Martyr Culture

Revolutionary Culture in Rojava

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I remain committed, until the end, to the struggle for liberation
and to the beauty and love it creates.

Abdullah Öcalan

Kurdish friends, upon meeting an internationalist, often ask about our decision to come to their homeland in Rojava, Kurdistan. When they'd ask how I first came into contact with the friends, I felt a bit embarrassed to say that, honestly, the first friends of the movement I met were those who helped me after I actually arrived in Mesopotamia. (Editor's note: "The friends" is a colloquialism stemming from the literal translation of the word "heval" which has historically been used by members of the Kurdish liberation movement to refer to each other.) I told them I learned about the movement by reading articles on a few different anarchist websites and contacted the friends by email. In fact, I knew so little about the movement that I first emailed YPG (People's Protection Units) instead of YPJ (Women's Protection Units). The friends were often amazed at this, and in their generosity considered it some kind of bravery or indication of the depth of my belief in the revolution and the people, rather than of naivety or impulsivity. It's a common story among internationalists from the so-called USA, because the Kurdish Freedom Movement doesn't have a presence here like it does in many parts of Europe, where there is a bigger Kurdish diaspora. When I initially went, I planned to stay for six months or a year. I ended up staying for several years, and for most of that time I was with the autonomous women's military defense forces, YPJ.

I decided to go in late 2018, and at that time it was hard to find much information about what to expect. Not much has changed in that regard. My dad told me to bring extra socks, and that before going I must read Che Guevara's *On Guerrilla Warfare*. Other than that, most of the practical information about what to bring I received from an internationalist fighter whom I reached through an online message board. He said to bring all sorts of supplies, sent a packing list, and told me to bring a bunch of US dollars. He emphasized that I should bring water for border crossing across the mountains, which he said would be long and difficult, but to not share my water because the Kurdish comrades would pass it down the line until there was none left, and then I wouldn't have water. The YPJ friend I was corresponding with told me I didn't need much,

and if it came to be that I needed something when I got there or along the way, comrades would sort it out then. This seemed to me rather casual at the time. I felt frustrated at the vagueness.

Packing and repacking my bag, researching the weather conditions, trying to prepare as much as possible for what could be the rest of my short little life, I wanted all the information I could find and there wasn't much. I didn't realize then that I was encountering the first contrast of revolutionary and capitalist culture: different modes of being. The internationalist from the message board, with his best intentions, showed me one way to go about struggle, while the YPJ comrade showed me another way of joining the revolution. Preparing myself as an individual by making sure I had all the right specific things on the one hand, and on the other, preparing myself to take on the same circumstances as whomever I end up with and to sort all my needs within the context of our collective needs. As an internationalist from the West, the tension between these tendencies has long lived in me. I find that it still does, but I have also found that being out of water together always seems to be better than having water while the person next to me doesn't.

Before I left, I tried many times to write letters to my family, close friends, and comrades, which I would leave in the hands of a trusted friend so that, in the event of my death, they could be sent. I was determined to leave loved ones with some words of strength—I didn't want to die, but since it was a distinct possibility, it was important to ensure that my death would not be a weight or darkness in their lives. I had made this decision for myself, but I realized as time went on that I'd also made a decision for many other people. My mother became the mother of a YPJ fighter defending the Women's Revolution. My close friends in the U.S. became personally involved in the defense of the liberated territories as their loved one would be there. Telling my family I was leaving was one of the hardest things I'd done in my life until that point, but writing those letters proved to be much more difficult. I found that I couldn't finish them. The hours I spent writing and re-writing them, however, were the first I'd ever spent thinking so much about my own death and its meaning. It's easier to think of dying than it is to think about the meaning of my own death for the people left behind. I told myself I'd finish the letters during my basic training.

I arrived first in Southern Kurdistan. After a short while, I ended up with a couple of other internationalists in a refugee camp where we stayed as we waited for the opportunity to cross the border into Rojava. We spoke not one word of Kurdish, and only very few words in Arabic, which as it turned out were all completely useless in the area we were staying. We couldn't read any signs, or documents, or understand the most basic hand gestures which were, to my surprise, completely different from the ones of my culture. Nobody mentioned that on any message boards. I never imagined it could be so difficult to establish a shared understanding of "yes" and "no." I felt like an incompetent toddler. Incompetent, I specify, because around me were quite often dozens of Kurdish toddlers each of a higher degree of competence within the context of Kurdish life. This is all to say that when encountering the world around me in those first weeks, as I waited in Başur (Southern Kurdistan) to cross the border into Rojava (Western Kurdistan), there was often no way anything could be explained to me with language, and often also not with a gesture, even given the downright maternal levels of patience of our Kurdish hosts.

I was very fortunate to be staying with a family deeply connected to values both Kurdish and revolutionary who regularly did work for the movement. It wasn't always clear to me who was related by blood, and who by life and struggle. A couple of days after I arrived in the camp, they took me to its center. We passed many earthbrick homes, and in some of them, hands of all sizes had left their imprints behind in the dried earth and concrete covering the sides as they'd joined

in the building process. Everything in the camp looked like it had been made by the people there, and indeed it had been. Houses were built close together, and winding paths took us through what felt like something between a village and a city. We reached a large concrete-floored pavilion, big enough for a couple hundred people at least, with a building at one side. The dull gray of the dirt roads, paths, and concrete all around us was interrupted by the tiny red, yellow, and green flags in the bunting which lined the pavilion, all a bit sun-faded, and interspersed with what must have been hundreds of little yellow flags with the face of Abdullah Öcalan, known in the movement as *Reber Apo*, leader of the Kurdish freedom movement and champion of democratic confederalism. As I write this, he is held on a Turkish prison island where he is kept in isolation, imprisoned for more than two decades.

I wasn't sure where we were going or why, but after a few days, I'd become accustomed to simply going along with things. We walked up the staircase into a dark room. As I entered, the light from the doorway caught dimly in a hundred places all around us. Corners, frames, glass, and gold all along the walls in the darkness. The father of the family went off as I walked closer to white plaster walls, and then as the generator outside began to growl, the lights flickered on, and all around me were faces in gold-framed photographs with bright red backgrounds. Some of the frames were clearly aged and others looked new. The faces were mainly young, although some were old. Men and women, mostly in uniforms. I'd never seen so many eyes sparkling with the warmth and kindness that would become familiar to me in Kurdistan. It's a spark, or perhaps more of an ember that I now understand is most common among revolutionaries, although I have seen something like it in the eyes of mothers, and sometimes in young children. In revolutionaries it is born of the capacity to practice love freely and openly that one acquires upon giving up a life lived for personal gain, and taking up the life lived for the love of the people.

Some of the faces were joyful and fresh, others weathered and with a fierceness that was at once both full of fire for the enemy and totally unthreatening for the rest of us. There was so much the look of hope all around. They were the faces of people you could trust with anything—of friends. Language wasn't required to transmit the understanding that they were all dead now, and also wildly alive.

After some weeks, with the aid of a very faulty translation app and a "dictionary" with almost as many errors as accuracies, we, the internationalists and the Kurdish family hosting us, reached a level of communication that allowed us, however slowly, to discuss matters together. One friend of the family was a wounded fighter. He was passionate and kind, often deep in thought, and took seriously the task of showing us comradeship and helping us understand the world around us. One day we were discussing religion, and asked him if he was Muslim. He said Fire was god, and told us a bit about the principles of Zoroaster before telling us of all the martyrs who had self-immolated for Kurdistan, naming dozens. At first I couldn't believe it. Surely with so many people burning themselves alive we would have heard about it. Certainly it would be possible to find some news articles online in English. But when I looked, there were none, and the only ones he could find were in Kurdish, Turkish, or Arabic.

Elefterya, he said, was a Greek woman, an internationalist like us. She burned herself for the freedom of the Kurdish people who faced occupation in all four parts of their homeland, as well as generations of torture and genocide. From then on, he said, hers would be my name. I felt it at that moment as a weight, though not at all in any unwelcome sense. I began to think of the meaning of carrying the name of a revolutionary martyr, which is something I've never finished thinking about. What does it mean to give up my own personal name? What happens when it is

my task to carry on hers? The name of a woman who gave everything. Who am I to go by her name? What is needed of me, and what am I capable of?

Shortly after this, it was our time to cross, and we said our goodbyes to the friends who had taken such good care of us. It was amazing to me that a family would take us in like that, as their own, even with all the risks involved. We'd been complete strangers. Later when I discussed this with my commander, she pointed out that they would have done the same for any friends of the movement, as they have many times before and will again.

The YPJ International academy where I arrived was named after Şehîd Avaşin Tekoşin Güneş (Martyr Ivana Hoffman): the first internationalist woman martyr of the Rojava revolution, who fell in the defense of Tall Tamr. While living there I walked past her smiling, warm portrait, and that of Şehîd Hêlîn Qereçox (Martyr Anna Campbell) dozens of times every day. I was surrounded by rocks laid down by the hands of Şehîd Hêlîn, who helped to build the academy before she was martyred in the defense of Afrin, and while I was there I laid down more rocks with a comrade who is now Şehîd (martyred) herself. Often while visiting friends in other parts of YPJ, I would be asked by Kurdish comrades if I'd known Şehîd Hêlîn since she was an internationalist. I never met her, but for years I heard stories of her, how she spoke such good Kurdish, was always reading and writing, how she joined the life and what she brought to it. I stayed in places she'd been, and found that everywhere she went, she'd laid down a foundation for internationalist women to be understood and taken seriously as militants, even if we spoke Kurdish with funny accents. She, and other militants like Avasin, Legerin (Alina Sanchez), and Ronahî (Andrea Wolf), had set the definition of an internationalist woman and left us a torch to carry. I met many Kurdish and Arabic comrades who had never met an internationalist, but none who had never heard of internationalist militants among their ranks.

Within the month of my arrival, dozens of comrades fell martyr: mostly Kurdish and Arabic members of YPG and YPJ, and one internationalist, Tekoşer "Orso" Piling, who fell martyr in Bāghūz alongside an Arab YPG fighter named Ahmed "Shami" Hebeb. I never met either of them, but Şehîd Tekoşer's martyr ceremony was the first I went to, and his last letter was the first such letter I read. It stayed with me. It seemed rather casual for the occasion of his death, but I found myself thinking of him every time it rained, whether I was watching the droplets on the window or feeling them run down my cheeks.

On the days when I felt smallest, felt the most unable to do anything in the face of the massive imperialist machine and its fascist Turkish State, I thought of all the little droplets of water that constitute the rain. Together with the comrades, they have been enough to sustain the life that can be sustained in these conditions, even as the region is devastated by the water-war tactics of the Turkish state, which has cut the water from flowing into the liberated parts of Rojava.

We got in a van headed to the ceremony and drove down streets lined with the photographs of martyrs, where in the West there would be billboards advertising things nobody needs. I didn't expect it would take us so long to get there since it wasn't so far, but when we got close, lining the streets in every direction were cars, trucks, and vans—military and civilian—parked to attend. Swarms of people moved among those cars, a river flowing all in the same direction: to see Orso off across the border so he could return to his homeland. Most were local, but many came from other parts of Rojava. We got out and followed the currents of the crowd, and I heard an indescribable human sound, dreadfully familiar. As we turned a corner, what I saw broke open some part of me. I'm not sure now, looking back years later, how many mothers I actually saw then, but in my memory they were there in hundreds: crying out, wailing at the sacrifice of

Tekoşer as though he was their own son. They had never met him, and didn't need to. He was their son, just as he was my comrade, the same as every person behind every photograph along our way. After a while, comrades with faces covered by their keffiyehs to hide their identities from cameras carried on their shoulders the casket that held the body of Şehîd Tekoşer.

Back at the academy, our basic training began with ideology. Every aspect of revolutionary ideology is connected in some way or another to the martyrs. Revolutionary culture itself is derived in large part from the culture of the martyrs. The martyrs are everywhere, and with them their meaning—if one is willing to look. Examples are everywhere in the life, but let's take something as basic as the food we ate each day. We didn't get it by going to a grocery store. It was brought to us by a comrade, sent by the logistics center of the revolution, itself named after a martyr like all logistics centers. Often it would be named after a martyr who put forth a lot of effort to build the material basis for the revolution and its fighting forces.

It is easy for those raised in part by Hollywood to imagine the rugged soldier with the gun in his hand, gloriously fighting in a visually impressive scene, and to forget or simply never learn of the role of logistics—their procurement and distribution—in war as a determining factor of victory or defeat. It's also easy, when a bit sleep-deprived from guard duty and busy with the many tasks at hand, to forget while eating lunch that every lentil, grain of rice, bottle of olive oil, was brought in front of you not by the familiar forces that move materials in a capitalist society, but by the hands and work of comrades, and by families who support the revolution. In my experience it is harder to forget after learning that comrades have sacrificed their lives to get supplies of food, water, and bullets to the people who need them.

In every logistics center I ever visited, there hung somewhere a photograph taken many years ago of a comrade, now martyred, stitching back together a shoe by hand. Underneath it is written "thus have we reached this day." When I first arrived, I shared a rifle for a month or so with two other comrades. Our commander said we'd make due like this until more rifles could arrive and told us that it was normal for comrades to share weapons in the early days of the armed struggle, when they were acquired from the hands of the enemy at great sacrifice. Everything we have, she said, is a value given to us by the sacrifices of the Şehîd, and so it is thus our duty to protect it as best we can. This deceptively simple statement represented an entirely different relationship to material objects than any I'd encountered in my life until then.

Those of us at the academy then came mostly from anarchist backgrounds, and while we tended to fancy ourselves as non-materialistic and opposed to consumerism, it became clear that in practice our relationship to objects and possessions had more to do with the capitalist culture we came from than we'd thought. More experienced comrades had a way of making things last, while newer comrades would often break things, and then lament that we should simply ask for a replacement for this broken broom or that pot without handles. Why not? After all, they would send us one.

We didn't understand at first the duality of responsibility that underpins the relationships within the revolution. When it comes to distributing provisions, there is the responsibility of comrades in logistics to provide for the needs of the comrades to the best of their ability. It's our responsibility to go to whatever lengths are necessary to meet the needs of our comrades, as comrades have given their very lives to do just that. When a comrade says they need something, we don't ask if they *really* need it because there is also the responsibility of comrades to ask of *themselves*: what is it we really need, and what can we make do without? We expect both of these tendencies of ourselves, take on this responsibility, and shape our practice around the

assumption that other comrades are also expecting these things of themselves. This is part of why the cultivation of the militant personality among comrades is so important, because so much of how we live depends on people being or becoming humble, thoughtful, responsible, communal, strong-willed, and self-sacrificing. And as it happens, surviving the conditions of struggle in itself requires and cultivates in many people some or all of these qualities.

It is a fact of all protracted armed struggle that comrades are wounded, but often survive. It is impressively common in Kurdistan for these comrades who are wounded, having lost an eye or their leg or a hand, to nonetheless have such a will, such a determination coming from their love of their people and connection to the martyrs, that they continue in the struggle, often with the same or a higher capacity than they had before they were wounded. Rêber Apo calls comrades who are wounded in this way "living şehîd." Most of my commanders over the years were comrades who were very seriously wounded, and whose injuries left them with heavy, daily consequences. From these comrades I learned the most about militancy.

In the West we receive a lot of messages about the body: capitalist culture values what is productive and fungible. Patriarchy denigrates that which is considered weak, and academic (liberal, postmodernist) forms of feminism have reacted to this at times by reclaiming the power of vulnerability. Extreme forms of these ideas are displayed among liberal activists in the glorification of victimhood and powerlessness. Revolutionary culture is what emerges when we overcome simple reaction to the enemy in order to formulate our values not on their terms but on ours, and so what is valued is not simply strength or weakness, but will. Will is the life force of the people and our revolutionary movements.

Wounded comrades taught me an entirely different approach to discipline that had nothing at all to do with patriarchy or capitalism. At first I saw it as macho when comrades refused to be sick, or insisted on doing difficult things themselves that "able-bodied" comrades like myself could more easily do for them. I thought it was questionable when comrades would say that overcoming limitations was a matter of strengthening one's psychology and militancy, and cringed at the idea of how my friends in the West would see these statements. I wasn't sure what to think of this culture in which it was the norm to expect more of ourselves than I was used to. But then as I lived with wounded comrades, I noticed that it comfortably was expected that we would all work together and do what's needed while each challenging our own limitations, wounded or not, and that ended up working well for all of us, wounded and not.

There is an ocean of distance between individualism and individuality, and the latter, in the extraordinarily practiced communal culture of revolutionary Kurdistan, is often seamlessly and beautifully interconnected with the collective. There is again the dual responsibility among committed militants of each comrade taking care to anticipate what others need, and each comrade in turn to struggle against their own limitations, to become the fullest expression of who they can be, of their essence.

I once remarked that the martyrdom of Şehîd Hêlîn was a tragedy, and a comrade who lived a long time with her and loved her very much told me this was an insulting thing to say. She said it was right to point to the atrocities committed by the Turkish State, but that it was Şehîd Hêlîn's dream to go and fight to defend Afrin, and that fighting there was an expression of her foremost ambition. Şehîd Hêlîn knew that she might fall martyr in the struggle, but she said she was ready to give her life if necessary. She, a person who loved living very much, gave her life because she had something worth fighting for.

Criticism and self-criticism is another practice enriched by the cultural knowledge imparted by the collective experience of the martyrs. I will share a few words that have slowly but persistently changed what I am able to accept from myself, which I have heard now in one form or another more times than I can count: we do not measure ourselves by the standards and conduct of the people around us. We do not measure ourselves by what is considered "normal." There is nothing normal among us. We measure ourselves by the standards set for us by the sacrifices of our martyrs. This doesn't mean that we do everything as any martyr did: I shouldn't take up smoking simply because Tekoşer did. It's about what we expect of ourselves, as people who remain on the path set by the martyrs and their sacrifice. It means that Tekoşer died defending this land, its people, and the revolution they built to liberate themselves, and we owe it to him to liberate it from occupation so that his sacrifice does not go to waste.

It's no small ambition to overthrow the capitalist-imperialist system. It's a serious task, and while a lot of groundwork has been laid, the struggle has been hard-fought, and the path until this point has been lined with countless sacrifices both known and unknowable. What is clear is that, while this struggle is built on the foundations of the struggles put forth over thousands of years, what is required of us if we are to reach our aim is struggle at a level never before seen on this earth. We must become people ready to meet that task at hand. It is on this basis that we criticize ourselves and our comrades. The friends point out that we in fact only criticize our comrades and never our enemy. Another way of saying this is that we let our comrades know where their weak points are so that they cannot be exploited, while our approach to the weaknesses of the enemy is to identify and exploit them in order to defeat them. Why would we criticize except with the intention to strengthen?

There are some aspects of the culture surrounding martyrs that seemed strange to me at first. For example, in the Defense Forces, we take care not to act too casual in front of martyr portraits by crossing one's legs, laying down, taking a nap or sleeping, etc. In the burial place of martyrs, there is no smoking or chewing gum, although notably it is perfectly alright to laugh or sing and for children to run around freely. Comrades sometimes cultivate gardens for the martyrs. When transporting the portrait of the martyr, I have seen comrades refuse to put it in the trunk. Rather they place it in its own seat. This seemed to me religious, almost. It may be that I first perceived it this way because I grew up surrounded by capitalist culture, wherein nothing is allowed to be sacred except within the context of religious practice.

Now I will share something I, and many others, have come to understand the hard way. I encountered many norms about how we speak and act towards each other, that for several years I did not understand: some specific words that we don't say to each other, some ways we don't treat a comrade even as they behave badly or even if we really don't like them, many things we don't do as well as some things that we do. All this felt to me a bit dogmatic at times. It turns out that many aspects of revolutionary culture in Kurdistan, particularly those concerned with approach towards other comrades, are the result of decades of experience of thousands of dedicated people, facing the loss of thousands of other dedicated people. Sometimes the person lost is our most beloved comrade, and sometimes she is a comrade who tended to get on one's nerves. Militants are people, and it happens often that, like all people, they struggle with some topic or another within themselves throughout their lives, and when living communally as we do in the struggle, all those personal issues become a part of the lives of all one's comrades. People make mistakes, and revolutionaries are people who take enormous responsibility and thus can and do make mistakes of equal proportion. The Turkish state doesn't turn around and go home

from its genocidal fascist campaign simply because a comrade makes a big mistake, and so neither do our comrades. They make huge mistakes and still they must continue, together with everyone else. Sometimes their mistake was a genuine accident, and other times it is the result of a serious personal shortcoming. However frustrated we become with each other, it's important within the context of the struggle, and particularly within the context of war, to remember that any of the words we exchange with a comrade at any moment can be our last. We are facing an enemy that is trying to kill as many of us as possible. It's an important fact to remain grounded in, and tends to bring into focus the actual proportions of our disagreements and differences.

I've been fortunate to experience the highest ideals of comradeship among Kurdish friends, and so I can tell you honestly it's no myth, but it seems to me that, like all of the achievements of revolutionary struggle, this immense depth of comradeship present in many places within the Kurdish freedom movement—this ultimate expression of communal love—was uncovered at great sacrifice. This contrast of sacrifice and achievement, insofar as one is willing to come into contact with it, reveals the essence of struggle and delivers a weight of meaning to all aspects of the life.

There is a cutting harshness in the reality of armed struggle, one that can't be softened: at some point, people you love die. One day she is there, bringing you a tea made in that way she knows you like, handling her sidearm with way less care than you would prefer, telling you something you'd rather not hear, discussing the book you're reading together, and then the next day she isn't here in the world anymore, and never will be again, except in the ways you and others bring her here: by remembering her, by making and fulfilling your promise to her in the life you are still living. That love you have doesn't disappear. A comrade once told me that martyr culture is the expression of that love which remains when it no longer has anywhere else to go.

Sometimes these comrades are martyred by the enemy in an airstrike as they drive from one place to another, sometimes they are martyred as they take their chances trying to do as much damage to the enemy as possible while living to fight another day. Sometimes they are martyred taking an action they know they will not survive, because they have evaluated that what they will accomplish is worth their life. The friends say that a militant must know when to live and when to die. What they mean is that a militant doesn't give their life in an empty way, and is not a person who seeks death. Şehîd Zilan, a woman who didn't meet the preconceptions of the time of what a "fighter" was supposed to be like, was the first comrade of the PKK to make a self-sacrifice action. She pioneered this kind of action because she saw it was a supremely effective way for her to destroy many enemy soldiers. Şehîd Beritan, cornered on a mountain, shot all her remaining bullets and then destroyed her rifle before she retreated to the peak, where she jumped off so as not to fall into enemy hands.

Şehîd Mazlum Doğan made a self-sacrificing action in the prison resistance while under the most extreme conditions, as a statement against betrayal, when Turkish prison guards were going to every imaginable length, using unending torture to force the imprisoned revolutionaries to turn against their own comrades. The friends say Şehîd Mazlum loved life so much he was willing to die for it. Because he was willing to die for it, to give up the only thing that was his in order to become a symbol of the heart of the struggle—the love of life and its fullest freest expression—other comrades were able to draw strength from him and continue the prison resistance through its darkest hour, as comrades do still today. This is what is meant by one of the most prominent slogans of the revolution: martyrs don't die / martyrs are immortal.

Life inside the capitalist system is designed to isolate us, to make us feel and be alone because that is when we are weakest. But in every moment, whatever the state of affairs, whatever lies behind us and whatever difficult obstacles remain ahead of us, we are never alone. Across the world, in every place that the capitalist-imperialist system has touched, there lives resistance. In the mountains of Kurdistan there are guerrilla comrades, and they will fight for the revolution until the end. And here, right here with us in this and every moment, is something that can never be taken from us: the martyrs. They never leave us, and at the risk of sounding ridiculous, I will share that it has been a source of strength in moments of need, when there is nothing else left, to literally imagine them around me: to bring their faces into my mind, and imagine what they would say to me. This is something anyone can do, whether recalling comrades we have personally known, or an antifascist partisan martyred long before our birth. It is complicated and beautiful to see comrades we have known personally become something beyond a person, and come to live in the hearts of thousands of people. Here we are confronted again with our own sense of personal ownership and the limitations it presents.

The truth is that comrades who were known and loved as people cannot anymore express themselves except through the memories and actions of others: those of us who, for now, are breathing. Tekoşer, Hêlîn, Avasin, Elefterya, Zilan, Ronahî, Mazlum, Sara, Atakan, Beritan, and thousands of others live on because we remember them, not only in our minds but in our actions. They live on because, for each of them who fell, many more comrades inspired by their memory join the struggle in their place, and those who fought by their side recommit themselves and dig in a bit deeper at the thought of them, because the love of them has to go somewhere, and some kinds of love have no place left to go but the struggle.

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This essay was written by Sara Blum, and internationalist who spent several years with the YPJ in Rojava, to accompany and contextualize *Orso: Wartime Journals of an Anarchist*, published in July 2025.

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