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Maria Rakhmaninova is a Russian philosopher and artist; until March 2022 professor at Saint Petersburg University of the Humanities and Social Sciences, she lost her position because of discussions with students about the war in Ukraine; a specialist in social and political philosophy especially in anarchism, protest movement, and feminism; in 2019 she founded the web magazine Akrateia (akrateia.info).

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Ribs of War: Lessons for Anarchists

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Since 2014, Russian aggression in Ukraine has revealed many hidden trends in recent history, both in the post-Soviet space and far beyond. Their analysis seems productive both for modernity as a whole and for comprehending the state of contemporary anarchism – including on a planetary scale.

The first and most obvious among these tendencies is the latent but inexorable inertia of empire and the imperial worldview, which permeates even anarchist discourses: Like many key figures of early twentieth-century Moscow anarchism, who retained an imperial colonial understanding of planetary space – including an understanding of Ukraine as the South of Russia, and did not take its liberation struggle seriously – many of the contemporary metropolitan anarchists have clearly inherited a Russian-imperial optic (ultimately often paradoxically coinciding with the Kremlin's). This happens to them even despite their articulated political rejection of the USSR: perhaps unbeknownst to themselves, they fully reproduce its epistemology, which promises them the position of a Cartesian subject “2.0” – perfectly neutral, perfectly

normal, perfectly objective and devoid of specific properties, and therefore claiming to speak on behalf of some universal international anarchist subject who can see all facets of truth and freedom.

Calling any deviations from their own image “harmful and annoying concreteness that sows discord in the ranks of workers” (referring to both regional, gender, and many other experiences), they actually insist on the priority of some abstract anarchism in an ideal theoretical vacuum over reality, and they see themselves as priests of these sacred spaces, untainted by brute reality and tedious empirical details (well, isn’t this what the empire tempts all its inhabitants to do?). To date, this originally philosophical problem has taken on a radically political character, as both the practices of inclusion-exclusion and the unity-disunity of the entire anarchist movement, as well as what its energies are directed towards – including in matters of solidarity and struggle – are turned away from it. All this points to how vulnerable to the inertia of systems of power the discourse on anarchist resistance proves to be, insensitive to philosophical registers.

This is not surprising, however: post-Soviet anarchism, represented predominantly by historians (articulately skeptical of philosophy and therefore not prone to philosophical-political reflection and self-criticism), has not really bothered to adopt at least a foreign philosophical perspective on reflection on power, and has therefore largely confined itself to unviable cosplay of anarchists of the past or vaguely abstract anarchists of the ideal world (as they appear to the inhabitants of the Metropolis). However, the narrow historical discourses of the empire quite predictably turn out to be untrue to history itself: the classic anarchist, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, directly supported the national liberation struggle of Ukrainians (Cossacks) against Polish colonization; M. Bakunin defended the independence of Galician Ukrainians from Russia and Poland both in his Panslavist period and already being an anarchist and insisting on the idea of national self-determination of “small national-

Without an anti-state, anti-hierarchical, and emancipatory core, it risks slipping into a monstrous conservative order like the Taliban. The primary task of contemporary anarchists is to provide decolonial discourses with a coherent and properly developed anarchist perspective. In developing this perspective, a careful reflection on philosophical dichotomies – in particular regionalism/universalism, etc. – is necessary. These are some of the most obvious problems manifested by the Russian war in Ukraine, which require a close reflection of both contemporary anarchism and contemporary society in general.

guishability. Meanwhile, even problematic from the point of view of anarchism and its criticism of capital, Ukraine's European integration would actually mean nothing more than its joining a broad federation of other European nations (as opposed to Russia, a somewhat more plausible federation), with the prospect of resolving language, social policy, and other problems through a European legal procedure – undoubtedly more humane than those envisioned in Russia.

In this sense, it would be correct to say that it is Ukraine that finds itself in the field of universalism – inheriting the conquests of European modernity (including its epistemological universalism), while Russia, on the contrary, finds itself in the position of aggressive imperial regionalism – both inside and outside imposing the Russian world, the Russian language, and an ugly golem of Russian values, crookedly glued together by bureaucrats on their knees and from someone else's memory. Thus, it is obvious that the existing opposition of regionalism and universalism is not so simple, and it requires closer scrutiny, taking into account the current level of development of humanitarian knowledge. In all likelihood, we should talk about the need to develop fundamentally alternative ways of thinking about planetary space and of interacting with it (this is how anarchist geography sets one of its tasks today). This imperative seems all the more important in light of the cynical hijacking of decolonial rhetoric by federal Russian discourses – which claim that Russia is fighting the colonizing states (the United States) and liberating (not exploiting, as we might think) African, Asian, Latin American societies, as well as its own indigenous societies. By labeling reactionary, exploitative, and destructive practices as “decolonial”, the Russian regime, through its rhetoric and its arbitrariness, unwittingly sheds light on the problem of conflating the decolonial and the conservative as such. Subsequently, this problem may also confront post-war (victorious) Ukraine. It is worth remembering that decoloniality is only an optic equipped with a system of methods and approaches.

ity”; and Kropotkin advocated the right of anarchists to participate in the national liberation movement (“but do not deny nationalist movements”), and to support nationalities that rise up against national oppression, because only by getting rid of external national oppression can a nation finally fully take the path of social revolution and fight for its further liberation from oppression by the national bourgeoisie, with which the proletariat of a certain nation will no longer have to ally for the sake of fighting against the “common enemy”. Such views were held by many theorists and practitioners of anarchism: Emma Goldman, Grigorii Maximov, Alexei Borovoi, and others[1]. Thus, even purely historically, the greatest theorists and practitioners of anarchism did not stand on the positions from which the view of the war professed by the modern anarchists of the metropolis would be possible today – either equating Russia and Ukraine as bourgeois states, or even being more loyal to the empire as “the lesser evil” – on the principle that “if a state is evil, then one state is quantitatively better than many”. It is characteristic that in the current war, these zealots of “true anarchism” are not at all in favor of Esperanto being established on both sides (however, even this would be less fantastic than the demands they actually voice): given this, we can say that when the Russian world devours everything different from itself, whoever remains silent is no longer neutral but is clearly on the side of the aggressor.

The second obvious trend revealed by the Russian military invasion is that not only citizens and beneficiaries of the Russian/Soviet/post-Soviet empires are vulnerable to the inertia discussed above, but also all those who uncritically inherit the automatism of global political representations (mostly Western), trying to evaluate them from the spaces of cozy everyday life, for which any global catastrophes look so distant (moreover, equidistant) that they are always almost purely theoretical. This is what the Stalinist camps looked like to the French intellectuals of the 1950s. This is what war in modern Ukraine for many activists of the First World looks like.

In fact, in this case, we are also talking about the epistemological inertia of power, but at the other pole. After years of ignoring the SOS signals from the post-Soviet abyss and, in general, the problems of the Second World, which is lost in the indistinguishability of its own allegedly unimportant existence, the First World woke up abruptly with the beginning of a full-scale invasion and – according to its grandfatherly (modern) habit of making an “objective” judgment based on metaphysical constructions that had been ingrained in its contented and sleepy space for centuries – found nothing better than to reapply Cold War optics to the new catastrophe. And it is not a big deal that in these optics there was no place for Ukrainian society as a political subject capable not only of political will, but also, as we have seen, of defending its foundations and imperatives.

By presenting the Russian war in Ukraine as an old confrontation of the bipolar world, many anarchists and leftists of the First World – out of the usual lordly clumsiness – found it possible to neglect such a “trifle” as the specifics of the current confrontation (in Latin America, where such sentiments are, alas, just as strong, they are at least explainable: on the one hand, there is its own struggle, on the other – the real remoteness from what is happening in Ukraine and Russia).

Meanwhile, it is obvious that a global authoritarian state – with a nightmarish biography, with a growing dictatorship built on repression, torture, arbitrary rule by oligarchs, strongmen, and corruption – has attacked and is committing genocide in a neighboring autonomous state. It is possible to imagine this confrontation as a conflict between two equal sides only from afar, but in fact it is even crazier than to imagine it as a conflict between the workers and the bourgeoisie: at least the workers outnumber the bourgeoisie. To urge today’s Ukraine – in the spirit of patriarchal “wisdom” to “set a good example” and “renounce militarism” by laying down arms – is the same as urging the victim not to resist the torturer and to give him everything he needs. The fact that both Rus-

sia and Ukraine are formally in the same position as states does not make their specific situations equal: especially in light of everything that has already happened in the past year and a half.

All the more so because the confrontation with NATO clearly serves the Putin regime only as a legitimate and purely decorative screen for its arbitrary behavior in Ukraine: otherwise, it would hardly allow such an unprecedented approach of NATO to Russia’s borders as it did as a result of Russian military aggression. Thus, the epistemological inertia of power systems lies not only in the foundations of Putin’s empire. It is also contained within the worldview of the privileged First World – and originates in the inertia of the former Western narcissism, which is insensitive to the reality of the Second World but is not ready to give up its claim to a final and true judgment about it (no matter how far it is from reality). This is true both for the right (which gives Russia the ability to resist the “corrupt callousness” of the Decline of Europe) and for the left (from which voices are heard in support of the supposed “People’s Republic” of Donbass and the malignant “People’s Republic of the DPR and the so-called malignancy of neoliberalism”).[2]

The third problem posed in a new way by the Russian war in Ukraine is the deep problematic nature and weak elaboration of the philosophical opposition between universalism and localism/regionalism. At the same time, the very existence of this opposition in contemporary anarchism (including the fact that it is not realized articulately) is problematic. Thus, if, in the spirit of metropolitan anarchists, we think of the confrontation between Russia and Ukraine as a confrontation between (altermodern Soviet) universalism and (national liberation) regionalism, we cannot avoid many uncomfortable questions. For example: is life without Putin, the Kremlin, and Soviet inertia (against which Ukrainian society is heroically fighting today) exactly “regionalism”? Such a false dilemma can be used only by the Kremlin, which speculates on the notion of “neo-Nazism”, naming everything that does not want to be absorbed and dissolved to the point of indistin-