

“There Are No ‘Bad peoples’”

**Essentialism in State Propaganda and the Ideological Anti-Essentialism of
martyr Dmitry Petrov**

BOAK

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This essay about some ideological positions of one of the founders of the Combat Organization of Anarcho-Communists, our friend and comrade, martyr Dmitry Petrov, was published on the anniversary of his martyrdom on April 19. We thank our friends for their help to translate it to English.

“Another important sense to participate in this war is to approve internationalism by example...

“...In the days when the deadly imperialism awakes, as a response, a wave of nationalism and contempt for Russians, I argue by word and deed: there are no “bad peoples”. All peoples have the same grief – greedy and power-hungry rulers”.

From Dmitry Petrov’s statement

Today, April 19, marks three years since the day our comrade, one of the founders of the Combat Organization of Anarcho-Communists, Dmitry Petrov, became a martyr, going as part of an anarchist combat group, alongside the anarchists and revolutionaries Finbar Cafferkey and Cooper Andrews, who also fell martyrs, to storm the positions of the Russian occupation forces near Bakhmut. There is so much the hero did not have time to say – while being an excellent theorist, he also always remained a partisan and a fighter, fought as an assault soldier, and sacrificed himself for revolutionary goals.

I would like to discuss one aspect of Dmitry Petrov’s worldview, namely his negative attitude toward a phenomenon that can be called essentialism – the notion that certain groups possess unchanging characteristics, often negative ones. This issue was so important to our comrade that he addressed it in the statement he left in case of his death. “I affirm in word and deed: there are no ‘bad peoples.’ All peoples share the same grief – greedy and power-hungry rulers,” he tells us.

Around the time this text was written, a related topic was discussed in a column by the Finnish anarchist Antti Rautiainen on the Autonomous Action website. Reading it provides further insight into the issue discussed here.

The Image of “the Other”: A Very Brief Overview

Our knowledge of different countries and regions, and of the ethnic and religious groups inhabiting them, does not arise out of nowhere; it is socially constructed under the dominance of power structures – hierarchical, patriarchal, racist, and colonial. This is the subject of the seminal research by one of the greatest postcolonial thinkers, Edward Said, “Orientalism”, published in 1979. Said analyzes how Western colonial powers constructed the image of the East they colonized as “the Other.” If colonial power was portrayed as a rational man, then the East was portrayed as a sensitive and weak woman. The West embodied freedom and reason – the East, despotism and fanaticism. The West was “civilized,” while the East was “archaic” and “barbaric.” This so-called “knowledge” formed the basis of the colonial literary and scholarly tradition, but it also shaped the reality in which the British and French empires in the past, and the United States and Israel today, imposed their will on colonized peoples through the most brutal methods: conquests, resource plundering, ethnic cleansing, and genocide.

Many have surely heard the apartheid state of Israel — which, before the eyes of the entire world, carried out the genocide of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip—being called “the only democracy in the Middle East.” This is a classic example of how the construction of an image of “the Other” serves colonial and genocidal purposes, shaping a hegemonic narrative that is imposed globally as an unquestionable truth. If Israel represents “democracy” and “civilization,” then the Palestinians, who have inhabited these lands for many centuries and were expelled or exterminated by the Zionist nation-building colonial project, were declared “barbarians” and “Islamic fanatics.” Moreover, to legitimize the occupation and apartheid, these characteristics of the Palestinians were proclaimed to be immutable. The founders of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, Georges Habash and Wadie Haddad, came from Christian families expelled by the colonizers from their lands during the Nakba (Catastrophe) in 1948 and held medical degrees — a highly sought-after and prestigious profession in the Middle East. This did not prevent Israeli propaganda from portraying the PFLP, using Islamophobic clichés, as “barbaric fanatics” who oppose “Western civilization.”

Essentialism and the Image of “the Other” in Russia’s Colonial Anti-Ukrainian Policy

For centuries, Russia pursued a colonial policy toward Ukrainian lands, and Ukraine was under a long period a Russian colony, supplying resources and labor to the imperial metropolis. Even after the Ukrainian state gained formal independence in 1991, Ukraine’s subordinate position was perpetuated through Russian economic dominance, the orientation of a significant — if not the majority — of Ukrainian politicians and the oligarchy toward Russia, as well as through Russian cultural hegemony.

Along with colonial dependence, the image of the Ukrainian as “the Other” took shape. In mass culture products and in the Russian consciousness, Ukrainians came to embody “provincialism” — simple-minded and somewhat foolish people speaking a “funny” language. Yet at the same time, they were cunning, resourceful, and to some extent deceitful and treacherous. These characteristics were contrasted with those of the inhabitants of the imperial metropolis: honest, straightforward, and possessing a “developed,” “scientific” mindset.

Ukrainian nationalism became a separate topic — both as a phenomenon in itself and as what imperial propaganda meant by it. In Russian imperial discourse, Ukrainian identity became inextricably linked to collaborationism during World War II and “Banderite.” In this regard, Russian propagandists followed in the footsteps of their Israeli and Western counterparts, who, on a discursive (and sometimes legal) level, attempt to equate any criticism of the Israeli apartheid state with “Islamist terrorism.” The achievements of Israeli and Western propaganda have been discussed previously; but Russian propaganda has also been quite successful in this regard — for instance, prior to February 24, 2022, in the mind of the average Westerner, Ukraine was to a significant extent associated with nationalism and neo-Nazi movements. The outbreak of full-scale war changed this discursive reality, just as the genocide of Palestinians that began in October 2023 and the mass internationalist resistance to it fundamentally altered global attitudes toward the Palestinian resistance.

The Image of “the Other” During the Russian-Ukrainian War

In February 2014, a popular uprising triumphed in Ukraine against the Yanukovich regime, which had a reputation for being pro-Russian. This was followed by Russia’s open imperialist aggression against Ukraine, which escalated into a full-scale invasion in February 2022. In Russia, state propaganda justified the attack with imperialist and “anti-fascist” narratives. Ukraine, meanwhile, had entered the final stretch of its nation-building process. The formation of a nation-state is always accompanied by a narrative opposition between the “united nation” and “outsiders” who are not part of the nation. The Ukrainian state system is significantly more pluralistic than the Russian or Belarusian ones, and therefore various political forces could and can propose their own versions of who to consider “outsiders” who do not fit into the Ukrainian nation: among these options are “communists,” “Soviet-era people,” “leftists,” “pro-Russian forces” (which can mean quite different things), Russians, Russian speakers, “anti-democrats,” draft dodgers, LGBTQ+ people, and so on.

At the narrative level, Russian and Ukrainian state propaganda have shaped an image of the ideal “Other” in the neighboring state and its people, endowed with all those unchanging negative traits that are supposedly not characteristic of “their own” state and its inhabitants. Basically, this is essentialism in its purest form; this discursive reality will hinder cross-border grassroots solidarity between Ukrainians and Russians for many years to come. Responsibility for this lies first and foremost with Putin’s imperialist, fascist Russian state, which launched a colonial war in Ukraine, and to a certain extent with Russian society, which failed to mobilize to stop it. Accordingly, dismantling the Russian imperial project, equipped with a nuclear arsenal, appears to be a primary goal for revolutionaries.

What does the ideal “Other” look like? Even during the popular uprising on the Maidan, Russian propaganda began to shape the image of Ukraine as a territory of chaos and upheaval. It was contrasted with Russian “stability” — stability was precisely one of the propaganda trump cards of Putin’s regime, used to justify authoritarianism and repression. Under the pretext of maintaining stability, Crimea was occupied and annexed in early 2014. This same narrative portrayed Ukrainians as spontaneous rebels and troublemakers who, without the “stabilizing,” paternalistic hand of their “big brother,” were simply incapable of establishing a normal life.

Another justification for the aggression was “anti-fascism.” As mentioned above, the efforts of Russian propaganda and the Russian state’s appropriation of the victory over Nazism in World War II led to a situation where, even in the minds of ordinary Westerners, Ukraine came to be associated for a time with a particular affinity for neo-Nazi tendencies. This is despite the fact that the very global concept of the nation-state — one of whose manifestations was Hitler’s National Socialist system — is a product of Western capitalist modernization. Sufficient attention has already been devoted to deconstructing Putin’s anti-fascist myth and exposing the nationalist, chauvinist tendencies within fascist Russia itself; but here it suffices to note that this myth has made a significant contribution to shaping the image of the Ukrainian as “the Other” — a Bandera supporter from a forest hideout, preparing a treacherous surprise attack. And therefore, preventive acts of aggression are supposedly justified. Incidentally, in recent decades, imperialist states have used similar arguments to justify virtually all of their “anti-terrorist” interventions.

What was the response of the Ukrainian nation-building project? The first thing that comes to mind here is the contrast between “freedom-loving Ukrainians” and “slave-like Russians.” Surely many have heard the claim “Russia is a nation of slaves” over the past four years. Essentially,

the ideal “Other.” Of course, this claim by Ukrainian propaganda can be challenged with numerous examples from Ukrainian reality: the state and business’s assault on Ukrainians’ social rights, the glaring economic inequality in the country, the strengthening of the security services, the excesses of mobilization, and the Ukrainian authorities’ initiatives — supported, at least in words, by some European governments — to forcibly return male Ukrainian citizens who have left the country. It is also worth noting that the Ukrainian nationalist myth of “freedom-loving Ukrainians” appropriates the anarchist Makhnovist movement, thereby stripping Makhnovism of its true substance. After all, the real Nestor Makhno and his comrades fought against the Ukrainian nation-state, the UPR, including in alliance with Soviet Russia, which they considered much closer ideologically. Furthermore, the Makhnovist movement saw its goal as the destruction of capitalism and the achievement of economic equality — an ideal from which the current Ukrainian state is extremely far removed.

After the outbreak of full-scale war, Ukrainian state propaganda also employed an essentialist civilizational dichotomy: the “civilized” West versus the “barbaric” East. Attempts, at least on a discursive level, to place Ukraine within the “camp of civilization” explain the Ukrainian authorities’ expressed support for a U.S. and Israeli attack on Iran and Zelenskyy’s repeated proposals to send Ukrainian UAV pilots to the Middle East. However, Russian propagandists also contrast Russia, as a “territory of order and civilization,” with the Ukrainian “barbaric Wild Field,” where there is neither order nor law.

Anarchists from Ukraine and internationalists from other countries are fighting in the current war on the side of Ukrainian society against the Russian colonial empire. The spontaneous desire for freedom and rejection of arbitrary power attributed to Ukrainian identity are, of course, closer to anarchist ideas than the fetishization of the state and imperial power pushed by Russian propaganda. There is also no doubt that there is significantly more room for self-organization and autonomy in Ukraine than in Russia, where society is completely stifled by the Putin regime. Yet, as the martyr Dmitry Petrov repeatedly noted in his writings, there are no peoples with unchanging negative characteristics, and even a national identity endowed with “freedom-loving” traits is not identical to anarchist ideology.

Dmitry Petrov’s Ideas and Struggle

Written many years before the full-scale war, during the uprising against the Yanukovich regime, Dima’s “Maidan Diary” is imbued with a rejection of nationalism and adulation of the “Western world,” as well as a desire for grassroots solidarity between Ukrainians and Russians. “The figures of the speech about Ukraine as “an outpost of Europe in the Third Cold War” and so on sometimes produced astonishment and a bitterly ironic state of mind,” he summarized his impressions of the speeches of the Maidan leaders during the so-called People’s Assembly. Note that our fallen comrade wrote this in February 2014, even before the Maidan’s victory, Russia’s annexation of Crimea, the limited incursion of Russian troops into eastern Ukraine, and the full-scale war. Before “defending Western civilization from the threat from the East” became the hegemonic narrative of the Ukrainian establishment. Yet even then, Dima saw the absurdity and harm of this ideological construct for both Ukrainians and international solidarity.

In the “Maidan Diary,” this “civilizational” approach was contrasted with cross-border grassroots solidarity, the exchange of experiences between social movements, and comradely mutual

aid in the struggle against structures of oppression. Dmitry Petrov spoke about a presentation by a comrade from Russia at the Ukrainian House, which had been liberated by the rebels. The topic of the speech was the protests in Russia in 2011–12:

“We told the audience (more than fifty people) about the mass protest campaign against United Russia (the ruling party) and Putin in 2011–2012 and the “Bolotnaya Square Case.” The main idea we wanted to convey to our listeners was that the protest should be organized on a horizontal basis. Ironically, despite the differences between the Russian movement and the Ukrainian insurgency, we too have something to share with our Slavic brothers. Even the notorious “coordination council” of the opposition was elected in our country, while here many executive (security and self-defense) posts are appointed from above: either by opposition parliamentary parties, or self-appointed, according to the principle of “he who dares, eats.” These quasi-officials are not accountable to the ordinary Maidan activists, including those who are constantly on the barricades, in the square, and in the Ukraine House. At the same time, their powers are much broader than those possessed by the Opposition Council in Russia. Needless to say, this situation undermines resistance to Yanukovich’s authoritarianism. Our message was as follows: the people of Ukraine, who have already shown themselves to be staunch opponents of tyranny, must not be satisfied with simply putting the boots of new oppressors on their necks in place of the old ones. We spoke about our experience of holding people’s assemblies during the “standing” demonstrations on Chistye Prudy and Barrikadnaya in Moscow. We also drew attention to some curious differences in the political realities of Russia and Ukraine. In particular, there are no parties in the Russian parliament that even remotely resemble the real opposition to the party in power. Paradoxically, we are “more fortunate” in this respect, since representative institutions and political parties in Russia seem to inspire less trust. We received a warm welcome, and many fervently supported us, while others argued with our egalitarian position, voicing common misconceptions about the inevitability of social hierarchies and the “impossibility” of organizing society along different lines. There is a struggle going on inside everyone—on the one hand, the people here have come out to resist the coercion of those in power, but on the other hand, the weight of prejudice, the habit of hierarchical social attitudes, and the vertical structure of society are still very strong and they drag resistance down.”

As we can see, the issue is not the unchanging “servile” traits of Russians or the innate love of freedom among Ukrainians — these qualities are formed in the course of social processes and collective struggle. The task of the revolutionary anarchist movement is precisely to act as an active, organized force that dismantles power structures and hierarchical prejudices through words and direct attacks.

Dmitry Petrov continued to act within this same ideological framework even after the start of full-scale war. Looking back, one can cautiously observe that during the first year of the full-scale invasion — and indeed afterward — a part of the libertarian circles in Ukraine and the post-Soviet space was gripped by a sort of fetishization of Ukrainian identity. In this understanding, Ukrainian collective identity already embodied anarchist ideals of freedom in and of itself,

and consequently rendered anarchism as an ideological doctrine less relevant. Anarchist organizational structures were also weakening, as Dima explicitly wrote in the article “To Be an Independent Force,” published in November 2022:

“The second, seemingly opposite, approach is proactive, but similar to the first in terms of its outcomes. Its supporters argue that anarchism and revolutionary struggle are not on the agenda right now, “first we will defend Ukraine from invasion,” “first we will overthrow Putin/Lukashenko (underline as appropriate),” we will throw ourselves headlong into this work, and then... No, my friends, if at the point of bifurcation you decide to postpone your ideas until better times, you can safely assume that you are shelving them forever.”

In the article “Four Months in the Anti-Authoritarian Platoon in Ukraine,” the martyr Dmitry Petrov, while acknowledging the necessity of organized struggle in a tactical alliance with other components of the Ukrainian resistance against Russian imperialism, spoke directly about the negative aspects of cooperation with the Ukrainian state and the Ukrainian military bureaucracy’s opposition to the formation of an anarchist military political organization. According to our fallen comrade, a temporary united front did not negate anarchist organizational efforts and ideological consciousness; on the contrary, it required their intensification and strengthening.

It should be noted that subsequent events confirmed Dima’s words. Ukrainian corruption amid the most brutal war, neoliberal reforms, deepening inequality and economic exploitation, and the political rise of the far right — all of this indicates that an abstractly pro-Ukrainian position and anarchist ideology, while having tactical points of convergence, are far from identical.

However, for Dima, the desire for autonomy within the framework of the Ukrainian resistance naturally did not negate a critical view of Russian society, which, willingly or unwillingly, participates in the atrocities of Putin’s regime. But this state of affairs was socially conditioned, not biologically fixed. In an interview with DOXA published in March 2023, he spoke directly about this, expressing hope for the growth of revolutionary ideas within Russia as well:

“Although it is quite possible that this very mad adventure will bury the Putin regime and offer a chance for change for the better — and thus for my return. Overall, my attitude toward people living in Russia hasn’t changed much. I have long been burdened by the submissiveness, laxity, and narrow-mindedness of our society. Although sometimes I can’t help but ask my compatriots a rhetorical question: ‘Guys, how can this be? A brutal dictatorship is committing horrific, bloody crimes of unprecedented scale in your name, and you all remain silent or, worse yet, nod in approval. What else do we need to see the light and take action?’ “However, this is more of an emotional note, nothing more; I do not view every Russian as an accomplice to the crime.”

The cross-border activities of the Combat Organization of Anarcho-Communists, in which the martyr Dmitry Petrov took the most active part, had and continues to have as its goal the liberation of Russian society, among others, from the Putin regime and the imperial, colonial mentality and philistine submissiveness associated with its expansionist policies.

Conclusion

In closing, I would like to mention two aspects of Dmitry Petrov's ideological legacy discussed in this article that are important for the future revolutionary organization of society. While rejecting the notion of inherent negative characteristics of any ethnic communities, Dima did not believe that ethnic and cultural groups should renounce their distinctiveness. On the contrary, this diversity underscored the importance of solidarity, internationalism, and the integration of shared experiences of resistance. Dmitry Petrov himself, having been socialized in a Russian-Jewish intellectual milieu, always spoke openly about his affiliation with Russian culture, even while fighting in the Ukrainian 95th Air Assault Brigade. Yet he was a master at preparing Kurdish food, promoted the ideas of the Kurdish Revolutionary Movement's philosophical leader, Abdullah Öcalan, within Russian-speaking circles, and studied and applied the guerrilla tactics of Ulrike Meinhof and Juan Carlos Mariella. Through his example, he demonstrated that internationalism means building bridges and fostering global solidarity, combined with a sensitive attitude toward cultural diversity.

At the same time, a revolutionary worldview serves as the cementing force in global international solidarity. Loyalty to the revolutionary struggle, faith in the revolution, and ideological conviction stood, in the opinion of the martyr Dmitry Petrov, above all other identities. It was from these that one should draw strength in the hour of the most difficult trials.

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