

Are Anarchists Giving in to War Fever?

In Defense of Anarchists Who Support the Ukrainian people

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This is my response to an article, “British Anarchism Succumbs to War Fever” by Alex Alder. It appeared on the libcom site and has been promoted by the Anarchist Communist Group. It was published on anarchistnews.

Its author is dismayed that so many revolutionary anarchist-socialists are in solidarity with the Ukrainian people. “How is it that today the anarchist movement in Britain (and elsewhere) is supporting one nation’s military against another, ideologically justifying and materially provisioning the Ukrainian war effort? ... From the long-standing anarchist paper Freedom and anarcho-communist Anarchist Federation (AFed), to the anarchist ‘scene’ around antifascist and other activist groups, war fever is rife.” From my perspective it is a very good thing that so many Western anarchists are supporting the Ukrainian people against the Russian imperialist attack. So are most Ukrainian, Russian, and Belarusian anarchists. “Many of the anarchists in Ukraine, and across Eastern Europe, have thrown themselves behind Ukraine’s war effort.” Alex Alder sees this as a betrayal of anarchist internationalism and anti-militarism. I do not.

If two slave masters get into a brawl, freedom-loving people will stay out of it. We don’t care who wins. But if a slave master is fighting with a slave who is trying to escape, freedom-loving people will support the slave. If another slave master (an enemy of the one fighting) throws a club or knife to the slave, we who love freedom will still support the slave and help him or her escape. (The metaphor does not present the “slave” as the Ukrainian state but as the Ukrainian people.)

Nationalism and Internationalism

Alder argues that supporting Ukraine contradicts anarchist opposition to nationalism. He quotes with favor a previous statement by the British AFed against nationalism: “As anarchist communists, we have always opposed nationalism...including that of ‘oppressed nations’. While we oppose oppression, exploitation and dispossession on national grounds, and oppose imperialism and imperialist warfare, we refuse to fall into the trap ... of identifying with the underdog side and glorifying the ‘resistance’— however ‘critically’.”

Surely this is an odd statement. On the one hand it opposes national oppression and exploitation and imperialist warfare, while on the other hand it refuses to identify with the “underdog,” the oppressed and exploited. Why should anarchists, opponents of all oppression and exploitation, not identify with the underdog, and support (if not “glorify”) the popular resistance?

The reason given is that national resistance is done under the ideological cover of “nationalism.” Here it is worth citing the view of the great Italian anarchist, Errico Malatesta (associate of Bakunin and Kropotkin). In 1915, he wrote “While the Carnage Lasts,” in opposition to both sides in World War I. Among other things, he wrote,

“We are cosmopolitans....But we understand that in countries where the government and the main oppressors are of foreign nationality, the question of freedom and economic emancipation presents itself under the guise of nationalist struggle, and we therefore sympathize with national insurrections as with any insurrection against the oppressors. In that case, as in all others, we are with the people against the government....We bow before the will of those concerned.”

In other words, anarchists are not nationalists but internationalists (“cosmopolitans”). Yet we recognize that sometimes peoples are oppressed by rulers from other nations. For example, the Ukrainians are not just exploited as workers (although the class conflict is always involved). They are bombed, massacred, raped, and tortured as Ukrainians. As Ukrainians they are threatened to have their language banned from schools, their children kidnapped, and their independence abolished. This is what the earlier quotation called “oppression, exploitation and dispossession on national grounds.” Therefore they tend to see this conflict in nationalist terms—not surprisingly. As Malatesta concluded, “We therefore sympathize with national insurrection...We are with the people against the [invading foreign-WP] government.”

“Nationalism,” which anarchists oppose, is not simply the same thing as opposition to national oppression. It is not just a desire for one’s people to be able to decide for themselves what kind of country they will have. That is “national self-determination”—including the freedom of a people to choose what political system they want (e.g. a democratic state, a centralized state, or no state at all [anarchy])—and their freedom to decide what economic system they want (state socialism, capitalism, libertarian socialism).

Rather, nationalism is only one program proposed for national self-determination. It implies the total unity of the nation, denying the reality of class and other differences, and supporting the ruling class and its state. Anarchists reject nationalism but not the goal of national self-determination. In the same article, Malatesta wrote, “We would like every human group to be able to live in the conditions it prefers and to be free to unite and break away from other groups as it pleases.” This is anarchism.

Similarly, Michael Bakunin wrote,

“Nationality...denotes the inalienable right of individuals, groups, associations and regions to their own way of life. And this way of life is the product of a long historical development. That is why I will always champion the cause of oppressed nationalities struggling to liberate themselves from the oppression of the state.” (Referring specially to the foreign state which is oppressing that nationality.) (Bakunin On Anarchism. [S. Dolgoff, Ed.] 1980; Black Rose. My emphasis.)

Unlike nationalists, anarchist-socialists (anarchist-communists) believe that all countries can achieve full self-determination only through the revolution of the international working class and its allies among all the oppressed. This includes women, people of color, and, among others, people of oppressed countries. Meanwhile, anarchists should not use popular nationalism as an excuse to not be “with the people against the [invading] government.”

The Ukrainian state is getting significant support from the U.S. and its NATO allies. Alder argues, “In supporting Ukraine, British anarchists have found themselves on the side of NATO, an imperialist military alliance ...But rather than take this as an opportunity to repudiate NATO, acknowledging a mere coincidence of interests in this particular situation, anarchists in Britain have wavered in their opposition.”

If true, those anarchists are making a mistake. It is possible to continue opposition to NATO, calling for its dissolution, while recognizing that there has been a “coincidence of interests” between Western imperialism and the Ukrainian people. However much the U.S. and other imperialist states are materially aiding the Ukrainians, it is the Ukrainians who are doing the actual fighting. It is the Ukrainian people who are being bombed and massacred. They are paying for their independence with their blood.

It is not unknown for competing imperialisms to support the rebellion of countries oppressed by the other imperial state. During the Cold War, the USSR gave support, military and otherwise, to peoples rebelling against the Western empires in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Meanwhile, the U.S. supported Russia's satellites in Eastern Europe.

The Vietnam-American war was a mirror image of the Ukrainian-Russian war, but the principle was the same. The U.S. was the active aggressor, while Stalinist Russia sent military aid to Vietnam. Yet the central conflict was between the rebellious Vietnamese people and the imperialist U.S. That the imperialist Russians sent aid or that the Vietnamese were misled by Ho's Stalinist-nationalists, did not change the fundamental dynamics nor the justification for solidarity with the people of Vietnam.

There is no need to politically endorse NATO. There is merely a "coincidence of interests" and they would betray the Ukrainians in a heartbeat if it suited their interests—as the U.S. has repeatedly done with the Kurds. But the Ukrainians have every right to take arms and aid from NATO. They have to get missiles from somewhere and where else is there? (Similarly, in the Vietnam-U.S. war, the Vietnamese had every right to get weapons from the Soviet Union.)

Anti-Fascism and the Popular Front

Alex Alder understands that Putin's Russia and Zelensky's Ukraine are not the same. While he would not call either "fascist," he regards Russia as having "reached a level of authoritarian nationalism, internal repression, and revanchist expansionism comparable to the fascist regimes of the twentieth century. The Ukrainian state can better be described as a neoliberal, corrupt democracy." There are fascist movements in both societies, but he rejects Putin's claim to be "denazifying" Ukraine.

He does not deny that it is better to live under a limited, bourgeois, democracy than under a semi-totalitarian dictatorship. But he does not believe in fighting for bourgeois democracy. He quotes Gilles Dauve, "The fight for a democratic state is inevitably a fight to consolidate the state, and far from crippling totalitarianism, such a fight increases totalitarianism's stranglehold on society."

He does not realize that the fight for bourgeois-democratic rights is also a fight for elements of workers' democracy which exist under capitalism: the freedom to form unions, to form radical political organizations, to argue for anarchism and socialism, to publish left literature, to organize for greater freedom for women and for People of Color, to demonstrate against ecological disaster, and against imperialist wars, and so on. Nor does he realize the revolutionary significance of the capitalist state's inability to live up to its democratic promises. The fight for democratic freedoms must come up against the limitations of bourgeois representative democracy. If fought for all the way, it leads toward anarchist-socialist revolution.

Alder repeatedly compares support of the Ukrainian war to a "Popular Front." In the 1930s, Popular Fronts were political alliances of "workers' parties" (Socialists and Communists) with liberal and conservative pro-capitalist parties, to form governing coalitions. Because they included bourgeois parties, they guaranteed that the government could not go beyond capitalism, despite the "workers' parties" claims to stand for some sort of socialism. Popular Fronts were formed in a number of countries, France being one and Spain another. In Spain, after Franco's fascist military rebellion, the main anarchist organizations (the CNT-FAI) also joined the Popular Front govern-

ment. Then and now, revolutionary anarchists have regarded this as a disaster and a prelude to the victory of the fascists.

In fact, none of the anarchists who support the Ukrainian side of the war have advocated Popular Fronts. In particular, in Ukraine, where almost all anarchists support the war, no one has joined Zelensky's party, urged votes for Zelensky, endorsed his party, allied with his party, taken positions in the government, or even ran for election on a separate ticket. Nor have other anarchists in Britain or elsewhere called for coalitions with bourgeois parties.

However, to Alder and his co-thinkers, just participating in the war makes anarchists collaborators with the capitalist state, a part of its militarism, in a de facto Popular Front. Other anarchists have seen things quite differently. For example, during the Spanish Civil War of the 1930s, some revolutionary anarchists denounced the policy of the anarchist leadership. They opposed joining the Popular Front and cooperating in the rebuilding of the Spanish state. They demanded that the anarchist leaders withdraw from the government. But they did not call on the anarchist workers to withdraw from the war against the fascists. The workers would not have understood such a proposal; they would have seen it as surrender to fascism. (And today, Ukrainians would see a demand for them to stop fighting as a call for surrender to Russia.) Further, working in most industries during a war was almost as much serving the war as being in the military. Instead they proposed to stay out of the government, but to participate in the anti-fascist war effort, with the aim of eventually winning over enough of the working class to carry out a revolution against both the liberal Republicans and the fascists.

One such dissident anarchist group was The Friends of Durruti Group. In their pamphlet *Towards a Fresh Revolution* (written 1938 by Jaime Balius), they wrote:

“There must be no collaboration with capitalism....Class struggle is no obstacle to workers continuing at present to fight on in the battlefields and working in the war industries....Revolutionary workers must not shoulder official posts, nor establish themselves in the ministries. For as long as the war lasts, collaboration is permissible—on the battlefield, in the trenches, on the parapets, and in productive labor in the rearguard.” (emphasis added)

This strategy is based on the assumption that the war is just, in the interests of the working class and the oppressed, and that the anarchists' goal—whether short-term or long-term—is to make a revolution against the state and capital.

War and Class Struggle

The author interprets the European conflict as having only two aspects, the capitalist class and its state versus the working class. His approach fits with the slogan, “No War but Class War!” Yet most anarchists these days would acknowledge other oppressed groups besides the proletariat. There are women, People of Color, LGBTQ people, Deaf people, Jews, other religious minorities (depending on the country), and so on and so forth. To be sure, these oppressions all overlap with class conflict but they also have their own reality and dynamics. Shall we then chant, “No War but Class War, and War Against Patriarchy by Women and their Allies, War Against White Supremacy by People of Color and their Allies, War against Antisemitism by Jews and their Allies,

Etc., Etc.”? It would make an awkward slogan, but most anarchists these days really mean this when they chant, “No War but Class War!”

While almost all anarchists accept all these non-class (but overlapping with class) oppressions as real, for some reason a great many reject national oppression as real. As I have previously quoted, Bakunin took it as real and Malatesta took it seriously as something people cared deeply about. Yet many reject national self-determination because they see it as supporting a new state, which anarchists know is not the answer. But a people’s self-determination means that they can choose their own society. They are (relatively) free to decide if they want a state, or to merge with another state, or to form a federal or centralized state. Right now most peoples are not anarchistic. They want their own state. Hopefully they will have the opportunity to learn from their mistakes. But we who believe in freedom want them to have their own chance to find out for themselves—the Palestinians, the Tibetans, the Puerto Ricans, the Yemenis, the West Saharans, the Uighurs, the Chechens, African-Americans, or, yes, Ukrainians.

We Who Believe in Freedom

To some anarchists and revolutionary libertarian socialists, by no means limited to Alex Alder and the Anarchist Communist Group (UK), support for Ukraine is un-anarchist. So is support for any national liberation struggle. Yet, to their dismay, many revolutionary anarchists do stand in solidarity with the Ukrainian people—despite their government, their capitalist class, and the support (for its reasons) by U.S. imperialism. This is true of many British anarchists as well as Ukrainian and Eastern European anarchists. So many anarchists disagree with them! Also, although Alder does not mention it, many anarchists throughout the history of the movement have supported wars of national self-determination. I have cited Bakunin and Malatesta; there are many other examples.

We who believe in freedom do not reject both sides when a powerful imperialist army tries to crush a smaller, weaker, and poorer country. We are not neutral when an imperialist dictatorship is seeking to destroy a people’s independence, culture, and national freedom. We do not look for excuses to stand off from supporting the attacked people. Neither do we drop our principled program of revolutionary opposition to all states and all capitalists. We do not support the Ukrainian state and its ruling class. We do solidarize with the workers, farmers, and others of the mass of Ukrainian people who are bravely resisting their re-colonization by the imperial Russian state. This is a part (not the whole) of the struggle for freedom, which is what anarchism is all about.

Will a victory by Ukraine, with its current state and imperialist alliances, open up the possibility of more freedom and democracy—leading to a greater possibility of an anarchist-socialist revolution? This cannot be said for sure. I do not have a crystal ball. But the defeat of the Ukrainian people by the authoritarian Russian empire of Putin will probably make our goals even harder to reach. In either case, it is the right thing to do to stand on the side of greater freedom.

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