

Russia: The Anarcho-Communist Combat Organization

An Interview with a Clandestine Anarchist Group

CrimethInc., BOAK

August 22, 2022

When the Russian military invaded Ukraine at the end of February 2022, anarchists and other anti-war demonstrators defied draconian anti-protest measures to take the streets to express opposition. Over the months since those protests were crushed, resistance to the invasion has assumed new forms. Clandestine attacks across Russia have targeted railroads, military recruiting centers, vehicles belonging to pro-war zealots, and Russian state propaganda messaging in favor of the war.

One of the groups promoting these attacks is known as the Anarcho-Communist Combat Organization. In the following interview, they speak about how they see their predecessors in the regional history of anarchist movements, how the political situation in Russia deteriorated to such an extent that it was possible to suppress social movements and invade Ukraine, and what kind of organizing is possible under the prevailing conditions. We also asked them to go into detail about some of their operational protocol, in case this is ever useful for anarchists elsewhere who may be compelled to adopt similar strategies as state repression intensifies around the world.

We, not the author(s), have added the hyperlinks and the notes between brackets that appear below for the purpose of assisting the reader.

As we understand it, the Anarcho-Communist Combat Organization maintains various social media pages, maintains a fund to support groups carrying out clandestine direct action, and helps publicize direct action reports and information about prisoners captured in the course of struggle. Tell us how you see your publishing work, as that is the chief way many people encounter your efforts.

From some comrades, we have encountered critiques regarding social media activity as such: that it is an endless stream of short messages, which does not leave any impact in the readers' minds.

We consider our social media efforts to be an important part of our media work, understood in the sense of our efforts to propagate our ideas. Our preferred platform for that purpose is Telegram, as it is less censored and it offers a somewhat more intellectual and politicized environment.

At the same time, we understand that the owners of any social media platforms, not to mention service providers, can cooperate with the repressive apparatus of any state. Therefore, is an important principle for us to ensure anonymity in our media work. We use an operating system based on Linux, which provides connection to the Internet exclusively through TOR. That goes for Telegram as well—we use it only this way. To register needed accounts for our activity, we use anonymous and virtual numbers and email at riseup.net, which is the project in the field of Internet technology that we trust most. We also consider it important to erase the metadata of media files—images, video, and texts. Some operating systems based on Linux allow you to do this within two clicks; with others, you need to install particular programs. In any case, it is always accessible and essential.

One of your roles is to report direct actions and the like in Russia. How do you confirm reports and news items that reach you before sharing them?

Regarding news items that we encounter online or which are sent to us—if the news is sent to us directly, we start by evaluating how plausible it is based on our own experience. We factor in the authenticity and clarity of the communiqué text (usually those who try to fake a communiqué are quite bad at pretending to be anarchists); the legibility of photo or video footage; and the precise coordinates regarding the place, date, and target of an attack. If the information we have received can be trusted according to these criteria, we consider it to be true and publish it. If the event is also reported on in mass media, including corporate media, that can serve as an additional confirmation that the event in question actually happened.

What process do you use to decide who to support with your action fund when there is no way to make direct contact?

Deciding who to support from the fund we have started is not easy, especially considering that it is rather small-scale. At first, we sent minor amounts to all who requested assistance. Soon, we discovered that in most cases, we did not receive in return any sort of confirmation that any real action was taken by these people. For this reason, we have now started to provide support from the fund *post factum*, when there is evidence that actions have taken place.

The transfers take place between BTC cryptowallets. With that, we send the recipients instructions regarding how to anonymize the cryptocurrency when buying fiat money for it.

We want to make one important recommendation to all future participants in partisan resistance: conduct preliminary tests of all the means of combat that you plan to use in your actions. Whether you are using Molotov cocktail or more advanced means, this will enable you to avoid unfortunate mistakes and problems in the moment of direct action.

Looking back at the history of Russia and the surrounding regions, what organizations and struggles do you consider to be your predecessors?

We see ourselves within the revolutionary anarchist tradition in Eastern Europe. We see the militant anarchist groups of the beginning of the last century as our predecessors: Chernoe Znamia [“Black Banner,” a federation of cadres founded in Białystok in 1903], “Beznachaliye”

[“Without Authority,” the principal anarchist circle in Petersburg at the opening of the 20th century], and the “Southern Russian Anarchist-Syndicalist Group.” What inspires us in these organizations is their commitment to resolute militant activity and their desire to involve the broad masses of the people in combat work, to unite the political and economic struggle into a single struggle for social revolution. We also consider ourselves to be the successors of the Revolutionary Insurgent Army of Ukraine (RPAU) [the forces associated with Nestor Makhno, also known as the Black Army] and the anarchists of the underground who, during the Civil War, opposed the reactionary and Bolshevik dictatorship with arms in their hands.

In regards to more recent times, our partisan anarchism brings creative approach to ideas and practice of New Revolutionary Alternative from the 1990s [a Russian insurrectionary anarchist group that carried out a series of attacks on government targets during the Chechen war] and groups organized around «Black Blog» around the end of the 2000s and the beginning of the 2010s. Besides that, we are inspired by heroic self-sacrifice of Mikhail Zhlobitsky, who bombed the FSB headquarters in Arkhangelsk on October 31, 2018, and we admire what he did.

Looking back on the experience and example of our predecessors, we conclude that successful revolutionary work requires a disciplined organization composed of determined, selfless, and dedicated comrades.

Over the years of your activity, you have seen Putin’s government become more and more repressive. When the government tightens repression, the anarchist movement faces a dilemma: should we become more public, taking more risks, in order to try to prevent a backlash in society? Or should we go underground to prepare for repression? Is it possible to do both? How do we balance the need for community organization with the need to keep our projects secure?

We are aware of examples in which some comrades have managed to balance between publicity and the underground for quite a long time, and to be quite active in both. However, this is the exception to the rule. A certain division into “above-ground” and “underground” wings is inevitable. The experience of many revolutionary movements of the twentieth century attests to this.

It is important for both wings to exist and to be strong. At the same time, we insist that there must be ties between them, including the possibility for militants to transfer from one wing to the other. In the past, we sometimes heard an opinion that for “security reasons” the public and underground wings should be completely isolated from each other. In our experience, there are always transitional links and channels of communication of some kind.

What advice can you give to anarchists in other parts of the world who are not currently organized in underground structures, but who may have to organize them? What steps should they take now that might be more difficult in the future?

It is very difficult to answer this without being intimately familiar with the specific realities of the parts of the world that we are talking about. Consequently, we can only emphasize the most general points.

First of all, comrades need to agitate within the anarchist movement itself for the creation of underground armed structures—as far as we know, the anarchists in most countries have no understanding of the need for this at all.

Then, the primary organizations of such structures need to be created, and more broadly, a network of reliable contacts in different regions of the country—of course, taking all the necessary security measures.

At the same time, comrades need to organize training and drills in various military fields.

It is never too early to start saving up money, weapons, and equipment. And to prepare fully secure frameworks for both public and non-public information and media activity, as well as non-cash money transfers. These seem to be the basics.

Looking back at the last fifteen years in Russia, could any sort of international solidarity and support have enabled anarchists in Russia to prevent Putin from gaining enough control over Russian society to be able to invade Ukraine?

Perhaps it makes sense to look back at an even earlier period—back to 1993 and 1996, when Yeltsin and the oligarchs consolidated power and crushed their political rivals. As unlikable as those rivals may have been, it now seems that the path to building an authoritarian state that could suppress any political alternative was already mapped out at that point. Putin only followed this logic, and he already faced fewer obstacles than Yeltsin. Then came the apolitical (or “satiated,” as people call them) 2000s, when there was hardly any possibility of rocking the boat. Perhaps, in theory, the political crisis of 2011–2012 could have ended Putin’s rule, if all the opposition forces had acted more cohesively and radically. The anarchists tried to radicalize the protest, but our forces were not enough, and the authorities decided to launch the first serious waves of repression.

It is hard for us to say what sort of international support could have made our movement stronger back then. The seizure of Crimea and the outbreak of war against Ukraine in 2014 caused a great upsurge of reactionary sentiments in Russia, and the country went straight to the current disaster.

In the US, some “anti-imperialists” (including a small number of alleged anarchists) believe that everyone who supports Ukrainian anarchists involved in military resistance to the invasion is fighting “side by side” with Ukrainian fascists, supporting the Zelensky government, and advancing the interests of NATO. Please explain your own position regarding how you think Russian and Ukrainian anarchists should act in this situation and what anarchists in other parts of the world should do in solidarity.

The defeat of Ukraine will bring about the triumph of the most reactionary forces in Russia—finalizing its transformation into a neo-Stalinist concentration camp, with unlimited power concentrated in the FSB [the Federal Security Service, successor to the KGB] and a totalitarian Orthodox imperial ideology. In occupied Ukraine, every sprout of civil society and political freedom will be destroyed and the very existence of Ukrainian culture will be called into question. On the other hand, if Russia is defeated, there will inevitably be a crisis for Putin’s power and a prospect of revolution. For anarchists, the choice between these alternatives seems clear.

In any case, we here in Eastern Europe see all this as much more urgent and real than the arguments (which people can have without committing to anything) about the geopolitical games of the United States and NATO, which we prefer to leave to Putin’s propagandists. So, solidarity with us means solidarity with Ukraine, with its victory.

You have had over half a year to evaluate the various anarchist strategies in Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine in response to the invasion. What did you expect and what sur-

prised you? For example, what do you think was the outcome of the public anti-war protests in February and March 2022? Can you share any thoughts on the effectiveness of Operation Solidarity, the Resistance Committee, the Feminist Anti-War Resistance, the Autonomous Action, or other organizations on both sides of the border that tried to respond to the invasion?

To be honest, in six months it is still unclear which combination of strategies is most effective. All the actions of the comrades have been of great importance, and still we cannot yet say that the anarchist movement in Russia/Belarus or Ukraine is on the rise, although in Ukraine we see an inspiring mobilization.

We support the decision of the anarchists in Ukraine to take up arms and join the military confrontation with imperialism. Any revolutionary political movement must be combative, must demonstrate its fighting ability in times of war and participate with society at large in its struggle. We are pleasantly surprised at the level of logistical success, the collection of material aid and necessary items, and the media resonance that the “civil wing” of the libertarian movement in Ukraine has managed to achieve.

However, we would like to see more organization and structure among anarchists on the Ukrainian side, as well as a more clearly and actively expressed political position. The manifesto of the Resistance Committee alone is insufficient for this.

As for Russia, we think that all actions—peaceful, violent, symbolic, and informational—are very important. Anything that can touch the minds and souls of people in our society. At the same time, we are supporters of partisan methods: sabotage, direct action, partisan war against the fascist regime. In our opinion, these will produce the greatest resonance and have the greatest political and revolutionary potential under the present conditions.

Do you think that people outside of Russia could have done something to make the first stage of the Russian anti-war movement go differently?

It must be said that although few believed that a full-scale invasion would take place, a huge international solidarity movement emerged within the first hours of the war. Anti-authoritarians who joined the armed resistance to Putinism in Ukraine were quickly provided and equipped with most of the necessary items. Volunteers, including members of anarchist initiatives, also helped Ukrainian refugees. There were solidarity actions, meetings, and discussions. A lot of work was done, and here we can only thank the comrades.

But there is almost always more we can do in the sphere of solidarity actions or fundraising for the libertarian movements in Ukraine and in Russia. We often hear that people in the West are gradually “getting tired of the topic of war,” and we don’t see the same consensus on the question of the international isolation of Putin’s regime that used to exist. What is important now is to maintain a “tone of solidarity,” to maintain a high level of awareness and activity.

Ever since Bakunin left Russia in 1840, and possibly before that, generation after generation of Russian radicals have had to flee Russia and organize outside of it. Can you share any thoughts on the problems of organizing movements that include political émigrés in exile? For example, how do you maintain connections between people inside and outside Russia? How do you balance between the influence of Russian comrades who “represent” the movement as émigrés in Western Europe and the perspectives of those who are still inside the country and are exposed to more risk as a result?

As far as we can see, one of the important problems in emigration is remaining politically active, maintaining a radical perspective, and finding a balance between integrating into a new community and staying connected to the realities and the movement back home.

The current community of exiles from Russia is, as far as we can see, quite dispersed. However, there are several groups of Russian anarchists abroad. This is a very positive thing, which needs to be developed.

In our view, we can only talk about “representation” if we are speaking of an organization with branches both in Russia and abroad. Otherwise, we are not talking about representation, but only about the opinions and perspectives of particular groups and individuals.

As for connections between emigrants and those who are active inside Russia—they do exist. The Internet and the means of anonymous communication contribute greatly to their existence. Here again, it would be appropriate to say that we need more organization in order for these connections to become systematic and politically significant, rather than sporadic individual communication. There are moves in the right direction, but we cannot reveal the details.

The split in Operation Solidarity has raised questions about conflict resolution and how people in the movement can cooperate with each other under intense pressure. How do the values and ideologies of the ruling order—such as capitalism, patriarchy and liberal individualism—manifest themselves in the activities and behavior of revolutionaries in the former Soviet republics?

It is difficult for us to judge the split we have not witnessed. However, we can share a common vision of the “culture of splits,” which flourishes not only in the anarchist movement, but in contemporary society in general.

Sometimes we hear from comrades: “Splits are good; if people have contradictions between each other, they should part their ways.” You can’t build a strong movement with that kind of logic. By experience, we can say that behind “ideological splits” there are always not only theoretical and practical differences, but also conflicts of ambition, a struggle for power and resources, and egoism. This is typical not only for novices who just have joined the movement, but also for old and seasoned revolutionaries who have been involved for many years.

We do not know of a surefire formula to prevent such splits. Unfortunately, every movement we know of has gone through dramatic conflicts, including some that were quite massive and successful. If anything probably serves to protect against splits, it is collective self-discipline—the understanding that the interests of the struggle are above individual desires and preferences, that collective decisions are not always what any particular individual would like, but that they are still important to keep the group together.

This may sound naïve, but comradely love and warm relationships in the collective can also protect against splits. But we know for a fact that these won’t guarantee anything, that they cannot completely eliminate conflicts. However, even if splits cannot be avoided completely, we should strive to minimize them.

Outside of Russia, we get the impression that Putin is drawing recruits from small towns in order to minimize the effects of the war in Moscow and St. Petersburg. What can be done to disrupt a political strategy that is designed to contain the impact of the war? How, in the face of powerful repression, can anarchists convey something to those who have reason to be outraged by the war?

This is a very correct impression, in our view. And here, the war itself, by its fatal inevitability, acts as the main agent of the regime's overthrow. This role cannot be undone, cannot be rolled back, neither by the Russian government if it wanted to, nor by the opponents of the regime—no other factor will be able to overshadow this war.

As to how we might bring our message to the people in these conditions of repression... we are trying to put our vision into action. Supporters of Putin's policy and those who are indifferent need to be shown that the war may be very close to them. Opponents of war need to be shown effective ways to fight it.

Do you think that the invasion of Ukraine is a sign of things to come around the world—a future in which war becomes more widespread, as capitalism enters a series of economic and environmental crises? What should people be doing now to prepare?

This is a very likely scenario. Of course, the universal answer we can give is that we should make an anarchist revolution as soon as possible :).

The more “realistic” advice should still refer to the strengthening of democratic control of the broad popular masses over the authorities—the more effective such control will be, the more problems can be avoided in the future. But this is still a relatively optimistic scenario—it is likely that society will not be strong enough, and the elites will bring their peoples to disaster. What remains to be done here is probably to try as hard as possible to develop comprehensive horizontal ties, including among the ideologically motivated members of the anarchist movement, so that these connections are not confined to activism, but work in the economic sphere as well. Such groups based in trust can help greatly to survive difficult times, and people from outside, from the atomized social chaos, can gather around them.

Finally, please explain how you think people outside the region can best support anarchists in Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine.

Participate in initiatives that support the revolutionaries of Eastern Europe materially and in the field of information. In particular, we encourage you to donate to our Revolutionary Anarchist Fund—this helps tremendously when it comes to carrying out the struggle and covering its costs.

It is important that the anarchist revolutionary strategy is not limited to one country or region. The state and capitalism must be attacked all over the world.

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Retrieved on November 6, 2022 from en.crimethinc.com

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