



**Women's International League For Peace And Freedom  
United States Section**

**BACKGROUND STATEMENT REGARDING  
RUSSIA AND UKRAINE – JUNE 2022**

**“What Happens When the Elephants Fight”**

The Membership of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, United States Section (“WILPF-US”) offers for reflection the following “background” informational statement and analysis with regard to “the Ukraine crisis” between the Russian Federation (“Russia”) and the United States of America (“USA”).

We, additionally to the points stated below, express our enthusiastic endorsement of H. Res. 877, the Foreign Policy for the 21st Century Resolution (authors: Representatives Pramila Jayapal and Barbara Lee introduced 19 January 2022), which addresses many of the larger issues of militarism, human rights, and the impact of the foreign policy of the USA upon women worldwide that are relevant to the present crisis, and which are central concerns for WILPF-US.

Holding that times of threatening or actual war should be times of self-examination for peace advocates, the WILPF-US Membership urges support for the following points, much inspired by the best Russian examples ranging from a millennium ago (see at point 7, “Kievan Rus’,”) to relatively modern times: Leo Tolstoy, to Julius Martov (an early Soviet dissident and champion of human rights), to Academician Andrei Sakharov, and to Raisa and Mikhail Gorbachev. We also recall the wisdom of Carl Schurz, a peace activist of our own country whose wise saying provides us with timely guidance: “My country, right or wrong; if right, to be kept right, and if wrong, to be set right.”

We seek to respond to a crisis between two nuclear weapons states which raises the issues not only of what the new rules for the emerging world of the 21st Century shall be, as we question whether there shall be a viable world at all, in view of the dual existential threats of nuclear war and global climate change. Addressing the latter, global climate change assails us with its perils of routine and everyday environmental degradation and environmental racism. Those of us in the “first world” repeatedly and unremorsefully refuse to recognize that global climate change impacts disproportionately and negatively the Global South and the majority of Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color (“BIPOC”) world-wide, as we claim to emphasize the importance of peace, without neglecting our commitment to freedom and human rights, but often fall short of positive outcomes.

While the world focuses on the interrelationships among interests of the peoples of Russia, Ukraine, and the USA – NATO, specifically, we warn against the fallacy that, “The enemy of my enemy is my friend.” Rather, we embrace Joan Baez's approach of, “Seeing with both eyes,” and recognize the flaws and inequities of the governments of all involved nations. We call out the governments and their corporate suppliers of “military might” and munitions makers of the world for the savage and wanton military-based global environmental degradation that is accelerated by their ever-larger quests for world and even outer-space domination by brute force. Those in power, in contrast, seem to look through closed eyes, refusing to recognize that their callous actions are increasingly depriving not only adults, but today's children and all our future progeny, of a viable world. The gigantic toxic carbon footprints generated by these militaries, without regard to the ground stained by the blood shed by those fallen in combat – civilian or military, produces the insanities of treating our planet, which sustains us all, as if it were a common enemy. Seeing with both eyes also means viewing the conflict from the perspective of the Global South as well as the majority of BIPOC people world-wide, who will suffer most from the consequences of ecological degradation and devastation wrought by the carbon footprints of even a “limited conventional” war.

We call attention to international WILPF's recent concerned opposition to a proposal of the Putin Administration in Russia to reinterpret universal human rights guarantees in terms of “traditional” values, in what WILPF warned could be an oppressive move to strip protections from Lesbian, Gay, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, Asexual/Allied (“LGBTQIA”) people: <https://www.wilpf.org/a-call-to-action-and-education-against-russias-traditional-values-resolution/>.

We also note that this attack on LGBTQIA people marks the intersection of the oppressions of patriarchy and white supremacist colonialism, since traditional Indigenous Nations of the Turtle Islands, or *Ixachitlan*, more recently known also as the Americas, have recognized a wide variety of different or variant sex/gender statuses,

with the term, “two-spirit people,” adopted not as a substitute for the myriad of unique Indigenous roles and language terms, but as an English placeholder to replace offensive or more biased terms met in the anthropological literature. Also, we note the work of groups in the African Diaspora, such as KOURAJ in Haiti, which defend the human rights and dignity of sex/gender variant people.

Both Russia and the USA are in danger of losing their democracy to authoritarian governments normalizing the human rights violation of assassination via use of drones and other lethal means. Thus, Russian journalists and cultural dissidents, such as the feminist musical group Pussy Riot, have faced prison and feared assassination; while voter suppression in the USA threatens to strengthen the current imposition of the tyranny of white supremacy. Elsewhere in the world, drone assassinations via “kill lists” denying anything close to resembling even minimal due process to the intended targets, as well as innocent civilians and bystanders, continue. The persecution of a whistleblower in the USA seeking to share information about drone assassinations with other citizens to advance democratic decision-making, such as Daniel Hale, shows that the people of the USA, like the people of Russia, are in danger of losing the vital rights and responsibilities of informed self-determination.

In emphasizing the imperative that the people of Russia and of the USA act decisively to avoid further war, we do not mean to distract from the ongoing necessity of resisting a dystopian Washington/Moscow Axis of rule by militarized masculinities imposing environmental destruction on the BIPOC majority of the world and especially the Global South, as well as the people of Ukraine. Rather, we see the immediate task of avoiding a catastrophic and possibly thermonuclear war, an outcome rejected by humanity as criminal in the United Nations (“UN”) Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (“TPNW”), as an occasion for the people of the world to unite in the larger struggle for peace with freedom. The following points should be read in this light:

1. We support the goal stated by Mikhail Gorbachev that has been variously translated into English as, “a common house of Europe,” or, “a common European home.” We attribute the present crisis to the continuation of anachronistic military blocs in Europe, for which our own country is responsible, when the people of the world of this 21st Century are far better served by the visions of Raisa and Mikhail Gorbachev, with rational regional planning and economic cooperation essential in meeting the looming crisis of global climate change.

2. There is talk of Ukraine’s asserted right to join any military alliance, but not enough questioning as to why NATO persists some 30 years after the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Warsaw Treaty Organization. We see the militarization of Europe as being contrary to the interests of Europeans themselves, including the people of the Russian Federation situated west of the Urals, as the movement for European Nuclear Disarmament (“END”) declared three decades ago, as well as contrary to the interests of the people of the Russian Federation and of the USA. considered generally.

3. We, Members of WILPF-US, candidly hold our government responsible for past militaristic nuclear “overstepping” that led to the “missile gap” crisis of 1961-1963 (with the actual gap in missile development making Russia fear a first nuclear strike), and likewise the “RYaN”\* crisis of 1981-1984 (when the Reagan Administration’s “overindulgence” in new weapons systems and the rhetoric of what Russian commentators such as Georgy Arbatov wittily styled, “nuclear theology,” almost triggered nuclear war through a miscalculation of the correlation of forces.) (\*With “RYaN” being an English transliteration of the Russian acronym for a surprise “rocket-nuclear attack” by the USA.)

4. At this time of crisis, we gently but firmly and enthusiastically remind all nuclear weapons states that the TPNW, which has the momentous Entry Into Force (“EIF”) date of 22 January 2021, and therefore just passed the first-year anniversary of that status, prohibits the threat or possession as well as the actual use of nuclear weapons, this use also having been condemned in the UN over half a century earlier by the UN General Assembly in A/RES/1653(XVI) (24 November 1961). We cite our country’s threat in August 1961 to use nuclear weapons over the Berlin crisis and then-President Reagan’s misplaced “jest” to have signed legislation that would “abolish Russia forever” as missteps that no nation should emulate today, but rather view with repulsion as acts of international hooliganism likely to repel the decent opinion of humankind. We note the stark contrast between that era and the humanitarian grounds upon which the TPNW is a hopeful guardian for the world’s future.

5. We sincerely apologize for our own country’s breaking out of traditional arms control agreements, such as the Antiballistic Missile (“ABM”) Treaty of 1972, and the putting in question of the demilitarization of outer space as agreed to in 1967, by the creation of the USA “Space Force.”

6. We zealously affirm the principles of Raisa and Mikhail Gorbachev of glasnost, or articulation of political and democratic interests (“a voice for the voiceless”); and perestroika, or, the restructuring of political

institutions. The Poor People's Campaign ("PPC") here in the USA, of which WILPF-US is a partner, supports these ideals of the Gorbachevs by seeking an open society free of economic and political oligarchy.

7. We applaud the respect for human rights shown by the best Russian tradition from the time of Kievan Rus', a millennium ago, when some of their rulers called for the abolition of the death penalty. We lament that our country has not followed the praiseworthy example of the Russian Federation in having established a moratorium on executions in 1996.

8. We support Academician Andrei Sakharov's concept of convergence, in which Russia may adopt some aspects of the USA's political democracy and the USA may adopt some aspects of the former USSR's model of a rationally planned economy, or the vibrant example of the cooperatives that flourished during the Gorbachev years. We join the PPC in supporting an economic bill of rights designed to abolish grinding poverty. Our WILPF-US #MoveTheMoney Campaign agrees with the positions of the late Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King and the PPC that militarism is contrary to the interests of our country and people and a rational and thriving economy that can provide a decent and dignified life for all must replace the current rampant militarism supported and championed by our government.

9. We emphasize that our countries must join as allies against what our planet's survival demands that our government recognize as humanity's common enemies of nuclear war and global climate change, and we must help to facilitate the decolonization of the world in the face of no less than six centuries of white supremacy. We recall the Swahili proverb, *Wapiganapo tembo nyasi huumia*, "When the elephants fight, the grass suffers." Our countries need to become allies not only because of, and in support of, our mutual interests, but also because of the interests of the peoples of the world, particularly those of the Global South, in a viable world.

10. We opposed our country's use of ethnic conflict to promote division within the USSR during the 1980s, and we join the Poor People's Campaign in highlighting the dangers of "religious nationalism," with its misleading narratives, as illustrated in our country by the heinous tragedies of Charlottesville in 2017 and the hooliganism at our national Capitol on 6 January 2021, both involving the specters of white supremacy in general and neo-Naziism in particular. We are committed, in solidarity with our feminist sisters of the Russian Federation, to a single standard of human rights for all as illustrated, for example, by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 ("UDHR"); the International Convention for the Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination of ("ICERD") of 1965; the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women ("CEDAW") of 1979; United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 ("UNSCR 1325") of the year 2000 and its precursors and progeny on the agenda of Women, Peace and Security; as well as to Jean Pictet's criteria for restraints on the use of military force, representing the worthy humanitarian concerns of his organization, the International Committee of the Red Cross.

11. We urge that all nations, including the Russian Federation and the USA, negotiate a viable framework for energy sustainability which also takes into account the needs of the Global South. Now, as during the "Great Patriotic War" [as the "Second World War" (1939-1945) is often known in Russia], our countries should join in a great alliance, in accordance with Academician Sakharov's scenario of convergence and the ideals of Leo Tolstoy supporting creative conflict in a multipolar and pluralistic world, and the democratic ideals of Raisa and Mikhail Gorbachev.

12. Soberly recalling the lessons of the catastrophe of World War I (1914-1918), from which WILPF rose up like a phoenix of human hope and moral commitment in 1915, we caution that troop mobilization schedules and reactions to them should not be permitted by their momentum to become self-fulfilling prophecies shaping events. We see a precipitous war as a common enemy of our peoples, and pledge through our #MoveTheMoney Campaign and by all fitting nonviolent means to seek alternatives to the misguided revival of the Cold War (1945-1991) that has spawned this crisis, a distraction from our common struggle for survival of our planet and its inhabitants and the urgent needs for local, national, regional and global planning and economic cooperation essential in meeting the looming crisis of global climate change, as well as for human survival, dignity, and self-determination.



The logically flawed, race-to-extinction mindset left over from the Cold War is unacceptable and frankly — insane. It can only be explained as a by-product of governments which exist to preserve power for the few. As the WILPF-US Section's national Disarm-End Wars issues committee noted in our official statement, the governments of

Russia and the United States of America seem unable to step back from a disastrous showdown. Perhaps this is to distract people from both countries as their governments continue their creeping authoritarianism.

During a recent meeting of the UN Security Council discussing Ukraine, the Ambassador from Kenya, Martin Kimani, recounted an African saying, which we find to be particularly poignant, as he told the Security Council the Cold War had been a destructive force for the African continent: *“Our internal divisions and fragilities were weaponized on the altar of geopolitical rivalry. It confirmed the truth of the African saying that recognizes when elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers.”* So, let us be mindful of what suffers when the two trans-Atlantic elephants of the USA and Russia fight, when the entire Global South will suffer, as they always do, when the so-called great global powers wage war.

In the words of our WILPF Secretary General, Madeleine Rees, “If the UN Security Council fails to reach sensible, diplomatic means to secure peace, then we call on the UN General Assembly to take leadership. The failure of the few, with vested interests in the pursuit of war, cannot prejudice the lives of the many who seek peace.”

To all who read this background informational statement and analysis, we ask you to consider this an earnest plea for peace – in Ukraine, and throughout the world – and to recognize the imperatives of our unifying, and demanding peace urgently and passionately, until we have been heard and any threat of suffering from war is extinct.



### **OTHER CONSIDERATIONS**

Now that the horrible war against and in Ukraine has continued for some months, our WILPF-US Members and others can show solidarity and creativity in pursuing peace with justice and equity despite the blandishments of the sets of empires, the USA – NATO and the Russian Federation, each urging us to play down the militarism and patriarchal white supremacy of the other. Rather, we will see with both eyes, and use our intersectional feminist outlooks within WILPF-US and across the national sections and regions of our international organization to address the concerns in global civil society of Women, Peace and Security to build a sustainable world and ecosystem where all may lead healthy lives.

Firstly, we recognize the roles that expansion both of NATO’s presence and of the USA’s hegemony in the late 1990s and early 2000s played in setting the stage for this brutal war, policies which might have represented serious problems for even the most progressive and humane Russian leadership. But, such a regime was not in place – instead, we and the world are witnessing the brutality of the regime of Vladimir Putin in repressing peaceful domestic opponents as well as waging a multifaceted set of warring aggressions, a predictably ruthless war with conventional weapons, against Ukraine and its citizens. We do not see the opportunism and militarized masculinity of one side as justifying that of the other, but join our Irish colleagues in warning against a “whataboutery,” that justifies the atrocities of one party by those of another. We champion the nonviolent, feminist alternative . . . [as expressed by WILPF Secretary General Madeleine Rees in her open letter to the Secretary General of the United Nations dated 28 January 2022, and found here: <https://www.wilpf.org/war-over-ukraine-militarism-is-killing-us-all/>]

Accordingly, we note that WILPF-US Members and others can support current arms control agreements, including the ABM and outer space treaties and most particularly, the Gorbachev-Reagan agreements rolling back nuclear forces in Europe. We further note that it is not too late to bring into play Charles Osgood’s strategy of GRIT or Gradual Reciprocation in Tension-reduction, initially proposed in 1962 for the de-escalation of one Cold War, and now urgently needed for the prevention or de-escalation of another.

### **UNITED NATIONS TREATY ON THE PROHIBITION OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS (TPNW)**

Additionally, we call attention to the achievements both of our sisters elsewhere in our region and of our International WILPF Reaching Critical Will (RCW) program in partnership with the International Campaign Against Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) globally, in achieving two landmarks for humanity: *El Tratado de Tlatelolco*, or Treaty of Tlatelolco, first negotiated in 1967, which made Latin America a nuclear-free zone (*zona libre de armas nucleares*) and established an agency to promote the purposes of this treaty: *Organismo para la Prohibición de Armas Nucleares en América Latina y El Caribe (OPANAL)*, Organization for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons in Latin America and the Caribbean; and the new global Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) adopted by 122 nations in the United Nations General Assembly on 7 July 2017, entered into legal force on 22 January 2021.

WILPF-US Members and others would do well to unite in reminding the world that the TPNW, known as the Treaty of Tlatelolco in much of this hemisphere because of its organic connections to the earlier regional agreement, reflects the decent opinions of humankind and offers an alternative to the brutal displays of force we have seen used in earnest in the Ukraine war, but which would be dwarfed in horror by any nuclear conflict. The fatally-flawed theory of “nuclear deterrence” offers no alternative, and the tragedy of Ukraine is a grim reminder that inhumane weapons will not fix the human tendency to miscalculate and enter into needless and destructive wars, whether using “mere” conventional weapons or worse. Even if the idea of “minimal deterrence” may seem stable in theory, the Cold War has taught us that each party still seeks to add “shiny new chrome hubcaps” and “bells-and-whistles” to its own arsenals, including its nuclear missiles, while calling its efforts “defensive,” thus putting its adversaries under pressure to do the same.

Further, in this age of global climate crisis, when arms races continue to serve as deadly diversions of technological and human resources from what needs to be the all-consuming and all-sustaining tasks of devising an equitable energy order that will permit the world, particularly the global South, to prosper without destroying any regional ecosystems or, of course, the Earth’s global ecosystem, we cannot afford such fatal distractions. Thus the TPNW is our first and last resort blueprint for sane action regarding global nuclear conflict, so that we may not obliterate, nor even inadvertently annihilate, our global populations, our environment, and our planet, itself, but instead have opportunities for ourselves and our future generations not only to survive, but to do so and to live well in a healthy environment being cared for as it allows the continuation of life on Earth.

WILPF-US Members and others can be supportive in seeking out what Jane Addams, a stellar founding Member of WILPF and recipient of the 1931 Nobel Peace Prize, called, “New Methods of Procedure:” the methods of nonviolent action, which she associated with popular anticolonial movements in places such as India and China (Fifth WILPF Congress, Dublin, 1926).

WILPF-US Members and others in the USA can look to the violence of our own national government in our region and indeed, at one of our own borders, to see kindred images of our own to some of the use of brutal military force in Ukraine. The USA established several decades ago, and seriously escalated within the last decade, ever-increasing militarization of the USA border with our Southern neighbor, Mexico. Done in purported efforts at eliminating drug smuggling, but in reality, also as convenient ways to deny entry into the USA to the impoverished refugees from war-torn and economically-devastated countries and regions to the South, these USA governmental actions indeed make disarmament a domestic as well as a foreign issue for us. Not that foreign policy should not also be considered: Just look to the repressive embargo policies of the USA that continue today, against their countries for the Cuban Revolution and Venezuelan Bolivarian Revolution, for example, as well as indifference towards the well-being of the people of Haiti and their democracy. All of these USA policies might well have provided models for the neo-imperialism of Putin.

We are mindful of Pakistani citizens who have been slaughtered by USA-launched drone attacks, as advocated for by spokespeople such as Safdar Dawar of the Tribal Union of Journalists in Pakistan. These witnesses, of what amount to massacres of civilians by installments, were wondering as early as 2010 whether people in the USA were aware that weaponized drone attacks had been carried out on civilians, and of their human consequences. Dawar asked: “What kind of democracy is America, where people do not ask these questions?” See Kathy Kelly and Josh Brollier, “Drones and Democracy,” *National Catholic Reporter* (May 18, 2010) <<http://ncronline.org/news/drones-and-democracy>>. Many citizens of the USA, we know, are clueless on these targeting policies, and do not know that anti-drone whistleblowers are often prosecuted in legal actions.

We see the USA governmental legal persecution of the anti-drone activists such as Daniel Hale, as one with the persecution of dissident Russian journalists by the Putin Administration. We take these developments as signals that WILPF US Members and citizens of the USA and of the world must remain relentlessly persistent in seeking better non-military means and non-violent alternatives for intergovernmental conflict resolution than are being undertaken today, for a just and sustainable world at peace. At the very least, the United Nations provides a better venue for problem-solving.

We remind WILPF-US Members and others that our just horror towards the violence and suffering of civilians in Ukraine should also be directed at the violence, including use of rape as a weapon of war in other parts of the world. For example the 137-year ordeal of the women of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), which began with the Belgian-sponsored genocide of 1885-1908 under King Leopold II, that killed an estimated 10 million people, and led to a series of wars and acts of internal violence now countered by a courageous Women’s Movement in the 26 provinces of the DRC (counting the capital region of Kinshasa as a province). We in WILPF stand with the people of the Ukraine, including the Russian-speaking Ukrainian minority of the Donbas; the

dissidents of Russia; the women of Haiti; the women of the Congo, and many others who will not be taken up here.

Not least, we caution ourselves in WILPF-US, and others, that what makes our society perhaps “exceptional” and certainly desirable in a positive sense is endangered by war and militarism, as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., observed in his sermon, “Beyond Vietnam,” given on 4 April 1967, a year to the day before his assassination. WILPF’s feminist outlook, and USA claimed ideals of free speech, nonviolent social movements, and ethnic diversity (emphatically including the cultural diversity of Indigenous Nations, despite white supremacy and physical and cultural genocide) are all aspects of this positive national heritage, however “exceptional,” which should be zealously protected by us all.

Lastly, we reiterate the lesson so poignantly recounted, above, in the Swahili proverb: “When the elephants fight, the grass suffers.” The world’s “superpower” countries need to cooperate as allies not only for mutual survival, but, above all, for the survival of all people and living species in the entire world. It is especially true in this particular instance where one of the superpowers has been attempting to expand its geographic influence over another, and the responding superpower has been turning elsewhere, taking actual destructive actions toward a single neighboring country, Ukraine. Escalation by both superpowers threatens more and worse attacks as we write this. In concluding our words, we must especially emphasize those interests of the “under-heard,” and particularly those peoples of the Global South, if we are to have a viable world. For if there are no grasses left in existence, there is nothing left to sustain the elephants of the world, either . . . .

