

Anarchists Support Self-Determination for Ukraine

What Did Bakunin Say About National Self-Determination?

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This is a response to a challenge by Tridni Valka, a Czech anarchist group. They denounced an article of mine. I had defended anarchists who support the Ukrainian people in the Ukraine-Russian war. Bakunin and other anarchists have supported oppressed nations and national self-determination, as part of their revolutionary program, as I demonstrate.

The Debate Goes On

Alex Alder wrote an article, “British Anarchism Succumbs to War Fever.” (Alder 2023) He was unhappy that many British, Eastern European, and other anarchists were supporting the Ukrainian people against the imperialist Russian invasion. I argued against his view in, “Are Anarchists Giving in to War Fever? In Defense of Anarchists Who Support the Ukrainian People.” (Price 2023)

My article was republished on the website of the Czech Anarchist Federation. Then Tridni Valka (Class War), another Czech anarchist grouping, wrote an angry response, denouncing my (and the Anarchist Federation’s) support for the Ukrainian people’s resistance. (Tridni Valka 2023) “The delay in our brief response can only be explained by the fact that it took us a long time to recover from [Wayne Price’s] text...” This is my response, in which I will try to cover key aspects of their argument.

Bakunin’s Views on National Self-Determination

Central to T.V.’s argument is a denial that anarchists might support any oppressed people or nation. “That ‘anarchists’ operate with the concept of nation is new to us! ... Anarchists are opposed to nationhood and its material consequences such as the nation-state [and] national self-determination....Revolutionary anarchists have always held anti-national positions...”

This statement is factually untrue. It confuses the nation (community, people, country) and the nation-state (national government, with its ideology of nationalism) which anarchists have indeed always opposed. I have previously written an article on the anarchist Errico Malatesta, comrade of Bakunin and Kropotkin. (Price 2022) I demonstrated that he had supported the national rebellions and self-determination of oppressed peoples, even as he opposed wars between imperialist states (particularly World War I). But what was the opinion of Michael Bakunin, among the first revolutionary anarchists?

In his selection of Bakunin’s writings, Sam Dolgoff writes, “Bakunin argues that the nation-state is not a natural community. He defines the contrast between Nationality, ones natural love for the place and the people...and Patriotism, the absolute power of the state over its native subjects and conquered national minorities.” (1980; p. 401)

Then he quotes Bakunin: “Nationality, like individuality, is a natural fact. It denotes the inalienable right of individuals, groups, associations, and regions to their own way of life. And this way of life is the product of a long historical development [a confluence of human beings with a common history, language, and a common cultural background]. And this is why *I will always champion the cause of oppressed nationalities struggling to liberate themselves from the domination of the state.*” (Dolgoff, 1980, p. 401. My emphasis.)

By “the state” in this passage, he refers to the foreign state which dominates the oppressed nationality. By “nationality...is a natural fact,” he means, not that nationality is a biological fact, but that it is created mostly by unplanned, unpurposive, social history.

Bakunin also wrote, “Every nationality, great or small, has the incontestable right to be itself, to live according to its own nature. This right is simply the corollary of the general principle of freedom.” (quoted in Bonanno 1990, pp. 20–21)

Also, “Each individual, each association, commune, or province, each region and nation, has the absolute right to determine its own fate, to associate with others or not, to ally itself with whomever it will, or break any alliance...The right to unite freely and [to] separate with the same freedom is the most important of all political rights, without which confederation will always be disguised centralization.” (quoted in Guerin, *Anarchism*, 1970, p. 67)

In his book on anarchism, Daniel Guerin interpreted this statement: “True internationalism rests on self-determination, which implies the right of secession..” (p. 67) Guerin goes so far as to suggest that “Lenin... adopted this concept from Bakunin.” This is unlikely, since Lenin had little regard for anarchist theory. The concept was already widely known by that time.

As T.V. recognizes, the right of national self-determination was a bourgeois-democratic demand, created by capitalism, along with such demands as free speech, freedom of association, land to the peasants, the right to bear arms, election of officials, and so on. However, capitalism never fully granted these demands, especially now in its epoch of decline. They can only be consistently won through a revolution of the workers and oppressed. Therefore the fight for bourgeois-democratic demands has revolutionary implications in our time.

“For Bakunin, then, the achievement of national liberation had to be linked to the broader struggle for an international revolution. If nationality was separate from the state...it did not need the state for emancipation....” (van den Walt & Schmidt 2009; p. 64)

Nor was Lenin’s concept of national self-determination exactly the same as that of anarchists. Lenin argued that self-determination would result in voluntary merger into a world state which was homogeneous, integrated, and centralized. Anarchists aim for a decentralized, regionalized, and pluralistic world, with peoples connecting through networks and federations.

It should be clear that Bakunin (also Malatesta, and Dolgoff and Guerin) would not have agreed with T.V. that all “Anarchists are opposed to nationhood and...have always held anti-national positions...,” including opposition to national self-determination. Opposition to nationhood and anti-nationality is the opinion of T.V., but it is not the “anarchist” tradition.

This is summarized in Zoe Barker’s recent overview of anarchism: “For anarchists, this commitment to universal human solidarity entailed an opposition to imperialism and colonialism and the support of anti-colonial national liberation movements, such as those in Cuba, India, and Ireland. According to Maximoff, ‘the anarchists demand the liberation of all colonies and support every struggle for national independence....’” (2023; pp. 109–110)

She follows with the important addition, “This support included the belief that the main goal of national liberation movements—emancipation—could only be achieved through the methods of anarchism, rather than the establishment of a new state.” (same)

That is, the program of “nationalism” could lead to a formally independent state (as it did in Cuba, India, and Ireland), with its own flag, its own currency and postage stamps, its own pres-

ident, army, police, and capitalists. The nation's workers are still being exploited. True emancipation from the imperialist-dominated world market and great-power politics, will require an international working class revolution. Anarchists participate in national liberation struggles in order to spread this awareness and work toward this goal. As Lucien van der Walt writes, many anarchists seek

“...to participate in national liberation struggles in order to shape them, win the battle of ideas, [and] displace nationalism with a politics of national liberation through class struggle....Nationalism is only one current in national liberation or anti-imperialist struggles...National liberation struggles could develop into a variety of outcomes.” (van den Walt & Schmidt 2009; pp. 310–11)

I present all these quotations and citations, not because I think that Bakunin and other anarchists were always correct—which I do not. I am trying to refute the smugly ignorant claim that all “Anarchists are opposed to nationhood and...national self-determination.”

During the War

In summary, (1) revolutionary anarchists support the wars of oppressed nations against imperialists. These are not the same as wars where both sides are imperialist. (2) revolutionary anarchists are always in opposition to states, even including the states of oppressed nations, advocating popular revolutions against them.

This raises the question of what anarchists should be doing when a national war is raging (as in Ukraine versus Russian imperialist aggression) but they are too weak as yet for there to be a revolution against the state.

In my paper (the one which T.V. took so long to “recover from”), I used the example of the Spanish Civil War/Revolution (1936–39). The issue was not national self-determination but a fascist-military attempt to overthrow the established bourgeois-democratic government. The government was run by a “Popular Front” coalition of Socialists, Stalinists, liberal politicians, and the main anarcho-syndicalist organizations (the CNT union and the FAI anarchist federation). While fighting the fascist armies, the Popular Front proceeded to re-build the weakened democratic capitalist state.

This policy was opposed by a revolutionary wing of the anarchists and syndicalists. (Evans 2020) One part of this wing was the Friends of Durruti Group. They called on the anarchist organizations to quit the government, to promote federations of self-managed industries and farms, to expropriate the capitalists and big landholders, and to federate workers and farmers councils and unions into a central body to run the war. Meanwhile by propaganda and action, they sought to persuade the majority of the working class to overturn the Popular Front regime and to make a revolution which could effectively defeat the fascist forces.

But they did not call on the workers to quit the armed forces which were fighting the fascist armies. After all, they criticized the Popular Front government for many things, but not for fighting the fascist military! (Similarly, anarchists should condemn the Ukrainian state for many things, but not for resisting the Russian invasion.)

Nor would the workers have understood a call for abandoning the army. They would have seen it as proposing surrender. (Similarly today, if anarchists told the Ukrainian workers to stop

fighting because the Ukrainian army was organized by a bourgeois national state, the workers would rightly see this as a call to surrender to the Russians.)

The Friends of Durruti wrote, “There must be no collaboration with capitalism whether outside the bourgeois state or from within the government itself. As producers our place is in the unions....[But] class struggle is no obstacle to fight on in the battlefields and working in the war factories.

“....Revolutionary workers must not shoulder official posts nor establish themselves in the ministries. For as long as the war lasts, collaboration is permissible—on the battlefield, in the trenches, on the parapets, and in productive labor in the rearguard.” (Friends of Durruti Group 1978; pp. 35 & 38)

In fact, none of the Ukrainian anarchists, most of whom support the war effort, have joined the government, joined Zelensky’s party, called for votes for his party, or participated in the government in any other way.

T.V. disputes my understanding of the Friends of Durruti (FoD). “Wayne Price...didn’t understand their critique of the united front in the least.” (Actually the FoD did not critique the “united front”—a coalition of workers’ organizations. They advocated an alliance of revolutionary organizations. What they opposed was the “Popular Front”, the coalition of workers’ parties with capitalist parties as well as Stalinists.) T.V. points out that the FoD did not only oppose governmental collaboration of anarchists with political parties. They also opposed anarchists working outside of government to further capitalist aims—the effort to rebuild the bourgeois democratic Spanish state. I did not say otherwise.

But T.V. goes on to criticize the FoD themselves. “The Friends of Durruti did not demand the withdrawal of the anarchists from the front, but this proved to be a decisive error...” But the FoD did not advocate that anarchist fighters passively carry out the program of the collaborationists. They tried to create a revolutionary strategy of action to lead to revolution. Their “decisive error” was in not organizing soon enough to build a revolutionary alternative to the reformist leadership of the anarchists and socialists.

Class Reductionism

The basic method of T.V. is that of class reductionism, a crude (and illegitimate) version of Marxism. I take the essence of anarchism to be opposition to all forms of domination. Exploitation of the modern working class by the bourgeoisie, integrated with the state, is central to all oppression. It supports all non-class forms of oppression, and is, in turn, supported by them. This includes the oppression of women, African-Americans and other People of Color, LGBTQ people, people with “disabilities,” youth, as well as (our topic) national oppression. But while class exploitation overlaps with all other oppressions, they are not reducible to class exploitation. They also have their own dynamics.

But to T.V., the only oppression worth considering is the proletariat’s exploitation by capitalism. All others are distractions. T.V. and I agree that the working class needs to overcome its divisions into women and men, African Americans and Euro-Americans, straights and LGBTQ people, Czechs and Slovaks, Ukrainians and Russians, etc. These divisions cannot be overcome

by ignoring them but only by defending the needs and freedoms of everyone, especially the most oppressed, the most exploited, including peoples facing the terror of imperialist aggression.

T.V. accuses the Czech Anarchist Federation and myself as being partially “in the camp of the warmongers who support the mutual massacre of proletarians in Ukraine.” This shows how far they have deviated from reality, in the service of their schematic abstractions. One side has chosen to make war. That is the imperialist state of Russia. It has invaded and occupied Ukraine, blown up its villages and cities, massacred its inhabitants, raped its women, tortured soldiers and civilians, kidnapped children, risked nuclear accidents at reactors, and sought to wipe out the Ukrainians as a culturally distinct people. The Ukrainian people have had the temerity to resist, which I suppose makes them “mutual warmongers” to T.V.—and to the Russian state. There is a French saying, “The animal is vicious. When attacked it defends itself.”

The anarchist-communists have not (yet?) persuaded the Ukrainian workers to overthrow capitalism and the state. So (unfortunately) the nationwide resistance is organized and led by the bourgeois state—although there is much bottom-up voluntary organizing. Lacking its own arms, the state has gotten military aid from Western imperialists. These do not really care about such things as democracy or national self-determination. They are out to expand their influence and weaken their Russian rival. But the Ukrainians have the right to take arms from whomever will offer them, rather than be crushed. Yet they should not be too trusting of the US and NATO, which would betray them in a breath, if it seemed to be in the imperialists’ interests.

I would not advise Ukrainian anarchists on their immediate tactics. But their overall strategy should have two interconnected goals. One is to drive out the Russians and defend the independence of the Ukrainians. The other is to spread the program of anarchism among the workers, soldiers, and other Ukrainians, with the eventual goal of an anti-state, anti-capitalist, revolution—by the working class and all oppressed, internationally. Even now, there is a need to oppose the government’s neo-liberal austerity and union-busting and to oppose nationalism in general and the far-right in particular.

The left, and not just anarchists, is deeply divided over the Ukraine-Russian war. The fundamental issue is whether to be on the side of the workers and other Ukrainians who are fighting for their very lives and independence, or whether to side with imperial elites offering only domination and destruction.

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