

Denazification done right

How Russian anti-fascists and anarchists are battling Putin's invasion

The Insider

23 May 2022

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Upon attacking Ukraine, Vladimir Putin announced its so-called “denazification” as one of his main goals. While the Kremlin is looking for imaginary Nazis, around 200 Russian anti-fascists and anarchists, who have a broad experience of countering the ultra-right in real life, have sided with Ukraine’s Armed Forces. *The Insider* spoke to three territorial defense fighters and a supply specialist to find out their motivation for taking up arms on Kyiv’s side and whether there are any Nazis in Ukraine.

«If Putin is brought to heel in this war, it will be a moment of revelation for many Russians» – Ilya, anarchist from Russia

My name is Ilya. I’m an anarchist living in Ukraine. I left Russia a few years back because of the crackdown on the entire anarchist movement. The rumors of an imminent war started spreading a few months before it began, and Ukrainian anarchists considered all possible options. So when we woke up at five in the morning on February 24 to the news of an airstrike on Kyiv, we began to bring our plan to life.

Before that, we only had time for a few drills. Some of us had had the experience of military drills; a few of our fighters participated in the anti-terrorist operation in Donbas *<The Insider’s note: the Ukrainian government’s name for its campaign against the Russian-backed armed separatists in Donbas>* in 2014–2016. Any paramilitary unit, even one consisting of yesterday’s civilians, must feature a military-type hierarchy and discipline. At the same time, we do our best to promote the culture of democracy, where any commander can become an object of criticism, regardless of their rank. There are no forbidden topics, and we hold regular meetings. However, orders must be followed, and the rules of cohabitation must be observed.

I’ve joined the territorial defense forces in the Kyiv Region. There are also individual anarchists and groups fighting within multiple units of the AFU and territorial defense. Our platoon is fifty-strong and counting. The ideology is far from homogeneous: we have Arsenal football fans *<The Insider’s note: Arsenal was a Kyiv-based association football club popular with Ukrainian anti-fascists. It ceased to exist in 2019>*, anti-fascists, and anarchists. Thanks to that, we get to recruit people from different circles. We’ve got Ukrainians, Russians, Belarusians, and people from further abroad. The national composition is split 50–50 between Ukrainians and foreign nationals. We don’t advertise our anarchist beliefs. We’re simply yet another territorial defense unit. That said, we aren’t trying to conceal them either. I have a diagonal red-and-black flag in my room, for instance, and we don’t take it down when our superiors come to inspect us.

Territorial defense fighters don’t interact with civilians much, but we have civilian volunteers cooking for us in the mess hall. They are rather cheerful-looking; of course, everyone can’t wait for the war to end, but they don’t look depressed or subdued. Now that the failure of Putin’s blitzkrieg is obvious, people harbor hopes of restoring justice.

Territorial defense forces get firearms and ammunition, but not much apart from that. Anarchists from abroad have been a massive help, raising considerable amounts to buy us vehicles and quality equipment. You can only run around in a fur coat with an assault rifle for so long. Fighters need a variety of equipment: helmets, armored vests, tactical vests, everything up to

torches and collimator sights. All these items are costly, but territorial defense fighters get no funding from the Armed Forces.

I'd like to thank the Anarchist Black Cross Dresden and Operation Solidarity, a charity we conceived well beforehand to make sure it starts operating from the first day of the war. It's an anarchist charity that supports those standing in resistance to Putin's invasion and those who left Ukraine for the West. Initially designed to support Ukrainian anarchists, the organization has expanded its mandate to offer assistance to regular military units and hospitals. Operation Solidarity has launched large-scale activities in Kyiv, Lviv, and Poland. Its headquarters is an awesome bar near downtown Kyiv, which was run by a couple of Belarusians who had fled from prosecution in their homeland. When the war broke out, they decided to give up their bar to someone who would continue their resistance.

A great many war-related anarchist and leftist events are being held in Europe. Unfortunately, many European leftists still support Putin's narrative about the invasion of Ukraine being an "anti-fascist war against NATO". Such views are particularly persistent in Greece, as well as Germany and other countries. We're promoting a different viewpoint, with a substantive contribution from CrimethInc., an international anarchist media project.

Our platoon also has anti-fascist movement members who aren't anarchists, so I'm going to speak for myself: Putin's invasion is not a war between two states. It's a war between Putin's regime and Ukrainian society. In my opinion, the Ukrainian state is corrupt, oligarchic, and neoliberal. I'm not too fond of it. However, Ukrainian society has a lot more freedom and pluralism than its Russian and Belarusian counterparts – than almost all of its neighbors. Turkey is no better than Putin's Russia, while Poland and Hungary have swayed considerably towards conservatism lately. The Ukrainian state exerts considerably less control over its citizens' private lives. Since Russia decided to export its authoritarian Mordor-style regime, Ukrainian society needs protection.

After the crackdown on protesters in Belarus in 2020, tens of thousands of Belarusians came here, following an even bigger wave of political immigrants from Russia. For all these years, Russian and Belarusian activists have had the opportunity to continue their organized political activities in Ukraine.

We, the revolutionary anarchists of Russia and Belarus, also hope for a change in the political climate of our countries, the destruction of their authoritarian regimes, and the emergence of space for progressive reforms. If Putin's regime is brought to heel in this horrendous, predatory, imperialistic war, this will create conditions for political change in Russia and Belarus. The regime will lose its popularity among the people and will sustain a powerful economic blow. This could become a moment of revelation for many Russians and Belarusians. Hopefully, this will also put an end to Putin's and Lukashenko's rule.

Like any crisis, a war also creates space for change in the country where it unfolds. If we recall the Paris Commune, the war between France and Germany opened up the opportunity for a meaningful attempt at revolutionary transformation. A wave of revolutions rolled across Europe after the First World War.

War exposed societal contradictions: we've seen many prominent businessmen take off from Ukraine and many Ukrainian politicians act in a disgraceful way. Hopefully, the war will show Ukrainian society that many representatives of the so-called elite are traitors unwilling to take any risks or stand by their people.

We can't offer our anarchist alternative from afar. We can't tell people what to do from the safety of cyberspace – all the more so because the struggle against occupation has become a common cause for the entire nation. In addition to territorial defense, we now also have “self-defense”, a one-hundred percent grassroots initiative, guys from the hood taking up arms because no one wants Mordor in this land.

«We're a mishmash of beliefs, age groups, and subcultures» – Oleksandr Kolchenko, anarchist from Crimea

In the 2000s, Oleksandr took part in many skirmishes with neo-Nazis. He was also convicted in the high-profile case of Ukrainian film director Oleg Sentsov on charges of contributing to terrorist activity and committing a terrorist act for trying to set fire to United Russia's office in Simferopol in 2014. Kolchenko was sentenced to ten years in jail and was released in 2019 during an exchange between Russia and Ukraine.

After my return to Ukraine, my activism became a sporadic affair because I was mostly pre-occupied with work and personal matters. When the war broke out, I spent the first two days in a bomb shelter. Staying idle and watching the idleness of others took a heavy toll on me. Furthermore, in the early days of the war, a few Russian military units started closing in on Kyiv, so its defense had to be taken seriously.

I tried applying through a military enlistment office, but the lines were huge, with people almost storming the office. After a long search, I joined one of the companies – a mishmash of beliefs, age groups, subcultures, and creeds. I'm with the territorial defense in Kyiv, guarding a facility and doing drills in the shooting range and training area.

Now that the Kyiv Region has been cleared of occupants, Kyiv is returning to peaceful life. But even though coffee shops are reopening, the threat in the north persists. Those who can go to the front line should go there because the war isn't over.

Nazis were a force in the streets, but after the Maidan, they barely won one or two percent in the all-Ukraine elections. Before the war, Ukraine's largest far-right organization was the National Corps – essentially, the political wing of the Azov Regiment. However, Azov has recently published a statement, equally denouncing Stalinism and Nazism as totalitarian regimes that inflicted the heaviest losses on Ukraine in its entire history.

«We can finally fight Putin's regime in the open» – Yuri, anarchist from Russia

I'm a Russian national and a member of the anarchist movement. When Russia started prosecuting and oppressing anarchists, I ended up in Ukraine. Ukrainian society is a lot more free than Russia. It is considerably less controlled by the state and features more powerful grassroots initiatives. After living in Russia, coming here was a big relief.

When the war began sometime after my arrival, I joined the territorial defense on its second day. For now, we're doing plenty of drills, tactical and medical, making good use of our time. We stick to a military daily routine. We get up, have breakfast, and work out. After lunch, we normally have theoretical classes on various military disciplines, handling firearms, and aiming.

I'd rather we went to the firing range more often. Then it's time for supper and lights out – another busy day gone by.

As an anarchist, I've stood in opposition to Putin's regime for years. But many of us ended up in jail because the regime always had the upper hand, leaving us as the victims. Today I finally have the opportunity to fight it in the open, without reserve. An anarchist army would be great, but the territorial defense has been our only realistic option so far. Our most urgent goal is to stop the aggressor. If Putin takes control of Ukraine, it will be the end of freedoms and the end of the anarchist movement.

When European leftists say there are plenty from the far-right in Ukraine, Ukrainians tell them to compare the share of ultra-right votes in Europe and here. *<The Insider's note: In its current composition, the Supreme Rada only has one deputy from the nationalistic Freedom Party, which is, in turn, the only ultra-right force in the Ukrainian parliament.>*

There are Nazis in Ukraine, but their influence is far from dominant. They are a small element of the political landscape. I can only recall one attempted attack from the Nazis. There was a Free Belarus rally in late August – early September 2021, where Pramen made an appearance. For some reason, Nazis have it in for this Belarusian anarchist organization. At the end of the day, passions flew high, but no one got hurt.

«Western anti-fascists are helping us with the fund-raising» – Salim, refugee from Donetsk, libertarian socialist

We started preparing for all-out war a month before it broke out. When Russia started amassing troops near the border, we were already weighing our options. I co-founded Operation Solidarity, a charity helping libertarians, anarchists, anti-fascists, and leftists who take up arms against the occupants. We've helped more than 200 people. It's hard to stay in touch with everyone because they are scattered across multiple formations. We supply rations, equipment, clothes – everything they need to keep fighting.

Corrupt military officers and politicians are another cause of gaps in military supplies, so the brunt of the effort lies with volunteers. It was true in 2014 and remains true to date: the state is slow on the uptake. It provides weapons and munitions, but when it comes to proper helmets, armored vests that weigh less than fifteen kilos, footwear, clothes, and collimator sights, it's all down to us.

We also help refugees with humanitarian aid and other matters and set up temporary shelters in Western Ukraine and Europe. We're working on retaining the libertarian society that has been developing in Ukraine since 2014. Very few have left for Europe; most have stayed.

Setting up an independent militia force without any ties to the government is pointless because it will be wiped out in no time. Heads of communities are good at security matters; Russian reconnaissance teams that went snooping around were quickly detected. Unless your unit coordinates its actions with the Armed Forces, you will soon be detained or exterminated – most likely, the latter. The same goes for occupied territories teeming with Russian regular troops. Finally, the quickest way to get weapons and learn something about warfare is by joining the army or territorial defense.

We launched a fund-raising campaign, with massive input from Western anarchists and anti-fascists, and seek to engage an even broader audience. We're raising money in Ukraine too,

though not a lot: domestic donations are scarce, and there are better-positioned foundations running local campaigns.

The issue of corruption persists: people who lay their hands on large amounts of money begin to use them poorly. As a result, front-line fighters have to wait for the crucial equipment, while guys manning checkpoints somewhere in Lviv [Western Ukraine] are in full gear: helmets, tactical glasses, firearms with all options, laser sights, tactical foregrips... Helmets and armored vests are being brought by the tens of thousands, but some end up in storage. Overall, they've imported so many that every civilian could have one.

In the first week of the war, Ukrainians bought up all relevant equipment available in shops, either for personal use or for the military. Then we started importing supplies from neighboring countries like Poland and Czechia, where there are many Ukrainians. They procure and ship military supplies to Ukraine. Around 100,000 Ukrainians who were out of the country for work returned home when the war broke out to join the defense.

Ukraine's Armed Forces had around 260,000 troops, with 60,000 to 100,000 battle-ready. The rest are overweight officers awaiting retirement and red-tape brigades. However, Ukraine passed a law on territorial defense a year ago. A lot of people have signed up, with as many as 100,000 firearms issued. Their level of combat experience varies. Most of those with experience fought in Donbas. Meanwhile, the AFU has mobilized reservists.

In 2014–2016, Nazis indeed abounded. They had full control of the streets with a force of up to 25,000 fighters. By 2017, most Nazi leaders had been repressed, killed, expelled from the country, or forced to bury the hatchet. The police and the SBU [Ukrainian intelligence] took them under control.

The anti-fascists were once an underground movement – until we launched a counteroffensive on the Nazis. In 2022, their support dwindled almost to nothing: they could rally three hundred people for a protest but were dismissed by the youth and the majority of the population. Our skirmishes with Nazis continued but became less violent. And we often came out on top.

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Retrieved on 22nd February 2023 from theins.ru
"Ilya" in this article has been identified as Dmitry Petrov, who died fighting in the Battle of
Bakhmut on 19 April 2023.

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