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Ukraine

**“If we didn’t join the armed
forces, the left in Ukraine
would cease to exist,” says
Taras Bilous**

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An interview with Taras Bilous, a Ukrainian historian and essayist who has served in the Ukrainian army since the beginning of the Russian aggression. Bilous is one of the most visible representatives of the Ukrainian left, a member of the group Social Movement (Sotsialnyi Rukh) and an editor of the online media outlet [Commons](#). He is best known abroad for his essays "Letter to the Western Left from Embattled Kijiv" and "I Am a Ukrainian Socialist. Here are the reasons why I am resisting the Russian invasion." The interview was conducted in Eastern Ukraine in early February, for A2Iarm.cz. It is part of a forthcoming publication on the Ukrainian anti-authoritarian scene.

We are meeting outside the army base. Are political discussions between soldiers problematic?

The military leadership does not censor the opinions of the rank and file. However, I know from personal experience that when subordinates talk to the media, especially on political topics, it can make junior officers nervous. It has happened to me that a commander was worried that he would get a slap on the wrist for my interview, even though realistically there was no such threat.

In any case, I try to avoid unnecessary discussions. I don’t loudly proclaim my political views or the fact that I’m a historian, to save my energy. Otherwise, immediately someone wants me to talk about Kyivan Rus’ or some provocative questions come up. If I see that there might be a possible collaboration in activism with some person in the future, then I’ll start talking more openly to them.

How challenging is it to work with people who have different views?

Opinions don’t bother me in this context. There are all kinds of people here, but you rarely get to discuss broader political issues. But on issues that directly affect our lives and military service, such as senior leadership, we find common ground quite easily.

A much bigger problem in the military is the human factor. Some officers give stupid orders that get people killed unnecessarily. Any soldier who has served at least six months can tell you more than one such story.

As for the rank and file, in the first few months of the invasion they all pulled themselves together, but now, after two years, fatigue has set in. In the West, many expect that with fatigue, our will to fight will gradually wane. However, just because we are tired does not mean that it is not important for us to continue to resist.

But as I said, there are all kinds of people here. Some, despite the actions of the officers, understand that we need to keep working and keep pushing. And others... I once served with a soldier from another company and we spent four days in a collapsing trench. I started fixing it, and the soldier says, “stop fucking about. Let the commander come and fix the trench himself.”

Despite a shared determination to continue resisting Russian aggression, everybody asks themselves: “Why should I be the one to make the sacrifice?” If the leadership has miscalculated on something, why should ordinary soldiers pay for it with their lives? And that includes civilians, whose willingness to enlist is declining. Even some of my friends who tried to enlist in 2022 and didn’t get drafted are now trying to escape mobilization. It’s not so much about fear as it is about certain nonsensical practices that are common in the military: everyone knows about them. They could

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have changed them a long time ago, but with a few exceptions in a few separate units, they didn’t.

In 2022, you decided to join the army despite not having experience of fighting after 2014. Do these two stages of the war differ for you?

In 2014, it was a war for territory. Some people really wanted to join Russia, even though [they were a minority](#). Quite a significant number of people with pro-Russian views wanted to stay in Ukraine, but they wanted federalization [Ed: more autonomy for Donetsk and Luhansk]. Of course, what percentage of the Donbas population held which view could be debated at length, and of course what the people living there thought has changed over time.

On the eve of the Russian troop intervention in 2022, a [survey](#) in the Donbas showed that welfare was more important to most people than which state they would live in - Ukraine or Russia. This is true for people living on both sides of the frontline. Of course, the opinion gap between the two parts of the Donbas has widened over the years. These are people who have become accustomed to a dual identity, so to speak. When they go to Lviv, people call them Muscovites, and when they are in Moscow, people call them Khokhols [Ed. Russian pejorative term for Ukrainians].

In 2014, a Russian, Igor Girkin [Also known as Igor Ivanovich Strelkov - Ed.], started the war (as the military commander of the Donetsk People’s Republic, author’s note), and later that year Russian troops invaded. But certainly, a lot of locals, for various reasons, decided to join the fight against the Ukrainian army.

At that time the war had a completely different effect on me. It killed any nationalism in me. But in 2022 we faced an open invasion, including areas like Kyiv, where nobody welcomed the Russian army. An invasion of the south, Kherson and Zaporozhye regions, where most people want to return to Ukraine. In that sense, it’s a different kind of war now. It’s all much simpler.

Do you feel the influence of this “double identity” directly among your fellow combatants?

Opinions differ everywhere, even here in the squad. For example, my current company commander apparently supported Anti-Maidan in the spring of 2014. I have a strained relationship with him, so I infer more from how he argues in conversations with other officers. According to him, the people in eastern Ukraine didn’t like Maidan, so they demanded federalization, but the government was unwilling to agree to negotiations. However, since Girkin’s group [separatists backed by Russian soldiers — author’s note] seized the town of Sloviansk in 2014, he says it has been a Russian intelligence operation. He also dislikes language activists who want us all to switch to Ukrainian. Most of my unit is from the eastern regions and from what I hear they do not like nationalists. Some of my acquaintances also served in units with members of the former riot police Berkut, who defended the Yanukovich regime during the Maidan — they haven’t changed their views on the Maidan. Nevertheless, they are defending Ukraine against Russian aggression.

What military position do you hold?

During the first two years of the full-scale invasion, I served primarily as a signalman. In practice, it was quite a varied job - sometimes behind a computer, sometimes setting up radios and laying communication cables. Most often, as signalmen, we stayed in a trench several kilometres away from the front line. We provide a backup channel of communication for the guys on the front line. If, for example, the general channel of communication goes down or the signal doesn’t reach them, we are there to provide a backup.

Recently my job has changed, I’m serving in a reconnaissance battalion, but what exactly I do I’d rather not say publicly.

In the Czech left-wing milieu, solidarity with civilians and refugees is strong, but there is little sympathy for armed resistance, or understanding why Ukrainians voluntary join the army. There are also demands to stop the supply of weapons. What do you think about all this?

When you feel the invasion first hand, it changes you. As one of our editors said, it is much easier to prioritise at such critical moments. There are a lot of things that are important to you in everyday life. But when your own life is at stake, that becomes the main thing and everything else is secondary. It clears the mind a little.

In the first days of the invasion, I understood that the future of the left movement in Ukraine depended on whether we actively participate in the war or not. We are all largely judged by our actions at such critical moments. We - the left - are already not very influential in this country and if we had not gone to fight, everything would have fallen apart. The left would have ceased to exist as any kind of entity in Ukraine. For some reasons, I was and still am one of the most visible representatives of the left movement now serving in the armed forces. And so, I have a responsibility not only for myself but for others. It was also easier for me, I am not married, I don’t even have children.

I don’t like to answer journalist questions about why I decided to join the army. To put it mildly, I wasn’t sure if I would make a good soldier. And that’s one of the reasons I didn’t prepare for it. I always thought I’d be more useful in other ways, like writing articles. Honestly, I’m still not much of a soldier (laughs). But I’m gradually learning and then we’ll see. I still have at least a whole year ahead of me.

Since the beginning of the full-scale Russian aggression, you have written two influential articles, “[A Letter to the Western Left from Kyiv](#)” and “[I’m a Ukrainian Socialist. Here’s why I resist the Russian invasion](#)”. which have been [translated into several languages](#). Is it possible to continue writing under conditions of war?

Since the beginning of the invasion, I was only able to write in a concentrated way in the first few months when I had the strength to do so. There was more time. My adrenaline was completely out of control during those first few months. I’ve never found it so easy to write in my life. I usually torture myself in formulating every sentence, but at that time I sat down and wrote an article in half a day. Not anymore. I don’t have the energy or the confidence. I’m more critical now, and I turn things round in my head.

You mentioned in one [interview](#) that it is not certain what will happen to the pro-Russian population of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions and Crimea once these territories are liberated. What will be the relationship with this part of society? What will happen?

We already have liberated areas, that is, we have a practice that we can analyse. For example, a friend of mine, a journalist and former left-wing activist who fled Crimea in 2014 to Ukraine, is now dealing with issues of collaboration in Lyman. People there are often tried unjustly. There are, of course, cases of those who actively participated in the repression, and they certainly need to be condemned. However, there are also cases where Ukraine is clearly unjustly judging, for example, an electrician from the technical services who maintained the living conditions of ordinary people in Lyman during the occupation.

There is a large grey area where it is not so clear-cut. The term ‘rule of law’ does not quite apply to Ukraine, given how many problems there are with the judiciary here. Despite all this, the level of repression and respect for human rights in the Russian-occupied territories and in the rest of Ukraine are incomparable.

The narrative in the Ukrainian mainstream about the eastern regions is also somewhat schizophrenic when it comes to the local population. On the one hand, people see them as “ours”, on the other hand, they see them all as “separatists”. There is no consistent narrative about what happened there in 2014. Moreover, if you go beyond a

certain accepted discourse, when describing those events, you are considered a separatist. So, in that respect, I really don’t like the way this is all working out in Ukraine.

You have written that the Zelenskyy government is implementing neo-liberal policies during the war. At the same time, you are of the opinion that Zelenskyy was the most centrist candidate, or at least the candidate furthest from the radical right. We would be interested to know how this has changed in the last two years. How does the electorate perceive this? Are there any changes on that level?

Yes, there are changes. At the time I meant that in terms of nationalism, Zelenskyy is the most moderate among those politicians who have a chance of becoming president of Ukraine. There have been no changes in this so far. However, the general consensus has moved towards stronger nationalism. And Zelenskyy has moved in that direction as well. One can also find politicians who are more open [than Zelenskyy – Ed.] towards the Russian-speaking population, but they have no chance of winning a presidential election. It also seems to me that some on the Western left don’t understand that an open stance on language issues does not mean a generally progressive agenda. From my point of view, this is often just a strategy of populists to win over those who formerly voted for the pro-Russian parties.

Zelenskyy spent the first year and a half of his mandate trying to achieve peace in the Donbas, and Poroshenko’s minions still blame him for that. In the early months of the invasion, Zelenskyy again addressed the Russian audience in his speeches. Like many Ukrainians, he hoped that people in the Russian Federation would eventually revolt. At some point he gave up and began to support the demand that Russians should not be issued visas and banned from entering Europe.

In the autumn of 2022, Putin declared a mobilization and Zelenskyy again spoke to the Russians in Russian. By that time, the Ukrainian mainstream had shifted to the point that talking to Russians in Russian like that was no longer seen as appropriate. So, we can see at such moments that Zelenskyy’s politics are still more inclusive than the Ukrainian political mainstream. So, yes, we are lucky that things have turned out this way.

But this doesn’t change the fact that Zelenskyy acts like an asshole on many issues. Most recently, for example, in the way he has approached the Palestine question. Also, how he responds to criticism, how he competes with political rivals and how he concentrates media power. He and his closest associates are showbiz people, and they take a very professional-technical approach to capturing the mood of the public. For example, in the first days of the Russian invasion, they combined the television news of all channels into a common telethon. At that time, it was appropriate to the situation; no one could provide such coverage of current events alone. That arrangement should have been abolished long ago because it limits freedom of speech. But it has not been abolished. They are assholes and idiots. We could make a long list of their totally inadequate policies.

What about the participation of the left in the Maidan? You weren’t part of the left-wing movement then. Could you describe the context at the time?

I have a contradictory relationship with that period. I was at the Maidan, but I don’t like the pathos around it. I was an activist before the Maidan. A few months earlier, we had tried to organize a protest about education. We handed out leaflets on campus, but people were very passive. But as soon as Maidan started, the same people who a few months back were saying that there was no point to protest, or something similarly cynical, all of a sudden, they got passionate about the cause and made such revolutionary speeches that I just stared at them (Laughter). I didn’t realise back then that people change suddenly in the case of big uprisings.

Maidan is a story about resistance to the state and the repressive apparatus, and about solidarity. But when the protest moved into a violent phase, participation in that violence changed people, which made me quite uncomfortable. I’m from Luhansk, so from the first day I was following what was happening over there. That was one

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of the reasons why I experienced Maidan differently from my classmates and friends from Kyiv. From the beginning I was worried that it would all turn into something nasty in the Donbas. Unfortunately, that is what happened.

I became a leftist in the middle of all this, in 2014, when the Western left did not show itself in the best light. And in fact, the Ukrainian left was in decay because of the same problems that we now blame on the West.

The reaction of the Western left is generally better now than in 2014, not least because it is now clear who the aggressor is. Even so, in the early days of the invasion, I felt it was necessary to provide some help from here to explain what and how, so that we could put an end to the misguided reactions right away. I thought, in my exaggerated way, that the people of the West would wake up. Now I see how naive I was and how I underestimated the scale of the problem. I had already had the experience of 2014, enough to not be too surprised by the reaction of the Western left. But we also have younger members who came into the left movement in the years immediately before the invasion, and for some of them it was a shock.

In one of your [articles](#), you addressed the right to self-determination and criticism of the arguments that the invasion of Ukraine is a mere proxy conflict. In your view, part of the radical left even takes a more “imperialist” position on this issue than, for example, US officials. How does this manifest itself and where do you think it has its roots?

Part of the Western left has bought into prejudices against Ukraine, uncritical perceptions of Russia, and so on. What do many anti-war leftists actually want, besides a halt to arms shipments? They want the US and Russia to make a deal without considering the views of those who live here. Such solutions have nothing to do with leftist values. Such an approach implies a certain acceptance of neo-realism in international relations.

There is no left consensus about how to approach such issues. The only consensus is probably on the right to self-determination of peoples, but in the case of Ukraine, this has suddenly been forgotten by a section of the left. When a situation becomes critical, some otherwise reasonable people suddenly write complete bullshit.

In this particular case, the United States is basically saying that Ukraine can decide when and under what conditions it will end its resistance. However, in the case of many other armed conflicts around the world, the US takes a very different position regarding support for the right to self-determination. At least in the countries of the global South. Like now, when the western left supports Palestine and the USA supports Israel.

We Ukrainians have also published a [letter of solidarity with the Palestinians](#). But the Western left has various approaches to supporting Palestine. It shocks me when some, often the same Western leftists who have shouted the loudest about the Ukrainian far right over the last year and a half, now uncritically support Hamas. So what the hell is it all about? I can no longer take any of their statements about the hypocrisy of the Western governments seriously.

It seems to me that there is a certain moralising in that position?

Yes. This is despite the fact that there has been a lot of feminist criticism in recent decades that rightly condemns the discrediting of women as emotional and non-objective beings. In the case of the war, they project this “emotionality” onto us Ukrainians. Although there is nothing wrong with emotion. The opposite of emotionality is not rationality, but indifference. And then it comes to hard decisions and the left somehow forgets everything.

The main problem seems obvious to me, and that is the confusion of anti-imperialism and anti-Americanism. All conflicts are seen in terms of opposition to the United States.

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Another thing that is still surprising to me is the confusion between the Russian Federation and the Soviet Union. We can discuss the Soviet Union and what the proper assessment of it should be. But Putin’s Russia is in no sense the Soviet Union. Today, it is a completely reactionary state. One cannot help but notice how many leftist writers slip into their texts comments and arguments revealing that they still see Russia as the Soviet Union. This is even though they rationally acknowledge that Putin’s regime is reactionary, conservative, neoliberal, and so on. And then, boom, suddenly they blurt out something to the effect that the United States’ support for Ukraine is some sort of revenge against Russia for the Bolshevik Revolution. Well, what bullshit! (laughter).

What advice would you give to the Western left?

A significant part of the left has taken an absolutely inadequate position. Those who devote their time to arguing in support of Ukraine are, after all, doing the right thing. The left is in crisis everywhere. It’s just that in some places it’s completely screwed up, like here, and in some places, like in the West, things are not as bad. If I were to give some general advice, I would recommend paying less attention to which abstract position is correct, and focusing more on practical action to help us climb out of the hole we are in.

Even in our own organization [Social Movement – Ed.] until 2022, we took different positions on the war in the Donbas. Sometimes it was difficult to reconcile these sensibilities. In order not to escalate the situation, we often censored ourselves. One of my arguments is, let’s not argue about things that we cannot influence. Left-wingers are often condescending, they consider themselves to be the only reasonable and critical ones. Yet, from the inside, you can see how much of this is learned boilerplate. For example, how some leftists articulate their position and strategy in debates. Instead of analysing specific conditions, they often just repeat examples taken from a completely different context and time, which do not fit the situation at all. We need to move away from these templates. Marxism is not dogma, but for some reason too many Marxists in practice reduce Marxism to a mere repetition of established dogmas. “No war except class war” and so on.

One telling situation occurred when the German delegation of *Die Linke* from the Bundestag arrived last spring. Until then, their position on the supply of arms had been completely negative. When they left, the chairman of the group said that they had reconsidered some of their positions after their experience in Kyiv. For example, that the Ukrainians clearly need missile defence. The same missile defence that they had refused to supply until then, was actually protecting them in Kyiv! And so, more than a year after the invasion, they realized how necessary it was. It took them a long time to come to this understanding, and there is still a lot they need to understand (laughter). But this is at least the basic minimum.

Is there anything you would like to say to the Czech left, for example in relation to the extreme pacifism you mentioned?

The Czech left has the historical experience of the suppression of the Prague Spring, so I don’t understand why they don’t find more understanding for our defiance. Perhaps it is because of an over-dependence on Western leftist theory. Frankly, it was exactly the same in our country and in some aspects it is still the same today. After 1989 the left in Ukraine was very depressing, and we looked all the more to Western authors. At Commons review, we certainly do translations. But at a certain level we understand and feels that we need a kind of decolonization of ourselves. February 24, 2022, the day of the Russian invasion, also became a moment of intellectual emancipation for us. It is necessary to be more critical of what Western authors write. We have learned a lot from them, and openly admit it, but we have a somewhat different context. We must not be afraid to look at it from a local perspective. And this includes developing a local analysis of the ideas of Western left-wing authors.

In the local leftist environment, we have also, to our detriment, many times just repeated the views of the Western left. The two scourges of contemporary left politics are historical reconstruction and the adoption of trends. People

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read hundred-year-old authors and proclaim themselves Marxists or feminists according to those classic texts. The world has changed a lot, and people read the classics too literally; even when they don’t really fit the current conditions anymore. And secondly, the left can’t break its habit of adopting trendy western culture wars or subcultures. In 2016, two leftist activists at an event in Ukraine decided to chant the slogan “Money for education, not for war!” The thing is that they imported this from a completely different context, from Italy, which has been involved in imperialist aggressions. Our case is different: Ukraine is, first and foremost, a victim of the aggression of another state. In short, it was a disaster. The consequences for the local left were simply terrible. We were already in a difficult situation after 2014, and this one action, one slogan, made things much worse. So yes, we have made a lot of mistakes. It’s true that some of us also drew the wrong conclusions. We still have a lot to learn. But at the same time, we’ve learned some things from our bitter experience.

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Translated from the [Czech](#) by Adam Novak for [ESSF](#).

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