

Anarchists should not be spreading Putinist propaganda

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Last September, some Italian anarchists published a collective letter criticising Ukrainian anarchists for defending themselves and their movement against Russian imperialist aggression.

The argument is based on both ethical and factual points. I will start by commenting on the latter, as unfortunately it seems like these comrades have fallen into an alternative reality, shaped by Russia Today and other Russian-sponsored social media disinformation.

Who started the war in Ukraine?

According to this group of Italian anarchists, the 2014 war

“began in 2014 with the attack against the Russian-speaking communities of Ukraine. In which Ukraine committed the violence, attacks, rapes, homicides, and bombings against the people of Donbass (roughly 14.000 deaths between 2014 and 2022, including hundreds of children); the horrible massacre of Odesa of the 2nd of May 2014, when unarmed protesters calling for the independence from Ukraine, who were hiding in the local union building, were slaughtered and burnt alive by a crowd of armed nazis escorted by the police...horrible massacre of Odesa of the 2nd of May 2014, when unarmed protesters calling for the independence from Ukraine, who were hiding in the local union building, were slaughtered and burnt alive by a crowd of armed nazis escorted by the police.”

And the war started due to these “provocations.” That is to say, according to Italian anarchists, the 2022 war was, in a way, started by Ukraine.

As with many wars, the 2014 Donbass war does not have a single starting point. Before the war, there were the Euromaidan demonstrations in Kiev, during which more than 100 people died. According to the Ukrainian Ministry of Interior, 17 police officers were killed during Euromaidan – I hope this is not “the attack against the Russian-speaking communities of Ukraine” that Italian anarchists are referencing:

After Maidan, Russia occupied and annexed Crimea. From the 27th of February 2014 on, one Russian soldier died – I suppose this is also not the Ukrainian attack Italian anarchists are speaking of.

In many Eastern Ukrainian cities, supporters of the ousted president Yanukovich had occupied administrative buildings, but these occupations were relatively non-violent. However, on the 12th of April 2014 armed troops lead by Russian GRU colonel Igor Girkin, later identified as a participant in the efforced disappearings in Chechnya, took over city of Sloviansk. They began taking hostages and murdering local people they suspected of opposing Russian interests, and also ransacking the homes of the local Roma minority. So, the war did not begin in 2014 with the attack against the Russian-speaking communities of Ukraine, but with a Russian secret services agent attacking an Ukrainian city with his troops, following Kremlin orders.

Obviously, the reasons behind the start of the war are complicated – conflicts between various groups of oligarchs, mistrust between political elites in different regions of their respective countries, connected to the language issue but not only. There is not much of a controversy or dispute in terms of who escalated the conflict; Girkin has himself said that he started the war, and that he is proud of it

As for the 14000 deaths that the Italian anarchists refer to as the victims of the war in Donbass, the source of this claim is not indicated, but this is the upper limit provided by the United Nations ONCHR report, which I suppose is the ultimate source. Of these 14000, 4400 are estimated to be Ukrainian armed forces losses, and 6500 is the estimated number for the Russian and separatist troops losses. Of the 14000, the UNCHR lists 3404 civilian victims, from both sides of the front, as Russian and separatist troops also regularly shoot at civilian dwellings and spread mines. However, of these 3404 victims, 3039 are from the period between 2014 and 2015, and 298 of the victims from the Malaysian civilian airplane Russian soldiers shot down accidentally. In 2021, before the attack in February 2022, only 25 civilians died in the conflict, on both sides of the front combined. Of these, 12 died in accidents involving mines and other explosive remnants. These numbers are not disputed by either side, and the UNCHR report is actually based on the numbers reported by officials in the "separatist" republics themselves. Thus it should be obvious that there was no genocide of the people of Donbass by the Ukrainian side going on in 2022, and that the conflict had mostly dwindled down up until the full-scale Russian invasion.

What happened in the Odesa trade union building?

When it comes to the Odesa trade union building fire on the 2nd of May 2014, there is a large amount of reporting directly from the scene. On that particular day, there was a march by pro-EuroMaidan football fans, which was attacked by armed pro-Russian AntiMaidan protesters, who cooperated with the police. In the photo you see AntiMaidan activist Vitaly Budko shooting with his assault rifle, allegedly killing Igor Ivanov from the opposing side. However the EuroMaidan faction gained the upper hand, they chased the AntiMaidan protestors to the Palace of Trade Unions, which burned down and where a number of people died. Among the victims were also who who had nothing to do with the AntiMaidan activists.



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The EuroMaidan crowd in Odesa were basically Ukrainian nationalists and right wing liberals along with some fascists, the AntiMaidan crowd were Russian nationalists and right wing conservatives with a flavor of Soviet nostalgia. None of these groups had anything to do with anarchism, anti-authoritarian ideas or any other kind of leftism apart from Stalinism, and picking a side between them would be ridiculous. Now, if anarchists or anti-fascists attacked some right-wing march, lost the fight and got killed, I would mourn the victims but I would not claim that “unarmed protesters had been slaughtered.” Of course, I would not wish death from carbon monoxide poisoning in a burning building even on Russian nationalists or Stalinists, but that kind of thing can happen when you start a fight and lose. You can find many videos of the fire online, for example in one you can see that the fire spreading from both outside and inside the building; it is highly likely AntiMaidan protestors were not very careful with their Molotov Cocktails. In other videos, you can see the EuroMaidan crowd reacting differently to the people trapped inside building – some beating up those escaping the building, others helping them escape using ladders.

The course of events in Odesa is not disputed. The local journalist group, 2nd of May, has gathered various conspiracy theories on their website, and refuted them. Although local police were passive during the events, they managed to investigate the violence to some extent, and to bring some of the EuroMaidan crowd into the court (violent AntiMaidan figures escaped to Russia before being arrested). However, due to the extreme pressure against the court, none were sentenced for the fire.

There are no two widely diverging stories when it comes to what transpired in Odesa, nor generally in regards to the events that took place in Ukraine in the spring of 2014. Even serious pro-Kremlin analysts are not claiming that Igor Girkin was an oppressed Russian-speaking Ukrainian, or that AntiMaidan protestors were attacked first in Odesa. Such fantastic alternate histories have been saved for social media and other trashy internet, and the gullible Western audience of Russia Today.

What about fascism in Ukraine?

If a war starts, it is usually a good approach to ask local anarchists, of which there are plenty in the Ukraine. Unfortunately, Italian anarchists seem to have consulted shitty Kremlin propaganda first. The same goes in regards to the influence of Nazis and fascists in Ukrainian society, which is both wildly exaggerated by Russian propagandists, and understated by Western liberals. It was Ukrainian anarchists and anti-fascists fighting against these same Nazis for years. No one knows the situation with Nazis better than the Ukrainian comrades, and they are best placed to estimate the severity of the danger that Ukrainian fascists pose to the wider Ukrainian society. I am not saying that other people should not have an opinion, I am not Ukrainian myself, I can hardly read the Ukrainian language, and I have only visited Ukraine 4 times in my life. I disagree with many Ukrainians about many Ukrainian events, but I ask for their opinion first.

It is strange to read that anarchists are concerned about the arrests of Putinists priests. Obviously, some of the leftists being repressed in Ukraine, have been against Putin all of their lives, and this is an issue that is not receiving enough attention, but it is impossible to compare the current level of repression in Ukraine to that in Russia.

On the ethics of resistance

As for the more ethical argument of not joining a state army and refusing to defend against imperialistic aggression; this is not connected to specific events but personal ethics. War is murder, and joining murder, for whatever cause, right or wrong, must be decided by the individual because the moral responsibility is always on the individual. I am no-one to demand pacifism, nor to ask someone to kill another.

Italian anarchists do not mention the topics of imperialism and colonialism even once in their statement. The Ukrainian war is portrayed and understood as a war between two equally authoritarian national governments, Ukrainian and Russian, or as a proxy war between two power blocs, the NATO and Russian-Chinese blocs. But Putin, the Russian elite and a large part of the brain-washed public do not consider Ukraine a “proper state”, but rather as a part of Russia taken over by some uppity and primitive peasants who are speaking a funny Russian dialect. The purpose of the war is to make Ukraine a Russian satellite, it is a war of imperialist conquest, either to create a buffer zone, or in the best case scenario for Kremlin, to assimilate all Ukrainians into Russian society.

There are hardly any imperialist conquests, which have not, also, been some kind of a proxy (or direct) war between colonialist or imperialist countries. Similarly, very few anti-colonial uprisings have succeeded without opportunistically seeking help from competing power blocs.

The Palestine conflict has for decades been, besides a national liberation struggle, a proxy war between Western and Soviet blocs, and most recently a proxy war between USA and Iran. These two aspects do not exclude each other. Every single word by Italian anarchists, written about the Ukrainian war benefiting capitalist war industries describes the Palestine conflict just as accurately, which has for decades been a testing ground for Israeli military technologies, and now occasionally for Iranian technologies as well. Does this mean that Palestinians should stop resisting, give up their land to settler extremists and move to whichever country agrees to accept them? Should Kurds also stop resisting? Anti-colonial and anti-imperialist resistance often happens within a state, or quasi-state framework, and most countries in the world have recognised a Palestinian state. If Israel and USA were to recognise a Palestinian state, and then continued to kill and ethnically cleanse Palestinians, would that be acceptable? It should not be too much to ask that the same principles be applied to all anti-imperialist struggles, not just the Ukrainian one.

Ethical issues and anarchist strategy are of course more complicated than factual inaccuracies. None of us can tell the future. We do not know what will happen in Ukraine, nor do we know whether the efforts of Ukrainian anarchists and anti-fascists will bear fruit or result in a bitter defeat.

Only time will tell who was right – those who fought against imperialism as volunteers in the trenches and gathered supplies for the volunteers, or those who called for desertion on the internet. But even the latter should take care that their statements are based on facts, and not on murky Kremlin propaganda which does not stand at the slightest scrutiny. I can accept and respect anarchists having different principles and different strategies, but I cannot accept anarchists spreading falsified facts.

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