

Resistance and mutual aid rather than doctrinarism and defeatism

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Anarcho-pacifism

In classical anarchist doctrine, the attitude towards armed conflicts between states was always negative. The war was perceived as a competition between states, elites, and capitals. Through wars, states spread patriotic sentiments that fuelled chauvinism, with the proletariat of individual countries quarreling among themselves and blocking the path to the development of internationalism. Militarism was one of the most important points in the anarchist's critique of states (including empires). Being a reflection of power, hierarchy, and centralism, it created the greatest obstacle to human freedom. The mass and organized murder of people, according to anarchists, should have met with resistance from the proletariat. Anarchists have consistently taken up anti-military – and less often, pacifist – positions.

Among the leading anarcho-pacifists, we can mention: Ferdinand Domela Nieuwenhuis and Bartholomeus de Ligt, E. Armand and Louis Lecoin, Ernst Friedrich (with his famous book *War against War!*)¹, as well as those who oscillate on the borderline of anarchism, such as Leo Tolstoy and Mahatma Gandhi. During World War I, “The International Anarchist Manifesto against the War” was published and signed by over 30 influential European and American anarchists, including Emma Goldman, Alexander Berkman, Errico Malatesta, Saul Janovsky, and Juda Grossman-Roshchin. During World War II, the slogan “Neither fascism nor anti-fascism” was pushed by anarcho-syndicalist organizations in Latin America, mainly in Argentina and Uruguay, and the Bulgarian Anarcho-Communist Federation, as well as some groups in England and France. The French anarcho-pacifism of the time took absurd forms, expressing itself in the slogan “better slavery than war!” More recently, the American intellectual Noam Chomsky could be called the leading anti-war anarchist activist.

At present, the banners of pacifists display the slogan “Peace at all costs!” which is frequently reiterated by left-liberal intellectuals from Western countries, including professor of linguistics, activist, and journalist Medea Benjamin, political scientist Hall Gardner, and others. For the veteran of Polish anarchism, Jarosław Urbański, “An immediate end to the conflict, regardless of the geopolitical context, is necessary to avoid further bloodshed.”² These slogans entail a closer association with various communists, Marxist, Trotskyist, and Maoist ideologies, which, ensnared in outdated doctrine, reduce their own dogmatism to slogans such as “No war but class war”, “Neither Ukrainian nor Russian!” or “Neither NATO nor Putin!” In Russia, this attitude is represented by the leaders of the Confederation of Revolutionary Anarcho-Syndicalists – the International Workers' Association (KRAS). Anatoly Dubovik, a Ukrainian anarchist, has argued that the leaders of KRAS (professional historians) are anarcho-Putinists.

Doctrinairism of these forces, hidden under the blanket of “classical international internationalism”, oddly enough leaves no room for international solidarity with Ukrainian anarchists and Ukrainian society; it is blind to the living, not mythical, anti-fascism that confronts the brutal imperialism of the Kremlin. Pacifism is good when it tries to prevent war, but not during war. Unfortunately, some “ideologically pure” comrades are stuck in rigid concepts detached from reality. But is it stupidity, cowardice, or plain defeatism? Our life is not black and white and does not stand still. There is no perfect purity in this world, except perhaps the laughter and tears of children. And Ukraine is flooded with these tears.

¹ Ernst Friedrich, *Krieg dem Kriege! Guerre à la guerre! War against war! Vojnu vojně!* (Berlin: Freie Jugend, 1926).

² Jarosław Urbański, “Rzeź w Ukrainie trwa. Dziesiątki tysięcy zabitych i inwalidów wojennych po obu stronach konfliktu”, *Rozbrat*, August 4, 2023, www.rozbrat.org.

Anti-militarism

Fortunately, pacifism has never been the dominant current in the history of the anarchist movement, which is saturated with rebellions and uprisings. Anarchism is known for its direct action tactics, propaganda by deed, revolutionary terror, illegalism, and finally insurrectionism, which prove that violence and radicalism have always been equal parts of libertarian theories and practices. Anarchists, with weapons in hand, took part in the Paris Commune, in both World Wars, as well as in smaller armed conflicts, including national liberation struggles on different continents (e.g., in Ireland, Korea, Cuba, and India). They formed military formations during the civil war in Russia (e.g., the Makhnovist movement), in the Spanish Civil War, in the French Resistance, etc.

The most famous conflict over the attitude of anarchists to participation in the war became the *Manifesto of the Sixteen* (1916), signed, among others, by Peter Kropotkin, Jean Grave, Christiaan Cornelissen, Varlam Cherkeshvili, Charles Malato, and Paul Reclus. Thus, they gained the name of “anarchopatriots”, “anarchomilitarists”, or, to use the words of Errico Malatesta, “pro-government anarchists”. Despite the mythology surrounding the views of Kropotkin and his followers on war, I am inclined to share the view that it was not a break with anarchism or a betrayal of libertarian ideals. In my opinion (and that of Ruth Kinna³) the position of the “prince of anarchy” was a consistent reaction to the situation. The reaction of an anarchist and anti-militarist, Errico Malatesta, who wrote to Maria Goldsmith in 1897 that anarchists must stand by people opposing the oppression of both personality and economic, religious, and “all the more national” oppression. In turn, at the beginning of World War I, in the article “Anti-militarism: Was it properly understood?”, published in the pages of *Freedom*, he declared:

It being so, the question arises: How is anti-militarist propaganda to be conducted?

The reply is evident: It must be supplemented by a promise of direct action. An anti-militarist ought never to join the anti-militarist agitation without taking in his inner self a solemn vow that in case a war breaks out, notwithstanding all efforts to prevent it, he will give the full support of his action to the country that will be invaded by a neighbor, whosoever the neighbor may be. Because, if the anti-militarists remain mere onlookers on the war, they support by their inaction the invaders; they help them to make slaves of the conquered populations; they aid them to become still stronger, and thus to be a still stronger obstacle to the Social Revolution in the future.⁴

This quote has not lost its relevance to this day.

During the Second World War, several sections of the International Workers' Association (the Poles, Italians, Spaniards, Swedes, and French) agreed that “Fascism and Nazism must be crushed wherever they appear and at all costs. This is one of the most important tasks at the moment.”⁵ Well-known anarcho-syndicalist activists, such as Rudolf Rocker and Grigory Maksimov, were of a similar opinion. In Europe, here and there, anarchists fought against the Nazis; let us recall,

³ See, e.g., Ruth Kinna, *Kropotkin: Reviewing the Classical Anarchist Tradition* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016).

⁴ Errico Malatesta, “Anti-militarism: Was it properly understood? (To the Editor of Freedom)”, *Freedom: A Journal of Anarchist Communism*, Vol 28, No 308, December 1914, 90.

⁵ Vadim Damjer, *Zabytyj Internacional: Meždunarodnoe anarho sindikalistskoe dviženie meždu dvumja mirovymi vojnami*, Vol. 2: *Meždunarodnyj anarho-sindikalizm v uslovijah “Velikogo krizisa” i nastuplenija fašizma: 1930–1939 gg.* (Moskva: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2007), p. 605.

for example, the Poles who took part in the Warsaw Uprising as part of the Syndicalist Brigade. Today, anarchists are militarily supporting the Kurds fighting in Rojava against Assad and the Islamists.

Kropotkin's above words are understandable for those, who, unlike pacifists, do not disagree with anarchists from Ukraine, Belarus, or Russia to fight for freedom in the ranks of the Armed Forces of Ukraine; for those who do not hide the fact that Russian imperialism is as unrestrained as Western imperialism; for those, for whom solidarity is not an empty sound, who support the right of Ukrainians to their own geopolitical choice, to self-defense, to fighting the invader, who brings regression, fascism, violations of even minimal rights and civil liberties, genocide, dictatorship, camps, rape, political murders, torture of prisoners, forced removal of children, etc. This is the opinion of the anarchists associated with the Resistance Committee, fighting and dying on the front lines, such as the Russian Dmitry Petrov from the Combat Organization of Anarcho-Communists, the Belarusian Zhvir, the American Cooper Andrews, or the Irishman Finbar Cafferkey – and those who are involved in helping, such as the Solidarity Collectives, ABC Dresden, ABC Czarna Galicja, Good Night Imperial Pride, and a number of other groups and unaffiliated anarchists from around the world, maliciously called “trench anarchists”.

The myth of anti-fascist Russia and Nazi Ukraine

Opinion pluralism is desirable even in the libertarian environment, but imposing doctrinal formulas on everyone, especially on Ukrainian anarchists, is at least out of place. Instead of asking the Ukrainian libertarian movement directly what help the Western left, and some anarchists, need, building hierarchies in the global anarchist movement (the West knows better), they repeat the myths of the Kremlin propaganda about “Nazi Ukraine”.

But what about the aggressor state?

It is Russia that is rapidly becoming a neo-fascist state, which, combined with its imperial military policy, poses a greater threat to Ukraine than the USA, EU, or NATO. (Do these structures pose a threat to Ukraine at all?) Putin is a reactionary, he is taking his own country backwards in its development, he is trying to impose a regression on other countries, and he is also sending masses of Buryats, Dagestanis, Kalmyks, and Tuvans for slaughter... He only recognizes the language of force, he multiplies the repression of his own citizens, and he denies the right of other nations to independence. The cult of violence, hierarchy, and militarism in Russia is instilled from kindergarten, through state ceremonies, mass culture, and politics of memory. Moscow appropriated the right to be the center of world anti-fascism. The powerful propaganda apparatus, both internal and foreign, creates a myth in which Russia won Nazism, in which there is no question of neo-Nazi militias fighting in Ukraine, such as Rusich, Ratibor, and the Imperial Legion, not to mention the degenerates from the Wagner Group. Didn't the Militant Organization of Russian Nationalists (with ties to the presidential administration) murder the well-known lawyer Stanislav Markelov and the young journalist Anastasia Baburova in Moscow, near the Kremlin? Winston Churchill was wrong about many things, but he was right about one thing: “The fascists of the future will call themselves anti-fascists.”

Ukraine is not and has never been a fascist state. Despite some actions in the field of historical politics, as in every country, the ultranationalists have never managed to dominate the Supreme Council of Ukraine. In fact, there were various parties, even pro-Russian ones (!). There are elec-

tions and a rotation of power. Has anything like this happened in Russia over the last 20 years? Zelensky, who has Jewish roots, spoke Russian on a daily basis and did business with Russia. The Azov Assault Brigade, consisting of a multitude of nationalities with different views (e.g., former commander Denis Prokopenko is a Karelian), showed incredible heroism during the defense of Azovstal. In addition, it officially condemned Nazism and Stalinism, undergoing an ideological transformation unlike the couch-potato anarchists.

Who among the current critics of Ukraine visited Ukraine and when was the last time? As a person with family ties to Ukraine and a regular visitor to Ukraine before the war, I have never encountered discrimination because of my the Russian language. I know the pros and cons of this society. And yet Ukraine does not impose anything on anyone, does not occupy, does not attack other countries. It has a dynamically sprouting civil society, strengthening after regular social upheavals (the Revolution on Granite 1990, the Orange Revolution 2004, Euromaidan 2013–2014) and giving grounds for spreading direct democracy.

Every form of imperialism and colonialism has been and is bad. But the world does not begin and end west of Warsaw. The Western scientific and activist perspective seems to have forgotten what the largest country in the world is and what its history is. It is Russia, ruled by a former KGB/FSB official who misses the days of Russian imperial greatness and is personally responsible for numerous murders and attempted political assassinations. It is surprising, therefore, that Russian imperialism, which is rooted in the culture and political tradition of Russia (tsarist, Bolshevik, Putinist), is not noticed. The faces change, the essence remains the same. Chechnya, South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Ukraine. In fact, Belarus is under the imperial dome of the Kremlin. *Russkiy mir* (Russian world), wishing to restore its former imperial power, will not stop at Kyiv. In the Kremlin's vision, places such as Moldova and Transnistria, the Baltic states, Kazakhstan, and perhaps Poland and the countries of Central Europe all belong to Russia's imperial reach. The boots of Russian soldiers have been on the heels of Russian "culture" for centuries.

The fight against Putinism, which is a priority for the inhabitants of our region, does not require worshipping NATO or Western imperialism (or any other group). The victory of Russia will enslave Ukraine, purges will begin, camps will be established (which is already taking place in the occupied territories), and repression will reach unprecedented proportions. Europe will be plunged into uncertainty and international structures that would not function without it will falter. Belarus, with thousands of political prisoners (including about 30 anarchists), will lose its chance of liberation.

Anarchism

Anarchism is not a closed doctrine, imagining the world in rigid terms of a black-and-white dichotomy, but rather it contains a more complex range of ideas, sometimes naïve and utopian, sometimes realistic and pragmatic. The latter includes helping Ukraine, through which anarchists try to find a common language with reality.

Anarchists do not need to reinvent the wheel. In a situation of war, instead of the repeated mantra of "No war but class war", one should turn to mutual aid, solidarity, internationalism, and the right to self-determination and self-defense. We should reject pacifism and the push for "peace at all costs" through diplomatic negotiations between the US and NATO on the one hand and the Kremlin on the other, and Ukraine's subjectivity should be defended in this conflict. Just

as Kropotkin said about the armed conflict of imperial Prussia and the Entente, that it was “a war not of armies alone, but a war of nations”, so today it is a war of nations, not imperialisms. A war of values, not alliances.

Anarchism is a practical philosophy; it is about action and critique of dogma. The “trench anarchists” do not have any illusions about Zelensky and his corrupt party, Servant of the People; they are not fighting for the Ukrainian state. Despite this, they see huge differences between the political culture of Russia and Ukraine. So-called “anarcho-militarists” are aligned with the people of Ukraine; they experience its fate and, unlike the Western supporters of “peace” and the proletariat, they have the right to speak on its behalf. Ukraine’s victory may offer a chance for further changes in society, for the development of direct democracy, for the liquidation of the oligarchic system, and finally for the nation to regain its own country. The dignity of society, which they trade in the West, has never been taken away from the Ukrainians, which is clearly evidenced by the heroic defense of the country in the first phase of the war and queues for territorial defense units. After winning freedom, the time will come to fight for land, jobs, and self-governance. An armed nation will no longer be a pawn in the great game of politicians and oligarchs. Ukraine’s victory may also contribute to potential changes in Russia, which in its current state is a constant threat to the world.

One could multiply quotes from the classics and theoreticians of anarchism, but what dictates life itself is the superior value. I will end with one quote from the Belgian anti-militarist Frans Verbelen: “Reality blows away the most beautiful theories as a storm the sand in the desert.”⁶ Let’s try to be like stone, not sand. Anarchists after the war will have a lot of work to do: reorganizing and rebuilding the movement, focusing on extremely important ecological issues, fighting for labor and social rights, building trade unions, confronting right-wing organizations and new authorities, etc. Then, as now, the material help of Western comrades, their experience and ideas will be needed. Is the “solidarity” written on our banners just an empty word? We must finally bridge the gulf between Eastern and Western anarchism. It is up to us whether we can bring about the future we dream about. In this undertaking, Ukraine is an opportunity and a test for us.

⁶ Frans Verbelen, “Why Belgian Anarchists Fight”, *Freedom: A Journal of Anarchist Communism*, Vol 28, No 307, November 1914, 87.

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