

Russia: You're Not Invited to Our Molotov Cocktail Party

Tuesday 31 January 2023, by [ARAMYAN Armen](#), [ASTASHIN Ivan](#), [LOSEV George](#), [Vesna Movement](#) (Date first published: 19 January 2023).

Does it make sense to torch military enlistment offices? The short answer is no. And here's why not.

From the outset of the mobilization in Russia, military enlistment offices have been targeted by arson attacks. We realized that this appears striking and effective and may seem like a good way to voice your protest. But is this really the case? Let's unpack it.

1. It is ineffective. Most often, arson does not damage individual records in any way — the fire is either put out in time, or there is no fire at all. There are no exact statistics here, but an analysis of news reports about the arson attacks confirms that in most cases they didn't accomplish anything.

Moreover, the authorities have now started [digitizing](#) conscript databases, which will soon render the destruction of paper files meaningless.

2. It involves very (!) high risks. Statistics show that arsonists are very often tracked down by the police: 48% of activists involved in arson attacks have been [detained](#).

If you are caught, a criminal case and a hefty prison sentence are virtually inevitable. Moreover, these arson attacks are most often [charged](#) as "terrorism" — and the people charged face up to fifteen years in prison if convicted.

3. It endangers others. Military enlistment offices are often guarded, which means that the watchmen may suffer. In addition, military enlistment offices are sometimes located in or near residential buildings, and the fire can spread to them.

4. There are other ways to resist that are safer and more effective. Considering all of the above, simply talking to friends and relatives (and writing on social media) about how to avoid mobilization seems to be a much more effective and safer means of resistance.

We have compiled a complete list of methods of online and offline resistance [here](#).

What protest methods you choose is your decision alone, of course. But we urge you to be aware and prudent in this matter and not to give in to emotions. Much more good comes from activists who aren't in jail.

Take care of yourself.

Source: [Vesna Movement \(Telegram\)](#), 10 January 2023. Translated by Hecksinductionhour

On January 11, Vesna surprised me more than ever. Have you already read the post [translated, above] with (almost) the same name?

I'll admit that [I didn't even know about this movement](#) until February 24. But after the start of the full-scale invasion, they proved their mettle, unlike other public movements. From the earliest days of the war, they spoke out against the invasion and urged people to protest. Vesna announced mass protests while other liberal democratic organizations took no decisive action. Neither *[Alexei Navalny's] Anti-Corruption Foundation* nor *[opposition liberal party] Yabloko*, for example, supported the call for mass street protests then. Vesna called for and was involved in the protests themselves, for which its members were persecuted and the movement was designated "extremist" by the authorities.

I try not to criticize methods and approaches to anti-war protests: everyone has the right to protest and resist as they are able and see fit. Today, however I want to speak critically about Vesna and respond to the piece, entitled "Does it make sense to torch military enlistment offices? The short answer is no. And here's why not."

Let's analyze the arguments made in the post.

1. Ineffectiveness. Vesna claims that torching military enlistment offices makes no sense, since military enlistment records are not destroyed as a result of these actions. Indeed, many arson attacks on military enlistment offices have caused quite superficial damage: the flames did not spread into the offices where the paper files of conscripts might have been stored. However, this has not always been the case. For example, as a result of the actions taken by [Ilya Farber](#) (a village schoolteacher), the room in a military enlistment office where official documents were stored was destroyed by fire, as was a room at a recruiting office containing the personal belongings of employees. Moreover, we should bear in mind that the authorities and propagandists have a stake in downplaying the damage from such attacks.

When analyzing direct actions, it is also important to take into account what the guerrillas themselves say, and not to talk about the abstract results of possible actions. Did they want to destroy records at all? Moreover, it is not only military enlistment offices that are set on fire. For example, [Bogdan Ziza](#), who threw a Molotov cocktail into a municipal administration building in Crimea, explained his motives as follows: "[I did it] so that those who are against this war, who are sitting at home and are afraid to voice their opinion, see that they are not alone." And [Alexei Rozhkov](#), who torched a military enlistment office on March 11, argues that the actions of guerrillas forced the authorities to withdraw conscripts from the combat zone.

If we talk about effectiveness in terms of direct action, then Vesna's criticism is patently ridiculous: the movement has never proposed direct action tactics. If the railway saboteurs, for example, argued that torching military enlistment offices was "ineffective," that would be a different conversation.

As for the digitization of draftee records, at the moment there is no information that it has been successfully implemented, except for claims by the authorities about starting the process. On the basis of the first wave of mobilization, the *Moscow Times* [explained](#) why rapid digitization of the Russian draft registration system is impossible under present conditions.

2. High risks. Indeed, people are persecuted for torching military enlistment offices. But anything else you do to counteract the Russian military machine is also fraught with high risks. You can now get a long stint in prison for the things you say. Not only Moscow municipal district councilor [Alexei Gorinov](#) (7 years) and politician [Ilya Yashin](#) (8.5 years) but also Vologda engineer [sic] [Vladimir Rumyantsev](#) (3 years) have already been handed harsh prison sentences for, allegedly, disseminating

“fake news” about the army. To date, these sentences have been even harsher than those already handed down for anti-war arson. It is impossible to assess in which case it would be easier for the state to track you down and persecute you — after you torched a military enlistment office, or after you publicly posted the truth about the war. It all depends, primarily, on the [security precautions](#) you take.

3. Endangering lives. Vesna’s arguments on this score completely echo the wording of pro-government media and prosecutors’ speeches: allegedly, when a military enlistment office is torched, people could get hurt. Attention! Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, guerrillas have carried out more than eighty anti-war arson attacks and not a single living being has been harmed! The guerrillas carry out their actions at night and plan attacks so that people do not get hurt. This is how they are discussed on the direct action Telegram channels, and the guerrillas themselves say the same thing.

4, Unsafe and ineffective. As an alternative to arson, Vesna suggests educating friends and relatives about how to avoid mobilization. Educating is, of course, an important and necessary thing to do. However, it alone is not enough to stop the war. They mention no other effective methods of resistance in their post.

I have already said a few words at the outset about evaluating the effectiveness of military enlistment offices. I will also quote Peter Gelderloos in this case: [“But beyond the strategic necessity of attacking the state with all means available to us, have those of us not faced with daily police intimidation, degradation, and subordination considered the uplifting effect of forcefully fighting back?”](#)

I would suggest that you draw your own conclusions.

Finally, I have a few wishes. If you are planning any action that the state may regard as a criminal offense — a guerrilla action or an anti-war statement — please assess the risks and take all possible security precautions. To do this, use the guides that have been compiled online and study the know-how of forerunners. Keep in mind that even this may not be enough. Recommendations on physical security from the [Combat Organization of Anarcho-Communists \(BOAK\)](#) can be found in [this article](#) published DOXA. And to learn the basics of digital security, take a look the website [Security in a Box](#).

You can find even more guides to security on the internet: don’t neglect perusing them and follow the rules they establish daily. The time you spend working through questions of security will in any case be less than the time spent in police custody in the event of your arrest after a protest action or a careless statement on the internet.

P.S. Vesna, please read [How Nonviolence Protects the State](#), by Peter Gelderloos.

[...]

What can you do?

Study the safety guides mentioned in the introduction, if you thought it was not so important or had put it off for later.

How can you take your minds off things?

[Listen](#) to the 10th edition of the podcast *Zhenskii srok* (“Women’s Prison Stint”) about how women revolutionaries fought the good fight and how they did time in Tsarist Russia. Among other things,

the podcast explains what was meant by the term “oranges” back then and why officials and security forces were afraid of “oranges.”

Source: Ivan Astashin, [DOXA Anti-War Newsletter #314](#), 11 January 2023. Translated by TRR

A column by ARMEN ARAMYAN, editor of DOXA, [published by DOXA on 13 January in Russian](#).

For many years the Russian opposition propagandised a particular manner of protest: clean, peaceful protest of the urban class, not dirtied with violence or even any pretension to violence. I was politicised at that time. I am 25, and I first went to a street demonstration when I was 17, in the second year of study at university. And I learned the lessons conscientiously: when somebody urges people to free a demonstrator who is being detained – that’s a provocation. If someone proposes to stay put on a square and not leave, or to occupy a government building – that’s a provocateur, and that person should be paid no heed.

We are better than them, because we do not use violence, and they do. Let everyone see us and our principles as unarmed, peaceful protesters, who are beaten by cosmonauts [*Russian riot police*] in full combat gear. Then *they* will understand what is going on. Why go on a demonstration? To express our opinion, to show that we are here. And if there are enough of us, that will produce *a split in the elite*.

Evidently, this strategy didn’t work. Whether it worked at one time is probably not so important now. I am convinced, by my own life experience, that it has failed. A year and a half ago, I recorded an inoffensive video to support student protests – and for that got a year’s house arrest. And in that year, the Russian authorities succeeded in destroying the remains of the electoral system, and invading Ukraine. No peaceful protest could stop them.

During that time, as the anti-Putin opposition de-escalated protests and adapted to new prohibitions – you need to give advance notice about a demo? OK. You need to set up metal detectors on site? Very good – the authorities, by contrast, escalated the conflict with society. They pursued ever-more-contrived legal cases – for actions ranging from throwing a plastic cup at a cop, to liking stuff or joking on Twitter.

We have been retreating tactically for a long time, and finally wound up on the edge of a precipice – in a situation where not to protest would be immoral, but where, at the same time, the most inoffensive action could result in the most serious sanctions. The neurosis in which a large part of Russian society now finds itself – all those arguments about who is more ethically immaculate: those who have left, those who have stayed, those who have half-left or one-quarter-stayed; who has the moral right to speak about something and who doesn’t – all this is a result of living in a paradox.

For the first few weeks after the invasion, this logic of conflict – that the opposition de-escalates and the state escalates – reached its limits. Peaceful protests came to an end. Resistance didn’t stop: several hundred people, at a minimum, set fire to military recruitment offices or dismantled railways on which the Russian army was sending arms, and soldiers, to the front.

And when this started to happen, a big part of the opposition had nothing to say. Our editorial group was one of the first to try to report on these actions, despite the shortage of information. We were even able to speak to some of the railway partisans in Russia. But much of the independent media and opposition politicians were silent.

The silence ended on 4 October, when [Alexei] Navalny’s team [announced](#) that it would again open

branches across the whole country, and support different methods of protest, including setting fire to recruitment centres. A month before that, in an [announced](#) with Ilya Azara [of [Novaya Gazeta](#), SP], Leonid Volkov [a [leading member](#) of Navalny's team, SP] answered a question about radical actions in this way:

I am ready to congratulate everyone who goes to set fire to a recruitment office or derail a train. But I don't understand where these people have come from, where to find them, or whether it's possible to organise them.

Evidently, in the course of a month, something changed. In October, the branches began to collect forms from potential supporters, and on 23 December a [platform](#) was set up on the dark web, which could only be accessed via a TOR browser. Navalny's team stated that the platform will not retain any details of its supporters. [In an [interview](#) with DOXA, Navalny's team clarified that the branches would be clandestine online "networks", SP.]

For some mysterious reason, news of the reopening of the branches, and of the setting-up of the platform, went practically unnoticed in the Russian media. In October, we were apparently the only (!) publication that [talked](#) with members of the Navalny team about the reopening of the branches. Organised antiwar resistance did not make it to the top of the news agenda.

It seems to me that, notwithstanding the mass of questions that political activists want to ask Navalny's team about this, organised resistance is the only way left to us, out of the war and out of Putinism.

I have had many discussions with antiwar activists and journalists lately, about how they assess their work, nearly a year after the start of full-scale war. The majority of them (of us) are burned out: they don't see any point in what we are doing. I think part of the problem is that a big part of our activity concerns not resistance, but help and treatment of the symptoms — evacuation and support for refugees. **Our activities don't bring the end of the war nearer, they just alleviate its consequences.**

You can count the initiatives focused on resistance on the fingers of two hands. And alas, they are not very effective. A comrade of mine, with whom at the start we put together guides about how to talk to your family members about the war, joked, bitterly:

The Russian army killed another hundred people while we were thinking about how to change the minds of one-and-a-half grandmas.

To get out of this dead end, we must together think of the future that we can achieve by our collective efforts. It's time to reject fatalism: stop waiting for everything to be decided on the field of battle and putting all our hopes in the Ukrainian armed forces (although much will of course be decided there); stop relying on the prospect that Putin will die soon, that the elite will split and that out of this split shoots of democracy will somehow magically grow. We will not take back for ourselves freedom and the right to shape our own future, unless we ourselves take power away from this elite. **The only way that we can do this, under conditions of military dictatorship, is organised resistance.**

Such resistance must be based on cooperation between those who have remained in Russia and those who have left. And also those who continue to come and go (and there are many of them). Such resistance can not be coordinated by some allegedly authoritative organisation. It has to be built, by developing cooperation with other antiwar initiatives —especially the feminists and decolonising initiatives, that is, with organisations that have done a huge amount of activity since

the all-out invasion and who bring together many thousands of committed supporters.

Most important of all, resistance must expand the boundaries of what we understand by non-violent protest and the permissibility of political violence. **We can not allow the dictatorship to impose a language that describes setting fire to a military recruitment office, with no human victims, as “terrorism” and “extremism”.**

Political struggle has always required a wide range of instruments, and if we want to defeat a dictatorship we have to learn how to use them; we need to understand clearly what each of them is good for. For many years we have paid no attention to methods of resistance that, although they are not violent, require much more decisiveness and organisation. It is to these methods that we need now to return.

There is no other way of building democracy in Russia (any democracy — liberal or socialist) without a grassroots resistance movement that can win widespread support. If the majority of opposition politicians in the pre-war period hoped that democracy could fall into their laps as a gift from the elite (as a so-called gesture of goodwill), then this year it has become completely clear: we will never have any power, if we can not ourselves take it in to our own hands.

Ulrike Meinhof [[a leader of the Red Army Faction in Germany, 1970–72, SP](#)] once quoted the words of a Black Panther activist [[probably Fred Hampton, SP](#)], spoken at a conference in February 1968 against the war in Vietnam:

Protest is when I say I don't like this. Resistance is when I put an end to what I don't like. Protest is when I say I refuse to go along with this anymore. Resistance is when I make sure everybody else stops going along too.

This comment was [published by DOXA](#), an independent Russian web site that has grown out of a student magazine to become a prominent voice against the war. Translation by Simon Pirani

Source: [“Russia: the time for protest has gone, it's time for resistance,” People and Nature, 17 January 2023. Thanks to Simon Pirani for permission to reprint his invaluable translation here. ||| TRR](#)

There is an interesting controversy on Twitter between *DOXA* (a left-wing media outlet) and the Vesna Movement (liberals) about violence.

Vesna wheeled out a text arguing that torching military enlistment offices is bad, and *DOXA* and other leftists responded by explaining why there is no way to do without such tactics now.

In response, the liberals and the publication *Kotyl* (“Boiler”), which took their side, have deployed a super argument: so why don't you go to Russia and torch these places yourself, instead of advising others to do it? They also claimed that *DOXA* embraces Putin's way of thinking by sending others to get killed instead of themselves.

I'll join in the fray and answer for myself. First, it's none of your damn business where I go or don't go and why.

Second, waging an armed struggle requires financing, training, experience, support bases, and much more. Now of this exists now.

Third, if you liberal assholes had not consistently advocated against every form of illegal resistance for all Putin's years and decades in power, if you had not demonized “radicals,” just as you are doing

now, if you had not readily dubbed “terrorists” all those at whom the authorities pointed a finger, the situation in paragraph 2 would have been different.

Yes, it was you who shat your pants, soiling not only us, but everyone, including the Ukrainians.

The leftists are “talking shit” about violence, but are not traveling to Russia to torch things? Well, at least we’re talking shit!

Look at yourself. The bravest of you, and there are relatively few of those, raise money for the Armed Forces of Ukraine so that Ukrainians will fight and die on your behalf. But you yourselves advocate nonviolence, my ass. Which of us are the hypocrites? Who has embraced Putin’s way of thinking?

If you have at least a drop of conscience, you’ll recall what the liberals wrote in the late nineteenth century about the [Decembrists](#) and [Narodniks](#) and at least shut your traps on the question of violence.

Source: George Losev ([Facebook](#)), 17 January 2023. Translated by Thomas Campbell

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P.S.

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