

Meet the Sneakiest Defenders of Putin's Invasion of Ukraine

Tuesday 3 May 2022, by [FORESTA Mathew](#) (Date first published: 29 April 2022).

Propaganda peddlers rake in cash and followers at the expense of the truth and oppressed people in Ukraine, Xinjiang, and Syria.

Misinformation is a profitable racket. Just ask Lee Camp.

In March, the former TV host found himself out of a job when RT America [shut down](#) in the wake of Vladimir Putin's illegal invasion of Ukraine. Make no mistake though: Camp does not find himself destitute. Since RT's closure he has continually directed his followers to give to him on the fundraising platform Patreon. There he has more than 1,900 donors giving in tiers of \$5, \$10, \$25, and \$90. Even assuming his supporters mostly sign up for the lowest one, this would ostensibly net him thousands of dollars a month, possibly six figures a year.

A strong reward for a self-styled leftist, anti-war, anti-imperialist who has seen fit to [deny](#) repression and [atrocities](#) the world over while often putting forward narratives friendly to Putin's invasion of Ukraine.

Camp has a large following even without his platform on RT: tens-of-thousands on YouTube, over 315,000 on Facebook, and more than 150,000 on Twitter. He [sometimes](#) claims to be against the war, offering the mildest criticism of Russia, yet the vast majority of his posts are critical of Ukraine as they face invasion from a larger, stronger power. Often they feature misinformation. One of his retweets hinted at the so-called "[Biolabs conspiracy theory](#)" that has spread like wildfire across the internet. This widely [debunked](#) notion postulates that the U.S. is somehow involved in producing biological weapons in Ukraine. Another of his retweets intimated his job loss was connected to the "[Great Reset](#)," another debunked conspiracy theory. Camp is a multi-platform kind of guy, and though he says the death of RT saw many of his videos removed from YouTube, he still has a channel and posts some of them on his Patreon.

In one he interviews Scott Ritter, a former UN weapons inspector who was correct about Iraq and WMDs. (Notably, Camp doesn't mention that Ritter is a [sex offender](#). He was arrested in 2001 after contacting cops who were posing as underage girls online, but the charges were dismissed on condition he entered intensive counseling, *The New York Times* [reported](#). He was convicted for a 2009 incident where he masturbated on a webcam for an undercover law enforcement officer who repeatedly stated he was a 15-year-old girl.)

During the interview, Ritter claims there is a battalion of Azov in "every brigade" of the Ukrainian Armed Forces—a reference to the notorious neo-Nazi Azov battalion. While Azov is very real and represents a very serious and concerning part of the far right in Ukraine, Ritter's claims are misinformation. Estimates of Azov's size in recent years range from 900 to around 2,500. This in a Ukrainian military that has more than 200,000 troops counting reserves and Territorial Defense units. Even in the video, Ritter acknowledges that the Ukrainian far right received only a small

chunk of the vote in [the last election](#) (less than 2.5 percent to be precise). While the far right does have some disproportionate influence in other sectors of society, nowhere is there any evidence of that much Azov infiltration of the military. Camp never pushed back on this, and in order to understand why you need to know a few things about ideology.

In left-wing circles there's a group derisively referred to as "[tankies](#)." This patois refers to a minority who support authoritarianism, defend dictators, and deny human rights abuses. In my experience they are a small clique even among the far left and are often held in contempt. Yet they are obnoxiously loud on social media and are starting to gain a following.

My observations indicate that many subscribe to an ideology known as Campism (not to be confused with Lee Camp). This idea sees the world divided into competing factions. Hence, their often well-justified criticisms of the United States lead them to reflexively defend Beijing or Moscow, the other camps. There is also the extremely strident belief in multi-polarity, with their often cogent critiques of U.S. hegemony leading them to see the need to help rival nations grow powerful in order to challenge and weaken it. Often this means protecting them in order to help their rise.

"I do think the number of people who literally support the invasion is fairly limited. The key problem to me is the dominant anti-war framework in the Western Left subscribes to a worldview and organizing strategy that believes we have no influence on other imperial states, and that we can only critique US/NATO," Promise Li, a Hong Kong-born leftist activist, writer, and member of the Lausan Collective, said in a text message interview. "This means that pro-Putin perspectives become condoned, or that we under-emphasize Russia's role in the conflict as a crude reaction against liberal interventionist war hawks, rather than trying to find genuinely positive alternatives of solidarity with the Ukrainian people."

One person Li indicated is a particularly bad actor is Sameera Khan, a former RT correspondent and a previous Miss New Jersey. While Camp's tenure ended with the network's demise, hers came to an abrupt halt in 2018 after her embarrassing [tweets](#) celebrating Stalin's gulags caused an uproar. She later apologized. It would seem she has learned very little since.

Some of the most violent, brutal dictators in the world have found in her a staunch defender. With over 90,000 followers, she has [tweeted](#) she supports Myanmar's armed forces (known as the Tatmadaw) over Aung San Suu Kyi, the elected leader whom they deposed in a recent coup. She not only denies the oppression of the Uyghur people in Western China, she actively [mocks](#) it.

Recently, she's railed against those trying to "feminize men" and "masculinize women," and men who "let other dudes fuck your wife." She says her love of Russia started when men carried her suitcase on a visit to Moscow—"anti-beta & anti-woke heaven," she [tweeted](#) along with a Russian flag. Until very recently her Twitter banner was a portrait of Chechen leader [Ramzan Kadyrov](#). Her [commentary](#) on the war in Ukraine is littered with much of the familiar propaganda and misinformation. In her case, some of it is tinged with a hefty [dose](#) of [transphobia](#) and homophobia.

"Biden, you should be very afraid of taking on Russia. Your they/them army wouldn't last ten minutes," she [tweeted](#).

This fits into her much larger pattern of bigoted rhetoric like [ranting](#) against sanctions on anti-LGBTQ countries and [at one point](#) praising the [notoriously](#) violent, anti-gay Kadyrov as "the ideal man-the perfect husband, warrior, leader all wrapped into one."

While Camp and Khan are vets of RT, others are mirroring Kremlin propaganda, and they are practiced in the skill.

Old Hands

For those who know them, it's no surprise that The Grayzone has taken to spreading pro-Russia propaganda. Edited by Max Blumenthal, the publication is [infamous](#) for its defenses of dictatorships and its denial of atrocities.

In addition to casting doubt on the reality of the Uyghur Muslims' repression in Xinjiang, they published a piece on Nicaragua that cited a false confession extracted under [torture](#). Strangely enough for a leftist, Blumenthal has associated with the far right before, having [previously appeared](#) on Tucker Carlson's Fox News show. Now he is flirting with right-wing positions on the coronavirus, [writing](#) that lockdowns do "little to slow the spread of Covid" ([most evidence](#) suggests they do help quite a bit). He was [listed](#) as a speaker at an anti-mandates event that featured reactionary figures like [Will Witt](#) and [Lara Logan](#). At a recent similar event in New York he praised the people in the movement, spun conspiracy theories, stated the issue wasn't one of left versus right, [and said](#): "I see this from the perspective of someone who's been in the anti-war movement, organizing against imperialism for years. I see this as a new war on the people."

"So I don't know if you noticed, but as soon as our corporate, feudal lords ran out of variants to frighten us into submission, as soon as the Moderna stock started slipping on the Dow, and the masks began to come off, they found a new war to keep the public in a state of mass formation psychosis and to continue the process of corporate looting," he said. "In this war they are lying about biolabs in Ukraine, sponsored by the Pentagon's Biological Threat Reduction Agency, and you know what they say, that their function was just as legitimate as Hunter Biden's job."

At a point, his speech slipped into incoherent ranting.

"They called you an anti-vaxxer, anti-masker, trucker, fascist, Tucker-watching traitor, trucker, fascist, Tucker lover, anti-vaxxer, anti-masker, all their insults just get lost, it all blends into one, the same bullshit, the same war, the same war," he said.

In another instance, an editor I worked with named Muhammad Idrees Ahmad noted Blumenthal went on what he described as a "[junket](#)" to Damascus, and there attended a forum presided over by Bashar al-Assad.

I should note here that Blumenthal and Ahmad have what seems to be a mutually hostile relationship, with both accusing the other of various things, including harassment. That said, the piece's depiction of Blumenthal's behavior as dishonorable matches up well with his record. His publication, The Grayzone, has consistently denied that the Assad regime used chemical weapons on its own people [when](#), indeed, [they did](#). Blumenthal has gone so far as to [make fun of](#) the very idea by putting a bag over his head to derisively mimic the desperate actions of Syrian civilians. One of his past [assertions](#) was that the White Helmets, famed for their rescue efforts on behalf of innocents, were nothing more than al Qaeda—a conspiracy theory that has [been](#) thoroughly exposed and refuted. According to a report published in *The New York Review of Books*, Blumenthal's bizarre reversal from his earlier criticisms of the Assad regime [happened](#) after a 2015 trip to a Moscow event celebrating RT's anniversary.

The Grayzone's record regarding the current conflict isn't very good so far. In a long, [humiliating video interview](#) with Russian diplomat Dmitry Polyanskiy posted on Feb. 15, Blumenthal offered no skepticism when his guest denied Russia was planning an invasion. Eleven days later, Blumenthal [tweeted](#) his assertion that "Ukraine's regular military" was "vanquished." Very embarrassing in light of the fact that Ukraine's military fights on quite effectively. He also appeared to snidely [defend](#) Tucker Carlson and effectively advanced the biolabs theory. Russian officials have taken notice with

Blumenthal earning retweets from both Polyanskiy and his fellow diplomat Alexander Alimov. In similar fashion to their denial of war crimes in Syria, The Grayzone has denied claims that Russian forces [bombed a theater in Mariupol](#), killing as many as 300 by a city council estimate.

The Grayzone mirrors the Russian Defense Ministry by heavily implying the bombing was a false flag by Azov Battalion, but they offer extremely thin evidence, including a questionable Russian language Telegram post and sporadic information gathered by pro-Kremlin outfits.

An obvious falsehood in their argument is that Russia stood nothing to gain militarily by bombing the theater in Mariupol. While that might appear true on a surface level, the same could be said of the many civilians recently [killed](#) by Russian bombardment in Syria. In both places, the bombing of civilians serves the purpose of intimidating and demoralizing enemy populations. Both Li and scholar Lily Hamourtziadou [have pointed](#) out how Russian denials of civilian casualties in Ukraine mirror their obvious falsehoods about Syria. While it is true that some sources have suggested Russia has [held back](#) a bit with its air power, the UN [estimates](#) that thousands of civilians have been killed in the conflict, mostly by artillery and airstrikes. The vital context of Russia's recent pattern of killing civilians in the Middle East does not make it into The Grayzone's story.

It's an oversight I doubt they would make when dealing with the actions of the United States.

Like Camp, Benjamin Norton also successfully fundraises on Patreon and enjoys a large social-media following, especially on Twitter. A former long time Grayzone editor now running his own website called Multipolarista, he has often denied the increasingly well-documented suffering the Russian military has inflicted on Ukraine. On Feb. 25, he retweeted [a post](#) that read: "A striking difference between Russian and US military operations is that Russia targets military installations and weapons almost exclusively—while the US deliberately targets civilian infrastructure such as schools, hospitals, dams, and water treatment plants."

Given the widely available evidence from both Syria and Chechnya, this is a clear, demonstrable lie that Norton put forward for his hundreds of thousands of followers. Norton's commentary can also be glaringly hypocritical.

"The United States has turned Latin America and the Caribbean into a key battlefield in its new cold war on China and Russia, invoking the 200-year-old colonialist Monroe Doctrine to justify aggressive interventionist policies," he [tweeted](#).

Apparently he can find all the outrage in the world for America's unjust domination of its neighbors, but can't hold Russia to the same standard in Eastern Europe.

Norton often recycles the same lines of argument. He [called](#) the leadership of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution "Fascist Horthyites"—a ridiculous assertion given that leaders like [Imre Nagy](#) were longtime Communist Party members. It's useful to remember here that the word "tankie" finds its origins in those who supported sending the Soviet tanks in to crush the Hungarian uprising. Norton is old-school.

When speaking about Ukraine, he often plays up the influence and extent of the far right in the country. In fairness, some of his videos acknowledge facts like the far right's small vote share, but he still hyper-focuses on them while [waving off](#) the tremendous [impact](#) Russian fascist Alexander Dugin has on Putin. The white supremacist Russian [mercenaries](#) fighting in Ukraine seem to not merit much mention from him either.

Despite all of what Grayzone, Blumenthal, and Norton have done, they've often met with approving [tweets](#) from Camp, and this is illustrative because these personalities seem to form something of a

community. Oftentimes that looks to be based on shared ideology, but in some cases it is more formal.

The Ties That Bind

Danny Haiphong is a writer, podcaster, and an advocate for authoritarian regimes in the aforementioned tradition.

As a co-editor of Friends of Socialist China, his advocacy's *raison d'être* seems to be defending the modern Chinese Communist Party. In the interest of full disclosure, I'll note here I've been publicly [critical](#) of the Chinese government before. In an email exchange, he touted China's accomplishments on multiple issues.

"I spend ample time on China because the United States is the most propagandized country in the world, with majorities holding a negative view of a country that is leading the way globally on matters that literally will determine humanity's future," he wrote.

As Coda Story has [noted](#), Haiphong is a [strident denier](#) of the atrocities in Xinjiang. A fact which he does not deny but justifies. In an interview conducted by Camp, he heavily implied that a Uyghur woman, Tursunay Ziawudun, who has [spoken publicly](#) about her sexual assault in a Xinjiang concentration camp, is not to be believed. This despite the fact that other women have corroborated her story, suggesting a deep and horrifying rape culture exists there.

In an email to The Daily Beast, Haiphong claimed that the story Ziawudun told the BBC is inconsistent with her other interviews; that she was resettled by an organization that has received funding from the National Endowment for Democracy; and that "the claims she has made at present should be further investigated."

The BBC's reporting actually addressed this point: "Ziawudun has spoken to the media before, but only from Kazakhstan, where she 'lived in constant fear of being sent back to China,' she said. She said she believed that if she revealed the extent of the sexual abuse she had experienced and seen, and was returned to Xinjiang, she would be punished more harshly than before. And she was ashamed."

It should be further noted that false rape allegations are very rare. It was rather stunning to see this supposed man of the left blithely dismiss a marginalized woman in this way. Frankly, it was misogynistic in the extreme.

In the circles Haiphong seems to run in we frequently see the same characters uplifting each other on their platforms. Norton was interviewed by Friends of Socialist China's Haiphong and Carlos Martinez on March 10. In January 2021, The Grayzone advertised Haiphong as appearing on a livestream with Blumenthal and Norton acting as two of the hosts. Haiphong admits he considers Blumenthal and Norton to be friends who he respects, and has recently been apoplectic over Ritter's Twitter ban. In October, 2021 Friends of Socialist China hosted a webinar featuring Norton, Haiphong, and CGTN host/social media personality Li Jingjing.

Li was recently [identified by the Associated Press](#) as an influencer who pushes propaganda, and whose accounts are often inconsistently labeled as Chinese state media.

"While the invasion was being condemned as a brazen assault on democracy, Li Jingjing presented a different narrative to her 21,000 YouTube subscribers, posting videos that echoed Russian propaganda and promoted misleading claims," the story said. "On YouTube, Li Jingjing says she's a 'traveler,' 'storyteller' and 'journalist.' But she does not reveal in her segments that she's a reporter

for CGTN, articulating views that are not just her own but also familiar Chinese government talking points.”

Li Jingjing was also named in a *New York Times* [story](#) detailing how the Chinese government seeks to shape public opinion. Her large social media presence includes a whopping 2,500,000-plus followers on Facebook. She often uses her YouTube channel to disseminate cutesy travel blogs that are kind to the positions of the ruling party. She has appeared in Xinjiang happily traipsing about, chitchatting, and eating. The message is clear: everything is fine, people are happy. This type of messaging has been [noted](#) by other journalists as a method of [propaganda](#) in no way unique to her. Li’s vlogs are even more embarrassing in light of footage from Xinjiang put forward by [Vice](#) and [Frontline](#) that tells a very different story from hers.

When Li recently interviewed Norton on her YouTube channel, she offered the mildest criticism of Russia. Yet, she did not push back as Norton put forward the bizarre misinformation that Ukraine is not a sovereign nation because of the overthrow of the government during the Maidan Revolution in 2014. Neither morally nor according to international law can one credibly argue that Ukraine lost all claims to sovereignty in 2014. Even if one believes that the post-Maidan regime was a “puppet,” as Norton claims in the interview, a new government led by Volodymyr Zelensky was elected in a landslide in 2019. In the comments Li says she is not taking a side, and claims to only be giving “context that many mainstream media and governments are not talking about.” Allowing the spread of blatant pro-Russia disinformation is a funny way of showing such self-proclaimed neutrality.

What Li doesn’t mention in either her interview with Norton or Haiphong is that they’re all [listed as co-signatories](#) of an ideological statement deriding the “propaganda war against China.” The document laments: “Unsubstantiated accusations of genocide and forced labour in Xinjiang echo endlessly in Western media and governments, along with conspiracy theories about the origins of the pandemic.”

It should also be noted that a recent independent [inquiry](#) found that China was guilty of crimes against humanity and genocide against the Uyghurs. The amount of evidence is vast, including satellite [photos](#), individual [testimony](#), and [investigative reporting](#) done in Xinjiang.

“This link between soft Russian apologism and Uyghur genocide denial stems from the problem I identified earlier, an inability for the Western Left to understand that there are other imperialist actors, and that a Campist division of the world forces people into a complete misreading of how imperialism works and how various nation-states are implicated in the same system and techniques of global imperialism,” Promise Li told me in a text interview.

Considering the fact that Li Jingjing, Norton, and Haiphong appear to have been three of the original 30 signatories of the Friends of Socialist China statement, one can’t imagine it is something they forgot. It should be remembered that even on her personal channel she puts herself forward as a journalist, and her vlogs have the air of journalistic programming. Totally lacking in transparency, the fact that Li doesn’t mention the statement during relevant interviews cannot, in my opinion, be [construed](#) as journalistically ethical. Haiphong defended himself from my criticism that this is deceptive and unethical on his part by indicating his Twitter bio reveals his involvement with Friends of Socialist China.

Haiphong hasn’t limited himself to just denying repression in Xinjiang. He’s also put forward familiar propaganda that lines up with Russian justifications for the invasion, including the misinformation about [biolabs](#). He does not deny this. Like Camp, he has found himself monetarily rewarded for his efforts on Patreon.

"After taxes, I make well below the income required to meet the cost of living in NYC," Haiphong claimed in an email interview.

Still, he has more than 450 subscribers, and that couldn't hurt. He is excited with its growth and sees it as vital to his operations, tweeting, "Many thanks to the new subscribers. I've reached 410, my goal for the month. I'm building toward the capacity to support myself and plan trips to China and elsewhere in the socialist world to conduct on the ground analysis. You can support me here!"

When confronted with videos from Haiphong and Camp's channel, YouTube said they do not violate their policies.

"In general, we have established policies that prohibit content [inciting violence](#) or [promoting hatred](#), including towards the Uyghur people. Additionally, as we've [shared](#), our teams are working quickly to remove violative content related to the war in Ukraine, and we've removed more than 1,200 channels and more than 30,000 videos for violating our policies," a YouTube spokesperson said via email.

Meta (Facebook) claimed it is taking active measures against disinformation.

"We take extensive steps to combat misinformation using a wide range of tools including our industry-leading network of more than 80 independent partners who fact-check claims across the globe. We also label media outlets that are wholly or partially under the editorial control of their government to help people better understand the sources of news content they see and prevent advertisers who repeatedly post misinformation or otherwise break our rules from running ads on our platform," a Meta (Facebook) spokesperson said in an email.

Twitter claimed the platform has increased the labeling of accounts as Chinese, Belarusian, and Russian state-funded media, deleted bad actors, curated "reliable information" in Twitter Moments, and monitors for dishonest narratives among other actions. Patreon said that in seeking a balance between free expression and safety, the platform only takes action on accounts "when misinformation demonstrates an immediate capacity to hurt people." They have specifically banned COVID-19 and QAnon disinformation in light of this, but did not say that this policy applies to dishonesty around Ukraine or Xinjiang denialism.

"When it comes to misinformation, we're mindful that we're balancing two responsibilities: first, protecting the expression & livelihoods of those using the platform; & second: keeping the platform safe for all those who use it," a Patreon representative said in an email.

When I pointed out some of The Grayzone and Max Blumenthal's statements on COVID-19, they said their Trust and Safety team "will review the material and make the determination." As of now The Grayzone's Patreon is still up and has more than 800 donors. During a recent interview, Blumenthal denied The Grayzone receives any state funding through Russia or China saying, "Well, you can see we get a lot of support on Patreon, and anyone who supports us outside Patreon are like private friends of mine who are basically progressive Americans who support progressive media."

When sent an emailed list of questions regarding this article, a clearly angry Lee Camp called them "demonstrably false and defamatory statements disguised as questions" which he did not go on to answer. And when contacted, Khan directed me to get in touch with another pro-Russia internet personality she's associated with who tweets under the name InfraHaz. She did not answer the questions sent to her.

Li also did not answer questions about her funding, editorial independence, or her close ties with Norton and Haiphong. Instead, she wrote back saying she believes China is being presented in an

unfair light and that she has not seen repression in Xinjiang with her own eyes. She said that it is the U.S. government, mainstream media, and “separatists’ groups” that have encouraged misinformation. This is, again, in contrast with the great preponderance of evidence showing that the oppression of the Uyghurs is very real.

Norton and Ritter did not respond to multiple attempts to contact them for this story.

Blumenthal, meanwhile, took to [tweeting](#) screenshots of my email to him, writing that the questions “read like unhinged neocon hate mail or q’s from a McCarthy era prosecutor, and go on & on.”

As some on Twitter pointed out, Blumenthal would likely be furious if I didn’t do the ethical thing and give him a chance to respond. His notion that questioning him about what has been laid out in this column represents some kind of McCarthyism, hate mail, or neoconservatism is preposterous. My [reporting](#) has cast a critical eye on U.S. foreign policy before, so my issue with him is not that he criticized the United States; it is with his irresponsible and unethical conduct, flirtation with reactionaries, seeming contempt for the oppressed, and what I believe to be his incessant licking of tyrants’ boots.

It might be easy for some to write these people off as cranks, but they have accrued tens or in some cases hundreds of thousands of followers and donors. Perhaps more importantly, they have gained influence despite their long history of bad acts. Indeed, it was none other than former Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff who spoke on a recent Friends of Socialist China webinar.

I’ve been publicly critical of many of these figures before, but my own frustrations are not the problem. Those who are harmed, who really suffer, are the people in Ukraine, Syria, and Xinjiang. Their stories and pleas are often ignored in light of the misinformation. Pleas like those of the Ukrainian leftists Promise Li advocates we listen to as they call for people to fight to cancel the Eastern European country’s foreign debt.

In the end, efforts like that are what these disinformation peddlers obstruct as they, uplifted by big tech, deny the bombs that fall on civilian heads, justify the tanks that roll forward in a war of aggression, and aid the boot that fall on the neck of the oppressed.

Mathew Foresta is a writer and journalist. His work has appeared in *USA Today*, *HuffPost*, *VICE*, and *Los Angeles* magazine.

[Click here](#) to subscribe to ESSF newsletters in English and/or French.

P.S.

The Daily Beast

<https://www.thedailybeast.com/meet-the-sneakiest-defenders-of-vladimir-putins-ukraine-invasion-and-chinas-xinjiang-repression>