

# **Summer of anarchism in Ljubljana and St.Imier?**

**Personal impression of anarchist events**

Integration Nightmare

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# Contents

Balkan Anarchist Bookfair 2023 . . . . .	3
St. Imier . . . . .	4

This July I managed to visit two big anarchist festivals – Balkan Anarchist Bookfair and Anarchy 2023 in St.Imier. The first event attracted hundreds of activists mostly from the Balkans and Western Europe, while the Swiss festival had more people from outside the EU.

As a lot of things happened, I would like to share my personal experience and criticism of these events from the point of view of the participants. During BAB and St.Imier I had a lot of contacts with comrades from Belarus, Russia and Ukraine to gather some extra information and try to understand how things were developing. The whole text will be primarily focused on coverage of the war in Ukraine and situation in Belarus during those events.

## **Balkan Anarchist Bookfair 2023**

Let's start with a short introduction. Balkan Anarchist Bookfair is an event organized by different parts of the Balkan Anarchist Network. The location of the bookfair is constantly changing between different countries: last year it was organized in Cluj, Romania, this year in Ljubljana, Slovenia.

Depending on the region of the Balkans and the time of the event, it can attract very different people, both politically and geographically. For example, the closeness of Ljubljana to Central European tourist destinations and German-speaking countries attracted a lot of anarchists on holiday and German-speaking activists to the event. This certainly had a certain influence on the discussions that took place during the book fair, sometimes in a good way, sometimes in a bad way, bringing all the baggage of Western European activism to the Balkans.

From the very beginning, the organizers of BAB made their position on the war very clear, equating anti-militarism with a defeatist position in the war in Ukraine. This anti-militarism found a lot of space in the program, with a “main event” on Saturday called “Balkan Anarchists against War” (most of the talks and discussions during BAB had parallel events at the same time, but this was the only one on the program from 16 to 18).

It is hard to say that there was anything new in the panel discussion. Abstract statements about how bad wars are were made in public, where there were no people who would advocate wars. And although the event was supposed to be very theoretical, there were certainly people who had something to say about the war in Ukraine. For example, an activist from Serbia who called for an end to sanctions against Russia and called the 2014 Maidan uprising a coup. The same activist who was seen in a picture together with the Serbian far right under the Russian imperial flag (the full statement of this person can be found here – [bab2023.espivblogs.net](http://bab2023.espivblogs.net)). The event itself ended with not a single comment from the audience allowed in the first place (and later moved outside the main building of BAB for informal discussion).

The general mood was that the comrades organizing the panel discussion were not even interested in the thoughts of the people in the audience, as they already knew everything about the wars and how they affect societies.

It is very interesting how some comrades from the Balkans draw the Yugoslavian war every time the situation in Ukraine comes up. At the same time, they ignore the fact that every war has its own structure, reasons for military conflict and the situation of ordinary people in it. After 17 months of full-scale war in Ukraine, certain groups of anarchists still fail to grasp that there are so many different ways to fight against war. From Russian Z patriots who are shouting that they want this war to stop, that why more troops should be sent, to the Ukrainian workers who

are volunteering to drive the Russian invaders out of their homes. Laying down arms and dying in the cellar after being tortured by the Russian military or political police is only one of the directions we can take as anarchists.

Interestingly, there was little to no Ukrainian presence in the conversations about the war. In fact, in the first days of the bookfair there were rumours that Solidarity collectives were told that there was no place for them in the event (this was later confirmed by some comrades). And this seems to be a systematic approach in the circles that call for stopping arms deliveries to Ukraine and support so-called “defeatism”. While insisting on their unique knowledge gained from the experience of the Balkan wars, the anarchists deny the same unique experience to the comrades in Ukraine and prefer not to listen to what they have to say in the discussion on war and militarism.

In general, the issue of war in Ukraine was silently present in many parts of the program. Even the presentation by the Anarchist Black Cross Belarus, which had a small part about the war in Ukraine, provoked more discussion about the war than about the repression of comrades or the political crisis in the country.

It’s strange to see so many people wanting to talk about the issue, but so few people willing to organize events to actually do it (not theoretical discussions about anti-militarism, which most anarchists support).

To be honest I was glad to leave BAB behind. I had a lot of weird interactions: from comrades I haven’t seen so many years who pretend that they don’t know you to the people who wanted to explain you the whole world by completely ignoring objective facts not only about the war, but many other topics. The only good part of the whole event was to see that despite certain positions of the organizers there are still a lot of people who standing strong in solidarity with people in Belarus and Ukraine.

## **St. Imier**

If the meeting in Ljubljana was confusing, the gathering of thousands of anarchists in St.Imier was overwhelming. With more than 400 workshops/presentations/discussions, it was easy to leave in very different worlds. From anarchist individualism to social struggles around the world.

One comrade joked at the beginning of the gathering that they had managed to put together a complete program that included stretching, yoga, self-care sessions and only concerts in the evening.

The reality was very different and most of the events were completely full. Sadly, this was my main experience of the event – arriving for a presentation/workshop only to find that there was no room left. Considering that the program was self-organized with very little input from the organizers, there were a lot of great presentations and talks that could satisfy the curiosity of activists from all over the world.

There were some confusing events about COVID-19 and some other issues, but the general level of cringe was at a manageable level. After all, the anarchist movement attracts people from very different social and economic groups. The reasons why these people participate in the movement are also very different depending on the region.

The most complicated issue for me and many other comrades was once again the war in Ukraine. Before the event, I was told that there was some struggle to actually get a good place

and time to discuss the war organized by people from Ukraine/Belarus. The comrades had to make some extra efforts to make things happen. I later found out that this was because some of the people in the organizing circles were actively trying to prevent voices from Eastern Europe from being heard by a large audience. Fortunately, there were enough people in the organizing crew who, with a bit of a fight, managed to get big rooms for at least some of the events.

And if the discussion about Belarus didn't generate so many comments about the war this time, there were several events where smaller groups of people tried to sabotage any conversation by shouting. The arguments of the shouters were always the same, and they were not really interested in listening to anything that was said before or after their attempts to disrupt the event.

The panel discussion of several ABC groups and Solidarity Zone in the big hall was a concentration of different tactics of sabotage trying to prevent people from Ukraine/Belarus/Russia from speaking. Starting with a small group of Germans who tried to put their anti-militarist posters next to the stand of the Solidarity collectives during the event (which provoked a conflict with some Ukrainian comrades not because of anti-militarism, but because of the kind of anti-militarism these people stand for), and ending with people shouting in their language without any translation at the people sitting on the panel. The most disturbing and heartbreaking moment was certainly when at least one so-called anarchist laughed during the moment of silence in memory of comrades and other people who fell victim to Russian imperialist aggression. I'm not sure if there is any political movement in the world that can tolerate such ignorance and arrogance. And even in such a situation no violence was used against this person by the Ukrainian, Belarusian or Russian comrades.

Being in the middle of some discussions about the war, I noticed how little effort people made to understand the situation. Their approach, as well as their lack of solidarity, was most likely decided in the first days of the full-scale invasion (not to mention that some believed in the myth of Nazi junta in Ukraine since 2014). The texts they read from the 19<sup>th</sup> century seem to define what they do in the reality of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. And it is not about the core principles of anarchism, such as solidarity, equality and freedom, but about some text analyzing wars of the past, which is used as a universal approach to the wars of modernity.

Talking about militarism in anarchist circles these days seems to be a hidden way to deny solidarity to the Ukrainian people. And this happened both during the Balkan Anarchist Bookfair and in St.Imier. We see some anarchists who prefer to ignore calls to support their comrades in favor of quoting from the higher theoretical chair. It is unclear how to proceed with people who deny the dangers of ethical cleansing in favor of their own ideas floating in the clouds.

With the ecological catastrophe unfolding before our eyes, we are looking at a future full of wars and conflicts. And if we, as anarchists, aren't able to find answers to the coming challenges that will plague humanity for generations to come, then we will fade into history without the possibility of real change. Same as anarchists of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, we should remember that the road to liberation is the road that involves constant learning.

Moving on to the comrades who spoke about the issue – most of them were great and continued to address the questions coming from different directions, including the anti-militarist camp. The presence of the topic during the event was much stronger than at the Balkan Anarchist Bookfair and you could see how many people are actually still paying attention to the war in Ukraine and trying to do their best to support those who are fighting in different ways against the Russian imperialist project.

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The summer of 2023 showed that the anarchist movement is still in crisis. Some pretend that after COVID-19 and during the war in Ukraine we can continue working as usual. Others have completely lost faith in the struggle and have drifted into civilian life, probably hoping to have a few years of peace before the whole global system starts to fall apart.

But there are also people who continue the struggle despite the challenges, trying to resist war, economic crisis, ecological disaster and state repression. From Chile to Belarus, from Chiapas to the Philippines, there are thousands upon thousands who still carry the flame of revolution and freedom in their hearts, and as long as these people fight, anarchism will live.

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