Anarchists & The War in Ukraine

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Despite the appeal of nationalism among today's Ukrainians, the legacy of anarchism in that tormented region has not been forgotten. In fact, it is resurgent, though not always in ways that anarchists in more comfortable lands might like.

Russian President Vladimir Putin's claim that Ukraine is historically part of Russia is almost accurate. However, Russia is the child of Ukraine. The ancient state of Kievan Rus grew up around Kyiv, the pivot of a Baltic-to-Constantinople trade route.

Until 1991, Ukraine had never been independent. Over centuries, parts of the territory were absorbed by Poland, Turkey, Lithuania, Austria, and Russia. The very name Ukraine means borderland, conveying perhaps a subconscious feeling of not quite belonging anywhere.

While this complex history of shifting borders was misery for the Ukrainians, it had the effect of Europeanizing the region in many ways, making its culture, religion and language different from those of Russia. Thus, the opinion expressed by many Ukrainians today that they are Europeans, not Russians. It may also be a factor in the appeal of anarchism to many Ukrainians—the people matter more than the state.

Although there is value in knowing the past, what matters is the present. It's clear that Ukrainians (with the exception of the ethnic Russians) are not Russians, don't want to be Russians, and now that they are under brutal attack by Russians, no longer even like Russians. They do not want to be colonized.

Russia has a long history of demonizing the Ukrainian people as kulaks (wealthy peasants who exploit the poor), Nazis and heretics (to Russian Orthodoxy). The war is a product of Slavophilism, a creed that Putin embraces. Slavophilism is about autocracy, anti-Semitism, Russian Orthodoxy, and the moral superiority of a unique Russian culture and traditions. Above all, Slavophilism is a prisoner of the past.

A true Slavophile would have trouble understanding why Ukrainians don't want to be Russians. But something more sinister than Putin's Slavophile megalomania is at work here. He is driven by kleptocratic capitalism, the corrupt corporate oligarchy that keeps him in power, and whom he enriches in return.

The story of the rise and fall of anarchism in Ukraine in the years following the October Revolution is well known to anarchists, and to most Ukrainians. Nestor Makhno (1888–1934) not only led an anarchist uprising after the Bolshevik 1917 revolution, but also wrote extensively about the dream of establishing anarchism in his homeland. The crushing of this insurgency resulted in the establishment of state capitalism and communist tyranny.

The story of the Makhnovisti was suppressed throughout the Soviet era. If Makhno or other anarchists were mentioned at all, they were portrayed as decadent enemies of Marxism-Leninism. Anarchism in Ukraine today is under the triple pressures of an existential battle against Russia, numerous right-wing organizations, and a corrupt Kiev government.

Organizations calling themselves anarchist appeared in Ukraine and other former Soviet-bloc nations as soon as the USSR collapsed in 1991. Understanding the activities of grassroots anarchist organizations in Ukraine requires weaving through a labyrinth of social media, complex politics and personalities.

Groups have appeared, disappeared, splintered and recombined in bewildering ways. The so-called 2014 Maidan Revolution amplified the confusion, and the 2022 Russian invasion added another layer of complexity as groups all across the political spectrum took up arms. The Arsenal Kyiv Hooligans proclaim on Instagram, ("We don't want your love. We don't need your respect.") RevDia and Black Headquarter (*United Anti-authoritarian Forces of Ukraine*) look much alike posing in photos with guns, camo uniforms, burned-out Russian tanks, bombed-out hospitals, more guns. All need help and accept humanitarian aid for civilian victims as well as for resistance fighters.

It's not easy for outsiders to distinguish the self-styled oxymoronic "anarcho-capitalists" from the anarcho-syndicalists or from anarchists of different tendencies.

The 2022 Russian invasion sparked new interest in Makhno, though today's situation is not comparable to that of a century ago.

The Makhnovisti temporarily worked both with and against the Reds and the Whites when it was advantageous, and also resisted German and Austro-Hungarian invaders, as they defended anarchist communes and other self-managed entities like the free soviets against the takeover by any of the authoritarian forces arrayed against them, regardless of the label. Now, as then, Ukraine is seething with grassroots organizations and militias, but neither the enemy nor the objectives are the same.

Ukrainian independence in 1991 saw the re-penetration of Western capital and consumerism bringing with it a dazzling flood of Nike sneakers, Big Macs, and iPhones. This encouraged some people to adopt right-wing frames of mind. Many rightists, who are often well educated and work in the informatics field, have appropriated anarchist language, the red-and-black flag, and even Makhno himself, portraying him as a nationalist (not true; he called for a Ukraine separate from Russia, but not a Ukrainian state) and downplaying his anarchist ideals. There are also people who maintain a genuine anarchist perspective.

"Most 'real' anarchists in Ukraine," writes Ukrainian journalist and economic analyst Denys Gorbach at open-democracy.net, "work at the grass roots level, involved in squats, punk concerts, distributing food to homeless people (Food not Bombs) and so on.

But nearly all anarchist groups and collectives are involved in the fighting. The fact that virtually the entire population has mobilized in self-defense against Russia puts political ideology in abeyance. This creates a dilemma for all radicals. Yes, the Ukrainians must defend themselves, and yes, it is essential to call for the dismantling of the military-industrial-imperialist system that makes and sells those arms.

Many radicals point out that the Ukrainians are accepting help from governments and organizations that are complicit in genocidal and other repressive operations around the world. It's a question of priorities. Is the existential threat to Ukraine worth accepting this help? Can you refuse help, however problematic, if your life depends on it?

The Territorial Defense Forces (TDF), the reserve arm of the Ukrainian army, consists partly of veterans of the humiliating defeat in Crimea in 2014, partly of volunteers including foreigners, and of a motley variety of men and women civilians with little training. Rightists, leftists, and anarchists can be found in the ranks. Some anarchists work with the leftist Resistance Committee, and some identify with Green anarchism.

The regular army has used the name Makhno's Bow for the forces defending Guliaipole, Makhno's hometown. At least some of the trade unions support anarchist goals. A "Feminist Manifesto" published in July 2022 advocates an anarchist philosophy.

Since independence, Ukraine has been a corrupt faux-democracy, like other post-USSR states. Bribery is endemic at all levels of society and politics. Bureaucrats steal public funds. Many workers are so poorly paid that participation in corruption is a matter of survival.

Even assuming an eventual Ukrainian state victory, it is likely that Ukrainians will still have to deal with a corrupt government. Nevertheless, it's encouraging that Makhno and the anarchists of a century ago have not been forgotten.

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