

Critical Mass Weekly News Briefing



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PEACE

Dave Middleton

There are encouraging signs from the latest peace talks between Ukraine and Russia. According to Reuters, both sides reported positive progress from the talks which began at the weekend.

Ukraine negotiators say that they are having 'hard talks' about a ceasefire, immediate withdrawal of troops and security guarantees with Russia. Ukrainian negotiator and presidential adviser, Mykhailo Podolyak, said: "We will not concede in principle on any positions. Russia now understands this. Russia is already beginning to talk constructively."

Leonid Slutsky, a Russian delegate, was quoted by RIA news agency as saying the talks had made substantial progress.

"According to my personal expectations, this progress may grow in the coming days into a joint position of both delegations, into documents for signing," Slutsky said. So far neither side have said specifically what these documents might actually contain.

Meanwhile, US Deputy Secretary of State, Wendy Sherman, said Russia was showing signs of a willingness to engage in substantive negotiations about ending a conflict in which far too many have already died.

Peace in a moment?

Last week, Russia told Ukraine it was ready to halt military operations 'in a moment' if Kyiv meets a list of conditions. Kremlin spokesperson, Dmitry Peskov, had said Moscow was demanding that Ukraine cease military action, change its constitution to enshrine neutrality, acknowledge Crimea as Russian territory, and recognise the separatist republics of Donetsk and Lugansk as independent states. He continued: "We really are finishing the demilitarisation of Ukraine. We will finish it. But the main thing is that Ukraine ceases its military action. They should stop their military action and then no one will shoot."

However, shortly after that statement the Russian military intensified its bombing of key cities in Ukraine. This was possibly in response to President Zelensky's continued appeal for NATO to reinforce a no-fly zone.

The fact that Russia is offering any concessions is being entirely ignored by the main British broadcaster, the BBC, who, as long ago as March 1st, were headlining with "Fighting escalates despite ceasefire talks". CNN are reporting that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky pressed US President Joe Biden for more sanctions to further squeeze Russia in a call last Friday.

Truth, counter-truth and propaganda

Whilst most western reporting is stressing that Russia is a bad faith actor, it is hard not to conclude that Zelensky's desire to be part of NATO may not be helping matters. If Russia are determined that any peace must include a definite commitment by Ukraine to remain independent of NATO, and Ukraine are determined to be brought under the umbrella of NATO, it is difficult to see how the two sides can reach an accommodation. Meanwhile, the military action continues. Russian forces fired more than 30 missiles at Yavoriv military training ground, located between Lviv and the

Polish border on Sunday.

Whilst the tentative steps toward peace continue, the United Nations reports that there have been 636 civilian deaths. Of those killed, 46 have been confirmed to have been children. Meanwhile, the US military estimates that around 3,000 Ukrainian armed forces and around 5,500 Russian armed forces have been killed. Of course, none of these figures can be independently verified and, depending on who you listen to, the war is either going very well or very badly for both sides!

Viktor Zolotov, chief of Russia's national guard and a member of Putin's security council, said progress had been slower than expected. His comments, made on Sunday, deviated from those of the Kremlin and Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu who said Russia's operation in Ukraine will be completed on time and in full. The Kremlin reinforced that the operation was going to plan, but that its army might change tack and look to seize full control of major cities. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Russia had been careful not to target civilians. According to western media sources, this is the exact opposite of what Russia has actually done. The bombing of cities has led both to a mass exodus, causing the refugee crisis emerging in Poland, and the devastation which is being reported.

Critical Mass continues to call for an end to the Russian invasion but also for a recognition that Russia does have legitimate security concerns prompted by NATO's eastern expansion. Any peace will start from a recognition that an immediate ceasefire is a precondition of negotiations. If Russia is telling the truth they want no more than for Ukraine to give up its ambition to become part of the European Union and NATO, that does not seem too high a price to pay to bring peace back to the Ukrainian people.

Photo by Robert Bye on Unsplash



OR WAR

Mike Stanton

Nuclear war is now more likely than at any time since the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. The USA had set up missile bases in Turkey, and Russia retaliated by siting its missiles in Cuba. As Russian ships sailed towards the American naval blockade around Cuba, we thought the world was ending. I was nine at the time and have spent my entire life in the shadow of the bomb. Khrushchev appeared to back down by agreeing to remove his missiles. But the US had secretly agreed to remove its missiles from Turkey as well, and so the crisis ended.

Russian Toecaps

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has raised the possibility of war between NATO and Russia, which could quickly escalate into nuclear war. Such a war would become inevitable if NATO tried to enforce a no fly zone over Ukraine. This is why all the NATO powers have vetoed the idea.

But rather than tone down the rhetoric we have Health Secretary Javid repeating Johnson's phrase about 'one Russian toecap.'

One Russian toecap on NATO soil will be considered an Act of War, cabinet minister warns

<https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/world-news/one-russian-toecap-nato-soil-26467861>

In truth, it is more likely that a stray Russian missile will overshoot its target and land in error on NATO territory. Will that be enough to justify a war with Russia? One can only hope that Johnson and Javid will not be in charge of the response if it happens.

Civil Defence

The renewed threat of nuclear war has drawn attention to the lack of any civil defence preparations in the UK. Virtually all civil defence preparations for use in a nuclear war have been abandoned. Local authorities are no longer obliged to draw up civil defence plans. We have no sirens, no bunkers, no means of alerting the public. And, even if we still had those, there is no up-to-date guidance for the public.

When Covid happened the government first claimed to be fully prepared and, when it was obvious they had not prepared at all, they defended their lack of preparedness, saying the viral threat was unprecedented and unforeseen. That was a lie as well.

They will find it even harder to claim ignorance as a defence for their failure to prepare for a future nuclear war, especially as they already devote £2.3 billion a year to maintaining the Trident programme for use in such a war. So how do they justify scrapping the civil defence measures because they were not needed when the cold war ended in the early 1990s, while maintaining our own nuclear threat?

A Nuclear App?

Finding PPE against nuclear attack will be harder than it was against Covid. Perhaps Serco will get the track and trace contract for incoming missiles? Not so daft as it sounds because the



Photo by Jordy Meow on Unsplash

government are developing a phone app based on the NHS Covid app to give warnings of danger to life nearby. It should have launched by now but has been delayed, according to an unnamed source in the cabinet office.

There is no public warning system because the Government has dithered on it as no one department wants to pay for it, whether that be the Home Office, the Defra or the Cabinet Office. We are totally unprepared.

UK has no alert system to warn public of imminent nuclear bomb attack from Putin with

funding row blamed (inews.co.uk)

Let us hope we are still around to use it when it does appear.

Panic

Both the military and the emergency services have urged the government to update guidance to the public that was last published in 1980. They have refused because they say it could cause us to panic. The previous advice came in a pamphlet called Protect and Survive. With advice on how to build your own nuclear shelter or whitewash your windows to deflect the blast, it was so laughable that people did not panic. They got angry.

Protest and Survive

CND and the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation responded with their own pamphlet, Protest and Survive. Its author, historian E.P. Thompson, spoke to packed meetings around the country. In 1981 the Greenham Common peace camp was established to protest the stationing of American nuclear weapons at the base. CND membership soared. A national demonstration in Barrow-in-Furness in 1984 attracted 20,000 people. Striking miners who

were in town to collect money at the shipyard gates supported the demo and joked that CND meant Coal Not Dole! 1,000 people formed a human chain around the Trident submarine works. We all sang "We Shall Overcome" and held a four minute silence for the victims of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

This is what the government fears. Not public panic, but public outrage and protest. Then, as now, we cannot rely on the government or the Labour opposition with its loyalty to NATO. We should take E.P. Thompson at his word to Protest And Survive.

WRITE FOR PEACE

Susie Granic

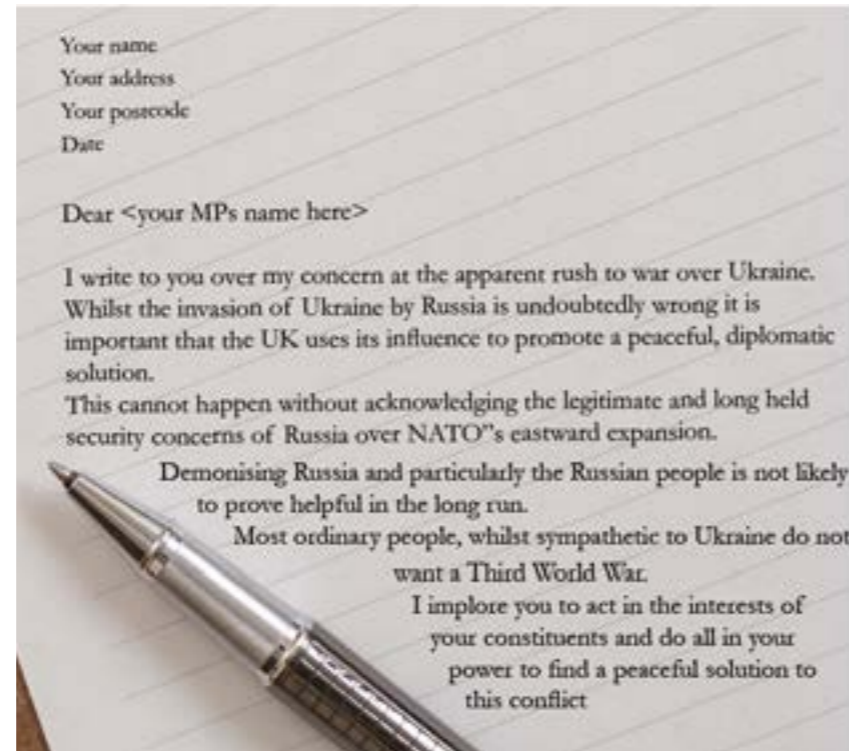
THERE are currently far too many voices, not just politicians, but the general public also, who appear to be egging on this war in Ukraine. Some may not realise it but, by backing Zelenskyy's call for a no fly zone, they are basically risking an escalation so terrible many may not realise the far-reaching consequences. Critical Mass published an article on these consequences yesterday, specifically the chances of a nuclear war, and how totally unprepared we are for such a threat.

On Wednesday Zelenskyy had said, "The negotiations sound more realistic", yet in his speech to the United States Congress on the same day he repeated his calls for a no fly zone over Ukraine. This is the very thing feared by most who know how that could so easily see the war spiral out of anybody's control.

During his speech the Ukrainian president invoked the memory of Pearl Harbour and compared it to what is happening in Ukraine – and yes, both were attacks on sovereign nations – but he also appealed to the US Congress using Martin Luther King's words.

'I have a dream.' These words are known to each of you today. I can say I have a need, a need to protect our sky. I need your decision, your help, which means exactly the same, the same you feel when you hear the words, 'I have a dream'.

President Zelenskyy speaking to US Congress



We are all familiar, or we certainly should be, with what MLK was talking about, and it certainly wasn't war, it was equality and an end to segregation and violence against Black people, so I personally find Zelenskyy using the words of such a towering figure of the civil rights movement in a call, not for peace, but for what would likely to be a worsening of the war, a tad cynical.

Although, I must make it clear, I am not supporting in any way what Putin has done and is doing; it is only that I think Zelenskyy is in a little over his head. Not surprising really for the former actor and comedian who has been president for just under three years and had no former political experience. While that is not uncommon in the US, it certainly is in the UK. We may believe most of our current government (and opposition) are corrupt and sometimes appear not to know what they are doing, but they are at least, in the main part, maintaining cool heads and rejecting the idea of a no fly zone.

Any escalation, any at all, would be of incredible danger to the world. And while our hearts go out to Ukrainian refugees and those suffering and killed, we need not more war, but peace. Yet nobody is speaking of this, there appear to be no diplomatic solutions offered to bring this conflict to an end. Hence, we at Critical Mass are launching our 'Write for Peace' campaign today in our magazine.

We are asking people – you – to write to your MP and tell them that a negotiated peace is the only solution.

You can use this website to find your MP's address: <https://members.parliament.uk/FindYourMP>

We have text on our website which you can cut and paste, or use your own words, but please write and encourage others to write and add their names to the call for peace. It really is the only solution. For those in Ukraine and for the rest of us.



Photo by Valentin Salja on Unsplash

Just when is it deemed okay to seize properties?

Susie Granic

WE are all well accustomed to the hypocrisy, lies and outright corruption from the Tory government, but this hypocrisy stared us in the face this week when police evicted squatters from a Russian oligarch's house in London. This came after our Levelling Up Secretary, Michael Gove, had said earlier that Russian oligarchs' mansions should be seized to give homes to Ukrainian refugees.

So which is it? Seize their homes or evict the squatters who had occupied the home to show solidarity with Ukrainians? A bit of both according to Prime Minister Johnson, whose spokesperson said: "Squatting in residential buildings is illegal but we are working to identify the appropriate use for seized properties while owners are subject to sanctions".

'Liberated'

The squatters had occupied a London mansion belonging to the family of Russian billionaire Oleg Deripaska, who was placed on Britain's sanctions list last week and whose assets were frozen by Britain last week. Gathering on the balcony at the front of the property, the squatters unfurled a Ukrainian flag and placed a banner reading "This property has been liberated".

In a statement, the squatters said: "You occupy Ukraine, we occupy you. By occupying this mansion, we want to show solidarity with the people of Ukraine, but also the people of Russia who never agreed to this madness."

Gove had said on the BBC only the day before, "I want to explore an option which would allow us to use the homes and properties of sanctioned individuals – as long as they are sanctioned – for humanitarian and other purposes."

Homes for Refugees

He spoke about the new Homes for Refugees scheme offering £350 a month to Britons who will give a room to a Ukrainian refugee escaping the war. A nice idea, but those willing to house refugees will do it out of kindness and compassion, not because they want money from the state – though obviously that will help those in need – and paying people for rooms does leave the scheme open to misuse by those wanting only the money rather than to actually help people.

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up (and I do apologise for going off track a bit here, but a secretary for levelling up? If you want to correct the imbalances, mainly economic, between areas and social groups in the UK, how about looking at energy price hikes, benefits etc?) said it is expected the Government's new sponsorship route will bring tens of thousands of Ukrainian refugees to the UK though he was unable to say where he got that figure from.

He added, speaking of the oligarchs' homes: "There's quite a high legal bar to cross and we're not talking about permanent confiscation. But we are saying: 'you're sanctioned, you're supporting Putin, this home is here, you have no right to use or

profit from it – and more than that, while you are not using or profiting from it, if we can use it in order to help others, let's do that'."

I find it interesting that when Jeremy Corbyn voiced the idea a few years ago that unoccupied London homes could possibly be seized to house the victims of the Grenfell tragedy, it was met with a huge outcry from the press. These same people who are only too often telling us 'we should look after our own first' didn't appear to feel that way when it was mainly people of colour who were made homeless after their tower block caught on fire through no fault of theirs.

Gove's own words: "while you are not using or profiting from it, if we can use it in order to help others, let's do that". How is that in any way different to what the Islington North MP wanted?



*Michael Gove -
UK Parliament
official portraits
2017*

Capitalism Is The Real Crisis

Howard Thorp

While the war rages in Ukraine, the UK has been hit by a cost of living crisis. High inflation, rents and energy bills and low pay, benefits and pensions, after a decade of Tory austerity, have brought us a perfect storm. Millions of families are struggling to manage and keep a warm roof over their heads. Even the middle classes have been hit by an extortionate rise in fuel bills, and money saving expert Martin Lewis has said, "Energy bills would cause some to starve or freeze".

Anti-poverty campaigner Jack Monroe, AKA Bootstrap Cook, has been actively working to expose the Tory government's mendacity and failure to deal with a crisis which is of their making. A few weeks ago she carried out research to show that the CPI (consumer prices index) which is used to measure inflation, failed to take into account the rise in costs which affect the poorest, particularly food prices. She noted that the cost of some supermarket basics had increased by over 100%. As a result, the ONS agreed to review the items in its prices basket of goods.

Yesterday in the Observer she attacked the government for their complicity in causing this crisis through austerity and failing to sufficiently raise pay and benefits:

"This government has routinely balanced its books on the backs of those least able to shoulder the burdens, and the macabre and heartbreaking roll call of the names of those who have died as a result of the failures and cruelties of the DWP runs to the thousands. And if their deaths, and lives, are not learned from, then many, many more people will die in the months and years to come."

Disabled activist Frances Ryan has pointed out how the Tory antipathy towards disabled people has led them into deeper poverty. Many disabled people missed out on the £20 benefits uplift to universal credit introduced by Rishi Sunak in 2020 as a result of the Covid crisis. The government is set to increase benefits by 3.1% at a time when inflation is expected to rise by over 7%. She says:

"Bear in mind that benefit rates are already at a 30-year low – a level so meagre that the government's own research shows disabled people are unable to afford food, rent and energy bills, even before the inflation hike. April's real-terms benefits cut comes only a few months after ministers cut the universal credit "uplift" of £20 a week. That move itself came after a decade of cuts and freezes to social security. The only things that have gone up for people on benefits in recent years are the queues at the food bank."

Richard J Murphy, the accountant and tax activist, has crunched the figures on the predicted 54% rise in energy prices next month and concludes that the increase will result in massive profits for the energy companies. He predicts that energy producer profits will rise 40 fold as a result of energy price increases, and, as he points out: "Let's be clear, that none of the cost of producing energy in



*Photo by Marcel
Strauß on
Unsplash*

the world has changed because of war in Ukraine. In fact, right now, there is not even a shortage of energy in the world because of that war: Russia is still supplying oil and gas right now". "It's vital to remember this: oil and gas are going up in price because people – oil companies, hedge funds and others – are speculating in oil and gas in the expectation that there will be shortages. No one actually thinks the stuff is going to cost more to produce."

Wherever you look there is a crisis – climate, Covid, cost of living, healthcare, housing – the list goes on. The cause of these crises is neoliberal capitalism, forty years of an onslaught on workers' pay and conditions and the privatisation of public services to provide easy profits for banks and corporations. Decades of deregulation and environmental destruction. This is no accident. It's a deliberate change brought about by politicians who work hand in hand with the super rich and the oligarchs that has given us the rotten, corrupt system we live in today. Without real change things can only get worse. It's time to wake up to the fact that the real crisis we face is capitalism.

Is Putin a War Criminal?

Mike Stanton

Is Putin a war criminal? Russia is fighting a dirty war in Ukraine. Civilians are not just collateral damage. They are being targeted in his desperate attempt to reboot the invasion and capture the cities which were expected to fall in the first week of the war. The media may refer to the Russian blitzkrieg in their efforts to equate Putin with Hitler, but this is a blitzkrieg that has stalled. Instead of rolling into Kyiv, the Russian forces will now have to batter their way in against determined defenders.

War Crimes

Does this constitute a war crime? Ever since the first Gulf War, we in the west have comforted ourselves with the thought that smart weapons can be precisely targeted to take out military targets and minimise civilian casualties. It helps that the wars that the USA and UK have been involved with, such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine, Yemen, Libya and Syria, have happened in faraway countries, of which we know little and care less.

But our bombs and missiles and airstrikes have inflicted the same damage on civilian populations in those countries as the Russians have in Ukraine. And weapons we condemn have been used by us in foreign wars.

This stuff just keeps coming. It's morally repulsive. <https://t.co/cQaKi9YeHC>

— Jonathon Shafi (@Jonathon_Shafi) March 3, 2022

There you have it. Weapons we used in Afghanistan are morally repulsive, but only when Putin uses them in Ukraine.

Mosul

Sharp eyed readers will have noticed that the ruined city pictured at the top of this story is not Mariupol or Volnovakha in Ukraine; it is Mosul, after it was liberated from ISIS by Iraqi ground forces supported by their Western allies air power during a year long battle in 2016/17. The battle took so long because ISIS were dug in and were using a trapped civilian population as human shields, and the allies were trying to minimise civilian casualties. Even so, there are credible estimates of over 40,000 civilian deaths. And, although thousands died at the hands of ISIS, the majority were killed by allied artillery and air strikes.

This is the reality of modern war. It is just as savage as any war in history, and civilians always suffer more casualties than the armed forces involved. As Ernest Hemingway said, "War is always a crime". So the warmongers are always war criminals.



Photo by Gwydion M. Williams is marked with CC BY 2.0.

Warmongers

Warmongers in the UK and the USA, notably Bush and Blair, are responsible for much of the suffering from war that arose from their own illegal war against Saddam Hussein and regime change in Iraq. This turned Iraq into a failed state and created the power vacuum which gave impetus to Islamic State.

But it goes back much further. The first Iraq War or Gulf War in 1991 helped to build support for al-Qaeda, who launched the 9/11 attacks on the USA which led to the Afghan War and the second Iraq War. Muslim peoples in the old Soviet Union were also radicalised by the events in 1991 and sought independence, nowhere more so than in Chechnya, where they fought and lost two wars with Russia.

Chechnya

Putin was President for most of the second Chechen war from 1999-2009. That war, especially the siege and battle for Grozny in 1999-2000, saw many war crimes. Between five and eight thousand civilians died as a result of Russian bombardments of Grozny and atrocities committed by the special forces that took the city after the rebels withdrew.

That did not stop the Labour Government from courting Putin. Both Foreign Secretary Cook and Prime Minister Blair visited Russia to meet with Putin. It may have been an exercise in realpolitik, but did it really justify inviting the architect of the destruction of Grozny to the UK that year for a meeting with the queen, and a full state visit three years later?

One Labour MP spoke out against Putin in the aftermath of Grozny. Jeremy Corbyn, of course, said the invitation to Putin was 'premature and inappropriate.' Now Corbyn, Stop the War, and anyone else who argues that peace in Ukraine is more important than trying to use it to win a proxy war with Russia is condemned as a Putin enabler.

Imperialism

Is Putin a war criminal? Yes. But so are Bush and Blair, the original Putin enabler, who has put on his tin helmet to suggest that NATO should not rule out direct military intervention in Ukraine! And so is every other western leader who has unleashed war on undeserving civilian populations around the world to defend 'our' interests. Defending 'our' interests by inflicting war on foreign countries is imperialism. The UK are past masters in imperialist adventures. We are currently heavily invested in the Saudi war against Yemen and active supporters of the Israeli war against Palestine. Putin may be a war criminal. But the UK government is a partner in crime.

