

Reflections on a visit to countries bordering Russia and Ukraine

Tim Gee, General Secretary, [Friends World Committee for Consultation](#)

When I close my eyes, whether to sleep, rest or pray I find my mind going to Central Europe, in particular to a ship docked in Estonia's principal port where 2000 Ukrainians, mostly women and children, wait to work out what's next for them.

It wasn't that the conditions were bad. It was clean, there was a playroom for the children, free food, free medicines and professional support to access the social system and to help find employment and accommodation.

It's more that it brought home to me, powerfully and symbolically, the long, tense wait that millions of people now face as they hope and pray for an end to the war in their home country.

I had spent the last week in a small delegation to some of the countries of Central Europe, where upwards of 375,000 soldiers stand 'pre-positioned' for war. This is also a humanitarian frontline, which countless people have escaped to or through.

Quakers in the region are sparse but spirited and, thanks to the generosity of Friends around the world donating money, a group nominated from the Central European Gathering has been able to distribute funds to places and projects where they know it will make a difference.

As well as helping refugees, Friends are interested in root causes which, in this case, is the war in Ukraine. Some have questioned whether our peace testimony still stands in such a context – a question I carried with me in my heart.

To my reading, the peace testimony is not a condemnation of all people who seek to defend themselves through use of arms in any situation, but is rather an affirmation that our vocation as Friends is to be peacemakers who profoundly seek that "others' feet may walk in the same". My travel partner, Quaker United Nations Organisation (QUNO) director Nozizwe Madlala-Routledge, often quotes one of her predecessors, Sydney Bailey who summarised Friends' peace testimony as the refusal to kill, relief of suffering and responding to the call to be peacemakers by building the institutions of peace and removing the causes of war. We saw every one of these being manifested in Central Europe.

Firstly, refusal to kill: there are no Quakers that we know of engaged in fighting in this war.

The second part is relief of suffering. In Warsaw we met Friends who described feeling strengthened by Quaker meetings for worship and community help with sign-language translation; provision of pro-bono legal support and distribution of hand-made toys made by Friends in North America. In Krakow, we met with staff from a charity assisting refugee families with special needs to access the support they need, supported financially by Quakers. In Estonia, Friends have been helping to distribute essentials to newcomers, providing access to free activities like ice-skating, and helping establish new institutions to welcome people including a school.

We also heard some tragic stories highlighting fixable problems in European governmental systems for welcoming newcomers. Another set of sad stories concerned relations between newly arrived, traumatised Ukrainians, and ethnic Russians living in the bordering countries.

Friends in Tallinn are already working with an established psychotherapeutic drama organisation to organise local-level sessions promoting intercultural understanding, with the hope that this could be repeated elsewhere. On a small scale at least, this is part of building institutions of peace.

On a larger scale, our global Quaker peace institutions are oriented towards the United Nations. At the time of writing, direct negotiations between Russia and Ukraine have broken down. We have been asked, though, by grassroots Friends to do what we can to encourage conversations about shared security between the states in the region, leading towards a settlement that meets each country's needs.

We also can and should carry on talking about other root causes, including the role of fossil fuels both in the fighting itself and in the economic war that accompanies it. Likewise, interpretations of Christianity used to justify violence and aggression need to be assertively questioned, while voices for peace are lifted up.

In this spirit it's worth quoting the Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organisations, which in February declared: "The only pious way to correct mutual difficulties and contradictions is through dialogue."

There are military routes to an end of the present fighting, but all would result in avoidable death. Quakers may be unusual in how consistently we have held to Jesus's teachings of peace, but we are by no means alone in our concern for a just peace and the negotiated settlement of conflict.

After visiting the refugee boat in Tallinn, I was taken by my hosts to the nearby Ukrainian church. So much good was happening there, including culturally relevant craft activities to help people process what was happening, a community of support and of prayer. As we were hearing about this, and being shown the fruits of the various projects, a mother and daughter entered the room. They wanted to use the chapel. They had just found out that their husband and father had been killed. As the room was opened up and we continued on our way, I felt I carried some of their grief with me. There are about 6 Friends in Estonia, 4 in Latvia, even fewer in Lithuania and a few more in Poland and the other Central European states. Proportionate to their size, the work the Central European Gathering is supporting is extraordinary and I am sure that further funds would assist its work. I went asking questions about our peace testimony. I returned sure that it is needed now as much as ever. How it manifests in this climate is still emerging. What is certain is that our vocation is to make peace, which the world sorely needs right now.