

# What Google Street View Can Say About The Quality Of Life In Your Neighborhood



In a remarkable new study, the broad-brush patterns between how we use and mark public space and our collective well-being were investigated in 2022 by Quynh C. Yue and colleagues [who analyzed](#) 164 million Google Street View images from locations across the United States. The study extracted information on the built environment with a focus on the directionality of traffic, the incidence of crosswalks and sidewalks, and the presence or absence of street signs, which foster way-finding. The information collected on the built environment was then compared with census-tract, health information for those neighborhoods that were included in the Google Street Views.

The researchers found that legible, accessible paths that eased movement and communication had positive health impacts. Traffic restrictions, like an abundance of single-lane roads, indicative of lower levels of urban connectivity, were correlated with chronic health conditions and lower levels of mental health. Walkability indicators such as crosswalks and sidewalks were associated with better health, including reductions in depression, obesity, high blood pressure, and high cholesterol. Street signs and streetlights were also found to be associated with decreased chronic conditions. Overall, living in neighborhoods with a built environment that supports social interaction and physical activity leads to positive health outcomes.

But what factors or social mechanisms underpin these correlations? For this contemporary study, that question is not easy to answer as we neither can pinpoint the history of town/urban planning for each street view, nor do we know the governmental or individual decisions and actions that created each different community-scape. Here, turning to archives of history and ground plans of past cities may hold some clues.

Humans interact, cooperate, and form social configurations at many different

scales with the sizes of our social networks highly variable. Many of us are part of household units. Members of different households often join forces or get together to form sports teams, or block associations, or work groups. Some of us live in small communities, others live in neighborhoods of variable extents, and most of us are affiliated with metropolitan areas or cities, states, nations, along professional associations, and market networks. In general, human affiliations and groupings have systems of governance that encompass the rules of the game, the norms, institutions, and modes of leadership. For humans, past and present, institutions and governance to a degree set the different parameters in which we live, work, cooperate, and interact.

Archaeologists faced with the challenge of defining the nature of, as well as variation and change in, governance over time rely on the material remains and residues of past human behaviors and actions to extract clues about politics in the past. Monumental architecture, statues of rulers, written texts, material symbols of office or the markers of royal position all can provide essential glimpses of individual aggrandizement, the personalization of clout, or alternative political forms in which power was more shared and distributed. But of late, archaeologists also have begun to examine the spatial layouts and allocations that are visible through the plans of ancient cities, arrangements of urban architectural components, and other indicators of socio-spatial behaviors to compare the variation in governance across human institutions.

In their writings, which draw on a comparative, quantitative study of 30 premodern states and empires from across the globe, [Richard Blanton and Lane Fargher](#) have [made a strong case](#) that legible and open urban plans that afford widespread access to services and power tend to be associated with more collective, less autocratic forms of governance. Urban forms, like grid systems that facilitate way-finding, allow travel and access to be more open and equal. Broad public spaces afford opportunities for the exchange of both information and material. Blanton and Fargher opine that less transparent, less efficient uses of space tend to degrade participation, voice, and economic efficacy, thereby underpinning and indicating less equal political relations and consolidations of power.

Blanton and Fargher also link variation in governance to degrees of inequality with more collective political forms fostering broader well-being and economic equity, while more autocratic regimes tend to associate with higher amounts of

inequality and more disparate outcomes in regard to health and well-being. In large part, these differences correlate with the greater provisioning of public goods and services by more collective governments, which contribute to biological, material, and emotional well-being. Additionally, more autocratic regimes were found to be more prone to social disruptions and unrest, which degrade well-being. Blanton and Fargher find statistical support for these relations in their sample. Their findings, in conjunction with recent studies in other historical regions, provide strong cross-cultural indications that governance, construction and uses of social space, and well-being are all behaviorally linked.

While caution is in order, the findings from the Google Street Map study do show clearly that socio-spatial arrangements have clear and direct impacts on human health and well-being, and that the built environments that we collectively construct can signal broader values and differences in governance. In a [specific recent example in the news](#), the shift toward autocracy in Turkey coincides with restrictions in public access to what was the largest civic space in the nation's biggest metropolis. Human cooperation and the institutions through which we implement it take different forms. These social ties and arrangements leave discreet on-the-ground signatures. How closely do these urban signatures and patterns correspond with equity, well-being, health, and sustainability? And, how much can we learn by examining these relationships in the past? The next era of archaeological research, aiming to document the relationship between shifts in governance and changes in urban layouts and access, should provide us with important answers.

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*Source:* [Independent Media Institute](#)

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# The Deafening Silence Of Intellectuals In The Face Of Growing Global Conflicts



*Boaventura de Sousa Santos*

Intellectuals do not have a monopoly on culture, on values, or on truth, much less on the meanings attributed to any one of these “domains of the spirit,” as they used to be termed. But intellectuals should also not shrink from denouncing what they see as destructive of culture, values, and truth, notably when such destruction claims to be carried out in the name of these “domains of spirit.” Intellectuals are not to refrain from saluting the sun before daybreak, but neither should they refrain from warning against the clouds ominously gathering in the sky before nightfall, preventing daylight from being enjoyed.

Europe is witnessing an alarming (re)emergence of two realities that are destructive of the “domains of the spirit”: the destruction of democracy, brought about by the growth of political forces of the far right; and the destruction of peace, brought about by the naturalization of war. Both destructions are legitimized by the very values each of them aims to destroy: fascism is promoted in the name of democracy; war is promoted in the name of peace. All of this has

become possible because the political initiative and presence in the media are being relinquished to conservative forces on the right and far right. Social protection measures aimed at making people feel both in their pockets and their daily existence that democracy is better than dictatorship are becoming ever more rare precisely because of the costs of the war in Ukraine and because the economic sanctions against the “enemy,” which supposedly should be hurting their intended target, are in fact hurting above all the European people whose governments have [allied](#) themselves with the U.S. The destruction of peace and democracy is mostly affected by the unequal and parallel drawing of two circles of warranted freedoms, i.e., freedoms of expression and freedoms of action endorsed by the political and media powers that be. The circle of freedoms warranted in the case of progressive positions advocating for just and durable peace and more inclusive democracy is getting smaller and smaller, while the circle of freedoms warranted in the case of conservative positions advocating for war and fascist polarization together with neoliberal economic inequality does not cease to grow. Progressive commentators are increasingly absent from the major media outlets, while every week conservative ones present us with page after page of staggering mediocrity.

Let us look at some of the main symptoms of this vast process currently underway:

1) The information war over the Russia-Ukraine conflict has so taken hold of published opinion that even commentators with a modicum of conservative common sense have submitted to it with sickening subservience. Here’s one example among many from the European corporate media: during his weekly appearance on a Portuguese TV channel (SIC, January 29, 2023), Luís Marques Mendes, a well-known commentator, usually a voice of common sense within the conservative camp, [said](#) something to this effect: “Ukraine has to win the war, because if it doesn’t, Russia will invade other European countries.” This is pretty much what American television viewers hear from MSNBC’s Rachel Maddow on a daily basis. Where does such an absurd idea come from, if not from an overdose of misinformation? Have they forgotten that post-Soviet Russia sought to join NATO and the EU but was rebuffed, and that, contrary to what had been promised to the former Soviet Union leader Mikhail Gorbachev, NATO expansion on Russia’s borders may constitute a legitimate defense concern on the part of Russia, even if the invasion of Ukraine is indeed illegal, as I myself repeatedly denounced from

day one? Don't they know that it was the U.S. and the United Kingdom who boycotted the first peace negotiations shortly after the war broke out? Have the commentators not considered, even for a moment, that a nuclear power that finds itself faced with the possibility of defeat in a conventional conflict might resort to using its nuclear weapons, which in turn could lead to nuclear catastrophe? Don't they see that two nationalisms, one Ukrainian, and the other Russian, are being exploited in the war in Ukraine to force Europe into total dependence on the U.S. and to stop the expansion of China, the country with which the U.S. is really at war? Don't the commentators realize that today's Ukraine is tomorrow's Taiwan? Curiously enough, no details are ever offered, in the midst of all this ventriloquistic propaganda fever, regarding what a defeat of Russia will mean; will it lead to the ousting of Russian President Vladimir Putin or to the balkanizing of Russia?

2) The anti-communist ideology that dominated the Western world until the 1990s is being surreptitiously recycled to promote anti-Russian hatred to the point of hysteria, even though it is a known fact that Putin is an autocratic leader, a friend of the European right and far right. Russian artists, musicians, and athletes are being [banned](#) from events, even as courses on Russian [culture](#) and literature—which are no less European than French literature and culture—are being terminated. In the wake of the Treaty of Versailles of 1919, with its strategy of humiliating Germany after its loss during World War I, German writers were barred from attending the first meeting of the annual PEN Congress, held in May 1923. The only dissenting voice was that of Romain Rolland, who won the 1915 Nobel Prize for Literature. Despite everything he had written against the war and German war crimes in particular, Rolland had the courage to say, “in the name of intellectual universalism”: “I will not subject my thinking to the tyrannical and demented fluctuations of politics.”

3) Democracy is being so emptied of meaning that it can be instrumentally defended by those who use it in order to destroy it. At the same time, those who serve democracy to strengthen it against fascism are labeled radical leftists. At the international level, the West unanimously applauded the 2014 events of Kyiv's Maidan square, which is where the [current war truly began](#). Despite the fact that the flags of Nazi organizations were in plain sight during the protests; despite the fact that popular rage was [directed](#) against a democratically elected President Viktor Yanukovich then; and despite the fact that, according to wiretaps, Victoria

Nuland, the U.S. neoconservative and then-assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian affairs, had explicitly named the people who were to wield power in case of victory, including an American citizen, Natalie Jaresko, who later served as Ukraine's new minister of finance from 2014 to 2016; despite all this, these events, which amounted to a well-orchestrated coup aimed at removing a pro-Russian president and turning Ukraine into a U.S. protectorate, were celebrated throughout the West as a vibrant victory for democracy. In fact, none of this was quite as absurd as the fact that when Juan Guaidó, a Venezuelan opposition figure, proclaimed himself interim president of Venezuela in a public square in Caracas in 2019, it was enough for the U.S., along with many EU countries, to recognize him as such. In December 2022, the Venezuelan opposition itself put an [end](#) to this farce.

4) The double standard for assessing what happens in the world is taking on aberrant proportions and is being used in a quasi-automatic fashion to strengthen the war apologists, stigmatize the parties of the left, and normalize fascists. Examples are legion, so the difficulty lies in choosing among them. Let me offer just a couple of illustrations from the national and international contexts. In Portugal, the raucous and offensive behavior of the members of Chega, the [far-right party](#), is very similar to the behavior of the deputies of Germany's Nazi party from the moment they entered the Reichstag in the early 1920s. Attempts were made to stop them, but the political initiative belonged to the Nazi party and the economic situation was on their side. As early as May 1933, the Nazi party [held](#) its first book burning, in Berlin. How long will it be until it happens in Portugal? Largely backed by U.S. counterinsurgency institutions, the position of today's global right vis-à-vis leftist governments is that, whenever the latter cannot be overthrown by soft coups, they must be worn down by accusations of corruption and forced to grapple with issues of governability so that they are prevented from governing strategically. It would appear that corruption in Portugal is confined to the Socialist Party, which secured an outright majority in the last election in 2022. In the eyes of the hegemonic conservative media, every minister in the Socialist Party government is presumed corrupt until proven otherwise. It shouldn't be hard to find similar examples in other countries.

From the international context, I will mention two glaring examples. There is now a [general consensus](#) that the September 2022 explosion of the Nord Stream gas pipelines was the work of the U.S. (and was allegedly "[overseen](#)" by President Joe

Biden, a claim he denied), which was possibly assisted by allies. An incident of this magnitude should have been immediately investigated by an independent international commission. What seems obvious is that the aggrieved party—Russia—had no interest in destroying an infrastructure that they could make useless by just turning off the tap. On February 8, Seymour Hersh, a respected American journalist, [used](#) conclusive information to show that the sabotage of Nord Stream 1 and 2 had in fact been planned by the U.S. since December 2021. If that was indeed the case, we have before us a heinous crime that is also an act of state terrorism. The U.S., which claims to be the champion of global democracy, should be supremely interested in finding out what happened. Was this the only way to force Germany to join the war against Russia? Was the sabotaging of the gas pipelines intended to put an end to Europe's policy, [initiated](#) by former Chancellor of Germany Willy Brandt, of being less energy-dependent on the U.S.? In the context of expensive energy and closed-down businesses, was this not an effective way of putting the brakes on the EU's economic engine? Who benefits from the situation? Heavy silence hangs over this act of state terrorism.

The other example of glaring double standards is the violence of the Israeli colonial occupation of Palestine which is intensifying. Israel killed [35 Palestinians](#) in January 2023 alone; in a raid [carried out on January 26](#) in the Jenin refugee camp, in the West Bank, Israel killed 10 people. One day later, a Palestinian youth killed seven people outside the synagogue of a Jewish settlement in East Jerusalem, an area illegally occupied by Israel. There is violence on both sides of the conflict, but the disproportion is overwhelming, and many acts of terrorism by the State of Israel (sometimes committed with impunity by the settlers or by soldiers at checkpoints) do not even make the news. There are no Western media correspondents to report on what is happening in the occupied territories, which is where most of the violence takes place. Except for furtive cellphone footage, we do not have gut-wrenching images of suffering and death on the Palestinian side. The international community and the Arab world have kept quiet on this matter. Despite the hugely disproportionate means of warfare, there is no movement to send effective military equipment to Palestine, as is currently the case with Ukraine. Why is Ukraine's a just resistance, but Palestinian resistance is not? Europe, the continent where the Holocaust that killed millions of Jews took place, is ultimately at the root of the crimes committed against Palestine, but nowadays it shares an odious complicity with Israel. The EU is currently hurrying to create a



court to try war crimes, but—and herein lies the hypocrisy—only those committed by Russia. Just as in the years leading up to World War I, the appeals to Europeanism (pan-Europe, as it was called back then) are increasingly becoming calls to war and leading to rhetoric aimed at concealing the unjust suffering and the loss of well-being now being imposed on the European people without them having been consulted on the need for, or advantages of, the Russia-Ukraine war.

5) Today, we witness a confrontation between U.S., Russian, and Chinese imperialism. There is also the pathological case of the United Kingdom, which, notwithstanding its abysmal social and political decline, has not yet realized that the British Empire has long ended. I am against all imperialism, and I admit that Russian or Chinese imperialism may prove to be the most dangerous ones in the future, but there is no doubt in my mind that, with its military and financial superiority, U.S. imperialism is at the moment the most dangerous of all. Of course, none of this is enough to guarantee its longevity. In fact, I have been arguing, based on sources from North American institutions (such as the [National Intelligence Council](#)), that it is an empire in decline, but it may be that its very decline is one of the factors that help explain why it is especially dangerous these days.

I have condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine from the start, but since that moment I have also pointed out that the U.S. had actively provoked Russia into this conflict, with the purpose of [weakening](#) Russia and containing China. The dynamics of U.S. imperialism seem unstoppable, fueled by the perpetual belief that the destruction it causes, furthers, or incites will take place [far](#) from its borders, protected as the country is by two vast oceans. The U.S. claims that its interventions are invariably for the good of democracy, but the truth is that it ends up leaving in its wake a path of destruction, dictatorship, or chaos. The most recent and probably most extreme manifestation of this ideology can be found in the latest book by the neoconservative Robert Kagan (Victoria Nuland's husband), titled [The Ghost at the Feast: America and the Collapse of World Order, 1900-1941](#) (Alfred Knopf, 2023). The book's central idea is that the U.S.—in its desire to bring greater happiness, freedom, and wealth to other nations, fighting corruption and tyranny wherever they exist—is a unique country. The U.S. is so prodigiously powerful that it would have avoided World War II if only it had had the chance to intervene militarily and financially in time to force Germany, Italy, Japan, France, and Great Britain to follow the new U.S.-led world order. Every

U.S. intervention overseas has been driven by altruistic motives, for the good of the people at whom the intervention is directed. According to Kagan, U.S. military interventions overseas—from the time of the Spanish-American War of 1898 (fought with the purpose, still felt to this day, of dominating Cuba) and the Philippine-American War of 1899-1902 (fought to prevent the self-determination of the Philippines, which resulted in [more than 200,000](#) Filipino deaths)—have always been inspired by unselfish notions and for the desire to help people.

This hypocrisy and erasure of inconvenient truths does not even consider the tragic reality of the Indigenous peoples and the Black population of the U.S., who were subjected to ferocious extermination and discrimination during those times of supposedly liberating interventions abroad. The historical record exposes the cruelty of such mendacity. U.S. interventions have invariably been dictated by the country's geopolitical and economic interests. In fact, the U.S. is no exception to the rule. On the contrary, this has always been the case with every empire (see, for example, the invasions of Russia by Napoleon and Adolf Hitler). The historical record shows that the precedence of imperial interests has often led to the suppression of aspirations for self-determination, freedom, and democracy and the extension of support to murderous dictators, with the ensuing devastation and death, from the Banana Wars in Nicaragua (1912), the support to Cuban dictator Fulgêncio Batista, or the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion to the coup against former Chilean President Salvador Allende (1973); from the coup against Mohammad Mossadegh, the former democratically elected president of Iran (1953) to the coup against Jacobo Árbenz, the former democratically elected president of Guatemala (1954); from the invasion of Vietnam to fight the communist threat (1965) to the invasion of Afghanistan (2001), allegedly as a defensive move against the terrorists who attacked New York's twin towers (none of whom was from Afghanistan)—following 20 years of U.S. support to the Mujahideen against the Soviet Union-backed communist government in Kabul; from the 2003 invasion of Iraq to take down Saddam Hussein and destroy his (nonexistent) weapons of mass destruction to the intervention in Syria to defend rebels who, for the most part, were (and are) radical Islamists; from the 1995 intervention in the Balkans, carried out through NATO without UN authorization, to the 2011 destruction of Libya. There have always been “benevolent reasons” for such interventions, which always relied on accomplices and allies at the local level. What will remain of martyred Ukraine when the war ends (because all wars end eventually)? What will be the situation in the other European countries, notably Germany and

France, which remain dominated by the false notion that the Marshall Plan was the manifestation of self-sacrificing philanthropy on the part of the U.S., to whom they owe infinite gratitude and unconditional solidarity? And what about Russia? What will a final assessment look like, beyond all the death and destruction that come with every war? Why don't we witness the emergence, in Europe, of a strong movement in favor of a just and lasting peace? Could it be that, despite the fact that the war is being fought in Europe, Europeans are waiting for some anti-war movement to emerge in the U.S., so they can join it with good conscience and without the risk of being viewed as friends of Putin, or even as communists?

Why so much silence about all this?

Perhaps the most incomprehensible silence is that of the intellectuals. It is incomprehensible because intellectuals frequently claim to be more percipient than ordinary mortals. History has taught us that, in the periods immediately before the outbreak of wars, all politicians declare themselves against the war while contributing to it by virtue of their actions. Silence is nothing short of complicity with the masters of war. Contrary to what happened at the beginning of the 20th century, there are now no well-known intellectuals making resounding declarations for peace, "independence of spirit," and democracy. Three imperialisms coexisted when World War I broke out: Russian, English, and Prussian imperialism. No one doubted that Prussian imperialism was the most aggressive of the three.

Intriguingly, no major German intellectuals were heard speaking out against the war at that time. The case of Thomas Mann is worthy of reflection. In November 1914, he published an article in *Neue Rundschau* titled "*Gedanken im Kriege*" (Thoughts in Wartime), in which he defended war as an act of "*Kultur*" (i.e., Germany, as he himself clarified) against civilization. In his view, *Kultur* was the sublimation of the demonic ("*die Sublimierung des Dämonischen*") and was above morality, reason, and science. Mann concluded by writing that "Law is the friend of the weak; it would reduce the world to a level. War brings out strength" ("[\*Das Gesetz ist der Freund des Schwachen, möchte gern die Welt verflachen, aber der Krieg läßt die Kraft erscheinen\*](#)"). Mann viewed *Kultur* and militarism as brothers. In 1918-1920, he published [\*Reflections of a Non-Political Man\*](#), a book in which he defended the Kaiser's policies and claimed that democracy was an anti-German idea. Fortunately for humanity, Thomas Mann would later change his mind and become one of the most vocal critics of Nazism. In contrast, from Peter Kropotkin

to Leo Tolstoy and from Fyodor Dostoyevsky to Maxim Gorky, the voices of Russian intellectuals raised against Russian imperialism never failed to make themselves heard.

There are many questions intellectuals have an obligation to address. Why have they stayed silent? Are there still intellectuals, or have they become weak shadows of what they once stood for?

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This article was produced by [Globetrotter](#).

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*Source:* Globetrotter

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# Why News Of Population Decline And Economic Slowdown Isn't Necessarily A Bad Thing



Richard Heinberg -  
Photo: Post Carbon

## Institute

*The Wall Street Journal* called China's slowdown "disappointing." But for the environment, it is welcome news.

On January 17, 2023, China's National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) [announced](#) that the country's population fell in 2022 by 850,000 people from 2021, which was the first population decline witnessed by the country in six decades. This has [mostly](#) resulted from low birth rates stemming from the imposition of China's one-child policy from 1980 to 2015, as well as from voluntary family decisions, rather than deaths from COVID-19.

On the same day, the NBS [reported](#) that China's GDP grew by only 3 percent in 2022, which is [less than half](#) the previous year's 8.1 percent expansion pace.

International news outlets greeted these bombshells with worry bordering on horror. [Time](#) noted that "[e]xperts are alarmed" by these trends; the [Wall Street Journal](#) said the slowdown was "disappointing" and posed a "major future challenge" for China and the rest of the world—language often reserved for articles on climate change. Hardly any major news coverage explored why China's lagging economy and shrinking population might actually be good things.

Yes, the reversal of China's growth trends may eventually have real and unfortunate impacts on Chinese families. But much if not all of that harm can be averted with appropriate policies. Moreover, for anyone aware of [environmental limits](#), China's economic deceleration and population decrease are actually welcome developments.

Humanity faces an imminent survival dilemma. Not only are we destabilizing the climate with carbon dioxide released from our burning of fossil fuels, but we are also taking habitat away from other species, to the point where wild animal (including some [insect](#)) populations have [declined by about 70 percent](#) in the past 50 years. Further, humanity is [depleting natural resources](#), ranging from mineral ores to forests, while [polluting ecosystems](#) with plastics and toxic chemicals in ever-burgeoning quantities. According to the [World Bank](#), "Global waste is expected to increase to 3.4 billion tons by 2050."

In 2015, scientists at the [Stockholm Resilience Center](#) calculated that, of nine critical global ecological thresholds that [define](#) "the safe operating limits of our

planet,” humanity has already crossed “at least four.” A related effort by the [Global Footprint Network](#), which tracks our “ecological footprint” (how much of Earth’s biological regenerative capacity is being used by human society), currently shows humanity consuming resources “as if we lived on 1.75 Earths”—which can only be sustained temporarily and will, in effect, result in robbing future generations of a fair chance at survival. As the human population grows (for decades we’ve been [adding](#) a billion people every 12 years), we use more land and resources. As the economy expands (it’s [doubling in size every 25 years](#)), we use more energy and therefore make it harder to reduce carbon emissions.

It hasn’t always been this way. Humanity’s addiction to rapid growth started in the 20th century as a result of having access to enormous amounts of cheap fossil fuel energy. Abundant energy enabled more resource extraction, more manufacturing, and more food production. Once the economic growth engine revved up, industrialists, economists, and politicians decided it was an unmitigated marvel, they attributed the growth to human ingenuity rather than fossil fuels, and restructured the global economy to depend on industrial expansion continuing forever.

This was a foolish thing to do since nothing can increase endlessly on a finite planet. Ecologists have warned [since the 1960s](#) that a reckoning is in store sooner or later. The only way to avoid it is to voluntarily and deliberately reduce growth—reversing it in some instances—and aim for what pioneer ecological economist Herman Daly called a “[steady state economy](#)” that helps maximize the benefit to humanity without depleting and polluting nature.

For decades, China’s economy has grown [more rapidly](#) than that of nearly any other country. And since China was the world’s most populous nation until 2022, this breathtaking growth has had an outsized impact. China has become the top [greenhouse gas emitter](#) and the [foremost devourer of natural resources](#) on the planet. It burns [more than half](#) of the world’s coal supply each year and is busy building [even more](#) coal-fired power plants.

But China isn’t polluting out of a lack of concern for the environmental damage caused by its actions; its coal burning is part of an economic strategy in which the U.S. and other wealthy nations have been complicit. The flourishing of Chinese manufacturing resulted from a grand bargain struck by multinational

corporations, in which American consumers got [cheaper products](#) (thanks to China's inexpensive energy and massive low-wage labor pool), U.S. corporations got higher profits, and the Chinese people got more economic opportunities than they had enjoyed previously—opportunities for which the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) could take credit. Everybody seemed to win, except the planet and its nonhuman creatures.

But coal is not endless, nor are raw materials required for manufacturing, nor is new farmland to feed an expanding population. Therefore, the growth of offshored production, and a Chinese economy based on it, can't go on forever. In fact, the longer such growth continues, the deeper the hole that humanity is digging for itself. Yes, we can make our consumption marginally "greener" by recycling more and building more solar panels and wind turbines. But the math tells us that any serious effort to return society to a balanced relationship with nature must eventually [require less overall consumption](#) by fewer consumers. Seen in that light, China's slowdown both in terms of economy and population looks like an event worth celebrating. So, why the hand-wringing?

In the view of conventional economists, fewer workers and consumers mean more anemic economic output. And for growth-oriented economic theory, that's a catastrophe. But it needn't be. Why not reorganize the economy around [human happiness](#) and the protection of nature, as opposed to the endless expansion of resource extraction, production, consumption, pollution, and human numbers?

China's slowdown presents the country and the world with a chance to manage a decline that must inevitably come, sooner or later. It's a chance to identify and seize opportunities while minimizing the pain entailed in a major directional change.

With fewer people, it should be easier to ensure that everybody in China has housing and access to basic necessities. At last, officials can ease up on building new cities, highways, and shopping malls. New construction can focus on replacing fuel-guzzling technologies with more efficient renewable energy replacements. China could even stop manufacturing throwaway consumer gadgets and start making long-lasting products designed for the dawning era of eco-restoration and regeneration.

A soft landing is possible: Several smaller countries have declining population

levels, [including](#) Croatia, Japan, Portugal, Poland, South Korea, and Lithuania. Each of these nations is seeing [stable or rising wages and historic lows in unemployment](#).

True, the transition to the post-growth era won't be easy for the CCP or the Chinese people if income and wages level off or worsen, and if a declining tax base can't sustain an aging population. The Chinese people have tacitly accepted an authoritarian regime with great restrictions on personal freedoms in exchange for promises of material betterment. If those promises fail, political instability could follow, possibly leading to widespread hardship and loss of life. To avert that catastrophe, the CCP will have to rethink its entire economic and political strategy.

Globally, in the shift to a post-growth economy, the financial sector will face the biggest risks. Vast tranches of debt that have been incurred during the past few decades are, in effect, bets that the economy will continue to expand. If the number of workers and consumers shrinks, then our global financial house of cards could come tumbling down.

But why have we put the fate of humanity in the hands of gamblers? A major retooling of our financial system is long overdue. The deleveraging of the global economy could be accomplished largely by reducing the assets of the world's multimillionaire and billionaire classes. There might be side benefits from doing so: Economic [inequality](#) is warping our politics and making many people jealous, resentful, and unhappy.

Sure, the end of economic expansion and population growth is a challenging prospect. But it's not nearly as daunting as the crisis we are setting up for ourselves if we continue to destroy nature through wasteful consumption and pollution. China's slowdown is a welcome opportunity for global leaders and policymakers to get our priorities straight and set ourselves on a path of sustainable [happiness and well-being](#).

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*Source:* Independent Media Institute



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# **We Face A Climate Abyss, But There Are Sparks Of Hope, Robert Pollin Says**



*Robert Pollin*

The energy transition from fossil-based systems of energy production and consumption to renewable energy sources is moving slowly, and scores of global conferences on climate change over the past few decades have failed to produce the desired results. From the look of things, fossil fuels are going to be around for a long time to come, even though there is undeniable evidence that humanity is moving, as economist Robert Pollin puts it, “relentlessly towards a climate abyss.”

But even so, the Green New Deal and the fight for a more sustainable future are anything but dead, argues Pollin, one of the world’s leading progressive economists. In the exclusive interview for *Truthout* that follows, Pollin argues that there are many positive developments here in the U.S., as well as in Europe and other parts of the world, to suggest that the fight against climate change is not yet lost. Pollin is distinguished university professor of economics and co-director of the Political Economy Research Institute (PERI) at the University of

Massachusetts Amherst. He is the author or co-author of a large number of books and academic articles, including *Climate Crisis and the Global Green New Deal* (with Noam Chomsky and C.J. Polychroniou, 2020) as well as major green economy transition programs for several U.S. states (including California, Maine New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Colorado, Washington and West Virginia) and different countries, including the U.S., India, South Korea, Spain, Brazil, South Africa, and Indonesia.

*C. J. Polychroniou: Bob, we seem to be losing the fight against global warming. 2022 has been described as “[the year the energy transition went off the rails](#)” as carbon emissions from fossil fuels last year are projected to hit record high and the Copernicus Climate Change Service said that summer 2022 was Europe’s hottest on record, causing over 20,000 excess deaths. Meanwhile, another global climate conference (COP 27) ended with no progress on fossil fuels. Why do fossil fuels continue to remain essential to the global economy, and why does the energy transition appear to be proceeding at a snail’s pace?*

*Robert Pollin: To begin with, I don’t think the current status of the fight against global warming is quite as bleak as the *Forbes Magazine* headline you are quoting conveys. Of course, there is a great deal of evidence demonstrating that we continue to move relentlessly toward a climate abyss. And yet, some significant positive countertendencies have also emerged over the past year. These countertendencies are not yet nearly adequate to move us onto a viable climate stabilization path. But we still need to embrace these developments so that we can build effectively from them.*

But let’s start by recognizing some grim realities. Here are a few indicators from the World Meteorological Organization’s 2022 report, “[Provisional State of the Global Climate](#)”:

- Concentrations of the three main greenhouse gases — carbon dioxide, methane and nitrous oxide — reached record highs in 2021, with preliminary evidence finding that this upward trend continued in 2022.
- The average global temperatures for 2015-2022 are likely to have been the eight warmest years on record.
- The temperature in the U.K. reached 105° Fahrenheit for the first time on record, while three states in Germany experienced their driest summer on record.
- Average daily temperatures were sustained at over 110° F during the heat wave

in India this past May, while monsoon flooding in Pakistan in July and August inundated about 9 percent of the country's total land area.

A *Washington Post* article from last July titled "[India's Deadly Heatwave Will Soon Be a Global Reality](#)" reported that,

"As the climate warms, conditions once experienced only in saunas and deep mineshafts are rapidly becoming the open-air reality for hundreds of millions of people, who have no escape to air conditioning or cooler climes. After a few hours with humid heat above 95° F — a measure known as the wet-bulb temperature — even healthy people with unlimited shade and water will die of heatstroke. For those carrying out physical labor, the threshold is closer to 88° F or even lower."

By far, the major driver of rising global temperatures is burning fossil fuels — oil, coal and natural gas — to produce energy. Therefore, the first and most important task for fighting global warming must be, simply, to stop burning oil, coal and natural gas to produce energy. *Forbes* is correct that 2022 brought a series of devastating setbacks on this front. To begin with, Russia's invasion of Ukraine led to oil and gas supply shortages, especially in Europe, which is heavily dependent on Russian supplies. These supply shortages enabled the oil giants to jack up prices and reap unprecedented profits. In fact, as has been widely reported, the six largest Western oil companies — ExxonMobil, Chevron, Shell, BP, Equinor and Total — made [\\$200 billion in profits in 2022](#), more than any previous year in the history of the industry.

The oil companies, in other words, are feasting as the world burns. Should we be surprised that Wall Street has registered its strong approval? Thus, the *Financial Times* [reported](#) that, "U.S. giant ExxonMobil, which has resisted pressure to decarbonize more than any other energy major, increased production in 2022 and its shares rallied more than 50 percent in the year as it raked in a record \$55.7 billion in profits." Then there is the case of BP, the oil major that had previously gone the furthest in its commitments to decarbonize. But those commitments went out the window in the face of exploding profit opportunities. The *Financial Times* noted that this decision "stirred anger from environmentalists ... yet the market approved. BP's shares rallied more than 10 percent over the following 48 hours, reaching their highest level in 3 ½ years."

Coal was also revived in 2022. This was due in part to the natural gas shortages created in Europe by the Ukraine war. But the largest increases in coal

consumption were not due to the war, but rather to the continued increases in consumption in India and especially China. China now accounts for about [50 percent of all global coal consumption](#).

These developments led Chevron's chief executive Mike Wirth to triumphantly pronounce that, "The reality is [fossil fuel] is what runs the world today. It's going to run the world tomorrow and five years from now, 10 years from now, 20 years from now." What if Wirth is correct? Then we are certainly moving closer to the climate abyss exactly in step with the Mike Wirths of the world engorging themselves on fossil fuel profits.

Amid this, where can we possibly also see significant positive developments? We can start in the U.S., with the enactment of the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) last August. The law is deliberately misnamed. It is mostly a measure to channel large-scale financing into clean energy investments. But the Biden administration couldn't openly advertise this fact without losing the support of West Virginia Sen. Joe Manchin. In any case, as a result of the IRA passing, [clean energy investments immediately spiked](#) in the last three months of 2022 to \$40 billion, equal to the total level of such investments for all of 2021. Moreover, most of this new investment money has been flowing into Republican-dominated states, where, as the *Wall Street Journal* [pointed out](#), not a single Republican member of Congress voted for the law. Still more, a large percentage of the new jobs being created by these investments, including in the Republican-dominated states, are [reserved for union members](#).

In short, a fundamental new reality could be emerging out of the IRA: that working people will begin to see how the green energy transformation can be a major engine for creating good union jobs, in red states just as much as in blue states. This is a central idea behind the Green New Deal, as has been advanced in the U.S. for over a decade by excellent groups like Labor Network for Sustainability, the BlueGreen Alliance and Reimagine Appalachia. If this point does become broadly recognized, it could deliver unprecedented levels of support for a global Green New Deal. For example, it would mean that, as opposed to the Yellow Vest movement that emerged in France in 2018 insisting that economic justice be prioritized over climate justice, the global Green New Deal will be understood as the means through which economic justice and climate justice movements can become unified.

There have also been major positive developments in Europe over the past year, which responded to the collapse of Russian oil and gas supplies by sharply increasing energy conservation measures and accelerating the roll-out of solar, wind, and other renewables. Thus, in 2022 for the first time, [solar and wind power combined](#) generated more electricity in Europe than either coal or gas. Going further, the European Commission enacted its REPowerEU program after Russia's invasion. Its goal is "a massive scale-up of renewables, as well as faster electrification and replacement of fossil-based heat and fuel in industry, buildings, and the transport sector." The target is for renewables to supply 45 percent of all energy in Europe by 2030. That would mean [more than doubling](#) the current 22 percent renewable share of overall energy supply in only 6 ½ years.

It is not clear that these goals will be actually achieved. To date, the level of EU funding behind REPowerEU does not match the rhetoric, at only about 0.2 percent of EU GDP annually through 2027. But here again, the point should become increasingly evident throughout Europe that the green energy transformation will be an engine for expanding job opportunities and raising working-class living standards — in other words, a clear alternative to the austerity economics that dominates in Europe today. As this point sinks in, the level of political support for funding REPowerEU at much higher levels could also grow correspondingly.

The election of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in October, returning him to the presidency of Brazil, was unquestionably a third major positive development over the past year. Lula's predecessor, Jair Bolsonaro, was hell-bent on razing the Amazon rainforest to make room for corporate agriculture and mining. Aside from burning fossil fuels for energy, deforestation is the most significant force causing climate change. Lula is committed to stopping deforestation and protecting the Amazon. But it is also true that Lula's commitments on this issue will be tested, for the simple reason that big profits can be made from destroying the rainforest.

Lula's election victory needs to now be buttressed by large increases in financial support for forest protection in Brazil and elsewhere, and more generally, for Green New Deal projects in the Global South. This hasn't happened so far, despite [pledges made by rich countries](#) at the most recent November climate summit in Egypt. In short, Lula's victory, as well as the rapid scaling up of clean energy investments and jobs in the U.S. and Europe, need to be embraced as major positive developments. But we still have far to go in defeating the ongoing

corporate project of destroying the planet in the name of profits.

*There is growing emphasis on the need for adaptation strategies to reduce the adverse effects of global warming. Shouldn't there be concern with shifting the climate policy focus from mitigation to adaptation?*

Large-scale climate adaptation investments are an absolute imperative. Let's come back to the brutal heat wave last spring in India. One obvious way to protect people during heat waves is with air conditioning. However, only 8 percent of Indian households now own air conditioning units. The situation in most of the rest of the world is not that different than India. The climate crisis has made access to air conditioning — along with cheap electricity generated by renewable energy sources to power the units — a necessity.

More generally, the global Green New Deal must incorporate a range of robust protections against climate change impacts. This includes greatly expanding available storage facilities for food, seed and fresh water, and ensuring that these structures are themselves strongly protected against climate events. It must also include water demand management infrastructure, including — where they can be introduced without damaging local ecologies — sea walls, dams, pumping capacity, permeable pavements and abundant water-buffeting vegetation. Existing buildings in vulnerable areas should be retrofitted to incorporate protective walls and green roofs to deal with both rainwater and heat. New buildings in vulnerable areas should be built with higher foundations or on stilts. Organic farming also provides important benefits in terms of climate protection. This is because organic farming is more effective than industrial agriculture in retaining the available water supply, using that water more efficiently, as well as mitigating soil erosion. Crop yields are also higher through organic farming under drought conditions and other forms of stress.

In addition to all these and other forms of physical protections, people and communities need to have access to effective and affordable financial insurance against climate change damage. More generally, protecting people against the worst effects of climate change will cost money. But this doesn't mean that funding for adaptation should be seen as competing with funding for mitigation. Both are absolute necessities. It's also not as if there is no money to be found. In addition to Big Oil's record-shattering profits in 2022, [global fossil fuel subsidies also doubled](#), from roughly \$500 billion to \$1 trillion in 2022. This spike in fossil

fuel subsidies came *after* the 2021 Glasgow Climate Pact committed to phasing out these subsidies. Both mitigation and adaptation investments will more than pay for themselves over time, by protecting both the workforce, the physical infrastructure and the food and water supply, by expanding job opportunities, and by delivering cheaper and more reliable energy. All of this is in addition, of course, to providing the only humane course of action in the face of the climate crisis.

*There is increasing concern among conservationists that the fight against global warming to save the planet is treating climate change apart from the broader ecological footprint. For example, it is contested that climate change is not the principal driver of biodiversity loss. Can global warming and biodiversity be tackled together?*

Global warming and biodiversity loss can certainly be tackled together to a significant extent, even while there is not a one-for-one overlap between them in terms of either causes or solutions. The single biggest driver of biodiversity loss is land use change. This includes the destruction of animal habitats through deforestation and related human encroachments, as well as the disruption of the remaining habitats through the increasing frequency and severity of heat waves, droughts and floods. More generally, a [2018 study](#) by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) found that two degrees Celsius of warming would risk “shifts of species to higher latitudes, damage to ecosystems (e.g., coral reefs, and mangroves, seagrass and other wetland ecosystems), loss of fisheries productivity (at low latitudes) and changes to ocean chemistry (e.g., acidification ... and dead zones.” The ecologist Pamela McElwee further [notes](#) that “if we reach the 2° C threshold, it is projected that 18 percent of insects, 16 percent of plants, and 8 percent of vertebrate species will lose over half of their geographic range, and localized extinctions are a near certainty.” The solution here is straightforward: do not allow global warming to cross the 2° C threshold or, for that matter, the more stringent 1.5° C threshold that the IPCC now insists is necessary.

But it is also the case that, as a 2021 IPCC study emphasized, “technology-based measures that are effective for climate change mitigation can pose serious threats to biodiversity.” For example, this IPCC study describes how the increased demand for minerals needed for wind turbines, solar panels, electric car motors and batteries can produce serious negative impacts on land areas as well as

oceans, to the extent that seabed mining becomes a major new source of mineral supplies. Some solutions here are at once obvious but difficult to achieve. They include greatly expanding the system of recycling the minerals where demand is growing, developing technologies in the renewable energy sectors in which mineral requirements are less intensive, as well as insisting on strong [environmental and social sustainability requirements](#) in mining operations.

In other words, the challenges of advancing an effective unified framework for addressing both climate change and biodiversity loss are formidable. But we simply have no alternative other than continuing to build the movement that is capable of meeting these challenges.

*This interview has been lightly edited for clarity.*

Source: <https://truthout.org/>

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# Chomsky: A Stronger NATO Is The Last Thing We Need As Russia-Ukraine War Turns 1



*Noam Chomsky*

The war in Ukraine is almost a year old, with no end in sight to the fighting, suffering and destruction. In fact, the war's next phase could turn into a bloodbath and last for years, as the U.S. and Germany agree to supply Ukraine with battle tanks and as Volodymyr Zelenskyy urges the West to send long-range missiles and fighter jets.

It is becoming increasingly obvious that this is now a U.S./NATO-Russia war, Noam Chomsky argues in the exclusive interview for *Truthout* that follows, excoriating the idea that, in light of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, there needs to be a stronger NATO rather than a negotiated settlement to the conflict. "Those calling for a stronger NATO might want to think about what NATO is doing right now, and also about how NATO depicts itself," Chomsky says, warning of "the growing threat of steps up the escalation ladder to nuclear war."

Chomsky is institute professor emeritus in the Department of Linguistics and Philosophy at MIT and laureate professor of linguistics and Agnese Nelms Haury Chair in the Program in Environment and Social Justice at the University of Arizona. One of the world's most-cited scholars and a public intellectual regarded by millions of people as a national and international treasure, Chomsky has

published more than 150 books in linguistics, political and social thought, political economy, media studies, U.S. foreign policy and world affairs. His latest books are *Illegitimate Authority: Facing the Challenges of Our Time* (with C.J. Polychroniou; Haymarket Books, forthcoming); *The Secrets of Words* (with Andrea Moro; MIT Press, 2022); *The Withdrawal: Iraq, Libya, Afghanistan, and the Fragility of U.S. Power* (with Vijay Prashad; The New Press, 2022); *The Precipice: Neoliberalism, the Pandemic and the Urgent Need for Social Change* (with C.J. Polychroniou; Haymarket Books, 2021); and *Climate Crisis and the Global Green New Deal: The Political Economy of Saving the Planet* (with Robert Pollin and C. J. Polychroniou; Verso 2020).

*C. J. Polychroniou: The war in Ukraine is approaching its one-year anniversary and not only is there no end in sight to the fighting, but the flow of weaponry from the U.S. and Germany to Ukraine is increasing. What's next on the NATO/U.S. agenda, one wonders? Urging the Ukrainian military to retaliate by striking Moscow and other Russian cities? So, what's your assessment, Noam, of the latest developments in the Russia-Ukraine conflict?*

*Noam Chomsky:* We can usefully begin by asking what is *not* on the NATO/U.S. agenda. The answer to that is easy: efforts to bring the horrors to an end before they become much worse. "Much worse" begins with the increasing devastation of Ukraine, awful enough, even though nowhere near the scale of the U.S.-U.K. invasion of Iraq or, of course, the U.S. destruction of Indochina, in a class by itself in the post-WWII era. That does not come close to exhausting the highly relevant list. To take a few minor examples, as of February 2023, the UN estimates civilian deaths in Ukraine at about 7,000. That's surely a severe underestimate. If we triple it, we reach the probable death toll of the U.S.-backed Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982. If we multiply it by 30, we reach the toll of Ronald Reagan's slaughter in Central America, one of Washington's minor escapades. And so it continues.

But this is a pointless exercise, in fact a contemptible one in Western doctrine. How dare one bring up Western crimes when the official task is to denounce Russia as uniquely horrendous! Furthermore, for each of our crimes, elaborate apologetics are readily available. They quickly collapse on investigation, as has been demonstrated in painstaking detail. But that is all irrelevant within a well-functioning doctrinal system in which "unpopular ideas can be silenced, and inconvenient facts kept dark, without the need for any official ban," to borrow

George Orwell's description of free England in his (unpublished) introduction to *Animal Farm*.

But "much worse" goes far beyond the grim toll in Ukraine. It includes those facing starvation from the curtailing of grain and fertilizer from the rich Black Sea region; the growing threat of steps up the escalation ladder to nuclear war (which means terminal war); and arguably worst of all, the sharp reversal of the limited efforts to avert the impending catastrophe of global heating, which there should be no need to review.

Unfortunately, there is a need. We cannot ignore the euphoria in the fossil fuel industry over the skyrocketing profits and the tantalizing prospects for decades more of destruction of human life on Earth as they abandon their marginal commitment to sustainable energy as profitability of fossil fuels soars.

And we cannot ignore the success of the propaganda system in driving such concerns from the minds of the victims, the general population. The latest [Pew poll](#) of popular attitudes on urgent issues did not even ask about nuclear war. Climate change was at the bottom of the list; among Republicans, 13 percent.

It is, after all, only the most important issue to have arisen in human history, another unpopular idea that has been effectively suppressed.

The poll happened to coincide with the latest setting of the Doomsday Clock, moved forward to 90 seconds to midnight, another record, driven by the usual concerns: nuclear war and environmental destruction. We can add a third concern: the silencing of awareness that our institutions are driving us to catastrophe.

Let's return to the current topic: how policy is being designed to bring about "much worse" by escalating the conflict. The official reason remains as before: to severely weaken Russia. The liberal commentariat, however, offers more humane reasons: We must ensure that Ukraine is in a stronger position for eventual negotiations. Or in a weaker position, an alternative that does not enter into consideration, though it is hardly unrealistic.

In the face of such powerful arguments as these, we must concentrate on sending U.S. and German tanks, probably soon jet planes, and more direct U.S.-NATO participation in the war.

What's probably coming next is not concealed. The press has just reported that the Pentagon is calling for a top-secret program to insert "control teams" in Ukraine to monitor troop movements. It has also revealed that the U.S. has been providing targeting information for all advanced weapon strikes, "a previously undisclosed practice that reveals a deeper and more operationally active role for the Pentagon in the war." At some point there might be Russian retaliation, [another step up the escalation ladder](#).

Persisting on its present course, the war will come to vindicate the view of much of the world outside the West that this is a U.S.-Russian war with Ukrainian bodies — increasingly corpses. The view, to quote Ambassador Chas Freeman, that the U.S. seems to be fighting Russia to the last Ukrainian, reiterating the conclusion of Diego Cordovez and Selig Harrison that in the 1980s the U.S. was fighting Russia to the last Afghan.

There have been real successes for the official policy of severely weakening Russia. As many commentators have discussed, for a fraction of its colossal military budget, the U.S., via Ukraine, is significantly degrading the military capacity of its sole adversary in this arena, not a small achievement. It's a bonanza for major sectors of the U.S. economy, including fossil fuel and military industries. In the geopolitical domain, it resolves — at least temporarily — what has been a major concern throughout the post-WWII era: ensuring that Europe remains under U.S. control within the NATO system instead of adopting an independent course and becoming more closely integrated with its natural resource-rich trading partner to the East.

Temporarily. It is not clear how long the complex German-based industrial system in Europe will be willing to face decline, even a measure of deindustrialization, by subordinating itself to the U.S. and its British lackey.

Is there any hope for diplomatic efforts to escape the steady drift to disaster for Ukraine and beyond? Given Washington's lack of interest, there is little media inquiry, but enough has leaked out from Ukrainian, U.S., and other sources to make it reasonably clear that there have been possibilities, even as recently as last March. We've discussed them in the past and more [bits of evidence of varying quality](#) keep trickling through.

Do opportunities for diplomacy still remain? As fighting continues, positions

predictably harden. Right now, Ukrainian and Russian stands appear irreconcilable. That is not a novel situation in world affairs. It has often turned out that “Peace talks are possible if there is a political will to engage in them,” the situation right now, [two Finnish analysts suggest](#). They proceed to outline steps that can be taken to ease the way toward further accommodation. They rightly point out that the political will is there in some circles: among them the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and senior figures in the Council of Foreign Relations. So far, however, vilification and demonization are the preferred method to deflect such deviation from the commitment to “much worse,” often accompanied by lofty rhetoric about the cosmic struggle between the forces of light and darkness.

The rhetoric is all too familiar to those who have paid any attention to U.S. exploits throughout the world. We might, for example, recall Richard Nixon’s call to the American people to join him in pulverizing Cambodia: “If, when the chips are down, the world’s most powerful nation, the United States of America, acts like a pitiful, helpless giant, the forces of totalitarianism and anarchy will threaten free nations and free institutions throughout the world.”

A constant refrain.

*Putin’s invasion of Ukraine has clearly hit the buffers, but as is the case with any war, there is dishonesty, propaganda and lies flying left and right from all sides involved. On some occasions, there is also outright madness in the thinking of some commentators which, unfortunately enough, passes itself off as analytical discourse worth publishing in so-called world leading opinion pages. “Russia must lose this war and demilitarize” argued the authors of a recent piece that appeared in [Project Syndicate](#). In addition, they claim that the West does not want to see Russia defeated. And they cite you as one of those who is somehow naïve enough to believe in the idea that the West bears responsibility for creating the conditions provoking Russia’s attack on Ukraine. Your comments and reaction to this piece of “analysis” on the ongoing war in Ukraine, which I presume may in fact be widely shared not only by Ukrainians but also by many others in Eastern Europe and the Baltic states, not to mention the United States?*

There’s not much point wasting time on “outright madness” — which, in this case, also calls for devastation of Ukraine and great damage far beyond.

But it’s not complete madness. They’re right about me, though they might add

that I share the company of [almost all historians](#) and a wide range of prominent policy intellectuals since the '90s, among them leading hawks, as well as the top echelon of the diplomatic corps who know anything about Russia, from George Kennan and Reagan's Ambassador to Russia Jack Matlock, to Bush II's hawkish defense secretary Robert Gates, to the current head of the CIA, and an impressive list of others. The list in fact includes any literate person capable of reviewing the very clear historical and diplomatic record with an open mind.

It is, surely, worthwhile to think seriously about the history of the past 30 years since Bill Clinton launched a new Cold War by [violating the firm and unambiguous U.S. promise](#) to Mikhail Gorbachev that "We understand the need for assurances to the countries in the East. If we maintain a presence in a Germany that is a part of NATO, there would be no extension of NATO's jurisdiction for forces of NATO one inch to the east."

Those who want to ignore the history are free to do so, at the cost of failure to understand what is happening now, and what the prospects are for preventing "much worse."

*Another unfortunate chapter in human mentality in connection with the Russian-Ukraine conflict is the degree of racism manifested by many commentators and policy makers in the Western world. Yes, fortunately enough, Ukrainians fleeing their country have been welcomed with open arms by European countries, which is not of course the treatment accorded to those fleeing parts of Africa and Asia (or from Central America in the case of the United States) because of persecution, political instability and conflict, and desire to escape poverty. In fact, it's hard to miss the racism hidden behind the thinking of many who claim that one should not compare U.S.'s invasion of Iraq with Russia's invasion of Ukraine because the two events are on a different level. This is, for instance, [the position taken by the neoliberal Polish intellectual Adam Michnik](#), who, incidentally, also cites you as one of those who commits the cardinal sin of failing to draw distinctions between the two invasions! Your reaction to this type of "intellectual analysis?"*

Outside the self-protective Western bubble, the racism is [perceived in even starker terms](#), for example, by the distinguished Indian writer and political activist/essayist Arundhati Roy: "Ukraine is certainly not seen here as something with a clear moral tale to tell. When brown or black people get bombed or shocked-and-awed, it does not matter, but with white people it is supposed to be

different.”

I'll return directly to the “cardinal sin,” a most revealing aspect of contemporary high culture in the West, mimicked by loyalists elsewhere.

We should recognize however that Eastern Europe is a somewhat special case. For familiar and obvious reasons, Eastern European elites tend to be more susceptible to U.S. propaganda than the norm. That's the basis for Donald Rumsfeld's distinction between Old and New Europe. Old Europe are the bad guys, who refused to join in the U.S. invasion of Iraq, encumbered by antiquated ideas about international law and elementary morality. New Europe, mostly the former Russians satellites, are the good guys, free from such baggage.

*Finally, there are even some “leftist” intellectuals out there who have taken the position that the world now, in light of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, needs a stronger NATO and that there shouldn't be any negotiated settlements to the conflict. I find it hard to digest the notion that anyone who claims to be part of the left-radical tradition would be advocating the expansion of NATO and be in favor of the continuation of the war, so what's your take on this particularly strange “leftist” position?*

I somehow missed the calls from the left for a revival of the Warsaw Pact when the U.S. invaded Iraq and Afghanistan while also attacking Serbia and Libya — always with pretexts, to be sure.

Those calling for a stronger NATO might want to think about what NATO is doing right now, and also about how NATO depicts itself. The latest NATO summit extended the North Atlantic to the Indo-Pacific, that is, all the world. NATO's role is to participate in the U.S. project of planning for a war with China, already an economic war as the U.S. dedicates itself (and by compulsion, its allies) to preventing Chinese economic development, with steps toward possible military confrontation lurking not far in the distance. Again, terminal war.

We've discussed all of this before. There are new developments as Europe, South Korea and Japan ponder ways to avoid severe economic decline by following Washington's orders to withhold technology from China, their major market.

It's also of no slight interest to see the self-image that NATO is proudly constructing. One instructive example is the U.S. Navy's latest acquisition, the

amphibious assault ship *USS Fallujah*, named to commemorate [the two Marine attacks on Fallujah in 2004](#), among the more atrocious crimes of the U.S. invasion of Iraq. It's normal for imperial states to ignore or seek to explain away their crimes. It's a shade more unusual to see them celebrated.

Outsiders don't always find this amusing, including Iraqis. Reflecting on the commissioning of the *USS Fallujah*, [Iraqi journalist Nabil Salih describes](#) a football field "known as the [Martyrs' Cemetery](#). It is where residents of the once besieged city [of Fallujah] buried the women and children massacred in repeated United States assaults to repress a raging rebellion in the early years of occupation. In Iraq, even playgrounds are now sites for mourning. The war entailed showering Fallujah in depleted uranium and white phosphorus."

"But US savagery didn't end there," Salih continues:

"Twenty years and incalculable birth defects later, the US navy is naming one of its warships the *USS Fallujah*.... This is how the US Empire continues its war against Iraqis. Fallujah's name, bleached in white phosphorus implanted in mothers' wombs for generations, is a spoil of war, too. "Under extraordinary odds," reads a US Empire [statement](#) explaining the decision to name a warship after Fallujah, "the Marines prevailed against a determined enemy who enjoyed all the advantages of defending in an urban area."... What is left is the haunting absence of family members, homes bombed into nonexistence and photographs incinerated along with the smiling faces. Instead, a lethally corrupt system of cross-sectarian camaraderie-in-theft was bequeathed to us by the unpunished war criminals of Downing Street and the Beltway."

Salih quotes Walter Benjamin in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*: "Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate."

"Through this historical revisionism," Salih concludes, "the US has launched another assault on our dead. Benjamin had warned us: 'Even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins.' The enemy has won."

That's the true image of NATO, as many victims can testify.

But what do Iraqis know, or other Brown and Black people like them? For "The Truth" one can turn to a Polish writer who obediently repeats the most vulgar American propaganda, echoing many of his counterparts among the commissars



at home.

Let's be fair, however. At the time of the massacre, the U.S. media did report what was going on. I can do no better than to quote at length from the [damning compilation](#) of much of that reporting that Australian journalist John Menadue published in 2018:

[On October 16, 2004, the Washington Post reported](#) that *"electricity and water were cut off to the city just as a fresh wave of [bombing] strikes began Thursday night, an action that US forces also took at the start of assaults on Najaf and Samarra."* The Red Cross and other aid agencies were also denied access to deliver the most basic of humanitarian aid — water, food, and emergency medical supplies to the civilian population.

On November 7, a [New York Times front page story](#) detailed how the Coalition's ground campaign was launched by seizing Fallujah's only hospital: *"Patients and hospital employees were rushed out of the rooms by armed soldiers and ordered to sit or lie on the floor while troops tied their hands behind their backs."* The story also revealed the motive for attacking the hospital: *"The offensive also shut down what officers said was a propaganda weapon for the militants: Fallujah General Hospital with its stream of reports of civilian casualties."* The city's two medical clinics were also bombed and destroyed.

In a November 2005 editorial denouncing its use, the [New York Times described white phosphorous](#), *"Packed into an artillery shell, it explodes over a battlefield in a white glare that can illuminate an enemy's positions. It also rains balls of flaming chemicals, which cling to anything they touch and burn until their oxygen supply is cut off. They can burn for hours inside a human body."*

In early November 2004, alongside the *New York Times* reports that Fallujah's main hospital had been attacked, the *Nation* magazine referred to *"reports that US armed forces killed scores of patients in an attack on a Fallujah health centre and have deprived civilians of medical care, food and water."*

The [BBC reported on 11 November 2004](#) *"Without water and electricity, we feel completely cut off from every one else ... there are dead women and children lying on the streets. People are getting weaker from hunger. Many are dying from their injuries because there is no medical help left in the city whatsoever."*

On 14 November 2004, [the Guardian reported](#) “The horrific conditions for those who remained in the city have begun to emerge in the last 24 hours as it becomes clear that US military claims of ‘precision’ targeting of insurgent positions were false.... The city has been without power or water for days.”

That’s NATO, for those willing to learn about the world.

But enough of this deplorable whataboutism. Orders from on high are that it is outrageous to compare the new Hitler’s assault on Ukraine with the misguided but benign U.S.-U.K. mercy mission to help Iraqis by ousting an evil dictator — whom the U.S. enthusiastically supported right through his worst crimes, but that’s not proper fare for the intellectual class.

Again, however, we should be fair. Not all agree that it’s improper to raise questions about the U.S. mission in Iraq. Recently, there was much ado about [Harvard’s rejection of Human Rights Watch Director Kenneth Roth](#) for a position at the Kennedy School, quickly rescinded under protest. Roth’s credentials were lauded. He even took the negative position in a debate, moderated by noted human rights advocate Samantha Power, on whether the Iraq invasion qualifies as humanitarian intervention. (Michael Ignatieff, director of the Carr Center for Human Rights, argued it did qualify.)

How lucky we are that at the peak of the intellectual world, our culture is so free and open that we even can have a debate on whether the enterprise was an exercise in humanitarianism.

The undisciplined might ask how we would react to an analogous event at Moscow University.

Source: <https://truthout.org/>

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# The Foreign Fighters On The Front Lines Of The Russia-Ukraine War



*John P. Ruehl*

On February 2, 2023, former U.S. Marine Peter Reed [was killed](#) in Ukraine while evacuating civilians in the front-line city of Bakhmut. [Two days later](#) on February 4, the bodies of two British volunteers, Christopher Perry and Andrew Bagshaw, were returned as part of a prisoner swap deal with Russian forces. Their deaths mark some of the latest Western casualties in Ukraine one year after Russian forces invaded the country in February 2022.

Foreign fighters have flocked to Ukraine [since the initial round of Russian military intervention](#) in 2014. But following the Russian invasion in February 2022, the number of fighters making their way to Ukraine has skyrocketed. After Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy [asked](#) foreigners to join the International Defense Legion of Ukraine at the beginning of the war on February 27, around [20,000 volunteers from more than 50 countries](#) arrived in Kyiv over

the next two weeks.

Many traveled to the country [for ideological reasons](#). In contrast to the disillusionment many Western veterans felt after combat tours in [Afghanistan](#) and [Iraq](#), the belief that they would be helping to “[ease Ukrainian suffering](#)” and would be [defending democracy](#) have been powerful motivators in bringing thousands of volunteers to Kyiv.

However, the vast majority of foreign arrivals [returned home before the summer of 2022](#) for several reasons. Some [lacked credible experience](#) and were accused of being “[war tourists](#)” instead of being dedicated to Ukraine’s liberation. Western soldiers who volunteered also found themselves [operating](#) without strong air support and other key technological advantages enjoyed over militant groups in the Middle East.

Language barriers have often inhibited foreign fighters from not being able to [communicate](#) clearly with their Ukrainian counterparts. Allegations of criminality, [both in their home countries as well as in Ukraine](#), have also been levied on some foreign volunteers.

Most estimates place [between 1,000 and 3,000 foreign fighters](#) currently supporting Ukrainian forces, largely serving in three battalions of the International Legion. Hundreds of more professional foreign volunteers are believed to be serving in smaller units separate from the International Legion.

These include groups dominated by citizens from across the former Soviet Union, such as the [Georgian Legion](#), [Chechen battalions](#), and [Kalinoŭski Regiment](#), a group of Belarusian fighters. Western-dominated military units include groups like [Alpha](#), [Phalanx](#), and [the Norman Brigade](#). However, even these units have faced controversy. The leadership of the Norman Brigade, a Canadian-led unit, for example, [has been repeatedly criticized by former members](#).

Western private military and security companies (PMSCs) are also active in Ukraine. The [Mozart Group](#), a U.S. PMSC, styled to counter the Russian PMSC Wagner Group (similarly named after a German composer), was active in the Ukrainian conflict in the early days. But as funding dried up and remarks by some of its members drew negative attention on social media, [the Mozart Group fell apart](#). Its remaining leadership is currently attempting to reorganize itself and get back to the front line.

The involvement of U.S. volunteers in Ukraine has also raised questions over potential [violations of the Neutrality Act](#), enacted in 1794 to prevent American citizens from getting involved in foreign wars. Yet while the U.S. State Department has [recommended against](#) U.S. citizens from traveling to Ukraine, Washington has done little to prevent [thousands of its citizens](#) from traveling there.

The U.S. is not alone in its mixed messaging over foreign fighters. The British government has [stated it is illegal](#) for British troops and ex-service personnel to travel to Ukraine to fight, but just days into the Russian invasion in February 2022, then-Foreign Secretary Liz Truss [announced her support](#) for British individuals traveling to Ukraine to do so. Other Western governments have, meanwhile, declared they would discourage individual citizens from traveling to Ukraine but [would not prosecute those who did so](#).

This has not prevented some legal action from being taken against those who are caught. [In June 2022](#), a court in the Russian-controlled separatist region of Donetsk sentenced two British citizens and a Moroccan to death for fighting in the Ukrainian military. “Such treatment of prisoners of war constitutes a war crime, but the Russians claimed that they were mercenaries and, thus, the rules of war did not apply to them,” [stated](#) the Harvard International Review.

Wary of instigating a wider war between NATO and Russia, Western officials have refrained from putting official boots on the ground. Nonetheless, U.S. special operations forces [have been active in Ukraine](#) since before the war and continue to operate in the country, along with CIA personnel. Additionally, special forces from Britain, France, Canada, Lithuania, and other Western allies [are also active](#) in Ukraine.

Alongside the lack of clarity over the intelligence and special forces operations, it is difficult to confirm the exact number of Westerners in Ukraine, what type of roles they are serving, where exactly they are, and how many have died. Seemingly erroneous claims are also often made regarding their casualties. On January 25, 2023, a Turkish website, allegedly citing what is assumed to be data from Israel’s intelligence agency Mossad, [stated that thousands of soldiers from NATO countries](#) had been killed, including hundreds from the U.S. and the UK. This claim was quickly [denied by NATO](#).

The Kremlin has, meanwhile, highlighted how Russia is [not just fighting Ukraine, but NATO itself](#), and [captured](#) Western fighters are key to portraying this message to both the Russian public and international audiences. Moscow has [sought to frame the conflict](#) as a wider struggle against the West, which it believes will resonate with other populations around the world.

[In March 2022](#), Russian President Vladimir Putin called for foreign fighters to help liberate the Donbas, while according to Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, 16,000 foreigners had indicated they were willing to fight alongside Russian forces in Ukraine, according to Newsweek.

Yevgeny Prigozhin, the financier of Wagner Group, [declared on his company's Telegram channel](#) in February 2023 that more than 10 million U.S. citizens had signed up with the group to fight for Russia. While Wagner has found most of its new recruits [from Russian prisons](#), the Kremlin has had some luck in recruiting foreign fighters to Ukraine. Many Russian PMSCs have typically [recruited from former Soviet states](#), and Central Asian fighters are [suspected to be fighting on both sides](#) of the conflict.

Many Serbians also resent the [West's historical role in their country's affairs](#) and small groups of Serbian nationals have been fighting alongside Russian forces in Ukraine [since 2014](#). Serbian officials noted in January 2023 that they were [monitoring reports](#) of additional Serbians serving Russia in Ukraine. Montenegrin officials are also attempting to prevent their citizens, many of whom share pro-Serbian and pro-Russian sentiment, [from going to Ukraine](#), with some having already done so since 2014 as well.

Iranian soldiers and personnel are [in Ukraine helping Russians](#) operate Iranian-made drones, and according to a Ukrainian official, [10 Iranians were killed](#) during an attack on Russian positions in October 2022. Hundreds of Syrian fighters are [also suspected to be in Ukraine](#), mirroring the dynamics of the Syrian civil war where Iranian, Syrian, and Russian troops have fought together since 2015.

The possibility of additional volunteers from other countries joining the war on both sides remains high. [In August 2022](#), Russian state media began suggesting that up to 100,000 North Korean volunteers could end up supporting the Kremlin's campaign in Ukraine. While that number is clearly optimistic, North Korean volunteers may come to exceed the handful of [South Korean citizens](#)

known to have traveled to Ukraine to fight for Kyiv.

Additionally, [small numbers of U.S. citizens](#) have also gone to fight for Russia, alongside U.S.-trained Afghan commandos [also now fighting for Russia in Ukraine](#). Though the Kremlin [denies the reports](#), it is believed Afghan soldiers have been [actively recruited](#) by the Kremlin for months.

The Russia-Ukraine war is clearly more than a war between two countries. In addition to the material aid, both [Russia](#) and [particularly Ukraine](#) have received from their allies, thousands of foreign fighters from around the world have arrived to fight alongside them. As more volunteers continue to arrive, there is a greater risk of other countries becoming entangled in the conflict. Establishing safeguards to deal with foreign volunteer casualties and prisoners of war is crucial to preventing the conflict from escalating further.

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