

Why Nuclear Weapons Abolition Will Kill Millions (Again)

By

Kirk L. Fansher

Einstein once said that he did not know how World War III would be fought, but World War IV would be fought with sticks and stones. Nuclear abolitionists, in their zeal to put the nuclear genie back in the bottle, will bring that about.

Several months ago, the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* published an article by [Zak Kallenborn](#) in which he defended nuclear weapons and their utility. Rebuttal articles published made two fundamental arguments. First, [realism](#) predicts the unavoidability of war, which requires the elimination of nuclear weapons. Second, [deterrence is unreliable](#) because previous close calls predict future failure.

The authors believe that reducing nuclear weapons to [near] zero limits the danger in inevitable future wars because future cheating or proliferation would only take place in small numbers, thereby limiting the damage of nuclear use. History and game theory prove this argument dangerously flawed.

For two millennia, major power wars occurred several times per century. Oxford's Max Roser [charts](#) this bloody cost over the past 600 years. In that time 5–10 people per 100,000 population died in these wars, most of them civilians. In the past century deaths topped 100–200 deaths per 100,000 population.

Then after World War II something happened. Over the past seven decades this death rate has plummeted 99 percent to near zero (0.1/100,000 population). This is in spite of small spikes, which are attributable primarily to ethnic genocide in the (non-nuclear) global South. The world did not magically become more pacific. It built nuclear weapons.

The same abolitionists who criticize Kallenborn are horrified by the scale of the slaughter in Gaza and Ukraine. Over [315,000 Russian and 31,000 Ukraine](#) troops are dead in Ukraine and [12,000](#) Hamas fighters in Gaza. Nuclear abolitionists fail to grasp, this is a mere drop in the bucket compared to great power war.

For example, during World War I, there were 480,000 casualties in 7 days at the Battle of the Marne. There were 848,614 casualties at Passendaele and another 946,000 at Verdun. During World War II, more than 61,000 British civilians died in the Battle of Britain. Seventy-eight thousand American Airmen of the 8th Air Force died over Germany.

European deaths during World War II are estimated at [28.7 million](#) people. Great-power war gave rise to Joseph Stalin and Adolph Hitler, who exterminated over 30 million people between them. Stalin's genocide of [3.5 to 7 million](#) Ukrainians in 1932 and 1933 is the historical context for Ukrainian resistance today.

When it comes to killing civilians, the Japanese beat Stalin and Hitler combined. They killed over 300,000 Chinese during the "Rape of Nanjing." China suffered over [35 million](#) casualties during the Japanese occupation. When atomic bombs dropped on Japan, the Japanese army was still killing an estimated 250,000 Chinese every month.

During World War II, conventional bombing raids killed more civilians in a single night than both atomic bombs. In the Dresden firestorm, caused by allied conventional bombing, 135,000 Germans were incinerated. The ability of today's conventional weapons is even greater.

The only answer to the horror of war is to keep the peace through effective deterrence. To do this, those who would wage war must know the reward does not justify the risk. Deterrence does this at every level of conflict.

Arms control treaty regimes, the source of stability for nuclear disarmament advocates, are largely a failure. Despite the existence of the [Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons](#), Iran, Iraq, Israel, Libya, North Korea, Pakistan, and South Africa all sought or obtained the bomb. The [Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty](#) also failed to stop nuclear testing, with the violations of India, North Korea, and Pakistan. China, Egypt, Iran, Israel, Russia, and the United States have either not signed or ratified the treaty.

Russia breached the [Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty](#) during the Obama administration and then suspended participation in New START in 2023. As a result, for the first time in five decades, there is no nuclear arms limitation treaty between the United States and Russia/Soviet Union. Russia already maintained a policy of escalate to de-escalate during New START negotiations and, in fact, Chinese, North Korean, and Russian military doctrines all contemplate nuclear warfighting across the spectrum of conflict.

Deterrence is working every day and is not reserved for discussions of nuclear war. As China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia coalesce in an authoritarian coalition, deterrence remains the last best hope for averting war. It works along the entire continuum of conflict, reducing the likelihood of war. In short, nuclear weapons save lives.



Colonel [Kirk Fansher](#) (US Air Force, Ret.) is a Senior Fellow at the National Institute for Deterrence Studies. The views expressed are the author's own.