

High Altitudes, Violent Lands

Mountainous regions are home to just 10% of the world's population—and many of its ugliest and most persistent wars



A shepherd tends to his flock in the Kurdistan region of Iraq, March 2, 2016. *PHOTO: GILES CLARKE/GETTY IMAGES*

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Try this exercise: On a globe, chart all the places that have endured major conflicts—rebellions, terrorist campaigns, civil wars and more conventional ones—over the past half-century. Next, run your hand over the surface of the map and check the altitude key. You will find a striking pattern: elevation.

Though mountainous regions include only 10% of the world's population and a quarter of its surface, they are home to many of its ugliest and most persistent wars. Nearly every separatist struggle by an ethnic minority since World War II has occurred at high altitude—Kashmir, Chechnya, Kosovo, Aceh, the Basque region, the lands of the Kurds. Other notably violent conflicts also have played out in highlands: the civil strife of Yemen and Nepal, Colombia's narco-insurgency, Afghanistan's bloody free-for-all.

Marginal as they may sometimes seem to those focused on great-power conflicts, these remote communities are key to the world's stability. It is no accident that rebels and drug cartels seek havens in peaks. The mountains shield those who want to elude or destroy authority—the revolutionary, the poppy grower, the jihadist.

Mountains are the last places where roads are built and the first where outlaws go to hide. Residing on natural frontiers as they often do, highlanders find themselves at the crossroads of global strife, caught between indifferent states that care little about their own needs.

People fight in mountains for familiar reasons: territory, poverty, greed, discrimination, grudges and natural resources. But isolated highlands in the Hindu Kush or the Himalayas also harbor some of the world's most neglected people. Their privation can make them suspicious of newcomers, who have often brought exploitation and tyranny rather than help.

It is little wonder that, since colonial times, peasants in Mexico's poorest southern ranges have resisted central authority more often and more tenaciously than flatlanders, who are better integrated into the broader society. They earn at best \$2 a day, according to the Mexican government, or one-tenth the national average, a disparity typical for restive mountain regions world-wide.

History brims with cases of indomitable mountain people. Virtually no invader has succeeded in subjugating a highland population since Alexander the Great, who won over the people of Bactria, in what is now Afghanistan, by co-option rather than force. He married a warlord's daughter and encouraged his soldiers to follow suit. The powers that followed him tried to conquer the place outright and failed.

The physical walls of mountains can be existential as well. They often profoundly shape mind-sets, providing a topographical barrier to assimilation. Chinese communists even coined a term that translates to "mountaintop-ist" to describe an independent-minded soul who balks at the party's authority.

The word mountain can be a baggy term, throwing a stubby 300-foot protrusion into the same class as Mount Everest. Yet despite the physical variations, upland communities world-wide all share cruel weather and rocky earth, which together defeat most forms of agriculture and instill a sense of apartness. Most mountain communities struggle to get by, rarely sharing the wealth of the extractive industries that outsiders bring to their lands.

To get a sense of their discontent, listen to the World Mountain People Association. This network of highlanders from some 70 countries convenes on scenic ascents every year to pursue "the continuity of mountain identity." The group was born out of a global forum organized by Unesco in 2000. Its gatherings call to mind the pointed multiculturalism of a Benetton ad—turbaned Tuaregs communing with Sherpas—except that the diversity here is genuine.

The group's leader is Jean Lassalle, a 6-foot-7-inch French parliamentarian from a family of sheep farmers in the Pyrenees. That isn't exactly life in, say, Chechnya or Kashmir, but his tussles with Paris over grazing lands have, he says, taught him that the challenges highlanders face are all too often invisible to their countries' leadership.

Mr. Lassalle affirms what behavioral geographers and anthropologists have long said: Mountain topography not only yields similar concerns, it breeds similar characteristics. "Mountain people instantly understand each other," he told me near his high-altitude hamlet. "We don't view things like those from the plains." An Ecuadorean indigenous leader in a long braid sitting next to him nodded in vigorous assent.

Mr. Lassalle and his South American comrade cited ample evidence that the severe weather and physical hardships of mountain regions give rise to mental toughness, self-sufficiency, insularity and a talent for improvisation, among other traits. From the Ozarks to the Pashtun tribal areas, "mountain people" in the network acknowledge and often celebrate these similarities.

The earth's elevated and bumpy surfaces can foster a distinctive lifestyle as well. From Tyrol to Bolivia, herders make seasonal treks to upland communal pastures. Honor codes that disappeared from much of the world centuries ago can still govern social relations in mountainous regions such as Albania, where 10,000 men have perished in vendettas over the past two decades, according to a local nonprofit group. In Afghanistan, harsh conditions produce closed and defensive villages whose warlords defy outside rule. From Nepal's eastern highlands to the Mayan heartland, villagers describe being passionately attached to the sacred earth on which they live.

In his 2016 best seller, "Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of Family and Culture in Crisis," J.D. Vance acknowledges the stereotypes of Appalachia's hill people—a penchant for fights and a fierce loyalty to family and feuds. "We do not like outsiders," he writes of the Scotch-Irish subculture in which he was raised, a constituency that helped to sweep Donald Trump into the presidency. The hillbillies he describes feel cast off from elite society—an isolation that goes beyond politics.

What holds for Appalachia is true of much of the rest of the world. The problems of uplanders from Kashmir to Kachin might seem faraway and exotic, but the rest of us ignore the people of the mountains at our peril. Mountain communities, despite their isolation, can profoundly affect the lives of flatlanders, whether through drugs, terrorism, war or elections.

There is also a moral imperative to pay heed, to see more clearly our fellow citizens who dwell on high. The Kurds have a saying, "No friends but the mountains." Those closer to sea level must learn to be better friends.

—Ms. Matloff teaches conflict reporting at Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism. Her new book, "No Friends but the Mountains: Dispatches From the World's Violent Highlands," will be published by Basic Books on March 7.