

‘Putin’s terror affects everyone’: anarchists join Ukraine’s war effort

Friday 27 May 2022 (Date first published: 26 May 2022).

Activists from Kyiv and around world join state forces in fight against totalitarianism

In an unnamed basement bar in central Kyiv, Ukrainian anarchists have created a headquarters where they gather supplies to send to their peers on the frontlines and welcome anarchists from abroad who have come to fight.

It is unusual to see anarchists supporting state structures, but they say taking action against Russia is necessary for their survival. “We are fighting to protect the more or less free society that exists in [Ukraine](#),” said an activist, Dmytro. “Without which there would be no space for activism or underground movements.”

He added: “Putin’s terror is happening [in Ukraine] and it is indiscriminate. It is happening against every part of the population, but especially against the Russian-speaking parts of the population that Putin supposedly came here to liberate,” referring to the fact that the war has been heaviest in eastern and southern Ukraine.

“His regime is an ultraconservative, rightwing dictatorship that represses anarchists in Russia, the free press, LGBT networks. It scares even the most banal, grassroots initiatives, like animal rights activists. We see the conflict between Ukraine and Russia as a conflict between a more or less democratic state and a totalitarian one.”

The activist left is relatively small in Ukraine, where the memory of Soviet communism lingers, and its anarchist component is even smaller. But from 1917-21 Ukraine was home to one of the world’s most famous anarchist movements, which sprung out of the power vacuum created by the fall of Tsarist Russia.

Led by the anarchist Nestor Makhno, the movement argued for the rights of Ukraine’s peasantry and quickly grew in popularity under the slogans “Death to those who stand in the way of free working people” and “Power breeds parasites, long live anarchy!”

At the height of the movement, self-governing communes existed across most of southern and eastern Ukraine under the protection of Makhno’s army. His base was in Huliaipole, a town in Ukraine’s Zaporizhzhia region, which has been frequently fought over since February. The Bolsheviks defeated Makhno’s army and he died in exile in Paris.

Those at the Kyiv anarchists’ headquarters admit that these are no longer “Makhno times”. Today, the anarchist movement in Ukraine is small and a battalion acting independently would collapse on a modern-day battlefield, they say.

About 100 anarchists have signed up to fight in Ukraine’s army and territorial defence forces,

according to Serhiy Movchan, the group's spokesperson. In addition, about 20 foreign anarchists have signed up, including a Russian who fled his country three years ago. Others have come to Ukraine to work as volunteer paramedics.

"We have a strict screening process," said Dmytro, who was eager to stress that the foreign volunteers differ from some of the others who have arrived in the country since February. "We don't want people who just come here to kill; we want them to understand what they are fighting for."

Before the 24 February invasion, the anarchists – small in number – would join forces with wider leftwing activist networks. But attracting supporters faced obstacles due to the country's experience of the Soviet era.

In the name of socialism, mass murders were carried out, a man-made famine was created, and swathes of culture and history, including the Ukrainian language, were repressed. A controversial set of [de-Communisation laws](#) were passed in 2015 to deal with this legacy, but many on the left feel the wider population began to associate everything on the left with the Soviet Union.

Then, under Putin's Russia Kremlin spin doctors and their allies co-opted leftist rhetoric to create pro-Russian political parties across the former Soviet Union, including Ukraine. These parties were used to appeal to those voters who harboured nostalgia for communist times.

Leaked emails in 2016 revealed how the Kharkiv regional leader of the Communist party of Ukraine, banned the previous year for promoting separatism, had received emails from the office of the former Kremlin spin doctor Vladislav Surkov on how to foment separatism and campaign for federalisation. (Since 2014 [the Kremlin has been pushing](#) for federalisation in Ukraine as Russia's way of re-gaining leverage in national politics.)

Dmytro also pointed to the "leftwing" messaging used by the Kremlin when creating the self-declared people's republics in Donetsk and Luhansk regions, the Russian-backed unrecognised states in eastern Ukraine. He said that the irony is that the entities have been headed by ultra-rightists such as Igor Girkin, who promoted Russian nationalism, [carried out extrajudicial killings](#), and banned freedom of speech and association.

The recent full-scale invasion by Russia has brought another layer of mud for activists on Ukraine's left, said Movchan.

"Putin has appropriated the word anti-fascist and he exploits it to justify his war," said Movhcan. "[Ukrainian] nationalists say if you're anti-fascist, you're pro-Russian, but that's not the case."

Movchan said far-right nationalism has always failed to gain popular support in Ukraine, but moderate nationalism – which emphasises religion, language and the army – became mainstream after 2014.

Many Ukrainian politicians assumed nationalist messaging in an ensuing competition to present themselves as Ukrainian patriots. This nationalism promotes conservative, non-progressive ideas and therefore presents a "big problem", said Movchan.

"I think both sides of the elite did a lot to create a situation whereby Ukrainians argue a lot about language and versions of history instead of how Kryvyi Rih Stal was privatised," said Movchan, referring to Ukraine's largest steelworks that was privatised in 2004 by oligarchs close to the then-president.

Movchan said that this form of nationalism has given those in power a tool to ignore Ukraine's social

issues, but that people need to be clear that Ukraine's internal problems are not to blame for the war. "The cause of the war is the Russian Federation," said Movchan.

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