Eco-Defense and Repression in Russia

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We just received this inspiring and instructive report from anonymous comrades in Russia, describing two years of struggle against logging operations in one of the major forests near Moscow. The struggle culminated this summer in the "Khimki battle," in which several hundred armed antifascists and anarchists attacked a government building in suburban Moscow; the authorities responded in kind, and subsequent solidarity efforts in Belarus provoked further repression.

Most of the links in this text lead to Russian-language pages; those too busy to teach themselves Russian can at least plug the website addresses into Google translate and struggle through computer-generated translations.

Prelude: A Spiking We Will Go

We learned of Moscow city authorities' plans to destroy the Khimki forest in summer of 2008, when local environmentalists started an outreach campaign to drum up support for their cause. Even then it was already late, since the forest—one of the three major forests surrounding Moscow—had already been extensively logged and was pockmarked with tumors: cottages for the nouveau-riche, warehouses, parking lots, and malls.

So without a minute to lose, we grabbed some spikes and rushed in. The logging site was patrolled by guards, but their attention was distracted by the official "eco-camp" in front of their cabin so it was easy to sneak in and spike every tree we could get our nails into. This was our first experience of eco-action and it was exciting and inspiring: we didn't get caught and we accomplished what we had come to do. We were sure that between our action, the constant pressure liberal ecologists were putting on the authorities, and the popular movement gaining momentum in the local suburbs, the tree-killers would retreat and leave the forest for good. Soon we learned better.

The trees were being felled to prepare the way for a massive new road plan authorized by the federal government. High-ranking officials—as high-ranking as Putin himself, we later learned—had a stake in lobbying for the new toll highway to be built right through the forest. The construction was financed by the international syndicate Vinci, headquartered in France, and several European banks working in partnership with the Russian national bank, Sberbank. With such powerful enemies arrayed against the forest and its defenders, the situation turned ugly.

Foreword: The Russian Context

> "Those numbers are murdered antifascists only. We don't know exactly how many immigrants are killed by Nazis every year." -Anarchist spokesperson at an international Antifa conference

In fall 2008, Khimki journalist Mikhail Beketov, who played a major role in news coverage of the corrupt road plans of local and government officials, was brutally attacked by thugs.

The attack left him in a coma and he later had to have his legs amputated. That same month, elsewhere in Moscow, several well-known activists were attacked or threatened with violence. That's not to say that cops haven't beaten ecologists before. But it was the first time such blatant attempts were made on the lives of our comrades.

We were sucked into "the wormhole of violence" in the dead of winter 2009, when Stanislav Markelov, who provided legal support for Beketov, and Anastasya Baburova, an eco-anarchist and journalist, were shot dead in the center of Moscow. By the time some of us returned to the surface—fortunately, almost unscathed—the whole activist landscape had changed.

Since winter 2009 the streets of Russian cities have been rife with Nazi/Antifa violence, as the conflict has steadily shifted from the social-political context towards a scenario of gang warfare. This context is crucial for understanding how the struggle for Khimki forest developed.

For almost six years now, the anti-authoritarian movement in Russia has consisted primarily of two wings, one ecological and the other antifascist; the former is primarily anarchist, but the antifascist movement also includes significant participation from patriots and Stalinist parties. These groups meet infrequently at convergences, eco-camps, and other events such as the numerous *in memoriam* actions dedicated to murdered comrades. But with machismo increasing in the antifascist scene because of the perceived necessity to maim and kill more Nazis in retaliation for Nazi attacks, and paranoia spreading in the eco-defense movement because of the need to constantly attack construction sites and engines in the absence of popular opposition to deforestation, the rift widened. By the time of the Khimki defense, the movement was already straining to maintain coherence. Some people suspect that if it weren't for the selective murders of the few anarchists and antifascists wise and widely respected enough to hold the various schisms in check, the movement would have been more prepared for this crisis.

Interlude: We Don't Need No Water

Two years after our first adventure, we experienced a touching reunion with our dear forest. It was the first night of the resumed logging operation when we disembarked from our special eco-defense vehicle and ran for the cover of the nearby tree line. In several minutes we changed clothes and double-checked our comms, camouflage, and the presents we had brought along for the construction vehicles. Soon several shadows glided silently over the nocturnal plain under the pale moonlight towards the faraway forest, which was still alive and foreboding.

When we arrived at the logging encampment, we split up. Some of us lay in the romantic cover of some bushes, enjoying the stars and the sound of each other's breath; our friends who were more eager to do reconnaissance bounded off toward the black shapes of tractors and excavators. Then all hell broke loose. Suddenly we could hear the all-too-familiar sound of a vehicle going up in flames, which sometimes reminds one of a jet plane flying overhead. The entire forest was bathed in dancing red and orange light, and the comms scouts were

yelling in surprise. We tried to figure out what had happened. Luckily we evaded the guards' attention and made it back to our transport on the remote and empty road. Red lights, comm talk—and we were sound and safe, spirited away to another town.

As it turned out, ours was not the only group sneaking around the site that busy night. Needless to say, the inhabitants of the eco-camp were blamed for the arson. In fact, the presence of the camp actually prevented eco-defenders from damaging everything they wanted to—that is why only one vehicle was torched at the site. But this didn't occur to the logging manager, who immediately requested a police investigation of the arson and the ecologists' suspected part in it; soon enough, he got his revenge on them in a perverse but typically Russian manner.

Over the following days our scouts reported increased guard and cop nighttime activity around the logging site, including roadblocks and patrols in the vicinity, so eco-defenders had to cancel their initial plans and shift focus a bit. Khimki is a big forest, and the logging and despoiling of wildlife in the name of profit took place almost everywhere. The incident did raise serious questions regarding overall security though: because ELF groups do not share their plans with each other, such accidental encounters are bound to happen again and again as these methods are propagated.

Enter the Nazis

As we found out later, one early morning we barely missed a mob of hired Nazi thugs who were marching towards the eco-camp at about the same time we were escaping yet again into the mist after another scouting mission. Upon arriving, they started verbally and physically abusing every eco-protestor present, but settled for guarding the logging equipment once the police made their appearance. A top manager of the logging company later admitted that he had hired the Nazis "for security reasons."

This episode showed every doubting critic how easily capitalists fall back upon fascist support—a truism not yet obvious even to most activists in Russia—and sparked a fire in the hearts of the previously dormant antifascist wing of our movement. The confrontation that morning did more to popularize and escalate the conflict than any eco-camp, internet PR campaign, or eco-defense action ever could have. Some of our comrades reflected that what we had witnessed was a fine example of how an unforeseen, unplanned, chaotic event—even one deemed negative—can push the movement and its supporters in the right direction.

That is to say, in a *revolutionary* direction.

The Khimki Battle

The loggers had made a major mistake. Employing Nazis in what was perceived by almost every citizen as an anti-human project broke the ranks of the extreme right; most fascist groups tried to capitalize on the situation by posing as opponents of the destruction

of the forest. More importantly, now every antifascist in the vicinity had enemies in sight and rushed to the battle.

The next day the announcement went out that a huge unpermitted show would take place in the center of Moscow. Hundreds of anti-authoritarian activists, antifascists, and party-goers gathered in anticipation of a street-party with a long-disbanded famous antifascist band as the headliner. Instead, as everybody arrived at the meeting place a guy in sunglasses announced that there would be no show, no street-party, and that the plan all along had been to go to the suburbs and attack the logging camp and the Nazis gathered there. Some people left, but the majority set out for Khimki.

While most of protesters were traveling via railway, scouts reported multiple riot police squads at the logging site. It was then decided to head for the Khimki municipal building—Khimki formally being a town in its own right—which was defenseless while every available police unit was on guard in the forest. Dressed for a party, people gathered in a bright and colorful bloc at the railway station and started marching towards the target. The bloc was accompanied by two scooters that acted as lookouts and rear guard during the action. At first local residents reacted with fear or suspicion, but after hearing the slogans and reading the banner or talking to protestors many expressed approval and support. Cars continued honking throughout the march and assault on the building.

So it came to pass that on July 28 in broad daylight, with the approval of hundreds of onlookers, several hundred anarchists and antifascists gathered in the center of Moscow, traveled to the railway station, hopped on the train, rode to the suburban district Khimki, disembarked, blocked up, and marched up to the municipal office chanting and lighting flares. Participants immediately commenced breaking windows, painting anti-logging and pro-forest graffiti, opening fire on the building with handguns, and even chopping the front door with an axe. Throughout this action no police officer showed up to protect state property.

Satisfied with the damage done and having received word from lookouts that riot police were loading up into busses at the logging camp, anarchists and antifascists started back towards the railway station. At this moment, two encounters with police took place. The first to face the angry mob were several cops on foot, who were strolling down the street when it suddenly flooded with anarchists. The cops retreated to the sound of breaking bottles and crashing stones. Then a police patrol made the mistake of trying to intervene in the protest; they quickly realized their mistake and retreated. Unfortunately, antifascists on foot couldn't catch up with the swiftly retreating police car. It should be pointed out that, although the local populace supported the action verbally and symbolically via honking horns, the action failed to entice onlookers into any sort of participation.

Nevertheless, protestors managed to reach the railway station and crowd into the train, where they waited patiently for the doors to close. The doors, however, did not close. As it turned out, the locomotive driver was at that moment involved in a tense conversation with the police commander. A group of antifascists with handguns was quickly dispatched to explain to him the negative consequences of siding with our class enemies, and finally the engine started moving, pulling the train towards the safety of the big city with no trees.

Criticism has been raised in the aftermath of this event about the distribution of information, the lack of advance organizing, and on-site video recording. Most of the people who took part had initially expected to attend a street party and arrived unprepared for direct action, without matching clothes, masks, or gloves and with working cell phones. Many young participants used social transport cards with ID tags in them to gain entrance to subway. The few organizers who *did* know the whole plan from the beginning hadn't prepared accordingly and failed to provide even the most minor riot gear such as face masks. This led to a huge number of protestors being videotaped with their facial features clearly distinguishable.

The Russian anti-authoritarian movement has yet to learn from its own mistakes when it comes to video recording during street protests. Protesters and "media-activists," most of whom turned out to be journalists invited from the liberal press, failed to recognize what a fatal mistake it was to videotape the unmasked faces of activists. Some of these reporters continued shooting even after people had gotten into the train and started pulling their masks off, so even participants who had provided for their own security failed to remain anonymous in the end because of this media-activism fetish. Later, people interrogated by the police reported that they were presented with a frame-by-frame breakdown of the video that circulated on the internet. Some comrades have been forced to leave the country because of this evidence.

> ***Most importantly, almost everybody has forgotten about the original problem. Our movement has thinned resources by betting everything on an ill-conceived riot, and now all we can do is try to stem the rising tide of repression.***

Two Cocktail Parties

On September 2, the Russian embassy in Minsk, the capital of Belarus, was firebombed by anarchists. One of the Molotov cocktails hit a car parked in the yard. The car burned up. Evidently, this was the only damage inflicted by the attackers. Soon a communiqué was published on Belarusian anarchist websites, stating that the attack had taken place in solidarity with the Russian anarchists fighting for the Khimki forest and that Belarusian anarchists held the Russian government responsible both for the continuing deforestation and the repression of the movement.

The next morning repression hit the Belarusian scene. It took the Belarusian KGB several days to round up and arrest almost every known or suspected anarchist in Minsk, Gomel, Soligorsk, and other Belarusian cities. Our comrades were pressed for confessions of having cooperated with the Russian secret services in an attempt to discredit the Belarusian government and bring down Lukashenko's regime. Most were formally questioned, then locked away and "forgotten" in cells for several days.

Some of our friends were not so lucky. One girl was hospitalized after she cut her veins during interrogation; another person, with previously existing serious health issues, developed major health problems as a result of the prison conditions and the severe beatings

he received. Some lucky few fled the country; others stayed, taking it upon themselves to organize prisoner support campaigns. Among those who stayed were the comrades brave enough to carry out a follow-up attack on the Minsk detention center three days after the KGB started mass-arresting anarchists. A group calling itself "Friends of Liberty" firebombed a guard post in the detention center perimeter and claimed responsibility for both firebombing attacks—the Russian embassy and the police guard post—on the internet. In their second communiqué, "Friends of Liberty" stated that the KGB reacted by arresting innocent people simply because the latter had already been on the KGB's radar. The aim of their second attack was evidently noble and brave: to demonstrate that the KGB got the wrong suspects. But the KGB was acting on Lukashenko's direct order to "pacify the opposition," a common practice in both Russia and Belarus shortly before presidential elections; so arrests, disappearances, and tortures continued unabated.

The Wings of a Butterfly

"Anarchy is all about order, not chaos." —popular Russian anarchist saying

Two notable events marked the fall of 2010: a deepening crisis in Belarusian-Russian relations, and the removal of Luzhkov from his position as the mayor of Moscow. Anarchists did their best to bring about both events.

Luzhkov, a petty Moscow tyrant who'd been abusing his position as mayor for more than 10 years, was relieved of his duties by presidential decree "for incompetence and failure to stand up to expectations." This occurred immediately after he returned from vacation, a month after the Khimki riots. Among the reasons cited by experts and analysts was Luzhkov's failure to cope with the Khimki crisis, as well as the part he played in the corrupt city development program.

Lukashenko, the Belarusian national-socialist dictator, gave in to fits of rage and anti-Russian rhetoric after the anarchist attacks on the Russian embassy and the police detention center where most of the anarchists arrested in Minsk were being held. An exchange of notes at the highest levels of diplomacy failed to avert the crisis, which had already been brewing before the Molotovs hit their targets. A series of bad political and economic decisions, the conspiracy-theory worldview every dictator seems inclined to, and a minor anarchist action led to the deepest political crisis Russia and Belarus have yet experienced.

This is not to imply that the departure of the mayor of Moscow and the collapse of relations with Lukashenko happened as a result of an anarchist plot or anything else along those lines. But it is important not to lose sight of the political perspective. We should consider the ways our actions can sometimes contribute to significant social changes and political upheavals—or at least scare the shit out of rich bastards!—however minor (like the Minsk firebombing) or major (like the Khimki battle) these actions may seem to participants and experts. It may be impossible to plan such things ahead of time, but we—boisterous chaos-loving anarchists—should take heart from these developments nevertheless. Hope for change and *be the change.*

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