

# Ukrainian Pacifist Movement: An interview With Its Leader Yurii Sheliazhenko

by Marcy Winograd Posted on [January 16, 2023](#)

CODEPINK's Marcy Winograd, Chair of the US-based [Peace in Ukraine Coalition](#), interviewed Yurii Sheliazhenko, Executive Secretary of the Ukrainian Pacifist Movement, about the war in Ukraine and military mobilization against the Russian invasion. Yurii lives in Kyiv, where he faces routine electricity shortages and daily air raid sirens that send people running to subway stations for shelter.

Inspired by pacifists Leo Tostoy, Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi, as well as Indian and Dutch nonviolent resistance, Yurii calls for an end to US and NATO weapons to Ukraine. Arming Ukraine undermined past peace agreements and discouraged negotiations to end the current crisis, he says.

The Ukrainian Pacifist Movement, with ten members at its core, opposes the war in Ukraine and all wars by advocating for protection of human rights, especially the right to conscientious objection to military service.

**1) Yurii, please tell us about the pacifist or antiwar movement in Ukraine. How many people are involved? Are you working with other European and Russian antiwar organizations? What actions have or can you take to end the war in Ukraine? What has been the reaction?**

Ukraine has a thriving civil society politically poisoned by warmongering mainstream. Brazen militarism dominates the media, education and all public sphere. Peace culture is weak and fragmented. Still, we have many organized and spontaneous forms of nonviolent war resistance, mostly hypocritically pretending to be in line with war effort. Without such conventional hypocrisy it would be impossible for the ruling elite to manufacture consent for the painfully ambitious aim of "peace through victory." For example, the same actors could express commitments to incompatible humanitarian and militarist values.

**People evade compulsory military service, as many families did through the centuries, by paying bribes, relocating, finding other loopholes and exemptions, at the same time they are vocally supporting the army and donating to it. Loud assurances in political loyalty coincide with passive resistance to violent policies under any convenient pretext. The same thing on occupied territories of Ukraine, and by the way, the same way mostly works war resistance in Russia and Belarus.**

Our organization, Ukrainian Pacifist Movement, is a small group representing this large social tendency but with determination to be consistent, smart and open pacifists. There are nearly ten activists in the core, nearly fifty people formally applied for membership and added to Google group, almost three times more people in our Telegram group, and we have an audience of thousands of people who liked and followed us on Facebook. As you can read [on our website](#), our work is aimed to uphold human right to refuse to kill, to stop the war in Ukraine and all wars in the world, and

to build peace, in particular through education, advocacy and protection of human rights, especially the right to conscientious objection to military service.

We are members of several international networks: European Bureau for Conscientious Objection, World BEYOND War, War Resisters' International, International Peace Bureau, Eastern European Network for Citizenship Education. In these networks we indeed cooperate with Russian and Belarusian peace activists, share experiences, act together in campaigns such as Christmas Peace Appeal and [#ObjectWar Campaign](#) calling for asylum to persecuted war resisters.

To end the war in Ukraine, we speak up and write letters to Ukrainian authorities, though our calls are mostly ignored or treated with contempt. Two months ago an official from the secretariat of Ukrainian Parliament Commissioner on Human Rights, instead of considering on the merits our appeal concerning human rights to peace and conscientious objection, sent it with absurd denunciation to the Security Service of Ukraine. We complained, without results.



Yurii Sheliashenko, leader of the Ukrainian Pacifist Movement (left), with Ihor Skrypnik and Dmytro Tyshchenko in front of the Ukrainian parliament building in Kiev, protesting compulsory military service.

## 2) How is it that you have not been conscripted to fight? What happens to men in Ukraine who resist conscription?

I avoided military registration and insured myself with exemption on academic grounds. I was a student, then lecturer and researcher, now I am also a student but I can't leave Ukraine for my second PhD studies in University of Munster. As I said,

many people seek and find more or less legal ways to avoid turning into cannon fodder, it is stigmatized because of entrenched militarism, but it is a part of popular culture from the deep past, from times when the Russian Empire and then Soviet Union imposed conscription in Ukraine and violently crushed all dissent.

**During martial law conscientious objection is not allowed, our complaints are in vain despite what we are asking is precisely what the UN Human Rights Committee several times recommended to Ukraine.** Even in peacetime it was possible only for formal members of few marginal privileged confessions who don't resist war and militarism publicly to be granted with alternative service of punitive and discriminatory character.

Soldiers also are not allowed to ask discharge on the grounds of conscientious objection. One of our members is currently serving on frontline, he was conscripted at the street against his will, in cold barracks he suffered pneumonia and commander tried to sent him to trenches for certain death, but he couldn't even walk so after several days of suffering he was transported to hospital and after two weeks of treatment spared with assignment to logistics platoon. He refuses to kill, but he was threatened with prison if refuse to take oath, and he decided not to go to prison to be able to see his wife and 9-year daughter. Yet the promises of commanders to give him such opportunities appeared empty words.

Evasion of conscription by mobilization is a crime punishable from three to five years of prison, mostly incarceration is replaced with probation, which means you must meet your probation officer two times a month and undergo checks of place of residence and work, psychological tests and correction. I know a self-declared pacifist under probation who pretended to be a supporter of war when I called him, probably because he feared that the call could be intercepted. If you refused to repent before the court, as [Vitaliy Alexeienko](#) did, or you was caught with drugs, or committed another offense, or someone in the probation center believes after conversation with you or analysis of your personality and tests by computer that there is a risk that you may commit a crime, you could get a real prison term instead of probation.

**3) What is daily life like for you and others in Kiev? Are people living and working as they might normally do? Are people huddling in bomb shelters? Do you have power and electricity in sub-zero temperatures?**

There are electricity shortages every day except some holidays, more rarely problems with water and heating. No problems with gas in my kitchen, at least yet. With the help of friends, I bought a power station, power banks, gadgets and a notebook with big capacity batteries to continue peace work. I also have all sorts of lights and a low-power electric heater able to work several hours from my power station which could warm up a room in case of no heating or insufficient heating.

Also, there are regular air raid sirens when offices and shops are closed and many people get to shelters, such as subway stations and underground parkings. Once recently an explosion was so loud and scary as during the shelling when the Russian army sieged Kyiv last spring. It was when a Russian rocket blew up a hotel nearby,

when Russians claimed extermination of Western military advisors and our government said a journalist was killed. People were not allowed to walk around for several days, it was uncomfortable because you need to go there to get to the subway station Palace Ukraine.

**4) Zelensky declared martial law during the war. What does this mean for you and others in Ukraine?**

First of all, it is military mobilization enforced through such measures as more compulsion for military registration as necessary to employment, education, housing, accommodation, handing out orders to appear in recruitment centers on the streets with selective arrests of young people and their transportation to these centers against their will, and prohibition to travel abroad for almost all men in age from 18 to 60. Ukrainian students of European universities protested at Shehyni checkpoint and were beaten by the border guard.

Trying to escape war-torn Ukraine, some people go through enormous hardships and risk their lives, tens of refugees drown in cold waters of Tisza river or frozen to death in the Carpathian mountains. Our member, Soviet-time dissident, conscientious objector and professional swimmer Oleg Sofianyuk blame president Zelensky for these deaths and putting new iron curtain on the borders of Ukraine, and I totally agree with him that authoritarian policy of coercive mobilization disdainful to freedom of conscience creates modern militarist serfdom.

Ukrainian border guards caught more than 8 000 men who attempted to leave Ukraine and sent them to recruitment centers, some possibly finished at the frontline. So-called territorial centers for recruitment and social support, to say shortly the recruitment centers, are a new name of old Soviet military commissariats in Ukraine. They are military units responsible for mandatory military registration, medical examination to establish fitness to service, conscription, mobilization, training gatherings of reservists, propaganda of military duty in schools and media and such sort of things. When you are coming there, by written order or voluntarily, usually you can't leave without permission. Many people are taken to the army against their will.

They catch runaway men in cooperation with border guards of neighboring European countries. Recently there was a completely tragic situation when six people run to Romania, two frozen to death on the way and four were caught there. Ukrainian media contradictory portrayed these people as "deserters" and "draft dodgers," like all men trying to leave the country, despite formally they didn't commit alleged crimes. They asked for asylum and were placed in a refugee camp. I hope they will not be handed out to the Ukrainian war machine.

**5) A majority in Congress voted to send tens of billions of dollars in weapons to Ukraine. They argue the US must not leave Ukraine defenseless against the Russian assault. Your response?**

This public money is wasted on geopolitical hegemony and war profiteering at the cost of welfare of the American people. So-called "defense" argument exploits a short-sighted, emotionally manipulative coverage of the war in corporate media. **Dynamics of conflict escalation from 2014 shows that U.S. weapons supply in the long-term perspective are contributing not to ending the war but to perpetuating and escalating it, in particular because of discouragement of Ukraine to seek for and comply with negotiated settlements such as Minsk agreements.**

It is not the first time of such a Congress vote, and weapons supply was increased every time when Ukraine hinted readiness to make even slightest steps towards peace with Russia. So-called long-haul strategy of Ukrainian victory published by Atlantic Council, leading think tank in US Ukraine policy for many years, suggests to reject Russian ceasefire proposals and militarily back Ukraine on the US-Israeli model, **it means turning Eastern Europe into the Middle East for many years to weaken Russia**, which apparently will not like to happen considering Russia-China economic cooperation.

Former NATO officials call for direct engagement into war in Ukraine without fear of nuclear escalation and diplomats call for many-years war for total victory of Ukraine at the events of Atlantic Council. This sort of experts helped the office of president Zelensky to write so-called Kyiv Security Compact which envisages multi-decade Western weapons supply to Ukraine for defensive war against Russia with total mobilization of Ukrainian population. Zelensky advertised at the G20 summit this plan of perpetual war as a core security guarantee for Ukraine in his so-called peace formula, later he announced a so-called peace summit to recruit other nations for crusade against Russia.

No other war received so much media coverage and US commitment as war in Ukraine. There are tens of ongoing wars in the world, I think caused by cancer-like war addiction of archaic economic and political institutions almost everywhere. Military industrial complex needs these wars and is entitled to provoke them covertly, including creation of fake demonic enemy images through its media wing. But even these warmongering media can't give a convincing explanation to the irrational worship of militarized borders and the whole **pagan idea of drawing "sacred" borders by blood**. Militarists just bet on ignorance of the population in the question of peace, lack of education and critical thinking about such archaic concepts as sovereignty.

Because of burning old deadly stuff in Ukraine and growing fears of Russia, US and other NATO members are pushed to buy new deadly stuff, including nukes, which mean hardening of global East-West antagonism. Peace culture and progressive hopes for abolition of war are undermined by peace-through-war and negotiation-after-victory attitudes funded by such sort of budgetary decisions you mentioned. So, it is not only pillage of today's welfare funds but also stealing of happiness of the next generations.

When people lack knowledge and courage to understand how to live, govern and resist injustice without violence, welfare and hopes for a better future are sacrificed to moloch of war. To change that tendency, we need to develop an innovative ecosystem

of peace and nonviolent way of life, including peace media and peace education, public peacebuilding dialogue on special platforms safely accessible to civilians from all belligerent countries, decision-making and academic platforms and peaceful markets of all kinds structurally protected from militarist dominance and attractive to economic players.

Peace-loving people must self-organize to send a signal to war profiteers and their political servants that business as usual will not be tolerated and nobody sane is willing to sustain the system of war by paid or unpaid, voluntary or compulsory work. Without pursuing big systemic changes it would be impossible to challenge the current durable system of war. We the peace-loving people of the world must respond with a long-term and resourceful strategy of universal transition to peace facing long-term strategies of militarist governance and war profiteering.

**6) If war is not the answer, what is the answer to the Russian invasion? What might the people of Ukraine have done to resist the invasion once it began?**

People could make occupation pointless and burdensome by popular non-cooperation with occupying forces, as Indian and Dutch nonviolent resistance demonstrated. There are a lot of effective methods of nonviolent resistance described by Gene Sharp and others. But this question, in my view, is only part of the main question which is: how to resist the whole war system, not only one side in war and not a fictional "enemy," because every demonic image of the enemy is false and unrealistic. Answer to this question is that people need to learn and practice peace, develop a culture of peace, critical thinking about wars and militarism, and stick to agreed foundations of peace such as the Minsk accords.

**7) How can antiwar activists in the US support you and the antiwar activists in Ukraine?**

Peace movement in Ukraine needs more practical knowledge, informational and material resources and legitimacy in the eyes of society to unfold. Our militarized culture is leaning to the West but disregards with contempt peace culture in the foundation of democratic values.

**So, it would be great to insist on promotion of peace culture and development of peace education in Ukraine, full protection of human right to conscientious objection to military service in the context of any decisions and projects to assist Ukraine made in the United States and NATO countries by public and private actors.**

It is vitally important to accompany humanitarian aid to Ukrainian civilians (of course, not feeding the beast of armed forces) with capacity-building of peace movement and **get rid of irresponsible thinking of the sort "it is for Ukrainians to decide whether to shed blood or talk peace."** Without collective knowledge and planning of the world peace movement, without moral and material support you could be certain that wrong decisions will be made. Our friends, Italian peace activists, demonstrated a good example when they organized pro-peace events coming to Ukraine with humanitarian aid.



A plan of long-term support of the peace movement in Ukraine should be developed as a part of long-term strategy of the world peace movement with special attention to possible risks, such as repressions against peace activists, arrests of assets, infiltration of militarists and right-wingers etc. Since the nonprofit sector in Ukraine is expected to work for war effort and is annoyingly controlled by the state agencies, and there are not enough competent and sound people yet to organize and manage all necessary activities with compliance to all necessary formalities, perhaps some limited scope of currently possible activities must be performed by interactions on private level or in small-scale formally for-profit activities, but with necessary transparency and accountability to secure the final goal of capacity building of peace movement.

For now, we don't have a legal person in Ukraine for direct donations because of mentioned concerns, but I could propose my lectures and consultations for which anybody could pay any fee which I will spend on capacity building of our peace movement. In the future, when there will be more dependable and competent people in the movement, we will attempt to create such a legal person with bank account and team both on payroll and volunteers and seek for serious funding for some ambitious projects already dreamed up in sketch but not possible in immediate perspective because we need to grow up first.

There are also some organizations in Europe such as [Connection e.V.](#), [Movimento Nonviolento](#) and [Un Ponte Per](#) who already help Ukrainian peace movement, and in absence of Ukrainian pro-peace legal person it is possible to donate to them. Especially important is the work of Connection e.V. helping conscientious objectors and deserters from Ukraine, Russia and Belarus to seek asylum in Germany and other countries.

Indeed, sometimes you could help Ukrainian peace activists abroad who managed to escape Ukraine. In this context, I should say that **my friend Ruslan Kotsaba, prisoner of conscience jailed for one and half year for his YouTube blog calling to boycott military mobilization, acquitted and then put under trial again under right-wing pressure, is currently in New York and seeking asylum in the United States.** He needs to develop his English, seeking help to start life in a new place, and he is eager to participate in events of peace movements in the United States.

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- To learn more about Kostaba's appeal for asylum, visit <https://friendspeaceteams.org/ukrainian-pacifist-ruslan-kotsaba-speaks-out-against-war/>).