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Anti-war resistance in Russia

Tom Hughes

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The Ukrainian tennis player Sergiy Stakhovsky recently commented on the so called 'lack of resistance' to war within Russia, saying: "In the first few weeks I honestly believed that the Russians, once they saw what the army was doing, when they're watching the destruction of cities, the bombing of cities such as Kharkiv and Kyiv that they would go out and protest. But that didn't happen. Nobody came out. Few came to protest. There were no masses."

Stakhovsky seems to be drawn into the dangerous nationalist tide that is gaining hold in both Ukraine and Russia. In the world of sport itself, the Russian tennis player Andrei Rublev wrote 'no war please' on a TV camera lens after winning a match in Dubai, whilst the world number two tennis player Daniil Medvedev spoke about "promoting peace".

When war did break out, there were mass demonstrations, and individual protests involving putting messages in windows and on balconies, and affixing on cards and clothes, either peace signs or other anti-war symbols, or symbols of Ukraine. There were pickets by individuals, and a large number of anti-

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war petitions. Many professions garnered tens of thousands of signatures from their own field on petitions calling for the end of the war.

Between 24th and 28th of February, more than 6,440 people were arrested at anti-war actions. Some were simply passers-by who witnessed the police arrests. In the first month of the anti-war protests, a total of 15,000 people were arrested and tried in hearings that lasted from 3 to 10 minutes. These trials are still going on. They have resulted in short prison sentences, fines and felony cases. In addition to the arrests, the Russian state passed a new law on March 5th which could mean up to 15 years jail and at the very least heavy fines, for spreading “fake news” about the military. In addition much of the oppositional media-newspapers, radio stations, websites-have been closed down. Stricter censorship was imposed on the regional media, so that coverage of the war has ceased, or the propaganda of the Putin regime is transmitted.

Many journalists, unable to report on the war, have fled abroad. In schools, teachers are being forced to carry out pro-war propaganda lessons. Those who refused have been sacked or pressurised to resign. Again, some had to flee abroad because of the threat of prosecution. A teacher in Penza is facing felony charges for anti-war comments in a class.

In mid-March, two paramedics were arrested for putting up anti-war graffiti and are now under house arrest. In Kasimov in the Ryazan region, a Moscow journalist and a local inhabitant have been accused of vandalism for spray painting “Putin get out” on a statue of Lenin. They were tortured in order to make them confess.

This repression brought the open anti-war demonstrations to a finish by the end of March. As a result individual protests

are taking their place. These include slogans written on walls and fences, and writing anti-war slogans like Het bonhe (No War) on bank notes. Price tags on goods have been removed and replaced with the number of dead in Ukraine. The protests have spread throughout the Russian Federation. In Tula, 120 miles south of Moscow, a 19 year old youth, handed out anti-war leaflets at Lenin Square. On April 2nd he was arrested and fined 48,000 roubles.(around £660). A local Tula paper, Myslo, also reported that on April 10th, a car in a shopping centre park in Tula had been smeared with ketchup because it carried “Z” an “V” symbols in its windows (these symbols are signs of support for the war and the Putin regime).A reader had contacted the paper and sent in photos of the car saying “I think such events should be made public”!

In the far away Republic of Buryatia, 5,000 miles away from Moscow, and part of the Russian Federation, a 46 year old man damaged a Russian flag inscribed with Z in front of the large bronze head of Lenin in the capital Ulan-Ude. He was arrested the following day. A woman in Ulan-Ude demanded that a minibus driver remove the letter Z from his vehicle. The driver then took her to the police station.

In the latest individual protests, individuals have appeared in public places, carrying blank placards, or with Peace, or No, inscribed on them. Between April 16th and 18th, in various cities throughout Russia, more than 100 people on lone pickets have been arrested.

The Anarchist Black Cross in Moscow helped two people who had been handing out anti-war leaflets in the underground, to escape from Russia. They are also channelling funds to pay the fines of protestors.

The Crimean anarchist Evgeniy Karakashev who has already spent three years in prison, has now been charged with discrediting the armed forces of the Russian Federation whilst in prison. The authorities now want to send him to a harsher prison as a “repeated offender against prison discipline”.

In Moscow two people were arrested for carrying Molotov cocktails near an anti-war action. Another anti-war activist, Anastasiya Levaskova, threw a Molotov at police on the first day of the invasion of Ukraine. She too languishes in prison.

More than 300,000 people have now left Russia because of the repression, refusal to support the war or be conscripted into the armed forces.

Other examples of anti-war agitation have been the resignation of 57 members of the Communist Party in Surgut in western Siberia. Only six people now remain in the branch. This was a protest against the Party’s collaboration with the Putin regime and with the pro-Putin party United Russia. Also in Siberia, in Novosibirsk, a local activist was arrested at a rally to commemorate soldiers who fell during World War II, holding placards saying “Grandchildren, I am ashamed of you” and “We conquered fascism back then, we will conquer it this time too”. In Krasnoyarsk, police arrested a woman for an anti-war sign on her car, saying Zachem (Why?) with the letter Z apparently written in blood. In Orenburg in the Urals, paint was thrown at billboards featuring the letter Z. Also in the Urals, in Yekaterinburg, a woman was arrested for demonstrating against the war with her mouth sewn up. In Perm, another demonstrator was arrested for carrying a placard stating, “You can’t brainwash us with propaganda, people there are just like us”.

In Transbaikalia, far in the east of the Russian Federation, a man argued with a shop assistant and condemned the regime’s actions in Ukraine. He received a fine of 30,000 roubles (around £385). In Yasnogorsk in the Tula region, a 35 year old woman tore down Z posters in a kindergarten. She was fined 48,000 roubles.

Military recruitment offices have been attacked with Molotov cocktails in at least six towns and cities, during the months of April and May.

There is unrest too within the Russian armed forces. Sixty paratroopers from Pskov sent to Belarus as part of the invasion force refused to fight in Ukraine and mutinied, after which they were sent back to Russia. Some have been dismissed whilst others face court martials with the chance of prison sentences. There were also reports of mutinies in elite forces in Khakassia in the Caucasus. Also in the Caucasus, troops from South Ossetia, the unofficial Putin-backed breakaway from Georgia, refused to fight in Ukraine. In March, troops from the 37th Separate Guards Motor Rifle Brigade ran over their own commander with a tank after refusing to continue to fight. More and more soldiers are self-harming, shooting themselves in the feet or legs so that they can avoid going to the front. Others have killed themselves rather than fight.

All of this points to the need not to demonise the Russian people, and to uphold the principles of internationalism. We will continue, where possible, to report on anti-war resistance in Russia in order to counter this demonization, unfortunately now even spreading to anarchist circles here in Britain.