

Youth in Ukraine speak on one year of the NATO-Russia war

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One year into the NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, the conditions facing working people and youth in the country are nothing short of catastrophic. In November, US General Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, put the figure of military casualties for both Ukraine and Russia at 100,000 each. For months during the war, even the officially acknowledged daily death toll was in the hundreds of soldiers for Ukraine. In a rare indication of the extent of the mass slaughter, a retired US Marine who has been fighting in the Donbass alongside the Ukrainian army told ABC News that “The life expectancy is around four hours on the front line”, describing the situation in Bakhmut as a “meat-grinder.”

But the military casualties, horrific as they are, convey only a part of the catastrophe that torments the country, which has been transformed into the central staging ground for the war between NATO and Russia. Even before the war, Ukraine was the poorest country in Europe, with its population bitterly exploited and impoverished as a result of the Stalinist restoration of capitalism and successive IMF austerity programs .

Amidst the war, this trend was dramatically accelerated. While the NATO powers have spent tens of billions of dollars on the Ukrainian army and for weapons that have helped killed tens, if not hundreds of thousands, much of the population has literally been left to starve. According to the World Hunger Map, 12.8 million out of the 30 million residents who still live in Ukraine are suffering from insufficient food consumption. (More than eight million out of a pre-war population of just about 39 million have fled the country because of the war.)

The indicators for hunger and malnutrition in the Russian-controlled territories in the East are particularly high. In the Donetsk region, over half of the population (54 percent or 2 million people) suffer from insufficient food consumption. Overall, across the country, 8.2 percent of children suffer from acute malnutrition and 22.9 percent of children under the age of five have insufficient food consumption. These are by far the worst indicators in Europe.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has spoken with a number of youth in different parts of Ukraine about their experiences since the beginning of the war. To protect their safety, all responses

were anonymized.

In response to the question of how he had experienced the first year of the war, a teenager from Dnipropetrovsk, which has been right at the front lines for much of the conflict, said, “During the first year, I’ve constantly experienced the same terrible explosions, there are fewer now, but still. The war came as a surprise to me and my friends, it was all very sudden.”

A youth in his early twenties in southern Ukraine, parts of which have also seen heavy battles, recalled,

When I watched the crackdown on protests in Kazakhstan [in early 2022] with the help of Russian soldiers and Russian arms, I had no doubt that there would be a war. What made me think so at the time was not that there are those in Russia who are still driven by national-chauvinist interests, because this war cannot be reduced to that, but because what is posed is the question of Russia’s very survival. I remember very well the heated atmosphere during the military exercises close to the Ukrainian border.

Of course there was talk at the time that Russia was preparing for an attack, calling for support for Zelensky, because those who would not support him would be supporting Putin. I would say that there were two general elements to the moods at the time:

On the one hand, many felt that it was only a matter of time until the war would start, but on the other, they felt that it would not be now. Many people at that time lived in tension and in fear, but many also had faith that Putin would not attack. I remember when the war started, I was speaking to a librarian who was telling me how she thought that Putin was so good, but now he just attacked. She didn’t understand how that was possible.

When two Ukrainian APCs crossed the Russian border, and when Putin recognized the DNR [People’s Republic of Donetsk] and LNR [People’s Republic of Lugansk], and that Russian Federation troops were being brought into the territory in order to keep them there, and that the entire area of Donetsk and Lugansk needed to be part of the DNR and LNR, then I already

knew that war was inevitable.

Before the war, and when the war first started, we thought that Putin would reach Kiev. And I expected that they would be in our city. I remember very well the first sirens, I remember very well how the first bomb shelters were opened. I remember at the very end of February, not far from my town, there were two explosions. I also remember cruise missiles flying past us. I remember that in the second half of December, right above us, at night, the air defense shot down a missile. There was a loud explosion and a blaze of fire.

Youth in the southern and western parts of Ukraine, which have been less impacted by direct fighting but are in the grips of a severe economic and social breakdown, above all spoke on the state of extreme social and political tensions in the country. Amidst an almost complete collapse of the economy because of the war, a third of the working age population are now unemployed.

A 26-year old from Transcarpathia, a region in western Ukraine that borders Romania, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia, said, “The situation with work is terrible, the very fact that there is no prospect of finding any kind of part-time work even for simple survival, puts people’s social interaction in a deadlock. Not infrequently we have seen people being marginalized and falling to the bottom of the social ladder because of the lack of work. The situation is better for those who went abroad to earn money before the war and are still there, it gives them an opportunity to help their relatives who still live in Ukraine.”

In Odessa, a youth commented on the extremely high levels of food insecurity and unemployment, stressing that the “liberalization of prices” which are no longer regulated at all by the state, has led to a situation where “you can no longer even go to ATB (a grocery store chain) to buy the cheapest cheese, because they are all expensive. Everything has become more expensive. And as for unemployment — it’s generally rampant; only the service sector offers some jobs, but that’s not work, it is slavery.”

In another region of southern Ukraine, where about a third of the population suffer from insufficient food consumption, a youth said, “I have everything in terms of food in my town. Also, because our region is near the front line, the elderly and disabled people have been receiving aid packages from the Red Cross and from the city authorities. In the beginning, disabled people of the 1st and 2nd group were given rations once a month, then they started receiving them twice a month.”

In the nearby city of Nikolaev, however, the situation was much more difficult. Here, “young people my age dig in the trash [to get food], stores are closed, and everything has become very expensive.”

Amidst this tremendous social crisis and the relentless NATO

escalation of the war, the state promotion of outright fascist forces like the Azov Battalion and Nazi collaborators like Stepan Bandera has begun to permeate every aspect of political and cultural life in the country.

A teenager in Dnipropetrovsk said, “It is terrible, especially Azov, they wear swastikas, how can they be heroes? Yes, there are volunteers [in these battalions], but still, Bandera is a real Nazi, how is he supposed to be a hero?” A youth from Odessa noted that “this is how an information vacuum is created around the people. In this way, all these ideas are instilled as a form of patriotism, with staggering virulence, and even the slightest dissent is already portrayed like ‘betrayal’.”

A teenager from the same city noted, “the policy of the state [to promote fascism] can be noticed for example in musical compositions promoted in media resources, in concert performances and in the rest of radio space, however the policy of the Ukrainian government has acquired especially blatant form concerning nationalism during wartime and it affects also other information sources, including ideological posters for example in public places.”

Another one added, “The propaganda of nationalism comes from every cultural source in the mainstream media. A separate segment of propaganda is aimed exclusively at the younger generation, who are being targeted through various social networks and entertainment mediums. A big revision of the events of the 20th century is taking place: street names are changing, monuments of those who, according to the ruling class did not fight for ‘independence,’ are being demolished.”

A youth in Transcarpathia concluded, “For a year the war has shown that there are no crimes that cannot be committed by those who support this war. Too high a price is paid by both sides of this war, I cannot imagine a peaceful resolution of the conflict in the near future. Rather, this war of attrition will likely eventually place one side in a situation of a lack of resources, but such a scenario probably will not come soon.”

A supporter of the International Committee in southern Ukraine stressed that the working class in Ukraine “must learn to understand its own interests, and the interests of those who send workers to this war. The Ukrainian proletariat must fight. For that, it must have that vanguard party which can move it to victory.”



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