

Notes on Anti-Fascist Self-Defense Training

10 Lessons from the Russian Anti-Fascist Experience

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The Trump presidency has seen a boom of fascist organizing and anti-fascist resistance in North America. Strategies and tactics that originally developed in the European context have spread around the USA. Meanwhile, in Russia, both Nazi violence and anti-fascist activity have died down to a mere fraction of what they were at the peak of the years of confrontation, 2002–2011. In the following text, a participant in the Russian anti-fascist movement suggests some conclusions about how to train for anti-fascist confrontations.

In publishing this perspective, we aim to facilitate dialogue between those fighting fascism in a variety of conditions all around the world. We believe it is crucial for anti-fascists to learn from history and from each other's experience. If the Russian model for anti-fascist action reached its limits based on internal factors, as described below, we should take care not to reproduce those elements in our own organizing. Likewise, we encourage readers to bear in mind the political, social, and legal differences between the Russian and US contexts; you'll do no one any good by ending up in prison on weapons charges unless the alternative would have been even worse. In the long run, fascism won't be defeated simply by individual courage or force of arms, but by building a broad-based, participatory movement that addresses the social and economic problems fascists capitalize on to recruit for their organizations.

Introduction from the Author

Unfortunately, this text cannot go into detail about the history of Russian anti-fascism. That text has yet to be written.

There are a number of reasons why both fascist terror and anti-fascist organizing have drastically diminished in Russia over the past decade. First of all, Russian society is less dysfunctional. During the economic crisis of the 1990s, entire communities were devastated due to drugs and crime; people born in the 1980s were among the most affected. When this generation reached their twenties in the following decade, they were prone to violence and mayhem. Almost all the major Nazi terrorists were born in the 1980s. Since then, the majority of those still alive and not in prison have settled down somehow.

The police are also taking fascists and anti-fascists more seriously. A decade ago, you could bribe beat cops to get out of trouble; sometimes you could even bribe officers of the FSB (the successor to the KGB). Nowadays, beat cops contact the Center of Counteraction Against Extremists (E-Center) or the FSB, and they do not accept bribes anymore. The government has also heavily suppressed the football hooligan subculture, which used to be the biggest youth subculture in Russia.

A third reason is changing fascist strategies. Russian fascists have oscillated between organizing wide mass movements and underground terror. In the 1990s, Barkashov's party Russian National Unity boasted hundreds of thousands of supporters; by the late 2000s, nothing remained from those days and fascists were concentrating on underground terror cells. The most prominent of those was the Fighting Organization of Russian Nationalists (BORN), the speciality of which was high-profile murders, including those of anti-fascists Ivan Khutorskoy, Fyodor Filatov, Ilya Dzhaparidze, Stanislav Markelov, and Anastasia Baburova.

All the known BORN members have been dead or imprisoned since 2013. During the cycle of protests against election fraud in 2011–2012 and Alexei Navalny’s rise to prominence on an anti-corruption and anti-immigrant platform, fascists rediscovered their lost hope of building a mass movement and joined liberals and leftists in mass demonstrations—not without occasional fights with anti-fascists, however. New terror groups still occasionally emerge, such as the group around 20-year-old Pavel Vojtov, which murdered at least 15 homeless people in the Moscow area from 2014 to 2015. But this is nothing compared to the situation of the previous decade.

The last major Nazi attack on an anti-fascist concert was in summer 2010, when a group of Nazis aiming to assault a show by Moscow Death Brigade dispersed after warning shots were fired with a shotgun. The arms race had reached its logical conclusion; both anti-fascists and fascists lost interest in attacking the gigs of their opponents.

After the collapse of the movement against election fraud, the fascist movement was in a crisis, just as the rest of the opposition was. The war in Donbass (a region in eastern Ukraine torn by a Russia-backed insurgency) was another devastating blow, as Nazis were bitterly arguing about which side of the conflict to support. Eventually, both Nazis and anti-fascists ended up fighting in both sides of the front. Even anarchists have failed to reach a common position about the war in Donbass.

In a way, Russian anti-fascists had achieved a victory, as the movement was always organized around the goal of defending shows, not combating racism in Russian society in general. Since Nazis do not come to shows anymore, there is little organized anti-fascism left.

Because of all these factors, racist violence has dropped dramatically in Russia. According to SOVA center statistics, there were 692 incidents in 2007 and 93 in 2016—a whopping 86% drop. The real drop might be even more, as readiness to report crime grows as crime drops.

The reasons for the rise and fall of fascism and anti-fascism in Russia were rather local; there are probably not many universal lessons to draw from this. However, we can offer some notes regarding the practice in the streets.

The following suggestions are drawn from the experience of those years in Russia. All of this is basically common sense, but judging from what I’ve read online lately, some people may still benefit from these suggestions.

Note that self-defense in this text refers also to precautionary offense, as you cannot expect a state of peace with fascists to last indefinitely.

1. When it comes to physical confrontations, there is a strict hierarchy of tools.

A blunt weapon almost always wins against bare hands. A sharp weapon almost always wins against blunt weapons. A gun always wins against knives.

This hierarchy of tools is much more important than any disparity in size and strength; it also erases most disparity in skills. With a sharp weapon, you can easily defeat an unarmed opponent twice as heavy as you. Take this into account if you are small and weak.

Because of this...

2. There is no universal practice of self-defense.

The appropriate practice of self-defense depends completely on the cultural and legal context. For example:

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In Western and Central Europe, confrontations usually involve bare hands, sometimes blunt weapons. Most of these countries have a cultural aversion to using sharp weapons, although knives are sometimes drawn. Guns are almost never used, as firearm ownership is strictly regulated.

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In Greece, the mere possession of sharp weapons is heavily penalized. As a consequence, confrontations typically involve blunt weapons.

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In Finland, carrying knives is not unusual, and you should be prepared for the possibility that your opponent will be carrying one. Guns are also more available than in the rest of the Europe.

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In the USA, gun regulations are lax. You should operate under the assumption that your opponent may be carrying one.

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In Russia, the cultural framework is fluid. According to tradition, conflicts should be solved with bare hands, and gun legislation is rather strict. However, due to the escalation of conflict between 2002 and 2011, trauma guns and knives replaced fists; then shotguns replaced trauma guns and knives. Shotguns created a balance of terror and confrontations died out for the most part. Because of cultural and legal pressures, both of these shifts took a few years.

Antifa was born in Germany and originally spread in Western and Central Europe, but the practice of fighting barehanded is not applicable in places where the cultural and legal framework does not confine confrontations to those terms. There is no sense in training in unarmed self-defense if your opponent is likely to carry a blunt weapon. There is no sense training in self-defense with blunt weapons if your opponent is likely to carry a sharp weapon. If your opponent is likely to carry a gun, there is no sense training in self-defense with sharp weapons.

In addition to cultural and legal frameworks, scenarios also matter. I read an article about anti-racists setting up a powerlifting gym in the USA in order to be prepared for confrontations with racists and sexists in the streets and clubs. However, lifting weights is of very little use if you expect to confront a fascist demonstration. If the scenario is confronting a random racist, sexist, or homophobe in the street or serving as a bouncer at a benefit party, appearing big enough may solve the problem without violence.

This brings us to our next point...

3. Understand your priorities.

Unless you are a teenager or 20-something and plan to be a self-defense professional, you should prioritize. You cannot prepare for all scenarios; you should pick a few of them. Even if you do not have studies, a job, or a family now, you are likely to have any or all of them during the next 10 years that it will take you to become a universal expert.

You have a choice to make. If you expect to face unarmed opponents, train in unarmed self-defense. If you expect to face armed opponents, figure out how to survive the situation. If you only expect to face random harassers or drunken assholes at parties, you may lift weights. But most likely, you won't be able to prepare for all of these scenarios. Concentrate on what is most likely to keep you alive and healthy.

Therefore...

4. Do not train in Mixed Martial Arts.

Or at least do not concentrate on grappling, unless you only plan to be a bouncer and you do not anticipate any serious confrontations. This goes for anything related to ground fighting, including Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu and wrestling.

If you have to fight against several opponents and you go to ground with one of them, someone will kick your head or stab you in the back. If you want to stay alive, you never want to go to ground in any serious situation. You should know something about holds, but spending years studying the complex art of grappling makes no sense if the goal is to survive in the streets.

I always feel sad when I read about anti-fascists training in MMA. Obviously, it is a beautiful form of art. However, it has little to do with the kind of self-defense you may need in political confrontations. Yes, anti-fascist MMA tournaments have been organized in the former Soviet Union since 2009, but this choice is not due to street realities but due to culture. Pulling a knife is considered disgraceful; this is why people kept training and competing in MMA even when everyone was already carrying a knife or a trauma gun.

Avoid any fancy Japanese or Chinese technique with a thousand-year-old noble tradition unless studying it is your chief goal in life. These arts were developed for the purposes of a professional caste in feudal times; they require years of full-time study to master and involve impractical and outdated weapons. If you are landed gentry, perhaps you can afford to become a samurai. Otherwise, that is unlikely.

You know best what to do with your own life. Mastering Kwan Dao or Katana might be just as fascinating as mastering model train collecting. But in the streets, all three of those options are comparably useful unless you always carry a Kwan Dao or Katana with you.

If you have a job or other demanding commitments in your life, you haven't studied martial arts since childhood, and you do not possess natural talent, you should concentrate on learning the most essential and rudimentary skills. If you expect to face an opponent in an unarmed confrontation, the first thing to learn is how to deliver kicks and punches. Muay Thai is good for this. If you live in an area where it is more likely that you will find yourself in a scenario involving blunt and sharp weapons, I recommend Filipino martial arts such as Kali or Escrima—and nothing else. If you live in an area where everyone has a gun and issues are likely to be resolved through confrontations with firearms, just get a gun and learn how to use it.

And also...

5. Be prepared to use your weapon.

Even in countries where there are strict cultural norms or laws against weapons, they are sometimes used. Sticks and stones are everywhere; your opponent will probably find one if he is really in trouble. There is no country in which you should concentrate only on unarmed training.

Even if you *do* only prepare for unarmed confrontation, you should think about how to protect your knuckles. You are not going to go around with boxing gloves—nor would you want to use them in a serious confrontation, anyway. But if you break your hand with your first punch, you are in trouble. You should think about this. Always be prepared to protect your knuckles.

And when you train with weapons...

6. Do not spend much time studying disarming techniques.

Most likely, you will never have the opportunity to use them. Attempting to disarm a person of any weapon is always extremely dangerous. You should only try it if your opponent is obviously drunk and inexperienced and there are no other opponents around. Otherwise, you should not attempt to disarm someone, but rather, use your own weapon instead. If you don't have a weapon of your own and there is no way to escape... you're probably in trouble.

But besides training...

7. Be prepared to use what you have learned.

There is no point training in Filipino martial arts if you do not carry a weapon with you. It is pointless to do target practice if you don't carry a gun. When you have learned your art, you should always carry your weapon anywhere that you expect you may be involved in confrontations—and sooner or later, even where you do not expect them. If you are not able to do this, you should be prepared to deal with confrontations without your weapon.

8. What about running away?

Self-defense gurus often say, "First of all, you should attempt to run away." This is often good advice—but not always. First, it is always easier to catch someone than to run away, so it only makes sense to run if you believe that you are faster and you know your escape route. Second, you may not be the only one whose life and health is at stake. What if you are able to escape, but that would mean leaving your comrade to face your adversaries alone?

Obviously, it is a good idea to stay in good shape and do cardio training. Almost any street confrontation requires stamina and at least a bit of running. But you should be prepared for situations in which running away is not an option.

But even if gurus sometimes give bad advice...

9. Always train with professionals.

Or at least study under very experienced trainers. It might be nice to hang around and practice with your friends from time to time, but in order to learn something and to develop your skills, you have to join a serious group.

Yes, many trainers and people in clubs are assholes. Both trainers and regular students might be unfriendly, unsupportive, sexist, or otherwise insensitive. However, the people you're likely to face in street confrontations will not be nice, either.

I'm not saying that you should pay to participate in a class that is almost unbearable. If the other people are such assholes that you can't concentrate on the exercises, it's not worth the money. But any major city has plenty of options; if one trainer or club doesn't suit you, look for another one. You should only train exclusively alone or with friends if there really is no other choice.

However, although it is better to train with professionals, a professional trainer is probably not the best person to seek life advice from. If you ask your trainer how you should train and how much, she or he will probably answer that you should train six days a week and go to a competition on the seventh. Perhaps you only want to train to win in the streets, or at least to stay alive out there. Your trainer will probably have different life priorities than you. Not every anti-fascist has to be a professional trainer or fighter. If the art of your choice can only be useful after you've been practicing it three times a week for five years, it's not a good choice. One of the stupidest choices I made in my life was to train in ancient varieties of kung-fu for years. I never had enough time or skills achieve anything in them.

And at last of all...

10. Practice sparring in every training.

Only sparring can prepare you for serious confrontations. You should practice with many different rules and many different scenarios, such as one person against many people and many people against many people. You should train to draw your weapon fast. Do this in every training, even if you're a beginner. If your trainer does not understand importance of sparring, change classes.

Don't take it too hard, as you don't want to have CTE. But don't take it too easy either.

– Cloudbuster

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