

Ukraine: making a war of liberation

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Vladyslav Starodubtsev, a member of the Social Movement in Ukraine, spoke to Tom Harris

TH: The war has shifted focus towards the Donbas. What does the shift signify about the course of the war? How does it change the day-to-day experience of the war? And what kind of future shifts do you expect?

VS: In terms of day-to-day experience, it all depends on the region. In Kyiv, it's a welcome relief, because we aren't under siege. The corpses, destroyed cars and tanks are gone, the blood cleaned away. It's become more like normal life. You sometimes get rocket strikes, of course, but it's become more like a peaceful city. In some cities, Russian forces are advancing, and some cities have been liberated. So it differs a lot. Has the shift come as a surprise for Ukrainians? I don't think so. Before the war, everybody was expecting something like a new invasion on the Donbas could start. Nobody expected such an extreme move for Kyiv. So it's more like a return to a logical, rational Russian strategy. In one way, it makes you more calm and makes the future more predictable. But on the other hand, it's dangerous because it suggests the Russian command has started to understand what they are doing and think through their operations more rationally. And the situation in Donbas is hard for the Ukrainian army. Nothing guarantees that the Ukrainians will win, the situation is still 50/50. And there are numerous technological and weaponry advantages on the Russian side. They don't have any problems with their supplies when they're in the Donbas, they can use their air support and their artillery more freely. That wouldn't be possible if they were still pushing for the capital, they'd need a lot of supply convoys for the army and artillery. They would need a lot of air operations and to capture airfields. All that would make the Russian army more vulnerable. But in the Donbas, it's like World War One with drones and modern weapons.

TH: Given the assault on Odesa, do you expect a Russian invasion of Transnistria? And more broadly, do you think the war could spread and escalate internationally?

VS: After 24 February. I try not to make any predictions!

TH: Fair enough! Some people on demonstrations in the UK call for a no-fly zone. What do you make of that?

VS: I'm mostly indifferent on the question of a no-fly zone. I think for most of our comrades it is a completely unrealistic demand. The west won't do it, so why discuss it? It was supported by a majority of the Ukrainian population because of the fear of bombings and air strikes. And it's a completely reasonable fear.

Russia says it will escalate militarily and even attack convoys of military aid, so an escalation is a possibility, independently of what NATO will do. We can't really make any predictions. I think that a no-fly zone is unrealistic and would be a high-risk, low-reward situation for them.

It's a lot better to simply demand more weapons for Ukraine. It's more effective and carries less risks. Of course, that's still a demand that could lead to escalation, but then anything could lead to

escalation except us surrendering and saying “let’s do everything the Kremlin says and let them wipe out the Ukrainian population”. That would probably avoid escalation... only for now anyway!

Western governments don’t just refuse to implement a no-fly zone, they also don’t implement reasonable actions that could really help Ukraine. The Ukrainian army is still under-supplied, still short of weapons. And as for sanctions? Russia has a more stable currency now than before the war. Of course, they used state intervention to save it. But it shows the sanctions didn’t practically do much. We should push for sanctions on gas, fuel, banks and currency and so on. I think the only sanctions that have been effective are on high tech equipment, which created challenges for weapon design and manufacturing in Russia. But still, it’s not been enough to stop the war machine. They are still buying the necessary equipment, instruments, materials that can help manufacture their weapons. They have a working economy. So I think this is what we should be discussing, rather than debating about whether we can force NATO to intervene or not. If the West wanted to help, they could, there are a lot of ways, but practically Western capitalists don’t find it attractive to push through these demands.

TH: In Britain, when we raise the slogan ‘arm Ukraine’, a lot of people say, well, isn’t the West already arming Ukraine?

VS: Many weapons weren’t given but sold. And they were sold at a percentage more than they normally cost, which is a problem for our economy. And there aren’t enough. It’s not like the PR image they like to project, that every Ukrainian has two Javelins [anti-tank weapons] in their backyard. The truth is that the Russian army is far better armed. We don’t have enough artillery shells. The Russians can fire 50 barrages, and we can fire back only four or five. There’s a very unbalanced amount of military equipment and supplies on both sides. This is something that should be addressed and campaigned around. A Lend Lease bill has been passed in the US, probably the most that Western governments have done for us. It will send a lot of military aid to Ukraine. But time is a factor: it will only arrive in the middle of summer. And it’s still insufficient. We don’t need just weapons, we need them donated on time, we need to be trained to use them and they need to be in sufficient quantities to fight the second biggest army in the world. The USA has an enormous military budget and they still give us old weapons. With this budget, why do they give us weapons that were manufactured 20 years ago? You want a good way of demilitarising Europe and the US? Easy, just give it to Ukraine, please.

TH: The war is shaping up to be much longer than expected. Social Movement say they want to argue for the kind of Ukraine that should be rebuilt after the war. How do you argue for that, even as the current war grinds on?

VS: We don’t know how long the war will last, but the discussion is already underway. People still need jobs, somewhere to live, social provision. We’re campaigning to start rebuilding now, even under the rocket strikes. And it’s important the left makes itself heard in that discussion, because there’s people who want to rebuild the country on a right-wing, pro-market basis. There’s a battle of ideas and visions over what should reconstruction look like.

Even when the war is ongoing, people need social spending, they need food, they need social housing. They need a universal basic income, because everyone is losing their jobs. We need state intervention to guarantee jobs, healthcare and education. With free markets, that won’t happen. After the war there will need to be big investments in the liberated regions, especially if Ukraine liberates places like the Donbas or Crimea, places that are not attractive for investors. We need to have these discussions now or else reconstruction will take place in the interests of the oligarchy and big business.

TH: How has the war changed what Social Movement does politically?

VS: I think the war revolutionised Social Movement and all the organisations in Ukraine. It was like an adrenaline rush, an epochal change for Ukrainian society. We have a lot of things to do and if we don't do them, the left will be destroyed. When the war started, we organised daily meetings to discuss where we were and what we were doing. Then over time they became more task-oriented meetings about what needed to be done in the following days. We were all very mobilised, very effective. And once the adrenaline of war began to subside, we were able to maintain this new structure and new methods of working. We are doing stuff much more effectively now because we had that early-war experience of doing what was urgently necessary. It's been helpful for our work.

Before the war, we campaigned for the nationalisation of energy, against the rising prices of public transport in Kyiv, small campaigns like this. After the war, we diversified our work a lot. Some members of our organisation had gone to the military, so we supported them with equipment and medical supplies. Some of our members started doing humanitarian work. That's a completely new experience for us, not something that we did before the war. We had to work out how to organise it, how to collect money, transport goods etc.

When the war started there were legal restrictions on protest activities. We had to adapt to push our agenda of workers' rights and socialism during wartime. We created initiatives of legal consultation and passive resistance by workers, because we couldn't organise strikes and protests. We tried to think creatively. We made a blacklist of employers that are using the war to undermine workers' rights. We approached workers to write an open letter to the bosses. We started media campaigns against bosses that tried to undermine workers' rights or working conditions without good reason. The legal consultations were important because some employers can't help but do things illegally, even when they have all the laws in their favour! We help workers go to court to challenge decisions and get compensation.

Our international work completely transformed after the war. Before the war we had contact with the Ukraine Solidarity Campaign and a little bit with Die Linke. After the war started, we reached out to anyone who could help us. Before the war we were very Ukraine-centric, and internationally we were German-centric. But now people all over the world are promoting our debt campaign and supporting our struggle. Previously, few of us had experience of working with so many international contacts, but now it's become a very important part of our work.

TH: When and how did you get involved with the Social Movement and what's your role within the organisation?

VS: I began activism with Social Movement a few years ago. My first event was a protest of railway workers against the privatisation of the Ukrainian railway. It was a neo-liberal, anti-worker, anti-social reform. Fortunately this reform didn't go as planned for the government. If it had, the rail evacuations during the war would have been impossible. It was a good start! I found the organisation completely randomly, via a Tinder date with a Social Movement member. We participated in miners' strikes in Kryvi Rih and in campaigns to raise the wages of medical workers, organised events and became more involved in the ideological discussions in Social Movement. I became the youngest member of the Social Movement executive committee. It is a collective leadership organisation. At the moment my main work is mostly on the debt cancellation campaign.

TH: Is Sotsialniy Rukh quite a homogenous organisation politically or is it quite varied and are there any particularly big debates or differences of opinion within Sotsialniy Rukh?

VS: I think we have many of the same disagreements in our organisation as you have in the western left. Some are more influenced by the western left; they want to talk more about NATO's expansion. Others think that this discussion is just very colonial and Western-centric and we should produce our own Ukrainian narratives. That discussion is pretty big in our organisation. In general, the debates are between an older Trotskyist-left versus the New left in the organisation, more democratic socialist or anarchist. In general I'd say we are more united than most left-wing organisations! We have absolute unity on the main issues. We agree on the war, we all want socialism, we are all pro-Ukrainian. Generally where we disagree it's on less important stuff. And even though there are a lot of arguments and discussions, they don't always divide in the same way on all questions. Sometimes different Trotskyists and different democratic socialists will disagree with each other on one thing and agree on another. And these disagreements tend to be more practical than ideological.

TH: At the conference in Lviv you discussed how a lot of the 'socialist' parties in Ukraine are really just conservatives who dabble in USSR nostalgia. Are there any other left-wing organisations in Ukraine that are more genuine and healthy? Do you have any links with other left-wing organisations in Ukraine that you view as worthwhile?

VS: We are the biggest left organisation in Ukraine... and we aren't so big! The other left is very small. One should understand that to begin with. We have contacts with every left organisation that exists in the country and has a pro-Ukrainian, not Russian-nationalist position. Mostly we work with organisations that promote and defend workers rights, even in left-liberal or social-liberal ways. For example, we have connections with Social Democratic Platform that are oriented towards parties like the SPD. They're not particularly in the radical left or anti-capitalist left tradition. But we work with them on some issues where our views align. The same goes for anarchists. We are working with all anarchist organisations that do practical work. For example, we have connections with the feminist organisation Bilkis and with the anarchist resistance fighting in the army at the moment. We're working with Operation Solidarity. Apart from this, there aren't really any left-wing political organisations, so it's very sad!

We also work with left-wing think tanks, ecological groups, human rights organisations, groups like Ecodia or Fridays for Future. NGOs that pursue democratisation, fight for climate change, transparency etc are generally our closest friends on campaigning for a more social, ecological and democratic society. We align on practical questions, even if we disagree ideologically. And in this way, I think we are pushing Ukrainian civil society to the left.

TH: In a Ukraine Solidarity Campaign meeting recently, you compared the Russian invasion of Ukraine to several other geopolitical conflict: Palestine, Kurdistan, the French repression of Algeria. What do you draw from those comparisons?

VS: For me the comparison with Algeria is very striking. France had a colonial mindset, thinking of Algeria as a part of France, as logically being their territory, their sphere of influence. And some on the French left supported this! They said, 'okay, yeah, it's France's territory, we don't care that we are on the left, France must be supported for reasons of geopolitics'. Such people on the left like Guy Mollet or Francois Mitterand were saying just like this. And there's a similar divide in the left at the moment. There's a lot of support for Russian nationalism in the western left, like from the Portuguese Communist Party, or the Morning Star, which claims not to support the invasion but really does when you read between the lines.

But it's not just a war between states vying for geopolitical position. Like Algeria, it's also a decolonial war of national liberation. Not only are we defending our country from occupation and murder, but we're breaking with the tradition of the coloniser that occupied us for hundreds of years. Before 2014 and the Maidan, Ukraine was a very Russian-centric country. The country was

designed to serve Russia and Russians rather than the Ukrainian population. That's true of all kinds of colonised countries — designed on behalf of the colonisers, economically, politically, culturally and nationally. So there are comparisons with what the Algerians were doing to try and get rid of French influence.

There's similarities with the Kurdish struggle, too. Turkey uses the same rhetoric as Russia. They don't refer to war but to a 'special operation'. They say that no such nation as Kurdistan exists, that the Kurds don't have civil rights or rights to their land, or that all Kurds are terrorists, just like all Ukrainians are nazis. It's the same narrative and same justification, just applied to another place. It's the same with Israel and Palestine - colonisers think in the same way. Israel did not come out strongly against the Russian invasion: There was a diplomatic meeting between Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov and Israeli officials, he said to them that Ukraine is like Palestine. For once in his life, he was telling the truth! It's a similar situation. Israel understands this and they feel more connected to the Russian part of the story.

TH: I think they want to keep Russia sweet because they've got their own arrangements with them in Syria and they don't want to say anything that's going to upset the apple cart.

VS: They use similar arguments to Russia so they don't want to criticise them. How can they make arguments about what Russia is doing that wouldn't also apply to what they are doing in Palestine?

TH: Russia and its sympathisers in the Western left makes a big deal about discrimination against Russian-speakers. Do you think that there's anything reactionary in how the government has approached the Russian language and the rights of Russian speakers? Or is it all just propaganda from the Kremlin?

VS: I will speak from my perspective; I won't try to speak on behalf of Social Movement as we have differing views. I would say in Ukraine, some discrimination against the Russian language exists, but mostly not via the law, but because of some grassroots activists. They go to the Donbas and Russian-speaking areas and reproach people for saying words incorrectly. It's not really discrimination, but it is very annoying. It's shaming people and provoking them. But that wasn't the government, it was activists with radical patriotic fervour. But the result of such actions was the reverse: That made some people be against Ukrainian language — because activists had come to their workplace and homes and told them how to speak!

But the pro-Ukrainian laws are actually good, in Ukraine language is interconnected with the colonial problem. There's a lot of space for the Russian language. If you know Russian, you're okay in this country. But if you know only Ukrainian, you will have problems. You need to know both languages or just Russian to have a job, to participate in the public sphere. Media was disproportionately in the Russian language, at the cost of Ukrainian. This country was created and designed for Russian-speaking people, through the russification of the USSR and the Russian empire. Russian had a privileged position.

After the Maidan, the government tried to push for more equalising politics. Something needed to be done to create a space for Ukrainian language and culture to develop freely, which pushed some limitations on the domination of Russian. Of course, when such policies are implemented, there's always some resistance from the privileged group. And the privileged group here is Russian-speaking. You could make parallels with the black and white people in South Africa, with language rather than race. In Soviet or the Russian Empire period, If you spoke Russian and didn't identify as Ukrainian, you were a part of this master race of Russians, you were privileged. But if you spoke Ukrainian or identified as Ukrainian, you were a second class person. It's not the exact same situation; in South Africa, it was all about skin colour, but here it was more political and cultural. So

when Ukraine became independent, a lot of that inequality stayed, and something needed to be done about it.

Some Russian speakers (I'm Russian-speaking myself, for context!) or people with Russian-leaning political identities couldn't stand this and felt betrayed that their Russian-centric nation is promoting Ukrainian language and identity.

Personally I am supportive of Ukrainianisation politics, but I think that they should be done in social ways. The state should expand cultural spaces and education to promote the Ukrainian language, rather than doing it in a neoliberal way, which just annoys Russian speakers more. Instead of just renaming streets and passing legislation, really they should fund cultural projects and build dialogue. We support the general idea of development of the Ukrainian language. We're against methods that only provoke social conflicts and not social dialogue, and the development of Ukrainian culture needs strong budget funding.

TH: what forms of campaigning or solidarity should the left and labour movement activists internationally be pursuing in the coming months?

VS: In Ukraine, the government is pushing a new anti-labour law (#5371), even harsher than previous ones. Ukrainian workers need international support against this legislation, neoliberal even by European Union standards. It will allow people to be fired without any consultation and introduce zero-hour contracts. This is absolutely horrific for the stability of the workers, who can be laid off at any moment, without social guarantees and with less union protection. We need the international left to talk and campaign about this, because without that it will be difficult for us to push against it.

Secondly, the left should call for Ukraine's debt to be cancelled. Cancelling Ukrainian debt could be the first step in creating a new world economic order, a more social and democratic one, where structures like the IMF can't exploit developing countries, but where they are supported, given loans on progressive terms, and where social states are promoted rather than neoliberal ones.

The next step is to campaign for Ukraine's reconstruction. That reconstruction should be a break with the neoliberal consensus and austerity politics. It should be socially-oriented, ecological, feminist and inclusive, built on state intervention and investment, not on the free market dominance. It's the first step to go beyond the austerity consensus and for the new iteration of welfare policies. That's important not only for Ukraine but for the international left to promote its ideas and views. Ukraine needs reconstruction — the whole country has been bombed and many people have died. But also, as a world producer of food, our reconstruction is necessary to prevent a much broader chaos.

The other thing to campaign on is arms for Ukraine. The West already has a massive military budget, so send the arms to Ukraine! Actually, pushing for supporting Ukraine via already existing extremely big military budgets should be the most realistic way to demilitarise, as the reason for new militarisation is Russian aggression — so help to stop it directly. So, send your weapons here, and don't replace them with new ones at home. In such way, progressive demands of sending Ukraine weapons and demilitarisation should be interconnected.

The Ukrainian army is resisting an attack unprecedented on our country since World War 2 and they need a lot of help to stop the invaders. There is a narrative that the Ukrainian army is so modern, so well-equipped and so advanced — this is just false! We are holding mostly by bravery and defensive advantage. In terms of military equipment, Russia is far superior. They have more drones, more tanks, more weapons. We mostly just have Javelins, not a lot of them, actually. It's not enough. Weapons should be delivered without any terms, without any demands for payment, without any

interest. If Ukraine has to pay for weapons we won't have money for the basic needs for the people.

And we need sanctions on Russia. Not just on the state and on the oligarchy: all Russians need to have a break with normality and their daily routine. Imagine having a normal life when your country is committing genocide! It shouldn't be like this. Its economy should be sanctioned in every way. Russia shouldn't be allowed to have a stable currency for the war, to produce new weapons and military equipment. Russian people should feel that these times are different. When the war is over, they should have a normal life, but when the war is ongoing, they should feel that they're not just indifferent participants, that they also hold some responsibility for what's going on. On the left there is this very stupid discussion about sanctions harming the working class, but the Russian working class is actually supportive of the war. It is producing weapons and participating in the army and going on demonstrations in support of the Russian aggression, in Germany and in Denmark and other countries. Why shouldn't they be sanctioned too? They're directly helping Russia.

Sanctions might hurt the Russian working class, but they'll help the Ukrainian working class which is struggling just to survive. Empathy shouldn't be unequal, only on the Russian side, but extend to Ukrainians too. Situations are completely different. In Ukraine, people are dying, in Russia, people are being deprived of the ability to buy cheeseburgers. If people are made to feel unwelcome because they aren't anti-war — That's absolutely normal, that's absolutely morally correct.

TH: Thanks so much for telling us about what you're up to. And we'll do our best in Britain to support your struggle.

VS: Thanks for your solidarity and speaking about Ukraine and its problems!

Vladyslav Starodubtsev
Tom Harris

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