

Inside the Russian Resistance Against Putin's War

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Russian feminists have been at the forefront of the opposition to Russian imperialism's invasion of Ukraine. They issued a [manifesto](#) and launched Feminist Antiwar Resistance. At the start of the war, they helped organize protests. Faced with harsh repression, arrest, fines, and prison sentences, they continue to build the antiwar opposition to Putin's regime and forge solidarity with Ukraine and its fight for self-determination. *Spectre's* Ashley Smith interviews Sasha, an activist in Feminist Anti-War Resistance about the war, its impact on Russian society in general and women in particular, and the debates among feminists about how to oppose imperialism.

Sasha is a leftwing activist from Russia, a member of Feminist Anti-War Resistance. She is also a scholar who specializes on the history of women's movements.

What are conditions like now in Russia? How has the war impacted the economy and politics? What are the patterns of consciousness in the population about the war, Ukraine, and Putin's regime?

I'm not in Russia now so I can't speak from first-hand experience. But of course, I have been following developments closely via news and through my friends and family. The main ministry of official statistics just announced that the level of poverty has [grown by approximately 70 percent](#).

Over 20 million people in Russia now live below the poverty line, which is income less than approximately \$200 per month. That is a very large number of people thrown into poverty. I was surprised that these figures were even released by the state media.

Unemployment is growing because many of the Western companies have shut down their operations and in some cases closed permanently. IKEA, for example, announced that they are selling their factories. No one knows what will happen with their employees.

Other Russian factories cannot function properly because they are dependent on Western technology and supply chains, which have been interrupted by sanctions. The workers were sent on vacation and [instead of proper salaries they got land to grow potatoes](#). Only 5 percent of workers, however, even got that deal. It sounds absurd but it's true.

Prices are also skyrocketing. Inflation is increasing now at over 17 percent. This puts workers in a terrible position. They are losing their jobs, having their pay cut, and confronting massive price increases.

While there are few signs of social discontent right now, it's there below the surface. These terrible social conditions impact consciousness in a very contradictory fashion.

Official polls still say that now about 86 percent of people support the war. But I think those

quantitative polls are deeply misleading. [The Public Sociology Laboratory](#) (PS Lab), which is an independent research project run by scholar-activists, conducted qualitative research on people's opinions about various topics including the war.

When they asked people about the war, they found that there is a huge group between those that support the war and those that oppose it, who don't express support or discontent. This is a depoliticized majority, which they found is not strongly in favor of the war, but don't feel they have a right or the expertise to express their opinions. They have been disempowered and intimidated by Putin's autocratic regime and are hesitant to state their views.

Those who support the war do so because they [believe what they hear from the propaganda channels](#) of the official media. This is a fragile basis for support and might be subject to change over time as people gain access to real information and experience the impact of sanctions.

Of course, there is a hard core that is completely pro-war. But the official polling statistics can make it seem like this is true for everyone. But actual consciousness is more complex as the PS Lab study documents.

One thing that I would think would impact people's consciousness is the very high casualty rate among the Russian troops deployed to Ukraine. Have people heard about this or has the information been suppressed? What impact has it had on people's opinions about the war?

The impact of all this tragic loss of life is again not straightforward. Take the example of Dagestan, a Republic in the Russian Federation. It is one of the most economically deprived places in the country. A lot of soldiers deployed in Ukraine are from there and many have died during this invasion.

But rather than undermining support for the war, it has [affirmed people's sense of citizenship and belonging](#). Some even wear these losses as a badge of pride, saying that they would encourage more soldiers from their areas to fight in the war.

At the same time, discontent among other groups of people has grown and they are beginning to express it publicly. For example, in one famous case, a father who was very patriotic, a strong supporter of Putin and the invasion, and openly hates Ukrainians, lost his son in the war.

His son disappeared. Now this father is waging a public campaign against the Russian state because it won't acknowledge his son's service and death. Their callous disregard for his son has [turned him more and more against Putin and the war itself](#).

As the war goes on this could grow, especially as the state forces more and more men to "volunteer." Already there are cases of police officers, reservists, and soldiers who have tried to avoid being deployed. But on the whole there is an appearance of continued public support for the war.

At the start of the war, there was a wave of protests against it. What happened to those activists who led them? Is there much anti-war organizing going on now? What has been the particular role of feminist organizers in building the resistance to Putin's regime and his imperialist war?

We initially did have a lot of street protests at the beginning of the war in March. But the Russian state is much more skilled at repressing them than we are at staging them.

And they really did repress them, harshly sentencing many people with jail time and fines. That has

intimidated activists from doing much in public since then. Now, we are more focused on building up our infrastructure and establishing connections, which is mostly underground to protect people from the state.

Those of us abroad have done a number of things to support such projects. One important thing we've launched is an [antiwar fund](#). It supports people who got fired or have troubles at work because of their anti-war position.

Another thing we have done is come up with ways to connect people at a local level without getting them in trouble. One of the most successful experiences in this regard was a May Day action that we organized. We launched it as a reproductive strike to introduce and popularize the idea.

We called for people to go to peace prospects or parks, which almost every city has. Our slogan was "feed pigeons, not the war." We encouraged people to just go out and feed the pigeons in those peace parks and meet one another. We called this action through our Telegram channel, which has thousands of followers.

People went out to the parks and found fellow antiwar activists. In one case, some antiwar people in a small town who went to a park met other people who were not activists and started talking with them about the war and that attracted other antiwar activists. This is just an example of how we are trying to organize in a way that is safe, in a way that builds our infrastructure.

We are also providing psychological support for activists and anyone else who contacts us. We have volunteers who provide free, professional psychological counseling. This is a very important project for us as feminists to address the trauma caused by this war.

In another important initiative, we are providing help to Ukrainians who have been deported to Russia. Thousands have been sent there. We are giving them humanitarian aid and also helping them leave Russia if they want.

We have something like 1,000 volunteers who are doing this work, we collaborate on it with NGOs. We also help women and children that have been caught up in sex trafficking. Ukrainian women are one of the groups most likely to be trafficked.

The most important vehicle to coordinate this work is our telegram channel, which is anonymous. It allows people to send us their stickers, posters, suggestions for a joint action, and then recirculate them safely.

We were initially doing a lot of work in the early period of the war. But then we all hit a wall of exhaustion. Now people are coming back to more organizing. People are back and getting involved with guerilla stickering, graffiti, and other symbolic street action.

Right now, you are building infrastructure for the resistance. What kind of strategy are you developing for the future? What kind of antiwar actions do you have in mind when conditions become more favorable?

We must build up a lot more infrastructure before we can do larger protests. We are developing local networks for all sorts of initiatives and demonstrations that we simply cannot initiate now.

This is key because under an autocratic government, people lack basic organization. We face police state repression. Everyone must understand that since the big wave of protest organized by Alexi Navalny, Putin has targeted any and all activists, driving us underground.

Building a solidarity network will give people a sense of agency. Right now, people really don't have a sense that they affect change. They feel that even large street protests don't have any impact. We have to overcome this sentiment.

Our hope is that all the antiwar initiatives I described will broaden our ranks beyond already politicized young people and students, to broader masses. But we are still very much in an embryonic stage right now.

Is there any organizing among the troops? That was a very important part of antiwar organizing during the Vietnam War as well as during the Iraq War. During both, activists reached out to active duty troops, to reservists, to people being called up to build discontent within the military itself. Are there any initiatives like that?

There are [lawyers that are defending the rights of soldiers](#), who do not want to be deployed or do not think the state is within its rights to deploy them. They have had some success and more people have contacted them.

We have collaborated with some [organizations of soldiers' mothers](#) on how to help young people avoid conscription and how to apply for so-called alternative military service. We have messaged potential conscripts on a mass scale. We sent more than 1 million messages via bots with manuals on how to avoid death in Ukraine and also how to avoid military service. So, we have tried to sabotage conscription.

One of the networks of organizations of soldier's mothers dates back to the late Soviet times and was exceptionally active during the first war in Chechnya. They took actions like going to military stations and basically kidnapped soldiers to save them from the war, they also took part in negotiations and in the exchange of captured soldiers.

Some Russian Marxists like Ilya Budraitskis have taken to calling Putin's regime neofascist. Do you agree with that characterization? Why is homophobia and sexism such an integral part of Putin's right wing project? What impact has this had on women in Russia?

I completely agree with Ilya Budraitskis' characterization of Putin's regime. It is neofascist and so are its oligarchic backers. Since 2014, when Putin annexed Crimea and backed the so-called peoples' republics in Ukraine, the regime and oligarchs have been promoting so-called traditional values in Russia.

They are also funding neofascist and far right organizations in Europe. A recent report documented that the regime and the oligarchs are in fact the [largest foreign financial backers of these organizations](#).

Putin and the oligarchs promote the so-called traditional family with its so-called traditional gender roles. They want to push any LGBTQ+ person to the margins of society, at best tolerating their private existence, but banning them publicly. Now a new law is being discussed that will prohibit any visibility of LGBTQ+ people in Russia and ban LGBTQ+ "propaganda" aimed at minors.

This is in line with their neoliberal ideology that aims to privatize everything and keep public expenditure on social services to the bare minimum. They want women in the family to bear the burden of social reproduction. Also, this ideology of the family helps to atomize people and reduce their imagined society to their immediate family members.

This attempt by Russian oligarchs and the state to divide people along the lines of sexuality and

gender even impacts sections of the left. These sections accept the idea that LGBTQ+ people should not be a part of the public domain or that their issues as well as feminist ones should not be central demands in political struggle.

So, this sexist ideology is really fundamental to the Russian regime, and it has had great success in generalizing it through society. It serves several functions—shoring up their conservative base, using the so-called traditional family for social reproduction, and dividing people along gender lines.

How has Putin's regime collaborated with the Russian Orthodox Church in spreading these reactionary ideas and policies?

The church was very active alongside the regime in framing all this sexist and homophobic discourse especially when it comes to abortion and LGBTQ+ rights. The oligarchs, who fund the European far-right, are closely affiliated with the Church. With the backing of the regime and oligarchs, the Church has launched very public campaigns to enforce reactionary gender norms.

Even though they have failed at this point to criminalize abortion, they and their allies in the government were successful in imposing some restrictions on rights and access. For example, they imposed a one-week waiting period before women can have an abortion, reduced criteria for free abortion (both social and medical), banned any advertisement of abortion, and campaigned for excluding it from the national medical insurance coverage.

Have Putin, the oligarchs, and the church intensified women's oppression? How do women perceive Putin?

It is complex question to answer. Putin is no fool. If he had imposed these ideas and policies in a simplistic or ridiculous way, he would not have been that popular. But he hasn't; he has imposed them in a cunning fashion.

On the one hand, he promotes this very reactionary agenda, restricts abortion rights, and publicly uses misogynistic, patriarchal, and homophobic language. But, on the other, like many far right figures, he presents himself as the protector of women and women's "virtues."

On the one hand, he restricts abortion rights. But, on the other, he distributed money during the pandemic to all families with children and announced a similar campaign for March 8th this year as well. This policy won him lots of support from women, despite the fact that the amount of money was very small.

That women were happy about that just shows what dire conditions they and their children face. About [25 percent of kids in Russia live below the poverty](#) line. Putin uses this distribution of money to cloak his deeply misogynist agenda.

What has been your experience in building international solidarity among feminist in Europe and beyond in opposing Russia's invasion of Ukraine? What relations have you developed with the Ukrainian left and feminist movements?

We see that our first responsibility is to be allies of Ukraine and its fight for self-determination. We have tried to take proactive steps to support Ukrainian organizations without trying to intrude and without expecting anything in return.

We try to help with [fundraising for humanitarian aid and for feminist organizations](#) in Ukraine, which we encourage everyone to support, and we are planning to organize a fundraising event. When we take part in public events we support the demands of our Ukrainian comrades. That is

really very important for us.

We are very aware that we are in the aggressive power, and so we are very careful when participating in antiwar public events and round tables. We double-check with Ukrainian participants to make sure that it is OK with them and are happy to withdraw if they don't feel comfortable, because we want to amplify their voices.

That's the spirit in which we launched our [manifesto](#). It has gotten a lot of media attention. We put forward a clear antiwar stance declaring that this war is a war against women and that we oppose it full stop.

It was written to address the Russian people. It has played an important role in cohering antiwar feminists and broader antiwar sentiment. But then it was translated into many languages and gained international importance on the left.

We realized that it was being instrumentalized by some forces for goals different from our own. These forces used it to oppose all military action and spending, not only against Russia but also against the US and NATO and, most problematically, against Ukraine.

Thus, our manifesto was used to promote a somewhat blurry pacifist position. We didn't anticipate this debate about arms. So, our manifesto was used in ways that we didn't intend.

For me this is problematic. In my opinion, Ukraine has the right to defend itself against the Russian invasion and has the right to secure arms to do so. We need to make a distinction between them securing arms and the US and NATO increasing military spending.

We can support Ukraine's right to secure arms for self-defense and oppose increases in Western military budgets. Countries can send weapons from their existing stockpiles, which are already enormous.

Our problem is that our compelled silence on the issue of arming Ukraine was exploited by those groups that don't want to hear Ukrainian feminists and socialists but want to show some engagement in the situation via, for example, their solidarity with us. Our silence is compelled because raising the demand to defend Ukraine's right to secure arms puts our activists in Russia in immediate danger of arrest and long prison sentences and at the same time would have zero effect on anti-war mobilization in Russia.

Second, because of our horizontal structure, adopting a new position on arms requires organizing an assembly to vote, which is again problematic because of the risk of repression against our activists in Russia who would take part in a discussion like this. Thus, there is no way to say anything about the issue on behalf of the entire Feminist Anti-War Resistance, but many of us whom I know support Ukraine's right to secure arms.

We wanted to position ourselves against the Russian war and in solidarity with the Ukrainian resistance. So, we are now very careful to emphasize that, so we are not misunderstood as having position that is not clearly on Ukraine's side. We are on its side and against the Russian state.

Spectre recently ran a feminist anti-war statement that many in Russia, Eastern Europe, and Ukraine objected to. What were the problems with the statement?

The problem with the statement was that no feminist from Ukraine and almost none from Eastern Europe or Russia signed it. Only one did, and once she realized some of the political problems with the statement, she tried to remove her name but did not succeed.

So, instead of building solidarity, the statement produced conflict with Ukrainian, Russian, and Eastern European feminists. It also appeared very soon after Taras Bilous' ["A Letter to the Western Left"](#) that called on Western activists to listen to Ukrainian leftists, take their arguments and positions seriously, and support their country's struggle for self-determination including armed self-defense. The statement in *Spectre* did not do that.

On top of that, the statement became confused with our manifesto, which created a problem for us. The group which wrote it had a very similar name, "feminists against war," and because our manifesto invited everyone who supports us to use our logo, they did so.

And I want to emphasize that the group circulated information about our actions in Russia. So, they do actually support us, and we are grateful for their support. But that added to the problem of our own manifesto being instrumentalized in a pacifist manner against Ukraine's resistance in a way that we had never intended.

It was republished in *Spectre* under title "Feminist Anti-war Resistance," which is our group's name, whereas the name of the group that launched it is "Feminists against War," a minor, but important distinction. [When we wrote about it on Facebook](#), we got an uncomradely response, telling us that we should "do research first." That irritated us to say the least. It was patronizing and not the best way to build solidarity.

It also raised for us the question about how knowledge and positions are developed on the international left about our region. From our vantage point, and it is something that Taras Bilous' letter stressed, statements about people involved in conflicts must be created with their participation, not on their behalf, and in their absence.

One of the problems implicit in this debate is how to position the left internationally against the inter-imperial conflict between the US/NATO and Russia and at the same time in solidarity with Ukraine's right to self-determination and self-defense. How do you think feminists internationally and the left internationally should position themselves?

As feminists, we always start to answer such questions from the standpoint of experience including bodily experience. [Ukrainian feminists articulated this method and position](#) very well. Experience shapes knowledge production, just as much as abstract reason. It is often the source of affective solidarity.

We listen to the experience and ideas of those bearing the brunt of oppression, in this case Ukrainians, and based on that standpoint develop an approach to all the issues of this war. That has led us to be in solidarity with Ukrainian feminist resistance, with Ukrainian left resistance.

We are for whatever they need to win their liberation. From that standpoint, we are against Russian imperialism. We need to further develop our ideas about the inter-imperial conflict as part of this international dialog and debate on the left.

What is Putin's endgame in Ukraine? Will he stop at just taking Donbas or, even if at some point there is a settlement, will that just be a steppingstone to further war in Ukraine? What impact will the war, sanctions, the deaths of Russian soldiers, and the economic crisis have on Russian society and women in particular in the coming years?

For us as feminists, the regime's war has intensified all the problems in Russian society. Its imperialism will only cultivate more patriarchal oppression and violence against women, LGBTQ+ people, people with disabilities, and other oppressed groups.

This nightmare will get worse if Russia in some way “wins” this war. If it welcomes its military back as victors, this neofascist regime would be strengthened and its oppression of people in Russia deepened. There is no chance that former soldiers will get proper psychological treatment to work through the trauma and violence they went through, as well as no way that war criminals will be prosecuted.

It might also inspire the far-right and militarism internationally. I think that we have good reasons to expect that Putin’s revitalization of [Carl Schmitt’s ideas of sovereignty and imperialism](#) will gain a wider adherence and implementation — and nothing but horrors will come from that. And even worse, other powers will secure Russian backing to carry out their militarism.

Inside Russia, the affirmation of patriarchal policies and attitudes would lead to higher levels of sexual violence and domestic violence. We were already combating these problems before the war, and they’ve gotten worse since its start.

I cannot imagine what it would be like if Russia “wins” the war and if Putin gets something that will allow him to “save face”. We already think of Putin’s regime as a domestic abuser. The last thing we need is for this abuser to prove he has done everything right and achieved his goals with violence.

Ashley Smith is a socialist writer and activist in Burlington, Vermont. He has written in numerous publications including *Truthout*, *International Socialist Review*, *Socialist Worker*, *ZNet*, *Jacobin*, *New Politics*, *Harpers*, and many other online and print publications. He is currently working on a book for Haymarket entitled *Socialism and Anti-Imperialism*.

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