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Women in Russia

# Learning Solidarity Together

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**Anastasia Vosstavshaya and Marie are members of the Russian Socialist Movement (RSM), a revolutionary socialist organization active in the Russian state.** *Midnight Sun* spoke to them about what life is like for anti-war organizers in Russia today, the centrality of feminist organizing against the war, and what it means to build international solidarity with those fighting for liberation in both Russia and Ukraine. The conversation has been translated by *Midnight Sun* editor Olena Lyubchenko.

### **Midnight Sun: What does everyday life in political struggle look like for anti-war organizers in Russia today?**

**Anastasia:** Every day from morning to evening I'm at the university, so I engage in a "quiet picket" there: I write anti-war slogans and appeals for unity on blackboards, desks, on cloakroom tags, on walls. On weekends I meet with activists and supporters; we discuss further strategic plans and participate in actions and campaigns. Right now one of the most important strategic goals is to get Russian citizens to understand their own interests, which is necessary if we're to build unity against the deliberate fragmenting of the oppressed classes, against solidarities between exploiters and exploited, etc. We also want to focus on trade union (labour) slogans! It's important not only to say/write, "No to war," but also to explain what war leads to, if active measures are not taken to challenge it.

In Bonapartist France's localized war with Austria, France hoped to drown the liberationist aspirations of the Italian people, while hypocritically advertising this war as the "liberation of Italy." Then the people considered it their duty to tear off from the ruler the mask of the "liberator" and "defender of nationalities," just as currently in Russia, activists are fighting to show the bloody face of the dictator and the system that produced him. Since February 24, 2022, it has been officially confirmed that the Antichrist depicted on old Italian frescos is indeed Putin.

**Marie:** Currently in Russia, forms of protest familiar to Russians, such as rallies or pickets, are easily suppressed. People carrying posters in the city centres are detained within two to three minutes; in St. Petersburg and Moscow, anti-war rallies were quite massive, and in Kazan people went out onto the main street, but there were relatively few opportunities for people to act jointly. By the way, one sad feature of Russian rallies is that people are afraid to resist the police (to get into a fight with the police or just defend their comrades), because they're threatened with a criminal offence if they do so. The body of a police or National Guard officer is given a status of inviolability, so those officers feel their power on the street and are ready to lay charges against protesters even for a paper cup thrown in their direction. All of this further divides people who gather together to advocate for shared demands.

That is why a different trend is now gaining momentum: "inconspicuous" protest, or short and vivid actions and performances. By inconspicuous protest, I mean cases where people act anonymously and without witnesses. This can be anything from innocent postering of leaflets (which is now also punishable - new legislation has appeared that prosecutes those who spread "fake information" about the war and anything discrediting the Russian armed forces), to more radical actions such as setting fire to a military registration and enlistment office, or so-called "partizaning" on railroads, which has included several anonymous groups in Russia destroying railways or stopping trains. Every week there is news about derailed freight trains.

As for the left in this situation, the most common ideas heard in left circles are about the creation of trade unions and self-organization in the workplace.

**Midnight Sun: The Tsarist and post-Soviet concept of " CAA:89 <8@" (Russkyi Mir) ironically translates as both "Russian world" and "Russian peace." What are the current struggles and sentiments of working-class**

**people in Russia - women in particular - and how do they relate to the philosophy of "Russkiy Mir" involved in this war?**

**Marie:** The way I understand the idea of the "Russian world" - this is the idea that the Russians are God's chosen people, with an eschatological mission to fight against some great evil (usually Europe and the USA are implied here). That is, what is implied is the creation of a militaristic state, where the rights of people will be suppressed for the sake of Russia's highest mission, which will save the world from the Antichrist.

I suppose that in this conception, the working class is assigned the role of a silent executor of the will of the ruling class, and any protest can be perceived as a betrayal.

In the current reality in Russia, such ideas often flash on TV screens, but in addition to these ideas, state propaganda has collected a whole bunch of scraps of contradictory ideologies; thus that propaganda essentially expresses nothing, like the symbol Z. TV will tell us about the "Russian world," and will also be nostalgic about the Soviet Union (it's now very profitable to talk about this in the context of import substitution), and will call to finally bury Lenin, to the delight of the liberals. It's difficult to talk about workers' attitudes towards the "Russian world" - ideological and consistent fascists are still few, and the working masses are now rather apolitical, more concerned about their thinning wallet and swelling prices at the store. However, regardless of the outcome of the war, there's a risk of right-wing revanchism in society; we will have to prepare for this.

**Anastasia:** The "Russian world" [perspective] advances the concepts of Russianness and chosenness through a colonial lens, involving ideas of proselytism - to convert people of different nationalities and faiths, living in the territory of Russia or not, into "Russian Christians." The concept of the "Russian world" perfectly fits the state's idea of "the liberation of Ukraine from the Nazis." Yet it would be more correct to say that this idea is not cause but consequence - a consequence of the state's aggressive imperialist and capitalist policy, which has also given rise to a patriarchal superstructure. Whether in the countryside or in the city, a woman from the working class is an endless worker; thus this "philosophy of the Russian world" directly concerns the people of the working class, including women.

**Midnight Sun:** **Feminists have written and spoken about the heteronormative, conservative "family values" turn in Russia under Putin, as well as his government's collaboration with the far right in other countries such as Hungary, France, and India. How would you characterize this social-cultural and economic shift, and how does it inform the politics of Russia's invasion of Ukraine?**

**Anastasia:** The propaganda of the media and of the laws conserves skepticism, colonialism, and xenophobia in people, makes people look at the world through the imperial spectrum, where there are only the "bad" (a fifth column, "national traitors"), the "good" (Russians), and the authority on behalf of the "good" (the leader). Sexism and other forms of discrimination and oppression are instrumentalized in the structure of capitalist society, which makes full use of women's social and reproductive labour to consolidate heteronormativity at all institutional levels for the sake of its nationalist and imperialist goals. Capitalist society in Russia needs "its own" people - "Russians" (men, ideally, but women can be fucked over no less, and sometimes even more) - who will go through fire and water [in defence of that society]. So off they went. As [Alexandra] Kollontai's pamphlet said: "Ask any soldiers...what were they fighting for? [...] For what did they cripple people? They'll keep quiet, because they don't really know why."

A kind of enslavement deal has been established between the Russian state and women: the state takes advantage of women's vulnerable position and puts them in disadvantageous conditions, hiding behind [discourses of economic] "optimization" and [claims of] supporting social institutions ([per] Article 7 of the Constitution of the Russian Federation [guaranteeing social protections]). The state says, we will also increase the amount of the Maternity Capital [benefit to mothers] and the payment of benefits to single mothers, do not worry, everything is provided for

you. Despite this, the woman still remains in an enslaved position.

**Midnight Sun: If you can, please comment on the efforts, tactics, and objectives of the Feminist Anti-War Resistance organization that was born in Russia on February 25, the day after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Do you see this movement as an heir/successor of the Anti-Fascist Committee of Soviet Women?**

**Anastasia:** The main goal of the Feminist Anti-War Resistance (FAR) at this moment is the fight against domestic fascism and Russian imperialism, in contrast to the Anti-Fascist Committee of Soviet Women, which opposed the external enemy -- Hitler's Nazi Germany. The FAR is the largest anti-war organizing force [in Russia], constituted by various oppressed groups: feminists, non-titular ethnic groups [that is, ethnic groups other than the dominant one in a given region], workers, queers, and people of other identities ([including those referred to as] MOGII: marginalized or multiple orientations, gender identities, and/or intersex). Because this cohort directly faces discrimination in Russia, it's compelled to fight against it ([which involves fighting] xenophobia, chauvinism, nationalism, economic inequality, etc.).

**Marie:** The idea of comparing the Anti-Fascist Committee of Soviet Women and Feminist Anti-War Resistance looks rather curious. Sad irony - Soviet women fought against the Nazi occupiers who invaded the Soviet Union, whereas Russian feminists are fighting against war and fascism inside their own aggressor country.

In terms of the FAR's activities, feminists of different currents participate in the movement, so it features their various practices. For the most part, activists are engaged in organizing vivid actions or trying to convey information about the war in different ways. I like [FAR's] joint strike fund project with other organizations - "anti-job" and "anti-war sick leave." At present in Russia there is not a readiness for workplace strikes against the war, but support for and solidarity with those who were fired for their anti-war position are very important now. Huge economic upheavals will not be long in coming, and we need to be proactive, learning solidarity together and gaining class consciousness.

**Midnight Sun: We have seen many instances of racism on the Ukraine-EU border. Comrades in the Global South have condemned Western hypocrisy as expressed both through international law and through the humanitarian/military support provided to the Ukrainian resistance but not to people in, say, Palestine, Yemen, Iraq, and Afghanistan. What does racism look like in Russia, and what does it mean to be both an anti-racist and against Putin's war?**

**Marie:** In Russia, state propaganda loves referring to US military actions to divert attention and whitewash its invasion of Ukraine. This means that within the protest movement, it is somewhat problematic to raise such topics as the war in Iraq, for example, as this can be perceived as solidarity with the Russian state. It's seen as depicting the war in Ukraine in a vacuum, without an analysis of the economic causes that push states to fight each other. But it's necessary to talk about this [broader international context], precisely with the aim of understanding why wars are inevitable and natural in the capitalist system.

To speak of internal contradictions, the state is pursuing a vile policy towards national minorities - ascribing Russian identity to them as a way of declaring wartime solidarity among the nationalities of Russia (I've encountered slogans like "We are Chuvashs and we are Russians"). At the same time, members of national minority groups from impoverished regions have also been sent to war. As a result, these people perish for such values - for "Russianness" and for the washing machines stolen [by Russian soldiers in Ukraine] and sent back to their homes. I won't be surprised if separatist ideas spread in Russia: I recently saw one Kalmyk brand released clothes with the inscription "Non-Russian," criticizing the racism and xenophobia towards national minorities that's existed since before the war.

**Anastasia:** Judith Butler writes about a new "liberation" fascism (in Butler's ironic expression), whereby members of the poor layers of society have gotten the ability to hate other members of the poor layers of society and not be ashamed of their racism. Maybe the example is not very suitable, but I immediately recall the story of how, in my childhood, my Tatar great-grandmother (Ùbi, in the Tatar language) did not allow me to socialize with my neighbour in the village and called her "gypsy," and [said], "You cannot socialize with gypsies, or else they will steal something from us." I don't know if she was Roma or Tatar. I remember how I tried to prove to my great-grandmother (Ùbi) that my friend was "just like us." Such inter-ethnic conflicts are the result of chauvinist politics that aim to atomize different ethnic communities.

I am a Tatar, but because my appearance is unlike a typical Tatar's and I don't have a Tatar accent, I don't encounter racial discrimination (unlike my Tatar acquaintances). In this context, the republics' proclamations of independence from the Russian Federation become a significant issue (I would like Tatarstan to declare independence, to become an autonomous republic). It is important to see the difference between the nationalism of the metropolises and the nationalism of the colonies, because the second is a consequence of Russia's aggressive politics, and the first is the politics of ethnocentrism and racial (national) discrimination.

It is necessary to realize that Putin's imperial ambitions are killing national minorities: in the news, without fail, reports appear that people from Tatarstan, Buryatia, and other republics are dying in the course of this war. A lot of them.

**Midnight Sun: Since the invasion, internationally, the left has been immersed in debates around some version of "NATO vs. Russia," especially around calls for more "lethal aid" to Ukraine from NATO countries. What do you think of this dichotomy? Is it a false dichotomy, and if so, in what ways?**

**Marie:** Russian propaganda loves this opposition: they can scare us with the NATO army at Russia's borders and justify Russian war crimes in Ukraine. Like: NATO condemns us, but remember how they themselves have staged wars.

I don't rule out that NATO has its own interests with regards to Ukraine, but neither side [NATO nor Russia] brings peace to Ukrainians and Russians. I remember how, at the very beginning of the war, Ukrainians called on NATO to close the sky [impose a no-fly zone]...well, that didn't happen; these heroes who are supposed to bring peace and democracy let the Russian army bomb Ukrainian cities. I just want to say that it's an illusion, this notion that NATO is a noble knight from fairy tales who altruistically [takes] risks and rescues other countries and brings them peace. At the same time, one should not be deceived by those who grind their teeth with hatred at the word "NATO" - Russia is not a socialist state and not, like the USSR was, a worthy opponent of the capitalist world, but an imperialist predator gaining in appetite, and socialists' pro-Russian position...oh, how costly it will be.

**Anastasia:** The contradictory statements of German Chancellor Olaf Scholz that "NATO will not directly intervene in the conflict in Ukraine" and that "Russia cannot be allowed to win in Ukraine" are simply ridiculous. I want to know: will the European Parliament, Olaf Scholz, Joe Biden, Emmanuel Macron stop sponsoring Russia by buying gas and oil? Yet again, somehow, it turns out that the capitalists are trying to pick the pockets of those whom they publicly condemn.

**Midnight Sun: What should international solidarity both with the resistance in Ukraine to the Russian invasion and with the anti-war movement in Russia look like?**

**Marie:** Currently in Russia the anti-war movement has a "moralistic" character - with pacifist slogans and righteous appeals to the conscience of the apolitical masses. I don't in the least disparage the courage and honesty of the movement's participants, but it's unlikely that the whole public will rebel out of moral motives alone. Right now,

Russians are preoccupied with medicine shortages and price surges, but what will happen when the effects of sanctions hit in full measure? It is now very important for the left in Russia to monitor the growing discontent of the population and help workers cooperate and defend their rights, which will be violated in order to rescue business. At the same time, it is necessary to talk about who actually benefits from this war, who has funded it, and on whose backs all the hardships of the Russian economic crisis will fall. Time will tell whether a revolutionary situation is approaching, but it would be criminal for the left to stay asleep and not prepare for it.

From an anti-war position, it is important to protest not only against Russian imperialism, which does not exist in a vacuum. It turns out that from 2015 to 2020 alone, 10 European countries exported military equipment to Russia worth 346 million euros; France, in particular, sold [Russia] 152 million euros' worth of supplies to suppress protests. Thus it is also necessary to criticize the other states and capitalists who have nurtured the dictatorship in Russia and are now profiteering from the death and suffering of Ukrainians.

**Anastasia:** Some Russians intend to go to Ukraine after the war to help Ukrainians rebuild the cities destroyed by the Russian army, but the only thing for which Ukrainians have asked and keep asking of Russians? Stop the war, protest it, obstruct it, and don't intrude with unsolicited help. Now it's important not to sink into the chaos of "I am to blame," "We are to blame," "Everyone is to blame" (since feelings of guilt interfere with productive anti-war activities), but to grasp our collective responsibility. Free-speech liberals are very fond of arguing that "we" are all to blame, that "we" have failed as a nation, and the like. Their inflated egos vulgarize the concept of collective responsibility, shifting their ostentatious sense of guilt onto everyone. Such a position flirts with [the idea that we're a] "failed nation." Yet who failed as a nation: Tatars? Kalmyks? Kyrgyz? Uzbeks? Finno-Ugrics?

Right now, our international solidarity must be based on the payment of reparations to benefit Ukraine. I believe that this measure is justified, because, firstly, reparations are a small thing compared to how Putin and Putin's rule worsen the lives of Russians and have done so for more than 20 years (pension reform, "optimization" of healthcare, excess mortality, taxes that finance violent institutions, palaces for state officials and oligarchs, etc.); and secondly, if the war in Ukraine is funded with Russians' money, then why not help the injured side with this money?! It is also important to clarify that, first and foremost, reparations should be paid by the rich: officials, the nomenklatura, oligarchs, businessmen, etc. Their confiscated property alone could pay for half the damage that the Russian army has inflicted on Ukraine.

Source [Midnight Sun](#).

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