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War Is Forcing Ukrainian Leftists to Make Difficult Decisions About Violence

An anarchist resistance fighter and an isolated pacifist take divergent paths toward peace.

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About Violence

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

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Sounds of sirens and explosions have rocked Yurii Sheli-azhenko’s five-story house in Kyiv every day since Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24. Sheli-azhenko is the executive director of the Ukrainian Pacifist Movement and an isolated yet determined voice for peace in a country very much at war. He has experienced a “lot of hate” for refusing to bear arms and to join neighbors in making Molotov cocktails to fend off advancing Russian forces, which face stiff resistance from civilians turned fighters determined to defend Ukraine.

“Firstly, tell the truth, that there is no violent way to peace,” Sheli-azhenko said when asked over email about what people in the U.S. can do to support activists in Ukraine.

Somewhere else near Kyiv, “Ilya” and his comrades have taken up arms against the Russian military and are training for battle. Ilya, who must conceal his identity due to esca-

lating violence, is an anarchist who fled political repression in a neighboring country and decided to resist the Russian invasion. Along with fellow anarchists, democratic socialists, anti-fascists and other leftists from Ukraine and around the world, Ilya joined one of the “territorial defense” units that operate like voluntary militias under the Ukrainian military with some degree of autonomy. With support from a horizontal alliance of mutual aid groups and volunteers with civilian duties, anti-authoritarians have their own “international detachment” within the territorial defense structure and are fundraising for supplies, according to a group known as the Resistance Committee.

“When the enemy is attacking you, it is very difficult take an antiwar pacifist stance, and this is because you need to defend yourself,” Ilya said in an interview with *Truthout*.

Sheliazhenko and Ilya’s divergent paths illustrate the difficult and often extremely limited choices facing activists and progressive social movements in Ukraine. Notably, their different views on self-defense and the role of violence in politics have led both to take up active struggles that seem to complement rather than antagonize one another.

Ilya and his comrades have no illusions about the Ukrainian state, which he says “obviously has a lot of shortcomings and a lot of rotten systems.” However, Ukraine, Russia and pro-Russian separatists in Eastern Ukraine have engaged in low-level warfare since 2014, and like many others on the left, Ilya believes “Russian imperialist aggression” that could impose Putin’s style of brutal authoritarianism is the greatest common threat at this moment. Ukraine may not be a well-functioning democracy, but anti-authoritarian activists say the country’s problems will not be solved by Russian intervention and the incredibly repressive political conditions that come with it. Demonstrators in Russia are currently defying a brutal police crackdown and risking lengthy prison sentences to protest the war.

“In Russia a broad antiwar movement is arising and I greet it for sure, but here as far as I can estimate, most progressives, socialists, leftists and libertarian movements are now taking sides against Russian aggression, which does not necessarily mean solidarizing with Ukrainian state,” Ilya said.

Sheliazhenko blames right-wing nationalists on both sides for the deadly war, which has claimed hundreds and possibly thousands of civilian lives so far. Sheliazhenko and a fellow peace activist were doxed or “blacklisted” as traitors for opposing war with Russian-backed separatists by a far right website in Ukraine before being attacked by neo-Nazis in the streets. However, he said the rise of fascist gangs and far right ultranationalists since the 2014 Maidan uprising that deposed a pro-Russian president in Ukraine is no excuse for the bloody Russian invasion as Putin has claimed.

“The current crisis has a long history of misbehavior on all sides, and further attitudes like ‘we the angels can do whatever we wish,’ and ‘they the demons should suffer for their ugliness’ will lead to further escalation, not excluding nuclear apocalypse, and truth should help all sides to calm down and negotiate peace,” Sheliazhenko said.

While many civilians have volunteered to fight with the Ukrainian military, there is plenty for activists to do besides fight the Russians as the war enters its second week. Ilya said “civil volunteers” are helping families flee violence, speaking to media outlets worldwide, supporting the families of resistance fighters, gathering donations and supplies, and providing care to those returning from the front lines. Trade unions are currently organizing resources and helping refugees as they flee war-ravaged Eastern Ukraine to the West and neighboring countries such as Poland.

Volunteers come from a variety of political backgrounds, but for anarchists like Ilya, participating in resistance provides an avenue for increasing the capacity of radicals to influence politics and social development now and after the war.

Grassroots “self-organizations” that provide mutual aid and autonomous resistance are also springing up everywhere as a means of survival.

“To specify, not everyone in our unit identifies as an anarchist. The more important thing is that a lot of people organized spontaneously to help each other, to guard their neighborhoods and towns and villages and to confront the occupiers with Molotov [cocktails],” Ilya said.

Meanwhile, Sheliazhenko and scattered peace activists continue to oppose forced conscription into military service with tactics that include non-violent civil disobedience. Sheli-azhenko said men aged 18 to 60 are “prohibited from freedom of movement” and cannot even rent a hotel room without authorization from a military official.

Sheli-azhenko said bureaucratic red tape along with discriminatory alternatives to military service prevent even religious people from conscientious objection to military service. Activists in the U.S. should call for evacuation of all civilians from conflict zones regardless of race, gender and age and donate to aid organizations that are not bringing in more arms into Ukraine that could escalate conflict, he added. The U.S.-led NATO coalition has already supplied the military with plenty of weapons, and the possibility of Ukraine joining NATO was a major pretext to the war.

“Without investments in development of peace culture and peace education for citizenship, we will not achieve genuine peace,” Sheli-azhenko said.