Ukrainian Anarchists Shout Echos of Makhno

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Contents

The philosophy that drives left-wing factions in the 2022 Russo-Ukrainian war evolves from a rich history of Ukrainian anarchists.

> "The Anarchists are right in everything; in the negation of the existing order and in the assertion that, without Authority there could not be worse violence than that of Authority under existing conditions. They are mistaken only in thinking that anarchy can be instituted by a violent revolution."
>
> Leo Tolstoy, "On Anarchy"

Ukrainian Anarchists Resurgence

Ukrainian anarchists have found their place in the resurgence of the Russo-Ukrainian war.

This resurgence began with the February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. Overnight, a mysterious possibility quickly morphed into a brutal reality. The Russian troop build-up on the Ukrainian border turned out to be a real staging point for forward action, and not "a drill" as some analysts speculated.

In the past two months of the conflict, people across the globe have united to support Ukraine, including fighting on the front lines.

Ukrainian anarchists are one of the strangest yet most fascinating elements of the volunteer force to be reported on recently. Despite what one may think, their willingness to fight in war is not as counter-intuitive as it sounds. In fact, it's in their historical DNA.

Makhnovshchina

Ukrainian anarchists are an ancient breed. The political philosophy that drives an array of left-wing factions in the 2022 Russo-Ukrainian war evolves from a rich political history. One prolific example dates to the beginning of the 20th century: the revolutionary figure, Nestor Makhno.

Makhno entered the anarchist canon during the Russian Revolution of 1917–1923. Born into a peasant family, Makhno experienced the plight of income disparities and serfdom experientially. These experiences took place in the Ukrainian town of Huliaipole–an industrial sector of the Zaporizhzhia Oblast.

Left-wing activism's gravitational pull grasped Makhno during his teenage years. It started with the young comrade joining local political movements, yet escalated into the formation of the Revolutionary Insurrectionary Army of Ukraine, or the *Makhnovshchina.*

Peasantry United

The Makhnovshchina, led by Makhno, had the lifeblood of peasantry coursing through its veins. Followers of Makhno shared his story and banded around his anti-state rhetoric. They were anarchists at heart, which did not fall in line with the Bolsheviks and their hierarchal structure. Because of this contrast, the Makhnovshchina found themselves wedged between the dominant factions of the Russian Revolution.

In the four years, they were active (1917–1921), Makhno and his men influenced nearly 7 million Ukrainians. Contrary to the communists, anarchists had a message of liberation followed by a horizontally structured society.

The Marxist revolutionaries eventually won. Battles fought by the Makhnovshchina, including against the Germans in the First Great War, and the Russian White Army during the revolution were fruitless for the Ukrainian anarchist movement.

Makhno fled Ukraine and landed in Paris, where he would spend the rest of his days in exile; his legacy was left behind as an inspiration and source of strength for the Ukrainian anarchists who followed.

Euromaidan, neo-Makhnovists, and the 2014 Russian invasion of Ukraine

Ukrainian anarchists ebbed and flowed between the Makhnovshchina era and the present day. They carried their presence through the decades, with minimal impact. The collapse of the Soviet Union was a pivotal event for the movement. Liberation, symbolized by the fall of the Berlin Wall, laid the groundwork for the Ukrainian anarchist groups that are active in the ongoing crisis.

The Maidan Uprising, also known as Euromaidan, took place in Kyiv between November 2013 and February 2014.

Context: the Ukrainian government was on track to sign an agreement that would bring the nation closer to the European Union (EU). That was until a sudden withdrawal by former president Viktor Yanukovych mere days before the intended signing. Yanukovych, who conveniently now lives in Russia, in exile, was a highly controversial leader. A leader favoured by Putin.

What could have been a step toward Ukrainian integration into the EU ended with Yanukovych bowing to the Kremlin. Who, as the world knows tangibly based on the events of the last two months, rejects the idea of EU expansion Eastward. What resulted was mass civil unrest and protests in the Maidan Nzalezhnosti—the "Independence Square" in Kyiv.

The overarching theme of the protest had a gravitational pull on left-wing activists, including Ukrainian anarchists, who engaged in direct action. A so-called "neo-Makhnovist" fervour was present amongst the anarchists but with little impact on Euromaidan protests from a "forwarding ideology" perspective.

The course of the event brought many factions into civil conflict from both extremes of the political spectrum. With a utopian lens on, the protests could have been ample ground for a Makhnovist revolution, but that was a mere dream, as utopian ideas usually are. Ukrainian anarchists had low numbers, and poor coordination and their message were static because of interference from the surrounding noise of competing ideologies.

Kyiv is the home of the Autonomous Workers Union: an anarcho-syndicalist organization founded in 2011 with members from various elements of the left wing, some of whom took part in the Euromaidan.

In a short time following the Euromaidan – February 2014 – Russia invaded Ukraine and started the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war. They came from the East, unmarked, and began the annexation of Crimea and conflict in the Donbas region.

Ukrainian anarchists in the Russo-Ukrainian war

Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine has ignited an international volunteer movement to support their plight. The President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky, quickly formed the International Legion of Ukraine–a call to arms for volunteers across the world to join the war effort. (source)

Anarchists and other left-wing oriented groups have found their place in the effort with the diverse set of backgrounds and ideologies that have volunteered. It would seem counter-intuitive for such groups to join a nationalist conflict, given anarchists *generally* subscribe to an anti-war ethos.

This crisis is different. Russia is driven by imperialism, and anarchists, anti-fascists, and other left-wing fighters have banded around the push to drive them out. Not that they support the Ukrainian state or government or have dropped the core tenets of their central ideologies. Ukraine is their home, and if there was ever to be a hope of a stateless society, they need to have a state to begin with.

Jake Hanrahan, a prolific conflict journalist and founder of Popular Front, recently tweeted an image of an anarchist unit on the front lines, as well as a video clip of a Ukrainian volunteer proclaiming veganism and punk rock.

As noted in the tweet, the essence of Makhno is ever-present among some anarchists currently in combat. In Makhno's own hometown, citizens have reportedly appealed to him as a source of inspiration and strength, going as far as raising up local defence groups who call themselves "Makhno's bow".

The Resistance Committee is a known anarchist unit that is part of the Territorial Defense of Ukraine. In their own words:

> "There are many problems inside Ukraine, but these problems are more likely to be solved without the intervention of Russia.

> "Is it worth it to fight the Russian troops in the case of an invasion? We believe that the answer is yes. The options that Ukrainian anarchists are considering at the present moment include joining the armed forces of Ukraine, engaging in territorial defense, partisanship, and volunteering."

For anarchists within the borders of Ukraine, they do not limit the mission to combat roles. Some have taken a civil volunteer stance, helping with refugees, supporting the families of fighters, medically helping other fighters, and gathering supplies.

Operation Solidarity

Operation Solidarity is one instance – an "anti-authoritarian volunteer network organized during the war to jointly help all progressive forces in society to counter imperialist aggression against Ukraine."

Ukrainian anarchists don't stand alone, with their comrades in Europe conducting their own activism. Just this past March, anarchists seized the mansion of a Russian oligarch in London, hanging banners from the balcony with statements like "This property has been liberated", and flying the Ukrainian flag.

From an ideological standpoint, all left-wing volunteers face some interesting challenges, particularly amongst their peers in the fight against Russia. Numbers aren't entirely clear, but they are likely a tiny percentage of the overall volunteer force, compared to likely higher numbers of right-wing oriented fighters.

In one way, that shows how the beauty of comradery *can* shine through the fog of war. People from opposite ideological ends banded together – either directly or indirectly to resist the comically underperforming Russian war-machine.

As the conflict continues, we will probably hear more about these brave comrades, with their exploits and support for their homeland becoming engraved in the tragic historical timeline currently taking place.

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