

“I wanted Ukrainian activists involved in the war to have the opportunity to respond to the questions and criticisms that are often made by the left in Europe.”

Enguerran Carrier

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Enguerran Carrier has made the film *L’arme à gauche*: 23 minutes of testimonies of activists from Ukraine and Belarus, who explain their involvement in the Ukrainian resistance. Very useful. He is also the author of *Kurdistan: once upon a time the revolution*, to be published by Syllepse. The Editorial Solidarity Brigades interviewed him.

To make this film, you went to Ukraine. Can you tell us about this trip and your stay there, and tell us something about your personal itinerary, what brought you there?

I have been more or less closely linked to Ukraine for a good fifteen years. Emotional, friendly and political ties that led me to learn Ukrainian. The Maïdan movement had already revealed, in France, to what extent Ukraine was misunderstood: the media and activists often had a binary and caricatural reading of the events (civic revolution vs. fascist coup d’État) because they didn’t have a minimum knowledge of the country. I also fought in the ranks of the YPG [People’s Protection Units] between 2015 and 2018. When Russia invaded Ukraine, it was inconceivable to remain a passive spectator. I looked for ways to act positively, not wishing to fight myself, and the opportunity was given to me, somewhat by chance, to go as a freelance journalist on the spot.

Can you introduce the people you interviewed in this video?

I first met members of the anarchist organization the «Black Flag» (*Чорний Стяг*), from Lviv. They were Dmytro and Anton, who made the choice to join the Territorial Defence at the time when a Russian attack on the city seemed imminent. They were joined in their unit by Taras Bilous, one of the leaders of the «Social Movement» (*Соціальний Рух*) with whom you are familiar. Other anarchists made the choice to create a specific unit in the Territorial Defence. This one is composed mainly of Russian, Belarusian and many other countries’ activists. Let us specify in passing that the unit does not claim to be anarchist, contrary to what has been said on the web, even if anarchists form the most important contingent (about 2/3). This is where I met the Belarusian activist whose face and name have already been revealed in the press in his home country.

I thought it was important to give the floor to a representative of the Ukrainian working class. So I met Yuri Samoilov, a seasoned activist whose experience commands respect, and a member of the «Social Movement». A former miner, he has been an activist in free trade unions since the 1990s, for which a notorious oligarch put a price on his head. I do not despair that he will one day take up the pen and write his memoirs!

Finally, I would like to stress that the absence of women in the film is in no way due to negligence. But, during my stay, I did not meet any female activists willing to speak on camera. This is unfortunate, but revealing: there is a gendered division of labour even in the war and the Ukrainian army; it is not the YPG-YPJ.

The people you interviewed have a strong left-wing political orientation, why this choice?

Firstly, because they are absent from the media which, as usual, privilege the emotional and the spectacular to the detriment of the political and the explanatory. It is understandable that the mainstream media has little interest in this handful of activists, that the subject is not a seller. But some left-wing media, which often seek to make Ukraine co-responsible for this war, voluntarily conceal their existence. *L'Humanité* [daily newspaper of the French communist party], for example, met Taras Bilous. But his statements did not fit in with that newspaper's line, so his interview was simply not published.

Then photos started circulating about a mysterious anarchist unit. I know from experience that photos circulated on social networks in times of war are often misleading. How many fictitious units have we not heard about in Rojava! So I wanted to see what the reality of this unit was, what the place of revolutionaries, of all tendencies, was in this war.

Finally, I wanted Ukrainian activists involved in the war to have the opportunity to respond to the questions and criticisms that are often made by the left in Europe.

Several of them refer to the anarchist, libertarian movement; others we would call here «revolutionary communists», some have a trade unionist practice. What do they say about the real international support of these different currents?

Anarchists are generally satisfied with the support they are receiving. It must be said that the photos of «anarchist unit» have circulated a lot and have aroused the sympathy of many anarchists. All the more so as some of them skilfully played on the legend of Nestor Makhno. Some anarchists do refer to «Ukrainian neo-Nazis» and «fascist Russia» back to back, but this tendency seems to be in the minority, or at least is perceived as such in Ukraine.

The «revolutionary communists» (who do not define themselves as such, given the connotation of the word «communist» in Ukraine) are the most critical towards their sister organizations. They regret that many socialist, Trotskyist and other organizations regularly take up Russia's arguments in a more or less watered-down version. The position of the British SWP, in particular, which cynically calls for opposition to arms supplies to Ukraine so that the war can be ended as soon as possible (to Russia's benefit), arouses anger. It should be noted that the positions of foreign revolutionary socialists are often perceived as unanimously anti-Ukrainian, which is not the case. Hence the importance, it seems to me, of maintaining or establishing links with organizations on the ground and, above all, of participating in concrete solidarity actions.

Yuri Samoilov told me that he was pleased with the support of the European trade union organizations with which he is in contact (including the CGT and Solidaires). He regrets, however, that the Russian unions, with the exception of one teachers' union, have unanimously welcomed

the Russian invasion or, at the very least, have observed an approving silence. This says a lot about the control of the trade union apparatus in Russia.

You have written a book, *Kurdistan: Once Upon a Revolution*, which will be published very soon. What similarities and differences do you see between these two struggles?

In both cases, it can be said that they are defensive and «popular» wars, in the sense that there is widespread support for the objectives set. The rejection of the Russian invasion is almost unanimous, including among those who were yesterday labelled «pro-Russian». Wanting a strategic, cultural and «civilizational» rapprochement with Russia and being annexed by force, seeing cities razed to the ground and civilians summarily executed are two different things. The turnaround of the *Borot'ba* militants, yesterday volunteers in the Donbass, is significant in this respect.

But there the comparison ends. The war imposed on Rojava by the ASL [free syrian army], Daech, the Syrian regime and Turkey was the result of a popular revolution and an armed insurrection. It was about defending revolutionary gains against mostly 'intra-state' actors (with the exception of Turkey), against its own government. In the case of Ukraine, we are dealing with an interstate conflict dictated by the geostrategic interests of an aspiring «Russian empire». There is an aggressor and an aggressed, a monolithic state against a plural state, but the war was not provoked by a social revolution in Ukraine. Russia wants to conquer territory, not stifle a revolution that would threaten its existence. It is worth remembering that the oligarchic, corrupt and mafia-like system in Ukraine was unfortunately hardly shaken by the Mayan movement of 2013–2014.

The representative of the miners' union explains that after the war, after people have experienced their power to act, there will be «a great movement of protest against the established order». What do you think about the different conversations you had in Ukraine?

It is difficult to say. There is a definite frustration that the demands of 2014 have never been met. The political class is as corrupt as before, the mafias still operate freely and the economic boom promised by the liberals is still to come. Many had many grievances before 24 February, but the Russian invasion has pushed the thirst for social reform into the background. Criticism of V. Zelensky and the political staff, the clans of oligarchs still exist, but they are more discreet because nobody wants to give arguments to the enemy in what is experienced as an existential war.

Indeed, since 2014, Ukrainian governments have often used the war to divert attention from potentially destabilizing social elements (notably the far right). Yet the will for social change is there, the gap between the country's wealth and living standards is glaringly obvious, and speculation, which poses serious supply problems, is increasingly unbearable. «We win the war, and then we will be called to account» is a phrase I have heard regularly.

So yes, I believe that radical changes will be inevitable. The question is whether it will be from above or from below. V. Zelensky could use his authority to purge the administration and the economy of the most corrupt «middle» elements. But it is possible that Ukrainians will take to the streets again, as they did in 2013–2014, this time with weapons in their hands, experience of combat and a rage proportional to the number of people killed. However, in this case, I think that these social demands will be justified, as in 2014, by a national and liberal rhetoric («freeing the market» by firing parasitic and unpatriotic oligarchs). But nothing has been decided yet,

of course, and it is rather futile to indulge, for the moment, in conjectures about a more than uncertain future.

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