

Assembly, a Ukrainian Anarchist Magazine, on Politics and a Possible Russo-Ukrainian War

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Javier: Comrades, thank you for agreeing to this interview. We very much enjoyed your recent article in The Commoner, ‘The Time Has Come?’, about ongoing socio-economic resistance in Ukraine.

Today, the world looks on in horror as Russian President Vladimir Putin’s military is amassing over a hundred-thousand troops on Ukraine’s eastern border. These forces are reportedly composed of sixty battalion tactical groups (BTG’s), including Spetznatz special forces, hundreds of tanks, and dozens of ballistic-missile units—not to mention either the Black Sea Fleet or aerial forces. Although Ukraine gained formal independence from the collapsing Soviet Union in 1991, Putin has repeatedly expressed nostalgia for Tsarist and Soviet imperialism, while Maria Zakharova, spokesperson for the Russian Ministry for Foreign Affairs, has long belittled the idea of Ukrainian sovereignty.

Currently, the UK is selling light anti-tank weapons to Ukraine, while the US has supplied billions of dollars in military aid to the country since 2014, when the Russian military occupied and annexed Crimea. Some media sources suggest that Putin has not yet decided whether to order the invasion, which could spark the most destructive conflict in Europe since World War II, even if Ukraine is not a part of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). Now, following a breakdown in negotiations, President Joe Biden is reportedly considering sending thousands of NATO troops to the Baltic countries.

Can you tell us how you are feeling, and what the situation is like on the ground in Kharkov right now, located near the Russo-Ukrainian border?

It may surprise you, but we know almost no one here who is interested in such news, and even fewer who take it seriously. For the most part, people are worried about exorbitant energy bills that are leading to more and more houses having their heating switched off, and enterprises to working or going into the shadow sector precarizing their workers. Ukrainian gas is mostly exported to Europe, while energy carriers for power plants are bought from Russia and the occupied part of Donbass. So you can imagine why we would be skeptical about these horror forecasts from the Western press. It’s true that we are on the verge of social collapse, but it won’t be caused by a military conflict.

Javier: We certainly are surprised, as we have seen protests taking place in Kyiv against the latest war threats. The historian Olena Chebeliuk, from Lviv, has expressed her worry that Russia will “invade and capture Ukraine.” The U.S. and Russia have begun evacuating their embassies, and thousands of Ukrainian civilians apparently have volunteered to fight.

You paint such a different picture from our media, that we must ask: can this be so?

Yesterday’s assault on the Ukrainian parliament by small entrepreneurs protesting the abolition of reduced taxation by mandatory cash registers quite convincingly shows what really worries the masses here: the economic, social and tax policy (about 300 of these activists are from Kharkov). However, you will find almost no mention of these clashes in the English-language media: only in the local ones. The evacuation of embassies is carried out only by some Western countries: the same financiers are now divesting from Ukrainian government bonds. And jour-

nalists affiliated with the special services of these countries at the end of 2021 accused Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky of corruption in the Pandora Papers. Thus, they systematically put pressure on the Ukrainian top officials, trying to force them to take some steps in their interests (which ones – we cannot know for sure). That’s why spreading rumours about a big war is more just one of their technological tricks than a reflection of a real threat. On the other hand, we did not hear anything about that action in Kyiv linked by you. It looks like it was organised specially for *The Guardian’s* report! This is just more proof that the mainstream Western press consciously constructs a parallel reality.

Javier: In the context of this menacing standoff, the Ukrainian organisation Social Movement has released an international appeal for solidarity against Russian imperialism. We know that the Russian military has been occupying Crimea and waging war on Ukraine since 2014 as retaliation for the popular overthrow of the obscenely corrupt, Moscow-orientated President Viktor Yanukovich during the “Euromaidan” upsurge.

Where would you say you agree with, and differ from, Social Movement’s statement and/or political approach?

Please take into account that Social Movement is a civil organisation intending to become a left-wing parliamentary party like Syriza or Podemos. We largely agree with their statement, and our friends in other cities hold joint actions with them, but their structure is neither libertarian nor revolutionary. We hardly need to analyse the statement of Social Movement in detail. Populists will use any rhetoric if they think it will increase their popularity to convert it into electoral mandates. It’s very boring.

Yanukovich was the pro-Russian candidate during the 2005 presidential elections, but in 2010 he was elected significantly thanks to promises to integrate more with the EU. His Family (sic!) also kept stolen funds Western banks. Yes, he tried to bargain with Russia, but he was never such an ally to Putin as the Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko or the former Kazakhstani President Sultan Nazarbayev.

Please share with us your analysis of the legacy of Euromaidan and the so-called Revolution of Dignity (2013–2014).

Only either state propaganda or very cheated people can call this oligarchic-parliamentary coup a revolution. The term ‘revolution of dignity’ was coined by them to demonstrate their total hostility to the October [1917] Revolution: they say, we are not fighting for bread or for the means of production, but simply for a rearrangement within the ruling class. What could the enemies of any hierarchy have to do with such a movement? The anarchists were strangers in this conflict, but there was no one willing to create the third force: most of us preferred to abandon our own principles in essence, dissolving among liberals and nationalists only because of the mass-scale of their movement, then gradually discarding even anarchist self-identification. For several years anarchism almost disappeared from the political map of Ukraine and now we are only trying to restore what we had in the early 2010s. Although one of our journalists also took part in local Euromaidan, he was then an ordinary right-wing militant, not an anarchist.

At the same time, we will not deny that despite the obscurantism of its agenda, the Euromaidan victory objectively played some progressive role. The new regime didn't start anti-social reforms, but continued them and deepened class inequality in society so much that the words 'capitalism,' 'neoliberalism' and 'nationalism' have now become vituperative for many in Ukraine. For instance, after the opening of the agricultural land market on the 1st of July 2021, our region is the absolute leader in Ukraine by the area of land sold, with an average price of only \$698 per hectare. We also came out on top in debts for heating and hot water, as well as having about half of the region's population also have debts for home gas. All this presents the possibility of a revolutionary situation, but the realisation of the situation by society is still lagging behind for the reasons described below. Therefore, it makes no sense to be sad about 'peaceful 2013' or to discuss whether it could have happened otherwise — we need to study today's reality around us and to act for its change.

Javier: From his war on Chechnya (1999–2009) to his invasions of Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014–present), plus his interventions in Syria (2015–present) and Kazakhstan (2022) to prop up fellow autocrats threatened by uprisings, Putin has gained quite a notorious reputation for himself, based on his doctrine of 'anti-humanitarian intervention.' To boot, his government recently banned the renowned human-rights group, Memorial International, which had investigated the Soviet State's atrocities for over three decades.

Javier: Such an authoritarian legacy, paired with the thrust of Putin's propagandistic July 2021 essay, 'On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians,' arguably does not bode well for the current crisis on the Russo-Ukrainian border.

So rather than the brightness of a 'new 1917 on our doorstep,' which you hailed in your recent piece, might the near future not suggest a return to the bleaker days of 1914, 1936, or 1939?

There is no doubt that Putin's regime is now playing the same role of a continental gendarme as did Russian Tsarism under Nicholas I. You are also absolutely right that before 1917 there was 1914, when all of Europe thought that a small victorious war would last a couple of weeks, only to result in a world-revolutionary wave ending in 1923. With this in mind, we can see why the imperialist politicians and corporations are wary all the more that a military clash in the very centre of Europe will again lead to a comparable social explosion in their countries (at least in the USA — taking into account the rise of revolutionary struggle there during the last years). So the world leaders intend to divide spheres of influence peacefully and rattle their weapons just to facilitate their negotiations. The pandemic has shown that the modern capitalist order is a Colossus with feet of clay — and the very fact that the world has entered a new era of global repartition confirms this with all clarity.

For example, Ukraine also conducts military exercises on the Polish border and Ukrainian officials glorify those who carried out the genocide of the Poles during the Second World War. So what — do you really think that Ukraine is preparing to attack Poland? Neither do we...

But the spectre of October 1917 is visible even without the scenario of a wider Russian intervention. Please don't forget that positional trench warfare has already been going on in our neighbouring region since 2014, and the presidential elections of 2019 can be compared with February 1917 (Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky even acts frequently like Kerensky).

Only one piece of the puzzle is missing — the structure of our social fabric. People here usually live with some people, work with other people, and spend their leisure time with others entirely — so, Ukrainian society is much more amorphous and inert than are Western countries. This greatly inhibits mass activity and especially complicates the perception of anarchist ideas: even those who, in principle, admit that we are right, cannot in any way apply it to their daily life, let alone decide to take practical steps in this direction. In turn, this means a lack of resources for us: we are now in a situation like with the South Russian Workers Union in 1880, which was one of the first proletarian organisations in the Russian Empire. Its gatherings attracted hundreds of workers, who eagerly listened to every conversation, but donations were so symbolic that the movement in fact operated on funds that its co-founder Yelizaveta Kovalskaya received from her mother to rent a flat in Kiev (her mother, a landlord, owned an estate in Kharkov).

Javier: Some observers suggest that Putin is beating the drums of war to distract from internal problems in Russia, especially the COVID-19 pandemic, and that his aggressive posture is not serious, but rather designed to force concessions from Ukraine, the US, and European Union, especially over NATO. In reality, such interpretations may be overly optimistic. What are some of your thoughts on these questions?

What do you think would happen if Putin actually green-lighted a full invasion of Ukraine?

The Russian Federation Council unanimously approved his request to send the army here almost 8 years ago. Nothing new for us.

How can we and our readers support you, your comrades, and your compatriots now, and in the future?

First of all, we need help spreading news of anarchist activity in Ukraine abroad, but you are already doing this and it is really wonderful! We would also like to translate into English our investigations about the forgotten history of the local libertarian movement, but as it stands we don't have a large enough budget to even start this. The whole world celebrates May Day but who knows that almost the same as Chicago 1886 took place here 14 years earlier than that? Or, as already mentioned, Kovalska, who was born near our city and started revolutionary work in Kharkov had an epic life path not so different from Lucy Parsons. Why don't they deserve international loving memory equally? There are so many such examples...

Finally, we want to thank you for your attention to our humble opinions and to tell our comrades from Kazakhstan if they are reading this: keep fighting! Your struggle inspires our hearts, and despite all the clan intrigues taking place in the background, compared to Ukraine-2014 and Belarus-2020, this is a real popular uprising!

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