Between War and Terror: A Letter from Russia

written by Oxana Timofeeva | March 16, 2022



Russian protestor arrested. She holds a sign saying, “No War.” Photo from Al Jazeera

Since the very first day of the war, protests have been ongoing throughout Russia, and they have taken a variety of forms. The primary one is the daily “stroll” on the streets. In contemporary Russian political language, the words *gulyanie* (strolling) or *progulka* (a walk) mean protests and meetings. Formally, only one-person pickets are allowed, but their participants are usually immediately detained by the police. For this reason, people often simply agree to face the risk of arrest together and come out onto the streets at the same time. On the morning of February 24, only a few hours after Russian forces crossed over into Ukrainian territory, people realized that something monstrous and intolerable was underway. One after another they began to write on social media that it was time to take a “big walk.” The very same evening, people came out into the streets with the slogan “No to War!”

On the first day, it was terrifying. Nobody knew what kind of reaction to expect from the police, or which degree of violence they would employ. After a week of protesting, it seems to me that people are no longer afraid. The situation in our society is so catastrophic that people realize they already have nothing to lose. This is why many are ready to take the risk—they are unafraid of going to jail, of losing their jobs or their entire lives. Something must be done to finally end this war, for which we feel guilt, shame, alarm, and horror.

People are learning about digital security, creating networks of solidarity to circumvent official censorship, bans, and internet blocks. They make factsheets for those under arrest, Telegram channels for quickly exchanging information to coordinate meetings, legal help, and material support for those caught in the clutches of the police. Recently, however, some of the Western sanctions have impeded the coordination of protest and opposition actions. For example, Visa and MasterCard’s departure from Russia means that people cannot even download paid VPN software. In other words, they risk being cut off from communication at any given moment.

The protesters include people of different ages and professions. Student and feminist initiatives deserve special mention. Feminists have it especially hard. They were subject to repressions and bullying before the war, as the Russian ideology of militarism is primarily a patriarchal one. On March 6, for example, the biggest protest action took place. 5,000 were arrested and held without

access to legal counsel. The police use electroshock weapons, take away people's telephones, and sometimes subject people to torture.

There are also more moderate forms of protest—for example, the "quiet picket." People use anti-war symbols in everyday life, on their clothing, and so on. Some paste stickers or hand out leaflets—which is also very dangerous. In some cases, the police find people pasting stickers through footage from surveillance cameras, which are now all over the place. So basically, we are not giving up, but there are few of us, and even the largest mass protests remain invisible to most. The major independent magazines, newspapers, and internet resources have closed down, and state mass media are the only ones left standing, pumping out militaristic propaganda 24/7. We do not have enough resources to make the Russian peace movement visible in the country and abroad. We need help so that protestors can feel that their risks and efforts are not made in vain.

How has the so-called intelligentsia reacted to these events? Many are leaving or have already left. Many dropped everything and just left for nowhere—whoever could do so moved to Europe, many others have gone to the former USSR countries that are still destinations for Russian planes: Kazakhstan, Armenia, Uzbekistan, or countries that admit Russians without visas: Turkey, for example. People are fleeing Russia, trying to bring their families and children with them, because they have no illusions about there being any future at home. Most of my friends are already abroad, and their hearts are breaking. Those who stay behind and who don't have hope or strength to fight close up and fall into depression; some take to drink, others consider suicide. I've thought of that, too. I'm worried about my friends in Russia whose homes are being searched by the police; I'm worried to death about my relatives and friends in Ukraine. I feel direct physical terror and horror; my hands are shaking. The only thing that helps is to find them all and to try to do something.

We are now caught in the crossfire. Our country's foreign policy is war; its domestic policy is terror. These two things did not befall us suddenly, but gestated over the years, starting from the very moment that Putin came to power in 2000. He had no unambiguous ideology, but a goal: to hold onto power by any means. The two time-tested tools to do so were repression and military operations. Old activists and dissidents remember how the OMON fighters would have been among those opposing Putin's policies for the longest time. In the 2010s, the presidential elections were finally turned into a farce—no matter how we voted, Putin would win anyway due to massive election fraud. The machine of political repression gathered momentum; police violence grew widespread, and new political prisoners emerged. The state also resorted to another effective means of quashing internal dissent with a violent, grandly corrupt administrative system—namely, so-called military operations.

Putin first became president in the wake of the war in Chechnya, which resulted in Russia's domination of the territory at a massive cost to human life. He came with war. Aggressive foreign policy is the most powerful ideological argument, ensuring the support of a large portion of the population. Starting wars helps the regime to hold onto its electorate, and even if our country winds up totally isolated, impoverished, and destroyed—and this will happen very soon—there will be plenty of people who will honestly vote for Putin in the 2024 elections. It was in view of those elections that Russia's constitution was amended in 2020, making a lifelong presidency possible for Putin. Many among the liberal intelligentsia began distancing themselves from Putin's policies in 2010, when open repression and limits of personal freedom began. But the problem lay elsewhere. As a colleague has written on Facebook (I won't name him for security reasons), while we thought we were fighting Stalinism, we raised a fascist of our own.

Translated from the Russian by David Riff.

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