
Part III: **Insights from a South African Perspective**

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“What Have You to Do with Peace?” (2 Kings 9:17–22): Complexities of War and Peace in the Russian-Ukrainian War and South Africa’s Position

1 Introduction

On February 24, 2022, Russia launched a military action against Ukraine because, according to Russia’s president Putin, Russia has a historic claim and the right to rule Ukraine, and because Russia’s national security is threatened by Ukraine’s desire to join NATO, which is expanding westward, and by the support Ukraine is receiving from the United States and Western Europe. But this is not a proxy war between NATO and Russia; it is a Russia-versus-Ukraine war. The invasion sent shock waves throughout the world, as it was anticipated that the impact of a Russian-Ukrainian war on the globe would be very severe. Russia is the world’s third-largest producer of crude oil, a major supplier of gas and is responsible for 14 percent of Global fertilizer exports, while Ukraine is one of the world’s largest exporters of wheat and sunflower (Lim et al. 2022, 23–26). A full-blown war between Russia and Ukraine would cause much hardship around the world especially in the aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic. Two and a half years down the line, the effects of the war on both Russia and Ukraine, the rest of Europe and the world at large remain unquantifiable. The impact of the war is multidimensional, ranging from economy and environment to society and health. On the side of Ukraine, forced migrations and internal displacement of the citizenry became the order of the day, while the two territories are characterized by intense unrest, death and deprivation.

This essay examines the position of South Africa in the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine. In light of the perennial human quest for peace, it employs Jehu’s question “What peace?” in 2 Kings 9:14–26 as a hermeneutical lens to reflect on the meaning of peace in this war.

2 South Africa and the Russian-Ukrainian War

In wars between nations, it is typical that governments of other nations would take sides with either of the warring nations based on existing political and economic alliances, among other factors. However, in the Russian-Ukrainian case, it

appears Ukraine has garnered more sympathy from the international community than its aggressor, especially among their neighbors. In relation to the fighting itself,

“A crucial asymmetry is found in the international setting [. . .] Moscow fights solo, with its only comrades in arms two unrecognized satellites (“people’s republics”) in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine. Belarus allows Russia to use bases there to attack Ukraine but has not contributed troops. On the other hand, Kyiv’s burden is shared by G7, more than 30 other countries including the US and the EU. Aid and military assistance poured in for Ukraine whilst sanctions have been meted against Russia.” (Colton 2022, 21)

Whereas the ties between Ukraine and the rest of the Western world became stronger due to the war, Russia’s relations with other Western nations seemed to deteriorate (Colton 2022, 30). Further afield, even though several non-Western nations have thrown their political and/or military weight behind Ukraine, the South African government has taken what it calls a “non-alignment” or neutral stance in the Russian-Ukrainian war. But critics consider South Africa’s claim that it is “actively non-aligned” (Reuters 2023)¹ a facade and a tactical support of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. They argue that South Africa’s actions suggest that the Ramaphosa-led ANC government is actually taking sides with Putin’s government against Ukraine.

For instance, in May 2023, South Africa was accused openly of supplying arms to Russia. According to the US ambassador to South Africa, intelligence report showed that in December 2022, a US sanctioned Russian cargo ship was sighted in Cape Town, loading up and shipping weapons and ammunition to Moscow. The South African government denied the allegation and promised to launch an investigation into the matter, but it never issued any update on the outcome of the investigation. Earlier, South Africa (along with some other African countries) had abstained from voting on United Nations resolutions that condemn the war (Reuters 2023) and later also from a UN Human Rights Council vote to assist Ukraine with a human rights initiative. Furthermore, in January 2023, South Africa engaged in joint naval training drills with Russia and China and played host to Sergei Lavrov, Russia’s foreign minister who also attended this event (Gramer 2023).² The event is perceived by observers as South Africa strengthening its military ties with Russia. Later in July, President Cyril Ramaphosa and some of his

1 A news report confirms that “South Africa’s presidential security advisor said [. . .] the country was ‘actively non-aligned’ in Russia’s war against Ukraine, after U.S. allegations it had supplied weapons to Moscow led to a diplomatic crisis this week” (Reuters 2023).

2 Liubov Abravitova, Ukraine’s ambassador to South Africa, criticized the military drills, saying, “And on South Africa, Russia, China military exercises, let me just ask you, what the army that is

key ministers attended a Russian-African summit in St. Petersburg, from which many African leaders withdrew. Consequently, in what turned out to be a diplomatic spat, the South African government openly and repeatedly criticized the United States, which in turn accused South Africa of not respecting its professed non-alignment policy.

South Africa’s leading opposition party, the Democratic Alliance, also decried the government’s stance on Russia, noting that the arms deal fiasco “proves not only that South Africa is not non-aligned in Russia’s war on Ukraine, but that President Ramaphosa and his government have already lied to South Africa and the world as to our country’s involvement in this devastating conflict,” and that the South African government is in fact on the side of Russia (Steenhuisen 2023).

However, President Ramaphosa defended the non-alignment stance of his government. He called for an end to the war, saying, “As South Africa we continue to maintain our position that this conflict should be settled through negotiation and by diplomatic means, in line with founding principles of the Non-Aligned Movement, and that it is in the collective interest of everyone that it come to an end soon.” We should recall that South Africa joined the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) following its independence in 1994. The president therefore claimed that his non-alignment stance, which a foreign policy report refers to as “nonsensical” (Gramer 2023), is in line with the principles of the NAM that promote dialogue and peaceful negotiation.

As if to save face in the face of mounting US pressure, President Ramaphosa led what was dubbed a “peace mission” or an African Peace Initiative to Ukraine and Russia in June 2023. The delegation comprised of Senegal’s President Macky Sall, Zambian President Hakainde Hichilema and Comoros President Azali Assoumani, who also holds the rotating chair of the AU along with two other emissaries from the DRC and Uganda. The group called for a deescalation of fighting and a resolution of the war through dialogue. It also called for the release of prisoners of war and return of children, among other things. These leaders noted that the war was hurting Africa, as the food security of a number of African nations is being threatened, for example, because of a shortage of about 30 million tonnes of the grains that used to come from Ukraine as well as the disruptions in the supply chain which have caused a shortage of fertilizers in Africa, leading to a sharp rise in food prices.

Putin’s response to most of their peace proposals was that of dismissal. He insisted that Ukraine must recognize the Crimean Peninsula which he annexed in

killing innocent people, the army of rapists and murderers, what can they bring to [the] South African army as added value?” (Bartlett 2023a).

2014, as *bona fide* Russian territory. Ukraine's position on the other hand is that fighting would continue and unless Russia withdraws its troops from the areas it is occupying, there can be no peace talks. The African peace delegation therefore did not seem to accomplish much. In the broader African context, there appears to be some sort of apathy towards the war in a number of countries despite its economic impact on the continent. Africans are no strangers to conflict and the thinking in some quarters is, "It is their war, not ours," and that the weakness of the African mission to Kyiv and Moscow lies in the fact that Africa has not been able to resolve its own conflicts. Why should it then be bothered about the Russian-Ukrainian situation or why should the West expect African leaders to side automatically with it against Russia? The voting pattern in the UN General Assembly in which several developing countries adopted a "non-aligned" stance in respect to Russia reflects this line of thinking.

What then could cause President Ramaphosa to take sides openly with Putin and Moscow despite sharp condemnation of the war by the Western world and the United States, and knowing that such a stance could jeopardize South Africa's economic relations with the West and in particular with the United States? South Africa's membership of the BRICS group of leading, emerging economies, which includes Brazil, India and China as well as Russia, paints it as an ally of and being in solidarity with Russia. However, analysts also argue that geopolitically speaking, the BRICS membership plays a very minimal role in South Africa's support of Russia against Ukraine, that South Africa's trade with Russia is negligible and that the economic ties between the two countries are not that strong. Rather, they point to the historical ties with Moscow that date back to the time of apartheid when the USSR unflinchingly supported the African National Congress (ANC) movement against the apartheid state.

Thus, the backdrop of South Africa's latent empathy for Russia is Moscow's long-standing historical relationship with the ANC leadership. The members of uMkhonto we Sizwe (Xhosa, Zulu and Ndebele meaning "Spear of the Nation"; abbreviated MK), which was the paramilitary arm of the ANC founded by Nelson Mandela in December 1961 after the Sharpsville Massacre, were communist allies. The resistant movement at that time sought refuge under the wings of the Soviet Union, which then became its most powerful ally and benefactor. Thus, the ANC leadership entered into an agreement with Moscow to help with the military training of the uMkhonto we Sizwe based on a request by Oliver Tambo. From 1963 onwards, several ANC leaders including Thabo Mbeki, Oliver Tambo, Chris Hani,³ Moses Ko-

³ Chris Hani, who later became the MK Chief of Staff and the General-Secretary of the SACP, was assassinated in April 1993 by the radical right-wing Polish immigrant Janusz Waluś in collabora-

tane, Duma Nokwe, Joe Slovo and Ambrose Makiwane, and many others, therefore received military and tactical training, and training in guerrilla warfare, military strategy and tactics, topography, drilling and the use of firearms in the USSR, which also supplied the ANC with hardware (South African History Online 2019).

Subsequently, more than 2000 cadres of the MK were trained in the USSR. Ironically, some of the training took place in the Ukrainian city of Odessa, where 328 cadres were trained between 1963 and 1965. Clearly, South Africa considers Russia an old friend and seems to subscribe to the principle of “the enemy of my enemy is my friend and the enemy of my friend is my enemy” (Galam 2023). However, it forgets that Ukraine also used to be a friend or unless of course South Africa has become to Ukraine a fair-weather friend. The argument that South Africa is pandering to Moscow due to historical ties between the two therefore appears insufficient since comparably it has the same ties with Ukraine as well. As part of the former Soviet Union, Ukraine had supported South Africans’ struggle against apartheid (Bartlett 2023a).

What more then could be responsible for South Africa’s stance in this war? Are there more powerful forces behind the ANC government’s position than what historical ties portend? Nancy Bedford mentions in her article that we should follow the money.⁴ Interestingly, that is what journalists are trained to do. When complex news breaks – they are trained to follow the money. In the case of the ANC-Russia relationship, a trail of money has revealed that the powerful force behind the ANC government’s position in this war is corruption and not some ideological or historical affinity with Russia.⁵

It is reported that the ruling party ANC has been struggling financially for some time, so much so that it even struggles at times to pay staff at its headquarters. Critics however uncover a Russian trail involving the highly lucrative United Manganese of Kalahari (UMK) mines, with close financial links to sanctioned Russian oligarch Viktor Vekselberg, who is a key ally of President Vladimir Putin. Another major shareholder in the UMK mines is Chancellor House Holdings (CHH), a holding company linked to the ANC, which has secretly made huge donations to the party in recent years, becoming, as a matter of fact, the ANC’s biggest funder. The leader of South Africa’s main opposition party and a Member of Parliament,

tion with Clive Derby-Lewis, a shadow minister in the apartheid government. The aim was to pre-empt and disrupt the proposed democratic elections slated for 1994.

⁴ For further details, see the article of Nancy Bedford in this volume.

⁵ Special thanks to Pulitzer award-winning journalist Dele Olojede for pointing out this dimension in a personal discussion in December 2023.

John Steenhuisen, confirms that, “The ANC is siding with Russia for one reason alone: because the Russian Federation is funding the ANC, and thus infiltrating and destabilizing South African democracy” (Steenhuisen 2023). If behind the South Africa’s government’s profession of non-alignment is Russian money, then, the country’s nascent democracy is already in jeopardy.

In the next section therefore, I use the question by Jehu in 2 Kgs 19, “What peace?,” as a hermeneutical lens perfunctorily to view the Russian-Ukrainian situation.

3 Jehu: What Peace?

In 2 Kings 9:14–26,⁶ we read the story of Jehu who earlier had been anointed privately by Elisha’s aide as king of Israel in vv. 1–10. He immediately swings into ac-

⁶ The text of 2 Kings 9:14–26 reads: ¹⁴So Jehu the son of Jehoshaphat, the son of Nimshi, conspired against Joram. (Now Joram had been defending Ramoth Gilead, he and all Israel, against Hazael king of Syria. ¹⁵But King Joram had returned to Jezreel to recover from the wounds which the Syrians had inflicted on him when he fought with Hazael king of Syria.) And Jehu said, “If you are so minded, let no one leave or escape from the city to go and tell it in Jezreel.” ¹⁶So Jehu rode in a chariot and went to Jezreel, for Joram was laid up there; and Ahaziah king of Judah had come down to see Joram. ¹⁷Now a watchman stood on the tower in Jezreel, and he saw the company of Jehu as he came, and said, “I see a company of men.” And Joram said, “Get a horseman and send him to meet them, and let him say, ‘*Is it peace?*’” ¹⁸So the horseman went to meet him, and said, “Thus says the king: ‘*Is it peace?*’” And Jehu said, “What have you to do with peace? Turn around and follow me.” So the watchman reported, saying, “The messenger went to them, but is not coming back.” ¹⁹Then he sent out a second horseman who came to them, and said, “Thus says the king: ‘*Is it peace?*’” And Jehu answered, “*What have you to do with peace?* Turn around and follow me.” ²⁰So the watchman reported, saying, “He went up to them and is not coming back; and the driving is like the driving of Jehu the son of Nimshi, for he drives furiously!” ²¹Then Joram said, “Make ready.” And his chariot was made ready. Then Joram king of Israel and Ahaziah king of Judah went out, each in his chariot; and they went out to meet Jehu, and met him on the property of Naboth the Jezreelite. ²²Now it happened, when Joram saw Jehu, that he said, “*Is it peace, Jehu?*” So he answered, “*What peace,* as long as the harlotries of your mother Jezebel and her witchcraft are so many?” ²³Then Joram turned around and fled, and said to Ahaziah, “Treachery, Ahaziah!” ²⁴Now Jehu drew his bow with full strength and shot Jehoram between his arms; and the arrow came out at his heart, and he sank down in his chariot. ²⁵Then Jehu said to Bidkar his captain, “Pick him up, and throw him into the tract of the field of Naboth the Jezreelite; for remember, when you and I were riding together behind Ahab his father, that the Lord laid this burden upon him: ²⁶‘Surely I saw yesterday the blood of Naboth and the blood of his sons,’ says the Lord, ‘and I will repay you in this plot,’ says the Lord. Now therefore, take and throw him on the plot of ground, according to the word of the Lord.” (Translation: New King James Version. Emphasis by the author)

tion by plotting to overthrow and kill Joram, the reigning king of Israel. Joram sends messengers to Jehu to ask him, “Is it peace?” Four times, this question is asked in the passage (vv. 17, 18, 19, 20),⁷ and Jehu’s answer is, “What have you to do with peace?” (vv. 18, 19) and, “What peace, as long as the harlotries of your mother Jezebel and her witchcraft are so many?” (v. 22). Brueggemann remarks that, “For all of the use of the term in the account, there is here not a hint of *shalom* in the events narrated” (Brueggeman 2000, 386). But Olyan notes the literary significance of the repetition of the term *shalom* in the passage, which he claims is a binding motif in the narrative (Olyan 1984, 652–668).

The question Jehu is asked and his answers point to the reality of the quest for peace across ages that is ironically often accompanied by the resistance to peace. Jehu’s questions (What peace? What have you to do with peace?) underscore the elusiveness of peace as a concept and a reality. Peace is perspectival, that is what the question draws our attention to. However, for Jehu, peace is not even on the cards. As Sweeney points out, “Jehu sarcastically responds with a rhetorical question that asserts that peace is impossible” (Sweeney 2007, 334). Often-times, the actions of some rulers in situations of conflict indicate that they are not interested in peace or settlement, but in war. In the biblical world also, it was not uncommon to send emissaries of peace when one party perceived that the other was displaying hostility or simply wanted to prevent hostility. Toi, king of Hamath, sent envoys to David with a message of peace after David defeated Haddadzer (2 Sam 8:10). It was also not uncommon that such peace moves were rebuffed, as Nabal did when David sent him a message of peace (1 Sam 25:4–13).

King Joram sent his envoys to Jehu to ask, “Is it peace?” In other words, the king is ready to negotiate peace with Jehu. For Jehu, however, bloodshed is non-negotiable. There is no room for peace. The kings (Joram and Ahaziah of Judah) also therefore go out to entreat him peacefully but Jehu refuses to back down. Wiseman notes that, “Jehu rejected any possibility of covenant-agreement on the grounds that he would not be associated with them so long as Jezebel’s pagan influence was allowed to continue” (v. 22) (Wiseman 1993, 222). In order to show that he means business when he says there is no room for peace, Jehu becomes the aggressor and proceeds to overthrow the house of Omri, as he exterminates the two royal families of Israel and Judah – the two kings, the seventy sons of Ahab, Queen Jezebel and forty-two relatives of Ahaziah – as well as all the worshippers of Baal in the land (10:1–30). Interestingly, Jezebel’s sarcastic question to

⁷ Earlier and following the anointing of Jehu by a servant of Elisha, one of Jehu’s aides had also asked him the question, “Is it peace?” (2 Kgs 9:11). He sought to know whether Elisha’s servant had come peaceably.

Jehu, just before he asks that she be assassinated, also has to do with peace: “Had Zimri peace, who slew his master?”

To Jehu, therefore, peace is a revolutionary act of getting rid of evil, of sanitizing the throne of Israel through violence, of regicide and of seizing the throne. Jehu then questions what he sees as the superficial peace espoused by Joram, the king of Israel, and published by his servants. Joram’s idea of peace thrives in wrongdoing and Jehu tries to show that even though there may be no war in the land, it does not imply that there is peace. He answers Joram, “How can there be peace when the whoredoms and witchcrafts of your mother Jezebel are so many?” In other words, the superficial peace that you are offering now cannot erase the violent acts of your parents against Naboth whose vineyard they took and whose blood they shed.

Can superficial peace erase the generational violence against Ukraine? Joram seeks “peace” but ultimately pays with his own blood. Jehu seeks to define peace on his own, not Joram’s, terms. Oddly, Jehu tries to legitimize bloodshed by insisting that he is acting according to YHWH’s command (Sweeney 2007, 25–26). Remarkably, Jehu appears to use religion to legitimize his action only when it suits him. In 2 Kings 9:26, he quoted Elisha’s pronouncement against Ahab that the Lord would avenge the blood of Naboth that was shed by Ahab (1 Kgs 21:19). Jehu however did not wait for the Lord to take vengeance; he did so himself!

This of course prompts us to ask, What role does religion or religious leaders play in ongoing wars around the globe? Without attempting to answer the question in this discussion, we do concur with Hobb’s assertion that

“Because of the predominant character of warfare, it is important to understand the nature and technical character of the activity and its social impact. Since religion provided motivation for warfare and then sustained warriors and kings at war, it is equally important to understand the role of religious thought and ideology in this activity and the way in which this activity and its remembrance shape the character of the host society, its – ideals and its values.” (Hobbs 2005, 975)

A theological definition of peace therefore needs to consider peace in its various dimensions – peace with God (Rom 5:1), peace with fellow human beings (Rom 12:18; Heb 12:14), peace with the environment or the rest of creation (Num 35:33–34), and peace with oneself (Php 4:7). In respect of the last dimension, peace with oneself, it is important to also ask, What does peace mean to the collective and what does peace mean to the individual?

On a group or collective level, if, as Joram would, we define peace as cease-fire, as the surrendering of weapons, as the suspension of violence, as restoration of socioeconomic activity, or for instance as a warm handshake between Putin and Zelenskyy, what would peace mean to the woman who has been gang raped

in the war? Would her question be like that of Jehu – What peace? What would peace mean to families living in the occupied territories when the war ends? What would peace mean to the child who lost both parents in the war? Would their answer be, What peace? As I wrote this essay, a beleaguered congregant in my local church said to me in a private conversation, “I am at war.” She was unaware that I was writing on war! Individual sufferings cannot and should not be overlooked in this war. And questions of just peace will need to take into account the plights of individuals, especially women, children and other vulnerable persons who may not be present or represented at the negotiation table.

4 Unavoidability of War?

War has been an integral part of human history and relations, and history across the ages has shown that war may be unavoidable in some situations. The biblical world had more than its own share of war as the text and several archaeological and historical studies attest. Hobbs notes that not only was Israel’s early political history shaped by war, its subsequent history was also characterized by “conflict, death and battle” (Hobbs 2005, 974). But war was not uniquely a feature of Israel’s history but of the hostile, competitive milieu of the ancient Near East as a whole:

“War was a common feature of life in the ancient Near East and in the world of the OT. Pillaging raids (2 Kings 13:20), intertribal conflict (Judg 19–20) and full-scale invasions (2 Kings 15:29) were expectations of life lived in a context of limited resources of unpredictable supply. States of war were without formal declaration and consisted of prolonged periods of conflict, raiding, skirmishing, besieging, pillaging and fighting.” (Hobbs 2005, 975)

Above, Hobbs shows that Israel engaged in wars in the “context of limited resources of unpredictable supply.” It is uncertain though that scarcity of resources was the motivation behind Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, given that Russia’s economic strength and human resources by far outweigh Ukraine’s. Could greed and desire to exercise hard power be contributing factors behind Russia’s aggression and imperial injustice being meted out to Ukraine?

If war is not completely unavoidable as the classical dictum in Ecclesiastes 3:8b that there is “a time of war, and a time of peace” also suggests, then, seeking and ensuring peace should also be non-negotiable. “*Si vis pacem, para bellum*” is a Latin adage translated as ‘If you want peace, prepare for war,’ which we are told could also be turned on its head to become, ‘If you want peace, prepare for peace.’ But what if some war-thirsty fellow affirms the corollary, ‘If you want war, prepare for war,’ then, the journey toward peace may indeed be a long one. As Hobbs affirms, in the ancient world, “The means of achieving ‘rest’ from ene-

mies or war [. . .] is not always peaceful. Often it is predicated on warfare, siege and conquest” (Hobbs 2005, 979). It seems not much has changed since the time of our ancestors, though. Today, there are rulers who like Jehu reject entreaties of peace and settle for war.

5 Danger of Neutrality and an Ethics of Compromise

For Jehu the question is, How can there be peace if we engage in wrongdoing? Or how can there be peace if we support wrongdoing? No doubt, supporting wrongdoing or turning a blind eye to wrongdoing emboldens the wrongdoer.

South Africa professes to be non-aligned in the Russian-Ukrainian war. Is this an ethical stance to take given that it was the refusal of other nations to be neutral, to be non-aligned that helped South Africans through the dark days of apartheid? The government’s claim of neutrality in the war contradicts South Africa’s public posture as a progressive country and its foreign policy posture of supporting the underdog. For example, South Africa is supporting Palestinians against the Israeli and it helped to negotiate peace in Ireland about 20 years ago. South Africa also helped mediate peace in several conflicts in Africa – in the DRC, in Burundi, in Sudan–South Sudan.

The ANC-led government of South Africa has come under fire for its stance and actions in the Russian-Ukrainian war. To quench that fire, the starting point may be to stop receiving handouts from blood-stained hands.

It has been more than thirty months since the current war began, yet peace is not in sight. Russia’s invasion of its neighbor is morally unjust but answers or solutions may entail an ethics of compromise, which implies that the solution may have to come from within rather than from without. An African (Yoruba) adage says, “The owner of the problem is the solver of the problem” (Alátiṣe ni mọ àtiṣe ara ẹ). Russia and Ukraine are siblings. A family problem can be resolved within the family through dialogue and compromise. Seeking a middle ground may entail making sacrifices on both sides and sacrifices that would guarantee the security of the most vulnerable victims of this war. But such an ethics of compromise, in my thinking, will demand that ethics be not compromised in that dialogue.

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