

The Peace Movement and Ukraine: John Feffer Replies to Critics

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[John Feffer was interviewed by email by Stephen R. Shalom of the New Politics editorial board.]

New Politics (NP): *You wrote an article for Foreign Policy in Focus entitled “The Surprising Pervasiveness of American Arrogance,” criticizing a view in the peace movement on the war in Ukraine. Medea Benjamin, Nicolas J. S. Davies, and Marcy Winograd (hereafter BDW) wrote a response to you, also published on Foreign Policy in Focus, “The Surprising Pervasiveness Of Pro-War Propaganda.” I’d like to discuss your reaction to this critique.*

BDW argue that the United States, as Ukraine’s main arms supplier, has an obligation to push Ukraine towards negotiations at the same time that the world is pushing the Russians towards negotiations. BDW have called for an end to U.S. weapons to Ukraine. Do you think cutting off arms to Ukraine will hasten diplomacy?

John Feffer (JF): In some cases, cutting off the supply of weapons to a conflict will increase the likelihood of successful peace negotiations. But that’s not the case with Ukraine. The Ukrainians are not just fighting to oust Russian troops from occupied territory. They’re fighting to stop Russian soldiers from seizing more land and, indeed, the entire country. They’ve seen what kind of war crimes the Russian soldiers have committed. They will fight with whatever means they have to prevent those horrors from being visited upon themselves, their families, their friends. This is, in effect, a national liberation struggle, like the Vietnamese fight against the French and then the United States. If the Ukrainians don’t have U.S. weapons to fight the occupation forces, they will fight with weapons imported from elsewhere, with guns unearthed from World War II-era caches, with rocks if necessary.

Diplomacy will be advanced not primarily by the actions of the United States but by those of Russia: stopping its aerial bombing, its efforts to seize more territory, and its ultimate retreat from occupied territory.

Of course, if the United States had never provided Ukraine with weapons in the first place, Russia would have succeeded with its invasion. The end of the war would have meant the end of Ukraine,

which remains a potential scenario should the United States cut off arms shipments today.

NP: *BDW say that “The U.S. didn’t start the war, but it’s helped continue it.” Do you think this is true? Specifically, BDW claim that Washington has blocked peace agreements that Ukraine has wanted to pursue and that your denial of this is a “willful negation of well-documented real-world events.” How do you respond?*

JF: According to Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, “It is well known that we supported the proposal of the Ukrainian side to negotiate early in the special military operation and by the end of March, the two delegations agreed on the principle to settle this conflict. It is [also] well known and was published openly that our American, British, and some European colleagues told Ukraine that it is too early to deal, and the arrangement which was almost agreed was never revisited by the Kyiv regime.”

This is one of the “well-documented real-world events” that BDW are referring to, well-documented by the Russian government at least. Let’s take a closer look at this claim.

By the end of March, Russia and Ukraine had come to some rough agreement on a possible deal. The Russians said they would withdraw to the pre-invasion line; the Ukrainians said that they would take NATO membership off the table. There was still some disagreement over the “security guarantees” that Washington would provide Kyiv. Maybe the two sides could have reached an agreement. Naftali Bennett, the Israel prime minister involved in the negotiations, rated its prospects at 50/50.

But then came the revelations of Russian war crimes in Bucha in early April. These weren’t the first revelations of Russian atrocities, but they marked a turning point. The Ukrainians became considerably more skeptical of Russian willingness to adhere to any deal. And Russian President Vladimir Putin announced that a peace deal was at a dead end because the Ukrainians had fabricated (!) the news of war crimes in Bucha.

Then there’s UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s visit to Kyiv on April 9, 2022, when he supposedly scuttled the emerging deal. The evidence of Johnson’s pressuring of Zelensky comes from an article from *Ukrainska Pravda*. In fact, as this account makes clear, Johnson wasn’t telling Zelensky anything he didn’t already know or believe, namely that Putin couldn’t be trusted to adhere to the deal that was on the table.

Behind these claims of U.S. (or UK) intransigence is the notion that the West is eager to use Ukrainians as cannon fodder for their larger aim of weakening Russia and bringing down Putin’s government. This claim ignores the evidence of a considerable difference of opinion within the Biden administration over Ukraine, with some favoring a more aggressive military response and others preferring a more vigorous diplomatic approach.

Aside from this internal debate, the United States has good reasons to want an earlier rather than later resolution to the war. Supplying the Ukrainians is costly and draws down the U.S. arsenal. The war raises the risk of the use of nuclear weapons as well as the prospect of “loose nukes” if Russian domestic security breaks down (in the case of another coup attempt, for instance). And the focus on Russia distracts attention from what the U.S. foreign policy establishment believes to be the principal foe, China. In comparison to a number of other Ukrainian allies, the United States is actually quite “soft.” The Biden administration has hesitated on the delivery of certain weapon systems and been very lukewarm on the issue of NATO membership for Ukraine.

NP: *BDW give a list of things that the U.S. and its allies could do to help support negotiations, such as reopen the ABM treaty, offer to renegotiate the New START Treaty, and offer EU membership*

and a Marshall Fund to rebuild Ukraine. What do you think of these things?

JF: The United States should absolutely recommit to arms control negotiations with Russia (and other countries). EU membership for Ukraine is already on the table: it was granted candidate status in June 2022. And Ukraine will need enormous resources to rebuild, which its allies should provide.

So, these are critically important policies. Will they help in advancing peace negotiations between Russia and Ukraine? Probably not, because they do not address the drivers of the conflict at this point. Putin is committed to expanding the “Russian world,” and Ukraine is determined to oust all occupiers from its country. Any peace negotiation will ultimately have to focus on this territorial question.

NP: *BDW respond to your criticism that they ignore Ukrainian voices by citing their listening to Yuri Sheliashenko, the executive secretary of the Ukrainian Pacifist Movement, the Ukrainian Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, and others. They ask, “Does Feffer want us to listen only to Ukrainians who toe the line on the present government position of no territorial compromise?” How do you answer this challenge?*

JF: Of course it is possible to find Ukrainians who (more or less) support BDW’s position. It is a big country, after all. But there are three points to make here.

The first is: what do the vast majority of Ukrainians support? According to numerous public opinion polls, the overwhelming majority of Ukrainians reject the “peace now” approach.

The second is: what does the Ukrainian left support? The progressive sector of Ukrainian society, which is generally skeptical of the Zelensky government policies on politics and the economy, is united on the issue of the war. This Ukraine Peace Appeal, signed by a broad swath of civil society organizations and addressed to Western peace movements, strongly supports military assistance to Ukraine.

And the third is: are BDW really listening to the Ukrainian voices that they have cited? As a pacifist, Yuri Sheliashenko does indeed oppose arms shipments to the Ukrainian government and supports war resisters within the country. But he also supports resistance against the Russian occupation.

And here is what Nina Potarska, the Ukraine coordinator for WILPF, had to say at an “international summit for peace in Ukraine” that was held in Vienna in mid-June and that featured presentations by Noam Chomsky, Jeffrey Sachs, and other “peace now” proponents:

“In the early afternoon, Nina Potarska, from the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, brought to the 300 or so peace supporters a Ukrainian perspective, for the first time, what a ceasefire really means at the present time. [...] Families would remain separated, the conflict itself would not be resolved, Russia would probably once again illegally annex land. There would be no guarantee that Russia would not try again. On the verge of tears, the woman who had fled Ukraine said she probably wanted peace more than anyone else in the room. “But what do you really mean when you want peace,” she asked. We should be aware that singing songs while living in peace is a privilege, she said.”

So, perhaps BDW do listen to voices from Ukraine. But do they actually hear those voices?

NP: *Your exchange with BDW is now a few weeks old and we have witnessed the beginning of the Ukrainian counter-offensive and the Wagner mutiny in Russia. Do these events modify your views on how the peace movement should deal with the Ukraine question?*

JF: The Ukrainian government hopes that the counteroffensive will result in the expulsion of all Russian occupation forces – or, at least, put the Ukrainians in a much stronger position at the negotiating table. So far, that counteroffensive has been slow going. At some point, if this effort bogs down, a new deal may be on the table. But it should be the Ukrainians who make the decisions about territorial compromises – not outside governments.

I have written about the implications of the Wagner mutiny on the future of Putin and Russia. Clearly the Russian war effort is exacting a toll on Russian society that goes beyond just the economic costs of the sanctions or the anger around the mobilization of soldiers. Putin’s popularity is waning, and his grip on the upper echelons of power may also be loosening. I sketch out three scenarios in the article – Putin reestablishes control; the Ukrainians succeed with their counter-offensive and Putin gets shunted aside in a palace coup; or the war bogs down and Putin faces a putsch from the far right. If I were a betting man, I wouldn’t put any money on Putin at this point. And this would seem to be the best time for Ukraine to get the assistance it needs to exploit Putin’s weakness at home to make a military breakthrough.

The mutiny also reveals how uncomfortable the Biden administration is with regime change in Moscow. It reached out directly to the Kremlin to disavow any involvement with Prigozhin and the Wagner Group. And it is clearly distressed at the scenario of a Russia in chaos with “loose nukes” falling into the “wrong” hands. These developments should put to rest all the fanciful notions of a “proxy war.” But conspiracy theories, as we know, die hard.