

NOTE: the text below was published on January 28, 2023 in the *Davis Enterprise* [[Commentary: On America's role in Ukrainian war \(davisenterprise.com\)](https://www.davisenterprise.com)].

William W. Hagen
Professor emeritus of European History
University of California, Davis
© February 8, 2023

AMERICAN PEACE ADVOCACY AND PUTIN'S WAR

Mel Gurtov's column in the January 22 *Enterprise* brought to my secular mind the famous lines from Jeremiah 6:14, in which the prophet denounces those in Jerusalem who belittled the murderous threat of conquest by Babylon. Speaking of the Israelite authorities, Jeremiah said (in one persuasive modern translation): "They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. 'Peace, peace,' they say, when there is no peace."

Mel Gurtov, writing from Portland for the organization "Peace Voice," speaks for "supporters of a negotiated peace in Ukraine." Putin, he says, recently "again said he is interested in peace talks," failing to add that the Russian precondition for peace is Ukrainian recognition of all Russian annexations and conquests since 2014. Yet Gurtov concedes that, through Russian aggression, Putin, in egregious violation of international law, has "created insuperable obstacles to peace."

Gurtov condemns Condoleeza Rice's and Robert Gates's call, in the *Washington Post*, to "dramatically" increase arms supplies to Ukraine, so as to halt the threat that Putin's expansionism poses to the NATO states and so also -- at the cost, Gurtov adds, of Ukrainian suffering -- to "reclaim all Ukrainian territory." But, "morally and legally, that is no solution at all."

Why this is so Gurtov does not say. One might suppose that, in an ideal world, the moral and legal thing to do would be, precisely, Russian withdrawal. He concedes, moreover, that American advocates of negotiated peace have no definition of desirable terms of peace. He concludes, pessimistically, that there will therefore be none, and that the war will instead continue until one side is exhausted "or, hopefully, [that Russia] changes course when the regime changes." But: will Russian democracy emerge from a Putinesque "victory"?

Those who question American support for Ukraine echo Gurtov's vagueness and lack of concrete proposals for ending the war. Many who stand on the progressive left have evaded addressing the subject, except to deplore, as many Trumpian Republicans do, the cost of US military and other aid. But to argue against a war, once begun, on grounds that it is costing too

much is very Scroogian and potentially morally self-damaging. Should Lincoln have halted the Civil War on the Union side because it was costing too much?

Putin's war on Ukraine is a resumption of Imperial tsarist Russia's efforts before 1917 to smother the birth of a modern Ukrainian national culture, grounded in its own language (the free use of which the Russian government tried to suppress before the revolutionary wave rose in the empire in 1905). We in the West have only a very vague idea of Ukraine, and more as a territory than as a historical region. Yet, while it never attained independent statehood in past centuries (despite short-lived beginnings after 1917), it has long been the home of culture, politics, and even religion that varied importantly from the Muscovite pattern. The settlement in Ukraine of Russian-speaking immigrants dates mainly from the nineteenth century, while Russia conquered Crimea from the Ottoman Turks only in 1783, and a significant Russian-speaking presence there dates only from after the Crimean War of 1853-56. Russians in Ukraine's eastern provinces (the Donbas) streamed in as the region industrialized in the late nineteenth century. In other words, the argument that Ukrainian lands are "ancient Muscovite/Russian possessions" is false and deeply misleading.

Ukraine is now being born as a modern independent nation-state. It will soon figure in our minds as a country like Poland or France, and not as a chaotic fragment of the collapsed Soviet Union. We have good reason to support this development, because it will set a barrier to Russian ambitions of westward power-extension, a drive that has figured, among other states' great-power ambitions, in the outbreak of nearly all modern European wars since the time of Peter the Great. Russian imperialism has done no favors to the Russian people, and we should look forward to the day when Russia, too, is a country like all others in Europe, and not a would-be hegemon and master of a stifling sphere of influence in east-central and central Europe.

It is conceivable that the present war will end in a stalemate, as has occurred elsewhere many times, including in post-World War II Korea and Germany. In that case, Ukrainian borders will reflect the military status quo. Considering that Putin and his top officials have made it clear that the price Ukraine must pay for peace is recognition of Russia's conquests since 2014, for Ukraine to accept negotiations on these terms would be admission of defeat, not entry into a settlement that, while it might involve compromises, could be regarded by the Ukrainians as tolerable, or even honorable.

This is the perspective in which the objective of militarily pushing Russian armed occupation as far back as possible is justifiable, both politically and morally. War is, certainly, a curse, but on occasion unavoidable for ethically defensible reasons. Who would say the Nazi armies, or those of Japan in China, should not have been stopped by arms, the only possible means? And should anyone think that a Putinesque conquest of Ukraine would not be a tragedy for the Ukrainian people, let them look into the ravages inflicted on that land under Stalin, and into the repression of the Russian people themselves, especially the younger generations, taking place in Putin's Russia today. Let them consider Belarus, a culture with its own language, but whose dictatorial russophone government serves, as it did under the Soviet Union, as a proxy for the Kremlin, and where people cannot freely speak or publish in their own language nor can they honestly write and teach the history of their oft abused and conquered land.

So, yes, let the United States press hard diplomatically for open-ended peace negotiations with Russia. Perhaps they could give Putin an alibi for extracting himself from a war that is corroding his authority and empowering militarist-nationalist groups in Russia that have their own ambitions (which do not include their once-athletic but now creaky master).

But, meanwhile, let us and our NATO allies help Ukraine advance on the battlefield. American provision of Abrams tanks gave Germany backing to send its Leopard tanks as well. The fear that Russia will respond with "battlefield tactical nuclear weapons" seems implausible, if only because the lethal radiation they would release would endanger both Russia's separatist subordinates in Ukraine, people in Belarus, and in neighboring Russia itself.

Through centuries, Russia has intimidated the West with the image, and too often also the reality, of a ruthless militarized autocracy. But has it won all its wars? The answer is definitely not, in important part because of its own inner weaknesses. We should not quail before its threats, but rather emulate the courage of the Ukrainians and the determination of their neighbors in eastern Europe to assist them in repelling Russia's neo-imperialism..