

Solidarity Is Our Weapon

What Do Left-Wing Activists in the Army Think

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Two years ago on February 24 Russia launched a full-scale war against Ukraine. Ahead of this anniversary, we spoke with left-wing activists from Ukraine, Russia and Belarus who decided to join the ranks of the Ukrainian army. In these frank monologues, they shared personal stories about how they made decisions, how their understanding of Russian imperialism has changed during this time, and what kind of support and solidarity they expect from the Western left today.

Medic, Ukraine

When the invasion began, I did not plan to join the mobilisation. It seemed to me that there army exists to defend the country, and this is something very distant from me. Despite there being many people who wanted to join the army, I did not associate myself with this institution. But time went on, people – this terrible word – run out. And I saw how someone was forcibly taken into the army, that fewer people are ready, and actually have reasons for it – for example, children. I don't have children and my parents currently do not require support, so I thought that now I am the most ready person.

In reality, I now see how many people with children are in the army. And it always causes sadness that children grow up without parents. And although we know that women are more involved in taking care of the children, I see how much my fellow servicemen miss their children.

Now I understand that it is impossible to imagine that there will be people who are ready – no one is ever quite ready. When I made a decision, when I felt that my time had come, I tried to get into the service. But it was difficult for a woman to join the army in a non-rear (frontline) position.

During this time, I became disillusioned with many foreign left-wing organisations that I thought were friendly to the Ukrainian left. Once we were in a situation where we had to defend ourselves, they couldn't understand why we needed weapons – even though we explained a lot. I no longer relate to this misunderstanding, I run away from it – when you are in the serving in the army, your world narrows down to very specific, not global problems. I did a lot to explain to my Western colleagues why we need weapons. It didn't work out – I will try to help the resistance in a different way. It's too late to explain. You need to be with those who understand that you need to defend yourself – regardless of their political worldview.

I would like to see a basic awareness that, first of all, it is necessary to listen to the victim who defends themselves from the aggressor. Those who understood how to address Ukrainians, how to ask and listen, came to conclusions – and now they campaign for arming Ukraine, volunteer. For those who remained in their imaginary world, where they know better than these “unfortunate traumatised Ukrainians” – for them I am not a subject. And speaking makes sense when you are perceived as an equal.

They can come to Kharkiv, Kramatorsk, Slovyansk, Zaporizhzhia. Why does the Western left not understand this? For them, there is no difference: Avdiivka or Kramatorsk, it is “somewhere over there”. And for me, these are real cities where real people live. And I don't want these real people living within artillery range.

When you live far from the frontline, it seems like the war is far away. Now I'm in the rear, but much closer to the frontline than before. I constantly think: “What if they get here?” The Russian army, unfortunately, is very strong: they have a lot of people, a lot of weapons. They can come to Kharkiv, Kramatorsk, Slovyansk, Zaporizhzhia. Why does the Western left not understand this?

For them, there is no difference: Avdiivka or Kramatorsk, it is “somewhere over there”. And for me, these are real cities where real people live. And I don’t want these real people living within artillery range. There is a difference between your city being shelled by Shaheds [combat drones or UAVs] or by artillery – these are very different situations. We know the difference, but for the Western left, the war is simply a bad thing. It really is bad, but I would like to see more understanding of the Ukrainian reality. And for this it is not enough to just come here – you need to see those people living in the cities who can end up being the frontline. Then it becomes clear why Ukraine needs arms.

Of course, first of all, I am in the army because I am against imperialism. For me, it is primarily an anti-imperialist resistance. In theory, I understood this before, but meeting people, talking to them, I understand how ordinary these people around me are. Heroization, “our heroes” is actively spreading in the media. And they really are heroes who do amazing things. But they are also people who were civilians. Even if they have been serving since 2014, they still have a civilian life, a family, a home. These are people with different experiences and backgrounds, they speak different languages, have different preferences: some watch Russian movies or channels on YouTube, some don’t, some had a good salary and worked for elected officials, some grew up in an orphanage. They have different attitudes to the West, to the issue of armament and even to the question of the borders of Ukraine. Both class-wise and culturally, these are very different people, but they all have the same attitude towards Russia and do not want occupation. No one wants to see Russia in their homes – this is the common denominator. This anti-imperialism is formed by people who would have never met under other circumstances, and would have lived in different worlds. Someone would drink coffee in a big city, and someone would be a guest worker at a factory. But we met because we were attacked. And we must serve together.

Sometimes I feel scared and sad because of how great the threat is to all of us. I joke that I am here for the future of Polish children. There is a probability that Ukraine will not stand. If the West stops giving us weapons, if the army does not develop institutionally, there is no rotation and mobilisation, then there is a chance that we lose. In this case, Ukrainians will be forced to serve in the Russian Federation’s army. And then this imperialism will continue to expand westward. It now sounds – thanks not to God, but to the Armed Forces of Ukraine – like a very dark joke. But anything can happen. I would like us to avoid the worst scenario, and at least for Polish children to have a peaceful life. But there is also a chance for victory and for the changes in Ukraine as a society and as a state. I imagine the future Ukraine as in the works of Ukrainian artist David Chichkan – democratic, social, feminist.

Nikiforov, UAV pilot, Russia

I was born in Russia, I came to anarchism at the age of 15. This was influenced by my fascination with punk rock. For example, I loved and still sometimes listen to the band Contra la Contra. As I grew older, there came underground DIY concerts and illegal demonstrations, police detentions. After one of the demonstrations, more than 15 years ago, my friends were tortured with electric shocks in a Russian police station for the first time – such episodes accompanied our participation in political life in the future. After school, I moved to a bigger city, helped organise free markets, and participated in the life of local communities.

Faced with the state violence in Russia, it was becoming increasingly clear to me that it is through armed insurgents that we should oppose this regime. With a small group of friends, we started the first direct actions. For most of us they resulted in prison, and for me in emigration, and unfortunately they didn't bring significant results. Before the full-scale invasion in addition to work I participated in a project dedicated to the protection of workers' rights — I ran social media and did communications work, etc.

Before the full-scale war, I lived in Ukraine for several years. Russia unleashed a colonial war here, just when the Ukrainians on Maidan chose a way out of its influence. My opinions and political background did not allow me to stand aside when Russia launched a new invasion. On February 24, 2022, I woke up to the explosions in Kyiv, and already in the afternoon I arrived at the Military commissariat in the Kyiv region.

I would like to see more reflection on Russia's imperial past amongst leftists in the West.

The left in the West sometimes surprises with its pluralism. Some of them are influenced by Russian narratives. For years, Russia has spread among them the idea that Putin is an alternative to American imperialism, and that in the occupied east of Ukraine, comrades are reviving communism.

Some of these narratives appeared back during the Cold War, when the USSR was actively engaged in undercover work with leftists in Europe. Today, I have no resources left to study and understand new nuances of these ideas.

I would like to see more reflection on Russia's imperial past amongst leftists in the West. Think of the colonisation of Siberia. Think of the mass deportations, political executions and repressions under the tsarist and Soviet regimes. Remember the wars that Russia unleashed in Chechnya, Moldova and Georgia. Remember Irpin, Bucha. Imagine mass burials of civilians, basements for torture, which Russian troops systematically created in Ukrainian villages and cities that are nameless to you.

Think of Le Pen and AFD, a huge number of "new right" and red-brown movements in Europe that are directly funded by Russia. The left in Europe is now losing its political influence, they are losing their positions and the opportunity to change their societies for the better. What other arguments do they need? The time is coming when Russia becomes a threat to European democracy as well.

The European left needs to understand that their protest against arming Ukraine is tantamount to paternalistic reprimands to victims of violence: violence is of course unacceptable, but resisting it is also supposedly wrong. The delay in arms supplies is costing Ukrainians their lives.

One of the positive conclusions of the past years is that before the war the left in Eastern Europe managed to create some structures of solidarity, and our horizontal connections helped us build channels of support. On the other hand, I've had enough of the opinions of anarchists who were born or have lived in the West for a long time, especially at the beginning of the war — their "analysis" and "advice" were terribly annoying. I no longer believe that there is a homogenous left or anti-fascist movement, that we have a universal understanding of justice.

When it comes to the anarchists in Ukraine — they have done very well. Many initiatives (such as the well-known "Anti-authoritarian unit") were not successful, but our guys often lead units and occupy responsible positions within the Army — this is a significant contribution to Ukraine's resistance. The movement got rid of its former complete social isolation, became more grounded, and continues to receive feedback from non-politicized people — this gives hope that in the future Ukrainian leftists will have a greater influence on the politics of their society.

Being Russian made me realise even more how imperial my socialisation had been since childhood. I began to recall more often the history of my family, half of whom were sent to Siberia by the tsar, and the rest by the Bolsheviks. I am glad that the process of decolonisation is taking place in Ukraine, but I cannot judge how successful it is, as I am not Ukrainian myself.

Tin' (Shadow), combat medic, Belarus

I am an anarchist, and came to it a long time ago. I earn a living as a medical translator. I am interested in medicine, although I am not a doctor by education. Together with my comrades, I attended combat medicine courses that lasted several months.

Since I was entrusted with the necessary experience and knowledge, I considered it my duty to join the army, and arrived at the beginning of a full-scale war, hastily packing a medical bag just to be useful.

I saw the strongest mutual aid, rejection of authoritarianism and affirming humanism among ordinary brothers and sisters in arms at the front, who have little understanding of radical left-wing ideas.

I consider the point of view of the Western leftists, who call not to arm Ukraine, to be absurd – it is an attempt to blame the victim who is trying to fight back from violence. Do they think Ukraine should surrender? And then what? Should the countries of Eastern Europe surrender? All of Europe? Perhaps Asia, other countries, the whole world should become the arena of Putin's bloody dictatorship, only for there to be no war? I think this is a pernicious and cowardly way of looking at things. We are very short of brave and courageous people who are able to fight for their ideals, not only with words. And no one wants the end of the war as much as soldiers under artillery, up to their ears in mud in a trench somewhere near Bakhmut. But they also understand that ending the war is possible only by eliminating the regime, which will always bring violence and pose a threat.

I have become much better at feeling solidarity with apolitical people. They have a surprising amount of power. I saw the strongest mutual aid, rejection of authoritarianism and affirming humanism among ordinary brothers and sisters in arms at the front, who have little understanding of radical left-wing ideas. I felt and realised that these people have a lot of potential, that I should be with them and, moreover, that I should learn a lot from them.

Ervin, combat medic, Ukraine

At the age of 18, I worked at a state-owned repair company. Almost immediately I became interested in the protection of workers' rights, trade union activities. For 5 years I was a member of the trade union committee. Later I hitchhiked through Europe, talked to homeless people, squatted in houses, and practised freeganism. I got to know the activists of the Ukrainian grassroots cooperative that prepared lunches from salvaged products discarded by supermarkets. I read about the historical experience of unionising workers. Together with others in the community we squatted a bankrupt repair company, restored the workshops, lived and worked in them.

Those who fight in Ukraine defend more than one country in this war, so I would like left-wing activists to come here and take part in the fight against the Russian occupation.

With the beginning of the full-scale war, we made a decision to fight against Russian imperialism together with our comrades. During the first days, we found an opportunity to take up arms. After two years of the war, solidarity between us continues through mutual aid.

Those who fight in Ukraine defend more than one country in this war, so I would like left-wing activists to come here and take part in the fight against the Russian occupation. We could even create an anti-authoritarian battalion.

My experience shows the effectiveness of solidarity in the fight against internal and external enemies. Even during the war, the cooperative continues its activities in one of the cities, supporting the homeless, as well as several military veterans.

Garyn, reconnaissance, Belarus

We had a long communist tradition in my family, so it is not surprising that I became interested in left-wing ideas from childhood. But the more I read, the more I thought that the Marxist model would not bring any liberation, only dictatorship. At the same time, I began to get familiar with anarchism. Then came the acquaintance with the politicised punk-hardcore scene, through which I got into activism.

Before migration, I was self-employed, did assembly work, and took part in several anarchist projects.

I actively participated in the protests of 2020, and later I was forced to flee the country. I didn't want to run away a second time, so I stayed in Ukraine with weapons in my hands.

Since the very first mentions of the full-scale war, I had no doubts whether to fight the invaders. I saw with my own eyes what a dictatorship is. I wouldn't wish that upon anyone, especially the country that has become my new home. I also understood that war is a window of opportunity. All great anarchist projects were built during bloody wars. So it depends on us whether we can build something.

The anti-authoritarian unit created at the beginning of the war and united anarchists and anti-fascists, seemed to me the very beginning of a new anarchist military-political project. Unfortunately, it didn't happen as we wanted, but this experience was very important. And the end of the war is still far away.

I consider the Western leftists, who continue to call on their governments not to provide arms to Ukraine, because it allegedly incites war, to be useful idiots used by the Kremlin. They cover up their fear with fine-sounding slogans. All talk of "peace at any price" means peace for the West at the cost of the lives of thousands of people tortured in the occupied territories.

"The seemingly banal slogan 'Solidarity is our weapon' today sounds in a new way to us, the fighting anarchists."

This war cannot end with Ukraine's concessions. Putin has already tasted blood and will not stop. The defeat of Ukraine will put Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia under attack. Then Poland. If the Western leftists do not want to know the sound of the S-300 missile flying overhead, then they must do everything to increase support for Ukraine.

Solidarity has to start with the privileged Western left stopping condescendingly telling us how we should feel during the war and starting to ask how they can help.

During the war, I began to have a completely different attitude to solidarity. This word means much more to me now. It was solidarity that enabled Ukraine to endure these two years. Only

solidarity gives me hope for the end of the war and positive reconstruction of Ukraine and the entire region. As comrades from the Resistance Committee wrote in their recent report: “The seemingly banal slogan ‘Solidarity is our weapon’ today sounds in a new way to us, the fighting anarchists.”

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