

# It is always darkest before the dawn

## How Russian anarchists today struggle for revolution

LeftEast

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While it might seem that the neoliberal consensus has broken in some Western countries, in the post-socialist space discourses of privatization and individualization are so strong that we can hardly speak about a crisis of the neoliberal order. It is even harder to imagine some radical change in the West and almost impossible to speak seriously about revolution or partisans. Revolution and emancipation is what European citizens usually try to find in Kurdistan and Chiapas, while actually it might be found much closer – in Russian anarchist anti-war resistance.

The **Combat Organization of Anarcho-Communists** (BOAK) is an organization that carries guerrilla attacks on what holds Russian territories together—railways. Without railways, war is not possible. Ukrainian and Russian railways are of the same width which explains why the fighting around Kherson, Melitopol, and Mariupol was so severe – it gave the Russian army access to the transport infrastructure. At the same time railways are a weak point: it is simply not possible to protect thousands of kilometers of tracks. The “Railway war” started in Soviet Belarus during the Second World War and resumed more recently, first in Belarus (by the means of cyber attacks, direct actions, and workers’ strikes) and then on the territory of the Russian Federation. Today there are a number of underground cells operating all over Russia. Their goal is to stop the war by slashing the iron wrists. It turned out that it is an easy thing to do (e.g. it is enough to burn a grey box that you see sometimes near the railways as this box is a signalization, centralization and blocking system). Other surprisingly easy recipes on how to stop railways could be found on the group’s telegram channel.

### **Derail on a Railroad curve**

Remove the railroad track from a leght of 4 sleepers on the OUTSIDE of curve

And/or

Remove the railroad track from a leght of 4 sleepers in the MIDDLE INNER curve

### **The 4-14-4 method**

1. Remove track from sleeper 1–4 on the LEFT side
2. Count additional 14 sleepers (5–18)

### 3. Remove track off 4 sleepers on the RIGHT side (19–22)

Another activity of BOAK is Molotov attacks on the recruitment centers of the army. These attacks are recorded on video to demonstrate the meaning of a direct action is in its nutshell – it is easy to make, everyone can repeat it and the result (burned building) is seen immediately. It is a change here and now, genuine prefiguration. Moreover, it forces authorities to spend money on the protection of the recruitment centers, including protection of data and moves media attention from arrests to the actions themselves. 52 attacks were carried on from the summer until November 2022 and 48% of arsonist-activists were not found.

*Could you please tell us about the development of revolutionary anarcho-communist movement in Russia since the beginning of the war – both in ideological terms and in terms of tactics and strategies?*

We cannot say that the movement has undergone any dramatic changes in ideological terms since the beginning of war. In general, it has become obvious over the last several years that the Russian regime had been going through an open fascization. This development gave even more strength to our ideological conviction.

The situation is generally similar in terms of tactics and strategies. However, the above circumstances have become more obvious to a broader public and we observe an increase in coordination and interaction with wider opposition circles. With those that are ideationally close to us, we think about possible ways of transformations. There are also organizations that are not entirely anarchist but we cooperate with them. For example, Black Bridge (Chernoje Znamja) [a partisan organization, calling beside other things, for disruption of elections, which is an especially interesting strategy, because the legitimacy of the Russian regime heavily relies on elections] or Freedom and Will (Svoboda i Volja).

In light of what is happening, the revolutionary anarcho-communist approach has shown its relevance both in terms of methods that lead to a change of power and in terms of the ideal which we want to achieve after the revolution to avoid a repetition of current unfortunate events.

*The same question about repressions – how have they changed over the recent past and how have the tactics of resisting repressions changed?*

It's hard to say. On the one hand, we can't say that security services and police began to approach our organization in some new way. On the other hand, we see that the repressive methods used by the Russian authorities although did not change fundamentally, but clearly have intensified and expanded in scope. Torture used against anarchists had already become common and authorities are now persecuting not only the anarchists but also their families (which used to happen only in Belarus). Therefore, people who join the struggle must understand that great awareness and secrecy protocols are needed. These are neither a whim nor a game. [Here, it is worth noting that on 21.12.2022 the Russian State Duma passed a law presupposes a life sentence for sabotage]

*The experience of uprisings shows that we can't count on some sudden revolutionary avalanche or people waking up on their own. Often people remain passive. At this point it is important to do organizing work at the workplaces and prepare for a possible general strike. Is such work possible in Russia? is it being carried out? Is it possible in Russia at all? Given the specifics of the Russian economy, such work would have to include sectors of extraction and manufacturing of natural resources. What are the perspectives of the radical left movements in this area?*

The work you are asking about is very important in terms of increasing the chances of a revolution and the success of the subsequent reorganization of society. It enables the achievement of both economic influence on the authorities and the creation of organizational structures at workplaces that could be later used in a process of transferring production under the direct management of workers' collectives.

It is worth mentioning that we believe that a general strike will succeed only in combination with other resistance methods, such as mass protest actions and partisan guerrilla.

Unfortunately, the experience of Belarus in 2020 has shown that when people are passive, there is a great chance that they may not be ready for a general strike either. This is in addition to the enormous coordination a general strike requires between the collectives.

The major disadvantage of strikes isolated from other tactics is that it is a confrontation based on persistence. Who will last longer: striking workers (who have to pay their loans, feed their families, etc.) or a capitalist who has more resources? In the context of the enormous income gap, as it is now, the capitalists have every chance of winning such a confrontation. But, again, this is about using strikes as an isolated tactic, without other methods. If we deprive the enemy of money and attack on other fronts at the same time, it will greatly increase our chances of success.

As to whether such work is being done now, unfortunately, we cannot boast much success. Some work of this nature has been carried out by communist organizations (the Kurier trade union, etc.), but interaction with them has so far been difficult due to a number of ideological differences. In view of our limited resources and the need to stay underground, we cannot do it by ourselves:(

We have no information about the mining and processing sectors.

*Could you please say some more words about your strategy in a view all before mentioned hardships with organizational work at the workplaces?*

It is probably hard to imagine a revolution without a stoppage of the economy (at least, because any involvement of people in the revolutionary struggle would lead to their disconnection from production and a subsequent shut-down of the economy). However, we can outline what it is possible to do within the framework of a revolutionary strategy beyond such a shut-down. These are the following aspects:

- fomenting a grassroots guerrilla struggle, leading to a weakening of both the economy as well as the repressive apparatus.
- As the state weakens, its mistakes lead to greater instability. One of the mistakes could be the beginning of an avalanche of events. A revolutionary organization plays an important role in this moment: it should foment the situation and prevent subsiding. This could be the beginning of mass actions or strikes.
- At this further step, the main role of a revolutionary organization is the further acceleration of events, preventing authorities from mustering their strength, and combatting the repressive apparatus (e.g. protection of demonstrators and strikers from the cops' attacks, suppression of their resources and organizational bases).
- It is also very important to be involved in the events all the time with the goal of helping people with self-organizing, serving as centers of crystallization around which the self-

management organs will be formed, so the energies accumulated do not go into thin air, but create solid structures.

- And as a result, the coordination of people's efforts around the tasks of demolishing and reorganizing power (i.e., dispersing the existing government, seizing the buildings of the state apparatus and forming committees of popular self-government, which take on the tasks of transforming society), arming the defenders of revolution, etc.

In general, this is the strategy. But of course, reality brings changes to this plan.

*Another question about the revolution concerns the experience from 1917. This revolution in the long term did not achieve its goals of emancipation, among other things because the thinking of the masses was not liberated. The result of this revolution was the replacement of one dictatorship with another. Emancipation is a long process of political education. Do you think that now might be the right moment for a revolution in Russia, where there are still a lot of people who believe the state propaganda, a lot of people are leaving the country, and the experience in self-organizing is very limited?*

We can say that, in terms of the likelihood of revolution, today is the best moment we have had in years. It is unlikely that we will have a better one. The experience of 1917 shows that the problem is not only that thinking was not emancipated before the revolution. In principle, it is difficult to imagine that during a dictatorship there was such a possibility. And if the thinking is emancipated, then it means that dictatorship was never particularly strong, people believe that things are not that bad, revolution is not necessary and it is possible to make social change with the reforms. We believe that if the dictatorship is weaker, it is harder to agitate people to join the revolutionary fight (even in the case, when their freedom is actually limited by the exploitative capitalism – a system that could not be changed by elections).

In studying the memoirs of contemporaries of 1917, we have noticed that the very process of revolution led to dramatic leaps in the emancipation of consciousness. The wave of revolutionary creativity (not only in the cultural sense, but also in terms of revolutionary transformations in society, production, etc.) was truly gigantic. But it was stifled by forces that saw the goal not in the emancipation of society but in the redrawing of society according to totalitarian molds.

So not to repeat that sad experience, it is very important that the anti-authoritarian left is not only focused on the dismantling of the system and building a new one, but also on defense – including with weapons in hand – of people and the revolution from those who try to suppress them.

The experience of 1917 is undoubtedly multifaceted in the sense that its perception depends greatly upon the prism one uses to study it. The conclusions could be different and it might seem that we are saying something that has been already applied by the anarchists in 1917. In general, in our perception the errors of the anarchist movement could be called the following:

1. too strong a reliance on the will of liberated people who will sort things out themselves. In the end, the forces that were managing the process intercept and stifle the wave of popular creativity. We believe that we should not hesitate to create an anarchist organization, which will help the people move in an anti-authoritarian way. Here, of course, we are not referring to the Bolshevik avant-garde, which under the guise of the avant-garde working class party usurped the power. We rather mean something in the vein of what the Kurdistan Workers' Party do, i.e., helping the establishment of anti-authoritarian councils operating on the

basis of direct democracy and keeping them from slipping back into dictatorship. But it doesn't make decisions instead of the people and protects the structure from authoritarian forces.

2. Over-reliance on allies in the revolutionary process. We do not think that we need to fence ourselves off from all those who are not liberals, reds, and so on. It's important to stress that openly authoritarian and contradictory to anarchist ideals groups are no comrades. But we do believe that anarchists should be persistent in their ideals and be ready to defend them, so as not to be stabbed in the back, as has happened in the past.

*We are situated in the region of Eastern Europe – what are the specifics of the fight against the state in this region in general and what are the specifics of Russian imperialism?*

Among the specifics of Russian imperialism we can perhaps name internal colonialism. The central regions act as collective exploiters of the periphery. In doing so, conditions are created for the outflow of the most active people to the center. This leads to a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, Moscow and St. Petersburg are the most active in terms of protests, while on the other hand, they have greater wealth, giving their protests an elitist nature. They demand goods of a higher order (fair elections, freedom of speech, etc.) rather than the solution of everyday economic problems, and therefore most people are less willing to take radical action for their sake. These protests are also less likely to be understood and supported in the regions.

Also, a certain specificity of struggle with the state is set by the Soviet past and the 1990s. What people considered good or trash about the Soviet past varies depending on an individual's experience. This makes it difficult to build a unifying picture of a "beautiful future" that could enthuse people and bring them together.

*Sometimes one hears from certain activists that one of the possible solutions to Russian imperialism is the disintegration of Russia. What do you think about that?*

Here we have a two-fold attitude. We do not believe that the forced disintegration of Russia (into separate states) is something that we should strive for. Because of the great economic interconnectedness of the regions, such processes would hit everyone and new episodes of interethnic conflicts as it was in the 90s would be very probable.

On the other hand, forced incarceration of whole peoples is clearly not our ideal. Based on practical considerations, we can tell that fomenting a revolution is easier in a smaller country but defending the transformation is better all together.

We believe that putting an end to imperial ambitions of the Russian Federation is a good thing. But we see a solution in the spirit of true federalism, moving away from the center of power in Moscow to councils and committees in each region, with a transition to a very wide autonomy in internal decision-making, etc. but with the preservation of interregional coordination councils and structures, as well as economic interrelationships (and the building of new ones). i.e. disintegration without disintegration ☒

*On what ideological basis is it possible to unite the radical left in Ukraine, Belarus, Russia, and other states in the region?*

We think that anarcho-communism (with a federalist component, i.e. with regional autonomy, without imperialism, but with coordination) is still relevant ☒

Ukrainian anarchists are now on the front lines fighting the Russian intervention (as well as Russian and Belarussian anarchists who at the time of the war were in Ukraine or were able

to move there later). Russian and Belarussian anarchists have opened a second front in the rear. There is also interaction on the line of information warfare, assistance with dissemination of news, ideological materials, recipes. Also collecting finances for common tasks and supporting our common political prisoners.

*What conclusions did you draw from the Belarussian protests of 2020? Were there any other landmark events in the region that influenced your thinking and tactics?*

We have become more assured in the importance of an active role that the left forces play in coordinating the protest (in contrast with simply following the initiatives of the crowd). Also, it is important not to let the protest fade out and go on defense (peaceful protest, etc.)

because in such moments the authorities tend to seize the initiative ☒

In addition to the Belarussian protest, we have also followed the uprisings in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, which also took place in 2020–2022. Kyrgyzstan demonstrated what happens when the rebels do not retreat, but strengthen the pressure.

*You say in one interview that you belong to the tradition of such anarchist formations as the Black Banner (Chernoie Znamia) or the Southern Russian Anarchist-Syndicalist Group. Tell me more specifically (ideologically or tactically), in what ways does your work continue theirs? How do you work with historical memory? For example, in the Czech Republic the communist era destroyed the historical succession of the movement, which in the 1990s developed from the Western experience than from the longer tradition of Czech anarchism.*

We consider ourselves the followers of the Eastern European revolutionary anarchist tradition. The Black Banner and the Southern Russian Anarchist-Syndicalist Group which, incidentally, were once engaged in fierce polemics with each other, inspire us both ideologically and tactically.

Without going into detail, we, like our predecessors from beginning of the last century and follow their integral approach to the revolutionary struggle. By “integral” here we mean an approach to a human being that is related to all spheres of human activity. We understand revolution in this vein as well – this is not just the change of people in power and not even the change of the political system, but a wide social change, change of relationship not only between people, but also between people and nature. We advocate for political and economic revolution and for the continuation of the revolutionary struggle until the full and complete liberation of personality. Replacement of the particularities, without the integral approach, will not lead to the general change of the system – the frozen components will hamper this development.

If you look at the practice of the BOAK, you will see that our actions are mainly directed against the Putin dictatorship and the war it has unleashed. But this does not mean that our goals are limited to the destruction of Putin’s dictatorship. Our ultimate goal is anarchist communism, which we consider to be an alternative both to dictatorships and bourgeois “democracies.”

As for continuity in tactics, we are supporters of combat guerrilla methods of fighting. In addition, we seek to ensure that the fighting methods be adopted by the broad masses of workers. This in turn can lead to a popular guerrilla war against the exploiters.

We periodically publish historical materials about heroic revolutionaries of the past and their struggles. We want the memory of comrades who lived many years ago to live on in new direct actions and attacks on the regime.

*What is the anarchist imagination about the post-war future for Ukraine, Russia, and the Central and Eastern European region?*

With Ukraine, it is somewhat difficult to predict because, as we believe, in the best-case scenario, its victory will lead to the consolidation of Western-like democracy there. In this case, there might be a more fertile ground for the development, strengthening and dissemination of anarchist ideas in society. In view of the active participation of anarchists in the resistance, it is also likely that they will be anchored in the public political space and get a rostrum for realizing their ideals.

As for Russia, we are looking in the direction of the one described above – a federative republic with a wide autonomy of regions, transforming itself along the canons of anarcho-communism, with reorganization of political and economic system in the spirit of direct democracy, humanizing the environment, and solving ecological problems.

It is likely that if this direction of development in the Russian Federation is successful, we can expect our neighboring regions to move in the same direction: Ukraine, Central Europe and, what the heck, the whole world ☒

*In short, tell us how we can help you from inside and outside post-Soviet states?*

Three suggestions come to mind:

1. Pressuring their governments not to provide support of any kind to the Russian Federation. The victory of the Russian Federation will lead to the strengthening of the dictatorship in the whole region.
2. Spreading information about the anarcho-communist ideal of the future for our region, as well as methods and tactics of struggle – so that more and more people join the struggle.
3. If possible, contributing (including financially) to our initiatives. As you you may know, we've organized a revolutionary anarchist fund, which supports partisan groups, helps them develop and expand our front. This support is immensely important to us.

**Donate to the Revolutionary Anarchist Fund:**

Bitcoin: bc1qtnw6p89xk7xnsvzdktv79zhpv2m834pp5sfyg0 (segwit)

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