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Four Months in an Anti-Authoritarian Platoon in Ukraine

Ilya Leshiy

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“Ilya Leshiy” has been identified as Dmitry Petrov, who died fighting in the Battle of Bakhmut on 19 April 2023.

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piers. We all came here as volunteers willing to contribute to the fight. After more than four months with almost no engagement in action, it really harms the spirit and self-evaluation. It produces alienation from the activity we are part of here.

As for me, I am hardly a war-like person. However, the current situation calls out to participate both personally and collectively. It can open the way forward. On the rare occasions when I have visited Kyiv over the past months, I see a careless chilling atmosphere. As if there is no brutal war several hundred kilometers away that is taking the lives of many of the inhabitants of this city daily. I understand that people need to rest, to relax and please themselves a little bit. Still, this situation creates a deep feeling of dissonance. And the more time we spend stuck here in the deep rear, the more of a demobilizing effect it has on us, the more it alienates us from the purposes and cause that originally brought us together here.

At the same time, experienced comrades say that war is comprised of very different phases and situations. Being in combat itself takes 1% or less of the total time. The ability to wait, to be patient and manage the “dead time” is a useful skill for any partisan to develop and internalize.

Finishing this text, I want to stress that the story of this platoon is already unprecedented for the anti-authoritarian circles of Eastern Europe. Despite all the unavoidable shortcomings, I believe it has great potential for development and almost definitely there will be more interesting news from it. The structure which we have been able to form and the collective studying of military skills both represent important experiences.

With all the comradely critiques expressed above, still I want to affirm my respect and positive attitude towards my comrades-in-arms.

-Ilya “Leshiy” and friends,
July 2022

This article was written in the first part of July. Now the anti-authoritarian platoon has moved forward. It transferred to the new unit, where it will recover trainings, recruitment, and, after the required preparation, it is promised that it will be moved to battle. This is the moment for conclusions after the first phase of the existence of the platoon—in the frame of territorial defense of Kyiv oblast.

The anti-authoritarian platoon is the unofficial name for a unit in one of the brigades of the Territorial Defense Forces (TDF) of Ukraine in the Kyiv oblast. It came into being when anarchists and leftists of different backgrounds and groups, including anti-fascists and football hooligans, came together during the earliest stages of the war to participate in a fight against the imperialist invasion carried out by Putin’s regime.

The unit has existed for more than four months now—since the first day of the war. This is a good time to reflect and offer some analysis on how it has been going.

A couple of months before the war, alarming rumors began to circulate. At that moment, in the libertarian community of Kyiv, we started to discuss how anarchists should conduct themselves if the threat of full-scale war became reality. Very few people believed that it would really happen. In that period, we developed the idea that we would need both military and civilian branches. We had several meetings; we also reached agreement with a comrade from the TDF and had a couple of trainings with him. One comrade prepared social media accounts. All our preparations were rudimentary. However, on “day X” [the first day of the invasion], we just started to follow this framework, and it helped really a lot. Operation Solidarity, the anti-authoritarian platoon, and the Resistance Committee—perhaps the most visible examples of libertarian activity during this war—are all, to a great extent, the results of this preparation process. This shows the importance of planning and developing scenarios for how you will act in different possible situations.

Comrades have asked me, “*What if we could rewind back to 2020 with knowledge about today’s situation? What would we do differently?*” I think we would just spend more time, energy, and attention on forming more sustainable and more numerous groups, making connections and relationships, collecting money and preparing resources, education, skill-sharing, propaganda, and strategic analysis. But you will never have enough of any of those things. Your readiness for mobilization is equally important. From my current position, I would dare to advise comrades worldwide to plan, organize, and act as if it is already the final countdown and you will face a major historic challenge next month. In the current stage of history, this is always possible, so don’t be caught by surprise, ill-prepared.

Bureaucracy, Military Order...

I think I won’t be giving away any military secrets if I say that this unit has been in a prolonged search for a place in the structure of the army. It is looking for an option to join the fighting on the front line, to restore its ability to carry out recruitment and systematic training, as well as to solve some bureaucratic problems related to the registration of the fighters. We could call this a “transition period,” but it has lasted for about three months now, so it looks more like one of the stages of our existence.

The limbo we find ourselves in now raises the question of military bureaucracy that we unavoidably have to face as part of the armed forces. First of all, we need to clarify the nature of TDF. It differs from the normal army in that it is comprised chiefly of volunteers and on a local basis. In general, the TDF is considered less professional, more of an auxiliary force. At the same time, it has the same military hierarchy, rules, and habits of the higher command.

Obviously, taking a place in a vertical hierarchy is problematic from an anti-authoritarian perspective. However, we consciously

responsibility lies on our shoulders, because the atmosphere created in the collective is probably not very accessible for women. Our two comrades also had a critique regarding this—for example, that sometimes they had to shout and interrupt to be heard. On the other hand, some participants criticized the low integration of our non-male comrades into the daily routine of the platoon and the collective in general, regardless of their gender identity.

When I discuss all this with my close comrade, he says: “*Believe me, this is actually a nice collective; in a “normal” unit, things could be way tougher.*” And actually, I agree with him. All the shortcomings mentioned above should be criticized and addressed, but at the same time, as I evaluate them, they are still kind of moderate. We handle the majority of the challenges of collectivity in much more constructive and less painful ways than could be expected in some “apolitical” or reactionary environment. Recently, one of our friends spent a couple of weeks improving his skills in some of the “normal” territorial defense units of Kyiv oblast. “Guys, we live in paradise here,” he concluded upon returning to our place.

The Political Meaning of the Project

After several discussions in the platoon, we agreed on anti-imperialism and anti-authoritarianism as two main points that define us politically. There is no common political line apart from that. For some guys, this unit is more an option to be involved in this war together with friends and people with similar interests. Others have more far-reaching plans for the platoon as the way to show ourselves to society, to gain experience, and to create some sort of sustainable space for the anti-authoritarian movement to get organized and develop.

One of the main challenges at the moment is to overcome the bureaucratic obstacles, to get an opportunity to get reorganized and finally engage directly in armed resistance against the occu-

Another problem is that from the very beginning, the anti-authoritarian platoon has brought together several groups and individuals from very different background, number, level of “conflictedness,” and tendency towards domination. This provokes additional tension. Sometimes, it seems that it might be more productive for such a close and constant collective to begin with a more homogeneous core from the start. This core would establish some rules and collective culture and integrate newcomers into it.

What fuels conflicts of ambition among us is a certain mindset which is widespread in our circles. This is the mixture of

- disrespect towards hierarchy, to the extent that even the limited power of a person in some narrow field of capability can be denied with arrogance;
- at the same time, here we can find openness and a blind eye towards informal hierarchies based at one time on reputation, personal sympathies, and the like;
- egocentrism and badly taken individualism, which is also contagious because, in the collective where it is broadly present, you can hardly maintain collectivist patterns of behavior.

This mixture creates the ground for continuous tensions.

The problematic of gender and toxic masculinity is definitely also here. I am not sure that I am capable enough to analyze it properly. First of all, our platoon has been 100% male for the most of the time it has existed. We had two non-male paramedic comrades who worked with us for nearly two months. This dramatic imbalance, in my opinion, is chiefly the result of the culture of our circles here, in which women are less present than men and also alienated from activities related to using force. This is hard to address on the level of a single particular project. However, I believe that part of the

took this step. I think everyone in the platoon would agree that participating in the resistance is valuable even if it means temporary inclusion in the framework of the army.

Could we resist the invasion with arms independently from the state army under the current conditions? The answer is definitely no. Most ideas like this are being proposed far away from the country, by people who are cut off from this local context. First of all, there is not enough structure or resources on our side at the moment to seriously apply to form an independent armed force. At the same time, the Ukrainian state has enough force and will to suppress any fully autonomous force. In this situation, non-state guerrilla struggle is possible only in the territories occupied by the Russian army.

However, the most important reason is that the interests of Ukrainian society and the Ukrainian state currently overlap on one point, repelling the brutal invasion, though not on myriad other points. Because of this, any attempt to separately organize resistance doesn't seem to find any understanding from the people at the current time. But we see that the current situation in the Ukrainian armed forces still provides a lot of space for different political groups eager to fight the occupiers.

Since 2014, certain far-right factions have organized and maintained some partly autonomous military units. These are the Right Sector Ukrainian Volunteer Corps (RS-UVC) and its splinter group, Ukrainian Volunteer Army. Unlike the state army, these structures have a certain degree of internal autonomy, a clear ideological affiliation, and are more flexible with recruitment, bureaucracy, etc. However, as far as I know, all the same, they remain under operative command of the Ukrainian Army; and nowadays, at least, the RS-UVC is being transformed into a “more normal” and subordinate military unit.

Let's return to bureaucracy. Initially, our unit had a green light for active development, but then the line of the command of the battalion we belonged to dramatically changed. We appeared stuck

in our battalion, with very few options to invite new comrades into our ranks and the necessity to carry out some merely formal and boring tasks and duties, which damaged both our internal structure, our training process, and our spirit. Participants with foreign citizenship faced additional bureaucratic problems. We also couldn't arrange a proper opportunity to go to the fight as a unit; as of the first days of July, we remain in the rear. However, the situation is not desperate. We work on ways to solve these bureaucratic obstacles.

The collision with the military bureaucracy seems unavoidable in our situation. The lesson of this story is that more contacts and connections you have in the institutions that you want to deal with, the greater will be your chances to overcome or bypass the bureaucracy. In these past months, I have concluded that we, as revolutionaries, should not be squeamish about making contacts within state institutions. As long as we are clear about our political goals, taking risks to use connections to pursue those is more justified than restricting yourself from using the tools that could help the movement to gain ground.

Internal Structure and Life

According to army statutes, every platoon has several officer positions, which were assigned to those who had officer rank. Apart from this, the battalion command has hardly intervened in our internal order at all. We didn't organize our structure according to the idyllic image of a perfectly anarchist militia in which all the positions are elected and subordinate to general meeting. The reason is partly that the unit is constituted of a variety of people, not all of whom are anarchists. The assistants of the platoon commander and the section commanders were assigned by the platoon command.

At the same time, we also implemented certain horizontal institutions. After a proposal from one experienced comrade who came from Europe, we started to practice *teqmil*, critique and self-critique sessions by sections. Deputy commanders of sections were elected. One of their functions was to transmit critiques that exceeded the section level to the platoon command at the commanders' meeting.

After several conflicts related to media activities, the same comrade from Europe suggested that we should elect a media committee. This was approved by the command and done. Every platoon participant could vote, and the committee was formed by the three candidates who received the most votes. All interviews, texts, and photos to publish by platoon participants are to be approved by the media committee, which decides whether they fit norms established by the platoon command (mainly, security and not discrediting the Ukrainian army).

For now, all of these institutions are on pause, as the social microcosm of the unit was damaged by the above-mentioned bureaucratic obstacles and most of participants became tired and depressed as a result.

Of course, informal communication plays just as significant a role as institutional communication. On the one hand, from the very beginning, we developed a sort of democratic culture of very free expression of opinions, questions, and critique of everyone, including the command. On the other hand, there were a lot of hidden power struggles, conflicts of ambitions, and personal conflicts in general. I think that to some extent, this is unavoidable. But in our particular case, I believe it could be handled better.

One of the reasons is just lack of will, lack of effort for community building and resolution of conflicts in a comradely way. Some "old scores" of participants have also played a negative role. At the same time, I know perfectly well that people who are aware of comradely conflict resolution models are often unsuccessful at employing them.