

Despair and anger in a concentration camp

Assembly's interview on the second anniversary of big war in Ukraine

Assembly

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Winter conversation for a book project on the revolutionary left against the war currently in the making by communaut.org and diebuchmacherei.de. Published before the release of the German version with the consent of the interviewer.

1. How can we imagine everyday life in Kharkiv at the moment? By everyday life I don't mean your political work, which I'll come to in a moment, but the day-to-day life of a normal worker. Is there still work, how well can you live from it at the moment? How is the welfare state and its infrastructure, is there unemployment benefit and enough medical care? Do people sometimes sit in cafes and bars and talk about something, is there anyone left to talk to – or is everything completely subsumed under the war or reduced to the bare essentials?

– This is such a voluminous question that a separate conversation can be devoted to it. In very general terms, on the eve of the New Year we published a large analysis of the prospects for 2024, where we called it a decisive year for the maturation of a revolutionary situation that will make it possible to turn the war of states into a war against them. It is available in Russian, English, French, Italian and Spanish. As for our city specifically... If Ukraine is the backyard of Europe, then Kharkov, located almost on the Russian border, is the backyard of Ukraine. People here live either out of love for thrills, or out of complete hopelessness. A prison where lights out at 9 pm, roughly speaking. If in 2020, according to then-mayor Kernes, the average age in Kharkov was 35 years old, then at the beginning of a full-scale war there were mostly pensioners, and now the average age of the population is about 50. Although this is only a visual impression of public places, because men of conscription age (in Ukraine it is from 18 to 60 years, and leaving of the country is prohibited for most of them) often do not risk leaving the house and try to move along the streets only by car. Depression, alcoholism and complete sadness. The ship has been at the bottom already for a long time, but the passengers have locked themselves in their cabins and think that there will be enough air until someone saves them...

A positive thing: utility services in Kharkov are provided normally; if there were any outages this winter, they were for no more than a few hours due to technical faults. Electricity, gas, heating – everything is there. Russian troops are now bombing not power plants, but what they consider to be military enterprises, warehouses or places of deployment of personnel. Officially, there are now 1.2-1.4 million people in the city, out of an estimated 2 million before the full-scale invasion.

But this is largely due to immigrants from more front-line territories. How many locals remain is unknown. In addition to this, the Kharkov region is in third place in Ukraine in terms of area of arable land, and at the end of 2023 it was the absolute leader of the country in terms of its sale. The disappearance of the population is quite beneficial for part of the bourgeois class.

One can also only guess about the real situation with unemployment, because many do not want to register in job centers for fear of being drafted. But half-year ago we published an article about how women and pensioners are replacing men liable for military service at Kharkov enterprises due to mobilization. The parallels with Western Europe during the First World War are perhaps obvious. Despite this, as noted in our January material about mobilization kidnapping in Kharkov, there is a severe shortage of workers in many areas of the economy. If this continues, then the only public transport in the city will remain “buses of invincibility,” as people call cars for catching passers-by (a reference to the cliché “Invincible Kharkiv” from officious propaganda). Due in part to increased insecurity on the streets, coupled with decreased donations, our group has had to refocus its efforts this winter from providing humanitarian aid to residents in need to developing media activity. We do not want to change the look of the website – connection here is often bad, and with a more complex design it may be difficult for our local readers to open it. Rather, we will focus on improving the quality of content and involving more audience. To support this you are welcome to join our fundraising Mutual Aid Alert for East Ukraine.

Among other things, on the evening of February 9th, Russian drones attacked an oil depot in the middle of private housing sector in our city. That enterprise has already been minimally fined twice for violating fire regulations, but it seems no measures have been taken. Burning fuel spilled throughout the area, causing two families with three small children to burn alive, and at least four rivers got blackened by oil products. Our team joined the fighting of this environmental disaster, searching the coastal bush for wild birds stained or poisoned by oil.

2. The Ukrainian military is currently running out of soldiers. A new law on recruitment has therefore been passed. Men of military age who receive a notification must report back within 48 hours and will then be drafted. But morale seems to be exhausted. You have reported in your last article on numerous protest actions directed against the continuation of the war, e.g. women protested in numerous cities for the release of their husbands from the military. How do you assess the current mood of Ukrainian women and their attitude towards a continuation of the war? Is the mood in Ukraine changing?

– There are also no exact figures about what Ukrainian women think, because many are afraid to express their real view in opinion polls. Even among those of them whose male relatives are fighting, the opinions are directly opposite – somebody want the maximum tightening of mobilization so that everyone else suffers in the same way like they (just as someone who does not have the strength to get out of a quagmire tries to drag others into it). Others, on the contrary, want an immediate end to hostilities through peace negotiations of just freezing.

It is noteworthy that while in Kharkov talking about collective defense from pixel Sonderkommandos remains just talking, in Transcarpathia this began to come real: women there begin to resist their raids. That is, the situation in different parts of Ukraine is largely different. Firstly, Uzhgorod is a relatively small city, and those living there are not as alienated from each other as in a metropolis, where many do not even know their neighbors on the landing. Secondly, the Transcarpathian population is not exhausted by chronic stress from shelling and curfew; there is a vibrant economic life there, with businesses and money flowing in from all over the country. Moreover, in the westernmost region there is no such pressing feeling that “rocking the boat”

indirectly plays into the hands of the aggressor, as near the Russian border. In other words, if in 1917 Kharkov was at the forefront of the class struggle as a rear industrial hub, and the west of Ukraine was devastated by the war, now everything is exactly the opposite.

3. From the very beginning, your political work and agitation was strongly focused on facilitating desertion and anti-war boycotts. How has this work changed in the last year?

– Not really. The Assembly is an online newsletter, and if we can help the deserters in any way, then only by giving them a political justification for their acts, so that they do not suffer from remorse, but are proud of their refusal to choose between serving either Vladolf Putler or François Zevalier, personifications of the darkest reaction that only possible in today’s Europe, refusal to choose between the occupying colonial expedition and the defense of what has been grabbed by the Ukrainian ruling class since 1991. Help to deserters is being provided by the Russian liberal initiative Go to the Forest, which has dozens of volunteers and much more experienced organizers than us (By the way, the number of requests to them is growing rapidly: if for the entire 2023 they gave 727 consultations on desertion issues and provided assistance in this matter 235 times, in January 2024 alone – already 161 consultations and 35 assistance provisions, at that such stories usually take place precisely in borderland of our region with Donbass, where the majority of Russian mobilized soldiers serve). We are in contact with them and share their information, but it is impossible to do the same in Ukraine due to the much smaller size of the country (that means a higher likelihood of catching the one who has escaped from a unit) and a ban on departure even for men who are not serving in the army. That’s why we only strive to become some kind of ideological core for those who do not want to fight (not only military but also civilians), in order that this is not just a manifestation for their self-preservation instinct, but a conscious position – disagreement to kill and to die for other’s villas and yachts. Even adherents of pro-Ukrainian positions already often understand that there are no other options: last year convincingly showed that if Russian troops do not leave the occupied territories themselves, the Ukrainian army also will not be able to drive them out, so this will yield nothing except meaningless disposal people. Since there is no reason to believe that the Kremlin is preparing to surrender them, hope remains for processes from below. Soldiers should understand that the real enemy is not on the other side of the trenches, but on the other side of the fence around the administrative buildings.

Until the Russian army collapses from the within, passive resistance will probably prevail in Ukraine – the desire to remain as little as possible in the state’s field of view, the withdrawal of assets abroad, flight from the country by any remaining ways. According to NBU estimates, the amount of transfers from those traveling abroad, which used to be one of the main channels for the influx of currency into the country, is decreasing. If in 2021 it was \$14 billion, then in 2022 it became \$12.5 billion, and in 11 months of last year – \$10.6 billion. At the same time, after the start of a full-scale war, the outflow of funds from Ukrainian bank cards in the “travel” category increased significantly: \$20 billion the year before and \$18 billion last year. Every public tirade of professional patriots like “everyone should fight, but I’m more needed in my warm place” only strengthens the desire to break with this country as quickly as possible. However, a real civil war has started on Ukrainian social networks for the last half-year now between the conditional parties of “defenders” and “evaders,” comparable in severity to the events of 1919 in Germany. Time will tell whether it will go offline after the active stage of hostilities with Russia ceases, but steps must be taken now to ensure that this is a fight for a new vision of the future, and not a primitive settling of personal scores.

By the way, individual acts of “spontaneous black terror” already take place in Ukraine, although the anarchist movement still exists virtually. In addition to the episodes from this autumn survey, we recorded another case in Zhashkiv of the Cherkassy region: on the night of December 25th, some unknown person threw an F-1 grenade into the private yard of some enlistment serviceman; its fragments damaged a fence and a gas pipe. And on February 8th, an unemployed 33-year-old resident of Nikopol shot dead the deputy mayor in his car on suspicion of corruption. The investigation claims that he also was preparing attempts on other city officials. From our point of view, such desperate steps do not pose a threat to the system as a whole. This is only an indicator of growing tension in society. Just imagine that your neighbor (Russia) set fire to your house, you or someone from your family is inside, and outside, someone who lives off your taxes, at gunpoint, forbids to get out and demands to burn down along with the house. Did you imagine? This is the relationship between the people and the state in Ukraine...

4. In the previous interview, you wrote that many people made use of your structures, but that there was hardly any politicization. Has anything changed in this respect?

– Yes, many people actually contacted us through the contact form on the website and emailed their needs for food or medicine, after which we tried to help them. But such informal aid networks at the beginning of a full-scale war spanned the entire region. The Assembly was not something unique, but only one of many pieces of the puzzle. Now the population is indeed gradually becoming politicized, however not on the basis of horizontal self-organization but on the basis of dissatisfaction with the acts and plans at the top. On February 7th, the draconian bill to tighten mobilization was adopted in the first reading. We cannot know what changes will be then made to it, the only clear thing is that this will not help the agonizing regime. If parliamentarians and the President’s Office nevertheless push through the adoption of this bill, the critical mass of dissatisfied people will not disappear anywhere, but will only become even more embittered. All the same, hardly anybody will go to fight for them except those who will be thrown onto a bus on the streets!

5. In addition to the measures to recruit new soldiers, the Zelenskyi government took other authoritarian measures last year. For example, elections were suspended for the duration of the war. Is political work still possible at all under these conditions or do you have to work under conditions of clandestinity? How is the Ukrainian population reacting to these government measures?

– It’s true. Russian strikes on December 29th against a number of cities, including Kharkov, and a Ukrainian attack the next day on Belgorod, which cost the lives of dozens of civilians on each side, stopped the growing trend in the fall towards the gradual fading and curtailment of hostilities. Despite this, bills 10378 and 10379 on tightening mobilization and responsibility for draft dodgers, introduced into the Ukrainian parliament on December 25th to ensure the recruitment of approximately 500 thousand recruits, blew up the information field. It has demonstrated that a critical mass of those tired of the militaristic frenzy has already formed in the country: for too many, it no longer makes a fundamental difference under what flag they will be robbed. This dull hopeless despair, on the one hand, paralyzes the will to any social activity, on the other hand, it can make the people wonder how to do that no one robs them at all. It is for this reason that we say that a revolutionary situation is approaching.

The October thesis of the Assembly that men of conscription age will have to sever contacts with the state as much as possible and go into the gray zone came to the center of the national agenda: the whole country started talking about massive withdrawal of funds from bank cards,

transferring property to non-conscripted family members and other panicky things. You probably know the words of Erich Maria Remarque that those who most want to fight are those who will not end up in the war. However, with the decline in trust and loyalty to all state institutions that occurred in this half-year after the failure of summer counter-offensive, the cornerstone of the current policy – “reaching the 1991 borders” – got being opposed not only the silent majority but even part of the passionate minority. The electorate of the war until victorious end (that still exists among women, emigrants, pensioners and men with various deferments) is being pulled over by the chocolate king who wants to return to the presidency again, so the support of the Ze-gang this year will remain the repressive and bureaucratic vertical, and only as long as there is money to pay them.

6. The role of right-wing groups within the Ukrainian state and military apparatus in particular is repeatedly emphasized. How has this spectrum developed over the past year? Is there a consolidation or even an expansion of power of these structures as a result of the ongoing war?

– At the moment, we do not see any signs of an increase in the influence of right-wing ideologies and movements in Ukraine compared to 2022. We can only say that they are behaving more aggressively in terms of rhetoric, feeling that their time is running out, and trying to compensate in this way reducing of own ranks. The growth of their influence in the future is also doubtful, given that 30 years of dominance of the right-wing political spectrum have brought nothing to the country except devastation, death and emigration. At the same time, the far-right can exploit any popular sentiment to their advantage – in Western countries this became evident during the coronavirus quarantine, when their rhetoric sometimes resembled anarchists and leftists. Therefore, it is by no means excluded that we will still see attempts by some of them to oppose the war as “a conspiracy to destroy the Slavic peoples by the hands of each other.” Anything is possible, especially with such a level of anti-Semitism as in Eastern Europe.

7. What is the situation within Ukraine’s ruling class and politics? What shifts in power have been observed over the past year? Can you comment on this?

– In short, the ruling class of Ukraine is in a political crisis and is divided into two conditional factions: Ze and Za. As you know, on February 8, the president dismissed the commander-in-chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. Such a scandalous decision regarding a popular general during the war had its own forced reasons. With the onset of a vacuum of legitimacy of power after the end of the official powers of the president at the end of March 2024, Zaluzhnyi can become his main competitor in the fight for this post. And in his role as acting commander-in-chief, he has more opportunities for such a fight than in retirement. Therefore, despite the inevitable scandal from this decision, the President’s Office wants to carry it out until the end of the legal term. As for the rumors circulating about the possibility of a military coup in this case, it can be assumed that the Office bet on the deterrent factor of the Russian threat worked: Russia could take advantage of the coup and the temporary loss of control of the army to break through the front and seize new territories, so the Western allies could not allow such a scenario. And after the removal of the commander-in-chief without the threat of a coup, the usual political intrigues began, in which the current government is experienced and has a great chance of winning. In short, the country until recently resembled Latin America of the last century: at the crossroads between civilian officials trying to build a military dictatorship, and simply a military dictatorship. And for now, the first option has won.

8. Are you in contact with other left-wing and revolutionary groups? In the August 2022 interview, you painted a rather bleak picture of an anarchist left almost completely absorbed by the war. Have there been any resurgences of groups or have they really been mutilated beyond recognition by the war?

– Since last year, we cooperate with two leftist projects appeared in Ukraine – the Organization of Students Activists (OSA) and the news channel NMOdessa (something like “Don’t Keep Silence Odessa”). OSA operates in several cities, including Kharkov, and at the end of December, thanks to their action for which we provided media coverage, the deprivation of scholarships to many students of the Kharkov Polytechnic Institute was canceled. You can read about this in Russian, English and French (the report also tells how our pressure helped return the tram line to the Kharkov downtown the same month). The second ones in September were among the first to respond to the torture by mobilizers of two men from Kharkov and Krivoy Rog, who were detained while trying to cross the border with Poland. Thanks to the scandal that arose, a criminal case was opened against those involved and recently went to the court (see about this in Russian or in English). Now this channel distributes free pepper sprays in Odessa for self-defense against military kidnapping teams.

Both initiatives do not consider themselves anarchists; moreover, while the OSA positively assesses the Maidan obscurantist coup of 2014, NMO sometimes post Anti-Maidan fables from Kremlin propaganda despite their own characterizing the Russian state as fascist (and even more mature fascism than the Ukrainian one). Therefore, we are not completely same-minded ones. However, the emergence of such groups shows that outright social chauvinism and militarism in Ukrainian left-wing circles are no longer a trend, and the demand for it on the public agenda is becoming a thing of the past. This means that the Assembly’s ideas enter into the broad masses consciousness and our work is not in vain!

9. At the end of the interview with the Italian comrades in 2022, you were asked what you would like to say to Italian-speaking readers. Now you are conducting a conversation for a book with a Berlin publisher. Is there anything you would like to tell the German-speaking readers from Kharkiv?

– Okay. Germany is now becoming the most popular country for Ukrainian refugees. Ukraine is such a “free country” that its authorities consider all people with a Ukrainian passport to be their personal property in the most literal sense of this word. Therefore, they, as slave owners, have the exclusive right to earn money from them and exploit them. If they went abroad, this is a loss for the owners, and they want either compensation in their pocket, or the return of the slaves back to the stable. Something similar happened in the 19th century before the US Civil War (Again, this comparison is not rhetorical but literal: escaping to the EU across the icy Tisza differs from the escape across the winter Ohio River in the novel Uncle Tom’s Cabin only in the using of drones and thermal imagers by the pursuers, and already 20 guys have already died during such attempts in this river (two weeks ago, along with this, our compatriot from the Kharkov region drowned in the border river Prut, as reported the State Border Guard Service of Ukraine). Slaves fled from the South to the North, and slave owners demanded either to return the fugitives back or to pay money for them – and here the head of state is now calling on Germany to transfer him funds allocated for social support to Ukrainian refugees (his recent interview to ARD you can find without us). Naturally, with every statement by him or representatives of his gang that men who left the country during the war should be deported back or their standard of living in Europe should be lowered to Ukrainian standards, more and more refugees want to settle down

in new place. This, in turn, opens up the opportunity of their integration into the revolutionary movement of the host country – after all, it is now very difficult for Ukrainians to have the illusion that the state interests are identical to the interests of working people. Take advantage of this opportunity and let's actively exchange experiences with each other!

To do this, we are going to participate in the International Week of Action, to take place in Prague on May 20-26. We invite everyone interested to join, although the form of our participation is still unknown (no one knows what will happen tomorrow). Everyone who reads this interview and thinks like us – you are in the same ranks with us, because we work thanks to you and for people like you, in these dark times of widespread apathy and hopelessness.

Thank you for everything and let's not turn off the chosen path! To Anarchy!

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