

“Pacifism is a privilege”

Ukrainian leftists at war

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Many leftists in the West oppose the supply of weapons to Ukraine and call for reconciliation with the aggressor. At the same time, the Ukrainian left is defending its country at the front.

“Died on the outskirts of Balakliya, Kharkiv region,” reads the inscription on the grave of First Lieutenant Yuriy Samoilenko, buried in Obukhiv, Kyiv region. The photo shows a young man with a confident look, he was 34 years old.

“He was a man with a subcultural background, from the anti-fascist community. At the same time, he was very erudite,” Yuriy’s fellow combat medic with the call sign “Lesyk” recalls, sitting in front of the grave. — He believed that a big war was inevitable. First, he served in the ATO, then studied at the Defence University. He received a military speciality and an officer’s rank. He decided to connect his life with the army.”

When Russia started a full-scale war against Ukraine, Samoilenko served in one of the territorial defence brigades in Kyiv region. Several dozen of his friends from the left-wing community, including Lesyk, joined the brigade to fight under his command. They called themselves the “Resistance Committee”, an informal group of left-wing fighters founded on the eve of the invasion. Samoilenko organised military training for them and planned to create a separate unit.

“It was an attempt to gather all kinds of left-wing activists in one military unit,” Lesyk says. However, due to bureaucratic obstacles, it was not possible to register this unit, so the fighters went to other brigades, where they continue to fight in all parts of the frontline. “Lesyk” remained in the territorial defence. As a combat medic, he took part in the battles in Sievierodonetsk, Lysychansk and Bakhmut.

“The Russian regime is close to fascism”

“In post-Soviet countries, there are rarely political parties or groups that can be classified as left or right — everything is mixed,” Lesyk reflects. — “And it turns out that for 30 years the left-wing parties, which were usually called ‘communist’, were the successors of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. They used this name and its symbols, but in fact they were parties with a right-wing conservative view. This is why there is a stereotype that the left is Russian imperialists. But there is nothing more organic for the left than overcoming imperialism.”

Like Samoilenko and the rest of his comrades, Lesyk calls himself an anti-authoritarian fighter because he holds leftist views. “I believe that our society will be more harmonious if we have more participatory democracy, if material and cultural goods are distributed more evenly. I also think that historical processes are largely dependent on technology, large companies or groups of people. These views can probably be called socialist,” explains Lesyk.

He was involved in left-wing anti-fascist groups, organisations and trade unions. One of the areas of activity was the labour rights of precariously employed workers. “Lesyk” agrees that there are many stereotypes surrounding the left. “For example, that the ideal of the left is the Soviet Union and, accordingly, the modern left wants to restore it,” he says. — “This is, of course, not true. During the last century, it was the left that provided the most profound and systematic criticism of Soviet experiments. To have fewer stereotypes, we need to understand.”

“Lesyk is from Kyiv, and in civilian life he worked as a medical equipment engineer. He went to war for the first time in 2014. He joined a volunteer medical unit and evacuated the wounded. He was awarded the Order for Courage, third class.” On Maidan and at the beginning of the war,

I strengthened my left-wing views. I realised that this is not some local internal conflict between Maidan and Anti-Maidan, which does not accept the new government, but a new, more open and aggressive stage of encroachment by Russian imperialism,” Lesyk explains.

After a year of service, he returned to civilian life, but continued to work as a medical instructor on a volunteer basis. When the full-scale invasion began, he rejoined the army. “The Russian regime is a far-right regime. It is very close to fascism. I was absolutely sure that if Kyiv was occupied, we would just be shot, and I thought that I had a better chance with weapons in my hands. In addition, I believe that history is largely created not by heroes and leaders, but by ordinary people. So it would be wrong to stand aside,” Lesyk says. According to him, Ukrainian left-wing fighters have been assisted by their colleagues from Europe since the first days. These are separate organisations from Poland, Germany and Spain. Their aid is collected and delivered to the military by representatives of the Ukrainian left-wing organisation Solidarity Collectives.

“The army has its advantages – I know what to do in most situations,” Lesyk reflects. – “It’s hard for me to think about the future, but one way or another, I will have to influence changes in society. After all, after the victory, we will face extremely difficult social problems – the need to mobilise for reconstruction and overcome depopulation. To do this, we need a reconstruction programme that meets the interests of the majority of Ukrainians, not just certain financial and industrial groups. For Ukraine to continue its truly subjective existence after the war, we need social democracy,” he said.

“I set the tone for the discussion among the Western left”

Whether the Ukrainian left will have a political future after the war depends on how it ends, says left-wing activist Taras Bilous. He currently serves as a liaison officer in the Kharkiv region. “If Ukraine loses or is forced to make some painful compromise, there will be total conflicts about who is to blame. In this situation, I think we will have few prospects. After all, people in Ukraine are used to blaming the left for everything,” Taras believes.

He is from Luhansk. “I come from a Ukrainian-speaking, nationalist family – that’s how I was brought up,” he says. After moving to Kyiv to study, the Maidan protests and the outbreak of war in 2014, his views began to change from centre-right to social democratic. “I believe that capitalism is an unfair system and should be replaced by a more egalitarian and democratic one,” Taras explains his views. He joined the editorial board of the left-wing magazine Spilne and the labour rights organisation Social Movement.

The Kyiv leftist community was preparing for a full-scale war, Taras says. He attended one of its meetings and decided to join a volunteer group that would help volunteers and refugees. But when the invasion began, he changed his mind. “It took me one day,” he says. – “One of the reasons why I didn’t want to serve at first was that I suspected I wouldn’t make a good soldier. And, to be honest, after a year and a half of service, I’m inclined to say that I am. But I realised that I simply had no choice.”

He was inspired by like-minded people – a whole group of anarchists went to war. Another friend returned from Poland, where he had been working. Taras joined the territorial defence, but later he was transferred to another brigade. It took him a while to get recruited, and he used this time to discuss with Western leftists who took a pacifist or openly pro-Russian stance. He gave interviews, published articles and provoked discussions on social media.

“I was offered to write an article for Jacobin, a well-known American left-wing magazine that took an inadequate stance on the war, and on the eve of the invasion, published complete nonsense. And they offered to write about how the Ukrainian left was experiencing the invasion,” Taras recalls with indignation. — “I said I was ready to write what I thought about their previous publications.

In the end, the magazine refused to publish his article, arguing that criticising the left was inappropriate. Taras published his text with the title “A Letter to the Western Left from Kyiv” in the British publication *openDemocracy*. In it, he thanked the leftists who support Ukrainians and addressed “the other part of the Western left” — “those who imagined ‘NATO aggression in Ukraine’ and did not see Russian aggression”, “who criticised Ukraine for not fulfilling the Minsk agreements and kept silent about their violation by Russia and the so-called ‘people’s republics’;” “who exaggerated the influence of the far-right in Ukraine, but did not notice the far-right in the ‘people’s republics’ and avoided criticising Putin’s conservative, nationalist and authoritarian policies”.

“Many people started writing to me and thanking me. My opponents also acknowledged that to some extent I had set the tone for the discussion among the Western left,” says Taras. — “Now, looking back, I think that if we could have convinced anyone, it was in the first months. Then, in the autumn of last year, I realised that everyone had already formed their position. It’s harder to influence someone with words,” admits Taras. He believes that many Western radical leftists still hold pacifist or pro-Russian views.

“Duty is more important than desire”

Pacifism is a privilege, says Anna Zyablikova, a self-described anarcho-feminist who is currently serving in the Zaporizhzhia sector as a rifleman and medic in a medical evacuation crew. “You can be a very good person and follow all the rules, but a Russian missile will still hit you. And it’s hard for them to understand,” says Anna, referring to the Western left. — “They reject the feeling of powerlessness in the face of military aggression and hide behind pacifism: ‘war is bad’. We in Ukraine don’t like war either! We don’t like the fact that people are dying. I don’t like that I had to give up my career dreams. But I can’t give it up. I cannot afford to hide in pacifism.”

Anna is from Kharkiv. “Back on the Maidan, I felt more comfortable among students with left-wing views. After all, the right-wing subculture is about being closer to the ideal. Because I didn’t like this rhetoric, I wanted something opposite, and anarchism became my ideal. And because I’m a woman, I wanted to have a voice, so it became anarcho-feminism,” explains Anna. In the summer of 2014, she joined a squat, a social and cultural centre set up in an abandoned building in the centre of Kharkiv. It was inhabited mainly by left-wing activists who had moved from the occupied Donbas and Crimea.

When the full-scale war broke out, Anna was at university in Belgium, studying tropical ecology and biodiversity, and researching bats. But it was hard for Anna to stay abroad. She was outraged by the pacifist statements of some Europeans, including the leftists with whom she had connections. So at the end of last spring, she left her studies and returned home.

“I came back to find myself in this war. I came in slowly, like in water. First I came to Lviv. I thought I would have panic attacks just from the sirens — I was so scared. I expected very little from myself,” Anna admits. — “But I just felt that I was better off in Ukraine. If I stay, I have to

join the organised resistance.” For a while, she volunteered in Lviv, then in Kharkiv. Finally, she decided to apply to one of the combat brigades. And she did — first to the headquarters, then to a medical evacuation.

Before the full-scale war, Anna was an activist of the LGBT movement, participating in the organisation of equality marches. She is now part of the LGBT military community of about 300 people. However, in the spring of this year, Anna was expelled from the organising committee of Kharkiv Pride because she did not support a public statement made by one of the movement’s leaders. The latter spoke out against the renaming of a street in Kharkiv in honour of the fallen soldier and leader of the nationalist organisation Frykor, Heorhiy Tarasenko. This organisation has been obstructing equality marches in Kharkiv and, according to LGBT activists, has attacked them.

“I just have a different attitude to the politics of memory now, because I am close to death,” explains Anna. — “And in order to function properly in this, I need some fairy tales — the belief that when I die, there will be a plaque on my school about me, who died heroically in the war. And I don’t want the right-wing to come and knock that plaque down because I am LGBT. I also don’t want LGBT people to organise similar protests. I also have a Frykor activist in my company. When I told him that I was against that statement, he replied: it’s not important now, what’s important now is this — and pointed to a working map of our medrota for evacuating the wounded. And that’s how it should be.”

Anna believes that the full-scale war has not affected her political views. However, she has noticed some changes in herself. “I began to consider the duty to be useful in this war more important than my own desires,” she says, recalling how in 2015 she used to go to military enlistment offices to “get” her friends who had been called up for service. “I wouldn’t do that now,” Anna laughs.

“I understand all the problems of conscription. I understand that some people give bribes, and some people are called up because they are crooked or slanted. But I don’t know any other mechanism to make sure that the army has enough human resources,” says Anna. — “I see people around me who are not made for war. And I am not made for war. And those who come to me in medevac. They did not want to step on a mine, to come under fire. And they did not want to die. But in order to prevent this zone of pain and death from spreading, we need to resist. And this requires people. These are not rockets or ammunition. This is something that no one will send us.”

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