
Part V: **Peace Ethical Perspectives**

Nancy E. Bedford

Resistance, Otherwise: Considerations on Nonviolence in the Context of the Russian War on Ukraine

In February 2023, on the first anniversary of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Association of Mennonite Congregations in Germany put out a prayer:

War causes endless suffering. Locally, where people experience gun violence, rape, death and displacement; regionally, where the use of mines, heavy equipment and attacks on heavy industry contaminate habitats for future generations; and Globally, where inflation and rising food prices are further escalating the plight of people ravaged by other conflicts, wars and climate change. In memory of all those directly and indirectly affected by this war that violates international law, we pray: ‘DELIVER US FROM EVIL.’ (Arbeitsgemeinschaft 2023)

An attitude of prayer and humility is indispensable for life generally, but especially when we are dealing with painful and difficult subjects such as war. In looking at war from a perspective informed by the Christian faith, it is my conviction that only with the help of God’s Spirit can we discern how we might cooperate with God in that deliverance from evil for which we pray. In and through prayer we try to learn to think and act about reality in ways that are attuned to God’s work of transformation and liberation, as reflected in the gospels. It must be stated at the outset that this is not a practice that necessarily leads to pragmatic ends or to “realistic” postures, if by realism we mean what passes for common sense in the world of politics.

I have therefore titled my essay “Resistance, Otherwise.” This is meant to underline that from the outset for me as an Anabaptist theologian, the problem at hand is not a matter of whether to resist the evil of invasion or occupation or not, but rather about *how* to resist. The title is simultaneously a nod to what Boaventura de Sousa Santos calls “epistemologies of the South” (de Sousa Santos 2019), that is, ways of thinking and acting that have too often been repressed, denied or dismissed – among them, forms of nonviolent resistance. Central to such struggles are “concepts such as land, water, territory, self-determination, dignity, respect, good living, and mother earth” (de Sousa Santos 2016, 41), that is, considerations that go beyond only anthropocentric perspectives about the costs of war. To look at reality against the grain or “otherwise” means to be willing to change our angle of vision, to look at a given situation in a counter-hegemonic way or indeed to look at it and try to deal with it in a way that disidentifies with dominant com-

mon sense. This epistemological approach comes to us from many different schools of thought, including decolonial theory and queer theory. “Resistance otherwise” then, means that the baseline for me as an Anabaptist theologian is not a matter of sitting by and doing nothing or of reacting passively or indifferently in the face of aggression. It is a matter of resisting evil and violence *otherwise*. As a follower of Jesus I believe this is what he did and what he still calls us to do today, with the help of the Holy Spirit, who enlivens us and guides us into the loving and creative ways of God, helping us discern in the face of conflict, and actualizing the teachings and actions of Jesus for our contexts.

There is no doubt that the Russian invasion of Ukraine has been brutal. As Human Rights Watch has documented:

Since Russia’s full-scale invasion in 2022, its war against Ukraine has had a disastrous impact on civilian life, killing thousands of civilians, injuring many thousands more, and destroying civilian property and infrastructure. Russian forces committed a litany of violations of international humanitarian law, including indiscriminate and disproportionate bombing and shelling of civilian areas that hit homes and healthcare and educational facilities. Some of these attacks should be investigated as war crimes. In areas they occupied, Russian or Russian-affiliated forces committed apparent war crimes, including torture, summary executions, sexual violence, enforced disappearances, and looting of cultural property. (Human Rights Watch 2024)

To be clear, then, in pondering “resistance otherwise,” I am not attempting to dispute or soften the brutality of the invasion, to say that the power distribution is even, or to say that both sides are equally at fault. What I am proposing is for us to try to look at and respond to this reality *otherwise*, posing the kinds of questions that our received scripts about how to respond in case of invasion and war make almost impossible to ask. I am referring to questions about whether there are better ways to resist and respond to such aggression than the answer that seems the obvious one and which the government of Ukraine has indeed pursued. How might we envision resistance “otherwise” to invasion, armed aggression and brutality? Do Christian approaches to nonviolent resistance have anything to contribute to such situations? What does the lens of nonviolent resistance bring to our understanding of this war and to the many other armed conflicts happening around the world?¹

One might justifiably ask: what can religion or theology possibly contribute to our analysis of this situation? Religion is deeply embedded in this and other conflicts, and not necessarily in good ways. Though people in the Global north

¹ For an interactive map of such conflicts, see “Global Conflict Tracker,” *Council on Foreign Relations*. <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/>.

often think of religion as a privatized matter, the Russian-Ukrainian war has shown clearly that it is not so (European Academy 2022). In this conflict – as in many others – representatives of the Christian faith have justified war or armed struggle as necessary evils or even as worthy of praise. There are “good Christians” who have from the beginning supported and religiously justified Russia’s actions. Given that fact, it becomes doubly important to point out that these are not the only voices that emerge from the Christian faith, and that others question the religious justification of the Russian invasion. We can point, for instance, to an early Anabaptist statement that calls upon Patriarch Kirill to break with the logic of war, stating: “As Russia unleashes weapons upon Ukraine, we call on you as a Christian leader in Russia to speak and act boldly for the gospel of peace. Regardless of any rationale given for the attack upon Ukraine, this is an immoral action that Christians everywhere must condemn” (Kraybill 2022). Lamentably, Patriarch Kirill instead doubled down on his support of the invasion, making a “Prayer for Holy Rus” – and its victory – obligatory at church services. Not a few priests who refused to read the prayer or changed its wording from a plea for victory to a plea for peace “have been subjected to punishment (including defrocking), court procedures and fines” (Stoyanov 2024, 687).

Clearly, in any war in which there is an established Christian church presence, the problem of “military theocratization” can emerge, that is, a close alignment between representatives of a given church tradition and the justification of a “metaphysical struggle” or a “holy war” in defense of supposed Christian principles (Stoyanov 2024, 678). In the Russian-Ukrainian war, both sides have at times used religious or theological justifications of their stances, as is the case in most wars. When churches come down firmly on the side of either offensive or defensive war, they (perhaps unwittingly) sacralize armed violence, with unforeseen consequences. In so doing they also lose the opportunity to be a force for enacting alternative approaches of resistance in the face of discourses of inevitability.

In any Christian tradition (not only in those who are considered “peace” churches) it is possible to find those who resist the dominant scripts. Within Russian Orthodoxy, for example, there have been voices of resistance from the beginning of the conflict. In March 2022, almost immediately after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, a group of 292 Russian Orthodox priests and deacons from around the world signed an open letter calling for an end to a “fratricidal war” and for reconciliation, “asserting that the people of Ukraine should make their choice on their own, not under military threat and pressure” (Stoyanov 2024, 681). Inside Russia itself, there have been instances of similar resistance, something that takes a good bit of courage, such that clergy “who have actively opposed the military incursion in Ukraine with anti-war statements and sermons have faced intimidation, censoring, prosecution and defrocking” (Stoyanov 2024, 683).

To question the religious justification of a war of aggression may not be a particularly difficult step, especially for those outside the parameters of a conflict. But to take seriously defensive modes of “resistance otherwise,” as I am suggesting, means also to consider a less welcome position that is the corollary of the above theological critique of a perpetrator’s actions, namely, to question the logic of armed *resistance* to such aggression and invasion. Within the Christian faith, there are a number of streams of faith and practice that make explicit their conviction that nonviolent forms of resistance in the face of violent aggression and war are more in tune with the way of Jesus than picking up the sword, and therefore challenge the normalization of war as a response to war. Such streams come to this conclusion in sometimes differing ways. In their 2022 book *A Field Guide to Christian Nonviolence*, David Cramer and Myles Werntz identify eight currents within Christian nonviolence, from virtue ethics and mysticism to liberationist and feminist approaches.² The streams sometimes run together and at other times can be quite different in their emphases, for example, in how much weight they put on the effectiveness of nonviolent action. Their variety belies the impression some have that there is only one way to approach Christian nonviolence, that of being a passive victim whose response to evil is to offer oneself up as a sacrifice. I am an Anabaptist-Mennonite Christian theologian, and thus formed by the peace church traditions coming out of the Radical Reformation, but also – as a Latin American, a feminist theologian, and a practitioner of contemplative prayer – by some of the other streams as well. These various theological influences do not lead me to conclude that passivity is the best option in response to armed aggression, but they do urge me to ask questions in the face of the dominant narrative for which the “good” response to the Russian armed intervention in Ukraine is a bellicose one.

Out of the rich and multifaceted ongoing tradition of Christian nonviolence, one of the contributions that theology can make to the analysis of the Russian-Ukrainian war is to ask questions that do not emerge from the usual scripts applied to war. Rather, they come out of commitments reflected in the gospel ac-

2 The eight streams they mention are Christian Discipleship (André Trocmé, John H. Yoder, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Denny Weaver), Christian Virtue (Dorothy Day, Leonardo Boff, Eli McCarthy, Pope Francis), Christian Mysticism (Rowan Williams, Howard Thurman, Henri Nouwen, Thomas Merton, Dorothee Sölle), Apocalyptic Nonviolence (William Stringfellow, Daniel Berrigan, René Girard, Jacques Ellul), Realist Nonviolence (Walter Rauschenbusch, Georgia Harkness, Lawrence Burkholder, Duane Friesen, Glen Stassen, Lisa Sowle Cahill), Nonviolence as Political Practice (Martin Luther King Jr., Desmond Tutu), Liberationist Nonviolence (Oscar Romero, Hélder Câmara, Adolfo Pérez Esquivel), and Christian Anti-Violence (Elizabeth Albrecht, Traci West, Marie Fortune, Hilary Scarsella).

counts about the teaching of Jesus. I want to underline three such commitments or premises:

- 1) “You cannot serve both God and Mammon” (Matt 6:24);
- 2) “Let it not be so among you” (Matt 20:26); and
- 3) “Be as shrewd as serpents and as gentle as doves” (Matt 10:16).

The first premise encourages us to ask about the true costs of war and thus how effective it really is as a logic of resistance. The second leads us to question the wisdom of dominant scripts of how to respond in the face of aggression and violence, underlining the importance of decolonizing our imaginations. The third inspires us to consider concrete nonviolent ways of resisting the dominant logic of the inevitability of a violent response to violence, including (or even especially) for those of us who are not living in Ukraine right now, whose governments may be providing weapons used in the conflict.

1 Follow the Money: You Cannot Serve Both God and Mammon (Matthew 6:24)

Just before dawn on February 24, 2022, Russia rained down dozens of missile strikes on cities all over Ukraine and began an invasion with ground troops that initially reached the outskirts of Kyiv. They soon faced many logistical problems and strong Ukrainian resistance. By October of that year, the Russians withdrew from the north of the country, continuing to occupy areas in the South and the East (Visual Journalism Team BBC 2024). It is worth remembering that the Ukrainian resistance to the initial onslaught was not carried only through the use of arms. Many Ukrainians – and some Russians as well – enacted gestures of resistance. One article written in May of 2022 puts it this way:

Unarmed people block tanks. Street signs are changed so that “F*ck you!” is written on them or all roads point to The Hague to the International Criminal Court. Videos circulate of Ukrainians offering to tow Russian soldiers stranded without fuel to Moscow, and pictures of Russian deserters being welcomed with tea and cheers. (Isaak-Krauß 2022)³

There were also small and large nonviolent forms of resistance to the war inside Russia, from a woman filmed wearing the colors of the Ukrainian flag on the

³ The block quote above was taken from the version in English at <https://www.anabaptistwitness.org/2022/05/the-power-of-nonviolent-resistance/>.

subway, to scientists who publicly expressed their opposition to the war, and persons who demonstrated against the invasion (Christoyannopoulos 2022).

Nonetheless, the military response soon overshadowed all others and crowded out the narrative of alternative forms of resistance. By the day after the invasion, February 25, 2022, US President Joe Biden had already authorized the use of 350 million dollars in military assistance from Department of Defense (DOD) inventories, using Presidential Drawdown Authority. The latter is the capacity to provide military assistance, authorized under section 506(a)(1) of the Foreign Assistance Act (FAA) of the United States. It allows “speedy delivery of defense articles and services from Department of Defense stocks to foreign countries.” By December 27, 2023, there had been 54 such drawdowns. By the fall of 2024, the US had committed more than \$30.4 billion to Ukraine. The flow from US inventories has been constant: a steady stream of ammunitions, weapons and equipment, including Abrams tanks, HIMARS (High Mobility Artillery Rocket System, produced by Lockheed), Howitzers, Javelins, anti-armor systems, air surveillance radars, unmanned aerial systems, counter-UAS and electronic warfare detection equipment, air defense interceptors, anti-armor systems, small arms, heavy equipment transport vehicles, and maintenance support, artillery and tank ammunition, mortar systems, rockets, depleted uranium rounds and anti-tank weapons. The United States has also provided training of fighter pilots and of tank crews (US Department of State 2023).

Notably, none of these weapons have prevented continuing death and destruction in Ukraine. As Fernando Enns puts it:

Is the position of nonviolence in face of aggression obsolete? Not at all – on the contrary. Weapons do not protect from death and destruction. [. . .] The delivery of weapons does not put an end to war, but rather heats it up. [. . .] Neither can we [as peacemakers] protect people in war right now from death and destruction. We also are afraid. But our faith in the power of love is strong. Our trust in the power of nonviolence – as Jesus himself lived it out – is unbroken. (Enns 2022)

Lest his words seem overly idealistic, let us remember what we do know about the death and destruction that result from the way the armed conflict has played out. It is difficult to find reliable data about the consequences of the ongoing war in the lives of people both in Ukraine and in Russia. We know that there have been tens of thousands of civilian casualties in Ukraine,⁴ millions of internally displaced people, and millions of people who have left the country temporarily or permanently. By August 2023, around 70,000 Ukrainian soldiers had died and around 120,000 had been wounded (Cooper 2023). Pentagon calculations checked

⁴ By July 2023, the civilian casualties in Ukraine were calculated by the United Nations at 26,015: 9,369 killed and 16,646 injured (UNHR 2023).

by *New York Times* reporting in February 2024 put the deaths of Russian soldiers at 60,000, with over 240,000 wounded, including many thousands of amputees (MacFarquhar and Masaeva 2024). Neither side wants to publicize its casualties, which continue to add up day by day, week by week, month by month.

Militarism has unacceptably high environmental costs, even when a particular military force is not actively waging war. Military industrialization, for example, depends on fossil fuel consumption, as does the mobilization of troops. The Department of Defense of the United States alone produces more greenhouse gases than entire countries such as Norway or Portugal (Crawford 2023, 142). Both offensive and defensive aspects of the war in Ukraine have taken a terrible environmental toll. A UN report speaks of its “toxic legacy”: there has been extensive damage across the country, “with incidents at nuclear power plants and facilities, energy infrastructure, including oil storage tankers, oil refineries, drilling platforms and gas facilities and distribution pipelines, mines and industrial sites and agro-processing facilities.” As a result, there is air pollution and “potentially serious contamination of ground and surface waters.” Water infrastructure, “including pumping stations, purification plants and sewage facilities,” is severely affected. Furthermore, “multiple industrial facilities, warehouses and factories have been damaged, some storing a range of hazardous substances ranging from solvents to ammonia and plastics.” Alongside this, “hazardous substances have also been released from explosions in agro-industrial storage facilities, including fertilizer and nitric acid plants.” The bombing of livestock farms has led to carcasses that “pose a further public health risk.” Debris in destroyed housing is “likely to be mixed with hazardous materials, particularly asbestos.” There is an “increase of fires in various nature reserves and protected areas, as well as forested areas.” Beyond all of this, “pollution from the extensive use of weapons including in populated areas and the large volumes of military waste, including destroyed military vehicles, creates a major clean-up challenge” (UN Environment 2023). To this should be added the disastrous collapse of the Kakhovka dam in June 2023 (in the Russian-controlled Kherson region in the south) and the fragility of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Station (also in southern Ukraine). The list goes on.

At the same time that the people and the land are suffering horribly, however, the worldwide armament industry is benefitting and thriving. Military contractors Northrop Grumman, Raytheon, Pratt & Whitney, and Lockheed Martin have received millions of dollars in contracts to replenish the US Department of Defense stocks. These companies have gone as far as co-sponsoring a reception at the Ukrainian Embassy in Washington to celebrate their connection (Guyer 2022). Fossil fuel firms and big agriculture traders are also benefitting financially from the protracted conflict (Baines 2022). The triumph of Mars, the god of war, is ac-

accompanied by a triumph of Mammon, the god of money. From the perspective of the gospel of Jesus, both of these gods are idols that promise life but bring death and destruction. Clearly, there are very strong interests for whom the continuation of war means profit, and who thus push back against any perspective that would question the logic of the script that tells us that bellicosity is best dealt with by intensifying counter-bellicosity. Their influence is also a factor in our seeming incapacity to think about a response to the Russian invasion in any way save in terms of the logic of war and more war.

2 Scripts We Live By: Let it Not Be so Among You (Matthew 20:26)

The beginning of the invasion of Ukraine made it very difficult for many of us to think of resistance “otherwise.” It followed a script familiar to us from many movies and novels, that featured a young hero and underdog (Zelenskyy) battling an evil mastermind (Putin). Who would be so remiss as to question the logic of arming the underdog to help him triumph? Accepting this “script” as normative, however, tends to cancel out the possibility of thinking about alternative ways of supporting Ukraine. To imagine scenarios of nonviolent resistance supported by the kind of resources pledged to the war machine is literally “unthinkable” for those of us caught in the logic of spiraling violence and counter-violence. It seems to me that we need to pray for God’s Spirit to help us in “the renewing of our minds” (Rom 12:2) in order to begin to imagine fruitful possibilities for resistance that don’t conform to the business as usual of the war machine. A helpful approach is to ponder this question from the perspective of “otherwise” scripts in the face of war that depart from those normalized in popular culture. The examples that come to my mind are that of the prophet Jeremiah, that of the early Anabaptist theologian Michael Sattler, and that of some minority (or “fringe”) Protestants in Ukraine who are committed to nonviolence.

The Hebrew Bible prophet Jeremiah is a master of nonviolent gestures. His life of prayer – in his case, the prophetic experience of literally hearing and transmitting God’s voice – leads him to believe that it is wrong for Judah to trust in the weapons of the Egyptians in the face of the imminent Babylonian threat. Among his nonviolent gestures of protest are procuring a linen belt (that he then allows to rot; Jeremiah 13:1–11) and making an apparently senseless investment in a parcel of land he knows that is about to be overrun by the Babylonians (32:6–9). He is persecuted, receives death threats, and is mocked by false prophets. The manuscript he has dictated to his scribe Baruch is tossed into the fire by a ruler who

hadn't even finished reading it. He gets thrown in jail, part of the time at the bottom of a muddy cistern without food or water, accused of discouraging both the soldiers and the people generally from the proper defense of Jerusalem (38:1–28). In the end, as an old man, he ends up going with a remnant of the people of Judah to Egypt when they choose (against his advice and his prophecies) to go there.

We might be tempted to read Jeremiah's story through this lens of the Hollywood hero, the rugged individual who triumphs somehow alone against all odds. But if we read the story carefully, we see that Jeremiah is helped and defended by others all the way through. When the manuscript of his prophecies gets thrown into the fire, his scribe Baruch writes them down again, even adding more detail. In fact, Baruch keeps on writing all the way to Egypt. When Jeremiah receives death threats, friends step forth to protect him (26:24). When he gets thrown in the cistern, friends again come to his defense and manage to throw him a rope of rags tied together to get him out of the well. They convince the king to provide better conditions for his imprisonment, so he can have some light and fresh air (38:8). In the story of Jeremiah we see the power of nonviolent gestures of protest and the power of community in protest, even while nonviolent resistance is not always "effective" for the persons engaging in the protest: the tide is not always turned by their actions. Nonetheless, we still read the story of Jeremiah and learn from it today, because the descendants of those who went into exile to Babylon preserved it and cherished it.

The second script I want to mention is the story of Michael Sattler, the former prior of a Benedictine monastery in the Breisgau who became a leader of the early Anabaptist movement. His adherence to the Anabaptist way came in the context of the 16th century peasant unrest. In May 1527, he was tried for heresy in Rottenburg am Neckar, tortured and killed. The main matter at issue was his position on resistance to the hypothetical case of an invasion by the Turks, that is, by Muslims. Sattler, having conferred with his Anabaptist "brethren and sisters" and speaking for the group, pointed out that for confessing Christians, Jesus' command in Matt 5:21 ruled out warfare and killing. He thus insisted that if an invasion were to happen, his weapon of choice would be prayer, not armed defense (Williams and Mergal 1957, 144). Sattler refused to submit to the logic of responding to war with war, and even though such a war was at that moment a hypothetical, his refusal to submit to the dominant script about how a people should defend itself from invasion was enough to cost him his life. Nevertheless, his story remains as a powerful witness to resistance otherwise.

In Ukraine, the pressure on churches to sacralize the militarized defense has been intense. In the case of Protestant minority churches (Baptist and Pentecostal), many of the pastors and parishioners left the country soon after the Russian

attack, while simultaneously many new people began to attend services, in what the churches themselves describe as signs of an “awakening.” Some Protestants joined the war effort: “many Protestants (particularly from the mainstream officially registered all-Ukrainian Baptist and Pentecostal Unions) were drafted into or volunteered for the army and defended their country with weapons in their hands” (Vagramenko 2023, 123). However, some Christians belonging to more religiously marginal groups, such as unregistered Baptists, reformed Adventists, Pentecostals, and Jehovah’s Witnesses “refused to hold guns in their hands, firmly standing on their pacifist principles” (Vagramenko 2023, 123). These were groups that during the Soviet and post-Soviet periods had developed pacifist stances in an apparently “apolitical” manner that – nonetheless – has material, political consequences. Vagramenko argues that

although their refusal to fight in the war and their historically apolitical attitudes elicit social blame and can lead to the further marginalization of religious minorities, many Protestant groups attempt to develop alternative foundations for *bottom-up* peacebuilding and reconciliation in this war-torn society. (Vagramenko 2023, 124)

She points out that “these groups’ historical legacy of civil persecution and repression during the Soviet period helps to provide them with an interpretative framework to comprehend traumatic social changes and losses brought about by the war” and that “the ongoing war brought about re-traumatizing experiences,” but “traumatic historical memory has turned into a mobilizing force for believers’ agency and stimulated creative social responses during times of war” (124). As one Baptist man that Vagramenko interviewed for her ethnography puts it: “I am not going to fight; I am not going to shoot. I don’t want tears to be shed somewhere in Russia. I don’t want to kill, to kill Russians. I simply want to help people. If needed, I will give help to a Russian” (Vagramenko 2023, 133). He added that “In war, some prepare ammunition, some make Molotov cocktails, but we prepare our own weapon – the Word of God and prayer” (Vagramenko 2023, 134). These groups have also focused on organizing humanitarian aid. A network was created by religious communities from different confessions: “Pentecostals from one region arranged the production of packed ready-to-eat food; Baptists from another region distributed it to the front line; and Orthodox and Baptists organized evacuation transport from Irpin, Bucha, Hostomel, and Borodianka” (Vagramenko 2023, 133). Vagramenko points out that

[e]ven against the background of Russian aggression, the majority of Ukrainian Protestants don’t foster religious forms of nationalism or securitization of their faith (when a religious narrative is applied in the creation of an image of an external enemy). Many Protestant communities across the country keep Russian as a second (in some regions as the first) language in their religious services. (Vagramenko 2023, 134)

Of particular interest are the Jehovah's Witnesses, who have a hard-earned tradition of not participating in military service. This historical trajectory gives them a strong sense of identity and ability to "resist otherwise." As one man put it:

We don't fight with weapons, and people blame us for not protecting the country. I know for sure that there is not a single Jehovah's Witness in Ukraine who will kill someone in this war. But I also know for sure that there is not a single Jehovah's Witness in Russia who will take a gun in his hands, nobody in Ukraine will be killed by the hand of a Jehovah's Witness. (Vagramenko 2023, 136)

Vagramenko adds that "while standing on the grounds of faith-based pacifism, ordinary believers either develop alternative forms of social activism in times of war or pursue their own models for peace and dialogue, while refusing to engage in violence" (Vagramenko 2023, 136).

What are we to make of these alternative "scripts?" On the one hand, it should be said that there are actually many situations in which nonviolent resistance works very well to effect lasting societal change, as the work of Erica Chenoweth illustrates (Chenoweth 2021). On the other hand, I'm admittedly not bringing forth these alternative scripts as examples of great effectiveness in any immediate sense. Jeremiah failed in convincing Judah of the wisdom of his words. Michael Sattler was executed, as was the rest of his little community, including his wife. Those enacting their faith-based nonviolent resistance in Ukraine know that it is unlikely that their actions alone will put an end to the war. What I do want to point out is that for those of us who purpose to follow in the way of Jesus, through prayer it is possible to find in scripture itself, in the theological tradition, and in contemporary examples, inspiration for alternative life scripts to those which have been ingrained in us in everything from the *Iliad* to Hollywood – and even by some readings of the biblical narrative – in which violence is normalized and even sanctified. To explore such alternate scripts is to be able to imagine possibilities of resistance that are unthinkable otherwise.

3 A Plurality of Nonviolent Options: Be as Shrewd as Serpents and as Gentle as Doves (Matthew 10:16)

This takes me to my last point: what might we do right now to support nonviolent resistance in Ukraine? As Tatiana Kalenychenko points out, the process of peace and reconciliation requires internal effort: therapeutic work can help us put aside feelings of superiority and the need to put down another group in order to

elevate our own. That helps in re-personalizing and re-humanizing those who we perceive as our enemies (Kalenychenko 2023, 227). It is an exercise that is important as a spiritual practice in the face of “others” who may seem different to us or hostile, and one that gains all the more relevance when we are in the position of being attacked or harmed. How can we seek to defend ourselves without mirroring the indifference, the dehumanization or the hate that seems to be coming from the other side?

Eli McCarthy, who teaches Justice and Peace Studies at Georgetown University suggests five steps those of us outside Ukraine can take (McCarthy 2022).⁵

1. Amplify the nonviolent resistance to the war happening both in Ukraine and Russia (this can be done both in material ways through hubs for coordination of assistance and by circulating information)
2. Support unarmed, nonviolent civilian support and protection (for example through Unarmed Civilian Protection [UCP])⁶
3. Rehumanize all stakeholders (including enemies or adversaries; for instance, labels such as “thugs” and “monsters” should be avoided)
4. Encourage leaders in Ukraine, including Zelenskyy, to sign a phase-one agreement to end the war (this could save thousands of lives on both sides)
5. Send strategic delegations and humanitarian airlifts (for instance, cargo planes with medicine and foods) to help generate peace zones

For those of us attempting to imagine or live out alternative scripts to that of the inevitability of responding to aggression and war with more armed violence, an important dimension of nonviolent resistance is to avoid judging or condemning those who do not respond nonviolently to a situation of aggression. As McCarthy points out, “active nonviolence is not about condemning or judging people who lean toward violent resistance in really difficult situations like the one Ukrainians face.” The way people try to stand up actively against injustice are worthy of admiration. As he sees it, as a stance of accompaniment, active nonviolence is primarily about the solidarity we can exercise with people on the ground – Ukrainians and others – who are engaged “in a variety of creative, courageous, nonviolent ways” (McCarthy 2022).

As I’ve already mentioned, there have indeed been many nonviolent acts of resistance by Ukrainians since February 2022, some of them inspired by religious conviction, some of them not. As those who have engaged in such actions cer-

⁵ See also the recommendations of the Alliance for Peacebuilding, <https://www.allianceforpeacebuilding.org/ukraine-call-to-action-topline-recommendations>.

⁶ UCP is an evidence-based strategy for the protection of civilians through the methodology of non-armed violence interruption (more at <https://nonviolentpeaceforce.org/>).

tainly know, neither a commitment to resistance otherwise that is born of following Jesus nor any other form of nonviolent resistance is a guarantee of success (neither is armed or violent resistance, for that matter). It may not put an immediate end to an unwelcome occupation and it may entail suffering. But what we do know for certain is that the current logic of war already in place is leading to massive suffering and destruction of people and of the earth.

I hope that by now it is clear that I am not arguing for non-resistance. I am, rather, asking whether mirroring violence and armed aggression is the best way to resist injustice, violence – and in this case, invasion – if what we are looking for is to minimize death, human suffering, ecological destruction, and cycles of renewed violence. My sense is that armed resistance is not the best way to do so, but rather that putting the amount of energy, bravery and resources that usually go into a war effort into alternative forms of resistance instead, may well be more effective. I'm also arguing that, beyond "effectiveness," for those of us who try to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, participation in armed struggle – which, it would seem, necessarily entails the dehumanization of the Other in order to be able to fight to the death – does not seem to me like the best way to be faithful to the teaching of Jesus to love God, our neighbors (and ourselves) and our enemies.

That said, I would not deign to prescribe to Ukrainians – or to anybody else, for that matter – how they should or should not act in the face of armed aggression and invasion. We don't really know how we will react or what we will believe until we are forced to respond to the pressure of extreme situations. Some people of faith who previously identified as pacifists changed their minds when faced with the brutality of Russian bombardments (Zordrager 2024, 468–469). Many Ukrainian women have found themselves supporting the armed forces on the one hand, while engaging in tactics of nonviolent conflict resolution and working at the grassroots level to provide food, shelter, and emotional care on the other (Zordrager 2024, 471). Others, who may have not thought they were not pacifists at all, have found that nonviolent resistance is the best way forward.

What I have tried to do here is, first, to suggest that an *otherwise* resistance is often more positively transformative in terms of human lives lost and of ecological harm than the script of warlike responses to war preferred by the powerful. Thus, we should hesitate to normalize that response as the only viable, possible or effective stance in the face of aggression. Second, even in the cases where it might seem ineffective at some levels, a prayerful exploration of nonviolent resistance may still be the preferable path. It opens up our imaginations and with them, new possibilities for transformation and for a future with hope. It seems to me that it is a way that is much closer to that of Jesus than the paths that our societies – who seem largely unwilling to ponder the actual human and ecological costs both of offensive and defensive war strategies – hold to be logical and reasonable.

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