

Kiev's Repression of Anti-Fascism in Odessa

The Reality of the Repression

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There is a common misconception in the West that there is only one war in Ukraine: a war between the anti-Kiev rebels of the East, and the US-backed government in Kiev. While this conflict, with all its attendant geopolitical and strategic implications has stolen the majority of the headlines, there is another war raging in the country – a war to crush all dissent and opposition to the fascist-oligarch consensus. For while in the West many so called analysts and leftists debate whether there is really fascism in Ukraine or whether it's all just "Russian propaganda," a brutal war of political repression is taking place.

The authorities and their fascist thug auxiliaries have carried out everything from physical intimidation, to politically motivated arrests, kidnappings, torture, and targeted assassinations. All of this has been done under the auspices of "national unity," the convenient pretext that every oppressive regime from time immemorial has used to justify its actions. Were one to read the Western narrative on Ukraine, one could be forgiven for believing that the country's discontent and outrage is restricted solely to the area collectively known as Donbass – the Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics as they have declared themselves. Indeed, there is good reason for the media to portray such a distorted picture; it legitimizes the false claim that all Ukraine's problems are due to Russian meddling and covert militarization.

Instead, the reality is that anger and opposition to the US-backed oligarch-fascist coalition government in Kiev is deeply rooted and permeates much of Ukraine. In politically, economically, and culturally important cities such as Kharkov, Dnepropetrovsk, and Kherson, ghastly forms of political persecution are ongoing. However, nowhere is this repression more apparent than in the Black Sea port city of Odessa. And this is no accident.

Odessa: Center of Culture, Center of Resistance

For more than two centuries, Odessa has been the epicenter of multiculturalism in what is today called Ukraine, but what alternately was the Soviet Union and the Russian Empire. With its vibrant history of immigration and trade, Odessa has been the heart of internationalism and cultural, religious, and ethnic coexistence in the Russian-speaking world. Its significant populations of Russians, Jews, Ukrainians, Poles, Germans, Greeks, Tatars, Moldovans, Bulgarians and other ethnic and national identities made Odessa a truly international city, a cosmopolitan Black Sea port with French architecture, Ottoman influence, and rich Jewish and Russian/Soviet cultural history.

In many ways, Odessa was the quintessential Soviet city, one which, to a large extent, actually embodied the Soviet ideal enumerated in the state anthem – a city "united forever in friendship and labor." And it is this spirit of multiculturalism and shared history which

rejects the racist, chauvinist, fascist politics which now passes for standard political currency in “Democratic Ukraine.”

When in February 2014, the corrupt, though democratically elected, government of former President Viktor Yanukovich was ousted in a US-backed coup, the people of Odessa, just as in many other cities, began to organize counter-demonstrations against what they perceived to be a Western-sponsored oligarch-fascist alliance seizing power over their country. In the ensuing weeks and months, tens of thousands turned out into the streets to air their discontent, including massive rallies held in [February](#), [March](#), and [April](#).

This inchoate movement against the new dispensation in Kiev, [handpicked](#) by the US and its European allies, culminated in two critical events: the establishment of an anti-Maidan movement calling for federalization and greater autonomy for the Odessa region, and the [massacre](#) at the Trade Unions House carried out by fascist thugs which resulted in the deaths of more than fifty anti-fascist activists and demonstrators. As a protest organizer and eyewitness recounted to this author, “That was the moment when everything changed, when we knew what Ukraine had really become.”

The brutality of the pogrom – an appropriate word considering the long and violent history of this region – could hardly be believed even by hardened anti-fascist activists. Bodies with bullet wounds [found](#) inside the burned out building, [survivors beaten](#) on the streets after their desperate escape from the flames, and myriad other horrific accounts demonstrate unequivocally that what the Western media dishonestly and disgracefully referred to as “clashes with pro-Russian demonstrators,” was in fact a massacre; one that forever changed the nature of resistance in Odessa, and throughout much of Ukraine.

No longer were protesters simply airing their grievances against an illegitimate government sponsored by foreigners. No longer were there demonstrations simply in favor of federalization and greater autonomy. Instead, the nature of the resistance shifted to one of truly anti-fascist character seeking to get the truth about Ukraine out to the world at large. Where once Odessa had been the site of peaceful demands for fairness, instead it became the site of a brutal government crackdown aimed at destroying any semblance of political protest or resistance. Indeed, May 2, 2014 was a watershed. That was the day that politics became resistance.

The Reality of the Repression

The May 2, 2014 massacre in Odessa is one of the few examples of political repression that actually garnered some attention internationally. However, there have been numerous other examples of Kiev’s brutal and illegal crackdown on dissent in the critical coastal city and throughout the country, most of which remain almost entirely unreported.

In recent weeks and months, the local authorities have engaged in politically motivated arrests of key journalists and bloggers who have presented a critical perspective on the developments in Odessa. Most prominent among them are the editors of the website [infocenter-odessa.com](#), a locally oriented news site that has been fiercely critical of the Kiev regime and its local authorities.

In late 2014, the editor of the site, Yevgeny Anukhin, was [arrested](#) without any warrant while he was attempting to register his human rights organization with the authorities. According to various sources, the primary reasons for his arrest were his possession of video

evidence of illegal [shelling](#) by Ukrainian military of a checkpoint in Kotovka, and data on his computer which included a compilation of names of political prisoners held without trial in Odessa. With no evidence or warrant, and in breach of standard legal procedures, he was arrested and charged with recruitment of insurgents against the Ukrainian state.

In May 2015, the new editor of [infocenter-odessa.com](#) Vitaly Didenko, a leftist, anti-fascist activist and journalist was also arrested on trumped up charges of drug possession which, according to multiple sources in Odessa, are entirely fabricated by the SBU (Security Service of Ukraine) secret police in order to create a pretext upon which to detain him. In the course of his arrest, Didenko was seriously injured, incurring several broken ribs and a broken arm. He is currently sitting in an Odessa jail, his case entirely ignored by Western media, including those organizations ostensibly committed to the protection of journalists.

Additionally, just this past weekend (May 24, 2015) there was yet another sickening display of political repression on the very spot of the May 2, 2014 massacre. Activists and ordinary Odessa citizens had been taking part in a memorial service for the victims of the tragedy when the demonstration was violently dispersed by armed men in either military or national guard uniforms ([see here for photos](#)). According to eyewitnesses, the military men instigated violence at the gathering and broke it up, all while both local police and OSCE monitors stood aside and watched. Naturally, this is par for the course in “Democratic Ukraine.”

Aside from journalists, a large number of activists have been detained, kidnapped, and/or tortured by Ukrainian authorities and their fascist goons. Key members of the Borotba (Struggle) leftist organization have been repeatedly harassed, arrested, and beaten by the police. One particularly infamous example was the detainment of Vladislav Wojciechowski, a member of Borotba and survivor of the May 2nd massacre. According to Borotba’s [website](#), *“During the search of the apartment where he lived, explosives were planted. Nazi “self-defense” paramilitaries participated in his arrest. Vladislav was beaten, and it is possible that a confession was beaten out of him under torture. Currently, he is in SBU custody.”* He was ultimately charged with “terrorism” by the authorities after having been beaten and tortured by both Nazi goons and SBU agents.

Upon his release more than three months later in December 2014 in a “prisoner exchange” between Kiev and the eastern rebels, Wojciechowski defiantly [stated](#), *“I am very angry with the fascist government of Ukraine, which proved once again with its barbaric acts that it is willing to wade through corpses to defend its interests and those of the West. They failed to break me! And my will has become tempered steel. Now I’m even more convinced that it is impossible to save Ukraine without defeating fascism on its territory.”* Wojciechowski was also the editor of the website [2May.org](#), a site dedicated to disseminating the truth about the Odessa massacre.

It should be noted though that Wojciechowski was arrested along with his comrades Pavel Shishman of the now [outlawed](#) Communist Party of Ukraine, and Nikolai Popov of the Communist Youth. These arrests should come as no surprise to observers of the political situation in Ukraine where all forms of leftist politics – the Communist party, [Soviet symbols and names](#), etc. – have been outlawed and brutally repressed.

Kiev is not only engaged in an assault on political freedoms, but also a class war against the working class of Odessa and Ukraine generally. That the events leading up to the massacre took place at Kulikovo Field – a famous staging area for Soviet era demonstrations of

working class politics - and the massacre itself took place in the adjacent Trade Unions House, there's a symbolic resonance, the significance of which is not lost on the people of Odessa. It is the attempt to both erase the legacy of working class struggle and leftist politics, as well as the sacrifices of previous generations in a place where historical memory runs deep, and the scars of the past have yet to heal.

Aside from these shameful attacks on leftist formations, multicultural institutions too have been repressed under the pretext of "Russian separatism." A multiethnic, multi-nationality organization known as the Popular Rada of Bessarabia (PRB) was founded in early April 2015 in order to push for regional autonomy and/or ethnic autonomy in response to the legal and extralegal attacks on minorities by the Kiev authorities. It was reported that within 24 hours of the founding congress, Ukraine's SBU had [detained](#) the core leaders of the organization, including the Chair of the organization's presidium Dmitry Zatuliveter whose whereabouts, according to this author's latest information, remain unknown. Within two weeks 30 more PRB activists were [arrested](#), including founding member Vera Shevchenko.

While the Western media and its armies of think tanks and propaganda mouthpieces steadfastly deny that an organization such as PRB can be anything other than "a project of Russian political consultants," the reality is that such moves have been a *reaction* to repressive legislation and intimidation by the US-backed regime in Kiev which has done everything from outlawing the two most popular political parties of the Russian-speaking South and East (The Party of Regions and the Communist Party), to attempting to strip the Russian language of official status within Ukraine, a move interpreted by these groups as a direct threat against them and their regions where Russian, not Ukrainian, is the lingua franca.

As Senior Fellow at the Jamestown Foundation and former Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (read CIA front) contributor Vladimir Socor wrote last month in an article entitled [Ukraine Defuses Pro-Russia Instigations in Odesa Province](#), *"In the spirit of preventive action, Ukrainian law enforcement agencies have arrested some 20 members of a centrifugal organization in Odesa [sic] province..The timely intervention also stopped the publicity bandwagon that had just started rolling from Moscow in support of the Odesa [sic] group."* Interestingly, the author deceptively frames his apologia for so called "preventive detention" as merely a "timely intervention," conveniently glossing over the blatant illegality of the action by Kiev, which has eschewed the rule of law in favor of brute force and repression.

And what is the PRB's great crime in the eyes of Mr. Socor and the US interests for which he speaks? As he directly states in the article with typical condescension:

[BPR's program and manifesto] include demands for: greater representation of ethnic groups in the administration of Ukraine's Odesa [sic] province; promotion of the ethnic groups' cultural identities and schools; conferral of a "national-cultural special status" to Bessarabia; a free economic zone, with specific reference to local control over Ukraine's Black Sea and Danube ports; no integration of Ukraine with the European Union, the "enslavement practices of which would ruin the region and its agriculture"; and reinstatement of Ukraine's [recently abandoned] international status of nonalignment, or else: "In the event of Ukraine moving close to NATO [the North Atlantic Treaty Organization], we reserve the right to implement the self-determination of Bessarabia."

A careful reading of these demands reveals that these are precisely the demands that any right-minded anti-imperialist position should espouse, including rejection of NATO integration, rejection of EU integration, rejection of opening up Ukraine's agricultural sector to the likes of Monsanto and other Western corporations, and protection of ethnic, religious, and cultural minorities, among other things. While Socor writes of these demands derisively, the reality is that they constitute precisely the sort of program that is essential for defending both Ukraine's sovereignty, and the rights of the people of Odessa and the region. But of course, for Socor, this is all just a Russian plot. Instead, he kneels to kiss the chocolate ring of Poroshenko...and perhaps other parts of Victoria Nuland and John Kerry, while vigorously cheer-leading further political repression.

A Message for the Left

The question facing leftists internationally is no longer whether they believe there are fascists in Ukraine, or whether they are an important part of the political establishment in the country; this is now impossible to refute. Rather, the challenge before the international left is whether it can overcome its deep-seated mistrust of Russia, and consequent inability to separate fact from fiction, and unwaveringly defend its comrades in Ukraine with the conviction and aplomb of its historical antecedents.

There is a whole history that is under assault, a whole people being oppressed, a leftist tradition being ground to dust under the heel of an imperialist agenda and comprador oligarch bourgeoisie. Some on the left choose to snicker derisively at this struggle, aligning themselves once again with the Empire just as they so often have in Libya, Syria, and elsewhere. And then there those who, like this author, refuse to be cowed by the baseless slur of "Russian apologist" and "Putin puppet"; those of us who choose not to look away while our comrades in Ukraine are beaten, kidnapped, tortured, imprisoned, and disappeared.

For while they speak out in the face of reprisals, in the midst of brutal repression, under threat of prison and death, the least we can do is speak out from our comfortable chairs. Anything less is moral cowardice and utter betrayal.

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