

The anti-militarism of fools

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Sep 2nd 2025

Debates on anti-militarism continue to shake the anarchist movement in the western part of the world. Often in these debates we can see some organisations from Ukraine or Russia show support for the ‘no war but class war’ position. Three and a half years since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the anarchist movement is extremely divided. Previous strategies of ‘listening to local voices’ have mostly failed for those who were not interested in the first place. With more scandals certain to come in the future, it’s important to understand how we came to this point.

More than 10 years ago, Russia annexed Crimea and occupied part of eastern Ukraine. Even then, the Kremlin cited various reasons for the occupation depending on the political views of its target audience. For the leftist/anti-fascist movement, Russian propagandists prepared a narrative that a fascist regime in Kyiv had seized power illegally. The 2014 invasion was presented as an anti-fascist action. Most anarchists and anti-fascists in the region had developed immunity to such lies over many years of propaganda. But for some Western anti-fascists and leftists, the presence of fascist flags during the Maidan protests was so shocking that they believed the story of a far-right coup without further facts.

Many anarchists in Ukraine at the time believed that to fight the Russian Empire, it was enough to familiarise oneself with the situation in order to understand what was occurring in the country, and to provide facts what was happening. In Belarus, we had a similar idea of how to work with comrades in the West in the fight against Russian propaganda. This was: the truth speaks for itself, and those who insist on Putin’s position are just people who, for some reason, have not been reached by the facts. But, even then, we encountered people who knew better about what was happening in your own house.

I still remember how, at one presentation, an anti-authoritarian activist from Ukraine talked about Maidan and the situation after the protests, and a German expert responded by talking about how Kyiv was simply occupied by fascists. Attempts to prove him wrong were useless in that moment. Russian propaganda had already done its job. Back then, sitting at a presentation about Ukraine, it didn’t even occur to me that we were incredibly naive in our belief in critical thinking within the anarchist and leftist milieu...

After the full-scale invasion, I was one of those who insisted on the need to hear the voices of anarchists from Ukraine in order to understand the war and what we could do in this situation, depending on our capabilities. In my mind, such calls turned into the formation of permanent contacts between Western groups and activists from Ukraine/Belarus/Russia. And for a while,

that's what happened as people became interested, researched, and listened. But it didn't last long. Soon after, self-proclaimed fighters with militarism within the anarchist movement appeared on the horizon. For them, the messages of Ukrainian and Russian anarchists were unacceptable. Instead of organising in solidarity, some Western leftists and anarchists decided to look for groups within Belarus/Ukraine/Russia that would fully correspond to their dogmatic perspectives on the war and the role of Western countries in it.

In Russia, such allies were found relatively quickly. For anti-militarists, the Russian organisation KRAS-MAT's positions was easily integrated into the Western mothballed analysis of wars. They turned the Kremlin's attack on Ukraine into a clash between the ruling elites of both countries. Texts calling on Ukrainian society to lay down their arms and start fighting their own government began to spread across various anarchist and left-wing websites. The leftists and anarchists were not particularly interested in the criticism of KRAS-MAT by other groups within the affected regions. The ideological proximity of the Western left to KRAS-MAT was more important than any political problems with the syndicate of academics, which had long since ceased to try to participate in the workers' movement in Russia.

However, KRAS-MAT's position was relatively weak even in the eyes of Western anarchists. After all, the organisation exists within the aggressor state, where resistance to the war is almost completely absent. In this situation, some left-wing pacifists and anti-militarists began to chaotically search for allies in Ukraine and Belarus who could confirm their political analysis of the region.

In 2022–2023, some pacifists and anti-militarists found the Ukrainian Pacifist Movement (UPM). The UPM has never declared its commitment to any leftist views, and a mixture of right-wing and left-wing ideas can often be found on the organisation's information platforms. Moreover, Western leftists were not particularly bothered by the fact that one of the leaders of the organisation is the pro-Russian blogger Ruslan Kotsaba who was expelled from the organisation in 2023. Nine months later he became part of the right-wing pro-Russian organisation 'Another Ukraine.'

During the same period, European anarchists and leftists also discovered Assembly, another Ukrainian organisation. However, it was not the leftists who flocked to Assembly, but rather the authors of Assembly who, with the help of automatic translations, broke into leftist platforms such as libcom, completely filling the information field about Ukraine. The collective's texts, often written in a sensationalist style, fit well with the old political analyses of leftists and some anarchist organizations in the West. For most activists, Assembly can be understood from this excerpt, which begins the story of resistance to mobilisation in Ukraine:

“Throughout the territory of the Gulag darkness in the middle of Europe, a people's war against war is spreading. The heirs of the freedom-loving Zaporozhye Cossacks, Makhnovists, and rebels of Karmalyuk and Dovbush are responding with their own violence to the violence of the heirs of the NKVD, Gestapo, and Pinochet's death squads. And we are only on the threshold of a full-scale round-up of conscripts, which is expected after July 16.”

In essence, Assembly does not write anything special. Rather, it collects discontent within Ukrainian society such as: the fight against corruption, resistance to mobilisation, the lawlessness of local officials. All of which is written about by the Ukrainian media and in social networks.

The lack of criticism of the Russian regime and their attempts to put Russia and Ukraine on an equal political footing show, at least, Assembly's unwillingness to understand the Russian world. The relative popularity of Assembly in Western circles has only reinforced the dogmatism of the group, which is completely removed from any anarchist organisations in the region. The only exception being their active cooperation with the aforementioned KRAS-MAT.

Activists from Ukraine and Belarus tried unsuccessfully to draw attention to the inadequacy of the Assembly. But, once again, they came up against an ideological wall. Assembly, like other organisations, proved to be much more convenient for Western anti-militarists than the objective truth, which requires much greater effort in constant research, discussions, and even trips to war-torn countries.

The situation in Belarus was even more complicated for the Western left than with Ukraine. After the 2020 crackdown on dissent and protests, there were only a few anarchist organisations left in Belarus and the leftist movement was largely absent and uninteresting. Belarusian anarchist organisations immediately condemned the war and called for resistance to Russian aggression. There were no equivalents of the Assembly or KRAS-MAT in the country. However, somewhere in the vastness of the internet and NGO business, the German left dug up Olga Karach with her project 'Our Home,' which since 2022 has been trying to sell stories to the West about mass resistance to compulsory military service in Belarus.

Belarusian youth do indeed resist militarism, but this did not begin in 2022. It has existed for many decades. Websites and forums with information on how to avoid military service appeared in the early 2000s. But for Western activists, Olga Karach's story seemed very plausible. Yet, the ideology of 'Our Home' can be described as... money. The project has been around for a long time and, during its existence, has managed to secure sufficient funds from European and American foundations for the development of democracy and human rights. But Olga Karach's problems began after 2020, when Svetlana Tikhanovskaya appeared on the scene and dozens of new liberal organizations emerged to compete with 'Our Home's' projects. For some time, Karach tried to fight Tikhanovskaya for leadership of the opposition, but she had relatively little chance, given that everyone within the opposition knew who Karach was. In November 2022, Pramen published an article about Karach with information that Western pacifists had begun to raise money for her projects. I personally had to communicate with some German leftists on this matter, but information about "Our Home" was largely ignored. Over many years in the NGO environment, Olga has become very skilled at selling the right messages to different political groups and seems to have become a regular contributor to the German anarcho-pacifist newspaper Graswurzel Revolution (Grassroots Revolution).

At the moment, I doubt that discussions or presentations can lead to a greater understanding of what is happening among the 'skeptics' of the struggle against the 'Russian world'. Further, in many ways three years of discussions about the war in Ukraine have once again shown my own naivety and belief in anarchists. For example, somewhere in the past we lost track of the pro-Russian Stalinist organisation "Borotba" from Ukraine, which for many years reinforced myths about the Ukrainian fascist regime, and no amount of texts or public speeches could eradicate this myth. Borotba's ties to the Kremlin went largely unnoticed by Western leftist structures, and the damage done by the organization to the anti-fascist movement in Ukraine and beyond remains significant.

For me, the situation in the anarchist movement is very reminiscent of something that happened to me in Greece. During one of my trips around the country, I had the good fortune to find

myself in the same car as some Greek anti-fascists. It was a long journey, and I fell asleep quite quickly. Half an hour later, I was awakened by Russian Nazi rap. When I asked the Greek anti-fascists where they got such music, they replied that it was a gift from their anti-fascist friends in Donbas. When I told them that it was Nazi rap, they simply dismissed my comment. Fortunately, the Greek anti-fascists did not insist that we continue listening to the music of their friends from Donbas.

Examples from three countries with different political groups shows that the concept 'needing to listen to voices from the region' does not work in cases of ideological dogmatism. Western leftists and some anarchists are willing to work with openly fraudulent organisations, just to preserve old ideological principles. With this approach, and in an atmosphere of information warfare, it becomes relatively easy to find a person or a group who will repeat slogans that are convenient and completely ignore a significant part of the organised anarchist movement.

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