

# Gallows Humor, Beauty in Resistance

## World War III in Comics

Eric Laursen

2025

a review of

*World War 3 Now? World War 3 Illustrated*, Issue #54 by Jordan Worley, Nicole Shulman, Seth Tobocman, Sue Simensky Bietila, eds. AK Press, 2024

The new issue of *World War 3 Illustrated*, the 54<sup>th</sup>, is one of the biggest in the history of this long-running project, with over 50 artists and writers contributing.

The WW 3 Illustrated collective was formed in 1979, in the shadow of Ronald Reagan's impending election, by a group of New York City comix artists as a venue for explicitly political art. It has now been covering the deepening plight of our ravaged planet for long enough that these horrors can seem to longtime readers like a hideous kind of business-as-usual. Except that the artists and writers who produced this issue continue to find gallows humor in the horrors and beauty in resistance.

That said, the new issue announces itself with grim eloquence. On the front cover is an image by Palestinian artist Tayseer Barakat of a woman, living behind a wall, and behind that, a procession of tanks. Turn the book over and we see a cactus, a symbol of Israeli-born Jews, looming against the wall.

After Israel began its ground invasion of southern Lebanon on October 1, a chorus of so-called world leaders, starting with U.S. President Biden, intoned fearfully that if a ceasefire was not arranged forthwith, the Middle East could almost literally explode. Coupling the assault on recent Lebanon to Israel's campaign of ethnic cleansing in Gaza, UN secretary general Antonio Guterres warned, the Middle East crisis had "become a non-stop nightmare that threatens to take the whole region down."

Which only raises the question whether the "non-stop nightmare" is not upon us already, and not just in the Mideast. Hasn't World War III already begun?

The people of Ukraine, holding off a two-and-a-half-year-long Russian onslaught, might well think it has; so too the people of Africa's Sahel, caught between military governments and Islamist insurgents; the people of Sudan's Darfur region, decimated by a civil war between rival military strongmen; the people of Gaza and the West Bank, under bombardment by a government that seems determined to obliterate them; and the Israelis forced to flee their homes near the Lebanese border under Hezbollah rocket fire.

Meanwhile, civil wars rage in South Sudan, Myanmar, Libya, Congo, and elsewhere, often aggravated by outside big-power interference. In the industrialized world, mainstream politicians sit passively—at best—as neo-fascists and movements of the reactionary right leverage fear of immigration to turn the clock back to the era of Hitler, Mussolini, and Franco.

"In many countries, anti-war statements can now result in a prison sentence," the editors remind us. "Never before have so many contributors to this magazine expressed concern for their safety in publishing their views."

Along the way—through more than 250 pages of war, ultra-nationalism, repression, reaction, and environmental catastrophe—they offer a dazzling variety of graphic styles and images, activist art that is entertaining, enlightening,

ening, and powerful. The opposite of the shallow, distorted coverage and politically timid commentary the mainstream culture machine pumps out.

Coming together in the wake of Hamas's October 7, 2023 raid, many of the contributions here relate to the attacks that day and the mass murder and aggression the Israeli Defense Force and West Bank settlers have committed in response.

They come from a variety of points of view: the story of an Israeli survivor of the Hamas raid; art by Maisara Baroud, a Palestinian artist living and working in Gaza who had to move with his family multiple times to escape the hail of bombs; cartoonist Ethan Heitner's protest against the impulse in the face of atrocity to act as if everything is normal. "Israel is a machine for the conversion of Jewish grief into military power," Heitner writes. "But Jewish safety & freedom can only be found in Palestinian safety & freedom & vice versa."

Of course, we know nothing is "normal"; that knowledge is something that *World War 3 Illustrated* has been trying to impart since its inception. That's why a piece by tattoo artist Terry Tapp is especially resonant. Pre-September 11, 2001, he recalls, most people wanted silly, playful tattoos, often expressing "interesting takes on American pop art."

After the Twin Towers attacks, customers wanted patriotic tattoos, then memorial tattoos commemorating increasingly horrific events, sometimes with racist overtones. Trauma, which has been a way of life for African American, Native American, and other minorities since the inception of this country, is now fetishized by the dominant culture as well.

*World War 3* artists insist that all our struggles are connected. "Bienvenida" and "Rainbow Railroad," by Bianca and Annabelle Heckler and Samuel and Annabelle Heckler, respectively, highlight the plight of LGBTQIA+ people among the communities of undocumented people in American cities and their struggle for recognition and human rights. ("We have 8 million stories. 8 million reasons to be here. We belong to each other. We need each other.")

Two other contributions, "Defend the Forest" by cartoonist Harbin Lostutter and "Stop Cop City," a narrative piece by Priscilla Grimm, take us into the struggle to save Atlanta's Weelaunee Forest from being turned into a vast police training complex after it was promised to the community, a struggle the city has attempted to repress with deadly force and dubious legal actions. But that doesn't capture the magnitude of the powers arrayed against a low-income African American community: the police and their corporate sponsors, the city's political establishment, developers, and prosecutors wielding domestic terrorism and racketeering charges. The case is ongoing. Very few current issues encapsulate the racial and class struggle in the U.S. today quite like Cop City.

There is much more here: Artists Seth Tobocman (a *World War 3* founder) and Tamara Tornado and journalist Bill Weinberg lay out the history and issues behind Russia's murderous crusade to erase Ukraine, not only as a country, but as a national and cultural identity. In "30 Seconds in Gaza," Mohammad Sabaaneh turns 30-second videos from the heart of the shattered territory, which could easily be erased, into powerful graphics influenced by *Guernica*, Picasso's great work of anti-war, anti-fascist protest art.

Sabrina Jones revisits the story of CHARAS, the vibrant community center set up in an empty NYC public school in the 1970s that the city abandoned during the Giuliani and Bloomberg mayoralities when it sold the building to a developer. Carlo Quispe's comic details 40 years of repression and resistance as Peruvians fight for self-determination against the country's elite, foreign investors, and one corrupt, dictatorial president after another.

The one major crisis not covered in this issue is the catastrophic civil war in Sudan, which threatens over 20 million people with starvation and has received comparatively little attention in the mainstream media, given the relative invisibility of the Sudanese in the so-called developed world.

It's a natural for *World War 3 Illustrated*, which has always worked to foreground eyewitnesses, often the artists themselves, making it a work of enduring, up-close journalism as much as an artists' response to a violent, seemingly self-immolating period in human history. Something for the editors to think about as they plan the next installment in their monumental, 50-plus-year project.

Eric Laursen is a longtime anarchist writer, journalist, and activist. His latest book is *Polymath: The Life and Professions of Dr. Alex Comfort*, Author of "The Joy of Sex" from AK Press.



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