

“Defensive war as an act of popular resistance...”

Exclusive Interview with an Anarchist Fighter of the Territorial Defense Forces of Ukraine

Militant Wire

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One of the defining aspects of the current war in Ukraine is the presence of fighting units with distinct animating ideologies. Plenty of attention has been given to the far-right units of both the Territorial Defense Forces (TDF) and the Armed Forces of Ukraine, such as the Azov Regiment and Right Sector. On the Russian side, there has been a mix of ideologies present among its fighters, from neo-Bolshevik/authoritarian communist to neo-Nazi. Nationalist factions exist on each side as well, such as the Kastuś Kalinoŭski Regiment comprised of Belarusian volunteers, and the Georgian National Legion from their namesake country, organized in 2014 and still fighting today, both on the side of Ukraine. The 141st Special Motorized Regiment, or the Kadyrovtsy, a Chechen paramilitary unit, has posted droves of content on social media from their side of the invasion forces, notably during the siege of Mariupol—which since the outset of the war became an adversarial contest between the Kadyrovtsy and the neo-Nazi Azov Regiment. (Azov fighters posted video of themselves dipping rifle rounds in pork lard as an insult to their Muslim enemies on February 27th.)

Exclusive to the Ukrainian side of the war are fighting anarchist formations and those of ideologically aligned units. One of the most prominent anarchist organizations involved in the war is the Resistance Committee (RC), a coordinating body for anarchist, libertarian, and anti-fascist units within the TDF. Many of these smaller units participating in the Resistance Committee are openly anarchist, such as RevDia and Black Flag Ukraine. Others are less ideologically inclined and were organized under different auspices prior to the war, such as the anti-fascist football hooligan firm, Hoods Hoods Klan.

The Resistance Committee and affiliated fighting units have had a consistent presence on social media since the war began, posting videos and photos of their armed fighters in the field on exercise, on the range sitting in Maxim machine guns, at aid collection points, declaring their solidarity for jailed comrades in Belarus, patrolling their various areas of operations, and recently of some affiliated fighters at the front, who along with other members of the TDF have been redeployed to defend the east of the country. On May 20th, they published a four-page manifesto outlining who they are, their principles, the current scope of their activities, their organizational

aspirations and greater aspirations for Ukrainian society, their view on the war, and some key demands made of both the Ukrainian government and the international community.

The very presence of anarchists within the TDF has raised many questions among those outside of Ukraine. Typical of these questions is to ask how anarchists fighting for Ukraine are organized, and what their approximate force strength is at this time. Even more common are questions of how anarchists could join any *state's* military without contradicting their own ideology; similar to this are questions of how “anarchists could fight on the same side as fascists and neo-Nazis”. Ignoring that this last question is a major mischaracterization of the TDF’s force structure, we nonetheless hope to answer all of these questions about the anarchists currently fighting in and defending Ukraine.

Despite the attention that anarchists of the TDF have attracted in recent weeks, there is still much that the outside world does not know about them. Our interview with a participating member of the Resistance Committee and a TDF fighter of the affiliated anti-authoritarian platoon, “Ilya,” should answer many of these questions. Speaking strictly on his own behalf, however, here is what Ilya had to say:

Tom Lord: When was the Resistance Committee (RC) established, and what led to the decision to organize anti-authoritarian forces fighting in Ukraine?

ILYA: First of all, Resistance Committee was planned as the coordination of anarchists/libertarians willing to join the armed resistance against imperialist aggression of Putin’s regime. Now still the Committee as the coordination is more a project. But it has Instagram and Telegram channel to express anarchist participation in fighting as well as guerrilla activities in Russia and Belarus.

This plan was started being developed couple of months before the war, and media accounts were set just few weeks before it actually started. We made preparations for the case of war even though only few of us if anybody was expecting it will really happen.

The antiauthoritarian platoon of TDF is frequently confused with the Resistance Committee. They are not the same even though some people from the platoon (including me) participate in RC initiative.

What was behind the decision to engage in military resistance to the invasion? From my point of view, the main reasons are:

1. Necessity and determination to be together with the society of Ukraine in its fight against neo-totalitarian aggression;
2. Understanding that any political community with ambition to become significant social actor should get organized and actively involved in the events. War as well as the revolution is time of social transformation. Which forms this transformation will take depends also from us and our activity.

TL: Was there an original anarchist formation predating the Russian invasion at the core of the Committee? When you finally came together, how were you able to formally integrate with the Territorial Defense Forces (TDF)? What was that process like?

ILYA: There were no formation or even exact anarchist organization predating the appearance of RC. There were anarchist community, different groups and individuals willing to get organized under these emergency circumstances.

We had some personal connections within the structure of TDF which gave us opportunity “to land” there as a platoon.

TL: About how many fighters are organized under the RC?

ILYA: As we say above it makes sense to speak about fighters of antiauthoritarian platoon which are around 50 people.

TL: Does the RC have a degree of autonomy within the TDF?

ILYA: We have no specific conditions that would differ us from any other subdivision of TDF. However we have pretty free space how to organize our internal life and it is organized in pretty democratic way even though in accordance to demands of having certain military hierarchy.

TL: From your perspective, should we know anything about fighting anarchist formations in Ukraine that are *not* organized under the Resistance Committee?

ILYA: Yes, of course. Apart from RC and antiauthoritarian platoon there are a lot of individual comrades and small groups participating in TDF or regular army, including the people fighting on the frontline. Among organized groups we can mention comrades from Ecological Platform who are also integrated in TDF.

However one of the ideas which originally laid behind RC was to set a platform for dialogue and coordination between comrades in different places and subdivisions of armed forces.

TL: What is the RC’s perspective on the war? What is the Resistance Committee fighting for in this war, and what do you hope to achieve?

ILYA: I think that the perspective which unites all the people related to Resistance Committee is the vision of current defensive war as an act of popular resistance against purely imperialist intervention of Putin’s regime. That’s why we participate in it and believe that defeat of occupier forces will be definitely good both for local society and potentially for all post-Soviet region.

I would love to see the invasion crashed by popular resistance and at the same time anarchist movement to come out of this story as much more organized, combative and experienced. Having much more political vision and understanding how to achieve social transformations we aspire for and also more resources for it.

TL: Do you see the anarchist fighters of the RC as carrying on the tradition of the Makhnovshchina, or is there very little relationship between today’s Ukrainian anarchists and those of the last century during Nestor Makhno’s time?

ILYA: It is obvious that Makhnovist movement and Nestor Makhno himself are the great inspirations for the today’s anarchists in Ukraine, and particularly those who decided to take up arms. Sure Makhnovshchina still is the big symbol, point of reference and driving example for us. You can see face of Bat’ko Makhno in the stripes of some of our comrades.

It would be maybe too much to speak about any direct relation: so different time and social context and no continuous historical tradition of the anarchist movement because of the repressions under Bolsheviks. However we still study attentively organizational experience and social message of this movement. The basic principles of it are still actual. For many of us this movement plays a central role in historical perspective for this region.

TL: Much has been said outside of Ukraine about the fighting anarchist formation, RevDia. Are there any other anarchist militias that comprise the Resistance Committee whom you would like our readers to know about? It has been said that groups like RevDia were initially reluctant to join the Resistance Committee. Is this True? Care to say any more on that, and how the dispute was resolved, if it existed at all?

ILYA: Antiauthoritarian platoon is combined with anarchists of different backgrounds, antifascists and football hooligans. It is not a secret that relations between different constituents of this body were not always easy. However people decided to try to cast aside old quarrels for the sake of answering common challenge. I would say that we are still in process of working it out. It doesn't go without problems but there is still the will to stay organized within the military frame.

TL: As an anarchist organization, the RC obviously rejects central/vertical leadership. So, how are decisions made? Who "commands" the RC?

ILYA: As we say Resistance Committee as a coordination is still, let's say, under construction. Now it is more the space for dialogue between comrades + Media channels.

In antiauthoritarian platoon there is "normal" military hierarchy with section commanders and platoon commander subordinate to a higher military officers. However we have democratic culture of free mutual critique. We also imposed system of elected deputy commanders of the sections who are responsible to transmit critique of fighters to the platoon command. We elected media committee to regulate our media-activities. For some time we practiced teqmil, sessions of critique and self-critique, which we took from experience of revolutionaries in Kurdistan. Now it is on pause cause our unit pass through some period of waiting for new tasks and structuring.

TL: How have other units of the Territorial Defense Forces reacted to the RC, ideologically, strategically, or otherwise?

ILYA: There were no any specific reaction. Basically we are still normal unit of TDF.

TL: How have Ukrainian civilians reacted to the Resistance Committee? How have you been received by non-combatants in your areas of operations?

ILYA: We are in close contact mostly with the civilian structures of anarchist movement. It was really amazing how from the very first day of war the network of solidarity started to emerge connecting groups of comrades in different Ukrainian cities and in Europe. They have organized really significant line of logistics helping comrades in military structures, families and participated in so many different ways. Since the very first stages we stay in close collaboration with these civilian libertarian structures.

Of course we also have informal and good relations with the people in the places where we stationed. Mostly people meet us with sympathy and support, at the moment I see no alienation at all, just very pleasant communication. Mutual aid is here as well. Locals help us a lot with food, we helped a little bit with their agricultural works.

TL: Have any of your units seen combat yet? Care to say anything about the fight from an anarchist perspective?

ILYA: As a unit [antiauthoritarian platoon] we haven't been engaged in direct fighting yet. However at the first stages of war we were patrolling the area of suspected presence of the enemy diversionary groups. Also unit members assisted frontline units with the logistics and intelligence with drones. They successfully detected one of the enemy positions and then it was hit by the artillery. And helped the evacuation of civilians from the fighting zone. During these activities our fellow comrades appeared under mortar fire.

TL: Have you had much success recruiting fellow Ukrainians/Eastern Europeans? Have you had success recruiting foreigners outside of Ukraine/Belarus/Russia?

ILYA: Majority of our platoon are comrades from Ukraine. However there is also significant presence of Russians and Belarusians as well as some comrades from the West in the unit. It is really international one, but mostly made of Eastern Europeans of course.

TL: There is tremendous fascination outside Ukraine with anarchists “fighting on the same side as fascists” in this war. Acknowledging that this is a *major* mischaracterization, what is the Resistance Committee’s position on overtly fascist formations within the Territorial Defense Forces and within the regular Armed Forces of Ukraine? Have any of your fighters encountered Ukrainian fascists since the invasion? Do antifascist comrades anticipate clashes with Ukrainian fascists, who are also fighting against the Russian military?

ILYA: I would start with simple thing that actual powerful fascism is presented in modern Ukraine first of all by Putin’s occupiers and their imperialistic social project. It should be the first target for any antifascist force. The presence of far right in Ukrainian military is dramatically over-exaggerated, mostly by Putinist propaganda. It would be unfair, however, to deny presence and visibility of right-wingers both in society and army. We believe that the best way to confront this phenomenon today for us is to develop our own structure – organized and strong.

TL: Wars often lead to vacuums of authority, the breakdown of society, etc., and thus have high potential for revolutionary movements. Do you see a high potential for revolution in this war? If so, what would be the goals of such a revolution?

ILYA: War can lead to social transformation both in revolutionary or very reactionary trajectory. We hope that Ukrainian society will show solidarity and self-organization enough to democratize society more. Obvious objectives are more control over social and economical life on the grassroots level; to reduce to a minimum dependence from “international financial institutions”; to secure the rights of the workers; to broaden social sphere and the space of responsibility for local communities.

TL: Item #12 on your manifesto demands the ease of access to arms after the war. Do you think the Ukrainian government will try to disarm you after Ukrainian forces demobilize?

ILYA: First of all it would be very recklessly to speculate about demobilization since the war looks very far from an end. I wouldn’t like to go into suspicions about the intentions of any political actors but we believe that free access of the society to the means of self-defense should be assured.

TL: From your perspective, what does the war in Ukraine mean for the international anarchist movement beyond the conflict zone?

ILYA: I believe that this war is an important challenge for global anarchist community – it is an exam to develop adequate and combative political position towards the events. It also opens opportunities to get mobilized and organized in the same manner that Kurdish revolution has opened it recently. Of course to a lesser level – because in Kurdistan the revolutionary sense of the conflict is much more obvious for the outsider. However for our region this war is the moment of truth, the major point of bifurcation. This conflict also gives a fuel for the further libertarian analysis of global realities.

TL: Thank you, very much, for your time.

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Militant Wire’s Tom Lord Speaks with a Member of The Resistance Committee. “Ilya” has been identified as Dmitry Petrov, who died fighting in the Battle of Bakhmut on 19 April 2023.

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