



Ukrainian dissident resists NATO's proxy war

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Max Blumenthal (MB): Welcome to The Grayzone, I'm Max Blumenthal. As Ukraine's counteroffensive fails, videos are emerging across social media showing Ukrainian military police essentially kidnapping military aged men, throwing them into vans and shipping them to the front, to a military, which, according to conservative estimates, has lost close to 150,000 men either killed or injured. And according to The Wall Street Journal, some 50,000 Ukrainians have lost at least one limb in combat. These staggering numbers add to the scandal that was exposed when Volodymyr Zelensky fired key officials who were accepting \$10,000 bribes from Ukrainian men who wanted to pay their way out of military service. Meanwhile, hundreds of thousands of others have left the country. Are Ukrainians voting with their feet in opposition to this war? Is there an anti-war movement in Ukraine? And what does it mean to oppose NATO's proxy war in Ukraine? What does it mean for a Ukrainian to oppose U.S. military aid? To understand these questions and issues better I spoke to a well-known Ukrainian journalist named Ruslan Kotsaba, who has had to flee his country and has been placed on trial and put in solitary confinement for opposing the war. He now lives in New York City in exile and is the head of the Ukrainian Pacifist League.

Okay. Ruslan Kotsaba, what do you make of the reports from Western media about tens of thousands of Ukrainian men seeking to avoid conscription, Ukrainian officials being bribed to keep men out of the army and the videos of military police essentially kidnapping men on the streets, throwing them into vans and taking them in to the front lines. How does this relate to your own experience as a Ukrainian draft resister?

Ruslan Kotsaba (RK): Yeah. I'll be speaking from two sides, as an ordinary, peaceful Ukrainian and as the head of the Ukrainian pacifist movement. As a Ukrainian, I am very concerned that there are no such reports in the Western media. Even if there are, they are present only in the oppositional press, the so-called alternative media. But there is nothing about this breach of the Constitution in those media that are state financed or state controlled.

Nothing about citizens being caught in the streets and thrown to the front lines as cannon fodder. For some reason, nobody speaks about it either in American media or the leaders of NATO countries or in European media. And I would also like to add, being the head of the Ukrainian Pacifist Movement – I'm actually the founder of the Ukrainian Pacifist Movement – I'd like to add that being a human rights group, we can and we do assist people who, out of ideological reasons, be that religious or humanistic or moral ones don't want to kill other people. But we can't help those who die trying to cross the border illegally in an attempt to escape Ukraine, fleeing conscription; to escape conscription now one needs at least 10,000 USD. It's a kind of mafia pyramid, part of the money going to the very top circles. Not everybody has this sum of money. That's why there are so many people crossing the border illegally on their own, either drowning in the river at the attempt to cross it, or getting blown up by mines or something like that. And there are hundreds of thousands or probably millions in Europe and here in the USA of those who pay money, who had money.

MB: So, Ruslan, you are in touch with many draft resisters in Ukraine, people fleeing conscription. Can you describe any of the stories you've heard from them about how they've tried to escape, what kind of obstacles they've faced? And you said that several have died – I mean, can you describe what happened there?

RK: I'll tell you two stories about conscientious objectors or as they call them in Ukraine, deserters or state traitors. They're concerned with my native town. And I come from Ivano-Frankivsk, western Ukraine. The first is about Vitaly Alekseenko. It might have been the first real case when we, the Ukrainian Pacifist Movement, helped a person. He was convicted for refusing to carry arms. He was sentenced for a year in prison. We had been helping him legally until he managed to win in the Supreme Court. And he was really in prison. Same as myself. He was acquitted immediately from the courtroom. It's a very positive example, a rarity, unfortunately. Another case concerns Andrii Vyshnevetsky, also my countrymen from Ivano-Frankivsk, who, also being guided by ideological reasons, said that he didn't want to kill anyone and didn't want to die for someone, for somebody's interests.

That the main value for him was human life, not anybody's interest. Whether it was Zelensky or the idea of nation or some ideas of state. In fact, the Ukrainian Pacifist Movement I'm the leader of supports such people. Moreover, I guarantee that the way it was in the USA during its 10th year of war in Vietnam, the same it is here, the Ukrainian Pacifist Movement will become the most mainstream, the most popular, because the majority of people want to live and don't want to kill anyone. Even more now because gas is being pumped through the gas pipes from Russia on the territory of Ukraine every day and Ukraine gets money from Russia for this transportation of gas. There are certain deals with ammonia, with wheat; the Grain Deal, exchange of war prisoners. But at the same time, people are dying every day. Both Ukrainian people and Russian people die. So there is war business and there are common people's tragedies. And we, the Ukrainian Pacifist Movement, support such people, the same

as us, say that they want both Putin and NATO to go home from Ukraine. Both NATO and Putin.

We denounce Putin's assault, but we also condemn Ukrainian authorities who provoked the war, who did nothing to stop this war diplomatically and politically in order to elevate their electoral percentage, to promote their political interests, knowing that the war had been planned and the Ukrainian Pacifist Movement help all those people. The second thing I'd like to tell you is that tens of thousands of people now agree to one or two years of probation in order not to serve in the Army. But unfortunately, even being on probation, they are taken to the frontline as cannon fodder and they are carried back from their dead burnt pieces of meat in black plastic rubbish bags.

The problem is not that Zelensky decides whether it's war or peace. I'll tell you, even now, that both Putin and NATO should leave my country, Ukraine, alone. But we should be aware of the fact that the decisions are being taken in several offices. These are the Oval Office in Washington, the office in Moscow, also it might be offices in Berlin and Beijing, that's it. If they haven't made their decisions yet, it means that they're still doing business. They are not ready yet. And we hope only for God, myself, being a Christian pacifist, that God will make them come to their senses, see reason so that they might become cleverer and stop doing their business, both political and economic, on ordinary people's blood, grief and tragedy.

I was always stating, and I'm doing this now that the war is not between Ukraine and Russia. There is war between Russia and NATO on the territory of Ukraine at the cost of Ukrainian lives and on NATO's expense; with NATO's weapons and for NATO's interests, because NATO wants to weaken Russia. That's it. It's logical.

But when Europe and what I find most unpleasant, the USA don't see this deal as well, you see this agreement. And when we see here that someone is simply counting their money, some are more worried about Lockheed, some would like to write off obsolete weapons, rockets, cluster munitions, they want to give it all to Ukraine and they're going to count their money at the same time, money, money only business. And that's why my hope is with the – like you, Max, because you represent an alternative media. The one people trust. So that you might help us, the Ukrainian Pacifist Movement to raise the topic of saving Ukrainians lives; first of all.

Both Ukrainian and Russians, for you know, how many Russian refugees have come to the USA through Mexico. There are also conscientious objectors, deserters. It's good from one side that the Russians refuse to carry arms, that they're going to stay alive and are not killing anyone. But from another side, we understand that this is a problem for the American budget. These are unexpected expenses, and a common American citizen has his own pockets. That is a serious problem. Inflation in the USA is much bigger now than it was before the war, a year and a half back. That's why finishing this idea, I would like to say that we Ukrainians don't

want to die for foreign interests. It's not our war. There is no such thing as just war. There are no good wars. The greatest value is human life, regardless of religion, race, colour of one's skin, gender, etc.. God gave life to all of us to live and let other people live, not to die for some interests of the nation or some countries interests. The idea that unites all the people on our planet and what separates us from irresponsible politicians. Thank you.

MB: Well, Ruslan, thank you for your kind words about our work to expose the real situation in Ukraine. We have been covering this since 2014, since the US backed Maidan coup. And since that time there has been a civil war brought on by this nationalist oligarchic government that the US imposed on Ukraine. And ever since then, you have been persecuted by that government. You've been put on trial. You have been brutally attacked in the street, I think. And so I want you to talk about your own story now of resisting the draft and the drive to this catastrophic war that you just described. Tell us what happened. What's happened to you since 2014?

RK: I can say that in 2014, I was the only Ukrainian journalist working for the big media in the capital who got accreditations from both sides of the frontline. Accordingly, I made objective stories as objective journalism standards required. I presented both sides' points of view as there is a conflict. Unfortunately, only propaganda was required in Ukraine at the time. That is one sided journalism that represents only one side's truth. And I got into trouble with the security service of Ukraine. The most frequent accusation was that of treason and of being people's enemy. And so I spent 524 days in solitary confinement in Ivano-Frankivsk. And later, due to the intervention of such human rights groups as Amnesty International, I was recognised as the only prisoner of conscience. Amnesty International, the European Union, the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly all started to make a fuss concerning my illegal detainment in prison. And afterwards I was completely acquitted. After I had left my 524 days imprisonment, I became more influential and together with my supporters we organised the Pacifist Movement. I became a constant pacifist after all those terrible things I had seen in Donbas. When Ukrainians kill Ukrainians, people with Ukrainian passports killed people with Ukrainian passports. And it was even prohibited for me to say that it was a civil war. Although I know perfectly well that when Ukrainians kill Ukrainians, it's a civil war. In addition, they were only being killed because they wanted their issues to be taken into account; their language, historical, cultural and mental issues.

RK: That's why being the head of the Ukrainian Pacifist Movement, I faced further problems with Ukrainian authorities, Ukrainian special services. And the secret services organised attacks on me with the hands of neo-Nazis who they control. They wanted either to cripple or to kill me, but God helped me. Look, I stayed alive. And mostly I'm speaking of the organisation called Right Sector. The core of this is from Ivano-Frankivsk, my native town. I know personally the majority of their active members. That's why it was very important for me that the secret services meant to accomplish all the dirty work with the hands of those neo-Nazis. The majority of those neo-Nazis are not fighting at war now. They are so-called

armchair warriors, those who ignite animosity amongst people in social media. That's why I know that the Ukrainian pacifist movement that I lead can't do a thing without international support. And I'm very pleased to speak to objective journalists as Max Blumenthal, but truthfully, I feel very sorry to see the much respected media such as CNN, for example, or New York Times or BBC broadcast such blunt propaganda instead of following the rules of objective journalism. They once taught me themselves that objective journalism means highlighting both sides of the conflict. This is being objective, but they broadcast pure propaganda, and I'm very concerned about it because the USA have been teaching us standards of democracy for 32 years of Ukrainian independence and nowadays the USA doesn't see any breach of freedom of conscience, freedom of speech, religious freedom, freedom of moving in one's country. American authorities don't see this, and I'm very concerned about it. It won't lead to any good. God may punish America the same way he's punishing Ukraine at the moment. This is my opinion.

MB: Ruslan, can you describe how you were personally attacked and, you know the kind of physical effects this had on you? Just give us the details of what happened.

RK: So first of all, I spent 524 days under an assumed accusation in custody, in solitary confinement. That's my greatest loss. I lost my family. I lost my health, my authority, my profession of journalism. Second, there were regular attacks on me. The records of most of those attacks are on YouTube as they're filmed because neo-Nazis make reports, they film their attacks with their phones intentionally and show them through YouTube and social media. And so that groups fighting for truth, for peace should fear them. It is being done to create the atmosphere of fear and to fear disagreement. The authorities like it. The last case, when I partially lost my vision, my right eye has only 30% of vision now. It happened when they poured concentrated chemicals on me, meeting me at the railway station in Ivano-Frankivsk on my way back there from Kiev. And at the same time they were shouting Nazi slogans. It's tragic because they were left unpublished. And the man who organised this attack, Petro Urgan, is fighting now. But even now on his Facebook page, I can send you this, he is threatening to kill me. You see, neo-Nazi's motivation is to destroy and kill. We, being peaceful and pacifist, want to live and let others live to create, not to ruin. That is why, after all this persecution and what I saw at the frontline in Donbas, I'll be fighting for peace until the last minute of my life. And I do believe God will help me in this matter.

MB: So your wife was also attacked. Is that correct?

RK: Unfortunately, my family was under pressure. My wife had to divorce me and to change her last name. She was told that with Kotsaba as her last name, she wouldn't find work in Ivano-Frankivsk. My children were persecuted at school. They were called to be Putin's children when I was in prison. Other children heard what adults were discussing in their kitchens after watching stories about my persecution. And unfortunately, my family had to flee our native town, Ivano-Frankivsk, for several years until I was out of prison. And I

joined them afterwards in Kiev. We were together in Kiev, but in Ivano-Frankivsk, it was hell. Because the town itself is very conservative, where people are afraid of speaking their minds and have to say what the aggressive minority dictate to them.

MB: So you go to a Orthodox church in New York, which has many Ukrainians. New York City has a large Ukrainian expat community that's very nationalistic. And it's my understanding that they are trying to send you back to Ukraine to be prosecuted. Is that correct?

RK: Really, I have a problem with my compatriots here in America who are doing quite well living here. But at the same time, they're promoting the so-called party of war. They want America to continue financing the war, the USA and other NATO countries. They want the USA to give weapons. The ones leading to more human loss and economic loss, more distress. In this manner, making the war irrevocable, the so-called war to the last Ukrainian. And it surprised me to learn that the Church of Saint George in Manhattan, they're collecting signatures. One quite respectable lawyer, together with his assistant, are collecting signatures in order for me to be deported to Ukraine and imprisoned again. You see, the absurdity of the situation is that the church is supposed to be the kind of institution where all our brothers and sisters, through Christ, brothers and sisters in Christ, where we are all for peace, we're all supposed to honour the commandment: Thou shall not kill. Love your neighbour as yourself, forgive your enemies, that one should fight evil, etc. These are all matters of faith proclaimed in the New Testament, and I feel very sad about the fact because I'm a practising Christian, a churchgoing Christian, not only on paper, I really go there to confessions, etc. So it's very unpleasant for me that even priests sometimes start their sermons not with glory to God, but glory to Ukraine. We know that Ukraine's national interests are of second importance. God comes first. Everything in the hands of God. That is why I feel very uneasy about this politicisation that's going on now on the church level as well. I feel bad when my brothers in Christ of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine in Kiev are being humiliated, eliminating Orthodox Christianity in Ukraine. In fact canonical Orthodox Christianity. And it is not acceptable or even prohibited for us to discuss it here.

RK: Christians are supposed to keep together. It is a principle of any religion that has civilizational world importance. Christianity has more than a billion followers in the whole world. A billion people. And the Pope insists that this conflict should be solved diplomatically, not in military ways. All the world leaders are more and more frequently saying that this war to the last Ukrainian has got no prospects and is a blow to civilisation. And moreover, myself, being a pacifist, head of the Ukrainian Pacifist Movement, I gave an oath that war is a crime against humanity, a crime against humanity. That's why I can't act differently. I wonder why the central Ukrainian church in Manhattan, which is attended even by many of those working in the General Consulate of Ukraine in New York, why they allow themselves such politicised speeches. As this, the place where we all, our brothers and sisters in the eyes of God, where there are no parties, social movements and organisations, right or

left and the like. I'm very upset about it. And in general the day of independence of Ukraine has been celebrated recently and I participate in different groups in social media. I was ashamed to read several descriptions of my compatriots who are here, in comfortable and peaceful America, allowing themselves to be so hateful, to be so xenophobic, so misanthropic towards their own compatriots living in Donetsk and Lugansk. It's a shame. I hope it'll be solved on the church level too. But the main thing is that when war is going on in one's head and it hasn't been finished there, the war at the frontline won't stop either.

MB: Ruslan, do you think that this trend of tens and tens of thousands of Ukrainian men avoiding conscription is a referendum on the popularity of the war. And is Zelensky actually popular among Ukrainians?

RK: I'm appealing to everybody who's listening to me and watching me. Do not believe the data collected by the so-called surveys. People in Ukraine are afraid of each other. People are afraid when another group of people approach them. People in Ukraine are afraid to come clean. People in Ukraine are often zombified by one sided propaganda information. That's why Zelensky can be popular only in the absence of such democratic liberties as the freedom of conscience, freedom of speech, freedom of religion. And of course, in addition, the special services repression against dissent. That's why you shouldn't believe any surveys or percentages. Zelensky and his political fate have already been decided. He is a political corpse. He can be in power only at the expense of repression, and only as long as the war goes on so that he could be able to scare people that way and to prohibit the criticising of him hiding behind martial law. This is my point of view. More than that, only a week ago, the Secretary of the Ukrainian Pacifist Movement – he's an executive secretary – he executes everything we state. In fact, he is the head of the organisation in Ukraine.

RK: Well, the previous week SSU broke into his house. He was arrested, detained, they took his computers, phones, literature. And he is being accused of supporting Russian aggression. He is threatened with five years of imprisonment. This is Yuri Sheliashenko, he is under home arrest at the moment, which is carried out by Special Services forces. Only the repressions can keep Zelensky's dictatorship afloat. I can speak freely because I'm here in the USA having the status of a political refugee.

RK: Here I can speak the truth. If I spoke such things in Ukraine, I would be either killed by the Nazis or crippled by them on the request of the authorities. Who knows where I would be found in that case. Here I can still speak the truth. And that's why I'm speaking it. I'm speaking for those Ukrainians who can't say this because they're under pressure of Zelensky's dictatorship back there in Ukraine.

MB: So, Ruslan, I understand you were involved as director of a Stepan Bandera Museum in western Ukraine. And you have very strong opinions about the impact of Bandera and Banderism on Ukrainian society and how he's understood in the West. This is one of the

godfathers of Ukrainian nationalism, the founder of the OUNB, the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists that collaborated with the Nazi German occupiers of Ukraine, including the Waffen SS, and was involved in several massacres and pogroms of ethnic Poles and Jews. Tell us your thoughts on how Bandera is understood in modern day Ukraine and here in Washington.

RK: First, I would like to declare that after this counter-offensive, the so-called counter-offensive, the counter retreat is planned to happen when everybody and first of all, politicians here in Washington who continue financing and giving weapons for the war to go on, understand that it's impossible to fight the country that is three times bigger in population, that possesses mobilisation reserves five times larger, and that has a much bigger territory. It's impossible. And that's why I think the same way as I've stated before in this interview in those offices, the Oval Office in Washington, the office in the Red Square in the Kremlin, the office in Berlin, the office in Beijing and in London, of course, they'll have to realise that the military way is not the solution. That's why it's necessary to negotiate. Unfortunately, my Zelensky and I say so because he is my president, I voted for him, is not the subject. He won't be present in those negotiations or he'll be mere scenery there. Because I repeat, the war is going on between NATO and Russia, but on the territory of Ukraine at the expense of the lives of Ukrainians. And that's why the powerful people of this world and I'm talking about geopolitical players, you should become aware again of the fact that the war makes the EU and the USA weaker too and should start negotiating, start the diplomatic process. But there is an obstacle.

I'm sorry, but I'm a citizen of Ukraine speaking about your president of the USA. But I have to say this, your president, while still being a vice president with Victoria Nuland back there on Maidan, promoted both financially and politically the coup d'etat to take place. What it ended in for Ukraine is not only a loss of its independence. Ukraine was made an object. It's not subjective. Ukrainian authorities are also not subjected. They are objects. They are just weapons. In fact, Ukraine is objectified as anti-Russian. Simply to make Russia weaker. And that's why Biden, Joe Biden, knowing that he is involved in geopolitical corruption, I mean, the case when he was patronising his son, Hunter Biden, with the Burisma company in Kiev and his claim was to fire general prosecutor Shokin for \$1,000,000,000 in exchange for his son to be given a million or so a monthly. This is political corruption and Biden knows that his electoral rating depends on Zelensky's rating, and that's why he unfortunately has to finance the war and murder of people in my country in Ukraine. And that's why I don't believe that anything can change before the elections. And hundreds more Ukrainians and Russians are going to be killed and no American soldiers are going to be killed at the same time. But the USA is going to finance their defence industry, Lockheed and the rest of the companies that produce rockets, etc. Unfortunately, it is so; it is geopolitical cynicism and I am at a loss because I can't do anything.

The only thing I want to ask you is to render us informational support. Yes, we have problems with socialisation. We have mental problems. But you being people who value human life, being pacifist, anti militarist, you can render us informational support. You can tell the truth that basic rights and liberties of Ukrainian citizens are being violated, that the constitution doesn't work in Ukraine. As Zelensky said, that being the guarantor of the constitution put the constitution as if on pause. You should speak about it more here so that your American electorate should open their eyes and that this way people should get not only propaganda from CNN or The New York Times, but so that they might get balanced, objective information. And this way, the people who are going to run for election might know that people, the American electorate, know the truth so that it's impossible to promote profits at the expense of people being killed on another continent 10,000 miles across the ocean. This is the problem. We don't need your money. We need mere informational support. More than that, if you help the Ukrainian Pacifist Movement, it will be considered by the Ukrainian authorities as if you were giving money to spies. Anyway, anybody in Ukraine who's against war is called the hand of Moscow, the hand of Putin and other propaganda nonsense. That's why you can render us only informational support. And of course, you know that I attend all pacifist events taking place here in New York or Washington. You know that. I don't skip them and at my own expense, go somewhere to support, say, Julian Assange. They call me Ukrainian Julian Assange there because I was imprisoned for having told the truth, the critical truth about what's going on in Donbas, too. That's why I ask you to continue. You are doing everything right. But unfortunately, the alternative media haven't yet got the power. You've got, say, 3 million views, but there are 300 million people in the USA, see?! I would also like very much the alternative media, such as Grayzone and the rest, to become more influential. It will help us all. People will become cleverer and a clever person is not so easily deceived with propaganda.

MB: Ruslan, we've seen the counter offensive fail, but the US continues to send weapons. Biden continues to ask for more billions of dollars from Congress for weapons. What does the future of Ukraine look like under this post Maidan government? Will it perpetually be at war? And what can anti-war activists do to support Ukrainian anti-war activists like yourself to bring an end to this war?

RK: The matter is that once, it seems to me it was in 2008, for three months and a half, I had been an acting head of the Museum of Liberation Struggle in the name of Stefan Bandera. It's a museum in Ivano-Frankivsk. I was appointed there by the authorities in order to prevent the nationalists from stealing money given for one project. The project was called Dem'ianiv Laz. But I would like to tell you that all those demonstrations that the Nationalists organised against me were simply saying that I do not accept the slogan "Ukraine over everything, Death to the Enemies", all this rhetoric that as if a nation and state are above human life. It all led me to come into conflict with the so-called nationalistic movement in Ivano-Frankivsk and I'll remind you that in Western Ukraine, Svoboda is the ruling party nowadays. It's a political party, and they control the majority of local, regional district and town councils in

Galichina, western Ukraine. That's why I, being an ex head of the Bandera Museum, know better than others why Bandera cannot unite Ukrainians. I know better than anybody else why Bandera was an ordinary terrorist who didn't live a single day in Ukraine. He lived either in Austria, Hungary or Poland or in Germany when Germans attacked and the Second World War began. When somebody tells me that Bandera could unite Ukrainians, I can provide the arguments that Bandera is a historical person who separates Ukrainians who could never unite Ukrainians. Bandera is a political corpse who, first of all gave orders to eliminate Ukrainians for assumed a lack of conscientiousness; heads of schools, Ukrainian-Jewish who wanted peace, who wanted to create, not to ruin. And in addition, I'd be glad to be given a platform to explain that all the slogans that are being shouted out like "Ukraine above all, Death to the enemies, Glory to the nation" this is all neo-Naziism. They're the thirties of the previous century. In the 21st century, people should finally realise that no idea of nation, no idea of state can be over the idea of human life, which is the ultimate value. I feel upset and hurt that Zelensky being representative of the nation that suffered most because of Naziism, is now repeating all these slogans about Bandera. And I wonder how the ethnic Jew Zelensky is now promoting neo-Naziism as if to unite Ukraine. Bandera can only separate Ukrainians, and I can prove it with facts to you. But I hope it will be the topic of our next interview.

MB: Journalist and Ukrainian dissident Ruslan Kotsaba, thank you so much for joining us at The Grayzone and volunteering your insights. Best of luck.

RK: I really appreciate this talk about war and peace. Thank you.

MB: Thank you.

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