

Some thoughts on the Ukrainian revolution

summer 2014

[Here's a letter from an anarchist friend (he's in Kiev). It's supposed to be a reply to Crimethinc's recent article on the Ukrainian revolution and to everyone who so eagerly claims Ukrainian revolution to be a right-wing only affair.]

Comrades!

I'm writing to you from Ukraine. I participated a lot in Maidan riots and different anarchist initiatives during that time and want to make several comments that I find to be important for a better understanding of events. In general I agree with your hypothesis', but I want to emphasize several details which will make the picture not so dark.

To start with, nationalists and fascists took over the forefront of the confrontations only in the media image of Maidan. They have no real control over activities of protesters, but they controlled the scene of Maidan and the fascination of the mainstream medias.

Fascists from "Right Sector" and other organizations had a control only over their members. And it is very remarkable to emphasize that their organizational structures hadn't been very hierarchical. Groups among them were decentralized.

Some of their members had a really vague understanding of far-right values and had supported them only because they were the "most radical" force. Dmytro Jarosh, the leader of "Right Sector", was rather a media person, the speaker of "Right Sector", then actual Fuhrer. Now "Right Sector" almost has disappeared from public discourse. When the new authorities killed Oleksandr Muzychko, a commander of "Right Sector" in the Western regions of Ukraine, and several other provocations had happened, they disintegrated into a fictional "monstrous fascism" in Russian propaganda.

The real danger for anarchists was presented by "C14" neonazi group – youth militants from Svoboda party. They have almost no political hegemony and support from other protesters (Svoboda party tremendously lost their support as the result of their opportunistic policies during the uprising). They know Kiev antifascists and anarchists by face, because we had confronted a lot of them before Maidan. This group was not so big (100-200 people), but well-organized and better equipped. We couldn't form an anarchist "hundred-unit", because of their pressure. And during the defense of the Occupied Ministry of Education they were the biggest threat for us.

I talked with decades of other militant protesters and usually they discuss anarchism with great interest. Most of them didn't believe in any parties and fought, as they used to say, "against the police, authorities and corruption".

Personally, I consider the fantastic self-organization and solidarity among the protesters as the manifestation of practical "folk anarchism". Although it was badly comprehended.

Due to the consequences of Maidan and considering the demands of the protesters, the political impact of the upheaval is not nationalistic, but liberal. The dominant part of protesters talk about

a “better state (welfare state) with bureaucracy which is not corrupt, police which take care of our security and an army which will protect us from invaders, etc.”. The new president of Ukraine in his last speech promised that he will decentralize all authorities and give more rights and resources to local communities. And I’m afraid that smart ‘soft policies’ might repress the protest atmosphere for another decade. At the same time, it doesn’t seem that political elites understand this. They keep being corrupt and vote for brutal neo-liberal reforms.

The majority of people have decided to give credit to the new authorities. The degree of radicalism has fallen down. People think that they can achieve compromises with them and usually use tactics of picketing and other legal forms of protest. The efficiency of those tactics is not so big, so I hope it provokes people to become more radical.

And I think that national rhetoric about Maidan was superficial. The Ukrainian flag and the slogan “Slava Ukraini” (Honor of Ukraine) lost in some sense their state symbolism. During that time they were symbols of riots. Although after the beginning of the war, a strong reaction among the society has started. There was a shock, people didn’t know what to do about the Russian army in Crimea, so they gave credit to the army and the new authorities (right-centrist and neo-liberal parties in parliament). Today, common patriotism and nationalism displays itself as Russophobia and support of the Ukrainian army in the war, but not in support of the authorities and a strong state. There was a moment before the election of the new president when people believed that somehow Poroshenko would bring the stability back. That’s how most of them justified why they voted for him. But it seems to me that officials keep losing their support day after day.

Second, in fact, there were no “hundred-person fighting units with a strict hierarchy of command”. Self-defence forces consisted of approximately 40 hundred-units in Maidan. And only a dozen of them were nationalist or fascist.

Others have been united by regional (for instance, Lviv hundred) or community (Afghanistan veterans hundred) principle. Also there were not only “militant” hundred-units that took the brand “hundred”. For instance “Art hundred” which used to make decisions by consensus (they were strongly influenced by anarchists). I consider even more prominent that during the clashes on Grushevskogo street and Instytutska street, the real force who fought the police consisted of thousands of autonomous groups. From 2 to 10 friends used to fighting with police without any organizational membership. I personally participated in clashes just in a group of my friends who were not anarchists! (I didn’t participate in an affinity group during that time and all of my anarchist comrades were away at that time). Moreover, hundreds-units didn’t have 100 persons in them. Before clashes on Instytutska street, most of the “hundreds” have 20-40 people in. People just used to leave their hundreds after they got bored. There was a funny moment in the occupied Ministry of Education (the defense of that place were held mostly by anarchists). Two guys that joined us said “we left our hundred, they do nothing, and it seems to us that guarding of this place is more exciting). The constitution of militant protesters was very dynamic and not unified.

Third, after the clashes on Instytutska street, finally Maidan spread to all neighborhoods in Kiev and then to most of the cities and even villages in Ukraine.

People self-organized into local self-defense forces to fight the police and “titushkas” (pro-government militants). We (anarchists) understood the necessity of decentralization and spreading the protest to all parts of the city and the country, but due to the lack of experience of direct action, we haven’t brought an impulse to this tactic. People intuitively came to this after the government had blocked the subway which paralyzed the transport system in Kiev. Unprecedented violence on Instytutska street was so terrifying that it pushed forward schoolboys with wooden and metal sticks from villages in central Ukraine to stop buses with “titushkas”.

These local self-defense forces are more or less active uptil today. For example, they fight against property developers. I think that tactic of bringing disasters to quiet neighborhoods and blocking transport and other infrastructures in the cities might be fruitful in further uprisings.

To sum up, I think far-right organization are likely to capitalize on the uprising which is fertile for anarchism, but they have to evolve and adapt to that new ground. They have to make a serious effort to stay there. They just can't fully absorb protest from below.

So I think this situation is not so bad for anarchists. I encourage anarchist groups to take a part in a heart of uprisings, proposing not only more radical forms of direct action but drawing a truly radical political perspective. The best places for agitation of people are barricades. Also we have to provoke radical changes. We have to open new sides of what is permitted. First Molotov cocktails in the history of independent Ukraine was very different. For example, today cops and politicians are not untouchable anymore in Ukraine. What is next? We have to take out a prohibition from private property. We don't have to wait until the creation of a "big workers movement" as my syndicalist comrades do, or seek for mainstream media attention, or approval by liberal friends (as many of us did), we have to fight the state and the reactionaries now.

The attention of Ukrainian society has been turned to war on the East. The most remarkable phenomenon there are voluntary battalions. The most famous called "Donbas". The commanders of it call themselves as the "network of patriots". On several videos he demonstrated more or less a critical, but liberal position. Also, there is a battalion Azov, which consist of neonazis (although the mainstream tell nothing about their ideology). Other battalions don't have any political impact. I can't tell you a lot about the state of affairs in the East, because I haven't been there. I take my information from open and usually mainstream medias. In case if you have some doubts about pro-Russian side of the conflict, their leaders are, for sure, far-right. Usually their rhetoric is full of Russian imperialism and chauvinism, racism, homophobia and religious fundamentalism. Their anti-fascism is fake. It is just a product of Soviet mythology about the Second World War. For sure, there might be some people who think that they fight for their freedom, against real fascism and not for Putin, but they are not presented in political discourse.

Several anarchists have joined voluntary battalions. I don't think that it was best decision, but I can understand them. The lack of any activities and visible perspectives in Kiev combined with a true wish of resistance forces them to go to the war. I don't believe that they will become nationalists or something like this, I'm sure they work out-and-out to agitate soldiers and explain to them what is anarchism.

Probably, their new experience will be very useful for comrades who have stayed at home soon.

It's hard to predict the end of the story. But there is no reason for despair. New authorities are loosing their legitimacy. Also, there are lots of issues in the army.

Bad living conditions in soldier's camps and a stupid administration which brings death creates a fugitive atmosphere in the army. The rising prices, economic cuts and the recession can bring a new major crisis in Ukraine. I believe that for anarchists, the only acceptable perspective is the second wave of revolution. There is no other way than revolution in all our region. Ukrainian anarchists have to inspire Russian and Belarussian comrades to rise up. Only together we will be able to overthrow capitalism in our region and the world.

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