

1917-1921: The Ukrainian Makhnovist movement



The history of the revolutionary movement in the Ukraine - the anarchist Makhnovists - at the time of the 1917 Russian Revolution.

The revolution in the Ukraine was a libertarian revolution, and the workers and peasants fought both Tsarist reaction and Bolshevik domination.

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Long live the revolution

In February 1917, there was a Popular uprising in the Russian empire. The Tsar abdicated the principal political parties - most of them Socialist, and began to set up a crude parliamentary democracy, led by the Mensheviks. But Russia was a big, bleak, backward old empire that sprawled across five time zones, communication was bad; the uprisings continued. Radicals were released from prison, dissidents returned from exile, and ordinary people became increasingly aware of the possibilities of communal power. Peasants chased out the landowners, workers took over the factories and many organized themselves democratically through local mass meetings - Soviets.

Freedom was in the air. Much of the population had tasted it or at least had a whiff of it, it seemed to be out there for the taking. There seemed nothing to fear but the fear of freedom. Lenin (of the minority Bolsheviks) was one of the first politicians to sense the mood of the people. He realized that by adopting the popular slogans of the masses - "land to the peasants," "worker control," and "all power to the soviets," the Bolsheviks, under his leadership could seize power and move to the next phase of the "Marxist" revolution - "The dictatorship of the Proletariat.

In the months that followed, Lenin persuaded the Bolsheviks that his scam was a runner and they concentrated their efforts on gaining influence in the Soviets and in the army. The October revolution of 1917 was a spontaneous affair, The Bolsheviks simply pushed through the crowd shouting "Stand aside! There's nothing to be afraid of- trust me, I'm a doctor". Freedom was quarantined and strictly rationed. Soon, with the Bolshevik Secret Police, the Cheka quietly overseeing the running of the Soviets and the trade unions, freedom had disappeared.

Anarchy in the Ukraine

During the uprisings and reaction that followed the October Revolution, the fertile earth of the Southern Ukraine was trampled under the boots of at least four advancing and retreating armies. Various at war with each other [and] faced with a strong spirit of independence amongst the local insurgent peasants, none of these forces conquered the region or stayed long enough to set up any form of government. Official historians have failed to record the military genius of Nestor Makhno and the heroic deeds of his comrades in the Revolutionary Insurrection Army of the Ukraine. If the Makhnovists, as they became known, are mentioned at all they are referred to as "bandits" or (rather bizarrely) as part of the local

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Makhno was of poor peasant stock, an anarchist who had spent many years in prison for "terrorist activities" against the Tsar. He had been released in the February amnesty, and by October was in the thick of it - redistributing the land and resources. The Bolshevik party found it difficult to recruit or organise in the Ukraine, so Lenin decided to use the republic as a bargaining chip with Germany in Russia's withdrawal from the First World War.

Threatened by powerful enemies on all sides, Makhno and thousands of his fellow peasants launched a campaign of armed resistance so wild and imaginative that it became the stuff of instant legend. Theatrical hit-and-run attacks disguised as enemy officers, daring assassinations, robbing the rich, giving to the poor, it all reads like the further adventures of Robin Hood. And Makhno, though only 28, was honoured with the title of Batko ("little father") as he was 5'4".

The Revolutionary Insurrection Army soon became a fully operational volunteer army numbering 50 000, and for three years, the million or so peasants of the Ukraine learned to live in a lawless society under fire. A society based on co-operation with no state power, no politicians, and subsequently no concept of property - in effect, a state of Anarchy.

The Revolutionary Insurrection Army liberated several northern cities from the Ukrainian Nationalists. They threw open the prisons, blew up police stations, wasted the bosses and returned power directly to the workers. They ignored the local Bolsheviks and other socialist authoritarians.

1918 saw Germany's defeat in WW1 and the Bolsheviks turned their attention once more to the Ukraine. They established a political foothold in the northern cities and then moved south with the Red Army, ostensibly to defend the revolution against the Tsarist "Whites" and nationalists.

Fighting under the black flag of Anarchy, the Revolutionary Insurrection Army were renowned for their bravery, moreover they were respected for their honour and revolutionary ethics - they elected their own commanders, were self disciplined and owed their allegiance solely to the insurgent peasants. Their military alliance with the Bolsheviks started interfering with the politics of the local free communes.

Respect for the Revolutionary Insurrection Army's idealism led thousands of Red army soldiers to defect to them. Trotsky, the Bolshevik Commissar for war, soon replaced troops with Chinese and Lettish soldiers who spoke different languages to the Ukraine to prevent fraternising and to counter the defections. Elsewhere in Russia, idealists began to offer their services to Makhno and the movement grew, developing an education and cultural wing publishing newspapers and propaganda.

By 1920, Trotsky's tactics had become ugly. He ordered the assassination of thousands of villagers loyal to the Revolutionary Insurrection Army and he withdrew Red Army troops from the front and allowed the Tsarist Cossacks to overrun the southern Ukraine. The Makhnovists retreated, a growing caravan of their supporters and refugees trailing behind them, until eventually this vast nomadic village was boxed on all sides by a variety of enemy armies. The Red Army waited.

In a brilliant stroke, the Revolutionary Insurrection Army attacked their enemies where they were the strongest, turned their weapons against them, and went on to liberate the southern Ukraine once more. Trotsky once again offered a military deal. Makhno agreed, subject to the release of all Anarchist prisoners through Russia and was once again betrayed. On the 26th November 1920, the Makhnovist commanders were invited to a joint conference - they were met by a firing line squad.

Makhno, ever the romantic hero, eluded capture and continued to fight on, but the Bolsheviks had weakened his grass roots support and the war weary Ukrainian peasants were slow to pick up the pieces. Their brief flirtation with freedom was over.

"We have all flirted with freedom and, deep inside all of us have the urge to make it a serious relationship. The Anarchist values of individual freedom, grass roots democracy, and the decentralisation of ALL forms of power are, if anything, more pertinent today than ever. See you on the barricades."

- Tony Allen, Sept 1990-

The remainder of the Revolutionary Insurrection Army managed to fight their way to Romania where many went their own ways into exile in other lands. A few remained to reorganise and fight Ukraine. In response to the bloody and wholesale massacre of fellow Anarchists by Lenin and his bloodthirsty butchers, the Communist Party HQ in Moscow was blown up in September 1921.

From Zabalaza