

"It's no longer considered shameful to avoid military service"

Underground journalists speak on war fatigue and the slide to dictatorship in Ukraine

Clara Weiss
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The *World Socialist Web Site* recently conducted an interview with journalists from the Kharkov-based underground journalist collective assembly.org.ua. The website publishes news about social and environmental problems and struggles in East Ukraine. It advocates an end to the war from below, by the soldiers themselves, in opposition to both the Ukrainian and the Russian governments. The journalists have also declared their support for the campaign to free Ukrainian anti-war socialist Bogdan Syrotiuk.

Below, we are posting the interview with minor edits for length and clarity. It was conducted before July 16, when the new laws for the current mass mobilization went into effect. As the journalists explain, these laws have dramatically worsened the situation for masses of workers and young people in Ukraine overnight. They are now liable for criminal prosecution if they do not update their military registration data.

Clara Weiss: Your outlet focuses on the situation in Kharkov, which has been at the center of the war. Can you describe the situation in Kharkov facing ordinary people? What are social conditions like?

Assembly: Kharkov isn't really at the center of the war. After February 24, 2022, the front line ran right along its ring road and closest northern outskirts. In September of the same year, it rolled back to the Russian border (30 km from the city in a straight line). After the border assault by Russian troops on May 10th of 2024, the front stopped 20 km from the city.

Every day, attacks with ballistic missiles and guided aviation bombs continue. The targets of Russian troops are military infrastructure, energy facilities, industrial enterprises. Damage to residential buildings around them does not bother them at all. Everyone has generally gotten used to daily power outages for many hours, lasting up to half a day. Blackouts have been going on since the missile strike on March 22 of this year. The electricity supply is provided from other regions.

Of the approximately two million pre-war population, about half remain in Kharkov. There is no large outflow, because those who had somewhere to go have, for the most part, left long ago. Those who remain have several options: To be homeless in a basement or tent, living on the 2,000 hryvnia (about \$50 a month) in payments that are given to internally displaced persons; to go to jail for evading mobilization, or to join the army. And from there, you only return in a coffin, or after having deserted, or after having given a bribe.

Many streets and neighborhoods of Kharkov were almost empty even before the big Russian invasion due to the uneven population distribution. Now, citizens liable for military service are trying not to leave their homes: the 60-day period for updating military registration data for men between 18 and 60 expired on July 16, and then the full-scale safari season opened: Anyone who fails to update their military registration data will already be officially considered a draft dodger with all the

consequences—from being forcibly grabbed off the streets to the territorial recruitment center to a fine of 17,000 to 25,500 hryvnia (between \$415 and \$622). For reference, the average salary in Ukraine in 2023 was 17,400 hryvnia, (around \$424).

If Ukraine is the backyard of Europe, Kharkov is the backyard of Ukraine. People here live either out of love for thrills, or out of complete hopelessness. If in 2020, according to then-Mayor Gennady Kernes, the average age in Kharkov was 35, then at the beginning of the full-scale war there were mostly pensioners, and now the average age of the population is about 50. Although this is only the visual impression one gets at public places, due to the mobilization. Of course, there are places where raids by enlistment teams aren't a threat, such as beaches and cafes, the owners of which are rumored to give bribes. There are a lot of people there, especially on weekends.

Just like before the war, ecological disasters regularly occur in Kharkov. Thus, at the end of February 2024, all four rivers of the city turned black due to a huge oil spill after Russian drones attacked an oil depot between residential buildings, which had previously been fined for the lack of normal fire-fighting infrastructure. One of the two pine forests in the city recently died due to global warming. On the first day of this summer, the second remaining one began to be cut down to expand a sand quarry. The community of a nearby neighborhood stopped it and has since been watching to make sure that foresters don't resume.

Our outlet is almost the only one that supports the protesters. Supporters of the quarry justify this by saying that sand and wood are needed for the construction of fortifications, and no one cares about the devastation of an ecosystem protected by international agreements.

We see no reason to believe that in the case of a Russian occupation of Kharkov the official attitude toward the environment would change. Even if we consider the blowing up of the Kakhovka dam by their troops to be unproven, the barbaric deforestation of Siberia alone bears comparison with the devastation of the environment by the US military in Vietnam. It's very difficult to imagine that with such an approach to nature at home they would care about the Ukrainian ecology.

CW: How has the mood in the population changed with regard to the war since last year's failed NATO-backed counteroffensive?

The failure of the counteroffensive has caused apathy and a desire to leave Ukraine. Many in Kharkov and other Russian-speaking cities, who in 2022 rejected their native language as the "language of the enemy," have switched back to using it. The popularity of Trump, Erdogan, Orban and other foreign politicians who are talking about a peaceful solution to the conflict is also growing.

In turn, all the mouthpieces of the President's Office and oligarchy have begun to throw mud at draft evaders (understood as everyone who doesn't belong to high society and doesn't want to serve in the army), emigrants

or those wishing to leave, as well as those in Ukraine who speak Russian. In relation to these categories of people, the well-known Stalinist rhetoric about “enemies of the people,” “outlaws,” “the state comes first,” “not a step back,” etc. has been clearly revived.

But there is no talk of opening the borders so that all these “false Ukrainians” can leave the country to the “most worthy citizens”—the sale of ransom from captivity is a colossal business for the authorities. The consequence of this hysteria is that it’s no longer considered shameful to avoid military service. Already in April of this year, when the law on mobilization was adopted, videos with proud Ukrainian men singing songs like “I’m an evader” began to gain millions of views on social networks.

Finally, from winter to the present day, there has been a spontaneous wave of direct street action against representatives of the regime. Just the other day, the Assembly presented “With bayonet and grenade.” In it, we review dozens of such episodes, which we distinguish from incidents of Russian-backed sabotage, and draw some political conclusions.

An opinion poll conducted by the Razumkov Center last month asked Ukrainians whether they consider it shameful to evade military service. 29.1 percent believe that it is, 46.1 percent believe that it is not, and another quarter were undecided (or probably afraid to choose the second answer). The elderly (over 60) are the ones who condemn evaders the most—37 percent.

CW: How would you describe discussions taking place in a typical working class household in Kharkov today? What concerns do people have?

People are quite withdrawn now, so any description won’t be completely representative. It can be said that the government’s reliance on outright violence in replenishing the army and in governing the country in general plays into Russia’s hands: There is an atmosphere of complete demoralization, indifference to the city’s fate and a desire to leave and go as far away as possible. Many people perceive the arrival of the Russian army as a lesser evil because the Russians have not imposed a ban on going abroad for men aged 18-60.

Our journal tries to confront these sentiments, proving that one shouldn’t rely on the Kremlin’s mercy and one should take one’s life into one’s own hands. But even among people who have no illusions in this regard and are simply tired of the war, far-right conspiracy theories about “a war to eliminate Ukrainians for the settlement of Jews in Ukraine” and so on are widely spread.

Interest in left-wing ideas is also growing but, so far, much less. Most likely, this is due to the fact that Western socialists and anarchists prefer to limit themselves to verbal condemnations of the war, which have no effect on anything in Ukraine, instead of going to Ukrainian embassies with demands to open the borders. Of course, it’s difficult to imagine that a dictatorship would comply with such demands. However, above all, such actions would show to the Ukrainian working class that it isn’t alone in its troubles. Without this, we have what we have.

The situation on the labor market is currently approximately as follows:

Although a huge number of Kharkov enterprises have been destroyed or evacuated, even those remaining here lack personnel. Back in the spring of 2023, a labor shortage was beginning throughout Ukraine, even of unskilled workers. Men are hiding from mobilization en masse, women don’t want to do hard work or don’t have the necessary qualifications, labor migrants from third countries are only numbering in the hundreds throughout the country.

In order to somehow attract personnel, companies are raising wages. This growth, against the backdrop of a declining economy, is increasing the cost of living in Ukraine. This is not to mention the fact that the government has committed before the IMF to raising gas and electricity tariffs to avoid a default on its foreign debt. The rise in energy prices, in turn, leads to an even greater rise in food prices. And there’s also a

planned increase in taxes for military expenses. Naturally, war fatigue and discussions about when peace negotiations will start are very important topics for the working class now. We hope that our publications help save the lives of at least some of those who don’t want to die for someone’s yachts and villas.

CW: Our Comrade Bogdan Syrotiuk was arrested for opposing the war from a socialist and internationalist standpoint. Are there other cases of arrests of opponents of the war?

In total, in 2023 alone, Ukrainian courts issued 1,274 sentences in criminal cases for evading military service (Art. 336 of the Criminal Code). This is a third of the 3,746 sentences issued since the beginning of the Russian invasion in 2014. Among them are both suspended sentences and real prison terms.

For example, in our region, since the fall of 2023 courts have stopped issuing suspended sentences under this article—everyone began to be given three years in prison, although many draft dodgers agree to this option, hoping to avoid the army and perhaps even get out earlier under the amnesty. Alexei Matukhno from Kharkov now faces up to 8 years for “obstructing the legitimate activities of the Armed Forces of Ukraine and other military formations during a special period” (Art. 114-1 of the Criminal Code), i.e., for leaving comments in a local chat at the end of 2023 about the locations of subpoenas. It seems that this is the first precedent of such a criminal prosecution in the country which is not related to the administration of channels on the social media app Telegram where such locations are often indicated (sentences for such cases in different regions are already quite common.)

As for the persecution of those who oppose the war from a socialist and internationalist standpoint, such people are not yet numerous enough in Ukraine to pose a serious threat to the regime. Therefore, the main targets for repression are people who are far removed from politics and who simply don’t want to fight. Plus, without being personally familiar with the case, it’s often impossible to understand whether a particular person is really against the war: both in Ukraine and in Russia, those who actually support the other warring party often describe themselves publicly as “anti-war activists.”

CW: Can you describe the changes that have taken place in Ukraine in recent years, not only since 2022 but also since the 2014 coup, with regard to freedom of speech, freedom of assembly and freedom to associate. Would you say that there is democracy in Ukraine?

If there’s no male population in public places and there are vans driving through the streets like under the Hitler occupation of Kharkov, catching passers-by in basements to be beaten up and tortured, this speaks volumes about the situation with rights and freedoms. Of course, this slide into dictatorship began immediately after the Maidan [in 2014], when the disloyal half of the citizens were declared to be “wrong,” the aim being to forcibly assimilate them or push them out of the country.

Now Ukraine bears characteristics of a totalitarian state, which openly decides for the population what music it must listen to, what language it must speak and what church it must go to. But we don’t think that if the Maidan had been suppressed the situation would have been much better: The same policy would have been carried out in relation to the pro-Western and nationalist part of the society, as has been the case in Belarus after the 2020 suppression of protests and its de facto occupation by Russia.

At the same time, throughout the government-controlled territory of Ukraine, video evidence appears daily of how concerned passers-by help to defend those kidnapped on the street against enlistment patrols. They are often using physical force, but we know about only one example of prosecution for this: When on March 29th in the Khmelnytsky region a group of women smashed a military minivan during the subpoenas distribution, one of them was fined 85 hryvnia (about \$2) for petty hooliganism (this was, in fact, the cost of the stick with which she broke

the glass).

That is, some relative freedom of gathering in Ukraine still remains. Unlike in Russia, where there are no officially banned languages ??and national cultures, the borders are open for men to leave (except for those who have received a subpoena to the army), and the violent roundup of men for military service is being carried out only for conscription, while the front is staffed with contract soldiers. But there you can get a criminal case and go to prison just for an unauthorized picket.

It's quite obvious that the scope of rights and freedoms under capitalism is determined by the size of the wallet, and the ruling class has much more opportunities to educate its children in its native language or to buy the possibility of leaving Ukraine. Nevertheless, the Ukrainian Business Council, which unites 113 leading industry associations comprising 28,000 enterprises, called on the parliament to revise the draft law on mobilization at the beginning of this year.

However, no one removed either the blocking of bank accounts for evaders or the ban on property transactions for them, or the confiscation of their drivers' licenses, or the right to arbitrarily seize for military use means of transportation owned by enterprises, or other rules that the bourgeoisie called "unconstitutional." As we can see, the state can afford to ignore even its own opinion—because it lives at the expense of Western partners' economic base. In general, Ukraine is now somewhere halfway between the American Confederacy and North Korea.

CW: How has this "slide to dictatorship," as you call it, impacted the work of journalists like yourselves?

First of all, local journalism has practically died (this process was completed by early 2022). Social and mass media have generally turned into news aggregators, simply distributing official press releases. Naturally, under such conditions, the publications by Assembly can't be referenced by nation-wide media either. Our Ukrainian readers sometimes complain that they can't access the Assembly's website.

We don't receive grants from abroad—other organizations don't want to risk getting into trouble with the authorities by funding a counter-information initiative. Our hope lies entirely with like-minded people. At this link you can make a one-time donation to us or commit to a monthly donation. Any amount is very important to us, because the Assembly opens the eyes for people from below to this society and publishes things useful to help them save lives. No one knows what impact any of our words will have!

CW: Thank you very much for the interview.



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