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Defend Ukraine!

Fight Russian Imperialism!

Mike Ermler

December 15, 2014

Editors' Note: The article below deals with the crisis that began in Ukraine last fall with the Maidan uprising and the peaceful overthrow of the Russian-allied Yanukovich government.

The crisis intensified with Russia's annexation of Crimea in March, and has continued with Russia's arming and aid of separatists in Ukraine's east. Since Russia sent additional units in late summer to stop the Ukraine government's recapture of the separatist region, there has been a bogus ceasefire which Russia is all but openly violating by sending additional weapons and commandos to the separatists, interventions that have continued since the article was written.

Mike Ermler is a longtime anarchist in Detroit who follows the situation closely. Here, he argues that revolutionaries should defend Ukraine's independence through a tactical bloc with any and all forces resisting Russia, while maintaining their own independent revolutionary politics and goals. Readers wishing additional detail and historical background will find an accompanying set of posts by Mike and others, originally to the discussion site of the First of May Anarchist Alliance, on our website, www.utopianmag.com.

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The last days of August saw a large scale direct employment of Russian regular troops, artillery and armored units inside Ukraine's borders. This development in the Russian government's six months long violent assault on Ukrainian sovereignty resulted in a fragile and not entirely popular September ceasefire agreement. All need be clear that this is not only a challenge by the Russian state to Ukraine's new ruling circles. It is an attack on a majority of the Ukrainian peoples' democratic aspirations.

Internationally all partisans of justice and self-determination for oppressed peoples, truly democratic organizations of social self defense and anti-authoritarian revolutionaries need to rally to defense of Ukraine. Sharp condemnation and clear opposition to the Russian regime's ongoing imperialist attempts to weaken, subordinate and now dismember Ukraine is well past due from anarchist and anti-authoritarian groupings.

Events not only demand an unequivocal anarchist political defense of Ukraine's territorial integrity but solidarity with military actions aimed at defeating Putin's adventure. Additionally, the need for anti-authoritarians to get their act together in regards to understanding and intervening in "imperfect" anti-elite movements with strong nationalist, religious or liberal sentiments was dramatically highlighted by this winter's popular Maidan insurgency.

In such situations, the advance of social revolutionary developments with a strong anti-authoritarian component requires flexibility. It will not come about by anarchists adopting a class reductionist and pacifist abstentionism. In the case of Ukraine to their discredit many anarchists appear to have done so.

Adherence to the principle of self determination alone requires defense of Ukrainian independence. Ukraine became independent through a referendum in August 1991, supported by 92 percent of the voters, with majorities in all regions, even

Crimea. Over the 23 years since that initial referendum and the resulting declaration of independence, the overwhelming majority of the peoples of Ukraine have and continue to support independence. This applies not only to the more traditionally nationalist Ukrainian speakers but to the Russian speakers as well. Experience and political world view, not ethnicity or tongue, determines one's stance on independence and Russia.

Principle and common decency aside, there is a practical political purpose/objective for not remaining neutral in this clash between the two nation states. A defeat for Putin and his "Eurasian/Russian World project" in regards to Ukraine, a geopolitical linchpin, can only have a positive impact throughout the region. A serious challenge to his moves would break his string of "successes", heartening and fueling all domestic opposition to his authoritarian grip on Russia itself. Likewise, the internal opposition to neighboring neo-Soviet dictator Lukashenka in Belarus would receive a lift and more widely the terrain on which social movements from the Baltic to the Caucasus and through the Central Asian republics operate would open up.

The Russian speakers are not a monolith. Ethnic Russians were sent or migrated into Ukraine over the long years of Russian domination to work or, particularly as in the case of Crimea, for military deployment. Many Russian speakers, however, are from Ukrainian communities whose ability to speak Ukrainian was severely limited or extinguished over the long stretch of Tsarist and Soviet rule and Great Russian bias. Ironically, some of the hard core Ukrainian nationalist groupings in the center and eastern regions conduct their meetings in Russian. Surzhyk a mixture of Ukrainian and Russian, like intermarriage is widespread.

Post independence many people from nationalities around the region have decided to build their lives in Ukraine. These individuals and communities are amongst the most avid defenders of independence. Ethnic Russians, Jewish people, Ar-

menians, Azeris, Georgians and others could be found among the fighters and martyrs in the Maidan and presently amongst the volunteers fighting and dying against the reactionary separatists and Putin's troops in the east.

Clearly, the government in Kyiv and much of this pro-Ukraine population has a Western and European orientation. Deepening entanglement with the EU, IMF and possibly NATO is a mistake from a working class and anarchist viewpoint. We should not soft peddle our opposition to these institutions. This opposition, however, does not condone standing aside or apologizing for Putin's use of economic or military force to bludgeon Ukraine or others onto a path they reject.

Given the past and recent history of the region it is understandable why many Ukrainians look westward in their search for economic security and human rights. Without a clear defense of their right to self determination why would they trust to hear us out on our anarchist perspectives for the road forward.

Ukrainian and Russian nationalisms are not equivalent, not of the same dynamics. In the past and in this present situation Ukrainian nationalism overall has a decentralizing, democratic thrust whatever its outward forms. Ukrainian national resistance despite its present political limitations and some brutally tragic past episodes has the potential to open space for future democratic and social revolutionary developments. Proponents of a narrow ethnic Ukrainian nationalism do not dominate the movement. This place is held by an inclusive civic nationalism whose political center of gravity to present is a conservative liberalism, hence its attraction to the EU.

Russian nationalism, whether Tsarist, Soviet or in Putin's packaging was and remains a vehicle for the subordination and exploitation of Ukrainians and other peoples. It is authoritarian and imperialist. Its militant supporters in the now independent

ple as to the shortfalls of these societies. We use peoples' disappointment and anger with their role vis a vis defending Ukraine to agitate against relying on them and on themselves and for building solidarity with anti-imperialist and anti-authoritarian social movements regionally and more widely.

Ukrainian independence did not come about out of a radical-revolutionary break with the institutions and culture of Soviet/Russian society. The oligarchs, the political elites and the bureaucracy are a reflection of this fact. Ukraine is a textbook case of incomplete national and state formation. Twenty plus years on there were many in the ruling strata themselves as ambivalent, contemptuous and hostile to Ukrainian statehood and culture as to the people they govern.

This was crystalized over Yanukovich's term in office. His regime came to power on the heels of the political fragmentation and demoralization that followed the failings of the forces that governed post the 2004 Orange Revolution. Abusive government increasingly hostile to things Ukrainian became increasingly entrenched as the Donetsk based "Family" clique brought its exceedingly criminal methods to the wider nation after assuming power in Kyiv.

The Revolution of Dignity as the Maidan uprising was called, was a popular attempt at trying to pursue a solution to a range of social, political and cultural issues never realized out of the events of either 1990 or 2004. In short it can be seen as a national and bourgeois democratic revolution now with all the problems and shortfalls such a project entails. With this incomplete revolution now on a war footing, as anarchists we should continue to solidarize with it and defend it while pointing out at every turn the need for deeper social revolutionary measures to secure the security and justice people are striving for.

To abstain because it is far too removed from a comforting syndicalist scenario/template is criminal.

rades who choose this path. It must be clear to the Ukrainian people that we actively oppose Russian imperialism.

Defense of Russian imperialism proved widespread throughout the past year. There are those who quite consciously support Putin. A range of European right wing nationalist parties like the FN, Jobbik and the BNP support Russia as do those on the left such as various Communists or Der Linke in Germany. Others accept the imperialist carve up of the world as natural and necessary and believe Russia and all large states have a right to their spheres of influence and domination. Additionally there are those on the anti-Stalinist left who in simplistic ignorance can only see US and Western imperialism and Ukrainian nationalism, blind to the impact of Russian imperial power and appetites.

A group of Bosnian anarchists issued a statement taking on this focus on one imperialism and expressing solidarity with the military resistance to Russian imperialism. The reaction amongst anarchists entailed no responses of substance. Charges of being in contact with rightist autonomous nationalists were bandied about and a call to not post their statement was issued. These associations may exist and a fuller discussion of their nature if true is warranted. I believe, however, the character of discussion in this instance is indicative of how difficult a discussion of Russian imperialism vs. Ukrainian resistance within the anarchist movement may prove.

Several anarchist groups have refused to agree to possible common action such as the Bosnians advocate. Apparently this is because they feel the idea of actual coordination in action with rightist groups defending the country deviates too far from a model of independent anarchist and syndicalist action. They have limited themselves to opposing "Russian imperialism," in an overall way.

Opposition to Russian imperialism however should mean coordination in action against the Russian campaign. It doesn't mean not attacking the US, NATO and the EU. We educate peo-

nations ringing the Russian Federation are of a reactionary and colonial settler mindset whatever their class position.

The Russian government and others steadily repeat nonsense about the Maidan uprising being a fascist coup orchestrated by the West. They deny its broad based popular and democratic nature. Unlike the Maidan insurgency the so called separatist revolt, they defend, is greatly narrower in support, has a putsch like character and is thoroughly ridden with fascists, Stalinist types and hybrids of the two.

No one should be taken in by false claims of victimization of Russian speakers, being anti-fascist or somehow having an autonomous revolutionary working class thrust, as some on the left put forth. As anarchists we are for decentralization and local autonomy but in this case these purported "people's republics" must be condemned as agencies of the Russian state and its sordid allies. The language of autonomy and anti-fascism is cynically being employed in the service of a Great Russian imperialist and chauvinist offensive.

In March, Russian troops seized the Crimea long home to the Russian Fleet and other Russian military installations, military families, retirees, vacationers and generations of spin off settlers. Since independence an arrangement had Moscow paying Ukraine for continuing its military facilities on the peninsula. Overnight over 40% of Crimea's population, its ethnic Ukrainian and Muslim Tatar people found themselves against their wishes under Moscow's rule. The Russian majority (including Russian citizens) voted to approve this amidst an hysterical "anti-fascist" media campaign and the presence of armed pro-Russia gangs everywhere. Prior to and during the vote by the Crimea legislature to secede from Ukraine each representative was constantly watched over by two armed agents.

Now that Crimea is part of Putin's Russia, two respected leaders of the Tatar community have been barred from returning home and a Tatar scholar physically assaulted and his pass-

port stolen attempting to block his attending a UN World Conference on Indigenous Peoples in New York. Tatar homes, cultural and political institutions have been subject to search and seizure and individuals have disappeared. The Mejlis, governing body of the peninsula's Tatar community, which was recognized by the Ukrainian state is now in effect banned by the new Russian authorities. Evicted from its building it is declared "improperly registered". Non Tatar activists and others get detained and falsely branded as "Right Sector" agents. This amidst a reported general disarray in delivery of public services and benefits.

In April actions broke out across the south and east of the country attempting to duplicate the Crimean events. Municipal buildings were sometimes stormed and local Maidan spawned activities and pro-Ukraine demonstrations were physically attacked. However, throughout most of these heavily Russian speaking regions, this movement, while attracting some numbers, failed to reach anywhere near critical mass and soon retreated.

It was only in the Donbas region that this revolt gained any footing. The Donbas was once the center of both Tsarist Russia's and the Soviet Union's coal and steel industry. The region now suffers from a pronounced economic stagnation and lack of modernization. It is comprised of the Oblasts (provinces) of Donetsk and Luhansk both bordering Russia. The area in the past has supported Ukrainian independence but by lesser margins than elsewhere except Crimea. There is a widespread nostalgia for both the Soviet and even Tsarist times. Conspiracy theories abound and anti-cosmopolitan feelings leave it the most hostile area in Ukraine for foreigners, minorities, LGBT people and others.

Toppled President Yanukovich and his circle known as "The Family" have deep roots in this region. Loyalists are plentiful amongst municipal officials, police, established patronage and long allied criminal networks. Money for maintaining influ-

comrades upholding a position of military-technical support or defensive coordination of all groupings opposing Russian imperialism and its Ukrainian allies and agents. This tactical bloc extends to the Ukrainian government and its official forces. It entails no political support to that government or its constituent parties, proposals or plans to organize society. Nor does it mean relinquishing the right to criticize, debate and act on strategies to further autonomous popular initiatives and defeat our immediate common enemy. Neither should it blind comrades to the need to be prepared to physically defend themselves and others from this government or temporary allies among rightists and others. in the course of this alliance.

The existence of strong workplace and community based defense groups organized on anti-authoritarian lines with a political as well as physically independent working class perspective would be ideal in the present situation. If such independent radical-revolutionary formations existed on some scale or cohere out of the present struggle, the position of a military and tactical alliance would still hold true. That is until influence and forces are accumulated through this tactic and a clearly revolutionary crisis and necessity to act presents itself. If this doesn't come about the bloc is dissolved as the common threat is either defeated or dissipates.

This phase of struggle may not be overtly social revolutionary but anti-elite feelings run strong among the rank and file fighters and those mobilizing in their support. In the east entire communities are resisting an armed terror made possible by Moscow. Anarchists cannot stand aside while people's democratic aspirations are subject to violent assault. For Ukrainian comrades who throw themselves in this fight, the experience, personal ties and trust gained with a range of responsible non anarchist militants can only prove helpful in future struggles. Internationally anarchism as a purportedly revolutionary current opposed to all oppression must be able to support com-

Future provocations/interventions by Russia into other parts of Ukraine fomented through such networks are a real possibility.

The present Kyiv government did not initiate the events that have militarized the situation. In fact they stood like deer in the headlights as Russian and separatist provocations and violence unfolded.

The Right Sector took the step of agitating for a Revolutionary National Guard, the arming of the people and confronting the armed gangs in the east. Prodded by John Kerry and the Russians in Geneva Kyiv's response was to discuss disarming and outlawing Right Sector. Once it was apparent no military help was coming from the US or honest peace making from Moscow, any ideas of blanket repression of the militant wings of the Maidan movement were dropped by the provisional government. With little alternative, a version of the arming of volunteers was adopted. Steps to cobble together a somewhat reliably secure and functioning force out of the existing official armed services were begun while a mix of political forces assembled volunteer forces to defend or reclaim areas and populations under the separatist gun.

Ukraine wide there has been a movement of young men and women, veterans and others from across the political spectrum volunteering for military training, defense preps and service in the east. Whole units/sotnya of various Maidan defense groups enlisted together. There are popular initiatives to collect supplies, funds and provide support for these fighters and the military effort. One example is union members from a medical workers affiliate of the independent KPVU collecting and transferring supplies to the war zone, conducting medic training for volunteer and regular military units and working in front line hospital units.

Anarchists and anti-authoritarians should be active in all aspects of this movement to the fullest degree possible. Internationally our networks and organizations must be supportive of

ence and recruiting new local and outside mercenaries is no issue. The Family and friends amassed huge sums through bribes and looting of both regional and national public treasuries.

As throughout the Russian "near abroad" there exist in the Donbas a variety of Russian based hardcore nationalist and fascist groups. These networks geared up funneling volunteers across the border constituting the backbone of the armed separatists. These activities were publically sanctioned in several "patriotic" and ironically "anti-fascist" state sponsored celebrations in Moscow and elsewhere. Key figures in these Pan-Russian rightist and Stalinist groups have backgrounds in the Russian military and special forces. This facilitated their collaboration with Russian intelligence and special operations teams.

The Donbas is home to communities nervous and questioning of occurrences in the rest of Ukraine. Support for measures of autonomy is strong. This, however, never congealed into a solid large scale support for the two so called "Peoples Republics" and their "militaries". Many in the population including potential sympathizers became alienated by actions they engaged in. There also ended up being much contention between the separatist factions. Igor Girkin, a.k.a. Igor Strelkov, a key rebel commander complained of the inability to gain near enough volunteers from the local communities to match the more than adequate supply of Russian provided weapons and technical aid.

Just prior to events going full tilt, it appeared that around 70% of the region's population was for remaining in Ukraine but with a range of differing specifics and fervor. Those who backed militant separatism or unity with Russia stood at 30%. The latter were concentrated in and around specific cities.

Earlier in the spring before all manifestations of being pro-Ukraine had been repressed in these so called liberated areas, demonstrations and marches by the most active elements of the contending camps were comparable in size. The risks and possi-

ble resulting downward pressure on numbers were overwhelmingly with the Ukraine unity and Maidan partisans. They were subject to a wave of assaults, targeted killings, kidnappings and other forms of intimidation.

The separatist advance was halted and slowly turned, largely by units comprised of volunteers from the Donbas itself and adjacent areas of the east. Units that were increasingly augmented by volunteers from across Ukraine. After some delay units of the Ukrainian armed forces employing heavier weaponry and aircraft were brought to bear and under this pressure and the internal weaknesses discussed above the separatist insurgency began to more rapidly lose ground and seemed doomed. As a result by mid-August the operation needed to be rescued through thinly disguised Russian military intervention.

At this time Russian citizens who played prominent roles in either the so called peoples republics or the armed wings began to resurface in Moscow and local figures suddenly were raised to fill their positions. Russian troops then crossed the border in force securing the separatist position and inflicting severe losses on the Ukrainian side.

An unsteady ceasefire leaves one third of Donetsk's and Luhansk's area and one half of the two provinces population under the control of Russia and its allies. They are pressing their positions on numerous questions in the ensuing talks. Noting the anemic responses from the US and EU states Putin continues to at times brandish military threats while claiming for himself the role of peacemaker. Seeking to further weaken the EU front, Russia remains combative in the areas of economic threats and propaganda aimed at the various EU states' bodies politic.

Post-Maidan, the importance of the question of national self-determination has come into sharp focus. Likewise, issues of a military-political character have come to the fore. Moscow's actions and those of the Party of Regions, the Communist Party of

Ukraine and others within the country out to regain or retain some measure of power or fearing consequences of their involvement with the hated Yanukovych regime have made this so.

The top levels of the ruling clique may have fled but sympathizers are still in place throughout various levels and arms of the bureaucracy. There are also undoubtedly outright agents of the Russian state still in key positions.

Under Yanukovych the official armed forces were allowed to decline in size, upkeep and preparedness. His regime, however, expanded the numbers of internal and special police forces and their benefits. These internal security forces came to number 200,000 while the army, navy and air force personnel slipped to nearly 100,000. Military journals assess that the Ukrainian Army while numbering 68,000 had only 6,000 infantry remotely fit for combat service.

Some of the security police such as the Berkut have melted into safe populations. They fear prosecution or retribution given their involvement in murderous events at the Maidan and other acts of repression. They are angered at a loss of employment in a bleak economy. Glimpses of many individuals wearing pieces of Berkut uniforms were visible playing roles in mobs that attacked pro-Maidan forces from Kharkiv to Odessa and into the Donbas. In the year leading to Maidan these police were an active component in an "anti-fascist" campaign launched by the Yanukovych directed at all opposition activities and the independent press. Throughout the country they directed and worked in tandem with federations of fight clubs and sports associations such as Oplot (Stronghold) paid to be the "popular anti-fascist" street force. This spring Oplot was openly involved in attacks on the Kharkiv Maidan movement and one of its important figures Alexander Zakharchenko has now assumed a leadership position in the Donetsk Peoples Republic.