

War and anarchists

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For the second day in a row, the media is full of reports about the death of Ukrainian artist David Chichkan on the front lines. Adhering to the rule of “speak well of the dead or not at all,” I will say that may he rest in peace; he defended his country until his last breath. But, excuse me, anarchism has nothing to do with it, although most of these reports emphasize his anarchist beliefs. And I will not lie, his 2023 mural in Zaporizhia depicting Makhno under the state flag frankly outraged me.

This conversation should start way back in 2017-18. I’ve already posted some bits and pieces, but I’ll try to put them together to give you the full picture. By that time, anarchist organizations in Ukraine had been totally crushed by far-right groups under the protection of the police and state security services. The essence of the conflict was that, in accordance with their value system, ideological anarchists after the Maidan opposed neoliberal reforms and the commercialization of the social sphere, which had plunged the broad masses of the Ukrainian population into poverty. The state, on the contrary, pursued a policy of suppressing any left-wing movement and the ability of workers and socially vulnerable segments of the population to organize and defend their rights. Our Union of Anarchists also fell in this unequal struggle.

And immediately after this defeat, representatives of the authorities began to approach us with surprising consistency, trying to persuade us to sell the party or hand it over to the leadership of some high-ranking official. The first to arrive was a messenger from the advisor to the Minister of Internal Affairs, who wanted him to head the party. The cynicism of this approach is striking: without any legal grounds for prosecution, they destroyed the organization, crippled its activists, prevented them from holding rallies by constantly attacking them, and then offered them a role as a pocket organization of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. But the organizers of such a raider attack did not take into account the difference in worldviews: while for a nationalist, becoming a big policeman and legally using violence is the height of desire, for an anarchist, working with the authorities is an indelible disgrace, a lifelong stigma of being a provocateur. Nevertheless, since the days of Lutsenko, the Ukrainian police have had a sick fascination with Makhno, although what could be further from the great anarchist than the punitive authorities?

Then other approaches were used on us, offering various ransom amounts. And in the fall of 2021, an intermediary from a high-ranking general also proposed him to us as chairman and put forward a proposal that the territorial defense be formed under the banners of the SAU and using the historical heritage of the Makhnovists. They already knew about the impending war, and

the court political strategists apparently planned to exploit such a vivid symbol in the defense of the state—to defend the same Huliaipole in Makhnovist colors and images. Moreover, in a personal conversation, one competent representative told me directly: well, decide, we will do it anyway, with or without you. And the last tactic they used against us was to propose creating local cells of our party from some neophytes who did not understand anarchism at all. Given that in its current state, the SAU cannot verify whether there are any right-wing radicals or police informants among them, and then train the newly created collective to the proper level. But in that case, we risked being drawn into the games of the far right or the special services, from which it would be impossible to extricate ourselves.

I have already written about this, but I will repeat that anarchists fought in the ranks of the Red Army, and Makhno's Rebel Army concluded an agreement with the government of Soviet Ukraine against their common enemy, Wrangel. But in both cases, they pursued anarchist goals. The resolution of the 1st Congress of the Confederation of Anarchist Organizations of Ukraine "Nabat" in April 1919 stated that if anarchists joined the Red Army, they should conduct their propaganda in the troops and create conscious anarchist groups of defenders of the social revolution within the army. And the Starobelsk Agreement between the RPAU/Makhnovists and the Ukrainian SSR in October 1920 contained a political section according to which the Makhnovists went to shed blood on the Wrangel front for the legality of anarchist agitation, the election of anarchists to the Soviets at all levels, and anarchist self-government in the Gulyai-Pole region.

I am well aware of the enormous difference between the socio-political conditions and moods in society today and those of more than a hundred years ago. And I understand that the path from our reality to the anarchist ideal is much longer than it was for Makhno. But I am deeply convinced that an ideological anarchist cannot cooperate with the state, generally abandoning the anarchist path, without demanding in return the implementation of even the most basic anarchist projects, freedom of agitation, the introduction of mutual aid technologies, etc. If, for the sake of any state goals, he simply puts his ideas on hold until better times, removes his symbols, such as his work overalls, he simply ceases to be an anarchist. Even worse, if he retains the appearance of an anarchist but in fact defends political orders antagonistic to his ideas, a repressive system of government. This is a kind of shameful cosplay, a disguise that discredits the anarchist movement.

Therefore, during these contacts, our party made counterproposals, requesting support for its projects in exchange for assistance to the state that was acceptable to us. Under the circumstances, these projects posed no threat to the authorities, such as basic structures of self-government and social self-service, and even helped to relieve some of the social burden on the budget. However, from our point of view, they laid the foundation for abandoning post-Soviet paternalism in favor of the independent development of civil society. None of our proposals were accepted, and the authorities continued their attempts to beg and squeeze our organization, to put it at the service of the ruling regime without any obligations on their part, in the hope that we would simply be satisfied with some handouts. This fits perfectly into the current political mainstream in Ukraine, where, regardless of their names, parties and public organizations promote the same national-conservative ideology and neoliberal economy. The "end of history" according to Fukuyama. But my comrades and I are not interested in the careers of officials, otherwise we would have long since given up our anarchism. In short, we did not reach an agreement.

However, even without our participation, the results of three years of war show that the authorities have been unable to develop a serious movement in their support based on anarchist

ideas and under the banner of Makhnovism. Moreover, we are not the only ones in the world, and the presence of anarchists in the ranks of the Armed Forces of Ukraine is advertised by a number of Western participants in the anarchist movement. Despite the enormous resources available to the state with the support of the West, it has not managed to attract a significant number of people who declare themselves anarchists to its defense. There were a number of information campaigns, for example, with the same mural by Chichkan, but they were extremely clumsy, without knowledge of the basics of ideology and taking into account the anarchist system of values, so they failed. True, a certain stratum emerged in the nationalist camp that declared itself to be national anarchists. But their texts often contradict the basic ideas of anarchism, so they are not taken seriously by the movement.

I will not label my old anarchist friends or newcomers to our movement who decided, in one way or another, to first support the post-Maidan government and then defend the state in this war. They can explain themselves if they want to, with the exception, of course, of open provocateurs, whose stories are no longer of interest to anyone. I have only stated my position and that of my comrades who, during this difficult decade, have not grown weary or given up in the lawlessness of internal emigration, where the post-Maidan regime has driven us.

But I would strongly urge that the defense of the state, which is a constitutional duty of citizens and which even people with anarchist views are forced to perform if they are mobilized and have not gone underground, should not be presented by these people as the defense of some anarchist ideals. Many commanders of Makhno's army were veterans of World War I, and, for example, Vdovichenko, commander of the 2nd Azov Corps of Makhno's army, was already a member of an anarchist group before mobilization. But none of them declared that they were defending anarchist ideals in an imperialist war for the interests of the autocracy. In such cases, they fight as citizens, not as anarchists. All the more so today, when the authorities, even in small matters, did not want to make concessions to our idea, but simply tried to use our banner and history as an additional propaganda resource to mobilize society in defense of their narrow corporate interests, which are also destructive for the overwhelming majority of Ukrainian society.

But every war eventually comes to an end. And sooner or later, we will have a rare opportunity to put anarchist technologies of universal self-government at the service of our fellow citizens. The process of post-war reconstruction of the country must necessarily include the reconstruction of social relations, their humanization, and the modernization of the contract between society and the state. In conditions of economic ruin and an empty state budget, our projects of mutual aid and social self-service can make it easier for Ukrainians to overcome these hard times and grow into new, independent citizens. And at the same time, they will not become a form of cooperation between anarchists and the state that discredits us and violates our principles. In this important and necessary work, we are ready to lend a helping hand to all supporters of anarchist ideas and Makhno's legacy who have steadfastly endured all the trials of the last decade, have not resorted to persecuting their comrades in the interests of the elites, and have not traded our dream for scraps from the table of those in power.

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