
THE LENS

THIS ISSUE'S FEATURED ARTICLE

The War in Ukraine: One Year On

THE WAR IN UKRAINE: ONE YEAR ON

The war in Ukraine has reached its one-year mark. The effects of this conflict have been felt far and wide. The “special military operation” was supposed to be short-lived and from all accounts, the Russian government expected a short incursion and quick capitulation. As with the same assumption about the First World War just over a century ago, that assessment was incorrect.

The Russians are now in an intractable conflict, facing critical shortages and needing to increase the number of conscripts. At the same time there are reports of hundreds of thousands of young men leaving Russia to avoid being drafted into the armed forces.

The support for Ukraine by the international community was evidenced by the visit of President Biden to Ukraine on the 20th February 2023. And while military equipment has been pledged, it is important for us to prepare for peace as much as it is to ensure that Ukraine can defend its borders.

The reaction of the international community has highlighted (once again) the flaws in the multi-lateral collective security system. The current arrangements, highlighted by the UN Security Council, have shown that in the face of naked aggression by permanent members, our international institutions are caught in a situation of stasis and powerlessness.

The current conflict is an invitation for us to revise and review the system so that it creates the conditions for a more just and durable solution to international conflicts.

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- Archbishop Desmond Tutu

At some point the conflict will come to an end, peace talks will ensue and the foundations for peace-building will need to be in place. _____

An estimated 65 000 ward crimes have taken place with tens of thousands of which have been documented by groups like the Centre for Civil Liberties, which was the recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2022.

According to the group, they are documenting these crimes for future prosecution and memorialisation – two important aspects of Transitional Justice. In South Africa we have seen how the lack of evidence and the passage of time have eroded our abilities to hold people to account. This is a major obstacle to authentic reconciliation. The work that is being done in Ukraine now, will certainly form the basis for holding the guilty to account and prosecution in the future.

In South Africa, there are questions around the timing of the joint-military manoeuvres with Russia, coming as they do around the first anniversary of the invasion. The words of Martin Luther King Jr ring in our ears: “In the end we will remember not the words of our enemies...but the silence of our friends”. The IJR’s late patron, Archbishop Desmond Tutu famously said: “If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality”.

As we mark the one-year anniversary of the conflict in the Ukraine it is hard not to reflect on the conflict in Europe a hundred and nine years ago which brought the world into war and laid the seeds of the Second World War.

In a world where we are more globally interconnected and our interests are inextricably bound with the fate of other states; in a world where climate change possesses an existential threat; and where the omnipresence of nuclear weapons hangs over the current conflict, it is important for us to learn from history. Equally important is what we do with that learning.

We need to take what the past has taught us and use the lessons of history as the basis for a lasting peace, not just in Ukraine, but indeed in the rest of the world.

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