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After five years of war, Donbass anti-fascists ‘do not intend to retreat’

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After the 2014 U.S.-backed coup in Ukraine, longtime Russian communist activist Alexey Markov organized aid for grassroots militias conducting armed resistance in the Donbass mining region, which declared independence and formed the Donetsk and Lugansk People’s Republics (DPR and LPR).

With his comrade Petr Biryukov (military codename Arkadich), he soon founded the Volunteer Communist Detachment and joined the anti-fascist struggle. Today Markov, under the codename Dobri, commands the Ghost Battalion, successor to the legendary [Ghost Brigade](#) founded by Commander Alexey Mozgovoy.

Struggle-La Lucha asked Markov for an update on the situation at the front line five years after the U.S.-Ukraine war on Donbass began, at a cost of more than 10,000 lives so far. This interview was conducted before the April 30 runoff that saw [Vladimir Zelensky selected](#) to replace Petro Poroshenko as president of Ukraine.

Struggle-La Lucha: It's been five years since the Maidan coup in Ukraine, the beginning of the war against Donbass and the massacre in Odessa. You started out by bringing aid to the people's militias in Donbass. How did you get from there to your current situation, as commander of the Ghost Battalion?

Alexey Markov: In May 2014, after the killing of peaceful people in Odessa and shootings in Mariupol, my friend from Stakhanov [in the Lugansk People's Republic] addressed me with a request to assist Pavel Dremov's detachment. To my surprise, a lot of people responded to my request for help, and Dremov's group of 45 people was fully equipped with uniforms, body armor, kevlar helmets and walkie-talkies.

After the success of this action, acquaintances told me: "You are good at motivating people. You must continue this work." This is how the [Coordination Center for Assistance to Novorossiia](#) (CCPN), which still provides assistance to the units of the People's Militia of the LPR and DPR, was born. All the founders of the CCPN were united by leftist or communist convictions.

During the summer battles of 2014, we expected that one of the communist organizations of the Russian Federation or Novorossia would create its own communist unit, which we could join. Unfortunately, the communists in Novorossia were disunited both militarily and organizationally, so we decided to create our own squad to go to defend the Donbass from the neo-Nazis.

At the beginning of September 2014, I and Arkadich drove around the units we provided with assistance in order to more accurately determine their needs and select the location of the future Volunteer Communist Detachment (DKO). We spent three days at the headquarters of the Ghost Brigade in Alchevsk. During repeated conversations with Alexey Mozgovoy, we very much liked his position regarding the future of Donbass, which was to become socialist and free from oligarchs. I promised him that we would soon return with the squad.

Early on the morning of November 6, 2014, the first DKO team from Moscow arrived in Alchevsk and joined the Ghost Brigade as a separate unit, number 404. Two weeks later, having acquired the first weapons and some training, the detachment conducted its first combat operation in the village of Komissarovka, five kilometers from Debaltsevo. The personnel of the detachment led by Arkadich actively participated in the operation to free Debaltsevo in the winter of 2015, as a result of which, by order of Mozgovoy, Arkadich was appointed his deputy for combat training, and I as deputy for the rear.

After the [tragic death of Mozgovoy](#) [on May 23, 2015], his place was taken by the chief of staff of the brigade, Yuri Shevchenko. In the winter of 2016, the Ghost Brigade was reorganized into the 14th Separate Battalion of the People's Militia of the LPR under the command of Arkadich. In October 2016, Arkadich was promoted and became deputy commander of the 4th Brigade, and I was appointed to his position as commander of the Ghost Battalion, where I am today.

SLL: What was unique about the militia organized by Alexey Mozgovoy that drew you and other communists from around the world?

AM: Alexey Mozgovoy openly declared that the war in the Donbass should not be interethnic, but a class war. He openly spoke for the socialist future of Donbass, built on democratic principles, and called on Ukrainians to unite to oppose the oligarchs who had seized power. This attracted many leftist people to the ranks of his brigade, although very different people served in the brigade, from anarchists and communists to nationalists and monarchists.

Mozgovoy also conducted active work on the internet, arranged teleconferences with the Ukrainian side, and was always open to the press, which made him a very popular figure in the Donbass. Many viewed him as the most influential national leader and a possible future head of the republic.

Support from the left and anti-fascist forces has always been very important for the Ghosts. A lot of journalists and volunteers visited the brigade. This allowed us not only to attract new fighters, but also to convey information about what was happening in the Donbass to residents of other countries. Also, material assistance turned out to be very important and made it possible to somewhat fix the catastrophic shortage of equipment and weapons in the young army of Novorossiia.

SLL: The Minsk peace negotiations have been stalled for a long time. There have been big buildups of armaments by Ukraine in the war zone, but so far no new military offensive. How do you view the military situation of the republics today? What is the situation of the Ghosts stationed at the front line?

AM: In fact, the military situation in the republics has greatly deteriorated. Over the past year and a half, Ukraine has seriously re-equipped its army, filling it with modern types of weapons, and also conducted mass training of soldiers with the help of Western instructors. Now, the Ukrainian armed forces have not only quantitative, but also qualitative superiority over the army of the people's republics. Instead of a major offensive, which could lead to a response from Russia, they chose a strategy of constant pressure along the entire front line, which leads to small but permanent losses on our part.

The frontline sector defended by the Ghost Battalion is considered to be the most difficult in the LPR. Daily battles with the use of artillery, mortars and armored vehicles are constant there. Despite the difficult conditions and constant shelling, the fighters of the battalion steadfastly hold their positions and do not intend to retreat.

SLL: Do you believe Ukraine will be allowed to join NATO?

AM: I don't think that Ukraine will be able to join NATO any time soon. The main reason is that NATO does not accept countries with territorial claims, and Ukraine

claims not only Crimea, but also part of the border regions of Russia. Also, Ukraine's entry into NATO would entail a serious crisis in relations with the Russian Federation, which the European members are unlikely to be ready for. It's more likely that NATO will confine itself to comprehensive military and organizational support of Ukraine.

SLL: How do you assess the upcoming presidential election in Ukraine?

AM: For us, the elections in Ukraine will not bring any changes. The main presidential candidates have common Russophobic and anti-communist views, and intend to continue the course of confrontation with Russia. Most likely, before the elections, Poroshenko's regime will try to unite its supporters under the banner of "war with Russia," so the situation at the front will be complicated, and after the election, the course towards a military solution to the conflict in Donbass will continue.

SLL: What similarities or differences do you see between what happened in Ukraine five years ago and the current situation in Venezuela and other Latin American countries targeted by the U.S.?

AM: The scenarios in all these countries are very similar: with political and financial support from the U.S. and Western Europe, local oligarchs organize mass unrest and seizure of government buildings, provoking the legitimate authorities into limited use of police forces, after which they loudly declare "thousands of peaceful protesters were killed" and call for overthrowing the government. The henchmen of the oligarchs are immediately recognized by the U.S. and Western Europe as the sole legitimate authorities.

I hope Maduro proves to be a more decisive leader than [deposed Ukrainian President Viktor] Yanukovich, and will not give his country away to the mercenaries of international capital.

SLL: How do you view the relationship between what happened in Ukraine and the spread of neo-fascist movements in the West?

AM: The world is entering a phase of another economic crisis, and for big capital it is very natural to try and channel the discontent of the masses by setting some nations against others. Uninformed people will sooner see the cause of their impoverishment in “illegal immigrants” or the machinations of treacherous neighbors, than realize that their poverty is a necessary condition for the further enrichment of a handful of super-rich.

This was already the case at the beginning of the 20th century, when global capital relied on the Italian and German fascists in their struggle against the world labor movement. So the current oligarchs set Ukrainians against Russians, Europeans against Asians, and white residents of the U.S. against African Americans in order to distract them from their real enemies.

SLL: What are the prospects for anti-fascist revival in Ukraine and the former Soviet countries?

AM: It’s difficult to talk about the prospects for the revival of the anti-fascist movement in the post-Soviet republics while there are openly comprador bourgeois regimes in power that hate the Soviet past. For them, the fascists and Nazi collaborators are far closer socially than the Soviet heroes of the war against Nazism.

But in general, among the masses, the memory of the heroism of the anti-fascist fighters and hostility to Hitler’s ideology remains at a very high level. We will do everything possible so that victory will be on our side this time too!

SLL: How can working people in the U.S. and the West aid the struggle of the people’s militias in Donbass?

AM: In the first place, of course, there needs to be constant pressure on the governments of their countries to cancel or limit support for the fascist regime in Ukraine. Without constant military and financial assistance from the West, the neo-Nazis in Kiev will not last long.

Second is the widest possible dissemination of information about what is happening in the Donbass among ordinary residents of the United States and Western Europe. This applies to both traditional media and the internet.

Last but not least is providing material and technical assistance to units of the People's Militia of the LPR and the DPR, which are in a very difficult position due to lack of supplies.

