

I, Vitaliy, Ukrainian socialist activist deported to Russia

Wednesday 20 September 2023, by [LE TRÉHONDAT Patrick](#) (Date first published: 20 September 2023).

Vitaliy is a young Ukrainian revolutionary activist. The war on February 24 took him by surprise in Kherson. There, he experienced Russian aggression at close quarters. For refusing a Russian passport, a negation of his Ukrainian identity, he was deported to central Russia, where he lives in complete destitution, selling his labor power for a pittance, in constant fear of the danger that threatens him. This interview took time. Secure means of communication are not conducive to rapid exchanges. Vitaliy, who suffers from health problems, is often exhausted by his interminable working days. In this interview, he tells us about his daily life, Russian society at a time of “special military operation”, and his hopes. Despite his dramatic situation, Vitaliy has not lost his militant spirit and fighting spirit. With his comrades, he took part in sabotage of Russian military installations, and in the company where he works, he organized a strike to raise wages. A few days into our conversation, he learned that his father had been cowardly murdered by Russian soldiers. This dramatic event deeply depressed him, and slowed the pace of his answers to the questions I put to him. His testimony is painful. For Vitaliy, “it’s already midnight in this century”.



Illustration : Katya Gritseva

Can you tell us what’s been happening for you since February 24, 2022?

Until February 24, 2022, my life was full of all the pleasures of youth - smart, funny friends, university studies, a passion for learning, an active creative life. Of course, long before hostilities began in Kherson, Mariupol, Kharkiv, Zaporijjia I was observing the political situation in my country, seeing that Russia had been pursuing an aggressive military policy towards the Ukrainian state since 2014, indirectly declaring the possibility of an all-out offensive and the seizure of most Ukrainian territories. But I wanted to believe to the end that the Russian government would not reach the stage of such madness.

Indeed, until February 24, my life was quite serene and tranquil, I was intensely studying Marxist doctrine, writing articles for my Trotskyist community of 2,500 readers. Then one day, when black clouds of smoke appeared in the clear winter sky, I realized that life would never be the same again, because war had begun. I still remember vividly that day, early in the morning, I woke up to the sound of a woman crying. I happened to be sleeping in a dormitory with several girls. Everyone in the room woke up to hear one of them crying so loudly that they asked her what had happened, to which she replied: “It’s started”. Everyone was puzzled and started asking what exactly had

“started”, but she simply didn’t answer and continued sobbing. Later, I began to hear a rumbling outside, somewhere in the distance, and the picture cleared. It turned out that this crying girl had a boyfriend who served in the Ukrainian army and had been among the first to suffer the attack of the Russian invaders. I was bewildered, everything around me seemed like a dream, because I hadn’t expected this at all. The first thing that gripped everyone was shock and fear, and then all the students in the dormitory began to pack their things in a hurry and leave. I had to stay in a hostel, in Kherson itself, as my house and parents had been taken by the Russian invaders on the first day, although Kherson held out long enough, despite the clear advantage of the Russian army. All the inhabitants of Kherson began emptying store shelves or leaving for the western regions of Ukraine without question.

Complete chaos began to reign in the city. That same day, I went out into the street to document the events in progress. I stayed in constant contact with my comrades, informing them of what was happening directly on the spot. I filmed the first major explosions, fires and incidents. While everyone was in panic, I tried to film carefully what was happening around me. When the Russian army approached Kherson and the first battles for the Antonovsky Bridge began, many citizens immediately prepared to form partisan detachments and join the Ukrainian territorial defense and army. The people of Kherson put up a truly heroic resistance to the offensive, despite fear and hunger. And even when the Z [Russian] army completely took over the city, people demonstrated peacefully for several months, declaring “Kherson is Ukraine”.

I saw with my own eyes Russian troops in the city center firing live ammunition at people taking part in a peaceful demonstration.

I immediately realized that it was very dangerous to stay there, but only those with the financial means were able to leave the occupied city of Kherson.

In March, I had the chance to travel from Kherson to my home. I had to delete all the images I had shot, because on the way back, at checkpoints, Russian soldiers were checking the contents of everyone’s phone and brutally beating those who didn’t want to submit their mobile device for inspection. There were often electricity and internet problems, so my free time was mainly spent reading books. There was also a severe shortage of food, which made life very difficult. Finally, my life was threatened every day, as there were literally tanks everywhere, people with guns and explosions all the time.

At some point in mid-summer 2022, a Russian ammunition warehouse exploded in my village, killing around 3,000 Russian soldiers who had just returned from the front. As a result, shells continued to explode for several days, prompting the start of what became known as the evacuation. I didn’t know until the last minute what kind of place I was going to live in.

How do you live in Russia?

I’ve been living in central Russia for a year now, under the same conditions as all the citizens here. I was forced to take a Russian passport and the corresponding documents. I spent the whole year in a cheap old hotel with other refugees, and I’m still staying there. I have 12 square meters to share with another person, which is not very pleasant. The food is free for all the refugees here, but it’s very poor quality, so I gave it up a long time ago. And overall, the situation is not very favorable, the majority of the population really lives in poverty, the crime rate is very high in the area where the hotel where I live is located. Almost as soon as I arrived here, I started actively looking for work to feed myself, to help my parents who had stayed in the occupied territories, but I wasn’t surprised when I realized that there was practically no good work here, that there was inhuman exploitation everywhere, and that if you don’t have acquaintances in Russia of important businessmen or civil

servants, you're nobody here. So I spent almost a year selling my work for pennies, as most people here do. I usually work 240 hours a month, so I don't feel like I'm growing as a human being, I don't really have time for cultural activities or walks.

I'm still finding it hard to make good friends here, because all the conscious young people are moving to St Petersburg or Moscow, or leaving Russia, and I don't have the chance.

I'm invaded by a subconscious fear all the time I'm here, because I'm in a country that attacked the country of my birth. The threat is everywhere, nothing inspires confidence. As a war victim, I don't receive any compensation or psychological support, which I think is essential for war survivors.

Perhaps the most annoying thing is that I really don't have any like-minded people here, even though I know a lot of people.

How do Russians see you as a Ukrainian?

The people I communicate with react normally to my nationality. Personally, I have not been the victim of any form of national oppression throughout my stay here.

Some people have even expressed their support for me, saying they were also against the war, but the fear of being punished for their opinions prevented them from expressing themselves openly. I only know of a few stories where other refugees living with me in the hotel were insulted because they were Ukrainians. Basically, I think that the hostile attitude towards Ukrainians in Russia is not very widespread among the population.

Where you live, do people talk about the war in Ukraine?

Although the town I'm in is a long way from the zone of hostilities, many people are still interested in the war situation with Ukraine. Basically, I can distinguish between two types of people: some fully support Putin's actions, others are categorically opposed to power in Russia. But Putin's fans are more numerous, as many people here have been actively fed propaganda for decades. Since the start of February 24, 2022, the population has been following the news and events in Ukraine more and more closely, although almost the majority are quietly living their lives passively supporting or denying what the current power in Russia is doing.

Recently, the streets have seen more and more posters calling for people to join the Russian army. This clearly shows the lack of personnel on the front line. And they don't want another wave of mobilization, because the first wave turned out to be horrible in every way. As far as I know, since this school year, all Russian schools have introduced a new subject called "talking about what's important", where children are informed about the war with Ukraine, subjected to Russian imperialist propaganda and imbued with hatred towards the Ukrainian people.

Do you see any economic consequences of the war in Ukraine?

As I arrived in Russia in mid-August last year, I can't say exactly what the economic situation was like before the start of the full-scale offensive. I asked people here several times if they had felt any serious effects of the sanctions after February 24, and almost everyone said it was minimal. Prices of basic foodstuffs have remained virtually unchanged. In general, and if we don't make comparisons, the economic situation in Russia over the last decade has always been terrible, and I believe that the longer the war goes on, the greater the consequences for the Russian economy will be, but these consequences will not be immediate, and the government will always try to conceal them.

Were you politically active in Ukraine?

Before the war broke out, I was more politically active in Ukraine than I am today, for objective reasons. My main activity was writing Marxist and Trotskyist articles of all kinds. As you know, in the Ukrainian town where I was studying, there were actually quite a few extreme right-wing groups sticking up Nazi propaganda leaflets, drawing Nazi graffiti, and I was trying to counter them: I erased Nazi graffiti, and drew Communist graffiti in their place, and I led all kinds of campaigns inside the university where I was studying, but I mostly wrote articles, activities that became difficult to maintain when the war came to my home.

Currently, it's not particularly easy to engage in oppositional political activity in Russia, even online, as even Russian social networks are controlled by the bureaucratic state, but it is possible to find a way out somehow. At the moment, I'm working a little by writing articles in a resource that has almost five thousand readers, but that's not enough, because the articles are all about educational topics, and I want to call for action. One way or another, my comrades and I committed major sabotage in Moscow a month ago, which greatly influenced the state of the Russian army. I won't go into the details of this sabotage, of course, for my own safety and that of my comrades. Basically, it's difficult to maintain political activity, also given that you have to work very hard to at least feed yourself. When I came here, I got a job in a chain store and, as I gained work experience, I started encouraging other employees to stop work in order to get pay rises, and it worked. The store itself has been in existence since 2019, and employee pay hadn't risen since even though the situation in the country has changed a lot, and this level of pay was no longer sufficient. When I had already arrived, we started calling a peaceful strike for wages. All employees across the chain received a small increase. This was my first small but significant success in improving the lives of the working class.

And today?

As soon as I arrived here in the Urals, I immediately started looking for like-minded people, but in the whole year I've been here, I've never had the opportunity to meet politically committed people. The left-wing movement isn't as big here as it is in St. Petersburg or Moscow, where I have many comrades. All sensible people go to these cities, because Russia has a centralized economy and the standard of living in these cities is higher than in others. Basically, at the moment, my relations with Russian left-wing thinkers are only via the Internet.

Many people think Russia is a fascist state. Do you think so too?

I'm absolutely convinced that Russia is now moving towards a fascist regime. I wouldn't say that the form of government in Russia is exactly fascism, but the political situation already presents an important factor of progressive fascization of the country. If we compare Russia with the fascist countries of the 20th century, it does not fully meet all the criteria. One way or another, it's almost impossible for anyone with left-wing views to live here.

How do you see your future and that of your country?

It's a difficult question, because I was born in Ukraine and had planned to build my future there, but with the start of the war everything collapsed, as it did for everyone else: families, dreams and plans. I came here to Russia purely by the will of fate, with nothing behind me. So, personally, I still have no concrete plans as to what I'm going to do in the future, since my future depends entirely on military operations. I can't help noticing that Russia, as a country and territory, is objectively quite pretty and has a rich history, but as a state it's a terrible place, so if the system of government here became more democratic, then I wouldn't mind staying here for the rest of my life and even starting a family. The Russian language itself is unique and attractive, and Russian literature from the 19th and 20th centuries is generally amazing, so some people can really love this country despite the

dismal economic and political situation. I'd like to hope that sooner or later Russia wakes up and takes the right path, because if that doesn't happen and the situation only gets worse, then it will be a historical catastrophe.

Patrick Le Tréhondat

[*Click here*](#) to subscribe to *ESSF* newsletters in *English* and/or *French*.