

To Hell and Back

Anarchists Under Attack in Ukraine

silberfuchs

2023-05-01

In solemn remembrance of Yury Samoilenko, Sergey Petrovich, Igor Volohov, Finbar Cafferkey, Tisha, Dmitry 'Ilya' Petrov, and Cooper Andrews, may they all rest in power!

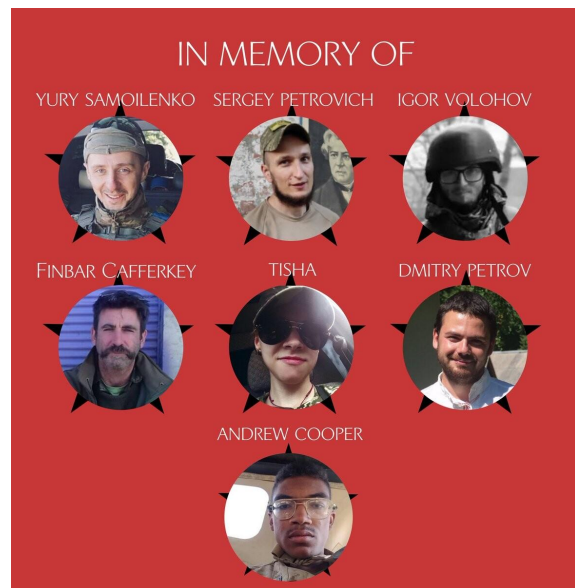
On 24 February 2022, one man, acting for his own domestic political purposes, launched what he had hoped would be a quick and easy war. With a barrage of missiles to apartment buildings, power stations, and hospitals, an iron fist of brutality attacked a land that had over the past 200 years been the scene of so much bloodshed and destruction. The Crimean War, World War I, the wars of the late 1910s and early 1920s, Stalin's artificial famines (the Holodomor) of the 1930s and the terror and purges that followed, World War II—especially the Holocaust, and the first Russian Invasion in 2014.

As the Austrian poet Georg Trakl wrote a few weeks into World War I:

die heiße Flamme des Geistes nährt heute ein gewaltiger Schmerz,
die ungeborenen Enkel.

the spirt's scorching flames are fed by the most violent pain,
the unborn generation.¹

Trakl wrote that poem after a battle near the small village of Grodek in what is now western Ukraine. A battle that was one of the most brutal of the initial war. As a medic, he was responsible



¹ full poem: allpoetry.com/Grodek

for tending to the injured. As the only person who was not injured or killed in the battle, he attempted to save as many people as possible, working nonstop for more than 12 hours without assistance. Overwhelmed with post-traumatic stress and survivor's guilt, he died by his own hand a few weeks later in a psychiatric hospital in Krakow.

It is hard for me to believe that a person who lives their life with care and love for others, with the values we proclaim as anarchists, could choose to start a war or wish it continues. War is cruelty on a mass scale. But when war is forced upon you, when you're under attack, when the principles you proclaim and the values you cherish are being attacked, you have to stand up and fight back. When bullets are flying at you and there is nowhere else to flee, what should you do? Cower in a corner and hope they stop out of the goodness of their heart?

This is the situation Ukrainian, Belarusian, and Russian Anarchists find themselves in today. Prior to the war, Ukraine was the most relatively 'free' former Soviet country, aside from the Baltic states. It was the home of many leftists and anarchists from Russia and Belarus. And it has a proud anarchist history, not least the histories of Maria Nikiforova² and Nestor Makhno.³ It should go without saying that the world is a very complicated and very different place when viewed from Central and Eastern Europe, especially compared with the view from Minneapolis or Oakland or Brooklyn. Uncritical repetition of slogans about antimilitarism or peace negotiations is easy when you're not being shot at.

I know the region from years of living there and even more years of studying it as a historian. While I am not from Central Europe, I am personally and very deeply pained by the war. For these reasons and many more, it is hopefully easy to understand why I am so offended by the suggestion that because of the conditions anarchists in Ukraine find themselves in, that they are fighting in support of NATO and the United States government.

As Dmitry Petrov wrote in his final testament:

As an anarchist, revolutionary and Russian, I found it necessary to take part in the armed resistance of the Ukrainian people against Putin's occupiers. I did this for justice, for defense of the Ukrainian society and for liberation of my country, Russia, from oppression. For the sake of all the people who are deprived of their dignity and the opportunity to breathe freely by the vile totalitarian system created in Russia and Belarus.⁴

What makes anarchists fighting in Ukraine different from those fighting in Rojava? In many ways the circumstances are similar: anarchists and antifascists, in a semi or fully autonomous combat group fighting as an ally of a western supported force. In Rojava this is the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a force that receives supplies and support on the ground from western military forces. In Ukraine this is the forces of the government of Ukraine. When Cooper Andrews fought in Rojava did that mean he was fighting 'for' NATO? And when Cooper fought Russian imperialism in Ukraine, how was the situation different from fighting Russian imperialism and its puppet Syrian regime?

As members of Anarchist Black Cross in Belarus stated with exceptional clarity:

² lib.edist.ro/library/malcolm-archibald-atamansha

³ lib.edist.ro/library/history-of-the-makhnovist-movement-1918-1921

⁴ <https://t.me/boakom/111>, zine version: lib.edist.ro/library/dmitri-petrov-last-testament

We consider a temporary truce between the anarchists and leftists on one side and the Ukrainian state on the other as forced and inevitable in the conditions of the modern European war. But this does not mean that we forget our revolutionary aims and advocate the strengthening of the state. The participation of anarchists in military structures should in no way become the formation of a new state patriotism. The alliance with the Ukrainian authorities was and remains temporary as long as the Russian state continues to shoot at everyone. During this period of collective resistance to Moscow, strengthening the anarchist movement in Ukraine becomes the key to its survival in case it defeats Putin. And this strengthening is only possible through international support. The rise of the ultra-right can only be countered by the rise of the anarchist revolutionary movement. Not the one that calls for peace by all means, but the one that is ready to take up rifles for self-defense.⁵

Or, as a Russian anarchist stated in the opening months of the war:

Could we resist the invasion with arms independently from the state army under the current conditions? The answer is definitely no. Most ideas like this are being proposed far away from the country, by people who are cut off from this local context. First of all, there is not enough structure or resources on our side at the moment to seriously apply to form an independent armed force. At the same time, the Ukrainian state has enough force and will to suppress any fully autonomous force. In this situation, non-state guerrilla struggle is possible only in the territories occupied by the Russian army.⁶

I will follow our comrades through the gates of Hell. And together we will make it back. Our fallen comrades will forever be a part of this history, they gave their lives in defense of our values as anarchists. Our task now is to ensure that their deaths were not in vain. Yury Samoilenko, Sergey Petrovich, Igor Volohov, Finbar Cafferkey, Tisha, Dmitry 'Ilya' Petrov, and Cooper Andrews, rest forever in power! We will always remember until our very last.

⁵ Anarchist Black Cross "Statement of the ABC Belarus on the war in Ukraine", zine version: lib.edist.ro/library/anarchist-black-cross-belarus-statement-of-the-abc-belarus-on-the-war-in-ukraine

⁶ Avtonom: "Four Months in an Anti-Authoritarian Platoon in Ukraine" zine version: lib.edist.ro/library/anonymous-four-months-in-an-anti-authoritarian-platoon-in-ukraine

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