

New York Times compares China's Zero-COVID policies to the Holocaust

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China stands alone in the world for its Zero-COVID strategy. As a direct result of the policies it has adopted, millions of lives have been saved. Only four people have died of COVID-19 in China since April 17, 2020. More than 800,000 people have died of COVID-19 in the United States since that date. The Zero-COVID policy of China demonstrates that the staggering worldwide death toll of the past two years—official numbers show nearly six million dead—was entirely preventable.

The policy adopted by the major capitalist governments, Washington foremost, has been one of social murder, letting the pandemic rip through the population because the necessary public health measures to prevent its spread would infringe on the production of profit. This policy is directly responsible for both mass death and the emergence of new variants, such as Delta and Omicron, as the pandemic has been allowed to spread and mutate.

Far from being treated as a model for public health, China has become the focus of sustained and vicious, even unhinged, attacks. The saving of lives has been turned by the western media into something monstrous, an authoritarian trampling on the rights and lives of the Chinese people.

An article on the front page of the *New York Times* on January 13 was among the most vile yet published in this campaign against China. Originally published online under the headline, “The Army of Millions Who Enforce China’s Zero-COVID Policy, at All Costs,” the article compared China’s public health measures to the Holocaust, with health care workers functioning like Nazis.

The author of the article was Li Yuan, a *New York Times* correspondent based in Hong Kong with a regular column, “The New New World.” Focused on an ongoing lockdown in the city of Xi’an, Li wrote, “For the officials, virus control comes first. The people’s lives, well-being and dignity come much later.”

It is a lie breathtaking in its enormity. What do “people’s lives, well-being and dignity” mean to the American capitalist class and the Biden administration? By repudiating virus control, they compel the working class to live with mass death. The milestone of over one million COVID deaths looms. There is an element of apocalyptic unreality to American social life. It is becoming impossible even to grieve. The dead are no longer given faces or names in the media, just numbers, and soon even those numbers will not be reported.

The policy of social murder adopted by Washington and followed around the globe has left China encircled by the pandemic. The immense achievement of eliminating the virus must

be repeated again and again in its border cities, as new cases and variants are carried into China from the pandemic-ridden wider world.

The city of Xi’an in northwestern China has over the past month had to take aggressive measures to contain and eliminate the most serious outbreak of COVID-19 in China since April 2020. It is these events which the *Times* singled out as authoritarian.

The city’s thirteen million residents were placed in strict lockdown, mass testing and contact tracing were deployed throughout the city, and the infected and exposed were isolated in specially constructed facilities.

The lockdown is a massive disruption of everyday life, requiring real sacrifices, as everyone strains to a common end: the prevention of the spread of the pandemic. Since the lockdown in Xi’an began in late December, the entire city has undergone mass testing for COVID-19 every few days. More than 45,000 residents volunteered to arrange the delivery of food and other basic necessities.

The paramount concern is locating unconnected cases as these indicate a wider, as yet undetected transmission of the virus. In early January the last unconnected infection was detected. From a peak of 180 new cases per day, the number of new cases was down to six as of yesterday.

It appears that Xi’an will soon be reopening, neighborhood by neighborhood, as the virus is eliminated. Over the course of the outbreak, more than 2,000 cases were isolated. No one has died.

Over the course of the lockdown there have been abuses and several tragedies. Food shortages strained the delivery system and in a few instances led to desperate hunger. A pregnant woman miscarried when she was denied care until she could provide a negative COVID-19 test. A man from a “medium risk” district was denied care and died of a heart attack.

The tragedies of Xi’an—the stillborn baby and the heart-attack victim—are the subject of fervent national discussion on social media. Countless comparable tragedies occur every day in the United States, deaths in overcrowded hospital waiting rooms, miscarriages of mothers denied maternal care. These things go unreported. The *Times* saves all of its moral outrage for China.

The *Times* seized on these events to present the Zero-COVID policy of China as repressive and inhuman. Li wrote that there was “a ruthlessness to the single-minded pursuit of a zero-COVID policy.” Ordinary health care workers were imbued with this spirit of authoritarianism and became the agents of repression. “A vast

army of community workers,” she stated, “carry out the policy with zeal” and in the process they became the “enablers of authoritarian policy.”

Each of these lines drips with the self-satisfied moralism of the upper middle class mobilized in service to the geopolitical interests of US imperialism. In Li’s account the health care workers, their sleepless careworn faces bearing the nearly permanent imprint of an N95 mask, are the agents of authoritarianism. They represent a culture that does not value individual lives or dignity. There is a long, racist history behind such claims. It was the foundational myth of the “yellow peril,” the lie of nineteenth century imperialism that China and the “countries of the Orient” represented a racial threat to the Western world.

The *Times* did not stop there, however. Li compares China’s Zero-COVID policy to the Holocaust. She cites philosopher Hannah Arendt’s phrase the “banality of evil,” which Arendt used to describe Adolph Eichmann, a leading Nazi. Arendt saw in Eichmann a man of bureaucratic mentality, lacking critical thought, who simply carried out what he was instructed to do. Eichmann’s motivations were in fact driven by historical and social factors of far greater complexity than Arendt’s quasi-psychological explanation. The *Times* adopts Arendt’s phrase, coined to describe one of the greatest criminals in human history, and applies it to the health care workers of Xi’an.

This is beyond repugnant. Many of the health care workers, the medical and nursing staff of Xi’an, gave up going home and stayed on their posts because of the difficulties of lockdown and the needs of the population. The *Times* compares them to Nazis, and follows orders in imposing an authoritarian regime.

The article’s imagery, in a calculated fashion, underlined this idea. Images of faceless health care workers line up shoulder to shoulder, in an article with the headline word “army.” Workers spray canisters of disinfectant fog in a manner menacingly suggestive of gas.

Li attempts to attribute the phrase “banality of evil” to Chinese opinion, claiming that Arendt is being widely cited by intellectuals in the country in reference to the authoritarianism of Zero-COVID. She cites as evidence of this a post from user @IWillNotResistIt on the Chinese social media platform Weibo. Weibo is more widely used than Twitter. It has more than half a billion active users every month. Li cherry-picked a quotation from a random user with 87 followers and wrenched it out of context.

The user @IWillNotResistIt followed the line about the “banality of evil” with this roughly translated passage: “All the frontline workers, including the staff at the epidemic prevention site in the last video, are really hardworking and they shouldn’t be blamed. Think about the suffocating feeling of wearing protective clothing and N95 all day long, not to mention the work.”

These were written as part of a larger discussion on Chinese social media, critical of the failures of Xi’an, calling for compassion. They were not written to demand an end to Zero-COVID, but rather to insist upon its proper implementation.

The Chinese government is authoritarian, but it is not a totalitarian dictatorship. Under intense pressure from the imperialist powers and international capital to roll back its Zero-COVID policy, it confronts in the Chinese working class an

immense barrier, as there is massive popular support for the public health measures that defend their lives.

The slanderous, historically malignant comparison to the Nazis originates entirely with the *New York Times*, and not with Chinese public opinion.

The equating of public health measures with Nazis and the Holocaust is not new. This is the much repeated argument of the far right and fascists in the United States and Europe about vaccine mandates, masks and quarantine. It is with these social forces that the *Times* is solidarizing itself.

On the same day that the *Times* published its slanderous attack on China, the Anti-Defamation League issued a statement, “It’s never appropriate to compare requirements for public health with the tactics of Nazi Germany. As we’ve said too many times to count, minimizing the Holocaust in this way is deeply offensive and harmful.” They were not writing in reference to the *New York Times*, but to fascistic Congressional Republicans who compared vaccine mandates to Nazi Germany.

There is an almost unhinged level of desperation in the rhetoric of the *New York Times* about China. It expresses the desperation in the American ruling class and in particular the Biden White House. This has increased drastically over the past year and finds expression in Li’s own articles.

On January 4, 2021, shortly before Biden took office, Li wrote an article for the *Times* in which she characterized life in China, “While many countries are still reeling from Covid-19, China—where the pandemic originated—has become one of the safest places in the world. ... The country reported fewer than 100,000 infections for all of 2020. The United States has been reporting more than that every day since early November.”

Li continued, “China resembles what ‘normal’ was like in the pre-pandemic world. Restaurants are packed. Hotels are full. Long lines form outside luxury brands stores. Instead of Zoom calls, people are meeting face to face to talk business or celebrate the new year.”

A year later, only one person has died from COVID-19 in China, but Li speaks of the “banality of evil” and authoritarianism. She has received her marching orders. This is not about developments in China, but about the crisis in the United States, where the ruling class has demonstrated an utter contempt for human life. The death toll will go up, but so will the stock market and that is all that matters.

The success of China’s Zero-COVID policy, the very fact that it has prioritized human lives, is a demonstration to the working class that there is an alternative to mass death. For the ruling elite, this is intolerable. It is this that drives their hysterical slanders against the scientific public health measures that are now only being implemented in China.



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