

The World Press Photo 2023 exhibition in Amsterdam: Visual war propaganda in the service of NATO

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The annual World Press Photo (WPP) exhibition for 2023 began its world tour on April 22, 2023, at De Nieuwe Kerk [The New Church], a 15th-century church in the centre of Amsterdam. The exhibition features the prints of over 150 mostly large-format photographs taken primarily in 2022. The exhibited photographs were selected from over 60,000 submissions by 3,752 photographers from 127 countries.

The pictures were chosen by an allegedly “independent global jury,” headed by Brent Lewis, the photo editor of the *New York Times*. The exhibition will be held in multiple cities across 17 countries, ending on December 17, 2023 in Prangins, Switzerland and Gouda, the Netherlands. Based on the history of its past 65 exhibitions, the event will likely attract millions of visitors worldwide.

In announcing its winning entries for 2023, World Press Photo officials declared that the exhibition represents “major news events and important moments overlooked by the mainstream media in 2022,” including “the war in Ukraine and historic protests in Iran...the realities in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, and the many faces of the climate crisis in countries ranging from Morocco to Australia to Peru to Kazakhstan.”

Based on its absurd claim that the mainstream media has “overlooked” the war in Ukraine, the WPP jury awarded its main prize to a photo of an injured pregnant woman being carried out of a maternity hospital in Mariupol allegedly damaged by Russian air strikes that injured 17 people and killed three, including the pregnant woman and her child. The photo, published by much of the Western world’s mainstream media at the time and featuring prominently in the current WPP exhibition, was taken by Evgeniy Maloletka, a Ukrainian nationalist, who works together with the neo-Nazi Azov battalion. Maloletka has praised the fascist members of the Azov battalion as “heroes of Ukraine” and referred on his social media accounts to Russian soldiers as “vampires.”

In selecting this photograph as its winner, the WPP commented that its jury “felt that this image captures the absurdity and horror of war...By giving the image a platform, the jury hopes that the world will stop and acknowledge the intolerable realities of this war and consider the future of Ukraine.” The bombing of a maternity hospital is an utterly reprehensible act. The tragic fate of Iryna Kalinina and her baby indeed captures the “horror of war” in Ukraine, but the depiction of the war at the WPP exhibition is entirely one-sided. The photo of Kalinina and accompanying pictures of the dead and injured were instrumental in the mainstream media’s call at the time for NATO to impose a no-fly zone over Ukraine—a move that would require the shooting down of Russian aircraft and possibly lead to world war.

What is the relationship between the fate of Iryna Kalinina and the social, political and historical conditions that led up to the reactionary Russian attack on Ukraine? The exhibition does not touch upon any of these critical political issues. In fact, as has been repeatedly analysed in WSWs coverage, the Ukraine war is a direct result of NATO’s relentless military expansion towards Russia since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, aimed at an imperialist ‘regime change’ operation in Moscow.

The WPP exhibition describes the bombing of the hospital in Mariupol, resulting in three deaths, as “evidence of the war crimes being committed against Ukrainian civilians by Russian forces.” By the same token, what conclusion should one draw from the deliberate bombing of civilians in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, and former Yugoslavia, in recent US-led wars that have resulted over 4.5 million deaths by conservative estimates?

The WPP’s completely distorted depiction of world events is reflected in another imperialist battleground—Afghanistan. The category of Global Winners features deeply moving photographs from Afghanistan, entitled “The Price of Peace in Afghanistan,” This collection of nine photographs by the Danish photographer Mads Nissen depicts the appalling conditions facing the Afghan population following decades of war.

The 15-year-old boy in this portrait is Khalil Ahmad. This photo was taken in the western city of Herat, close to a village infamously known as the ‘one kidney village’. The caption reads that Khalil “decided to sell his kidney for US\$3,500. After the operation, Khalil suffers chronic pain and no longer has the strength for football and cricket. The lack of jobs and the threat of starvation has led to a dramatic increase in the illegal organ trade.”

The WPP asserts that the tragic fate of Khalil is a result of “the withdrawal of US and allied forces from Afghanistan at the end of a 20-year-long attempt at nation-building.” Once again, the WPP claims are deeply duplicitous. Direct responsibility for the desperate plight of the Afghan population rests with the US and its NATO allies, whose aim had nothing to do with “nation building,” but rather with their plans to subjugate the Afghan people and plunder the country’s vast natural reserves, thereby facilitating US imperialism’s drive to assert its hegemony over the energy-rich region of Central Asia. During the span of the “20-year-long attempt at nation-building,” official estimates put the Afghan death toll at more than 200,000, with hundreds of thousands more wounded, maimed, with millions turned into refugees, a significant number of whom have taken the immense risk of traveling to Europe via perilous voyages across the

Mediterranean.

It should be noted that in 2010, Julian Assange, as an investigative journalist, published the Afghan war logs, a vast trove of leaked US military documents that provided an unprecedented insight into the criminality of the war waged by US-led NATO forces. After featuring a single photo in 2011, World Press Photo has failed to reference Assange's work and his systematic persecution by the US and its allies.

The historical lies and distortions continue. In the category of past exhibitions, the WPP "Photo of the Year 2000" depicts the plight of Albanian refugees.

The caption for the photograph argues that the "image depicts a man in Kukes, Albania, one of the largest gathering points for ethnic Albanian refugees escaping the violence in Serbia. Airstrikes by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization NATO against Serbia in 1999 eventually ended the war, but not before nearly one million ethnic Albanian fled the country."

Far from bringing the civil "war to an end," it was an alliance of NATO countries led by the US and Germany that initiated the war in the first place, by recognising the breakaway states of former Yugoslavia. This set the stage for a bloody conflict between the region's various populations—Muslims, Serbs, Croats and Albanians, which ultimately led to an unprecedented war offensive against Serbia. NATO, led by the United States, including forces from Britain, Germany, France, Italy and other allied countries, rained bombs for 78 days and nights on a poor, tiny country with less than eight million people.

While the WPP largely sanitises and downplays the role of the US and its imperialist allies in NATO in provoking war and social devastation across the globe, the exhibition does include some photos which reveal the real state of social and political relations in the 21st century. One of the most expressive photos on show features the vicious response of Israeli police to mourners carrying the casket of the Al Jazeera journalist Shireen Abu Akleh during her funeral in East Jerusalem, on May 13, 2022. Confronted with the overwhelming brutality of Israeli state forces on a daily basis, the Palestinian people are not even allowed to bury their dead in peace.

It is not possible within the bounds of this article to comment on other poignant photographs at the exhibition which deal, for example, with the impact of climate change, police violence and the plight of refugees. What is striking, however, are the number of burning topics omitted, such as internationally unprecedented levels of social inequality, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the rise to prominence of ultra-right and fascist forces across the globe. Instead, the exhibition prioritises a pro-NATO, anti-Russian narrative that fuels the war-hysteria and nationalism stoked by mainstream media.

Despite its claims, the World Press Photo foundation is far from being an "independent organization." Its chief players are deeply intertwined with the Dutch state apparatus, the country's monarchy and its trade unions. Joumana El Zein Khoury, the current executive director of the WPP foundation, previously served as director of the Prince Claus Fund, which was established by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Likewise, Jamila Aanzi, a member of the WPP supervisory board, currently serves on the Dutch government's advisory commission on the country's child care scandal, following the Dutch government's malicious campaign to penalise families undertaking child care. Aanzi also served as the vice president of FNV Young & United, the youth network of the Federation of Dutch Trade Unions. This organisation is

one of the two leading Dutch trade union confederations that have played a crucial role in betraying a wave of recent strikes.

The World Press Photo foundation has also collaborated in recent years with Bellingcat, a Netherlands-based "forensic research and open-source intelligence organisation." Bellingcat was founded soon after the 2014 coup in Kiev and is a US and European-funded organisation with close links to NATO.

Bellingcat's generous funding comes from sources that include the National Endowment for Democracy (often referred to as the "second CIA"), the European Council, and other "non-profit" organisations. Bellingcat has a history of specialising in investigations that confirm US government accusations against Russia or any other country that Washington has on its list of targets. Bellingcat founder Eliot Higgins visits and speaks frequently at World Press Photo events. He is a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council's Future Europe Initiative and a member of the Technology Advisory Board of the International Criminal Court based in The Hague.

At last year's exhibition, WPP declared that it was collaborating with Bellingcat for the sole purpose of "providing more detailed insight into the Russian invasion of Ukraine." The "detailed insight" provided at the behest of Bellingcat was then displayed at last year's exhibition as a "special section" to substantiate the claims by US and its NATO allies that "Putin is a war criminal." It doesn't come as an accident that the right-wing, pro-war historian Timothy Snyder wrote appreciatively: "Bellingcat is a treasure trove of hugely important investigative journalism."

The current WPP exhibition confirms the growing dangerous lurch to the right by official mainstream media. In the past century many outstanding photographers and their sponsors, such as Robert Capa, Don McCullin, James Nachtwey and the Magnum Photos agency, were characterised by their distinctly critical and anti-establishment attitude towards political developments. Today photographers, via their media managements and organisations such as World Press Photos, are being increasingly pressed into service to provide the sort of "embedded" photojournalism which conforms to the predatory war policy of the US and its NATO allies.



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