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Women in Ukraine

Grieving for Others, Not for Ourselves

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We ([Posle](#)) spoke with Irina Zhrebkina, editor-in-chief of the Gender Studies journal and Professor of Theory of Culture and Philosophy of Science at Kharkiv National University, who decided to stay in Ukraine despite the war. She is now trapped in the area of the Russian offensive. Irina shares her experience of living and teaching amidst constant shelling, and reflects upon the importance of a feminist perspective for anti-war resistance.

Posle: Irina, many in the academic community in Ukraine, Russia, and abroad closely follow your Facebook posts where you give vivid and heartfelt descriptions of your experiences in the war zone. Why did you decide to remain in Kharkiv? Are you still teaching?

Irina Zhrebkina: Immediately after the Russian army started shelling residential buildings in Ukrainian cities (in Kharkiv it started as early as February 24, when they shelled multi-story buildings in the North Saltovka district) millions of Ukrainians rushed to the West hoping to save not just their own lives (because those who just “survived” inevitably feel shame before those who died), but the lives of their children. I perfectly understand and share this fear for their children, but we do not have young children, and I personally found abandoning my city and country humiliating. It felt like betraying one’s love. To me organizing grassroots solidarity among neighbors seemed more important. We left for a village near Kharkov when a bomb hit our house.

I have three teaching days a week, and these days are incredibly interesting, as my students and I try to connect the philosophers and cultural theorists we study with attempts to explain this war.

In one of your posts, you noted that many of your colleagues who left Russia called for avoiding the use of the Russian language to support Ukraine. Some of the opposition figures who left Russia voiced similar appeals. And at the same time, “volunteers and checkout cashiers” remaining in Kharkov speak Russian (as you wrote in one of your posts). Have you ever had the desire to stop speaking and writing in Russian? What fate awaits the Russian language in post-war Ukraine?

Now, with the beginning of Russia’s war against Ukraine, the natural reaction of Ukrainian society is to reject everything related to Russia and the so-called “Russian world”. A number of Ukrainian cultural figures welcome this reaction as a gesture of decolonization and the final liberation of Ukraine from colonizing Russian culture. However, paradoxically, it is the Russian-speaking Ukrainian southeast, which has taken the brunt of the aggressor’s attacks and continues to live and fight under incessant missile attacks, playing a leading role in the implementation of Ukraine’s decolonization policy. The war showed that the border between the “Ukrainian world” and the “Russian world” has nothing to do with language or literature. And I believe that Ukraine will only be able to finally free itself from colonial dependence and become truly independent and democratic when it stops dividing the lives of its citizens into more and less correct and valuable based on language and cultural background.

On March 14, the Boston Review published your [article](#) on the objectives of the academic and, in particular, feminist community in the post-Soviet countries. You write that you “were sincerely convinced that feminism and gender studies would serve to emancipate Soviet people from the traumas of a repressive totalitarian past”. But it turned out that this strategy was flawed: the Russian invasion of Ukraine revealed that the threat to liberal democracy came not so much from the idea of communism as from the idea of fascism. In light of the closure of Memorial [one of the oldest civil rights groups in Russia] and the prohibition against identifying the role of the USSR and Germany in World War II, to what extent can we say that the ideas of decommunization and de-Stalinization are identical?

For me, totalitarianism and the idea of communism are by no means identical, but are in fact opposed to each other. Here I proceed from Marx's classical conception of communism as formulated in his Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, where communism is understood as 1) the abolition of human self-alienation and 2) the realization of the generic essence of humankind. I do not share the view of my teacher and friend Mikhail Ryklin, who derives totalitarianism and Stalinist repression from the idea of communism. That is why I always remind my students that communism never existed in the USSR, and therefore decommunization in post-Soviet countries is a completely pointless project.

The next question also relates to the article. There you refer to Judith Butler's definition of the so-called "new fascism", professed not as much by the middle classes as in the twentieth century, but by the poor. Can the lens of gender studies be helpful in understanding why the class base of fascism has changed?

Butler, whom I quote in my article, writes about "new fascism" as a form of "liberation" fascism that legitimizes the hate affect of the new "oppressed" in the so-called first world, i.e. the working class and low-wage workers in the US who have become a resource for the massive political mobilization carried out by Trump. When I applied Butler's notion of liberation fascism to my assessment of Putin's aggression in Ukraine, Butler supported this idea... But now I think differently. Today hatred, or "hatreds", as American feminist [Zillah Eisenstein](#) puts it, reveals itself as metastasis that spreads everywhere. It has become a powerful resource for mass political mobilization, including racist, nationalist, sexist mobilization. Yet, the regime of sensibility emerging from the situation of war in Ukraine has, in my view, a slightly different configuration of legalized hatred than in the countries of the so-called "West". The hatred freed and legitimized by war affects not only low-income social groups here. This hatred knows no class distinctions and unites people regardless of their social status, cultural differences and education. (Recently I read a FB post by a Russian-speaking priest from Italy, who reports that the most common sin that all immigrants from Ukraine and Russia confess to him today is hatred. And this priest admits that he struggles to find words to somehow support people who confess the sin of hatred).

A few years before the outbreak of the war, Butler reflected on the affective causes of war and on whether and how the forces of war and violence can be countered by the forces of nonviolence (in [The Force of Nonviolence: The Ethico-Political Bind](#)). She names the death drive, which Freud describes as the most fundamental and powerful of the human drives, as the main affective force behind war. It is more powerful than the libidinal urge. At the time she believed that opponents of war could oppose the suicidal urge to death as the main ontological cause of war with another, even more powerful urge capable of surpassing the death drive. At the time Butler believed that such an anti-militaristic impulse, capable of becoming an alternative to the death drive, could be found in mania, understood by Freud as resistance of the living organism to its destruction or self-destruction by melancholy. Mania, manifested in a manic desire to live, is, according to Freud, a cipher that opens up a new possibility: for mania asserts a desire to exist and to endure which has no real basis in a particular political regime. Therefore, if people of good will and opponents of war can find forms of educating people in a certain ("manic") way, they can develop, as Butler suggests, a manic aversion to violence and war as ways of destroying organic life.

How convincing are these arguments for nonviolence today in the situation of Putin's aggression into Ukraine, threatening humanity with a third world war and nuclear catastrophe? Can we rely on the forces of nonviolence under the threat of total war and the spread of military hatred, or are force and violence the only resources we have left to save humanity today? Is any success of the antiwar civil movement in Russia possible today, or do Russian anti-militarist intellectuals, if they want to be effective, have no choice but to create combat subversive groups inside the country or go to Ukraine to oppose Russian aggression with weapons in hand?

You probably know that in Russia today it is the feminist movement that is particularly active in opposing the war. The most striking example is probably Feminist Anti-War Resistance. Why is it that a feminist perspective is in demand when violence and aggression need to be confronted?

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Traditionally, the Women in Black (whose strategies Russian feminists seem to have focused on), who organized anti-war campaigns in Israel and the former Yugoslavia, have relied on undermining militarist national sovereignty by exposing their own lives to state violence in their countries (see [Athena Atanasiou's article](#)). They expressed grief for others, and not for their own folk. And they did so under fire, not at a distance from war.

Is contemporary Russian feminism capable of taking similar actions? Is it ready for it?

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Source [Posle](#).

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