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A Talk on the Ukrainian-Russian War

Based on a talk I gave at the August 12, 2023 Los
Angeles Anarchist Book Fair

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When the Russian state invaded Ukraine, I was immediately on the side of the Ukrainian people. Mainly this was because, like most people, I hate oppression, exploitation, and bullying. I am on the side of the oppressed, the exploited, the beaten, the marginalized, and the dominated. Especially whenever they fight back. While my political opinions have evolved over the years, this attitude has continued to be at the heart of my worldview.

Also, I have long supported the freedom of an oppressed people to national self-determination. I learned this concept during the fight against the U.S.-Vietnamese war (dating myself). My comrades and I had no illusions in the North Vietnamese state nor the leaders of the south Vietnamese war (the “Viet Cong” or NLF). They were Stalinists and would establish a Communist-type state-capitalist dictatorship (as they did). They received military aid from the imperialist Soviet Union. But there was no question that the peasants and workers of Vietnam were supporting the war and its

leadership. We gave no political support to the Stalinist leaders and rulers, we were their opponents. Yet we definitely were in solidarity with the Vietnamese people in their fight for independence and unity and whatever freedoms they might gain. We wanted the U.S. military forces to lose.

I thought these lessons of the Vietnamese-U.S. war applied to this war. They implied solidarity with the Ukrainian people (however much we opposed the Ukrainian state and its capitalist “oligarchs”) and full opposition to the Russian invaders. It implied that the oppressed people have the right to get arms from wherever they can, even from other imperialists who were competing with their immediate aggressor (then the Soviet Union, now the U.S. and NATO).

However, when I wrote this, I received much disagreement, often expressed with great personal hostility, expressed in name-calling, childish insults, and red-baiting. I was betraying anarchism! Some of my critics could not separate political disagreement from personal conflicts.

The first wave of arguments I faced held that “no anarchist” would support the war. This was because anarchists did not support wars, or anarchists did not support wars between capitalist states. This is to say that my critics rejected (or ignored) the importance of imperialism. They did not distinguish between wars between imperialist states and wars between an oppressed, colonized, nation and an imperialist state.

It was repeatedly pointed out to me that Peter Kropotkin had supported France and the Allies in World War I but that almost all anarchists at the time and later felt that he was badly mistaken. His comrade Errico Malatesta had written to condemn Kropotkin for taking sides in the Great War. But my critics did not know that Malatesta had also supported wars of national liberation by oppressed peoples (for example, in Libya against the Italian army, or in Cuba against the Spanish empire). (Price Nov. 2022)

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Much of the opposition to supporting Ukraine is due to its getting arms and aid from the U.S. and the rest of NATO. It is often called a “proxy war.” There is an assumption by many that only U.S. imperialism is evil.

But while U.S. imperialism is terrible, it is not the only imperialism. There is Russian imperialism, as the Ukrainians know.

It is not unusual for one imperialist power to intervene when a colony rebels against its imperialist master. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union often aided, with guns or money, national struggles against Western imperialists—in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Meanwhile the U.S. was “on the side” of eastern European states against the Soviet Union. Even during World War II, Nazi Germany gave “support” to Arab rebels in Britain and France’s colonies, and even to Ireland, while Imperial Japan claimed to be “freeing” Asian colonies from Britain, France, and Holland. So it was not surprising that Soviet Russia gave aid to Vietnam against the U.S.—or that the U.S. and allies should give aid to Ukraine. The U.S. state is acting for its reasons, its imperial interests in weakening its imperial competitor, not out of the “idealism” of its cynical politicians.

But make no mistake. For the Ukrainians, this is no “proxy war.” It is their villages, towns, and cities which are bombed and destroyed, not those of the U.S., Germany, or Britain. It is their population which is being massacred on the ground and from the air. It is their soldiers who are fighting and being killed in massive numbers. They are fighting and dying for their country, their people, and no one else.

I would not offer tactical advice to Ukrainian anarchists. But strategically I would say that their goals are two-fold: to defeat the Russian invasion and to spread anarchist ideas among the people, especially the workers. As revolutionary anarchists, we continue to be in solidarity with the oppressed, especially when they fight for their freedom.

I demonstrated that “classical anarchists” had supported popular struggles for national self-determination: including, but not limited to, Bakunin, Kropotkin, Malatesta, Makhno, and others. All (with the exception of Kropotkin) distinguished between wars among imperialists (of which they opposed all sides) and wars between imperialists and oppressed, non-imperialist, countries (of which they supported the oppressed peoples). (Price July 2022; 2023)

I also pointed out that many—perhaps most—of the Ukrainian anarchists supported—and participated in—the Ukrainian side of the war. Similarly, Russian and Belarusian anarchists were on the side of the Ukrainian people, and so were many other anarchists.

In a report on the 2023 International Anarchist Conference at St. Imier, Switzerland, a commentator wrote,

“Most events held on the war accepted the right of self-defence for Ukrainians as the minimum anarchist political basis....The event by anarchists from Russia, Ukraine and Belarus, who are actively resisting the invasion, was one of the most interesting of the meeting.” (Transnational Institute 2023)

All this does not prove that it is right to support the Ukrainian people, but it does disprove the claim that no anarchist would take such a stand.

In general, my opponents could not distinguish between “nationalism” and “national self-determination” or “liberation.” “National liberation” meant the freeing of a people from the oppression of the state of another nation. “National self-determination” meant that a people were able to decide for itself whether to be independent and what kind of political and economic system to have (which could be a capitalist state or libertarian socialism). But “nationalism” is one possible program meant to supposedly solve national oppression—by creating a new state and national

capitalist economy (perhaps state capitalist). Anarchists should be for “national self-determination” and “national liberation” but are thoroughly opposed to “nationalism.” Instead we advocate international anarchist socialism to achieve freedom for all peoples everywhere.

Others argued that Ukraine did not deserve national defense because it was not really a nation! They claimed that Ukraine was a recent invention, that its people were indistinguishable from Russians, and so on. (While not supporting the Russian invasion, many anarchists repeat Putin’s propaganda and lies.) In my opinion, all these claims were irrelevant. Historically there had been a Ukraine for centuries, oppressed by the Czars and then by the Stalinists. During the 70 years of the Soviet Union, there had been a recognized Ukrainian Republic in the USSR. But this too was not really relevant.

What was important was that the Ukrainians regarded themselves as a nation. In 1991 the Ukrainian people voted overwhelmingly for national independence from Russia—by more than 92 per cent. This included about 80 per cent in the eastern, mainly Russian-speaking, Donbas and about 54 per cent in Crimea. (Mirra 2023; p. 126) It was their opinion which counts, not that of foreign anarchists nor of Putin and his army.

To which some replied, that therefore the people of the eastern Ukraine, the Donbas, were a nation or nations because they had voted for their own republics merged into Russia. I would agree, except that the drive for their “national separation” was so clearly a Russian put-up job (with Russian soldiers everywhere). Indeed the whole movement for Donbas secession was organized since 2014 by Russian and pro-Russian agents.

Another argument was that anarchists must not support a capitalist state. In fact, no Ukrainian anarchists gave any political support to the Zelensky government. They did not vote for it nor urge others to vote for it. They did not join the ruling party nor any other. They did not participate in the government in any way. They have

opposed the neoliberal austerity and anti-union policies of the Zelensky government. There is no “Popular Front.”

Suppose there was a strike in the U.S. Anarchists would be on the side of the workers. Outside anarchists would do labor-support activities to help the strike. Anarchist workers at the workplace would join the strike and be active in its organizing. Yet the union would undoubtedly be run by a bureaucratic and possibly corrupt leadership. Should anarchists still participate? Or should they stand aside or perhaps cross the picket lines, because the union was undemocratic and centralized? Obviously, revolutionary anarchists would join the strike and be the most militant strikers, while fighting for a more democratic, federalist, and militant union. The same is true of anarchists in a just national war of self-determination, being part of the war while working for an eventual anarchist-socialist revolution.

Anarchists are participating in the war. Some distribute food and medicines. Others help refugees. But some formed Territorial Defense groups affiliated with the army. And some joined the army, fighting at the front.

It would have been optimal if Ukrainian anarchists had been able to organize militias or guerrilla groups independently of the state. Unfortunately they are far too weak to do that. They must either support the existing army in one way or another, or be passive. After all, while Ukrainian anarchists have much to criticize the army for, anarchists are not opposed to its fighting the Russian invaders!

Suppose anarchists were to say to the Ukrainian people, “We are against the Russian invasion, but we are also against the national army—we are even for sabotaging it—because it is the army of a state and capitalism.” Most workers would (correctly) regard this as treasonous de facto support of the invaders. On the other hand, anarchist participation in the war, in whatever capacity, can only increase positive views of anarchists among the population.