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‘In Ukraine, as in Rojava, we have a defensive war provoked by the other side’

Enguerran Carrier

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Having previously worked as a translator and historian, Enguerran Carrier decided in 2015 to volunteer with the People’s Defense Units (YPG), a mainly-Kurdish militia then engaged in a war to protect Rojava, in Syria’s north and east, from Islamic State (ISIS).

Seven years later, Carrier once again found himself in the middle of an armed conflict, travelling to Ukraine to film *Revolutionaries at War*. The documentary focuses on a volunteer battalion comprised of anarchists, anarcho-communists and socialists from Ukraine and Belarus fighting back against Russia’s invading army and why they chose to take up arms.

Green Left’s Federico Fuentes spoke to Carrier about his motivations for the film and lessons from his experiences in Rojava and Ukraine.

Prior to making this documentary about a left-wing battalion inside the Ukrainian armed forces you

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spent several years volunteering with the YPG. What motivated you to go to Rojava?

Soon after the battle of Kobanê in early 2015, the YPG made a public appeal for volunteers to join their ranks. The creation of a specifically leftist unit, later in 2015, motivated me to join them.

For the first time in many years, an opportunity was given to leftists to not only observe, but to directly take part in a revolution and in a war. I thought that European leftists, who are a minority in their own countries, should go to Syria to learn from a movement that had managed to “take power”.

On the surface, Rojava and Ukraine appear to be completely different situations. On one hand, you have an armed resistance led by leftists. On the other hand, you have an official state and an armed forces often known mostly for the fascist Azov battalion. Why did you decide to go to Ukraine to make *Revolutionaries at War*?

Many reasons brought me to Ukraine when the war broke out

I feel the task of any leftist is not to post a comment on Facebook based on information collected from the internet. When photos started circulating of an anarchist unit fighting in Ukraine, I wanted to see for myself what it was all about, because I knew from experience that most anarchist or leftist units in Rojava have never existed anywhere other than on Facebook.

My objective was simple: to make the voices of those most affected heard by asking them directly the questions I kept hearing in France: “Why would you fight for a semi-mafia state?”, “Isn’t this just a proxy war?”, “How could you fight alongside the far-right Azov Battalion?”.

The arguments of those who are sometimes called “NATO anarchists” are worth listening to, regardless of what you think of them.

Based on your experiences, what would you say are the commonalities and differences between the struggles in Ukraine and Rojava?

In both cases, these are defensive wars provoked by the other side. And, in both cases, the people largely support the forces that are defending them against the enemy, whatever their political opinions are.

In Rojava, many joined or gave support to the YPG, even if they were opposed to the PYD [the Democratic Union Party, a Kurdish left party in government in Rojava] or to Apoism [the ideology of Kurdish leader Abdullah Öcalan, which PYD follows], just because they were the only military force capable of defeating the Free Syrian Army and Daesh [ISIS].

In Ukraine, many opponents of President Volodymyr Zelensky and his party have joined or given support to the Ukrainian Armed Forces because nobody else can currently defend the country from Russia's invading forces.

The main difference, among many, is that in Rojava the war was caused by a social and national revolution, while this was not the case in Ukraine.

According to the militants I interviewed in Ukraine, some believe that the war will give birth to, probably not a revolution, but at least some radical changes in Ukraine. And, in fact, it is hard to imagine that the established order in Ukraine could survive a war such as this intact.

The hunger for real changes, the sentiment against corruption, against the oligarchy, against lawlessness, is something that is very tangible. It will be interesting, if such changes happen, to see how the West will react to them.

One complex issue for the left in both these struggles has been the involvement of outside powers in the conflict. Sometimes this has led to unexpected alliances, such as the one between the YPG and the United States, or the military support provided to Ukraine by the West.

Was this an issue you discussed with leftists engaged in these struggles? How did they view this question?

Of course this issue has been discussed in both cases. But we must underline that in Rojava, leftists are in power, so it is an issue that is being discussed by the ones heading the army and the country.

The question of the involvement of foreign powers has also been discussed by the left in Ukraine, in particular the possibility that the US and Europe will seek to “bargain” with Russia once the war is over, at the expense of the Ukrainian people.

But we must be careful to avoid any hasty parallels between the powers present in Ukraine. One cannot compare Russia’s direct involvement in the war with that of NATO, because, while the latter is spending billions to support Ukraine, the pretext for this has been provided to them by Russia’s invasion.

Moreover, their support for Ukraine was belated: the first reaction of the US was to offer Zelensky help to flee the country. NATO has never cared about “defending” Ukraine — its support is only about defeating and weakening Russia.

Most Ukrainian leftists do not understand why the left in Europe mechanically puts NATO and Russia on an equal footing. By making NATO co-responsible for the war, Russia is cleared of its undeniable responsibility.

It is not naive to write this: Russia was not responsible for the 2003 invasion of Iraq, or for France’s intervention in Chad. But, at the same time, neither the French state nor NATO provoked the war in Ukraine.

The fact that some leftists in Europe openly oppose the delivery of arms inspires even more disgust among Ukrainian leftists. These are the same people who confine themselves to on-line activism while never participating in any concrete action of solidarity with the Ukrainian people.

Paradoxically, while the YPG are carriers of an emancipatory social project, they seem much more dependent, for their

immediate survival, on US support than Ukraine. Ukraine is a recognised state, with a professional armed forces and significant industrial and economic potential, whereas the YPG is, from the point of view of the US, simply an unrecognised “non-state actor”.

Finally, what is the message you hope to convey through your documentary to leftists outside Ukraine?

We, in Europe, have gotten used to carrying out our activism amid conditions of peace for many decades now. War, military questions — both theoretical and practical — have completely disappeared from our reflections and discussions.

We need to be aware that this can change very quickly or otherwise we may find ourselves powerless when anything unexpected happens, such as occurred in Ukraine.

To put it simply: We need to look at how the Ukrainian left, although much less numerous and much less organised than leftist forces elsewhere, reacted to a situation of war.

These militants did not flee. They have not confined themselves to the role of passive commentators, nor do they indulge in a pampered marginality.

They are taking part in the battle, as an ultra-minority, without hiding any of their ideas or their objectives.

Hopefully, other leftists will do the same when the quiet circumstances in which they currently carry out their activism comes to an abrupt end.