

National Self-Determination and Anarchism in the War in Ukraine

Wayne Price

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From the start of the Russo-Ukrainian war, the main issue has been the self-determination of the Ukrainian people. Many anarchists reject the concept of the national self-determination of oppressed peoples such as Ukraine. Yet it has been advocated by anarchists since the birth of revolutionary libertarian socialism.

By “nations” I mean the same as “peoples” or “countries” or “nationalities” or “national communities.” Whether people – such as the Ukrainians – are an independent nation is something for themselves to determine, rather than outside observers or invading imperialist armies. The same goes for deciding what sort of political and economic system they want. That is self-determination. In 1991, the Ukrainians voted overwhelmingly for independence from Russia, and so did most Russian-speakers.

National self-determination began as part of the bourgeois-democratic program developed in the age of capitalist democratic revolutions. This included the English Revolution of the 1640s, the American Revolution of 1776, the French Revolution of 1789, the South American and Caribbean revolutions, and other rebellions around the world. The bourgeois-democratic program included freedom of speech, of the press, of assembly, land to the peasants, the right to bear arms, equality of all before the law, the election of officials... and the right of nations to self-determination.

The capitalist class has never lived up to its program, not consistently or fully. It has had to be forced, by the struggles and blood of the people. Now in the epoch of its decline, it is decreasingly able to maintain its democratic façade. The struggle for rights, even those of the bourgeois-democratic program, can only be fully won through the overthrow of capitalism and the state by the working class and all oppressed people.

For this reason, the struggle for national self-determination has become identified not with liberalism but with revolutionary socialism. Ignorant anarchists often claim it was invented by Lenin. Lenin indeed used it as a slogan, but the problem with Lenin was not that he was too democratic! For him, national self-determination (like other democratic demands) was a device to win support for his party’s rule from the working people of oppressed nations.

Lenin’s goal was a centralized state, ruling a centralized economy, and ruled by his centralized party. Support for national self-determination, he believed, would lead peoples eventually to voluntarily merge into a homogeneous world. On the contrary, anarchists, while internationalists, are also decentralists, regionalists, and pluralists. They aim for a world of free peoples, without states or borders, tied together through networks and free federations. Anarchist belief in national self-determination is based on a very different goal than Leninism’s.

Anarchists Supported National Self-Determination

From the beginnings of revolutionary anarchism, leading anarchists have supported national self-determination (without necessarily using that term). Mikhail Bakunin, often regarded as one of the “founders” of anarchism, declared:

Nationality... denotes the inalienable right of individuals, groups, associations, and regions to their own way of life... the product of a long historical development... And this is why I will always champion the cause of oppressed nationalities struggling to liberate themselves from the domination of the state.

By “state” he means, here, the foreign state which dominates the oppressed nationality.

Peter Kropotkin is also often regarded as a “founder” of anarchist-communism. He wrote, “True internationalism will never be attained except by the independence of each nationality... If we say no government of man over man, how can [we] permit the government of conquered nationalities by the conquering nationalities?”

Kropotkin supported all national movements against foreign oppressors, such as the Indians and Irish against Britain, the Balkan peoples against Turkey, and the Poles against Russia. Unfortunately, he did not make a clear distinction between wars of oppressed people against their oppressors, and wars among imperialist powers. This led to his supporting France and its allies against the Germans in inter-imperialist World War I. A large majority of anarchists strongly disagreed with him.

The Italian anarchist, Errico Malatesta, was a comrade of Bakunin and Kropotkin. He thought that Kropotkin was completely wrong to take sides in World War I, supporting one imperialist group over another. Malatesta wrote polemics against the minority of pro-war anarchists.

Yet he strongly supported wars of oppressed nations against imperialist domination. Malatesta supported the Libyan Arab fight against Italy’s colonization and the Cuban war for independence from Spain. “Anarchists, being the enemies of all governments and claiming the right to live and grow in total freedom for all ethnic and social groups, as well as for every individual, must necessarily oppose any actual government and side with any people that fight for their freedom.”

It is also worth noting what Nestor Makhno and his Ukrainian movement thought about national self-determination. This should be seen in the context of the Insurgent Army fighting off nationalist armies, as well as fighting for independence from the Austrians, Poles, and, of course, the Russians.

The Makhnovist movement declared (in October 1919):

Each national group has a natural and indisputable entitlement to... maintain and develop its national culture in every sphere. It is clear that this... has nothing to do with narrow nationalism of the “separatist” variety... We proclaim the right of the Ukrainian people (and every other nation) to self-determination, not in the narrow nationalist sense... but in the sense of the toilers’ right to self-determination.

I have been citing the views of “classical” anarchists, but anarchists have continued to support the struggles of oppressed nations from then to the present time. The claim that (all) anarchists do not support national self-determination is false.

Self-Determination is Not Nationalism

Anarchist opponents of self-determination for oppressed peoples confuse it with “nationalism.” But nationalism is only one program for achieving self-determination. It advocates the unity of the nation behind the national ruling class, denying class and other divisions within the country. It aims to set up a new state.

Anarchists do not support nationalism. Instead, they say that real, full, national independence can only be achieved through class struggle, linked up with the international revolution of the working class and all oppressed people. Nationalists and revolutionary anarchists only have a

negative agreement: opposition to the dominating imperialist state (in this case, Russia). But their positive programs – what they want to build to replace the invader – are entirely different.

Anti-self-determination anarchists say that this program means supporting national states. Yet being in solidarity with a people does not have to mean supporting their state. But in most cases (so far) the people have supported (or at least accepted) a state. Anarchists have not (yet) been able to persuade them otherwise. This is their choice. Libertarian socialists do not refuse to support an oppressed people in struggle because they still have a state. Perhaps they will learn from their statist experiences over time, with the encouragement of the anarchists.

Ukrainian anarchists give no political support to the government. They do not vote for Zelensky nor support his party nor urge others to vote for the regime. Their opposition to the state is made clear. Meanwhile, they support workers who resist the neo-liberal, anti-union, austerity government, and business policies. They spread anarchist propaganda wherever possible.

Militarily, it would be optimal if the Ukrainian anarchists could have independent militia or guerrilla forces. Unfortunately, they are far too weak. Only one force was able to organize a fight back against the invaders: the state's official army. While Ukrainian anarchists have many reasons to oppose their state and its army, they should not oppose one thing about them: namely that they are resisting the Russian invasion. For anarchists to tell Ukrainians not to fight against the Russians because the Ukrainian army is the instrument of a capitalist state – would sound to most Ukrainian workers like a call to surrender!

Some Ukrainian anarchists have joined the army while others organize food distribution and other services, all with the long-term goal of eventually overturning all states. That is a tactical question. Strategically, in one way or another, anarchists give practical support to the Ukrainian armed forces against the Russians. This is for the sake of the national self-determination of the Ukrainian people and the goal of international anarchism.

PS: The above was written before the breakout of the latest stage in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The same basic methodology applies to that war as to the Russo-Ukrainian War. The Palestinian people are oppressed by the Israeli state. Anarchists should support them in their struggles for national self-determination. This does not mean support for the reactionary politics of Hamas and certainly not for its reactionary tactics. But Hamas' atrocities are no excuse for the massive atrocities and war crimes being committed right now by the Israeli state. The Palestinian people have right and justice on their side.

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Wayne Price is an American activist, theorist, and writer, has published three books, including
The Value of Radical Theory: An Anarchist Introduction to Marx's Critique of Political Economy
(2013).

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