

Russian anti-war activists continue feminist tradition of opposing violence

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Abstract: *Since the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, several anti-war movements have been organised in Russia or by Russian emigrants abroad. One of them is Feminist Anti-War Resistance—a horizontal feminist organisation creating online and offline protest actions against the war in Ukraine. The article tells the story of the activists and explains why feminist ideas are so important in opposing the war.*

Keywords: *Ukraine, Russia, Feminist Anti-War Movement, Feminism, Gender*

1. Creation and structure of Feminist Anti-War Resistance

On February 24 2022, Russian president Vladimir Putin announced a “special operation” —war against the sovereign neighbouring state of Ukraine. Days later, the first and one of the biggest pacifist movements in Russia was created — Feminist Anti-War Resistance (Fem Anti-War Resistance or FAR for short). Members stated in its manifesto: “[A]s Russian citizens and feminists, we condemn this war. Feminism as a political force cannot be on the side of a war of aggression and military occupation—. The feminist movement in Russia struggles for vulnerable groups and the development of a just society with equal opportunities and prospects, in which there can be no place for violence and military conflicts” (FAR Instagram 2022).

Now after more than five months of war, FAR has become known as the instigator of major anti-war demonstrations in Russia and other countries. Its manifesto has been translated into 14 languages including Ukrainian, French, Spanish, Udmurt and Tatar, and it has 33,000 followers on Telegram

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and 15,000 on Instagram. Ella Rosman, one of the founders of FAR, says in an interview (The Village 2022): “[W]e organised the fastest anti-war resistance in Russia. When the invasion of Ukraine began, we contacted the feminist activists we knew and decided to start the movement: we discussed strategy, actions and goals.”

There are other anti-war activists operating in Russia, such as Vesna, Free Buryatia Foundation, Anti-War Sick Leave, Students Against War, Safe Repost, 8th Anti-War Group, but FAR was one of the first and one of the most organised.

Rosman, one of FAR’s 10 co-ordinators, says that number has stayed more or less the same since the start though different individuals take on various roles. Tasks are distributed among members; some write for social media or create performance protests, others organise partnerships with international feminist groups and organisations.

In an interview for independent media website Meduza (Filippova 2022), another FAR member Daria Serenko explained its decentralised horizontal structure; each city has an autonomous branch: “[T]o set up a FAR cell, it is enough just to call yourself FAR and share our ideological views. You send a message to the bot stating you support our manifesto and want to speak for us. Furthermore, each new cell can act independently, we are not an organisation in the usual sense, since this is not safe. We do not want there to be a ‘head’ and a ‘body’: if the ‘head’ is cut off, then the ‘body’ will also perish. We’ve learned about some cells just by chance, for example, from the reports of international journalists - we see our symbols in their photos.”

FAR undertakes several different types of activity: media and protest demonstrations; legal support for those prosecuted for their anti-war position; aid for Ukrainian refugees and migrants and political prisoners in Russia; and evacuation of activists from Russia. Moreover, 45 psychologists work helping anti-war activists who have experienced violence, burnout or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (FAR Instagram 2022). As activists say in their Telegram channel, FAR has helped hundreds of Ukrainians and others, many of them women, who have suffered because of the war.

FAR now has cells in more than 50 Russian cities and some abroad—in Armenia, Georgia, Germany, Korea and other countries. The organisation also has departments in more than 30 countries and has hosted international events and performances. Activists write (Filippova 2022): “[W]hile Russia isolates itself from reasonable international politics, we participate in the

network of international solidarity with Ukraine, we report on activists within the Russian Federation, we look for resources to support activists in Russia. We aim to publicise the anti-war movement and to bring the tragedy of Ukraine to the attention of citizens and the authorities.”

FAR reported from the Human Rights House Foundation Conference in Geneva on June 23, 2022, by holding a parallel conference entitled “The situation of human rights in the Russian Federation: building links with civil society as human rights violations intensify” (FAR Instagram 2022). FAR coordinator Lilia Vezhevatoва spoke about the scale of the anti-war movement in Russia and the support the movement feels the international community can provide to end the war as soon as possible. More than 60 participants attended, including official representatives from Poland, Lithuania and diplomats from other European countries.

2. War as a feminist issue

Feminist activists have a long tradition of opposition to war, violence and totalitarian regimes. During World War One, the feminist anti-war movement was relatively strong in Europe and the United States. In August 1914, in New York, 15,000 women took part in a peaceful demonstration, refusing offers of cooperation with male pacifists. In 1915, in The Hague, two European feminist pacifists, Rosika Schwimmer and Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence, in alliance with the Women’s Party for Peace, organised an international women’s peace conference. Despite various obstacles from most governments, delegates came from a number of countries. This conference was the first international meeting aimed at the struggle for peace and the development of principles for a peace agreement between warring nations (9oemarta 2022).

One of the most famous examples of female participation in peacekeeping was at the Greenham Common nuclear missile site in the UK, where in 1981 women set up a peaceful camp to demonstrate against the use of nuclear weapons. The protestors kept a permanent presence for several years, regularly blocking the road to the base in an attempt to prevent the entry and exit of convoys carrying missiles.

In 2020, Belarusian women became leaders and symbols of protest against the Lukashenko regime (Berman et al. 2021). Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, who at first simply wanted to stand in for her arrested husband, accidentally became the only presidential candidate from the opposition. Her triumvirate with Maria Kolesnikova and Veronika Tsepkala became a symbol of the demand for a renewal of democracy after 26 years

of Lukashenko's rule. Meanwhile on the streets, women dressed in white carried flowers to demonstrate their peaceful nature as they protested against police violence.

Historically, feminists and anti-military activists have approached war as a feminist issue, tightly linked to traditional male and female gender roles. Goldstein (2001) explains that gender roles outside war are very different in various societies with contrasting approaches to household labour, maternity and childcare. But cultures develop gender roles that equate "masculinity" with toughness under fire and only one percent of combatants globally down through history have been female (Goldstein 2001). Women therefore bear the brunt of all non-fighting duties during war, including childcare and provision of medical aid and food.

Feminist theorists expanded on this argument, contending that the same gender stereotypes and toxic masculinity which drive men to wage war and carry out acts of aggression against other nations fuel both state brutality against citizens and also intimate partner violence.

Russia in particular has a history of cult-like support for the military and admiration of leaders who project a ruthless hyper-masculine image, of which Vladimir Putin is now seen as the epitome. Russian culture is full of toxic masculinity and consequently normalises violence. In an interview with Russian media organisation Holod, psychologist Oleksandra Kvitko, who works with Ukrainian women impacted by sexual violence, called the accused Russian soldiers "the same age as Putin's rule" and linked their brutality to the fact that they see Ukrainians as "second-class citizens" (Nordic 2022).

The country also has a huge domestic violence problem and little legal or practical protection for women who have fled abusive relationships though it is far from alone as violence against women and girls is a global issue. UK feminist scholar Liz Kelly coined the term, "continuum of sexual violence", in the 1980s to describe a broad range of unwanted sexual acts within what could be considered to be "consensual" relationships. She interviewed 60 women of all ages who had been subjected to verbal, physical or sexual abuse from men. Significantly, not all the acts would be viewed as criminal offences in modern legislation and some of the women only realised that what they had been subjected to was a form of abuse some time later. Kelly defines sexual violence as including: "[A]ny physical, visual, verbal or sexual act that is experienced by the woman or girl, at the time or later, as a threat, invasion or assault, that has the effect of hurting her or degrading her and/or takes away her ability to control" (Kelly 1987: 56).

Kelly argues that societal tolerance of gendered stereotypes and lower level gendered aggression increases the normalisation of gendered abuse and violence in general. During times of war, the level of violence increases.

FAR coordinator Lölja Nordic endorses this position: “[T]he war in Ukraine and the war crimes that are happening there now show that everything feminists said turned out to be true, even though people ignored it for years. First, domestic abuse is decriminalised, the state signalling that you can beat your wife and get off with just a fine, then the state justifies police violence: not a single policeman is punished for torturing and beating his fellow citizens. And then we see that the military is torturing and brutally killing Ukrainians in Bucha. These are links in the same chain—the normalisation of violence, which occurs in stages” (Nordic 2022).

In the past 10 years, Russia’s feminist movement and ideology has grown and gained strength. There is more and more female representation in Russian politics and business. By the beginning of the war, there were at least 45 grassroots feminist groups with organisational and networking experience, based in Russian cities. Many of them have joined the anti-war movement. Grassroots feminist activists already had connections throughout the regions which is why it was easier to create a movement in such a short period of time.

3. Breaking the information blockade

From the beginning, FAR has had two main goals for its anti-war activities: development of the protest movement and dissemination of information about the war online and offline in various ways. Due to propaganda, most Russian citizens do not have access to independent sources of information so one of the movement’s key tasks is to communicate the truth about the war to as many people as possible. FAR founder member Ella Rosman says: “[P]eople don’t know about the monstrous things that are happening in Ukraine. Therefore, the first step in involving people in the protest is to convey the meaning of these events, or rather, their meaninglessness and cruelty.”

Daria Serenko adds that the goal is to break through the information blockade: “[O]n their side [the state]—a lot of money and a repressive apparatus, on our side—activists, enthusiasm and a desire for grassroots work. We are most focused on campaigning. We say: become agitators against the war” (The Village 2022).

FAR activities have gained the attention of an audience that has never been interested in politics or war. But the biggest obstacle and danger is current Russian legislation which allows the state to imprison anyone who even discusses the war in Ukraine. Since the start of the war, Russia has passed a number of laws which amount to de facto war censorship. In what conditions does FAR operate?

Researchers say that, after a “honeymoon period” from 2008 to 2012 under the presidency of the relatively more liberal Dmitry Medvedev, Russian media freedom drastically decreased. “[T]he promotion of a state ideology built on a mixture of ultra-conservatism and anti-Westernism within the framework of the concept of a besieged fortress provokes an exaggerated reaction to any critical or simply alternative opinion and leads to the cleansing of the internet space from any points that do not fit into this concept vision and expression” (Net Freedoms 2021).

Currently, three main articles in the Russian Criminal Court are used to silence anti-war voices: these articles criminalise the dissemination of what the state terms “fake news” about the Russian army (Article 207.3); discrediting military forces (Article 280.3) and calls for sanctions against Russia (Article 280.4). All three were introduced after the start of the war and are now frequently employed to target opponents of the war.

On March 4, 2022, two weeks after the war began, President Putin signed a clutch of laws that basically introduced censorship by making it illegal to “knowingly spread false information about the activities of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation” or “discredit the activities of Russian troops”. Punishments for violation of these laws range from fines of up to five million rubles or up to 10 years in prison, which can be increased to 15 years if the spread of “fake information” is judged to have had serious consequences.

What about the discrediting of the Russian army? First offences are subject to a fine of 50,000-100,000 rubles for ordinary citizens, 200,000-300,00 rubles for officials (Code of Administrative Offences, Article 20.4.4). Second offences are punishable by up to five years of imprisonment.

Russian officials see as discreditation any mention of world “war” itself. St. Petersburg artist and musician Alexandra Skochilenko—Sasha—has become one of the symbols of protest against the Russian invasion of Ukraine. After replacing price tags in St. Petersburg supermarkets with anti-war slogans, she was arrested and sent to a pre-trial detention centre. This led to Sasha becoming one of two Russians subject to a criminal rather

than an administrative case for this offence. Moreover, the authorities' allegation that she was motivated by "political hostility" means she now faces up to 10 years in prison (RFE/RL 2022).

On July 8, 2022, Moscow deputy Andrey Gorinov was sentenced to seven years in prison for calling the situation in Ukraine "war" instead of a "special military operation" during an open meeting of council deputies in his district (Kirby 2022). He became the first person to be imprisoned under Criminal Code Article 207.3, while 225 people were subject to criminal prosecution because of their anti-war positions by the end of August (OVD-Info project 2022b).

According to human rights defenders' project Net Freedoms, a total of 73 criminal cases about war censorship on "fake news" (Article 207.3) have been initiated since the war started: 12 of the accused identified themselves as journalists while seven said that they were activists and politicians (OVD-Info project 2022a). Under Article 20.3.3 of the Code of Administrative Offences (discrediting the army), during six months of war, 3,807 administrative cases have been initiated (OVD-Info project 2022b).

4. Partisan war information

While spreading information about the war is extremely dangerous for anti-war activists, FAR members are finding innovative ways to target new audiences.

FAR is focusing on different sections of the population, not just young people or those in big cities: for instance, they have tried to reach out to others through "Odnoklassniki" (Classmates), a social media platform traditionally used by the older generation in Russia, who mostly get information from heavily propagandised state TV (Femagainstwar 2022). There are instructions on FAR's Telegram channel on how Russian-based activists can safeguard themselves by creating accounts using foreign phone numbers and pseudonyms but add more photos and pictures to make a page look more authentic.

Another form of partisan activity is the print newspaper "Female Truth" (Zhenskaya Pravda) that mimics a typical Russian regional newspaper. Again, the goal is to reach older audiences and inform them about the war in a softer way while safeguarding activists who distribute the paper. Editor Lilia Vezhevatoва notes: "[W]e periodically receive feedback from people who've sprung our newspaper on their grandmother, for example. It's really heartening that Zhenskaya Pravda is providing opportunities to start a dialogue and to give those who would normally get all their

information from official sources a chance to see an alternative point of view” (Merkuriyeva 2022).

PDF-files of the newspaper are published in open access on FAR’s social media so that anyone can print it off to distribute amongst relatives, neighbours and others. Several different issues on special topics were published on July 6, 2022; the fifth issue was devoted to the stories of people who had experienced war at different periods in history. In addition to notes and interviews, each issue contains anti-war anecdotes, stories about famous people who speak out against the war in Ukraine, and useful instructions, such as why you need a VPN (the application to open internet resources that are blocked by the government in the country) and how to install it.

On March 8, 2022, FAR spearheaded an international solidarity protest—“Women in Black”—asking all women and queer people to wear black and lay flowers at Second World War monuments while holding a minute’s silence in memory of Ukrainians killed in the current conflict. More than 120 cities around the world took part in this action, and several participants were arrested in Russia.

The “Women in Black” idea was initiated by Israeli women in 1988 when they protested against the occupation of Palestine and Israeli army war crimes and has been repeated in honour of victims of other war crimes since.

Anti-war activism is long-term. And as a FAR member admits, there is little optimism that activists can stop attacks by the Russian army right now. However, such movements can create structure and spread ideas to prevent further tragedies, while establishing themselves as a pillar of Russia’s future civil society. FAR member Tanya, whose name has been changed for her safety, states in a recent interview (Filippova 2022): “[N]aturally, the anti-war movement cannot stop the war now. But it must keep going for the long haul. Too bad it didn’t start sooner. Perhaps if the FAR had been founded in 2014 [during the events in Crimea], people’s reaction [to the war] would not be so amorphous now.”

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