraine.

The far horizon, beyond the *Nation-State*: another world is necessary.

“No nation imagines itself coterminous with mankind.” Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 1983.⁷

“Through the release of atomic energy, our generation has brought into the world the most revolutionary force since prehistoric man’s discovery of fire. This basic power of the universe cannot be fitted into the outmoded concept of narrow nationalisms.” The Emergency Committee of Atomic Scientists, January 22, 1947.⁸

Similar currents of blood and soil nationalism have touched many countries, with a corrosive effect on political stability and on what democracy has been achieved; the United States is a leading example.⁹ So far, peace and disarmament advocates have not fully taken in the implications of this phenomenon—but to be fair, the dramatic efflorescence of ethnic, religious, and linguistic nationalisms and their move in from the margins of politics in the years after the 2007-2008 global financial crisis caught many observers by surprise.¹⁰ Yet we ignore the significance of these developments at our peril. Most of the nuclear-armed countries now have authoritarian nationalist governments, or have blood and soil nationalist parties or movements capable of taking power in the near term or otherwise having significant influence in the political mainstream. The Ukraine war is a stark reminder that while conflicts rooted in ethnic/linguistic/religious nationalisms might not be the most fundamental force driving militarism and war, they can be the proximate cause of wars among states that deploy these nationalist narratives as a key element of their strategies of rule.

It is easy to see other flashpoints where governments playing, or overplaying, the nationalism card could spark wars among nuclear-armed states, from the Middle East to Kashmir to Taiwan. These dangers are exacerbated as governments more explicitly blur the line between national-strategic and economic competition. (U.S. officials and politicians, for example, today frame virtually every industrial development policy they put forward as “essential to competing with China”.) Here too, there are resonances of the era of inter-imperial rivalry and “zero sum game” approaches to global economics and politics.

All of this is intensified by novel elements in the current conjuncture. Foremost among these are the disappearance of the “frontiers” of easily retrievable resources to exploit and human societies not yet incorporated into the global circulation of trade and investment that have been a significant factor driving the growth of global capitalism up to now, and the increasingly significant impacts of ecological overshoot, from climate change to pandemics. The civilizational crisis of ecological overshoot likely will require unprecedented levels of global cooperation if we are to avoid disaster. Yet we remain bound by the weight of our own history, by the immense inertia of technologies, a built world, and a social order constructed first and foremost to serve, enrich, and protect the privileged, heedless of the damage we do to the planet, or to each other.

It is for all these reasons that humanity must find its way past the era of Nation-states—and why it will be difficult for us to do so. Richard Falk writes that

“We now need a ‘politics of the impossible,’ a necessary utopianism that stands as an avowal of the attainability of the Great Transition.... Instead of the realities of localism and tribal community, our way forward needs to engage globalism and human community, and to affirm that such strivings fall within the realm of possibility. We must reimagine a sense of our place in the cosmos so that it becomes our standpoint: a patriotism for humanity in which the whole becomes greater than the part, and the part is no longer the dominant organizing principle of life on the planet. Understanding the interplay of parts and wholes is a helpful place to begin this transformative journey.”¹¹

Such a transformative path would require sustained social movements on a global scale. Even effective resistance to the intensification of nationalism, military confrontation, and arms racing being offered to us by our rulers as their response to this crisis will require such movements across much of the world.

Here in the United States, there is no mass peace movement. There have been, however, other signs of heightened political mobilization in recent years, responding to economic stagnation and precarity since the 2007-2008 financial crash, especially for young people, and also to the accelerating effects of climate change. More recently there have been movements that gained strength and urgency in response to the rise of white nationalism itself, embodied in Donald Trump, his presidency, and the takeover of one of the two major political parties by his followers. These included mobilizations to protect the lives and human rights of immigrants and other targeted minorities, such as the Movement for Black Lives. So far, these emerging movements for the most part have not taken up issues of war and peace. One exception is the growing Poor People’s Campaign, with its call for non-violence and an end to “the interlocking injustices of systemic racism, poverty, ecological devastation, the war economy/militarism and the distorted moral narrative of religious nationalism.”¹²

Seeking to understand together the reasons for the re-emergence now of blood and soil nationalisms as well as their historical genesis could be a step towards finding common cause with those movements, and a way in to understanding the deeper forces that generate the dangers and injustices we all are struggling against. For those working to avert climate change and other manifestations of ecological overshoot, the dangers posed by intensified nationalisms should be obvious. They heighten barriers to the global cooperation necessary to address the ecological crisis, and conventional nationalist programs for competitive growth are driven by imperatives quite different, and often at odds with necessary transition efforts. For a wide range of human rights movements and affected communities, blood and soil nationalist movements and governments pose an immediate threat. Understanding why these ideologies are resurgent as elements in strategies contending for state power and in strategies of rule as the long cycle of neo-liberal globalization reaches economic and political exhaustion, plagued by intractable disparities of wealth and widespread precarity, will help us better understand the relation between the surface politics of our time and its deeper dynamics.

In the long view, we must understand that *Nation*-states are not natural or necessary. They are made things, their prototypes forged in the crucible of European state-building, colonialism, and inter-imperial competition, their identity narratives shaped to justify the exploitation, enslavement, and extermination of other peoples, and to mobilize us against one another for war. We should seek

other ways to nurture and preserve what we value about our diverse cultures. Perhaps this latter domain could be better addressed by a reconstructed, more expansive vision of “human rights” in a post *Nation-State* world, a post-nationalist world.

Our path ahead will be long. The conversations we must have with one other may not be easy. We must keep in mind always the message of the Einstein Russell Manifesto: “remember your humanity and forget the rest.”¹³ And we must remember, even if for the first time, that there is only one humanity.

Notes

¹ The International Military Tribunal for Germany, *Judgment of the International Military Tribunal for the Trial of German Major War Criminals: The Nazi Regime in Germany*, (September 30, 1946), The Avalon Project, Yale University. <https://avalon.law.yale.edu/imt/09-30-46.asp>

² Many close observers of Ukraine’s politics, including on the left, reject simplistic narratives of the 2014 overthrow of the Yanukovich government as a U.S. backed, Nazi-led coup, and of portrayal of the current government as ‘Nazis’ or ‘Neo-Nazis.’ Yuliya Yurchenko, for example, states that “Many analytics, including those on the political left, rushed to frame the Maidan protests and the Yanukovich ouster as a fascist coup—it was not. Neither was it a coup orchestrated by the USA as some commentators tend to advocate.” Yuliya Yurchenko, *Ukraine and the Empire of Capital: From Marketisation to Armed Conflict* (London: Pluto Press, 2018), p.167.

These observers paint a more complex picture of an order of things dominated by Ukraine’s oligarchs, one of powerful factions deploying nationalist narratives to pursue power or sustain rule. Writing in 2018, Yurchenko characterized Ukraine’s politics as an “authoritarian neoliberal kleptocracy,” combining “the authoritarian neoliberalism of the West with its austerity driven dispossession and neoliberal statism of Russia.” *Ukraine and the Empire of Capital*, p.188.

Marko Bojcun in a January 2022 interview characterized Ukraine’s current politics thusly:

“There’s a range of political parties, which by and large, are instruments of powerful financial and oligarchic groups. There is no mass social democratic or labour movement party. However, contrary to the fantasies of the pro-Russian left in the West, the far right is a fairly marginal force. It has attracted no more than 2.3% of the popular vote in any national election. Compare that to Germany, to Austria, to France.” “Self-determination for Ukraine!,” Interview with Marko Bojcun, author of *The Workers’ Movement and the National Question in Ukraine: 1897-1918* and *Towards a Political Economy of Ukraine*. <https://ukrainesolidaritycampaign.org/2022/01/07/self-determination-for-ukraine/>

³ Lewis Mumford, “Gentlemen: You Are Mad!” *The Saturday Review of Literature*, March 2, 1946; collected in Kai Bird and Lawrence Lifschultz, eds, *Hiroshima’s Shadow: Writings on the Denial of History and the Smithsonian Controversy* (Stony Creek, CT: Pamphleteers Press, 1998) 284, 286.

⁴ Andrew Lichterman, “Donald Trump, Destroyer of Worlds,” *Tikkun* on the Web, November 27, 2017.

⁵ Quoted in Michael Sherry, *The Rise of American Air Power: The Creation of Armageddon* (New Haven: 1987, p.287.

⁶ Yuliya Yurchenko, *Ukraine and the Empire of Capital: From Marketisation to Armed Conflict* (London: Pluto Press, 2018), p.183.

⁷ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London; Verso Press, 1983, 1991), p.7.

⁸ The Emergency Committee of Atomic Scientists, January 22, 1947. (Trustees: Albert Einstein, Chairman, Harold C. Urey, Vice Chairman, Hans A. Bethe, T.R. Hogness, Philip M. Morse, Linus Pauling, Leo Azilard, V.F. Weisskopf.

⁹ “A final precondition for the coup attempt was the belief, among the target population, that the legitimacy of the United States government derives from its commitment to a particular religious and cultural heritage, and not from its democratic form. It is astonishing to many that the leaders of the Jan. 6 attack on the constitutional electoral process styled themselves as ‘patriots.’ But it makes a glimmer of sense once you understand that their allegiance is to a belief in blood, earth and religion, rather than to the mere idea of a government ‘of the people, by the people, for the people.’” Katherine Stewart, “Christian Nationalism Is One of Trump’s Most Powerful Weapons,” *The New York Times*, January 6, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/06/opinion/jan-6-christian-nationalism.html>

¹⁰ The reasons for this are complex, and doing justice to them goes far beyond the scope of this paper. Factors might include the long Cold War, in which the ideological lines of conflict between the antagonists were not mainly nationalist in character, and the triumphalist narrative of a “global” post-Cold War neoliberal corporate capitalism, mirrored by systemic critiques that also downplayed the significance not only of nationalist competition but of the role of the state generally.

¹¹ Rickard Falk, “Toward Global Solidarity: A Politics of Impossibility,” Global Justice in the 21st century blog, August 14, 2021 <https://richardfalk.org/2021/08/14/toward-global-solidarity-a-politics-of-impossibility/>

¹² “About the Poor People’s Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival,” <https://www.poorpeoplescampaign.org/about/>

¹³ The Russell-Einstein Manifesto, Issued in London, 9 July 1955, <http://websites.umich.edu/~pugwash/Manifesto.html>