

Unafraid to Be Called a “National Traitor”

"Where have you been for the last eight years?" is the question the Russian propaganda never tires of asking. Andrei Movchan, a journalist and left-wing activist from Ukraine, talks about his struggle against the far-right, migration, and calls on the Russian left to speak out against the war.

June 8, 2022 Andrei Movchan



The question “where have you been for the last eight years?” is still, after months of devastating war, one of the important themes of Russian propaganda. This moral claim is that those who oppose the war today preferred not to notice the suppression of dissenters by force and the rise of the far-right in Ukraine. We are well aware that the argument of “the last eight years” is based on lies and a twisted logic: one violence cannot justify another (much less such a blatant one), and thousands of victims cannot be compensated for by tens of thousands. Still, this article by the Ukrainian anti-fascist and socialist Andrei Movchan is important, because it is addressed primarily to that part of the Russian audience (including some on the left) that is trying to justify its conformism with excuses about “the last 8 years” or saying that “both sides are to blame”.

I received the news about the Russian invasion of Ukraine around 5 am on February 24, having woken up from an anxious dream. It was not because of the wailing sirens or explosions that I woke up. It was the noise of the first metro train which starts running in Barcelona around this time. For more than seven years now I have lived far from Kiev, my home city, having spent six of them in Catalonia. I am a political emigrant. At the end of 2014, I had to leave the country because of my anti-war position. I protested against the military resolution of the conflict in Donbas. For many of my compatriots, former friends, colleagues, acquaintances, I have become a “national traitor”.

Fifteen years ago, when I joined the Left, I could not imagine where this path would lead me and my few comrades. Even in that distant peacetime, a young man becoming a communist or a socialist in Ukraine was taken as a truly nonconformist gesture, a challenge to the blatant anti-communist mainstream, which had already taken a dominant position. This choice promised nothing but problems. We did not yet know what kind of problems though.

Their true scale began to take shape in the early 2010s, as the ultra-right movement gained momentum before our eyes. We, a handful of leftist activists, were the first to be exposed to the violence of these gangs. When no one in Donbas or in Crimea had yet heard the names of far-right gangs, we already knew these people by sight and tried to make this problem visible and somehow resist them.

Over the last four years of my life in Ukraine, the ultra-right mounted around 10 street attacks on me (alone or with comrades). Some of them got my right in a trauma unit. Photographers still ask me how I broke my nose; dentists wonder why my teeth are all crumbled; hairdressers are surprised to find scars from metal objects on the back of my head. It was terror. We were physically forced off the street.

For obvious reasons, I did not accept the Maidan Uprising. I knew first-hand those people who clashed with the police, and what values these people shared. What's more, I had no illusions about what future awaited people with communist views in the new Ukraine. We were in trouble. The trouble got even worse when Russia annexed Crimea.

I was terrified by a Pandora box that had just opened. I fully realized that the Russian population in Crimea had been striving to join Russia for all 25 years, never seeing the Ukrainian state as their home. What happened was not a surprise. Seeing that territorial losses would only provoke the rise of nationalism in Ukraine I was frightened. I knew that this would complicate the already deplorable situation of any opposition, primarily the left. From then on, anyone who criticized nationalism, who criticized the new government, and even mentioned the right of Crimeans to self-determination, could be declared a "national traitor". Or rather, was immediately labelled that .

The annexation of Crimea radically complicated the lives of those Ukrainians who did not want to put up with the new ways. Each of us faced a choice: how to react to what happened? Bowing and scraping to the nationalists for Crimea or stay true to our ideals and embrace the stigma of national traitors and outcasts? I chose the latter.

Crimea was followed by Donbas. It made our situation even worse. Every Ukrainian leftist had to answer the question: how to take this war? It was painful to realize that the logic implied territorial conflict. If Donbas had remained part of Ukraine, it would inevitably have become the focus of opposition sentiments and the protest movement of industrial workers. Donbas would become the social base of the left forces, it would put pressure on the government in Kiev, and its votes would undermine the hegemony of the right-wing pro-Western parties. Instead, the region was flying at full speed to its current state: destroyed, deindustrialized, a symbol of the Russian irredenta immersed in the passions of war and national hatred.

Our desires and hopes rarely coincide with the course of reality. Donbas was no exception. I felt that Donbas breaking away from Ukraine meant that other Ukrainian workers were left alone with the neoliberal pro-Western government and its loyal hirelings from the far-right gangs. Could I welcome the military strangulation of the Donbas dissenters? I could not.

I was deeply disgusted by the leaders of the Donbas uprising. I was repelled by their Russian nationalism, open Ukrainophobia, and contempt for the Ukrainian language, my mother tongue. I resented the widespread and vulgar understanding of the Soviet past as some sort of imperialist Russian project. It was disgusting not only at the level of politics, but even at the aesthetic level. However, I did not feel it possible to side with the Ukrainian government and the nationalists. In my view, the Ukrainian state suppressed any disagreement voiced by its own citizens.

As a communist and as a Ukrainian, I decided that my duty was to criticize my own government, army, and nationalism. Someone had to speak publicly about the most unpleasant facts. Saying that the enemy across the front was not so much Russian military and mercenaries as our fellow Ukrainians. That artillery shelled residential neighbourhoods. That the Ukrainian army in Donbas would not be welcomed with flowers. That volunteer battalions committed atrocities against the civilian population. That members of the government enriched themselves in the war. That the main enemy was in our own country.

You can imagine what this position meant in a society experiencing phantom pains from territorial losses. My career in journalism was over. Former friends hastened to disown me. I lost all the social capital accumulated over the previous years. Up to 80% of people who knew me never talked to me again. Others took an active part in public bullying.

For the nationalists, I became even more hateful than before. I lived in a safehouse, limited my contacts severely, and every trip to the centre of my home city became a test for nerves: too many people knew me by sight, many of them were not the most pleasant of the Kiev residents. The fact that I was attacked in 2014 only once was a happy coincidence. Most of the prominent ultra-rightists were in Donbas, and I wasn't their priority. However, they threatened to return soon and deal with the "fifth column".

By the end of 2014, my family convinced me to leave the country. That's how I ended up in Madrid. What followed was roaming and living as an illegal immigrant: without documents or money, not speaking the local language, not having friends or job, being unable to return to my homeland. The most difficult years of my life.

However, I have no regrets about the position I have been defending all these years.

After February 24, dear Russian comrades, you face the same challenges that we faced eight years ago. Now you're like us.

Your choice is much easier and more obvious. Your country, unlike Ukraine in 2014, does not suffer territorial losses, does not struggle with the issues of its integrity, does not repel disguised interventions. Russia is waging an aggressive war on the territory of a sovereign state, calling into question its very right to existence. It bombs peaceful

cities, kills civilians (primarily Russian speaking), and commits outrages in the occupied territories. You know it is true.

It is the duty of every Russian communist and internationalist to resist this criminal invasion. To demand an immediate and unconditional withdrawal of the Russian troops at least to where they were on February 24.

You may ask, "Where have you been all these eight years?" If you've read this text up to here, you know where I've been and what I've been doing. I opposed this war, having earned the stigma of a national traitor.

Some Russian left thinkers suggest numerous arguments on why one must either support the "special operation" or put up with it. None of these arguments are in any way convincing. No, it's not about rational political arguments, it's about something else. It is obvious to me that the deep fear of many leftists in Russia is to be labelled national traitors. I know that feeling. This fear of "betrayal" must be overcome, as we have overcome it.

Yes, if you condemn the war, you will certainly be accused of betraying the motherland. You will lose friends and acquaintances, career prospects and past achievements. You will be hated and despised by "patriots". You will be persecuted. However, Communists have always been persecuted and accused in all parts of the world. They have always been blamed for despising their bourgeois homeland and working for the enemy. Now it is the turn of the Russian left to enter the International through a symbolic break with the "motherland-state".

I am sincerely happy that many people from Russia I respect are not afraid of this stigma. For true patriotism now consists in speaking out against this national catastrophe, in doing everything possible to stop this shameful war.