



# Quaker Peace & Legislation Committee

## WATCHING BRIEF 22-1: UKRAINE

*As Quakers we seek a world without war. We seek a sustainable and just community. We have a vision of an Australia that upholds human rights and builds peace internationally, with particular focus on our region. In our approach to government, we will promote the importance of dialogue, of listening and of seeking that of God in every person. We aim to work for justice and to take away the occasion for war.*

*The invasion of Ukraine by Russia in late February 2022 has already generated enormous opposition and distress in Western countries and deep concern in non-Western countries about the effect on the global south. Quakers are joining with many others in 'holding in the Light' all involved and affected. They are also supporting public statements and offering practical humanitarian assistance through available channels and agencies. This Brief summarises some of the background and responses. We are aware that there are many perspectives about what is currently happening in Ukraine, as well as the historical context. We realise that our understanding and thinking about events is heavily influenced by the western and white-dominant culture and political environment in which we live.*

*April 2022*

### **Background**

Ukraine is the second largest country in Europe after Russia, and has a population of 44 million. Its area was contested, divide and ruled by various powers for hundreds of years from the 13th century. It became one of the Soviet republics from 1922 until the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991. It was then an independent and neutral state but maintained links with Russia and with Europe.

After the Soviet Union fell, NATO's eastern border expanded in waves to include the Baltic states and Poland. The alliance allowed Ukraine and Georgia to publicly request membership. The West was warned well before Putin's rise that extending NATO's borders toward Ukraine, in particular, would put that state in serious danger. Russia, (under Gorbachev) was given an understanding that NATO would not extend its reach,

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but it did so anyway by adding an extra 14 countries close to Russia's border since 1997.

In the years since 1991, the West has greatly increased its influence on eastern Europe, building up military forces and economic dominance, while many people in the region have found it difficult to achieve a standard of living anywhere near the western European countries. In addition, it has been difficult for most countries in this region to become or remain neutral in foreign policy. This has enhanced Russia's sense of being threatened.

A change of government in Ukraine in 2014, as a result of western supported dissident action, led to a closer alignment with the West, and Russia reacted by annexing Crimea and supporting separatists in Donetsk and Luhansk. The United Nations General Assembly resolved that the move on Crimea had no validity under international law.

In late 2021 there was a build-up of Russian military units near the Ukrainian borders to try to negotiate a diplomatic outcome to resolve Russia's concern to maintain its sphere of influence (parallel to the Cuban missile crisis) and prevent the expansion of NATO to include Ukraine. This led to many diplomatic efforts to prevent war. The French and German leaders were especially keen to prevent escalation. In mid-February 2022 Russia recognised the regions of Donetsk and Luhansk as separate states. This was followed within days by Russia invading Ukraine, in what it called a 'special military operation'. This led to immediate destruction and death in the region, and a flow of refugees into neighbouring countries such as Poland, Moldova, and Slovakia.

## Reactions and Responses

- The Ukrainian president and people immediately affirmed their determination to resist the invasion, and sought military and humanitarian support from NATO countries and beyond. This led to significant commitments from many countries including Australia.
- Coordinated action by the USA, UK, Canada, NATO and the European Union led to the immediate imposition of military, economic, cultural and sporting sanctions against Russia. The large tech giants – Google, Apple, Meta, Amazon and Microsoft have added their weight to the blockade of Russian access to internet etc.
- At the United Nations, a resolution brought to the Security Council on 25 February to deplore the Russian Federation's aggression as a violation of the UN Charter was supported by 11 of 15 SC members, but unsuccessful because of a Russian veto. There were several abstentions – China, India, and United Arab Emirates. This led 90 UN member states to co-sponsor a resolution called 'Uniting for Peace' which passed on 28 February in the UN General Assembly by 141 in favour, 5 against and 35 abstentions.
- The United Nations Human Rights Council voted on 4 March (32 in favour, 2 against (Russia, Eritrea), 13 abstentions (Armenia, Bolivia, Cameroon, China, Cuba, Gabon, India, Kazakhstan, Namibia, Pakistan, Sudan, Uzbekistan, Venezuela) to establish a commission of inquiry to investigate human rights violations in the region.

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- The Russian president Vladimir Putin threatened to widen the war by putting nuclear forces on alert in order to discourage NATO countries from intervening militarily to enforce a no-fly zone over Ukraine.
- Many public statements have been made by governments and NGOs calling for a cease-fire and Russian military withdrawal, and including options such as UN peacekeeping forces, neutrality for Ukraine, and support for the nuclear weapons ban treaty.
- Many humanitarian agencies have arranged help for the people of Ukraine who are in need of urgent supplies and/or seeking evacuation. The Red Cross says volunteers from all over the world are distributing food, water, bedding, clothes and basic aid items, and providing medical care and psychological support.
- Evacuation corridors have had mixed success in stopping the military attacks to allow civilians to flee bombed cities.
- The Australian Government has condemned the Russian moves, fully supports Ukraine's sovereignty, and has committed to contribute some military aid and medical supplies, as well as adopting the agreed sanctions on the financial, travel and sporting links with Russia, and on its senior government officials.
- Protests inside Russia against the war have been widespread (50 cities) but have met with a brutal response with many arrests and violence by authorities. *There remains a significantly high level of support for President Putin within Russia.*
- *Ongoing talks have been held between Russia and Ukraine representatives, seeking options to resolve the conflict, including (a) making Ukraine a neutral country (like Austria and Switzerland) with no formal link to NATO, (b) accepting that Crimea is now part of Russia, and (c) ensuring the flow of humanitarian aid and refugees is made safe. The future status of the provinces of Donetsk and Luhansk would remain for future negotiations.*

## Quaker Responses

The Quaker United Nations Office (QUNO) – see [www.quno.org](http://www.quno.org) has reported on the active work of diplomats to denounce the use of violence and military force and raise concerns about the plight of civilians and refugees. The following urgent issues have arisen in the UN debates:

- (a) Countries in Africa and Asia are concerned at the treatment of their citizens as they flee Ukraine.
- (b) Numerous countries from the Global South believe the conflict will put them under pressure to align with one side or the other, especially as they struggle to access COVID vaccines and that sanctions on Russia will also affect the cost and supply of grain from Russia on which they depend.
- (c) Powerful countries are able to ignore the principles of the UN and manipulate others so the rules are not applied equally.
- (d) The threat of nuclear warfare is a grave threat to all and an unconscionable option.
- (e) The implications of Russian aggression for small countries' sovereignty and territorial integrity.

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Friends World Committee for Consultation (FWCC) prepared a statement under the heading *Christian Call for Peace*, inspired by the many statements by churches on the conflict. Friends and others were invited to sign this message to be shared widely across national and cultural boundaries. The statement emphasised the words of Jesus against killing and affirming peacemakers and aid-givers. See [www.world@fwcc.world](http://www.world@fwcc.world)

Quakers in Britain issued a statement condemning the attack on Ukraine as asserting the Quaker belief in the preciousness of all human life. They called for a cessation of fighting and the resumption of negotiations, and for all parties to observe international law. They affirmed the value of peacemakers on all sides at this critical time.

Friends in Ukraine have been holding two meetings for worship each Sunday to pray for peace and are being joined by Quakers from all over the world. The Kyiv group has emphasised in its comments their ongoing commitment of to a peaceful relationship with Russia. The best time for Australian Friends to join is at 6.15pm (eastern daylight time) on Sunday. This meeting is being supported by Aotearoa/New Zealand Quakers in collaboration with Ukraine Quakers. For details contact Ronis Chapman at [ronis.chapman@gmail.com](mailto:ronis.chapman@gmail.com)

Friends in many other countries are also organising worship meetings to uphold Ukraine Friends. The European and Middle East Section of FWCC is supporting these initiatives. See <https://fwccemes.org/new/quaker-attention-on-peace-and-ukraine>

Australian Friends joined in a virtual silent vigil for all those involved in the conflict, held on Sunday 27 February organised by QPLC. Around 80 people were part of that focus on holding all leaders and decision-makers in the Light, so that they may be able to maintain strong channels of diplomacy and communication. There have also been other vigils and protests in Australian cities, led by groups such as the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, the Independent and Peaceful Australian Network, and the Medical Association for the Prevention of War.

The Quaker Peace and Legislation Committee sought a meeting with the Russian Embassy to explain Quakers' longstanding peace witness, expressing concern at the crisis in Ukraine, and seeking their response. As a result, on 6 April 2022 Harold Wilkinson and David Purnell from QPLC met with the Russian Ambassador Dr Alexey Pavlovsky at his official residence in Canberra. The ambassador welcomed the opportunity to speak about the ongoing Russian opposition to the expansion of Western military forces towards Russia, and his frustration at the 'one-sided' approach by Australian politicians and media. He outlined the Russian view that many of the visual images shown on our media led to an emotional response rather than a rational understanding of the real situation. He emphasised that Russia wanted the peace negotiations facilitated by Turkey to progress so that the armed conflict could end with a strong agreement to ensure that Ukraine would not join NATO, that Ukraine would become demilitarised and neutral, and that the pro-Nazi elements in Ukraine would be restrained. He raised a concern that Western countries were pushing Ukraine to delay peace negotiations in order to continue to attack Russia.

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## Analysis and Commentary

### (a) Before the war began.

Percy Allan (Institute of Public Policy, UTS) wrote an article (*Pearls and Irritations*, 13 February) pointing out that President Putin's concern with Ukraine was the same as John Kennedy's was with Cuba in 1962 – to stop a neighbouring country joining a hostile military pact (Warsaw Pact). The USSR president Khrushchev acceded to Kennedy's demand, the US withdrew its missiles from Turkey, and war was averted. "The only lasting, peaceful and low-cost solution to this standoff is for Ukraine to declare it will not join NATO and for NATO to say it will not accept it as a member but might intervene if it were invaded". He suggested that the following additional steps be negotiated- (a) the 2015 Minsk Agreement be implemented so that the Donetsk and Luhansk provinces are seen as self-governing provinces of Ukraine, (b) Russia accept Ukraine's right to join the European Union and Ukraine accept that Crimea is now part of Russia.

Jack Matlock (former US ambassador to USSR in late 1980s) wrote in *Accord* on 14 February that Putin's goal was to be treated with respect. The expansion of NATO was a mistake, and Russia should have been included in steps to make Europe more secure. He said that American moves since then have ignored or overridden Russia's concerns.

### (b) After the war began.

Patrick Cockburn (journalist for *Financial Times* and the *Independent*, UK) wrote an article in *Counterpunch* (28 February). He said that by invading Ukraine, President Putin has made an "unforced error of historic proportions" that will plunge his country into an unwinnable war. All the evidence is that there is far less pro-Russian sympathy today than ever before in Ukraine. This will lead to significant Russian casualties which will be hard to justify to the Russian people. His political survival may well be in doubt as a result of his overreach.

Kurt Johnson (*Crikey*, 7 March) reminds us that the collapse of the Soviet Union was seen as liberation in Western minds, but as a real collapse by many Russians, because the stability and security of their lives were undermined. Assurances given by Western leaders to Gorbachev that no country in the former Warsaw Pact would become part of NATO were soon ignored, leading to the view that the West could not be trusted. President Putin has assumed the role of the strongman who will right historic wrongs.

Kristine Fialko (University of Chicago) wrote in *The Canberra Times Forum*, 12 March) that, as a Ukrainian now living in America, she welcomes the interest of many people in the struggle of Ukrainians for independence. She acknowledges the enormous resistance by the people led by their president. But she warns against treating it like a Marvel story (e.g., *Star Wars*, *Lord of the Rings*) as has been a tendency on social media. There is real suffering and trauma for those on the ground, no easy way to escape, and no enthusiasm for them to have to become soldiers.

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George Lakey (*Common Dreams*, 26 February) catalogues the history of nonviolence in Czechoslovakia in 1968 as a focus for his thesis that nonviolent people power can be very potent in responding to an invasion from a superior military force. The result was a military stalemate that led to negotiations for a compromise result with a much reduced level of casualties. The response of Denmark and Norway to the Nazis had similar features. The nonviolent civilian defence approach still has great potential, especially when prepared. See <https://www.commondreams.org/views/2022/02/26/even-without-russias-military-might-ukraine-can-defend-against-invasion>

Bina Fernandez (Assoc. Prof, Melbourne University) wrote (*The Conversation*, 8 March) that reports have emerged of discrimination against African and Asian nationals fleeing Ukraine. Some were prevented from boarding trains and buses as priority was given to white Ukrainians, and others were subject to verbal and physical abuse when they reached the Polish border, and were delayed getting food and shelter. Some media commentaries have also portrayed white refugees as more 'civilised'. The existence of neo-fascist groups in Ukraine has not helped, and there is across Europe a continuing range of far-right white nationalists. This racism can be countered by recognising the Ukraine crisis as a power struggle between US/NATO and Russia, underwritten by the interests of weapons manufacturers and oil companies.

Alexander Hill (University of Calgary Canada) said (*The Conversation*, 8 March) that Vladimir Putin's offer of peace terms held out some positive hopes for talks to resume. Mr Hill spoke of the leader's demands as seeking neutrality for Ukraine, acknowledging Crimea as part of Russia, and recognising Donetsk and Luhansk as independent states. It is essential that the conflict not morph into a third world war. Both sides are determined not to back down, so the only option is negotiation. "We live in a messy, complicated world in which effective diplomacy that saves lives requires give and take. I hope the leaders of all involved in the current crisis realise just how high the stakes are".

Ramesh Thakur (ANU Disarmament Centre) spoke at a Pax Christi webinar on 10 March. He said that Russia had been badly treated through encirclement by NATO and the west, but that its choice of war was very risky. The re-balancing of major powers since the end of the Cold War has involved poor behaviour by the USA especially towards Russia. China has learned from this and could use that awareness to assert its own emerging position more strongly.

John Menadue (Pearls and Irritations, 16 March) drew attention to the contrast in the Australian media reporting of the Russian attack on a maternity hospital in Mariupol Ukraine with the almost complete absence of reporting on the US attack on a hospital in Fallujah in the Iraq war in 2004.

John Braithwaite (ANU Regulatory Network) wrote an editorial in *The International Journal of Restorative Justice* in mid-March. He has tried to identify steps that people can take towards healing the crisis:

- Dissuade people from engaging in the cyber exchanges that escalate the conflict.
- Remind friends that no conflict is so wicked that all paths to de-escalation are closed.

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- Listen to others even when you think they are deranged, and engage with them in a loving way.
- Support the international institutions that heal.
- Give to humanitarian efforts for Ukraine, and welcome a Ukrainian refugee.
- Disseminate stories from people in Russia and Ukraine that show common suffering and resilience.
- Speak up against actions that stigmatise people because they are Russian.
- Support freedom movements in Russia.

## ***Conclusion***

The world needs calm and co-designed approaches to help re-build trust and enable all involved in the Ukraine conflict to restore positive relationships. As Friends, we seek nonviolent ways to bring about change that offers hope of caring and creative communities. The military option needs to remain off the table if we are to see humane outcomes. Civilians should not be enticed into participation in war by joining military forces. Our political representatives must be challenged to give priority to diplomatic responses to crises, and to refrain from inflammatory rhetoric.

This issue requires much more analysis and consideration than we have been able to provide in this brief. Ongoing exploration and reviews would be necessary to understand all of the elements which have led to this crisis. Consideration needs to be given to the perspectives of both sides of this conflict beyond the traditional sources of information from western media.

QPLC will continue to engage with Friends here and overseas in actions that respond peacefully to the war and the needs that emerge for supporting people affected in so many ways. We will also communicate Quaker concern to those in government here and elsewhere. Friends are encouraged to participate in meetings for worship (outlined in this Brief) to support those involved in the conflict, and to seek ways of offering humanitarian assistance.

*Canberra  
April 2022*