

In Memory of Dmitry Petrov

An Incomplete Biography and Translation of His Work

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On April 19, 2023, three anarchists were killed in battle near Bakhmut: an American named Cooper Andrews, an Irishman named Finbar Cafferkey, and a Russian named Dmitry Petrov, known to us until then as Ilya Leshy. People in our networks have shared undertakings with all three of these comrades over the years.

In the following eulogy, we explore the life of Dmitry Petrov, who also went by the *noms de guerre* Ilya Leshy and Fil Kuznetsov. For background, you should start by reading the statements from his comrades in the Anarcho-Communist Combat Organization, the Resistance Committee, and Solidarity Collectives, as well as Dmitry's statement from beyond the grave.

A few weeks before the war began, Dmitry participated in an interview that we included in our coverage of the unfolding situation. On the first day of the Russian invasion, under what must have been challenging conditions, Dmitry took time to speak with us about how anarchists were responding. Throughout our exchanges over the following year, we were impressed by his humility, the earnestness with which he approached his efforts, and his sincere desire for critique.¹

When Dmitry was killed, his comrades revealed that he had been involved in some of the most significant anarchist initiatives in 21st-century Russia, including co-founding the Anarcho-Communist Combat Organization. Here, we will provide an overview of his efforts as a snapshot of the past two decades of struggle in the post-Soviet world, concluding with a translation of his text, *The Mission of Anarchism in the Modern World*.

¹ One of Dmitry's virtues, at least in our communication with him, was that he retained a humble, open-minded approach to strategy while nonetheless acting decisively. This stands in stark contrast to the strident voices on every side of the debate about the Russia-Ukraine war who lecture each other from a position of absolute certitude without ever having set foot in either country. In the interview we published at the beginning of 2022, asked how he might answer those who charged that participating in the military defense of Ukraine would make anarchists into accomplices of the Ukrainian government, Dmitry responded, "First of all, I would answer them—thanks, this is a valuable critique. We really need to evaluate how to intervene so as not to just become a tool in some state's hands." In the last message we received from him, in March 2023, he concluded, "If you have any questions, if you have any advice, any thoughts, any analysis to share, I would be super happy to hear it, and super interested." This is a remarkable thing for a person who is risking his life daily to say to people far away in conditions of relative safety.

No one in our collective believes that state militarism can bring about the world we desire to live in. We are internally divided over the issue of anarchists participating in military resistance to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Some of us believe that serving in a state military formation can never advance the anarchist cause. Others believe that the decision to do so can only be understood in view of the brutal autocracy that prevails in Russia, in which committed anarchists like Dmitry had tried virtually every other approach. If we reject state militarism, it is an open question how else to respond to imperialist invasions—and we will be better equipped to approach that question if we understand the life trajectory of Russian anarchists like Dmitry.

According to one of our contacts in the Russian anarchist movement, Dmitry was an active participant in anarchist activities in Moscow starting when he was a teenager, as early as 2004. He became known to other comrades as *Ekolog* (“ecologist”) on account of his environmentalism, organizing against the construction of incinerators and for the defense of Bitsevski Park in Moscow. He also participated in Food Not Bombs, the anarchist MPST union (“Interprofessional Workers’ Union”), and a variety of other initiatives.

While Dmitri was becoming more active in the anarchist movement, fascists and police were escalating their violence against it. They had begun maiming and killing activists and journalists and even their lawyers; Fedor Filatov, Ilya Borodayenko, Timur Kacharava, and Anna Politkovskaya were only a few of the many casualties. In January 2009, the lawyer Stanislav Markelov and the journalist and anarchist eco-activist Anastasia Baburova were murdered in downtown Moscow. The previous summer, Dmitry had fought alongside Anastasia Baburova to defend Georgian refugees from Abkhazia who were staying in Yasnyi proezd in Moscow.

The following month, Dmitry took part in a clandestine action claimed under the name People’s Retribution. According to one account, this was a landmark event in Russia:

The first anti-cop arson of a new generation of anarchist rebels took place on the night of February 19–20, 2009. The next day, a video was published on the internet on behalf of the group People’s Retribution, showing anonymous people throwing Molotov cocktails at police cars. “People’s Retribution” announced the destruction of two cars and called on “every self-respecting person... to stand up against the arbitrariness and despotism of the police, secret services, and bureaucracy.”

Afterwards, Dmitry participated in establishing an anonymous platform for reporting such clandestine actions, the Black Blog, which began publishing in May 2010. When the anonymous editors announced the end of the Black Blog in March 2019, they alluded to the burning of the police cars on February 19, 2009: “More than ten years have passed since we threw our first Molotov cocktail at the police.”

One of the flashpoints of conflict around Moscow at that time was the Khimki forest, which anarchists and ecological activists were defending against corrupt officials and loggers and the fascists in their employ. On July 28, 2010, the fight over Khimki came to a head when hundreds of anarchists and anti-fascists marched on the local municipal offices in response to a fascist attack. We don’t know what Dmitry’s precise involvement in these events was. The anonymous report we received from Russian anarchists seems to bear the work of a familiar hand; but in an

interview, an anonymous representative of Black Blog denied that they had participated in the demonstration at the municipal offices.

Over the following months, the authorities detained and tortured over 500 anarchists and anti-fascists. Several were forced to flee the country. Nonetheless, this was not enough to suppress what was at that time a powerful movement. According to the aforementioned account,

“2009–2012 was the peak of anarchist resistance in the history of the post-Soviet region of Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine. Something happened almost every day, especially in the Moscow region, day and night.”

By summer 2012, over a hundred arson attacks had taken place targeting police stations and vehicles, military enlistment offices, cars belonging to state officials, and construction equipment intended to destroy forests. The Black Blog reported many of these actions, including some claimed by additional groups that Dmitry reportedly participated in, such as Anti-Nashist Action (countering the pro-Putin youth group, *Nashi*) and *ZaNurgaliyeva* (likely an ironic reference to then-Minister of Interior Rashid Nurgaliyev, a former KGB functionary).

On June 7, 2011, for example, an improvised device exploded beside a traffic police post at kilometer 22 of the Moscow Ring Road. The Anarchist Guerilla group claimed responsibility with a video of the explosion on the Black Blog. According to the Anarcho-Communist Combat Organization, Dmitry participated in this action.

In a subsequent interview, pseudonymous participants in the burning of the police post described the action in detail. Here is an excerpt:

DENIS: We are descending from the crossing over the Moscow Ring Road. It's almost light now. Some pensioner is already here walking his dog. I must say, according to our experience of night outings, this category of citizens is one of the very first to appear on the city streets in the morning. They say that in old age people sleep very little. Although our faces are covered, I still feel anxiety—after all, a witness can remember something. Of course, this is complete madness—to return to a failed bomb, and even in the light, in full view of the whole neighborhood. But so much effort has been expended—it is impossible to leave with nothing.

Let's return to the post. Everything is the same as we left: a basin with coal and a cylinder stands between the fence and the booth. Alexei goes to the edge of the concrete ditch, lights a phosphorus match, and throws it into the basin. Nothing happens. Has the gasoline burned away? Discouraged, we slowly walk back to the bridge. “Listen, did you definitely see the match fall into the basin?” I ask Alexei. “Yeah, it looked like it.” “But you can't say for sure?” “No, I'm not sure.”

Last try. We return, I climb over the ditch, approach the fence, light a match, throw it right into the basin and... a bluish flame spreads over the coal. It happened! Now we are running, our hearts are beating—what if the explosion catches us in a conspicuous place? But the joy of success drowns out the anxiety.

BORIS: It was starting to get light. I noticed an incomprehensible movement behind the booth. I looked closely, I realized that it was the reflection of fire on the trees. It was burning!

But suddenly a car quickly drove into the parking lot, illuminating the booth with its headlights. A traffic cop ran out of the car, took out a fire extinguisher, and began to put out the flames. Unsuccessfully. On the contrary, it seemed that the fire flared up more and more. The traffic cop ran into the post and came out with another fire extinguisher, a larger one. Again, failure—the flame only blazed more and more. Apparently, having decided not to risk it, the traffic cop returned to his post. The flame, meanwhile, rose above the booth—but there was still no explosion. The camera I was using stopped recording for the second time; I pressed “record” again. Police cars began to arrive at the post.

And then there was an explosion.

Everything was lit up by a flash, a bright orange flame shot up about fifteen meters. We continued filming. Cars began to drive away from the traffic police post, and just then our comrades returned. Alexei nervously shouted: “What are you doing, they are coming after us!”

Nevertheless, the account concluded with an admonition characteristic of Dmitry’s later writing:

You cannot seize power and impose anarchy on people from above. You cannot make a revolution for them and force them to live in a new society. Anarchist ideals will win only when people realize their strength, taking responsibility for their own lives and each other’s. Therefore, the main thing is to restore people’s faith in their own strength.

The same social tensions expressed in these clandestine actions eventually came to a boil in mass participatory events. Across Russia, hundreds of thousands of people participated in the opposition movement of 2011–2012. On May 6, 2012, the “March of Millions” ended in clashes with the police in Moscow’s Bolotnaya Square. Once again, according to the Anarcho-Communist Combat Organization, Dmitry Petrov participated in the events in Bolotnaya Square, alongside the anarchist Alexei Polikhovich and others who were subsequently imprisoned for attempting to defend demonstrators from armored riot police.

That was arguably the high-water mark of political possibility in Russia. Over the years that followed, Putin’s government managed to establish a stranglehold on the country, systematically destroying or assimilating all forms of opposition. When we interviewed the Anarcho-Communist Combat Organization last August, they traced the beginning of the process that eventually led to the Russian invasion of Ukraine to the defeat of that movement:

Perhaps, in theory, the political crisis of 2011–2012 could have ended Putin’s rule, if all the opposition forces had acted more cohesively and radically. The anarchists tried to radicalize the protest, but our forces were not enough, and the authorities decided to launch the first serious waves of repression.

After the clashes on Bolotnaya Square, Dmitry continued to participate in both clandestine action and public organizing. As the Anarcho-Communist Combat Organization related to us in the aforementioned interview,

“We are aware of examples in which some comrades have managed to balance between public activity and the underground for quite a long time, and to be quite active in both.”

In 2013, a protest movement broke out against the pro-Putin government of Ukraine, culminating in the Ukrainian Revolution of February 2014. Although nationalists elbowed out anarchists and other anti-authoritarians to take a prominent place in these events, that outcome was not foreordained; things might have turned out differently if anarchists had been more numerous and better prepared. The Yellow Vest movement of 2018–2019 in France offers an example of a social movement in which nationalists initially had an advantage, but anarchists and anti-fascists managed to outflank them.

While the outcome of the Ukrainian uprising was still up in the air, Dmitry Petrov traveled to Kyiv to participate in the struggle on the Maidan, the central square of Ukraine’s capital city. According to Vladimir Platonenko,

In February 2014, Ekolog [Dmitry] spent about ten days on the Maidan, having come to Ukraine specifically for this. He took part in the arrangement of Ukrdom [the “Ukrainian house,” a staging point for anarchists and anti-fascists during the uprising, which was burned on February 18], delivering food to positions, and even in the battle on February 18. But at the same time, he constantly tried to develop an anarchist component in the general popular, complex, and heterogeneous Maidan protest movement. He participated in an attempt to create the “Left Hundred,” created an “anarchist regiment” (with anarchist literature) in the library of the Ukrdom, told the Maidan participants about the protests in favor of the uprising that had taken place in Moscow and about the reasons for the defeat of the protesters. He did not go with the flow; rather, he participated in determining the flow of events to the best of his ability.

The situation in Ukraine was never simple. In the final entry on the Black Blog, dated February 2015, the editors describe the debates among themselves regarding whether the arsons in Ukraine that were reported to their platform represented genuine anti-state activity or pro-Putin authoritarian activity. Rather than present a facile or sanitized narrative, the authors summarized both views so that readers could draw their own conclusions—but that was the last update to the Black Blog. This debate foreshadowed the later controversies about how anarchists should position themselves in the war between the Russian and Ukrainian governments.

In the years following his participation in the Ukrainian uprising, Dmitry maintained an online journal chronicling his travels to sites of natural beauty and historical interest, including parks, forests, and museums around Russia. He obtained a PhD in history and engaged in anthropological studies as a researcher at the Center for Civilizational and Regional Studies of the African Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences.

Inspired initially by an article written by David Graeber, Dmitry went to Rojava while the war against the Islamic State was at its fiercest. He spent six months there. Afterwards, in 2017, he discussed his experiences in this interview and participated in the research project Hevale: Revolution in Kurdistan, which published multiple books.

Later, he contributed articles to the Ukrainian leftist site Commons about the impact of COVID-19 in Rojava and the conflict between confederal and imperial models in Kurdistan.

According to Ukrainian anti-fascists, “He studied the revolutionary experience of the Kurds deeply, and while he was critical, he respected it and sincerely tried to convey its most valuable lessons.” By his own account, Dmitry aimed “not only to tell the Russian left about the social revolution in Kurdistan, but also to share the anti-authoritarian worldview with the Kurds themselves.”

In 2018, Dmitry left Russia. By that time, Putin’s regime had tamed the violent fascist movement of the preceding decade and moved on to crushing all other social movements. It was becoming standard practice for the Russian Federal Security Service to round up suspected anarchists and anti-fascists and torture them via electrical shock and other horrific methods in order to force them to sign false confessions admitting to participating in invented “terror networks.”

As Dmitry later told the news site Doga,

I avoided leaving the country as long as I could, but I left when I learned that the security forces were interested in my modest person.

He chose Ukraine as his point of destination, considering its government to be the least successfully authoritarian of the post-Soviet countries. In the Doga interview, he described his activities upon arriving there:

In Ukraine, we had initiatives among anarchist emigrants from Russia and Belarus, a kind of diaspora. And so it was a lot of different things: from the cinema club and discussions to street actions. But the main thing was to establish ties and an attempt to form systematically operating structures.

As we have noted elsewhere, it is becoming more and more important to find ways to center the agency of refugees as wars, state repression, ecological catastrophes, and economic crises force millions into exile. Yet at the same time that he was getting situated in Ukraine, Dmitry must have continued organizing with anarchists in Russia from afar. The Telegram channel Anarchist Combatant appeared that same year, in 2018.

In 2019, the editors of Black Blog announced the conclusion of the project. It had been four years since the last post had appeared. They emphasized that they remained convinced of the value of the strategy they had embraced in 2009:

We have sown our seeds and we are already seeing sprouts. Our enemies—the oppressors and their henchmen within the “power structures”—could not stop us, no matter how hard they tried.

We do not do these things to feed our egos. Everything we do, we do not for personal ambition, but to advance the struggle for freedom and justice. We are convinced that we have succeeded. And now, ten years later, we declare to you, as we did before, that we believe that our anti-authoritarian ideas are correct and the radical path we have chosen is correct. The fight continues.

On June 10, 2020, at the high point of the George Floyd uprising in the United States and in response to police violence in Ukraine, anarchists set fire to the Investigative Department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs in Kyiv, sending a communiqué that appeared on the Anarchist

Combatant website. This should address any lingering doubts about whether Dmitry sought to make peace with the Ukrainian authorities.

That summer, when an uprising broke out in Belarus, Dmitry illegally crossed the border to participate. According to Belarusian anarchists,

During his stay in Minsk, he took part in dozens of marches, helped organize an anarchist bloc at demonstrations, and even managed to pelt cops with their own stun grenades. At night, when many Belarusians were resting, Leshy [Dmitry] and other comrades took to the streets of Minsk and destroyed the surveillance cameras that played an important role in the infrastructure of repression... In the fall of 2020, he prepared several materials for our website. If you've ever marched through Minsk beside an anarchist column, chances are that you've walked shoulder to shoulder with this incredible man.

The uprising in Belarus was ultimately crushed; many of the anarchists who participated remain in prison today, underscoring the considerable risks of insurrectionary activity in the post-Soviet sphere. In September 2020, a blog post appeared from the Anarcho-Communist Combat Organization: a communiqué from a clandestine partisan action in Belarus.

Surveying this trajectory, it is possible to interpret Dmitry's path from the Black Blog through the uprisings of 2012, 2014, and 2020 to the Anarcho-Communist Combat Organization as the continuous development of a single strategy. Blending public activity and clandestine organizing, he sought to create a model suited to the volatile and dangerous conditions of the post-Soviet countries, a model that could serve both to take advantage of moments of possibility and to survive periods of intense repression. As state violence and surveillance intensify, activists in other parts of the world may find that they need something similar.

Starting before Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, Dmitry joined Ukrainian and Belarusian anarchists in attempting to put together an explicitly anarchist and anti-authoritarian military unit. One function of such a unit was to ensure that the participants would not have to fight side by side with fascists, who are indeed present in the Ukrainian military. In addition, Dmitry saw participating in the defense of Ukraine as an opportunity to gain credibility for anarchist ideas in the eyes of the general public in Ukraine, and to continue his own longstanding fight against Putin's regime.

During the first phase of the Russian invasion, Dmitry and his comrades participated in the territorial defense of the region around Kyiv, becoming integrated as an independent unit in the Territorial Defense Forces. After this, their "anti-authoritarian platoon" became mired in military bureaucracy, putting the status of the non-Ukrainian members in limbo and keeping the entire unit away from the fighting.

In July 2022, Dmitry wrote an analysis of the first four months of the "anti-authoritarian platoon," discussing its internal structure and evaluating its successes and failures. This is an important historical document for those who are curious about the extent to which the military model developed in Rojava can be reproduced in other circumstances. It will be instructive for anyone who wants to discuss anarchist involvement in military affairs, whether they seek to improve on it or to critique it.

Dmitry and others in the platoon were eager to get to the front. Eventually, the platoon disbanded, and they succeeded in going to the front in a different formation. When last we heard

from him, he told us that he was about to leave that unit, in hopes of trying once more to establish some kind of explicitly anti-authoritarian unit.

We will leave it to others to debate whether Dmitry's persistent attempts to establish an anarchist military unit represent the honorable continuation of his lifelong anarchist project, a misguided departure from it, an error arising from some preexisting flaw within it, or a courageous attempt to grapple with an almost impossible situation. Those who wish to hear his own thoughts on the matter may choose from an array of interviews. It must not be forgotten that in addition to fighting in Ukraine, he continued to support sabotage and other forms of subversive activity in Russia through the Anarcho-Communist Combat Organization, and he continued to emphasize the importance of autonomy, horizontality, and direct action to the anarchist struggle.

The sincerity of his effort, in any case, is beyond question.

My dear friends, comrades and relatives, I apologize to all those I hurt with my leaving. I appreciate your warmth very much. However, I firmly believe that the struggle for justice, against oppression and injustice is one of the most worthy meanings that humans can fill their life with. And this struggle requires sacrifices, up to the complete self-sacrifice.

The best memory for me is if you continue actively struggle, overcoming personal ambitions and unnecessary harmful strife. If you continue to fight actively to achieve a free society based on equality and solidarity. For you and for me and for all our comrades. Risk, deprivation and sacrifice on this path are our constant companions. But be sure – they are not in vain.

-Dmitri Petrov's final statement

In an interview published in December 2017, Dmitry said "In general, almost everything that is created by human hands is the fruit of the labor of countless people." In that spirit, we do not seek to hold Dmitry up as an exemplary figure. Rather, his life affords us a glimpse into the lives of many Russian anarchists, illuminating their courage and the challenges they have faced.

Above all, Dmitry's life is a testament to how much is possible even in the most difficult conditions. Under a brutal dictatorship, faced with mounting adversity, he repeatedly found ways to continue organizing and fighting for the future he desired.

None of this is intended to glorify death in battle. As the 21st century progresses, life is becoming increasingly cheap—witness how the Wagner Group has intentionally used prisoners as cannon fodder. Anarchists should be in no special hurry to risk our lives—soon enough, there will be chances aplenty to die in the service of a variety of causes, or for no cause whatsoever. Rather than seeking to prove our commitment by our deaths, let's express our passion for freedom in the way we live every moment of our lives.

Yet as authoritarianism rises around the world and war spreads from Syria to Ukraine, from Ukraine to Sudan, we too may have to answer the questions that Dmitry confronted when Russia

invaded the country to which he had fled. If we are to be prepared for that situation—especially if we want to propose other answers to those questions—we need to study what has taken place in Russia. It may be that there is still time for things to turn out differently in other parts of the world, if we act boldly enough—but time is growing tight.

When an anarchist dies, it is up to those of us who survive to put that comrade's experiences at the disposal of future generations. We can't know for sure which perspectives those who come after us will need most.

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