



From Omaha Beach to Bucha Ukraine; Pathways Towards Peace and Healing By Douglas Gardner, 2023

A recent visit to the beaches of Normandy provided the backdrop for powerful and clear reflections on the parallels between World War II and the present war in Ukraine. The unfolding situation is hauntingly familiar with an authoritarian despot disregarding basic human decency, breaking international law, and brutalizing a neighboring country in Europe.

Recalling a bit of history, in 1938 Adolf Hitler “absorbed” Austria and Czechoslovakia followed by an all-out attack on Poland in 1939 that triggered what became a global conflict. Likewise, Russian President Vladimir Putin has “absorbed” Crimea and parts of the Donbas region in Ukraine in 2014 followed by his February 2022 all-out attack on the country.

Hitler’s terrible signature in the pages of history was the murder of millions in the Holocaust and the economic and physical devastation of much of Europe. Similarly, Putin will be known in the history books for his crimes of unprovoked aggression against Ukrainian civilians. The mass graves of murdered civilians in Bucha are just the start to uncovering the depth of his depravity.

The war has had an enormous impact not just on Ukraine but on people around the globe, with severe shortages of food and energy especially in the poorest countries most susceptible to hunger and famine.

At this moment there are no apparent exit ramps for either party. There are, however, possibilities to explore while providing the continued military and humanitarian support necessary for Ukraine to defend itself and for civilians to survive the profound turbulence of war.

In solidarity with the determined Ukrainian military response to defend itself supported with equipment from Ukraine’s allies around the globe, here are six potential pathways to peace and healing:

- **Diplomacy:** The West's unity to date in supporting Ukraine has been extraordinary but is not assured in the future. Combatting competing economic priorities and the potential for "Ukraine fatigue" will be paramount. There is no doubt that Putin is hoping western resolve will waiver.

Maximum pressure needs to be maintained on Russia's trading partners such as China and India to discourage their tacit or direct support of the aggression against Ukraine. Likewise, similar efforts are needed with smaller states in Africa and Asia that are recipients of Russian oil and largesse.

The UN Secretary General, along with Turkey, have shown success in bringing the parties together for the opening of food corridors to Africa and the Middle East. Can this small but important step be expanded? The UN and its member states have the primary tools for reestablishing a rules-based order despite Russia having a veto in the UN Security Council. The votes at the UN General Assembly over the past year have been clear indicators of international condemnation of the Russian invasion.

Nothing short of an unrelenting diplomatic full-court press is needed to isolate Russia as a rogue nation. In that spirit, the official designation by the USA of Russia as a "state sponsor of terrorism" is warranted and overdue.

- **Shine the light of truth:** President Putin has a long track record of attacking political opponents, journalists, human rights activists, and even wealthy oligarchs who dare to speak openly. He had no qualms about using the deadly nerve agent Novichok on Alexei Navalny, nor has he shown any apparent discomfort at the recent contagion of mysterious "falls" of select oligarchs from tall buildings. Murder and the terror it creates are central parts of his domestic playbook.

His narcissism goes beyond the widely circulated photo of a bare-chested horseback ride. Public opinion in Russia is critical to his ego and he has well-oiled disinformation tools to shape both domestic and global opinion. His foray into Ukraine was, among other things, an attempt to cement his place in history alongside earlier Czars as a great leader and protector of imperial Russia. Sadly, his unprovoked war of choice and his terrorizing of Ukrainian civilians will place him among history's most reviled leaders.

Truth is the enemy of this former KGB agent. The more that the grim reality of his naked aggression in Ukraine is exposed to the Russian people via social media and other channels, the more disenchanting his base will become. Likewise, it should be stressed that the "collective West" has no territorial designs on Russia, but simply the intention to support Ukraine in its efforts to expel the invaders. Such a shift in domestic public awareness would not only encourage Putin to change course in Ukraine but it could also embolden the inner circles at the Kremlin and the oligarchs to make a change at the top.

- **Envisage carrots beyond the stick:** Upon the withdrawal from Ukraine of the Russian forces, the senseless loss of blood and treasure will halt on both sides. This would be a signal to the Russians who have fled the country due to military conscription and the war (upwards of a million people) that they could consider returning home. Lifting the embargo will bring consumer goods that have been missed by the Russian population. The return to the world stage of Russian sports and culture will be a source of pride. In short, engaging the Russian people in a positive, post-war vision could potentially accelerate an end to the conflict.
- **Ukraine's reconstruction.** The war will end with some form of Russian withdrawal -- hopefully sooner rather than later.

The extraordinary Ukrainian spirit remains unbowed by Russian aggression and will need to be turned to the monumental task of rebuilding. Ukraine has tremendous technological skills and will have the opportunity to “build back better” with energy efficient, modern infrastructure. An updated Marshall Plan (under a new name) funded by Russian reparations, the USA and Western allies, along with the World Bank and the UN will be needed.

- **Healing of Ukrainians.** Beyond the physical destruction of large swaths of Eastern Ukraine, the impact on the collective mental health of the country's citizenry has been incalculable. This goes far beyond the obvious impact on soldiers in combat and encompasses the wider population, especially children.

The return of peace will be the first and most fundamental step to healing. It will allow families to reunite, children to sleep without sirens and explosions, businesses to reopen, and life to return to normal in cities, towns, and villages.

Additionally, there are evidence-based tools to deal with stress, anxiety, and in extreme cases PTSD. Transforming trauma needs to be a central part of support for Ukraine during these latter stages of the war and thereafter.

Simple techniques of soft breathing, meditation, visualization, and movement are motors for healing both the mind and the body. Such effective, non-pharmacologic steps can have lifelong benefits. When taught with care, wisdom, and love, the healing impact of trauma transformation techniques can be profound.

- **Accountability:** Part of helping the world achieve closure and move beyond WW II was the establishment of the Nuremberg trials of senior Nazi officials. Similarly, a special tribunal must be established to adjudicate Russia's crimes of aggression with a focus on the senior-most officials, including Putin. This will be an essential element for delivering justice after the terror inflicted on Ukraine by Russia's callous disregard for international law and basic human decency. Evidence of Russia's crimes has been carefully documented and draft indictments have already been prepared.

In summary, no country should have to endure the kind of aggression that Russia has unleashed on Ukraine. Paths to peace and healing need to now be prioritized so that humankind can end the war, liberate Ukraine, and move to a more durable peace among the family of nations with our better angels leading the way.

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