

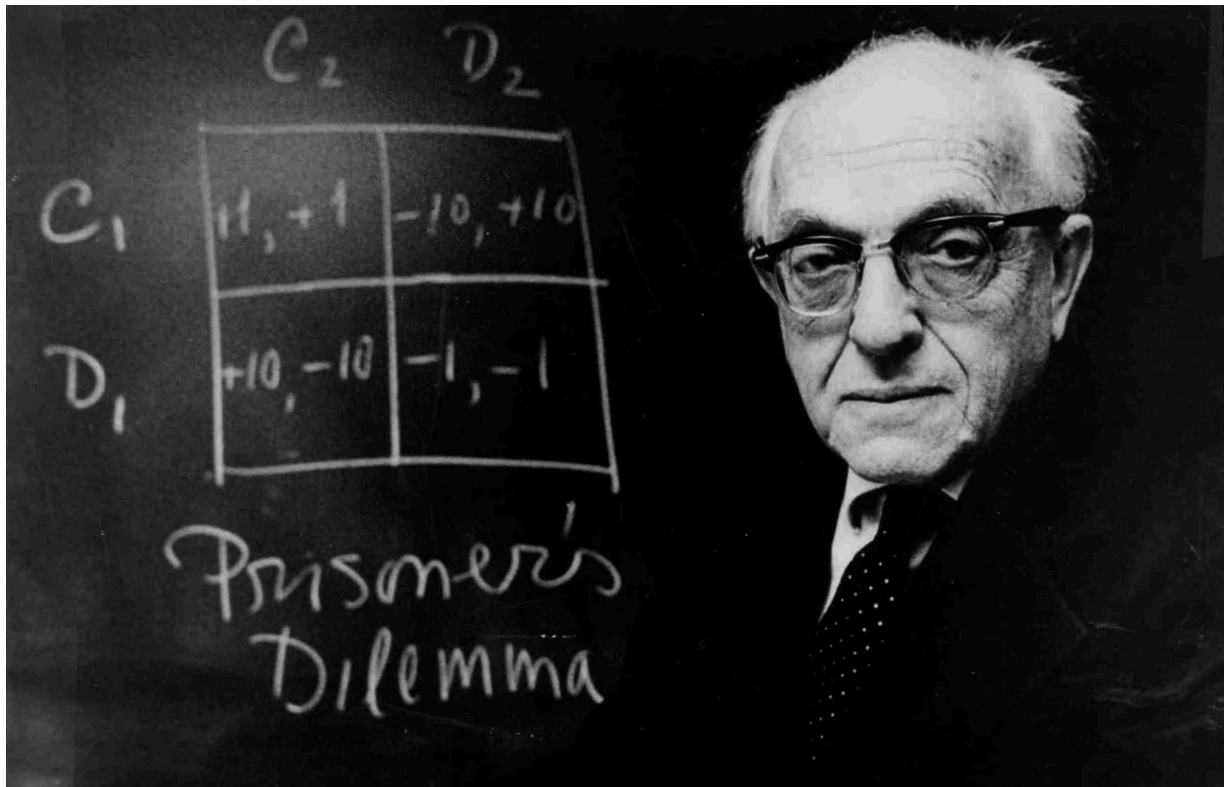
'Tit for tat' inventor offers path to peace in Russia-Ukraine conflict

Shirli Kopelman, Anthony Rapoport and Markus Schwaninger | The Detroit News

Are we promoting war or peace? Have our leaders forgotten how to negotiate? How we think about conflict is critical as we face a maelstrom of news coming from Ukraine.

We are fortunate to have known leading intellectual Anatol Rapoport (1911-2007) as a father, friend and colleague. He was a mathematical psychologist, philosopher and pioneer of peace research and education. In a lifetime of thought and action as well as hundreds of articles and numerous books, he developed insights into human conflict and cooperation. His ideas are now more relevant than ever.

He became a leading scholar of game theory, general systems theory, conflict resolution and peace research. He focused on cooperative games, which illustrate the pitfalls of conventional strategic thinking and the potential for mutual benefit. His famous "tit for tat" strategy for the iterated prisoner's dilemma is a stroke of genius, a way to win without winning.



Anatol Rapoport with a blackboard illustration of the prisoner's dilemma. Image credit: Courtesy of Rapoport Family

This sounds like a paradox, but it works. Yet, Rapoport cautioned about the use and misuse of game-theory, especially in international relations. He

noted that it helps us understand how people think. It does not prescribe solutions to societal challenges.

As a peace researcher, Rapoport emphasized that the most important goal is the abolition of the institution of war. Rapoport considered war akin to a fatal, contagious disease. His last book, "Conversations with Three Russians," is a philosophical engagement with the history of Russian thought.

In it, Rapoport poses and responds to a set of fundamental questions: Can humanity be unified on what is evil? I don't know.

Must it, if it is to survive? Yes.

In other words, humanity cannot make peace with war. But division and confrontation, leading to wars, are just what prevents us from uniting. No escape.

This sounds hopeless, but we remember his joke: "Despair may be rational, but there's no percentage in it."

His astounding blend of rational power and moral commitment proposes there is an exit: Humanity is not in a dead end street but a fork in the road. He believed conflict resolution is possible between groups of people, especially if we unite against our common enemy, the institution of war. He always insisted that we act as if there is hope, and thereby bring it into existence.

Rapoport would see the current crisis through a systems lens. Beyond countries and alliances, humanity is a globally interdependent community. Our resources are continually sapped by perpetual preparations for devastating wars. The potential for international cooperation is continually undermined by competition between great powers seeking hegemony over others.

Rapoport would have hoped to channel the widespread revulsion against Russia's current atrocities into a rejection of all militarism, including that of the United States and its allies based on our common humanity.

How Rapoport would have reacted to the Ukraine crisis is clear to us: He would have unequivocally opposed Russia's aggression. He would have recognized the importance of Ukrainian resistance and their need to protect their independence.

He would have supported the immediate response of economic sanctions and favored maximal international cooperation to solve problems. But the calls for increased military budgets and the forward stationing of NATO forces on Russia's borders would have filled him with dread.

Rapoport would likely ask: How can the end of this war help prevent the start of the next, rather than fueling it?

The West appears locked into a conflict management approach to the crisis, yet conflict management counterintuitively prolongs a crisis and supports

the institution of war. Scholars and practitioners of conflict resolution know that unless an enemy can be totally defeated, every war ends with negotiations. The current war taking place entirely on Ukrainian territory, cannot result in the total defeat of Russia.

If Ukraine, therefore, is to survive as an independent country, the war can only end in a negotiated withdrawal of Russian forces. That requires a conflict resolution approach, acknowledging all parties accepting that they may have legitimate interests at stake (even if the other side's "truth" appears to be irrational) and working to resolve (not manage) the conflict.

Only conflict resolution leads to true ceasefires, guides de-escalation and snuffs out embers that may lurk in the corner. It is not only a bilateral negotiation between Ukraine and Russia and between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

Shaping the future is everyone's responsibility. Everyone potentially impacted by this crisis and anyone who can mobilize resources to promote conflict resolution needs to engage. Are our leaders part of the problem or part of the solution? Why isn't President Joe Biden at the table? Seriously engaging in bona fide negotiations is the only way to peace.

Shirli Kopelman is a negotiation researcher and practitioner and a professor at the University of Michigan. In 2020, Kopelman published the article "Tit for Tat and Beyond: The Legendary Work of Anatol Rapoport." Anthony Rapoport is a professional musician based in Toronto and a long-time participant in peace and climate activism. He is co-author, with his father Anatol Rapoport, of "Canada and the World." Markus Schwaninger is a professor emeritus at the University of St. Gallen, Switzerland. He is an Austrian-Swiss economist and member of the Board of the International World Organization of Systems and Cybernetics. He was a close friend and colleague of Anatol Rapoport.