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Exiled Russian Activist Challenges Pacifist Approach to Ending War on Ukraine

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Russia's war in Ukraine is intensifying. In response to victories on the battlefield won by Ukrainians this fall, Russia has responded by launching a wave of missile and drone attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure throughout the country. As a result, over 15,000 Ukrainian civilians had been killed or injured by [early October](#), and [another 1,043](#) by early November. Despite this state terrorism, Ukraine has continued to put up a valiant resistance to invasion and occupation.

Faced with a failing war, Vladimir Putin's regime has conscripted hundreds of thousands of men into his armed forces and deployed them to his frontlines. That, in turn, has triggered a rise in antiwar resistance in Russia. In an exclusive for *Truthout*, Ashley Smith interviews Lolja Nordic from the Russian activist organization Feminist Antiwar Resistance about the movement against Putin's regime and its imperialist invasion of Ukraine.

Lolja Nordic is anarcho ecofeminist, antiwar activist and artist from Saint Petersburg, where until recently she organized for gender equality, human rights and climate justice. She is a co-coordinator of Feminist Anti-War Resistance, a group created in February 2022 to protest the war in Ukraine. Since January 2021 Lolja has been facing political repression, arrest and threats for her activism. In March 2022 she had to flee Russia and continue her work in exile after becoming a suspect in a "[phone terrorism](#)" criminal case, which was fabricated by the Russian secret police to put pressure on several antiwar activists.

Ashley Smith: What is the nature and roots of Putin's invasion of Ukraine? Why did he launch it and what are his war aims?

Lolja Nordic: Putin actually started the war back in 2014 when he annexed Crimea. He just escalated it in February. His reasons are clear, and he has repeated them over and over. He has a very colonial mindset; he opposes any country in the post-Soviet space gaining its independence. He has ambitions to rebuild the old empire.

He considers Ukraine to be a part of Russia and will not allow it to exist as an independent country. He denies it is a nation, rejects its right to self-determination, and refuses to acknowledge Ukrainians' agency and subjectivity.

After Ukraine's Maidan uprising in 2013-2014 that drove Russia's corrupt ally, Viktor Yanukovich, from power, Putin feared that the country was slipping out of his control. So, over the last eight years he has deployed troops to Ukraine, backed up the so-called People's Republics in Donetsk and Luhansk, and plotted to carry out the colonial seizure of the whole country.

Putin's imperialism flows from his abusive, toxic and patriarchal worldview. You can hear this in how he speaks about Ukraine. His language is identical to how rapists and abusers talk about their

victims.

The Ukrainian resistance has scored a wave of victories and forced Putin to conscript hundreds of thousands of people. What impact has Russia's military defeats and the mobilization had on Russian society?

The defeats and mobilization have forced the war into the middle of Russian society. Men are being called up and deployed in large numbers and against their will. Almost every family in Russia has a loved one that could be forced to fight in Ukraine.

This has triggered broader questioning of the war. Before the mobilization, conservative Russians could believe Putin's claim that it would not affect your life. They had supported Putin for years based on his promise of stability and his claim that without his rule there would be chaos.

That is no longer credible. Hundreds of thousands of people have fled the country to avoid conscription and repression, others have gone into hiding; some conscripted men even [committed suicide or died](#) in suspicious circumstances at the training camps; large numbers have been deployed in battle, and many are already dying at the front. People are beginning to realize that Putin's regime is the source of instability and chaos.

That does not mean everyone who is against the war or mobilization has become an antiwar activist. Putin retains a base, especially in the elite but also among broader sections of the population. But now there is much more questioning and that has given space for more resistance to Putin and his war.

In February and March there were daily antiwar protests in cities all over Russia. The regime crushed them with harsh repression, arresting more than [16,000 people by June](#). By October this number had risen to 19,000. Many activists were [tortured](#) and some even [raped](#).

Putin immediately criminalized all expressions of antiwar opposition. You can get arrested for posting the word "war" or even for wearing [clothing](#) with the colors of the Ukrainian flag. This repression drove protests for the most part off the streets.

Most Russian people are not wealthy, many are struggling on low wages and find it difficult to meet their basic needs. So, they are reluctant to risk the safety of their families or lose their jobs by openly opposing the war when faced with possible, arrest, fines and torture.

But the mobilization triggered another wave of protests. The most significant ones were in Republics like [Dagestan](#) and [Sakha \(Yakutia\)](#) where women led marches against conscription. This took incredible bravery, because in regions like Dagestan protesters face even more severe repression than people do in cities like Moscow or St. Petersburg. For over a decade, Russia has carried out [mass repression and counter-insurgency](#) to impose its rule in Dagestan.

But protests are not the only form of antiwar resistance. Thousands of Russians are involved in the grassroots networks to provide humanitarian aid to Ukrainians who have been abducted and forcefully relocated from Ukraine to Russia. Those networks also help them flee from Russia across the border back to Ukraine or into Europe.

There is also a large [partisan movement](#) made up mostly of anarchists. They have been disabling railway lines to disrupt the transport of military vehicles and weaponry to the front. They have thrown Molotov cocktails to set fire to military offices all over the country on weekends when no one was inside with the aim of slowing conscription.

What has your organization Feminist Antiwar Resistance been doing to build opposition to the war? What specifically feminist arguments do you stress in your organizing?

For feminists worldwide, war is one of our central issues. We see how all kinds of violence are interconnected, including militaristic violence. War has its roots in patriarchal culture, its oppressive structures, and systemic violence. So, when Putin ordered the invasion of Ukraine, we decided to unite different feminist groups from all over Russia and from other countries to form Feminist Antiwar Resistance.

It is a horizontal network with groups and activists both inside and outside Russia. We have a lot of different campaigns to confront the regime and weaken Russia's war machine. We have organized many street protests and actions since February 24. When the mobilization was announced, we worked with a youth-led democracy group, *Vesna* (Spring), to call demonstrations throughout the country.

Together with Anti-job and Antivoenny Bolnichny (Antiwar Sick Leave) — two organizations which fight for labor rights in Russia — we built a project called [Anti-War Fund](#) that provides help to workers whose labor rights were violated because of their antiwar activism. This is important because many people are threatened with getting fired illegally for being spotted at protests or just posting antiwar content online. To build a sustainable antiwar movement we need to support these kinds of workers with free legal help and protection, so it would be more difficult for the bosses and companies to pressure and silence them.

We built our own network of volunteers providing humanitarian aid to Ukrainian refugees in Russia. We started a hotline where antiwar activists can get urgent, free psychological help. We provide counseling and advice to people who face all sorts of risks. We organize help to political prisoners and help activists find temporary hiding to escape repression.

One of our goals is to break through the regime's propaganda both online and offline. We have established Feminist Antiwar Resistance social media on Telegram, Instagram, Facebook and Twitter as a form of digital resistance and launched a printed newspaper that exposes the reality of this horrific imperialist war.

We produce a newspaper called *Zhenskaya Pravda* (Women's Truth). It looks like an ordinary local free newspaper, but it's filled with antiwar articles. We disguise it like that so it could be spread widely in different public spaces in Russia. Anybody can print it at home and spread it secretly at campuses, malls, community buildings, etc.

Often, we design our posts as memes or jokes to go viral, reach a broader, conservative, or apolitical audience. But once you dig into them you can find the information and arguments against the regime and the invasion.

One of our most important new initiatives is collaborating with different decolonial antiwar movements organized by Russia's ethnic minorities and Indigenous people. They have been fighting to protect their culture and fight for their independence. We are working with them to give them a platform to give voice to their struggle.

Russian forces in the occupation have suffered enormous casualties. Is there any resistance to the war developing in the Russian troops?

There are signs of this beginning. A lot of people who were conscripted are really angry. They were not adequately trained, did not have adequate equipment, and were just sent to the front lines. Many

of them posted videos expressing anger over these conditions. Some groups of conscripted soldiers have staged [protests and sabotage](#) at the training camps.

At this point, we don't know if this is leading to large-scale resistance within the Russian troops. There is no transparency of what is happening at the front inside the Russian army and soldiers who try to sabotage or desert face the risk of being executed at the front by their own commanders.

But we do know that people are sabotaging Russia's war just by refusing conscription either by fleeing the country or going into hiding. Some people don't look at it that way, but I do.

Anything that weakens the Russian army is helping Ukraine win. People refusing conscription deprives Russian imperialism of foot soldiers. However, conscious or not, that is part of the antiwar resistance.

Given the setbacks Russia has suffered, Putin has turned to state terrorist attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure to break Ukraine's will to fight. What is Putin's strategy now?

It's really hard to get inside Putin's head. To be honest, his assessment of the war and therefore his strategy is a bit delusional. He does not get accurate reports from his underlings.

So, he can't really come up with an effective strategy. Everything about this war demonstrates his strategic incompetence from the initial failed siege of Kyiv to the defeats Russian forces are experiencing now.

Faced with these setbacks, Putin is now using tactics he used in Chechnya and Syria — massacring civilians, blowing up apartment buildings, and destroying civilian infrastructure like water and electric plants. He doesn't care about human lives in Ukraine or in Russia. He's sacrificing us all for his imperialist ambitions.

We endured this in Russia through his 22-year reign. He's launched war after war from Chechnya to Georgia to Syria and now Ukraine. None of this has benefitted anyone but his regime and its cronies. Ordinary Russians and Putin's international victims have paid the price with their lives and livelihoods. His regime is a terrorist state.

But the governments in Europe that now denounce Putin are hypocrites. Many of them up until February [met with him at summits](#), [shook his hand](#), and some, especially among the far right elite, spoke about him as a strong leader and [somehow part of the opposition to the U.S.](#) They did this while they knew that he was murdering independent journalists, killing his political opponents, and jailing and torturing Russian activists.

European activists and leftists, as well as those in the U.S., have to criticize their own governments for enabling this regime to rule. European states, even now in the midst of this war, are still financing Putin's military machine with every payment for Russia's fossil fuel exports.

In the West, many pacifists have argued for an immediate ceasefire and a negotiated settlement. What are the problems with such calls?

It is absurd to demand that an occupied country stop fighting for its liberation and essentially give up its land for peace. It's the same as telling a victim of violence to not resist a person who tries to abuse, rape or murder them. Why would we tell that to Ukrainians?

Our task is to stop the aggressor. That means first and foremost building solidarity with Ukraine and

its people. They have been screaming for help for months. They don't have enough weapons to fight against Russian aggression. They don't have defensive weapons to protect their citizens from missile attacks. They deserve all the military and financial help to liberate their country.

Instead of putting demands on Ukraine to stop fighting, we should be focused on doing all we can to weaken Russia's war machine. If we are disturbed by global militarization, we should be first of all focused not on the question of whether it's good to provide weapons to Ukraine, but on how to demilitarize and weaken the Russian army, how to put pressure on those countries that have been providing weapons to Russian soldiers or equipment to Russian police to beat and arrest protesters. To begin with, countries should stop financing Putin's war and reinforcing the Russian military by buying Russian fossil fuels.

Where do you think the war and the resistance to it are headed? What should we expect in the short, medium and long term?

It is very difficult to predict. There are just too many variables. What I do know is that we have to keep building the resistance to the regime in Russia and it is a lot of work. We need to build and enlarge grassroots horizontal networks of resistance to cover the whole country, provide mutual aid and sustain it.

We need to expand the number of people who are aware, ready to act, and trained to co-organize so we are prepared to act fast in critical moments. We need international solidarity with Ukraine against this war. We need international solidarity with people who are fighting Putin's regime in Russia.

In Russia, we are fighting for a future free of Putin and his oligarchs and their militarism. That future will be one where women, queer people, ethnic minorities, Indigenous people and working people can all live together in peace and with equal rights.

Ashley Smith
Lolja Nordic

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