

Cooking is Resistance

A conversation about food, war, and feminist organizing

Zoë:

This is Zoë from Feminist Food Journal and for this month's letter from the editor, I spoke with three feminist activists about food, war, and feminist organizing.

[Feminist Food Stories theme music]

Before Russia invaded Ukraine, I was already thinking about war and the role that women and food play in times of conflict. We had begun planning the launch of our call for papers for our second issue WAR. Although I knew full well that wars are being waged around the world and that colonial expansion and civil unrest are lived realities of so many people in so many different places, suddenly this war brought these realities closer to home. Living in Germany, just one country removed from the horrors unfolding in Ukraine, the war quickly and unsurprisingly, became all anyone could talk about.

I remember walking to the U Bahn (or subway) station in those early days of the war and passing a small anti-war gathering and a group of women singing, their voices ringing out over the square.

[Audio clip of [Ukrainian folk singers](#)]

The fierceness that tinged their wavering voices brought me to tears as I stopped to join the small crowd that had gathered in solidarity. As I stood and listened, I — like so many others — had the strong urge to act, to do something to help these neighbours whose lives had been thrown into senseless violence at the whim of an imperialist aggressor. But just as soon as this thought crossed my mind, I couldn't help but challenge myself — why was I allowing this war to dominate my imagination? What more could I — should I — also be doing to support the victims of the wars in Yemen, Ethiopia, Afghanistan, and so many other places.

As I left the gathering and descended the escalator into the U Bahn station, I received a text from a friend offering a list of things we could do to support people in Ukraine and the Ukrainian government in their resistance. On it were links to donate directly to the Ukrainian army. It made me feel uncomfortable. On the one hand, I would consider myself anti-war, a believer in non-violence. As a feminist, I associate military force with patriarchy, capitalism, imperialism, etc. On the other hand, I realize the necessity of violence as a part of resistance in circumstances of aggression, such as those in Ukraine. And it was people in Ukraine calling for this kind of support; who am I to be sitting on my high horse in my warm, comfortable, and safe home more than a thousand kilometres from the violence? Is it possible to stay true to non-violent values while also offering support and solidarity for resistance movements in war zones? How can you support resistance without taking part in the glorification of the militarization of society?

Amid all of this, I was thinking about women and food: Reading about the women in Ukraine supporting the war effort by [making borscht and Molotov cocktails](#). Reading that, like all wars, this one's impacts are highly [gendered](#), that many [trans](#) and non-binary people were struggling to cross the borders into safety. Learning just how dependent our food system — including those parts of the system intended to support the poorest and hungriest people, most of whom are women — is on Ukrainian wheat and Russian oil and natural gas.

When I scrolled past the beautiful flyer for Cooking Up Resistance in my LinkedIn feed, I knew I'd found what I had been looking for. Cooking Up Resistance was a virtual collective Ukrainian home cooking class and discussion with queer and feminist Ukrainian activists. It was organized to raise money for [Feminist Workshop](#), a grassroots organization based in Lviv, led by young girls, women, LGBTQI, and internally displaced people.

[Audio clip from video by Feminist Workshop: "Sex, Freedom, Money: What more do feminists want?" (["СЕКС, СВОБОДА, ГРОШІ: ЧОГО ЩЕ ХОЧУТЬ ФЕМІНІСТКИ?"](#))

During the war, Feminist Workshop has been providing temporary housing; coordinating transportation and evacuations, and providing psychological support for activists. (You can find out more about Feminist Workshop in the link in the show notes and all the resources and donation links mentioned in this podcast will also be listed there.)

Reading through the [Statement of Solidarity and Call for Action](#) linked in the Cooking Up Resistance post, I was impressed by the lucid and unapologetic description of the imperial invasion of Ukraine. It acknowledged the need for solidarity not only for Ukraine but for the so many millions of people around the world whose lives are impacted by war, imperialism, and occupation. I was grateful amidst the flurry of conflicting information coming at me from all channels, for the clear list of "what you can do".

The event was organized by a group of friends and feminist activists, Marion, Nino, and Fenya. After attending Cooking Up Resistance, I had a conversation with them to learn more about the event, to understand the role that food plays in their activism and in their lives, and to hear their feminist perspectives on war and resistance.

Marion:

My name is Marion, pronouns are she/her. I'm a post-doctoral researcher. I've been doing research into gender and sexual diversity for a number of years now.

Nino:

My name is Nino (she/her). I'm originally from Georgia, but I'm currently based in Barcelona and at the moment I'm leading the programming of Ukrainian crisis response at [Voice Amplified](#). But I've been organizing in Eastern Europe for more than 10 years, primarily in Georgia, but in neighbourhood countries as well.

Fenya:

I'm Fenya, she/her as well. I'm based in Belgium. I do a lot of Jewish organizing, Palestine solidarity, anti-war organizing. I started a chapter of Food Not Bombs in London. I did that for about five/six years. I think that's also where my interest came from, but then through AWID, I had also briefly worked with Feminist Workshop and then through Food Not bombs the aspect of food is something that I was really interested in.

Zoë:

Nino and Fenya met while working together at [AWID](#), the Association for Women's Rights in Development. From there a beautiful feminist friendship blossomed. Fenya later became the godmother to Nino's cat.

Nino:

And then Marion, you explain.

Marion:

Thanks, that's very diplomatic of you, Nino. I think that's also kind of part of the whole story. I've known Fenya for a year. We're dating. And through Fenya I have also met Nino, which is really wonderful.

Zoë:

The idea for Cooking Up Resistance emerged, perhaps unsurprisingly, over dinner. It all started during a meal shared at Nino's house in Barcelona, between the three organizers, Nino's partner, sister, and brother-in-law, Denys, who is Ukrainian and was the chef teaching us to make borscht at Cooking Up Resistance.

Marion:

We all were at your apartment and we were sitting and trying to have a good time. And Nino's partner cooked a wonderful dinner. It all felt very cozy, but at the same time, there was this big elephant in the room, namely two people who have recently been displaced because of the war. But the food was so lovely and it felt kind of hard not to talk about this elephant in the room, but at the same time, it was like maybe we don't need to talk about it all the time because I know it's on your mind constantly.

And somehow we got more passionate, talking about food and we all kind of like to cook. Food is really something that connects us. We all come from very different backgrounds. There is the Jewish tradition. I myself have Austrian and Polish roots. There is Nino with Georgian roots. We have somebody with Ukrainian roots. There is somebody with Serbian roots, and we just talked a lot about commonalities, but also differences in cooking and kind of shared dishes because all of these kitchens, for example, all of them have a sort of dumpling and a sort of borscht. You know, it differs a bit from region and from cultural traditions, but there is a commonality.

When you meet up with a bunch of feminist organizers, there's always this idea in the back of their minds: What can we do? Somehow this idea came up. Can we do a cooking class and raise some money for a feminist organization?

Nino:

In so many ways it was also a coping mechanism because ever since the war started, we were just trying to figure out, what can we do? How to channel this frustration, anger, all this sense of injustice into something that will serve people because collecting all those emotions and just sitting with them is very difficult. And I think for each of us doing things — organizing — is very productive. Anger is productive in that sense.

The first name of it was actually "Borscht Not Bombs". But that would mean just Ukraine and we don't want to do that. Then we were brainstorming on a name that can accommodate the world, with a whole diversity of crises.

Armenia [Arthakhj] is happening just around the corner. Everyone is talking about "war in Europe". Armenia had war last year as well — since last year — but also for decades in Nagorno-Karabakh. But no one is actually talking about that.

And then, of course, the Palestinian [struggle for liberation]. I think for each of us, that's a very important part of our activism.

The Ukraine war is also influencing Palestine directly because the [Israeli government is resettling, saving Ukrainian Jews'](#) lives and taking hundreds of thousands of them to Israel, which means that Palestinian land is being occupied.

We want to point out that there are multiple crises and everything is interconnected; all these crises are interconnected. To kind of unpack as a cabbage, what are the layers of what's going on in the world and why are these crises connected? But also why is feminist solidarity so important to be connected on a translational level?

Fenya:

I'm walking around here in Brussels and in London and seeing everyone with little banners for "welcome Ukrainians". But then when we have these ongoing crises in Afghanistan and we have the US and Western powers actively aggravating that. And people needing to leave and people being unsafe we don't allow them in, we allow them to drown at sea. That doesn't mean we shouldn't support Ukrainians, but it means that we need to be a little more reflective on whose lives are worth saving.

The fact that so many people are mobilizing around Ukraine is because we feel, you know, they're similar to us and they're the same and they're not, not as different as those people over there.

Nino:

The way we framed the messaging about the cooking class was, we didn't call it something that we want to do for Ukrainian people, but for people in Ukraine. We want to acknowledge that this war has touched millions of people. And these are not only white people we are talking about. Not only ethnically Ukrainian. There have been asylum seekers, undocumented migrants, people of colour.

Fenya:

In recent days, I've been in touch with lots of groups of women who use drugs and HIV-positive women, and they just don't get any support. Because drug use or HIV is so heavily stigmatized, in general, feminist funders won't support them. They're already underfunded, in a non-conflict situation and already struggling and stigmatized. And so now the situation is even worse.

Zoë:

Food itself and the cooking class were important as a structure around which these activists built a space for others to share and for the rest of us to listen to and learn from them. Food and feeding are an embodiment of care. And as Saidiya Hartman, an American writer and cultural historian says, care is the antidote to violence. Cooking Up Resistance demonstrated to me the power of food in times of conflict, not only in the sense of feeding troops but also for those of us on the outside, looking in, trying to understand unimaginable violence and grappling with a sense of powerlessness to stop it. As this conversation with the organizers of the event revealed, food has an important role to play in almost all dimensions of war, from protests against violence and oppression to survival after conflict and the reclamation of identity following colonization.

Fenya:

One thing with Food Not Bombs, our group in London, we created kind of our own personal idea or politics of why we're doing this. And for us, it was about feminist ethics of care and collective care and the idea of visibility and care and, and the idea that people are feeding movements, people are doing care work, and that is also what keeps movements going and it's never really appreciated.

In the eighties, Food Not Bombs was started by a couple of people, including, I think people who were houseless or had been houseless at the time. It was actually started as an anti-nuclear protest. That's the idea that billions of dollars are going towards war with nuclear weapons, towards things, and systems that destroy human life and all forms of life, whereas people are going hungry and you know, what kind of priorities do our governments really have if that's what we're spending money on.

And they basically started handing out free food. And the idea is also to visiblize the fact that people are going hungry, that people don't have the resources they need and juxtapose it

with how governments prioritize war and destruction in a very visible way. And for me, what I love is it's also providing care and showing the kind of community and world that we want.

At [Food Not Bombs] we would talk about wars. We would talk about prison abolition. We would talk about all these topics. But because we were cooking together — it's very different when you're cooking, to discuss kind of a heavy topic, than when you're sitting at a table just staring at each other and having it in a really formal space.

Marion:

It is something intuitive for me. Like Fen said, we need food in order to organize. We need food to keep going. But for me, it's mostly the connecting character of food that was important in organizing this event.

Nino:

I was born in post-war Georgia and I grew up in this conflict [affected] setting. Then I was a teenager when the last war happened, of which I have too much graphic, very visual memories of. So the way I was growing up there was chaos in the country; obviously huge economic crisis, identity crises, all sorts of crises, you name it.

The only way for people to sustain themselves and survive was through mutual support systems. Even borscht! Georgians were cooking borscht as a neighbourhood. Someone would bring garlic, someone would bring beetroot, someone would bring cabbage. You saw the size of the borscht pot, right? You can feed a village in one go. That's how food was distributed. We still have this habit in Georgia of "borrowing". Like one garlic clove, you knock on your neighbours' door — you don't go to a supermarket for that.

So that is very much embedded in a culture, at least in Eastern Europe, because we went through so many wars and so many hardships. And people have had this support system since the beginning of time. And that's how in days like these people go back to it and heavily rely on those networks and habits that we still have.

To Zoom out, why feminism and food? In so many ways, countries that were colonizers and all that Imperial logic was coming and taking and appropriating the local culture. They just take away everything and they take away our identities and eating that, reclaiming that is definitely, is an activism. Right now in Kyiv, there are these billboards saying "Borscht, Gogol (which is a writer) and Crimea are Ukrainian." And there is this note for the Russian soldiers: "Tell that to Putin, if you go back- if, you go back."

Food and this war intersected in so many ways. For example, there was this woman who was sitting on the balcony, smoking a cigarette, saw a Russian drone, took the jar of pickles she had on the balcony, and [knocked the drone down](#). That's the spirit of Ukraine! That's the spirit, particularly of Ukrainian women.

[Audio clip from NPR's [Weekend Edition Saturday](#): "[Ukrainian women are volunteering to fight, continuing a tradition](#)"]

Zoë:

For me, one of the things that were particularly powerful about Cooking Up Resistance was the disorientation I felt when the descriptions from the Feminist Workshop organizers of the atrocities being committed in Ukraine were punctuated by instructions to add the potatoes to the pot or fry the cabbage; in some small way, it felt like this juxtaposition somehow mimicked the absurdity of war.

Fenya:

I was really also struck by the intimacy that cooking together and seeing each other's kitchens brought and the kind of care also into the conversation and how it felt so different from let's have a webinar and listen to people talking. It just felt very different.

Marion:

There was really this atmosphere of solidarity. Obviously there were very heavy topics we talked about, but also there was this shared experience of cooking together, learning a new skill. And each of us ended up with a plate of hot, delicious soup in the end.

Nino:

All the beautiful, smart ideas are born when women get together, and that's exactly what we did.

Zoë:

This has been a Letter from the Editor from Zoe at Feminist Food Journal. I want to say a huge thank you to Nino, Marion, and Fenya for taking the time to speak with me, and for being so open in sharing their experiences, ideas, and wisdom. Please be sure to check out the links in the show notes where you can learn more about and donate to Feminist Workshop, and also get information on the war in Ukraine and how you can support. I really encourage you to read the Solidarity Statement and Call for Action put together by the Cooking Up Resistance team.