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War in Ukraine

Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: Interview with a Volunteer from the Kiev Territorial Defense

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On February 24, 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine. For several weeks, the war has been raging on Ukrainian territory, the Russian army is intensifying its offensive, several cities are besieged, the humanitarian situation is worsening. In Kiev, the noose is tightening. In order to protect their city, thousands of Kievans volunteered for territorial defense. Taras Kobzar, one of these volunteers, tells us about his experience of this war and the political context in Ukraine. Taras Kobzar is an anarcho-syndicalist activist, having carried out many social initiatives in Donetsk since 1989, a city he had to flee in 2014 because of the occupation of Donbass by the separatists. He has since lived in Kiev and is currently fighting in territorial defense (civilian units trained to protect the area where they reside under the orders of the national army).

Perrine Poupin (P.P.): How did you experience the beginning of the war, on February 24, 2022?

Taras Kobzar (T.K.): Even though until the last days there was a lot of talk about the possibility of war, I never wanted to believe it. Most ordinary Ukrainians were taken by surprise by the attack by Russian troops. Like other people, I was woken up early in the morning by explosion sounds that sounded in the sky. Around 5 a.m., Russian planes (I later learned that they were drones) attacked Boryspil Airport (the largest civilian airport in Ukraine), located on the outskirts of the city of Kiev. I went out on the balcony and heard exchanges of fire between the air defense of the Ukrainian army and the Russian air force. At first, I wanted to believe that this was just a military provocation to put pressure on Ukraine. And that it would end like this. No one wanted to believe in an all-out and protracted war. Despite warnings from Western intelligence services, especially US and British, and many other signs, no one wanted to believe it. It was not believed that Putin would embark on such an adventure. The war was a great shock to the Ukrainians. I feel unreality. I had a similar experience in Donetsk in 2014.

P.P.: Why do you think Russia is attacking Ukraine now?

T.K.: This war marks the return of the imperial ambitions of the Kremlin and Putin, who considers that his historical mission is to re-establish the borders of the Russian Empire or the Soviet Union. His aspiration is to make Russia an influential empire again in the world, as in Soviet times, by "recovering" the "Russian lands" that became independent states more than thirty years ago, when the Soviet Union collapsed. Putin was greatly encouraged by the positive reaction of Russian society to the annexation of Crimea. I also think he saw the lack of a strong Western response to its criminal activities as evidence of weakness and as a sign that the West would not be an obstacle to his plans.

Another reason for this war is that Putin has decided, in view of the next Russian presidential election in 2024 (the outcome of which is already decided in advance), to offer the country's chauvinist majority another spectacular victory, which proves the greatness of Russia, personified by a great president. This is a way to ensure that his popularity rating skyrockets with this electorate. Putin wants to go down in history as the grandfather of the nation, much like Stalin. Ukraine stands in the way of its plans with its independent, pro-Western and anti-Russian attitude.

P.P.: Many analysts draw a parallel with the war in Syria. What do you think?

T.K.: Many Ukrainian cities are already hardly different from Aleppo: they are in whole or in part in ruins. Russian soldiers shoot unscrupulously at civilians and residential neighborhoods. We will never forgive or forget that. Russia's notorious military machine is facing a people in Ukraine who will fight to the end. The experience gained by the Russians in the wars they have waged in recent years, whether in Syria or elsewhere, will not be enough for them to

defeat us. The Russian military machine, despite its terrible reputation, turns out to be a colossus with feet of clay, just like the Russian Empire as a whole. This war will destroy the Putin regime. The Ukrainian army and society have changed a lot since 2014. Just as Ireland was said to be a bird that would devour the liver of the British Empire, Ukraine today is a small but formidable country that will bring about the fall of the last fascist empire in this world.

P.P.: How has the political landscape changed in Ukraine since the Maidan Revolution? [1] What are the different political forces involved? What about the weight of far-right movements?

T.K.: Initially, I was skeptical of the Maidan movement. In the first few weeks, I had the impression that this was just a political masquerade to prepare for the elections in Ukraine. But over time, this uprising clearly emerged as a genuine national revolution, as a profound refoundation of the Ukrainian political and social community from a real self-organization of civil society.

The oppositions between right and left are now fading in the face of the imperative need to face a common problem: to defend people's lives, the territorial integrity of the country and the future of our young democracy. Today, values such as political freedom, grassroots self-organization, social reforms, the possibility for the people to arm themselves, the alternation of power based on an electoral process, respect for fundamental rights, the self-awareness of the people are at the heart of the struggle waged by all Ukrainians. These principles radically distinguish Ukrainian society united by a common historical destiny from the authoritarian, chauvinist and racist aggressor against whom we are fighting.

Three tendencies with their own historical traditions, stemming from the revolution and civil war of a century ago (1917-1922), are now organically linked in Ukraine: the Makhnovschina, the Petlyurovshchina and the Hetmanschina. The Makhnovshchina has its roots in the anarchist tradition of the Ukrainian people, which is embodied today in the self-organization that this people demonstrates, especially through the voluntary movement and territorial defense; the Petlyurovshchina is the army and national republican associations; Hetmanschtchina is state power and the business world. All these tendencies are now united by the same desire to defend the country, by the same concern to see this country develop freely and independently. It is only after the war that we will be able to see what will really happen, but today, we live a unique situation: everyone is talking to each other. It reminds me of republican Spain in 1936. President Zelensky also recalls President Manuel Azaña. So currently, we can in no way speak of competition or opposition between these different political currents.

I serve in a unit created by nationalists, which is supplied by municipal authorities and volunteers, and which is financed by private companies. We give courses on anarchism to combatants and we organize soldiers' committees that ensure the well-being of combatants and respect for their rights without this being a problem. One can find weapon in hand in the same trench an anarchist, a nationalist, a Euro-optimist, a simple peasant, a worker or a computer scientist without a precise political opinion. All are united by the same desire to protect their people, and the independence and freedom of Ukraine. We are all brothers and sisters, we are the people! This is the universally shared slogan and the only ideology that reigns today. The French Revolution of 1789 created a French nation, the Ukrainian Revolution of 2013-14 and especially the war of 2022 are creating a new nation, the Ukrainian nation. The people woke up. The 600 years of struggle and suffering of the Ukrainian people are coming to an end.

P.P.: Who are the people who are committed? Why and for what purpose? What can we say about nationalism in Ukraine, a subject that fascinates some commentators here in France?

T.K.: It is difficult to say now what will happen after this war. Whatever its outcome, Ukraine has already won. It has won morally, spiritually, politically and socially. Perhaps years of maturation, years of new social battles and class struggle within society await us. Struggles for social transformation, a series of new revolutions. But all this will make it possible for today's war, a war that is both a war of liberation and a social war. A war between an empire and a

republic, between law and contempt for the law, between life and death, between freedom and slavery.

In this context, Ukrainian nationalism is similar to the nationalism of the Irish in their struggle against the British Empire. It is a liberating and creative nationalism. It is a national liberation struggle led by the people. The influence of radical groups is not as great as it seems from the outside. This war poses a threat of genocide to the Ukrainian people. Faced with the danger posed by this annihilation, unity is necessary, even if it will fade over time. But it is the essence of the movement that counts, the momentum of liberation that runs through Ukraine in the face of Russian social racism that denies us the right to exist on principle. Words, banners and historical identification markers are no more than aesthetics or symbols. They have long since ceased to have the meanings that we are trying to attribute to them. The red flag and the words "anti-fascism" have a completely different meaning today than they did a century ago. Even as the Russian authorities reduce Ukrainian cities to rubble (we can speak of Twenty-first century Guernica), they are preparing to organize an "international anti-fascist congress". Is this irony? A mockery? Or the fulfillment of George Orwell's brilliant prophecy? Putin is the Hitler of today. There is nothing else to say.

P.P.: Who is President Zelensky? How did he come to power?

T.K.: Zelensky was a very popular comedian and entertainer in Ukraine. His election to the presidency reflected the desire of the people to see the emergence of people who were not associated with the old pre-war political establishment, the desire for a renewal of the political class. Zelensky's campaign slogan was "peace." Many Ukrainians had placed their hopes in him because they were tired of the war that had been going on since 2014. Zelensky had promised to find a way out of the current situation in Donbass and to settle the military conflict. In addition, Zelensky's team was committed to carrying out economic and political reforms that would benefit ordinary people. But these expectations were disappointed, and Zelensky's government, like Zelensky himself, was severely criticized by different segments of society. It is a tradition in Ukraine to constantly and publicly criticize any authority, rather than sacralize it.

Initially, Zelensky's party was therefore perceived as the party of peace. But the Minsk agreements imposed by Russia proved impossible to implement, as it would have meant eternal blackmail of war on the part of the Kremlin and Ukraine's total dependence on Putin's will. These agreements provided for the forced recognition of separatist "republics" within Ukraine, which would have been entirely dependent on the Kremlin's decisions. The invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 put an end to this ambiguous situation and showed that peace was not an option for Ukrainians. Russia does not want to collaborate with an independent partner country, it wants a vassal, a protectorate, a fully dependent territory. The invasion has once and for all exposed Putin's true intentions towards Ukraine, intentions that date back well before 2014. While President Zelensky had until then been a politician of disputed authority, hostage to circumstances, since the invasion he has transformed himself into a strong leader who enjoys the support of almost all citizens.

P.P.: What is the situation in Donbass? How do you analyze this one, you who are from the region?

T.K.: Everything that has been happening in Donbas since 2014 is a well-planned operation by the Kremlin. The development of separatist sentiments among the population of these regions that preceded the creation of the so-called "republics" was orchestrated from scratch by the Russian special services. I remember how it all began: I witnessed with my own eyes the theatrical staging of the "popular referendum" on the independence of Donbass and I witnessed the real number of people who participated. Pro-Russian sentiments in Donbas in 2014 were very limited. The situation has changed a lot over time. According to Russian propaganda, the number of supporters of Russia increased sharply, but this was done gradually, in stages. In the spring of 2014, in major cities like Donetsk, pro-Russians were actually Russian citizens transported there by bus (especially from the Rostov region of Russia) to support pro-Russian actions by posing as locals.

At the same time, pro-Ukrainian rallies were held in Donetsk that brought together a very large number of real inhabitants, as shown in many photos and videos, and as I have witnessed. Street fighting between pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian protesters broke out in the spring of 2014 that resulted in injuries on the Ukrainian side. Supporters of Russia were actively supplied with weapons from specially established bases in Rostov. Donetsk has been flooded with Russian security agents on the orders of the Kremlin, overseen in particular by Sergey Glazyev, a prominent politician. It was then that the killings of Ukrainian civilian activists and the persecution of Ukrainians began.

The situation then changed dramatically when Russian militant groups began arriving in Donetsk and lobbied to create a separatist militia led by the FSB. In the summer, the situation degenerated into direct hostilities with units of the Ukrainian army and with the use of artillery and aviation. Pro-Russian security services fired mortars into residential areas, accusing the Ukrainian army of being responsible. These provocations made it possible to create the climate desired by the occupiers.

The third step in creating pro-Russian sentiment was the creation of the "Donetsk People's Republic", whose territory was isolated from the rest of Ukraine. In this regime of isolation, with the help of the pro-Russian media, public opinion was handed over to the Kremlin's propaganda. In institutions, universities and educational institutions there began to be an atmosphere of "1937" (when the Stalinist purges provoked the execution and deportation to Soviet labor camps of several million Ukrainians).

Currently, according to the information I have, a significant part of the population of the separatist enclaves is favorable to Ukraine and does not accept the state of affairs in the "republics". In 2014, Donetsk was a rich and developed region, where the standard of living was much higher than in many other regions in Ukraine, such as those around the cities of Zaporizhzhia or Dnipro. The Communist Party (CPU) had little influence in the Donetsk region. For example, his supporters were not much more numerous than the anarchists during the May 1 demonstrations. It is therefore strange to speak of any nostalgia for the Soviet Union. All these feelings were artificially fabricated as part of the "Russian Spring" project.

P.P.: How has the Ukrainian army evolved since 2014, when it was almost non-existent?

T.K.: In 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea and started the war in Donbass, the Ukrainian army was indeed very weak and insufficiently mobilized. During Ukraine's thirty years of independence (1991-2014), the Ukrainian government failed to reform the army, rearm it, create a high civic consciousness among the military, and provide them with effective training in modern warfare. Survival of the former "Soviet" army, the Ukrainian army was more of a decoration than a real armed force. The same goes for the Ukrainian Navy. In addition, Russia was never considered a military threat and there was no plan for a possible military conflict. The military leadership of the Ukrainian army was composed mainly of people with a more bureaucratic than military mind, pro-Russian and from a "Soviet military tradition" that they shared with their Russian "colleagues". Therefore, there were very few units of the Ukrainian army able to withstand the Russian invasion in 2014. Few Ukrainians were psychologically prepared to shoot at the Russians. As a result, in the early years of the war, the defense effort was mostly supported by formations of Ukrainian volunteers, patriotic-minded citizens and partisan units, poorly equipped and inexperienced in combat.

The eight years of war (2014-2022) have seen this situation change radically. An effective and well-equipped army has been set up, highly motivated and with real combat experience. A territorial defense force capable of being deployed in the event of a general war was established, with community training centers run by volunteers where civilians could receive basic military training. All this made it possible to put up effective resistance to Russian troops during the invasion in February 2022. The army, armed people and civilian volunteers are now operating in a coordinated manner throughout the country, which has helped counter the Kremlin's blitzkrieg attempt, which hoped to cross the border and quickly seize Ukraine's most important centers. In addition, the Ukrainian population is much

more organized and united than in 2014. The Russian military was not welcomed by anyone, and there was no attempt by the civilian population to form new pro-Russian enclaves.

P.P.: This war is causing a lot of discussion and tension in the Western militant world. How do you position yourself in relation to the NATO vs Russia debate?

T.K.: Among the supporters of a democratic and republican Ukraine, there is no doubt about the desire to integrate Europe and adherence to the values of Western democracy. If one has to choose between the totalitarian regime of Putin's empire and Western democracy (while remaining lucid about its flaws), the choice in Ukraine is clearly and irrevocably in favor of the West. Faced with the prospect of being crushed by the Kremlin's imperial ambitions (Russia does not even recognize the existence of Ukrainians as an independent people), the idea of becoming an ally of NATO, the EU and the US does not seem like a terrible thing. The problem of NATO's eastward expansion (even if it is a reality rather than a scarecrow or chimera as in the Cold War era) is not a problem for Ukraine, but for Russia. It is not acceptable for Russia to solve its geopolitical problems through the genocide of the Ukrainian people. These issues could have been resolved through international negotiations. But now Putin has lost that opportunity and there is no other strategy than the destruction of the Russian aggressor regime. It is obvious to everyone that the Russian militarist machine will not stop in Ukraine. After Ukraine, the war will spread to the Baltic States and even further into Eastern Europe, via Poland. The Kremlin is talking about a space of influence from the Pacific Ocean to the Atlantic Ocean, so we should not be under any illusions about what will happen next. It is a repetition of history with Hitler and the great Reich. Ukraine's desire to ally itself with Western democracies is therefore justified, it is obvious. The war in Ukraine is a matter of survival not only for Ukraine, but also for Europe. If today's Russia believes it is allowed to react in this way to avoid having NATO on its borders (assuming for a moment that this rhetoric is admissible), then let this Russia go to hell!

A separate question for leftists and anarchists is what strategy to adopt that is in line with their ideological principles. For me, the solution is simple. As long as Hitler exists (personally or collectively), the left must oppose and fight him, and Hitler's enemies are our allies. After Hitler's defeat, a new era will open in which local and international class strategies will have their place. This was the case during the Second World War, it should be the same today.

In my opinion, public life in Ukraine since the Maidan revolution has been crossed on all sides by tendencies that I consider rather libertarian. The names, colors and shapes differ from those of traditional anarchist forces, but in their essence, these dynamics are part of the principles of anarchism: electoral activity and alternation of power, direct democracy, self-organization and development of horizontal bonds, universal armament of the people, spontaneity and sense of initiative, ability of grassroots civic groups to control government, free and transparent information within civil society and between citizens and the government. Certainly, many things exist in the embryonic state and coexist with bourgeois institutions and corruption, but everything is evolving and it is in our power to continue what we have started since Maidan.

In Putin's Russia, there is none of this: it is a police state where the cult of bloodthirsty dictators reigns and where militarism, chauvinism and racism are elevated to the rank of state religion that permeates all strata of society. From this point of view, there is no possible comparison with the presence or influence of radical ultra-right groups in Ukraine: these groups remain a very small minority in the country. Of course, I would prefer our war to be placed under the banner of Nestor Makhno (founder of the Ukrainian Revolutionary Insurrectionary Army, which, after the October Revolution and until 1921, fought both the counter-revolutionary Tsarist army and the Bolshevik Red Army) and not Stepan Bandera (Ukrainian politician and nationalist ideologue) who collaborated with Nazi Germany), although the figure of Makhno is quite popular here! I would of course like to fight in the name of anarchy rather than the Nation, but these are only symbols and words that do not change the real nature of the movement that runs through Ukraine. In any case, currently, to choose between: "Long live the King" and "Long live the Nation", I choose without hesitation the Nation!

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[1] In February 2014, protesters occupied Maidan Square ("Independence Square") and obtained the impeachment of President Viktor Yanukovych, close to Moscow, after 5 days of clashes with the police.