“In a nuclear war between the US and Russia, everybody in the world would die”

Nuclear expert speaks on the dangers of war between the US and Russia

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“I do not know with what weapons World War III will be fought, but World War IV will be fought with sticks and stones.” – attributed to Albert Einstein

In 2017, the *World Socialist Web Site* published a series of interviews with leading experts on the subject of nuclear war. They spoke on both the inherent dangers of such a conflict, even of a “limited” nuclear exchange, as well as the decades-long effort by the American military, media and political establishment, to conceal the true horror that such a war would bring.

Yesterday, we published an interview with scientist and anti-nuclear activist Steven Starr. Today we are republishing the second of these interviews, conducted with Greg Mello, who spoke on the underlying political and economic interests driving the world toward nuclear war. Mello is the secretary and executive director of the Los Alamos Study Group, an organization that has researched the dangers of nuclear war and advocated for disarmament since 1989.

The threat of nuclear war is now more acute than at any time in history. The continuous eastward expansion of NATO following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 has culminated in the US-NATO provocation of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, which has already had immense global repercussions.

Thousands of soldiers and civilians have been killed in Ukraine and nearly 3 million people have been displaced. The Western media and sections of the political establishment recklessly demand that NATO impose a “no-fly zone” over Ukraine, in which NATO aircraft would attempt to shoot down their Russian counterparts. This would immediately provoke a direct confrontation between the world’s two largest nuclear-armed powers, with incalculable consequences.

Amid the war in Eastern Europe, the coronavirus pandemic continues unabated. According to estimates of excess deaths, between 18 and 20 million people have likely died directly or indirectly from COVID-19 during the past two years. A nuclear war would raise such a scale of death from the millions to the *billions.*

The pandemic—which amounts to a social crime of staggering dimensions—has proven once again the willingness of the capitalist ruling elites to sacrifice the lives of millions of people, as took place in World War I and World War II. The same ruling elites are entirely capable of starting a nuclear war, which could quickly snuff out all human life and potentially all life on Earth.

The fundamental conclusion that must be drawn from the present drive to World War III and the ongoing pandemic is that capitalism is a bankrupt social system which threatens the health and very existence of humanity. The international working class must overthrow world capitalism and build a new society upon socialist foundations, based on nuclear and military disarmament, social equality and scientific planning.

All workers who understand the present dangers and the need to build a revolutionary movement to stop the drive to war and stop the pandemic should make the decision to join and build the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) as the world party of socialist revolution.

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WSWS: What role have the Democrats played in the increased tensions between the US and Russia over Syria? [*This interview was conducted a week after the April 6, 2017 cruise missile strike by the Trump administration against a Syrian airbase, which dramatically escalated tensions between the US and Russia at the time.*]

Greg Mello: Even as recently as 2013, when there was a fake chemical weapon attack in Syria, I don’t think the Democrats were as “on board” with war as they are today. But now, as a result of the candidacy of Hillary Clinton, the Russia-baiting and the neo-McCarthyite hyperbole has really ratcheted up, marginalizing even those within the party who express any amount of skepticism about the official story, such as Congresswoman Tulsi Gabbard. And this is someone who went to Syria to find out what was really going on. She found that the majority of people in Syria want the US to stop funding the rebels and are happy with the Assad government’s efforts to oust Al Qaeda and ISIS. But she’s being silenced.

WSWS: Could you speak on some of the corporate interests involved in this?

GM: Fifty-nine cruise missiles cost a lot of money. Each missile used costs, I guess, between $1 and $1.6 million, so the strike as a whole cost between $60 to $100 million. That doesn’t include the cost of the deployment of the ships and the other elements that make up a strike. It’s probably twice as much, if you include those elements. In terms of the missiles, if they are replaced, that’s income for whatever company replaces them.

Companies also get free advertising from such a strike. I saw the clip from MSNBC’s Brian Williams, who praised the missiles using the Leonard Cohen line, “I’m guided by the beauty of our weapons.” That’s a priceless advertising clip, especially when the same images and videos of the missiles are on primetime news and across the Internet. I’m sure their stock values, literally and figuratively, went up.

But even this is peanuts compared to the really high dollar amounts that come from continued tensions with Russia and the US government’s need to dominate the world. We’re talking not about millions of dollars, but billions—really, trillions. To maintain the idea that we should be in every part of the world, the US spends on all components of national defense about $1 trillion a year. So it really adds up quickly.

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And the US military just got an increase to its base budget that is comparable to Russia's entire defense budget. In the US, we spend way more money on the military than all of our potential adversaries combined. That's where the real money is.

We get NATO to buy the latest versions of military equipment, compatible with ours. All of those arms sales plus our own national purchases are worth trillions. That's what this strike upholds. A military spending pattern on a colossal scale.

This goes along with the geopolitical questions you mentioned.

WSWS: Could elaborate on the geopolitical questions?

GM: Well, Trump has said that we won't go into Syria, but there's no consistent policy on this. Let's assume there is another strike, will it involve Russia? Will it kill Russians? What will Putin or any other Russian leader feel he needs to do then?

Stephen Cohen, professor emeritus of Russian studies at Princeton and New York University, noted that Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev called American and Russian relations "ruined." And Medvedev is not a hardliner against the West. For him to say that, you can only imagine what the generals and other hardliners are whispering in Putin's other ear.

If we make another strike, either with a US airplane or a "coalition" airplane, it could easily be shot down by the high end anti-aircraft weapons that Syria and Russia have deployed. This would lead to an outcry from the US political establishment to do more, to double down on our mistake. All in all, it's difficult to see how an air campaign could have a decisive effect on the war in Syria without creating an extreme risk of escalation between the US and Russia.

Geopolitically, the situation in Syria has gone so far towards Assad remaining in power and the terrorists being pushed out that a serious US attack on Syria would either fail, or else it would really damage Russian interests, humiliate Russia and kill her soldiers along with Assad's, and therefore tilt the balance toward WWIII.

The idea that the poisonings in Khan Sheikhoun occurred because of chemical weapons or precursors released by a conventional munitions attack on an Al Qaeda weapons warehouse or workshop, which is the report of the Russian government, makes the most sense given everything we know. The notion that Assad or some rogue element in his army dropped chemical weapons on his own people, just when he is winning militarily and politically, is ridiculous.

Now we see that the US does not want the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons involved in an investigation of the attack. Really?

The OPCW is the world's policeman for chemical weapons, something the US helped create. They got the Nobel Peace Prize in 2013 for verifying that all of Syria's chemical weapons had been destroyed. They destroyed them on a US ship. In this case and in every case, the OPCW would carefully study evidence gathered with chain of custody procedures at an accredited laboratory, all of which are essential when matters of war and peace are at stake. It's the same way you'd collect evidence in a high-profile murder case.

This hasn't happened for the most recent chemical weapon attack—and the US doesn't want it to happen. Instead, the US has recently issued a statement of the "facts," a piece of paper claiming to be from all 17 intelligence agencies, but without letterheads or signatures, which uses weasel words like "we have confidence." There is no indication what agencies have signed off on this or what actual evidence has been collected. Moreover, an attack like this takes a few weeks to investigate, not a few days.

This all is happening because Syria is one of the more important crossroads between the hydrocarbons of the Middle East and European customers. If you're going to get oil and natural gas from Qatar to Europe without going through Iran, you have to have pipelines that go through Syria. This is especially important if you don't want Europe to be dependent on natural gas from Russia, if you want to prevent Germany and Russia and the rest of Asia from further integration economically. The US government does not want Europe dependent on hydrocarbons supplied by Russia or Iran.

So, really, Syria is a proxy war between the US and other regional powers—Iran, allied with Russia—for control over Europe's gas and oil. In addition, Israel wants control of the Golan Heights in order to drill in that region.

It's also worth considering that China's oil production seems to have peaked. The world's net exports of oil—that is, the oil that can be bought on the international market—are starting to very slowly decline.

Since a barrel of oil will produce more value in countries such as China and India because the workers are paid so much less, China can always outbid the US and Europe for oil. Given a free market, they will. Alongside this problem, the oil-producing countries are using more oil internally as their populations and economies grow, which will inevitably produce a crisis in the availability and affordability of oil. That crisis will be upon us in the 2020s and it implies the potential for great power conflicts over these resources.

You didn't have this during the Cold War because the US and Russia each had enough resources, as did our allies. But now, the cheap oil is running out and there are no cheap replacements. The potential for conflict, including between nuclear-armed powers, is rising.

WSWS: How many people would die during the first day of such a war?

GM: To a first approximation, in a nuclear war between the US and Russia, everybody in the world would die. Some people in the southern hemisphere might survive, but probably not even them.

Even a couple of nuclear weapons could end the United States as a government and an economy. It wouldn't take a great deal to destroy the "just in time" supply chains, the financial markets and the Internet. The whole system is very fragile, especially with respect to nuclear weapons. Even in a somewhat limited nuclear war, say a war where only ICBM silos and airfields were targeted, there would be so much fallout from the ICBM fields alone that much of the Midwest would be wiped out, including places like Chicago.

Then there is the problem of the nuclear power plants, which have stored within them and their spent fuel pools and storage areas truly vast amounts of radioactivity. If their electricity supply is interrupted, these plants are quite susceptible to fires and meltdowns, as we saw at Fukushima.

Keep in mind that nuclear war is not one or two Hiroshima-sized bombs. The imagination cannot encompass nuclear war. Nuclear war means nuclear winter. It means the collapse of very fragile electronic, financial, governmental, administrative systems that keep everyone alive. We'd be lucky to reboot in the early 19th century. And if enough weapons are detonated, the collapse of the Earth's ozone layer would mean that every form of life that has eyes could be blinded. The combined effects of a US-Russian nuclear war would mean that pretty much every terrestrial mammal, and many plants, would become extinct. There would be a dramatic biological thinning.

I think many parts of the US military just don't get it. I've talked to people on the National Security Council and they have the idea that Russia will back down. I begged them, about 18 months ago, to bring in some Cold War era veteran diplomats from the realist school, people like former ambassador to Russia Jack Matlock, who was appointed by Ronald Reagan, to try and convince them that Russia won't just do what we want, that they have their own legitimate interests that we would do well to understand and take into consideration.

WSWS: What are your thoughts on how to deal with the problem of nuclear war?

GM: I would say that the effort to decrease inequality in the world is at

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the core of dealing with the threat of nuclear war. We have to get the military-industrial-financial complex off people's backs. If you have so much power concentrated in so few hands, and have such high levels of inequality, the people in power are blinded by their position. They are insulated from society's problems. So gross inequality—economic and especially political—leads to sort of political stupidity. It could lead to annihilation. The ignorant masses are not the problem. It's the ignorance and hubris at the top. It always is.

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