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Malatesta on War and National Self-Determination
Lessons for Anarchists Considering the Ukrainian War
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Introduction

There is a debate among anarchists in the U.S. and internationally about the proper approach to the Ukrainian war with the Russian state. Some (such as myself) express solidarity with the Ukrainian people against the invasion by the Russian Federation. (The “Ukrainian people” are mostly the working class, lower middle class, farmers, and the poor.) Others reject support for the Ukrainians. Ukraine, they point out, has a capitalist economy, has a state, is a nation, and gets aid from U.S. imperialism and its NATO allies (all of which is true).

Both sides have been known to cite the Italian anarchist, Errico Malatesta (1853-1932). He was a younger friend and comrade of Bakunin and Kropotkin, regarded as “founders” of anarchism. “Malatesta, whose sixty-year career is little known outside of Italy, stands with Michael Bakunin and Peter Kropotkin as one of the great revolutionaries of international anarchism.” (Pernicone 1993; p. 3)

Since the Russian military invaded Ukraine, I have engaged in many Internet debates with opponents of support for the Ukrainian people (not the state but the people). Some arguments have been with state socialists who are essentially on the side of the Russian invaders. Virtually no anarchists, however, have illusions in Putin’s Russia. (Nor do they have illusions in the benevolence of U.S. imperialism, unlike most liberals.) Yet many anarchists reject any support for the Ukrainian people, treating them as no better than the Russian invaders. (For my view, see Price 2022.)

A few writers have posted references to Malatesta's opposition to World War I, claiming that this shows that a leading anarchist was opposed to "war" as such. During the First World War, most anarchists opposed both sides, but a minority supported the Allies. This minority included Kropotkin, the most respected anarchist thinker of his time! Malatesta wrote rebuttals to these pro-war anarchists. (See "Anarchists Have Forgotten Their Principles," and "Pro- Government Anarchists," in Malatesta 2014.)

He wrote, "[Anarchists] have always preached that the workers of all countries are brothers, and that the enemy—the 'foreigner'—is the exploiter, whether born near us or in a far-off country….We have always chosen our…companions-in-arms, as well as our enemies, because…of the position they occupy in the social struggle, and never for reasons of race or nationality. We have always fought against patriotism…and we were proud of being internationalists…Now…the most atrocious consequences of capitalist and State domination should indicate, even to the blind, that we were in the right…" (Malatesta 2014; p. 380)

But in the same work, he wrote, "I am not a 'pacifist.'… The oppressed are always in a state of legitimate self- defense, and have always the right to attack the oppressors…There are wars that are necessary, holy wars, and these are wars of liberation, such as are generally 'civil wars'—i.e., revolutions." (same; p. 379)

In other words, all sides of a war among oppressors were to be opposed—such as the First World War between blocs of imperialist states (France-Britain- Russia-and later the U.S. vs.

Price, Wayne (2022). "Defend Ukraine! Revolutionary Opposition to Russian and U.S. Imperialism!" https://www.anarkismo.net/article/32559?search_text=Wayne+Price

Price, Wayne (2019). "The Revolutionary Anarchist-Socialism of Errico Malatesta" https://www.anarkismo.net/article/31632

have not made fools of themselves by opposing the resistance of the people. Instead they have merged with the broader movement of Ukrainians. Some have provided non-military services through mutual aid groups, such as food distribution. Others have formed a military unit composed of anarchists and anti-fascists. Although they have a good deal of autonomy, they coordinate with the Territorial Defense Forces.

Some anarchists in other countries have criticized them for cooperating with the state. Of course it would be better if they could form a large scale anarchist militia or guerrilla force. But given the limitations of the anarchist groupings, this seems a reasonable tactic for now. Following Malatesta's approach, participation in the nation-wide effort to beat back the Russian invaders may make it possible for anarchists to have a wider influence in the future Ukraine.

References

Malatesta, Errico (2019) (Davide Turcato, Ed.) (Paul Sharkey, Trans.). Malatesta in America 1899—1900. The Complete Works of Errico Malatesta; Vol. IV. Chico CA: AK Press.

Malatesta, Errico (2014) (Davide Turcato, Ed.) (Paul Sharkey, Trans.). The Method of Freedom; An Errico Malatesta Reader. Oakland CA: AK Press. Pernicone, Nunzio (1993). Italian Anarchism, 1864— 1892. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press.

Germany-Austria- Turkey). But wars of the oppressed against oppressors were wars of liberation, to be supported. Nor did Malatesta limit this to class wars, such as revolutions by slaves, peasants, or modern workers. (This is sometimes expressed as "No War but Class War!") He also included wars by oppressed nations.

Malatesta on National Liberation

In 1911, the Italian state, in competition with the Turkish empire, sought to conquer parts of north Africa. Malatesta denounced "the loot-and-pillage war that the Italian government meant to wage on the people of Libya." (same; p. 353) But he did not condemn both sides.

"If, by some misfortune, a clash were to erupt between one people and another we stand with the people that are defending their independence… It is the Arabs' revolt against the Italian tyrant that is noble and holy…We hope that the Italian people…will force a withdrawal from Africa upon its government; if not, we hope the Arabs may succeed in driving it out," (same; p. 357) He did not support the politics of the Arabs' rulers; but he was in solidarity with the Arab people and wanted them to drive out the Italian imperialists.

Another example: In 1900, Malatesta spent a brief period in Cuba. It was not that long after the Cuban War of Independence which had driven out the Spanish colonizers. In his talks (reprinted in Malatesta 2019; pp. 218—237) he praised the Cuban anarchists who participated in the national struggle; he praised the Cuban workers who fought for their freedom; he

warned of the establishment of a new state with its capitalist backers; and he warned of the U.S. imperialists taking the place of the Spanish.

"Permit me to send a greeting to the brave Cuban workers, white and black, born here or elsewhere…I have long admired the selflessness and heroism with which they fought for their country's freedom…" (same; p. 231)

"…My comrades' thoughts on the issue of [Cuban] independence… Anarchists, being the enemies of all governments and claiming the right to live and grow in total freedom for all ethnic and social groups, as well as for every individual, must necessarily oppose any actual government and side with any people that fights for their freedom." (same; p. 233)

"We anarchists want Cuba's freedom, just as we want that of all peoples: we want true freedom though. And for this we have fought and will continue to fight." (same; p. 234)

Malatesta was fully aware of the limitations of Cuban independence. "Cubans have managed to reap very little from the expulsion of the Spanish government because the Spanish capitalists who exploit them remain here…[and] they remain subject to other capitalists, Cubans [and] Americans…" (same; p. 233) He warned that a new, capitalist, state was being formed, under the protection of the U.S.

Even within those limitations, he felt that the struggle had not been in vain. "There is something, though, that the Cubans have achieved, and that is the awareness that, having managed to drive Spanish rule out of Cuba by force, they will obtain by force whatever they aim for." (same; p. 226) That is, they learned the possibility of revolution. The fight for full freedom

Ukraine

What light do Malatesta's views cast on the Ukrainian war? Certainly he would oppose an inter-imperialist war between Russia and the U.S.A. and its NATO allies—if it ever got to that—just as he denounced World War I. The war between the Russian state and the people of Ukraine is another matter. Russia is an imperialist aggressor. Ukraine is a weak, poor, and non-imperialist country.

As Malatesta shows, it is a distortion to say that real anarchists do not support oppressed peoples (nations, countries) against imperial oppressors. It is true that the Ukrainian people are not anarchists or socialists; they accept their state and capitalism. Does that mean that anarchists should punish them by refusing to defend them when attacked by a strong enemy which massacres their people and smashes their cities?

It is true that the Ukrainians have taken arms from the only source available, namely Western imperialists. This does not change the basic nature of the war—but the Ukrainians should be careful and not trust the U.S. Its government might betray them easily if its leaders thought it was worth it. (The Cubans got aid against Spain from the U.S. In itself this was not unprincipled. Their mistake was to not prepare to resist the U.S. as the war ended.)

As far as I can tell, Ukrainian anarchists have in fact followed Malatesta's approach. Virtually the whole country has risen up to oppose the invasion. There is voluntary organizing throughout the nation, both military and providing social services, despite chaos and destruction. Ukrainian anarchists

ter how close or distant to the workers' class struggle. This included big groups such as the peasants, or women—and nations oppressed by the Czarist empire or by other imperialisms. He also advocated supporting smaller groups such as censored writers, conscripted soldiers, religious minorities, etc.

The problem with Lenin's program was not that it was too democratic!! The problem was that its democracy was only instrumental. Its aim was to get his party into centralized state power. Lenin was for land to the peasants, as a step toward the merger into large-scale state farms—supposedly voluntary, although that is not how Stalin or Mao carried it out. Similarly, if the socialists in the imperialist country supported the rights of workers in an oppressed country, then supposedly these workers would eventually trust the socialists and be willing to voluntarily merge—again, not how it worked out in practice (as in Ukraine).

By supporting national self-determination, Lenin hoped to eventually get to a merged, homogenized, and centralized one-world state—a true monstrosity. Anarchists are also internationalists, seeking the end of national states. But they are also decentralists and pluralists, regionalists and federalists. They work toward a world of many cultures, interacting through federations and networks—with no country dominating any other. This is the fundamental basis of anarchist support for national self-determination.

in Cuba was not over. "The struggle will have only just begun and it will be necessary to continue it, unrelenting and without mercy, against every government and every exploiter." (same; p.236)

Malatesta had an approach, a method of organizing. (See Price 2019.) Calling himself a "revolutionary anarchist-socialist," he advocated that anarchists should participate in every popular movement for improving people's lives, no matter how limited. At the same time, he advocated that revolutionary anarchists who agreed with each other should organize themselves to promote anarchism as a program and a vision within broader movements. He advocated that anarchists participate in unions, union-organizing, and strikes. But he opposed dissolving the anarchist movement into the labor movement (as he believed some anarcho- syndicalists proposed). Instead he wanted anarchist groups to be inside and outside the unions.

Similarly, he wanted Italian anarchists to participate in the anti-monarchist movement. He proposed to ally with the left wing of the movement, which was in favor of a popular revolution to overthrow the archaic Italian king. Malatesta was prepared to form a coalition with social democrats (mostly Marxists) who hoped to replace the king with an elected parliament, in which they would gradually move toward state socialism. Also with radical republicans, who just wanted to create a parliamentary democracy. In the course of a popular revolution, he hoped that the anarchists would be able to take it further than their allies originally wanted.

"By taking part in the [anti-monarchist] insurrection…and playing as large a part as we can, we would earn the sympathy of the risen people and would be in a position to push things as far as possible…We must cooperate with the republicans, the democratic socialists, and any other anti-monarchist party to bring down the monarchy; but we must do so as anarchists, in the interests of anarchy, without disbanding our forces or mixing them in with others' forces and without making any commitment beyond cooperation on military action," (same; pp. 161-2) Italian anarchists and syndicalists attempted to carry out this approach in the fight against the rise of Fascism.

Malatesta's method was summarized by a younger revolutionary, Eugenio Pellaco: "Wherever the people are to be found, that is where the anarchist must be, ready to propagandize and fight…" (Pernicone 1993; p. 273)

Malatesta vs. Lenin on National Self-Determination

Malatesta's views on national self-determination (or wars of national liberation) can be put in a broader context. A great many anarchists regard a recognition of the reality that nations exist—and that some are oppressed by others—is the same as "nationalism." But national oppression is an objective problem (the denial of a people's freedom to chose their own economic and political society). "Nationalism" is one program for dealing with the problem.

Anarchists reject the nationalist program. It calls for the unity of all classes within the nation, under the leadership of capitalist rulers, establishing a state, and denying the common interests of the workers of the oppressed nation with workers in other countries. Nor does it work. Even if the oppressed nation wins its political independence, it will still be dominated by the world market which is ruled by the big capitalist economies (imperialism). Politically it will still be dominated by the big states with their huge military forces. Anarchist-socialists believe that the only final solution to national oppression (that is, achieving national liberation) is through an international revolution of the world's working class and all oppressed people, establishing world-wide anarchy. Not the same as nationalism.

Many anarchists ignorantly believe that "national self-determination" is a Leninist concept. Actually it is one of the basic bourgeois-democratic demands raised in the great bourgeois-democratic revolutions of Britain (1640), the U.S. (1776), France (1789), and others. These included freedom of speech, of the press, of assembly, of religion, as well as land to those who use it, the right to bear arms, habeus corpus, the election of officials, no discrimination on the basis of race, gender, religion, nationality, and so on. Of course, the capitalist class has never upheld its own democratic program in any consistent way; the implementation of these demands has always depended on the struggles of the exploited and oppressed against the ruling classes.

Lenin's idea was for his party to do more than fight for improved workers' wages and working conditions. It should defend the bourgeois-democratic rights of all oppressed, no mat-