



Message from the NSTF Executive Director

Scientists DO have voices

“Science is the search for truth, that is the effort to understand the world: it involves the rejection of bias, of dogma, of revelation, but not the rejection of morality.”

So said Dr [Linus Pauling](#), the recipient of the Nobel Prize in Chemistry in 1954 and the Nobel Peace Prize in 1962. *“The atom bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki were a turning point in Linus Pauling's life. Together with other scientists he spoke and wrote against the nuclear arms race, and he was a driving force in the Pugwash movement. It sought to reduce the role of nuclear arms in international politics and was awarded the Peace Prize in 1995. In 1959, Linus Pauling drafted the famous "Hiroshima Appeal", the concluding document issued after the Fifth World Conference against Atomic and Hydrogen Bombs. He was one of the prime movers who urged the nuclear powers the USA, the Soviet Union and Great Britain to conclude a nuclear test ban treaty, which entered into force on 10 October 1963. On the same day, the Norwegian Nobel Committee announced that Linus Pauling had been awarded the Peace Prize that had been held over from 1962”.* ([Linus Pauling - Facts \(nobelprize.org\)](#))

The voices of scientists are important. Scientists seek the truth and they typically reason logically. We can see in hindsight how important the role of scientists was during the past two years of the COVID-19 pandemic. They are the voice of reason, even if they often disagree somewhat with one another on particular details.

Although the long history of tension between Russia and the Ukraine is complex and I am by no means a historian, recent events can be criticized at face value due to the cruel and blatant disregard by Russia of human lives and rights.

Freedom of speech

There have been reports/rumours that South African scientists have been silenced on the issue of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. However, all South Africans' right to freedom of speech and freedom to hold protests and present petitions are enshrined in the Constitution. In terms of this inalienable right, there is no obstacle for scientists to voice their individual stances on the war on Ukraine. See [Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 | South African Government \(www.gov.za\)](#), Sections 16 and 17:

16) Freedom of expression

1. Everyone has the right to freedom of expression, which includes

- a. freedom of the press and other media;*
- b. freedom to receive or impart information or ideas;*
- c. freedom of artistic creativity; and*
- d. academic freedom and freedom of scientific research.*

2. The right in subsection (1) does not extend to

- a. propaganda for war;*

b. incitement of imminent violence; or

c. advocacy of hatred that is based on race, ethnicity, gender or religion, and that constitutes incitement to cause harm.

17. Assembly, demonstration, picket and petition

Everyone has the right, peacefully and unarmed, to assemble, to demonstrate, to picket and to present petitions.

18. Freedom of association

Everyone has the right to freedom of association.

Academic freedom is therefore also protected under the Constitution and is a strong tradition among academics over large parts of the world, which asserts that academics must be allowed to share their knowledge and express their opinions. Science academies are established and conducted on the strong assumption of independence of opinion. The Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) has not been hesitant to give opinions critical of or at odds with government policy in the past. For example, publishing a study on the ineffectiveness of certain foods to prevent HIV/AIDS, at a time when the government's position was that people must eat such foods instead of having access to Antiretroviral medication (ARVs) to treat HIV/AIDS. There are many other examples. However, these opinions are based on consensus studies and research. In the case of the Russian/Ukraine war, the Academy has not done any studies as yet. If it is indeed expected to refrain from a public statement as an academy, I think it deplorable, but I respect their choice in light of the circumstances.

Some South African universities have issued statements asserting the right of scientists to be heard and condemning Russia's war on Ukraine, for example University of the Witwatersrand (Wits): [2022-03 - Scientific diplomacy and cooperation in this time of war - Wits University](#)

The following articles are not necessarily one hundred percent correct, nor do I totally agree with them, but they may be important to understand the rumours and allegations:

[Academics condemn silencing of scientists over Russian invasion \(universityworldnews.com\)](#)

[Letters | Challenge to SA's silenced scientists | Witness \(news24.com\)](#)

[The Academy of Science of South Africa's pusillanimou... \(dailymaverick.co.za\)](#)

[ASSAf must rethink its fence-sitting and condemn the Russian invasion | UCT News](#)

Sanctions and boycotts

In South Africa we know about sanctions and boycotts. These helped us to make the transition from apartheid to a democratic dispensation. However, academic boycotts have always been contentious. Exchanges of knowledge and insights lead to mutual understanding which can be conducive to peaceful resolution of conflict. In the case of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, some academics have chosen to exclude Russian scientists and scholars from collaborative projects and in other ways. Russian scientists have objected to this, condemned the war on Ukraine and pleaded with Vladimir Putin in an open letter on 3 March, which was published here: [Thousands Of Russian Scientists Slam Ukraine War | Barron's \(barrons.com\)](#) (By AFP - Agence France Presse).

The letter says:

"Nearly 7,000 Russian scientists, mathematicians and academics had as of Thursday signed an open letter addressed to President Vladimir Putin "strongly" protesting against his war in Ukraine.

"The massive global backlash to Moscow's invasion a week ago has already affected a range of scientific initiatives, including the International Space Station and a planned Russian-European mission to land a rover on Mars.

"We, Russian scientists and science journalists, strongly protest against the military invasion of Ukraine launched by Russian armed forces," the open letter published Tuesday on the trv-science.ru news website said.

"And the Russian parliament took up another bill this week that would toughen punishment for criticising the war in Ukraine.

"Humanist values are the foundation on which science is built. The many years spent strengthening Russia's reputation as a leading centre of mathematics have been completely scuppered," the letter said.

The letter pointed out that the International Congress of Mathematicians, which Russia had been scheduled to host in July, has been cancelled due to the invasion.

It also called Russia "the military aggressor and, accordingly, a rogue state".

"Becoming a great scientific nation "cannot be achieved in the present conditions, when the lives of our closest colleagues -- mathematicians in Ukraine... are in danger because of the Russian army.

"Russia finds itself in a situation of international isolation, without the possibility to conduct in-depth scientific exchanges or work with scientists in other countries," the letter said.

"We are convinced that no geopolitical interest can justify this death and bloodshed. War will only lead to the total loss of our country.

"Western sanctions have cut Russia off from many global initiatives over the last week. NASA is exploring ways to keep the International Space Station, long home to both astronauts and cosmonauts, in orbit without Russian help.

"The European Space Agency meanwhile said a joint mission using a Russian launcher to land a European rover on Mars was "very unlikely" to take off this year as planned."

See also this article which appeared on 17 March, appealing to the world not to boycott Russian scholars, writers and artists: [Don't wage war against Russian scholars | The College Fix](#), by Margaret Kelly, Assistant Editor. This article is well worth reading.

Among other instances, it mentions Martin Ivens's report on *"March 12 that the Cardiff Philharmonic Orchestra in Wales removed a popular overture from nineteenth-century Russian composer Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky from its upcoming program following the attack on Ukraine. In Italy, a university tried to **cancel** a course on Russian writer Fyodor Dostoyevsky."*

Being afraid to listen to Tchaikovsky or to lecture on Dostoyevsky is absurd. These are a brilliant composer and a brilliant writer, both from the 19th century. It shows how afraid people have become of touching anything Russian, but it is an example of the unintended consequences of academic boycotts. The warmongers in Ukraine are not the Russian people in general, and certainly not Russians that have been dead for two centuries!

The article says:

"First, banning content from Russian scholars and writers – who may very well be actively opposing the invasion – punishes those who would serve as our allies. It censors those whose work in developing the science necessary for new medicines, perhaps, or in reporting on Putin from the inside, could help Ukraine protect its people, or win the war.

"More fundamentally, cultural and scholarly boycotts are an insult to intellectual freedom. Good scholarship and art depend on independence and integrity. Our policies should reflect the reality that intellectuals are more than their national identity.

"The individual – scholar, writer or artist – is greater than his nationality, ethnicity or race.

"The point is not that these artists are right or wrong; it's that you can't assume that a member of a nation is complicit in decisions made by their government – and that's doubly true when the Russian

artist died hundreds of years ago, as in the case of Dostoevsky and Tchaikovsky. It's also especially true for living Russians because their government is headed by an autocrat, a ruler with absolute power.

"Brave Russian artists, priests and intellectuals," Iven [wrote](#), "have been the backbone of the opposition to the country's autocrats for decades. The West should be careful not to isolate those who represent the country's conscience."

"Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, whose novel *"The Gulag Archipelago"* revealed to the world the atrocities of the Soviet Union's forced labor camps, is just one of the Russian dissidents Iven cited as exemplary. He also mentions Andrey Zvyagintsev, whose film *"Leviathan"* depicted both the Russian state and official church as "rotten to the core" – and Vladimir Sorokin, whose dystopian novel *"Day of the Oprichnik"* portrays a tsarist Russia in 2027 that bears some resemblance to Putin's regime".

[Дніпровський національний університет імені Олеся Гончара : Scientific and Research Department \(dnu.dp.ua\)](#)

See also:

[European Space Agency is suspending its upcoming Mars mission with Russia over Putin's 'aggression' towards Ukraine \(msn.com\)](#)

[European Space Agency suspends its Mars rover mission with Russia over the war in Ukraine \(msn.com\)](#)

Meanwhile, in Russia...

The Russian people are making it very clear that they do not agree with 'Putin's war'. We see news reports on daily protests involving thousands of citizens. What is even more remarkable is that these protests against the treatment of Ukraine have been held over about six years. (I am not sure of the figures, but there are news reports that appeared in the past few years of such large protests.) The protests against the Russian government are probably intensifying as the sanctions affect the lives and work of ordinary Russians.

Why should the Russian war on Ukraine be condemned?

1) Because war crimes are being committed by Russian soldiers in Ukraine.

The war is not only being televised, but is watched blow-by-blow on the internet by much of the world. This is the remarkable thing that distinguishes this war from others: that those who have access to the internet all over the world (except Russians) can watch it in gruesome detail. This is because Ukrainians still have access to the internet (thanks to Elon Musk's Starlink internet terminals) as well as the Ukrainians being familiar with and fluent in their use of the internet and social media. Those who have escaped from Ukraine also tell of their ordeals, which is promptly broadcast in various ways. It is clear from these reports and footage of the war that civilians are being targeted, and that war crimes are being committed.

The European Union (EU) and the United States (US) have claimed that war crimes have been committed by Russian forces in Ukraine. See: [EU Slams 'War Crimes' in Ukraine, Mulls Fresh Sanctions – NBC New York](#), by Lorne Cook, published on 21 March 2022.

The International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague, the Netherlands, recognised by the EU, but not by the US and Russia, is gathering evidence about possible war crimes in Ukraine.

The "courts will have to decide, but for me these are clearly war crimes," German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock said. She referred to the increase in Russian attacks on civilian infrastructure, including hospitals and theatres.

EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell, who chaired a meeting of the bloc's foreign ministers in Brussels, said that "what's happening in Mariupol is a massive war crime. Destroying everything, bombarding and killing everybody in an indiscriminate manner. This is something awful."

On the 1st of March, this article appeared in Newsweek: [Russia Has Committed These War Crimes in Ukraine, According to Reports \(newsweek.com\)](https://www.newsweek.com/russia-has-committed-these-war-crimes-in-ukraine-according-to-reports-1481111):

It quotes [The International Criminal Court's chief prosecutor](#) as saying "that he plans to open an investigation 'as rapidly as possible' into possible war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in Ukraine". It also refers to civilian targets being hit in Kharkiv a few days after the invasion started. In the three weeks since then, targeting Ukrainian civilians has not relented.

2) Russia is holding Ukraine as a hostage to provoke NATO countries to react militarily.

Vladimir Putin knows very well that NATO would not want to start a third world war, so he is holding NATO (and the world) to ransom. Not only has a sovereign country been invaded and occupied, and thousands of innocent civilians killed, but the war is affecting the whole world, including the civilians in many other countries. This war cannot have a good outcome, not even for Russia.

3) Russian citizens are deliberately misled, denied access to news of and analyses of the war and they are not allowed to protest.

News in Russia is strictly controlled, despite Russian reforms over the past 30 years. Even the soldiers who were ordered to invade Ukraine were not properly and truthfully informed of the nature of the invasion and of Ukraine itself. The reaction of the authorities and police to protests in Russia seems to be brutal, and many protesters have been arrested and/or beaten and manhandled.

All the above contradict the values that South Africa has committed itself to in the Constitution as well as legislation, and that are upheld by our courts, namely freedom of speech, of protest, and access to information, among others.

See, for example, the manner in which the crowds were addressed by Putin at a concert celebrating the anniversary of the Russian annexation of Crimea. Speaking at the Luzhniki stadium in Moscow on 18 March, Putin boasted about the "military operation" in Ukraine, saying the purpose of it was to "save people from suffering". ([Putin speaks at live music concert in Moscow to celebrate anniversary of Crimea 'reunification' | World News | Sky News](#))

4) The Russian invasion has caused dramatic domino effects throughout the world.

From millions of Ukrainian refugees needing to be housed and cared for, to the effects of sanctions, and the sudden widespread shortage of oil and gas, what Putin has done is having crippling effects on other countries.

The Russian-Ukraine relationship has been tense and complex for centuries. Addressing the wider geo-political implications of this escalated conflict, in the Rapport Weekliks of 20 March, an article by Johann Roussouw (of the University of the Free State) provides an interesting analysis: [Johann Rossouw: Tyd om te besef die apokalips het begin | Netwerk24](#).

He refers to René Girard, who said in 1972 that violence results in contexts where there are similarities between countries, rather than differences. The problem is an absence of clear demarcation of borders, which results in borders becoming contested. There is also the concept of someone (in this case a country) to be 'sacrificed' so that the 'order can be restored'. In this case, Ukraine has been disputed territory for decades and serves as the 'scapegoat' for the situation to be 'resolved'. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia was not happy, naturally because of formerly Soviet states being declared as independent countries, but also because of the manner in which borders were demarcated. People in the 'separatist' areas of Ukraine speak Russian, and it is therefore somewhat understandable that Russia wants to 'help' them to become part of the Russian Federation.

The increasing threat of a third world war, and especially of nuclear weapons being deployed, is the result of geo-political events over the past few decades. The world is therefore at risk of the 'apocalypse', where everything is gradually under less control and sinking into chaos.

One does hope that this scenario will be averted, but it is sobering to read that there was something inevitable about the Russian war on Ukraine, and the prediction of an 'apocalypse'.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, here are some quotations of Fyodor Dostoyevsky, that may as well have been said in response to the Ukrainian crisis:

"A man who lies to himself, and believes his own lies becomes unable to recognize truth, either in himself or in anyone else, and he ends up losing respect for himself and for others. When he has no respect for anyone, he can no longer love, and, in order to divert himself, having no love in him, he yields to his impulses, indulges in the lowest forms of pleasure, and behaves in the end like an animal. And it all comes from lying - lying to others and to yourself."

"People speak sometimes about the "bestial" cruelty of man, but that is terribly unjust and offensive to beasts, no animal could ever be so cruel as a man, so artfully, so artistically cruel."

"Whoever has experienced the power and the unrestrained ability to humiliate another human being automatically loses his own sensations. Tyranny is a habit, it has its own organic life, it develops finally into a disease. The habit can kill and coarsen the very best man or woman to the level of a beast. Blood and power intoxicate ... the return of the human dignity, repentance and regeneration becomes almost impossible."

(From [A-Z Quotes | Quotes for All Occasions \(azquotes.com\)](https://www.azquotes.com/))

It should be clear by now that I am of the opinion that Russia launched an unprovoked military attack on the Ukraine. Regardless of the history, and the complexity of many factors at play, Russia contravened international laws and agreements by invading the Ukraine, and is continuing to fight against the Ukrainian people, killing thousands of civilians and destroying buildings, facilities and infrastructure. Russia is also committing war crimes and crimes against humanity by targeting civilians. Russia's actions should be condemned, and Putin and his government should be brought before the International Criminal Court in The Hague.

More on South Africa's official stance:

The South African's stance on the Russian war on Ukraine is controversial. See the following reports/articles:

[South Africa ignores "warnings" and condemns Ukraine's war against NATO - Infobae](#)

This after the government abstained from a vote condemning the actions of Russia in Ukraine: [Government on Emergency United Nations General Assembly Special Session on Ukraine | South African Government \(www.gov.za\)](#)

More on Dostoevsky:

Because Fyodor Dostoyevsky was one of the greatest writers of all times, and because of the type of person he was, it is perhaps worthwhile to reflect on his life and his words.

According to Wikipedia, a friend once wrote of him:

"There was no student in the entire institution with less of a military bearing than F.M. Dostoevsky. He moved clumsily and jerkily; his uniform hung awkwardly on him; and his knapsack, shako and rifle all looked like some sort of fetter he had been forced to wear for a time and which lay heavily on

him.^[26] Dostoevsky's character and interests made him an outsider among his 120 classmates: he showed bravery and a strong sense of justice, protected newcomers, aligned himself with teachers, criticised corruption among officers and helped poor farmers. Although he was solitary and inhabited his own literary world, he was respected by his classmates.” [Fyodor Dostoevsky - Wikipedia](#).

“The members of a circle that Dostoyevsky belonged to, were arrested on spurious allegations against them and sentenced to death by firing squad. ... “The prisoners were taken to Semyonov Place in St Petersburg on 23 December 1849... The execution was stayed when a cart delivered a letter from the Tsar commuting the sentence. Dostoevsky later alluded to his experience of what he believed to be the last moments of his life in his 1868–1869 novel, [The Idiot](#).”

“Dostoevsky served four years of exile with hard labour ... in [Omsk](#), Siberia, followed by a term of compulsory military service. After a fourteen-day sleigh ride, the prisoners reached [Tobolsk](#)”.

“Dostoevsky described his barracks: In summer, intolerable closeness; in winter, unendurable cold. All the floors were rotten. Filth on the floors an inch thick; one could slip and fall ... We were packed like herrings in a barrel ... There was no room to turn around. From dusk to dawn it was impossible not to behave like pigs ... Fleas, lice, and black beetles by the bushel ...”

“Classified as “one of the most dangerous convicts”, Dostoevsky had his hands and feet shackled until his release.”

“As a pacifist, he rejected any violent method or upheaval led by either progressives or reactionaries. He supported private property and business rights, and did not agree with many criticisms of the free market from the socialist utopians of his time.”^{[128][129]}

The opinions expressed above are those of the Executive Director, Ms Jansie Niehaus, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the [Executive Committee](#) or [members](#) of the NSTF.