

# THE MAKHNOVIST MOVEMENT AND THE NATIONAL QUESTION IN THE UKRAINE, 1917–1921\*

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## SOCIAL AND ETHNIC FOUNDATIONS

The Makhnovist movement of 1917-1921 represents the clearest and most powerful manifestation of anarchism in Ukraine.<sup>1</sup> However, it is essential to bear in mind that this movement reflected the particular features of only one part of the very heterogeneous Ukraine, which to this day is still distinctly divided into the West (Galicia), the Central part of the country (the northern part of the Right Bank of the Dnepr), the South (including the Crimea), the Left Bank, and the Donbass.

The territory in which the Makhnovists held sway primarily encompassed Priazove (the region close to the Sea of Azov), the southern part of the Left Bank, and the eastern Donbass. The Makhnovists also operated on the Right Bank, mainly in Ekaterinoslav, as well as in the Poltava region and the Chernigov region. The Makhnovist movement—the *Makhnovischna* or “Makhno movement”—was named after the anarchist Nestor Ivanovich Makhno “1888–1934.” It had its roots in a quarter of the small town of Gulyai-Pole in the Aleksandrov District.

The history of this area is associated with Cossack outlaws, agricultural struggle and nomadic culture. However, by the beginning of the 20th century only the memory of the Zaporozhe Cossacks remained. New people with a new way of life had settled in the local steppe.

Marxist historiography maintained that this was a *kulak* area (that is, dominated by prosperous landed peasants who employed labour), and that kulak farms accounted for

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22 percent of all agriculture in the region.<sup>2</sup> But this figure can be arrived at only by counting as kulaks peasants who had at their disposal more than 10.9 hectares of land,<sup>3</sup> a view that even in the Marxist historiography is regarded as “extreme”.<sup>4</sup> Large estates and peasant farming still constituted the basis of agriculture in the area. Kulakism was concentrated primarily in the German farms—an alien phenomenon within the local peasant milieu. The attempt during the Stolypin reforms to destroy the peasant commune, or *obshchina*, met with great resistance in the Ekaterinoslav province.<sup>5</sup>

The territory in which the Makhno movement was to develop was one of the most market-oriented in the whole of the Russian empire. By the early 20th century, the Ukraine was the empire’s richest farming region in the empire: it accounted for 40 percent of cultivated land, and, by 1914, produced around 20 percent of the world’s wheat and nearly 90 percent of the empire’s wheat exports.<sup>6</sup> The proximity of the ports and the well-developed rail network stimulated the development of the grain market.

In 1913, for example, the Ekaterinaoslav province produced approximately 1,789 metric tons of wheat.<sup>7</sup> Of these, 860 metric tons were exported outside the province.<sup>8</sup> This is to leave out of account the intra-provincial market, which was also quite extensive, as the province had numerous industrial centres that required bread. The peasants remained the most active force within the Ekaterinoslav Bread market: between 1862 and 1914 the peasants of the steppe region succeeded in buying up almost half the landlords’ (pomeshchiki) land. But the landowners relentlessly raised the price of land.<sup>9</sup> Relying on the support of government, they sought to retain a leasing relationship with the peasants. Naturally this aroused hostility from the peasants towards all forms of large-scale private ownership, whether on the part of the landed gentry or the kulaks. At the same time the communal-market form of peasant agriculture facilitated the development of various forms of agricultural cooperatives, which the zemstvos (local governments with class-based representation) actively supported.<sup>10</sup>

The market orientation of *obshchina* agriculture also contributed to the development, in what became the Makhnovist territory, of agricultural machine production and other agriculture-related industry. 24.4 percent of the country’s agricultural machinery was produced in the Ekaterinoslav and Tavrischeskaya provinces, compared with only 10

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<sup>2</sup> Iu. Iu. Kondufor (ed.) *Istoriya Ukrainskoi SSR*, vol. 6, Kiev, Nauk: Dumka, 1983, 16.

<sup>3</sup> Or 10 *desyatins* in terms of the pre-1924 imperial measurements. See M. Kubanin, *Makhnovshchina, Leningrad*: n.p., 1927, 19.

<sup>4</sup> Yu. K. Strizhakov, *Prodotryady v gody grazhdanskoi voiny i inostrannoi interventsii 1917–1921 gg.*, Moscow, 1973, 225.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, S. Kobytov, V.A. Kozlov and B.G. Litvak, *Russkoe krest’yanstvo. Etapy dukhovnogo osvobozhdeniya*, Moscow, 1988, 74.

<sup>6</sup> Colin M. Darch, “*The Makhnovishna, 1917–1921: ideology, nationalism, and peasant insurgency in early twentieth century Ukraine*”, Ph.D. diss., University of Bradford, 1994, 136, 138–139.

<sup>7</sup> 109,806 *pudi* in terms of the pre-1924 imperial measurements.

<sup>8</sup> 52,757 *pudi*: *Vsya Ekaterinoslavskaya guberniya, Ekaterinoslav*: n.p., 1913, 3.

<sup>9</sup> M. Kubanin, *Ukaz. soch.* (“*Selected Works*”), 18–19.

<sup>10</sup> *Vsya Ekaterinoslavskaya guberniya*, 9–10.

percent in Moscow.<sup>11</sup> A significant proportion of industry in the Ekaterinoslav province was dispersed around the province, and small towns and large villages became genuine agro-industrial complexes. In the future capital of the Makhnovists, Gulyai-Pole, there was an iron foundry and two steam mills, and in the Gulyai-Pole rural district (*volost*), there were 12 tile and brick works.<sup>12</sup>

This led not only to a highly commercialized economy, but also to close relations between the peasantry and the working class, which was dispersed among various rural locations. Many peasants also moved away to become wage-earners in the neighbouring large industrial centres. At the same time, they were able to return to the village in the event of an industrial crisis. The village itself, in such cases, was to a great extent protected from industrial shortages, since much industrial production occurred on the spot, locally. Under these circumstances the big cities seemed to the peasants alien, and not especially relevant.

The prevailing social order in Priazove did not favour the development of nationalism, which had its roots in the economically more isolated peasantry of the northern Ukraine, and became a force in the Civil War. In terms of ethnic composition, in 1917–1925 Ukrainians constituted 80–83 percent of the overall population of the Ukraine. At the same time, the non-Ukrainian population predominated in the big cities and in the Donbass. The population of the Makhnovist territory was notably mixed. Here Ukrainians (“Little Russians”) and Russians (“Great Russians”) lived side by side, and their villages were interspersed with German, Jewish and Greek settlements.

The lingua franca of the region was Russian, and a significant proportion of Ukrainians (including Makhno) did not actually speak Ukrainian. Nor did the Left Bank benefit from the circulation of money lent by Jewish moneylenders, since the Jewish population in the settlements was primarily engaged in trade and agriculture. For this reason anti-Semitism, too, was less rife in these parts than in the Right Bank.

## **THE BEGINNINGS AND RISE OF THE ANARCHIST MOVEMENT**

The anarchist movement in Ukraine, as in Russia as a whole, originated in the “Populist” or *narodnik movement* of the 1870s and 1880s. However, in the 1880s most of the *narodnik* groups moved away from anarchism, or were crushed by the tsarist regime. The revival of the anarchist movement in the Russian empire began in 1903. It was then, too, that the first group arose in Nezhin in the Chernigov province. In 1904 the anarcho-communists held their all-Russian conference in Odessa.

During the revolution of 1905–1907 there was a powerful surge in socio-political activity, including the anarchist movement. Its main centres in the Ukraine were Odessa

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<sup>11</sup> Kubanin, *Ukaz. soch.*, 11.

<sup>12</sup> *Vsya Ekaterinoslavskaya guberniya*, 42.

and Ekaterinoslav, but groups were also active in Kiev, Zhitomir and Kamenets-Podolskoe. The anarchists numbered several thousand, the majority being young Jews.

Anarchist groups, particularly the anarcho-communists, carried out agitational work and resorted to terrorist acts. In Odessa, Ekaterinoslav and Kiev, the anarchists participated alongside other left-wing groups in the creation of armed detachments. The syndicalist current also began to develop with Yakov Novomirsky's establishment of the South Russian group of anarcho-syndicalists in 1906. After the revolution was defeated, there was a sharp drop in both the number of organisations, and in their membership.

The revolution of 1905–1907 also affected Gulyai-Pole. On the 22 February 1905, the Kerner factory went on strike.<sup>13</sup> The workers demanded improved working conditions, and the abolition of penalties and overtime. Among the strikers was the young Nestor Makhno.

In September 1906 the terrorist Peasant Group of Anarcho-communists (also known as the “Union of Free Grain Growers”) began to operate in Gulyai-Pole. The group was led by Voldemar Antoni, who was associated with the Ekaterinoslav anarchists, and the Semenyut brothers, Aleksandr and Prokopii. There were several different nationalities among the group's members.

Makhno located the terrorists faster than the police, forced them to accept him into their ranks, and by the 14 October was already participating in a robbery. At the end of 1906 he was arrested for possessing weapons, but then released as a minor. In the course of the year the group carried out four bloodless robberies. Young people in black masks (or with faces smeared in mud) demanded money “for the starving” or simply money as such, introducing themselves as anarchists and disappearing afterwards. Their gains amounted to around 1,000 roubles.<sup>14</sup> On the 27 August 1907, Makhno was involved in an exchange of fire with the police. A short while later he was identified and arrested. But his friends did not abandon him. Under pressure from the terrorist group, the peasant who had identified Makhno withdrew his testimony.

However, by 1907 the Gulyai-Pole “Robin Hood” gang was operating under police surveillance. The valiant custodians of law and order were in no hurry to arrest young people with weapons, allowing them instead to become more deeply involved with crime in order to create a stronger case against them, according to a Soviet researcher, G. Novopolin, who studied the documents from the trial.<sup>15</sup>

The role of Sherlock Holmes in unmasking the Gulyai-Pole group fell to the resident constable in Gulyai-Pole, Karachentsev. In order to discover who was involved, the village detective put to use the usual Russian weapon - provocation. Karachentsev's agents infiltrated the group, took part in its attacks, and informed him of the group's activities.

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<sup>13</sup> All dates up to 14 February 1918 are given according to the Julian calendar used at that time in Russia.

<sup>14</sup> Nestor Ivanovich Makhno, *Vospominanija*, Moscow: n.p., 1991, 132–133.

<sup>15</sup> Makhno, *Vospominanija*, 134.

The police exposed 14 members of the group of terrorists. The terrorists identified one of the police agents - Kushnir - and killed him. But Karachentsev was already on the trail of the disintegrating group.

Following the murder on the 28 July 1908, the core of the group was surrounded in Gulyai-Pole, but the anarchists fought their way out and escaped. After this, the group finally disintegrated and split up; Antoni went abroad.

On the 26 August, Makhno landed up once again in prison. On the 31 December 1908, he tried to escape, but was apprehended. On the 5 January 1910 Prokopii Semenyut attempted to liberate his friends as they were being transported to Ekaterinoslav, but did not succeed (he was prevented by an agent provocateur called Altgauzen). The group's last act was the murder of constable Karachentsev on 22 November 1909.

On 22 March Makhno, together with his comrades, was sentenced to death by hanging "for membership of a malicious gang, created for the purpose of committing robbery, for two attacks on a dwelling house and an attempted attack of the same nature".<sup>16</sup> At this point Makhno had not participated in any murder, and according to peacetime laws should have been sentenced to hard labour. But a national "anti-terrorist operation" was under way, and human life was cheap.

Makhno waited for the sentence to be carried out. He was young and full of energy, and expected to be hanged. He did not know that the bureaucracy was meanwhile still debating his fate. The decisive factor was that his parents had at some point falsified his date of birth—he was still considered a minor. This allowed the authorities also to take into account the fact that his actual crimes had not involved murder. As a result the death penalty in Makhno's case was commuted to hard labour in perpetuity.

## **THE RISE OF THE MAKHNOVISCHNA**

The February revolution of 1917, which represented the start of the Great Russian Revolution, led to a fresh upsurge in the anarchist movement in the Ukraine. The movement re-established its 1905 position, but against the background of the dramatic political struggle the influence of the anarchists outside the limits of the Makhnovist territory was not great. The Central Rada ("council") - an assembly of the main political groupings - became the most influential force in the Ukraine. The leading parties within it were the Ukrainian social democrats and the Socialist Revolutionaries (SRs), who stood for the autonomy of Ukraine within the framework of a larger Russian realm.

In March 1917, the former terrorist Makhno returned from penal servitude to his native Gulyai-Pole. Having won his laurels as a martyr and fighter against the regime, Makhno became a figure of authority, a local notable. March 1917 was a period of euphoria. The

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<sup>16</sup> Quoted in V.N. Volkovinskii, *Makhno i ego krakh*, Moscow: *Vsesoiuznyi zaochnyi politekhnicheskii institut Moskva*, 1991, 24.

revolutionaries who had returned from prison, exile or emigration became unbelievably popular. But few succeeded in turning this initial enthusiasm into lasting mass support. To achieve this it was necessary to establish a solid organisation. Makhno set about doing this.

Makhno gathered his old acquaintances and revived the group of anarcho-communists. Like all other anarchists at the time, the group was influenced by the ideas of Piotr Kropotkin, albeit in an extremely abstract and simplified form. Until August 1917 Makhno also cooperated with the district authorities in preparing the elections to the zemstvos, and even in imposing the taxes that were such anathema to the anarchists.<sup>17</sup>

On the 28–29 March, Makhno was elected to the executive committee of the Peasant Union in the local volost, and became its head. There were no other revolutionaries with his authority in the small town. The Peasant Union paralysed the Social Committee - which supported the Provisional Government - seized its sections and, in effect, turned itself into the highest organ of power in the region: the Gulyai-Pole soviet or council (formally known as the Peasant Union until August 1917). Delegates were sent to the soviet from relatively compact groups of the population, which made it easier to relate to voters.<sup>18</sup> But it was the executive committee that took care of day-to-day affairs, dealing with everything ranging from major political questions, to the recovery of a lost cow.<sup>19</sup>

The anarcho-communists' system of power rested on a network of mass organisations that supported Makhno's policies: unions, factory committees, farm labourers' committees, and popular gatherings (*skhody-sobraniya*). The latter represented a kind of permanent referendum that allowed the anarchist leaders to check on the mood of the population. They also played the role of civil courts, resolving disputes among citizens.<sup>20</sup> Makhno loved speaking at these gatherings. He was a brilliant speaker, mixing vernacular speech with scientific terms that he had picked up in prison. The inhabitants of Gulyai-Pole, who were not spoilt by visits from other orators, listened with pleasure to his Russian speech (in a southern dialect close to Ukrainian).

Following talks between the Central Rada and the Russian Provisional Government, the borders of the autonomous Ukraine had been defined and confirmed in the "Provisional Instruction to the General Secretariat of the Central Rada", issued by the Provisional Government on 17 August 1917. In this Instruction the territory of Ukraine was limited to the Kiev, Volyn, Poltava, Podolsk and Chernigov provinces.

Until November 1917 the Ekaterinoslav province, to which Gulyai-Pole belonged, was not considered part of the new Ukraine. Makhno rejected the right of the Provisional Government to define the borders of Ukraine, not because he was eager to come under

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<sup>17</sup> V. Danilov and T. Shanin (eds.), Nestor Makhno, *Krest'yanskoe dvizhenie na Ukraine. 1918–1921, Dokumenty i materialy*, Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2006, 38–39.

<sup>18</sup> Nestor Ivanovich Makhno, *Rossiiskaya revolyutsiya na Ukraine*, Paris: n.p., 1929, 12–57.

<sup>19</sup> Danilov and Shanin, Nestor Makhno, 38.

<sup>20</sup> Makhno, *Krest'yanskoe dvizhenie*, 37.

the control of the Central Rada at Kiev, but because as an anarchist, he rejected state power and state borders as such.

The main task that the peasantry set was not national, but social, specifically, the redistribution of land. Following their accession to power, the Makhnovists seized the land registry documents and undertook an inventory of estates—this was in striking contrast to earlier peasant movements, which burned the land registries. The peasants wanted to organise the distribution of land owned by the gentry and kulaks. Makhno put this demand to the first congress of district soviets which took place in Gulyai-Pole. The anarchist movement's agrarian programme proposed to liquidate the landowners' and kulaks' ownership "of land and the luxury estates which they are unable to attend to by their own labour".<sup>21</sup> The landowners and kulaks would maintain the right to cultivate land, but only by their own efforts. A further proposal to unite peasants into communes was not successful.

Already by June that year, the peasants had ceased to pay rent, thereby violating the orders of government officials. But they did not succeed in bringing about immediate agrarian reform. First they were delayed by a sharp conflict with B.K. Mikhno, the regional (*uezdny*) commissar of the Provisional Government, and then they were held up by the harvest. In order not to disrupt the production process, the peasants postponed the main reforms until the spring: "on this occasion they confined themselves to not paying rent to the landowners, putting the land under the management of land committees, and appointing guards, in the form of farm managers, to keep watch until the spring over both livestock and equipment so that the landowners would not be able to sell them off".<sup>22</sup>

This reform by itself soon yielded results: the peasants no longer worked on the former landowners' fields out of fear, but out of conscience, and brought in the biggest harvest in the province.<sup>23</sup> And Makhno went further. On 25 September the congress of soviets and peasant organisations in Gulyai-Pole announced the confiscation of gentry-owned land, and its transfer to common ownership. Thus Makhno resolved "the land question" before the decrees of the All Russian Congress of Soviets or the laws of the Constituent Assembly. The leader of the SRs, Viktor Chernov, had made virtually the same proposals. But he was unable to convince the Provisional Government to agree to his approach, whereas the Makhno soviet succeeded in implementing it.

After the Kornilov revolt, which deprived the Provisional Government of authority in the district as the central authorities were unable to prevent counter-revolutionary actions, the Makhnovists created their own Committee to Defend the Revolution under the auspices of the soviet and confiscated "kulak" weapons for use by their own detachment. Makhno, of course, headed the committee. The new organ was supposed to

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<sup>21</sup> Makhno, *Kres'yanskoe dvizhenie*, 70–71.

<sup>22</sup> Makhno, *Kres'yanskoe dvizhenie*, 77.

<sup>23</sup> *Narodne zhittya*, 17 September 1917

be in charge of defending the district from any outside interference. The Committee called a congress of soviets of the Gulyai-Pole district, which supported Makhno's actions. Thus, Gulyai-Pole became the capital of the surrounding villages.

## **THE FORMATION OF THE NATIONALIST UKRAINIAN STATE**

The creation of an independent centre of power in the Gulyai-Pole district was treated with hostility by the official district administration. The Gulyai-Pole district had long been a source of irritation to commissar Mikhno. The anarcho-communists had liquidated the Social Committee, and in effect removed the district from the jurisdiction of the regional authorities. Mikhno threatened to organise a punitive expedition to the district. But the Makhnovischna were armed and ready to repulse any attack. At the same time they decided to attack the enemy from the rear: an agitation team was sent to the regional centre of Aleksandrovsk to campaign against Mikhno. The workers supported the people of Gulyai-Pole by going on strike, thereby paralysing the work of that regional commissar, who was forced to leave the anarchist district alone.

In September, Makhno encountered competition in the struggle for the "revolutionary masses" from a personage even more radical than himself. The well-known anarchist Mariya Girgorevna "Marusya" Nikiforovna arrived in Gulyai-Pole. By this time the 32-year-old Marusya (as she was called by her associates) was even more famous than Makhno himself. She had taken part in the stormy events in Petrograd, and then returned to her native region:<sup>24</sup>

In Aleksandrovsk and neighbouring Ekaterinoslav she began to set up anarchist workers' military detachments of the [anarchist] Black Guard. Soon she would succeed in organising such detachments in Odessa, Nikolaev, Kherson, Kamensk, Melitopol, Yuzovsk, Nikopol, Gorlovka...

If even half this information is true, Marusya represented a highly influential figure. Her Black Guards carried out raids on factory owners and military units, replenishing their ammunition, and then financing workers' organisations. Thus Marusya's popularity grew.

Makhno, who was used to negotiating with the bourgeoisie (on his own terms, of course), but not (any more) to organising raids, did not approve of Nikiforova's methods, which were aimed at provoking a confrontation with the Aleksandrov authorities. Marusya even incited some of the Makhnovists to attack a military unit in Orekhov. The operation was successful: the attackers destroyed a subdivision of the

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<sup>24</sup> V. Savchenko, *Avantyuristy grazhdanskoi voiny*, Kharkov/Moscow: Izd-vo Folio/ AST, 2000, 71

Preobrazhenskii regiment, killing their officers and seizing their arms. Makhno was outraged by Marusya's irresponsibility. At this point he was trying to avoid armed confrontation, and to confine himself to threats.

Marusya was meanwhile forced to leave Gulyai-Pole and move on to Aleksandrovsk, where she was soon arrested by the supporters of Provisional Government.<sup>25</sup> The Makhnovists, and the Aleksandrov workers, were obliged to rescue the extremist, threatening raids and a strike. When a crowd of workers arrived at the prison gates, Marusya was released. The members of the Aleksandrov soviet were re-elected to the benefit of the Left, the government commissar was frightened, and the Aleksandrov officials ceased to threaten Gulyai-Pole.

In short, Makhno had established soviet power in his territory earlier than Lenin, and was ahead of him in building a new society. Makhno's initiatives also exceeded those of the October Revolution: workers' control, self-management in the collectives and workers' organisations, cooperation, and attempts to regulate the exchange of products outside of the collapsing market. The soviet system was viewed by the Makhnovists not as a hierarchical governing force, a state, but as the guarantor of the full rights of workers' and peasants' organisations.

On the 26 October 1917, in the course of the upheavals in Petrograd, "all power to the soviets" was declared. For this reason the Makhnovists took a favourable view of the October Revolution, and even proposed votes for the Bolsheviks and SRs in the elections to the Constituent Assembly.<sup>26</sup> However, unlike the Bolsheviks, Makhno spoke out against economic and political centralism and against privileges for workers and civil servants.

In Kiev there were clashes between the Bolsheviks and supporters of the Provisional Government; as a result on the 1 November, power in Kiev was transferred to the Central Rada. In its third "Universal" (or official proclamation) on the 7 November, the Rada confirmed that it was aiming to secure the autonomy of Ukraine as part of a federal Russia.<sup>27</sup> The Universal also declared that the Kiev, Chernigov, Volyn, Podolsk, Kharkov, Ekaterinoslav, and Kherson provinces and the Materikovaya part of the Tavrichesakaya province (not including the Crimea), would be part of Ukraine. Thus, the Rada's territorial claims were greater than before.

Makhno became engrossed in this new political reality. He had struggled bitterly for the power of the soviets in these areas even before the October Revolution, and felt that now there was no time to lose. At issue was the question of which sphere of influence the Left Bank of the Dnepr would come under: soviet power, the Rada's Ukrainian government, or the "White" counter-revolutionaries.

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<sup>25</sup> V. Belash V., "Makhnovshchina", in *Letopis' revolyutsii*, No.3, 1928, 194–195.

<sup>26</sup> Nestor Ivanovich Makhno, *Ukaz. soch.* ("Selected Works"), 77.

<sup>27</sup> The Rada issued four Universals from 1917–1918, regarded as the founding documents of the nationalist Ukrainian People's Republic.

Makhno took part in reconciling the Ekaterinoslav soviet and the mutinous Georgiev cavaliers who protested against soviet power, and sought by every means possible to prevent the Central Rada from extending its influence. In Gulyai-Pole there was a well-organised group of supporters of the new Ukrainian state, who held their meetings in the town.<sup>28</sup> Makhno gathered the peasants of the region at a Regional Congress of Soviets, which passed a resolution declaring “Death to the Central Rada”.<sup>29</sup> The Ukrainian nationalists were silenced for a time.

At the same time, the district came under threat from an even more dangerous quarter: several echelons of Cossacks had returned from the Front. If they got through to the Don at this point, the forces of General Alexey Maximovich Kaledin, head of the Don Cossack Whites, would have been given a significant military boost. Taking a short-term perspective, Makhno could have simply let the Cossacks through to the Don. But he needed to take a longer-term view, and his Congress of Soviets called for a detachment to be formed to fight the Cossacks. This was a “free battalion” led by the Makhno brothers, with Savva as the commander, and Nestor as the political organiser.

This was the first time Nestor Makhno was to put himself forward as a military leader. His future reputation for military leadership had not yet been established when the Makhnovist forces seized the approaches to the Kichkasskii bridge across the Dnepr. In a brief battle on 8 January 1918, the Makhnovists, in alliance with the Bolsheviks and the Left SRs, halted and disarmed the Cossacks. The Cossacks themselves were not, in any case, eager for battle. What they wanted most was to get home, and it did not matter all that much whether they did so with arms, or without. The outcome of this battle complicated Kaledin’s position.

Already on December 4, Soviet Russia declared that it was prepared to recognise the Ukraine’s independence, but not the authority of the Central Rada, since the latter did not have the authority to represent the Ukrainian people. Who, then, did have that authority? At the elections to the Constituent Assembly the parties of the Central Rada, the majority of whom were socialists, won a significant majority of the votes. But that left out a quarter of the voters—those living in the big cities and on the Left Bank of the Dnepr. The Central Rada laid claim to a broad swathe of territory extending all the way to the Donbass and Kursk, where its power had never been recognised.

By laying claim to the eastern territories, the Central Rada had also claimed the population of the Left Bank, which was even more indifferent to the nationalist idea than the inhabitants of the Right Bank. On 3–5 December the Bolsheviks and the Left SRs suffered a defeat at the 1st Congress of Ukrainian Soviets, and withdrew from it. Blaming the Central Rada for not having admitted some of the delegates from the Eastern Ukraine to the Congress, they gathered in Kharkov and declared a Ukrainian Soviet Republic.

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<sup>28</sup> V.N. Volkovinskii, *Ukaz. soch.* (“*Selected Works*”), 34.

<sup>29</sup> Makhno, *Ukaz. soch.*, 110.

On 8 November, detachments from Russia and the Donbass (which was both Russian and Ukrainian, but in January had created its own Donetsk-Krivorosh Soviet Republic) came to their aid. Now, having got “their” own Ukraine, the Bolsheviks also had to recognise that “their” eastern districts, with a mixed population, belonged to the Ukraine. Having collided with the Soviets over their extended sphere of influence, the Central Rada on 9 January 1918, declared the independent Ukrainian People’s Republic.

Nowadays, the war that ensued between the Ukrainian nationalists and the Bolsheviks is referred to by the former as “Russia’s aggression”. But inhabitants of Ukraine also marched in the Red columns; it was they who rose up for the power of the soviets. Many were not interested in a national state as such, but in its social content—in what it would give to the peasant and worker. Although in its Universal the Central Rada had declared the right of the peasants to the land, like the Provisional Government, it delayed in actually instituting agrarian reform.

For Makhno—as for the majority of the inhabitants of Eastern Ukraine, including Kiev and Odessa, where the majority spoke Russian—the nationalist Ukrainian government was not theirs. For them the war against the Central Rada, and the other authorities established by the Ukrainian nationalists, was a war against an attempt to tear apart the living fabric of the people by those who were dragging their feet in carrying out socialist transformation. The Central Rada put forward romantic nationalist promises, yet the advance of Soviet troops did not arouse any significant popular opposition.

On 8 February 1918 Mikhail Muravev’s Soviet troops took Kiev, and the Central Rada fled to Zhitomir.

## **BREST-LITOVSK, GERMAN OCCUPATION AND ANARCHIST RESISTANCE**

But at this point the fate of the Ukraine was being decided not in Kiev, but in Brest. Here, on the 9 December 1917, peace talks began between Russia and the Central Powers: Germany, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria and the Ottoman Empire.

On the 18 December 1917, a Central Rada delegation arrived. On the 30th December, the Bolshevik representative Leon Trotsky recognised its authority to participate, in the hope of preventing it from openly transferring its allegiance to the Germans. Nevertheless, in the conditions of heightened conflict, the Central Rada representatives decided to come to a separate agreement with the Central Powers. This would define the fate of the Ukraine—including those territories that were totally against the Central Rada.

Makhno did not suspect that the fate of his district was now being decided in far-off Brest. On the 9 February 1918, Rada representatives concluded a peace agreement under which the Ukraine undertook to supply Germany with provisions that would alleviate the social crisis in that country, and invited German troops to the Ukraine to

oust the supporters of Soviet power. The Ukrainian nationalists had acquired a distinctly pro-German slant, which was maintained right up to the Second World War. The German representatives were not, however, ready to settle with Russia yet.

They demanded that Russia first renounce its rights to Poland, the Caucasus, the Baltic States and Ukraine, whose fate would be decided by Germany and its allies, that Russia pay reparations, and so on. The Bolsheviks could not sign such a peace agreement with German imperialists without changing the principles on which they had come to power.

On the 10th February 1918, Trotsky refused to sign the capitulating peace agreement, and unilaterally announced an end to the state of war, and the demobilisation of the army. He calculated that the Germans, exhausted by war, would not be able to attack. However, the Germans immediately pushed the Eastern Front deep into the Russian realm, including the Ukraine. The remnants of the demoralised old army, and detachments of the Red Guard, were unable to halt the Germans.

On 3 March 1918, after bitter fights inside the party's Central Committee, the Bolsheviks were forced to conclude what V.I. Lenin described as the "obscene" Treaty of Brest Litovsk. This effectively ceded the Ukraine and other territories to the control of Germany (or the allied Ottomans).

It is difficult to establish Makhno's precise attitude to the Treaty. In his memoirs he claims to have said the following: "By concluding this alliance with the monarchists both the Central Rada and the Bolsheviks are preparing death for the revolution and its champions—the revolutionary toilers".<sup>30</sup>

However, we know that during his first alliance with the Bolsheviks (see below) Makhno spoke out against blaming them for colluding with the Germans.<sup>31</sup> Nor did Makhno reproach the Bolshevik leaders for the Brest-Litovsk Treaty during his discussions with them in June 1918. The Germans' incursions markedly energised the Central Rada's supporters in the anarchist district. They attached great hopes to the Germans.

The nationalist leader, P. Semenyut, openly threatened the anarchists with physical reprisals once the Germans had arrived. In response, the anarcho-syndicalists, unbeknownst to Makhno (or so he claimed), declared "revolutionary terror" on the nationalists, and killed Semenyut. Gulyai-Pole found itself on the brink of civil war. Hearing what had happened, Makhno applied all his efforts to get the decision on "revolutionary terror" repealed, and to conclude an agreement with the opposition, thereby averting a bloody vendetta.

A joint commission was set up with the nationalists to ban assassinations.<sup>32</sup> Meanwhile,

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<sup>30</sup> Makhno, *Ukaz. soch.*, 155.

<sup>31</sup> I. Teper (*Gordeev*), *Makhno: ot "edinogo anarkhizma" k stopam rumynskogo korolya*, Khar'kov, 1924, 26.

<sup>32</sup> Makhno, *Ukaz. soch.*, 182–191.

the Ukrainian nationalists continued to campaign in the district. At the same time the nationalists took steps to prepare a coup in Gulyai-Pole. They began blackmailing the Jewish community, threatening a pogrom once the Germans arrived. After some hesitation, the Jewish leaders decided to help their sworn enemies in order to prevent such reprisals.<sup>33</sup>

“Among the Jews—shopkeepers, hoteliers, manufacturers—a defeatist mood has once again arisen”, claimed M. Goncharok:<sup>34</sup>

The well-to-do leaders of the community demanded that the Jewish population disband their [national] military company. Rank-and-file volunteers, mainly youths from poor families, refused point blank, regarding this as base treachery in relation to the anarchists and peasant volunteer corps who had entrusted them with weapons. Opinions within the company, however, were split.

This social-psychological reconstruction is inaccurate. The supposed split did not happen—the company decided to obey the Jewish community leaders. Meanwhile the Germans, ousting detachments of SRs, Bolsheviks and anarchists, were approaching the Dnepr. The Makhnovists formed a “free battalion” which joined the Front. As in January, Makhno gave the role of commander to another man, a sailor called Polonskii, reserving himself the role of political leader. Preparing to defend Gulyai-Pole, Makhno headed towards the headquarters of the Red Guard in order to coordinate actions with other detachments.

Gulyai-Pole was meanwhile guarded by the Jewish national company under the command of one Taranovskii. On the night of 15–16 April, the company carried out a coup in Gulyai-Pole in favour of the Ukrainian nationalists, and arrested a group of anarchocommunists. At the same time a detachment of nationalists launched a surprise attack on the “free battalion” and disarmed them.<sup>35</sup>

These events caught Makhno unawares. At one blow he had been deprived of military strength and a support base. It is notable that Makhno was not inclined to blame the Jews for what had happened. In his view, rumours of a “Jewish plot” in the Ukraine “would undoubtedly provoke a pogrom and the massacre of poor innocent Jews, constantly persecuted by everyone in Russian and Ukrainian history and never knowing

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<sup>33</sup> Makhno, *Ukaz. soch.*, 148–149.

<sup>34</sup> M. Goncharok, *Vek voli. Russkii anarkhizm i evrei XIX–XX vv.*, Jerusalem: Mishmeret Shalom, 1996, 36.

<sup>35</sup> Makhno, *Ukaz. soch.*, 206.

peace to this day”.<sup>36</sup>

Understanding the reasons for the Jewish community’s actions, Makhno, returning later on to the Gulyai-Pole district, spoke out against taking revenge on the participants in the coup—i.e. the Jews; he “convinced the peasants and workers that the Jewish toilers, even those who made up the soldiers of the company and were direct participants in its counter-revolutionary activities—will themselves condemn this shameful act”.<sup>37</sup> And indeed, in 1919, a Jewish national battalion would be formed in the Makhnovist armed forces. On the 16 April 1918, participants in a demonstration by the citizens of Gulyai-Pole released the anarchists who had been arrested by the plotters. But it was already impossible to organise the defence of the town: the Germans crossed the Dnepr and soon afterwards entered Gulyai-Pole. Together with the nationalists they set about punishing any anarchists who had not managed to escape.

The nationalists’ victory was short-lived, and its hopes in the German forces misplaced. In April 1918, the Germans, along with Ukrainian capitalists and landowners, backed a coup against the Rada and its Republic; this was led by General Pavlo Skoropadsky, who formed the pliant and counter-revolutionary Hetmanate, a dictatorial regime. Skoropadsky instituted grain requisitions and land restorations to the pomeshchiki, provoking a massive popular backlash. The second cycle of Makhnovist activity now began, as the movement played a decisive role in opposing the Germans, the Hetmanate, and the wealthy classes in the Ukraine.

## **THE NATIONAL LIBERATION STRUGGLE, ANARCHISM AND THE MAKHNOVIST TERRITORY**

On the 4 July 1918 Makhno, with the help of the Bolsheviks, returned to his native district and put together a small partisan detachment. On the 22 September this began military operations against the Germans. Makhno’s detachment engaged in its first battle in the village of Dibrivki (*Bolshaya Mikhailovka*) on 30th September. Joining with the small Shusya detachment, which had earlier fought as partisans here, Makhno and a group of three dozen men succeeded in crushing the Germans’ superior forces.

The authority of the new detachment grew in the area, and Makhno himself was given the respectful nickname *Batko* (“little father”). The Battle of Dibrivki marked the beginning of a destructive vendetta—as well as the start of a cycle of military victories against the Germans, the Whites and the nationalists. What happened was that the Germans amassed a considerable force, and carried out a demonstrative execution in Dibrivki, which the partisans were unable to prevent. Inhabitants of the surrounding German farms took part in the punitive expedition. In return, the Makhnovists destroyed the farms and killed participants in a punitive action, and, as Alexey Chubenko

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<sup>36</sup> Makhno, *Ukaz. soch.*, 149.

<sup>37</sup> Nestor Ivanovich Makhno, *Pod udarami kontrrevolyutsii*, Paris: n.p., 1936, 11

recalled:<sup>38</sup>

Haystacks, straw and houses burned so fiercely that in the streets it was as bright as day. The Germans, having stopped firing, ran out of their homes. But our men shot all the menfolk straight away.

Having burned the kulak farms, the rebels, according to Makhno, told the families who had lost their homes: “Go where the Dibrivki peasants, men, women and children . . . went, those whom your fathers, sons and husbands either killed or raped or whose huts they burned”.<sup>39</sup>

At the same time, after the first outburst of terror Makhno issued an order not to touch Germans who offered no resistance, and when his commander Petrenko destroyed a peaceful German kulak farm, Makhno saw to it that the Germans were paid compensation.<sup>40</sup> While Makhno stressed the struggle for freedom from foreign powers, he also emphasised his actions had an anti-landowner and anti-kulak nature, including opposition to the Ukrainian elite and the nationalist state.

The popular army should, for example, take the opportunity to acquire supplies at the expense of the landowners and kulaks: “I asked the assembled population to say openly where the kulaks lived, people with sheep and cattle, so that we could get two or three sheep from them for soup for our soldiers”.<sup>41</sup> At this point people’s courts (*obshchestvennye sudy*) began to operate at peasant gatherings, with authority to decide the fate of the accused. In response to the protests of the anarcho-communist A. Marchenko against this practice, Makhno remarked: “Let him put his sentimentality in his pocket”.<sup>42</sup>

As a rule, the Makhnovists released any captured German troops. But they sometimes shot civilian Germans as “spies”,<sup>43</sup> and commonly, officers. The insurgents’ severity towards the kulaks only increased their authority in the eyes of the peasants. Makhno began to base his actions on the numerically strong peasant volunteer corps, which he could draw on for major operations—the core of the Makhnovist army. He would notify them in advance of the meeting place. Interestingly, the enemy knew nothing about this.

When revolution broke out in Germany in November 1918, the German backing for the Hetmanate was shaken. The nationalists regrouped in the Directory, retook Kiev in December and toppled Skoropadsky, and in January 1919 they united the Ukrainian

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<sup>38</sup> Makhno, *Vospominaniya*, 47.

<sup>39</sup> Nestor Ivanovich Makhno, *Ukrainskaya revolyutsiya*, Paris, 1937, 112.

<sup>40</sup> Makhno, *Ukrainskaya revolyutsiya*, 112; Central State Archive of the Civil Organisations of Ukraine, D.153, L.27. This archive is hereafter abbreviated as TsDAGOU.

<sup>41</sup> Makhno, *Ukaz. soch.*, 74.

<sup>42</sup> Makhno, *Ukaz. soch.*, 106.

<sup>43</sup> TsDAGOU, F. 5, O 1, D. 274, L. 12.

People's Republic with the separate West Ukrainian People's Republic. Meanwhile, the extensive Priazove district came under Makhnovist control.

On 30 December 1918, the Batko even briefly occupied Ekaterinoslav, one of the biggest cities in Ukraine, but because of conflicts with his Bolshevik allies he was unable to defend the city from Directory head Symon Vasylyovych Petliura's advancing army.<sup>44</sup> During this period, Makhno took steps to transform his movement from a destructive peasant uprising to a social revolutionary movement that embodied supreme power in the territory it controlled. But having gained control over a relatively stable swathe of territory, Makhno decided that the time had come to add some proper democratic institutions to the anarcho-military milieu: namely, a Military Revolutionary Soviet (VRS).

The constructive work started in 1917 resumed, a conscious effort to create a self-managed anarchist society. For this purpose the 1st Congress of District Soviets was called on the 23 January 1919 (in the numbering of the 1919 congresses the forums of 1917 were ignored). As in 1917, the Makhno movement regarded the Congresses as the supreme authority. In 1919 three such congresses were held (on the 23 January, 8–12 February, and 10–29 April). Their resolutions, adopted after heated discussions, accorded with anarchist ideas:<sup>45</sup>

In our insurgent struggle we need a united brotherly family of workers and peasants to defend land, truth and freedom. The second district congress of front-line soldiers insistently calls on their peasant and worker comrades to undertake by their own efforts to build a new, free society in their locale, without tyrannical decrees and orders, and in defiance of tyrants and oppressors throughout the world: a society without ruling landowners, without subordinate slaves, without rich or poor.

Delegates to the congress spoke out sharply against “parasitical bureaucrats” who were the source of these “tyrannical decrees”. Makhno's staff, who also engaged in cultural and education work, represented an important organ of power, but all their civil (and formally speaking their military) activity was under the control of the executive organ of the congress (the VRS) and a number of educational institutions were established, alongside land redistribution and several cooperative farms. The Bolshevik commander of the Ukrainian Front, Vladimir Antonov-Ovseenko, who visited the district in May 1919, reported:<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Aleksandr Shubin, *Makhno i Makhnovskoe dvizhenie*, Moscow: Izd-vo “MIK”, 1998, 53–55.

<sup>45</sup> *Protokoly II s'ezda frontovnikov, povstancheskih, rabochikh i krest'yanskikh Sovetov, otdelov i podotdelov*, Gulyai-pole, 1919, 25.

<sup>46</sup> TsDAGOU, F.5, O1., D.153, L.137–138.

Children's communes and schools are getting going—Gulyai-Pole is one of the most cultured centres in Novorossiia—here there are three secondary educational institutions and so on. Through Makhno's efforts ten hospitals for the wounded have been opened, a workshop has been organised to repair implements and manufacture locks and equipment.

Children were taught to read and underwent military training, primarily in the form of military games (which were sometimes quite tough). But the main educational work was carried out not with children but with adults. The VRS' Kultprosovet ("Culture and Propaganda Council"), which was responsible for enlightenment and agitation work among the population, was staffed by anarchists and Left SRs who had come to the district. Freedom of agitation was also upheld for other left-wing parties, including Bolsheviks, although the anarchists dominated the district ideologically. Makhno's conflicts with certain commanders intensified.

When the semi-independent commander Fedor Shchus undertook reprisals against German settlers, Makhno responded by arresting him and promised to execute him if it happened again. Shchus, who had only recently demonstrated his independence from Makhno, was no longer capable of withstanding the Batko, whose power in the district at this time was based not only on military strength. "Shchus gave his word not to repeat the murders and swore loyalty to Makhno",<sup>47</sup> recalled *Chubenko*.

As a result, Makhno succeeded in maintaining solid discipline among his officers. One of Bolshevik leader Lev Kamenev's assistants recalled Makhno's style of leadership at an officers' meeting during a visit to Gulyai-Pole: "At the slightest noise he would threaten the perpetrator: 'Out with you!'"<sup>48</sup> The first social-political organisation to carry out and influence Makhno's policies was a Union of Anarchists, which arose from a group of anarcho-communists joined by a number of other anarchist groups. Many Makhnovist officers and anarchists who had come to the district joined the Union. Also, prominent activists in the Makhnovists like Grigory Vasilevskii, Boris Veretelnikov, Alexey Marchenko, Petr Gavrilenko, Vasily Kurilenko, Viktor Belash, Trofim Vdovichenko, and others, were anarchists.

Makhno nonetheless had a sceptical attitude towards the anarchist group *Nabat* ("Alarm"), also known as the Confederation of Anarchist Organisations of the Ukraine: this included leading figures like Vsevolod Mikhailovich Eikhenbaum (known as "*Voline*"). *Nabat* united newcomers like *Voline* with some of the urban Ukrainian

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<sup>47</sup> TsDAGOU, F.5, O1., D.351, L.2.

<sup>48</sup> "Ekspeditsiya L. V. Kameneva v 1919 g.: *poezdka na Ukrainu*", *Proletarskaya revolyutsiya*, 1925, No. 6, 139.

anarchists (primarily anarcho-syndicalists) in the autumn of 1918, but evidently it represented only one of the various anarchist groupings. Its claims to the leadership of the Makhno movement were unfounded.

Makhno did not regard himself as being bound by the decisions of the Nabat's April 1918 conference in Elisavetgrad, which were taken in his absence. It is essential to distinguish the influence of the local anarchists on the development of the movement from that of the urban anarchist newcomers to the region, towards whom the Makhnovists had already developed a sceptical attitude by 1918. However, even here there are some significant exceptions. The most obvious example is Makhno's comrade in penal servitude, Peter Arshinov (also known "*Marin*"). According to Isaak Teper:<sup>49</sup>

Marin was in general the only anarchist [anarchist newcomer—AS.] whom Makhno sincerely respected and whose advice he accepted unquestioningly... He was the only person, as I indicated above, to whom Makhno in general submitted in the full sense of the word.

Arshinov (who had been in jail with Makhno) joined up with him, and together they determined the movement's ideology. Makhno called his own views anarcho-communist "in Bakunin's sense".<sup>50</sup> Later, Makhno proposed the following organisation of state and society: "I envisaged such a structure only in the form of a free soviet structure, in which the entire country would be covered by local, completely free, independent, self-governing social organisations of workers",<sup>51</sup> in contrast to Bolshevik and Soviet state centralism.

In late 1918 a delegation of railway workers visited Makhno. According to Chubenko's memoirs, the workers<sup>52</sup>

... began asking what they should do in terms of organising power. Makhno replied that they need to organise a soviet that should be completely independent, i.e. a free soviet, independent of all parties. They then appealed to him for money, since they had no money at all, and needed money to pay the workers, who had received no wages for three weeks. Makhno without saying a word ordered them to be given 20,000 [roubles], and this was done.

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<sup>49</sup> I. Teper, *Ukaz. soch.* ("Selected Works"), 32.

<sup>50</sup> Makhno, *Pod udarami kontrrevolyutsii*, 130.

<sup>51</sup> *Anarkhicheskii vestnik*, Berlin, 1923, No.1, 28.

<sup>52</sup> TsDAGOU, F.5, O1., D.153, L.29.

In a proclamation on 8 February 1919 Makhno announced the following task: “The building of a genuine Soviet structure in which the soviets, chosen by the workers, will be the servants of the people, executing the laws and decrees that the workers themselves will write at the all Ukrainian labour congress”.<sup>53</sup> Thus for the question of Ukrainian independence, the VRS declared in October 1919:<sup>54</sup>

When speaking of Ukrainian independence, we do not mean national independence in Petliura’s sense, but the social independence of workers and peasants. We declare that Ukrainian, and all other, working people have the right to self-determination not as an ‘independent nation’, but as ‘independent workers’.

### **THE ALLIANCE WITH THE BOLSHEVIKS, AND THE ISSUE OF ANTI-SEMITISM**

Dividing up their respective spheres of influence with the Ukrainian nationalists, the Makhnovists had a large amount of territory and peasant support, and came under attack from the Whites. By the beginning of January, the Makhnovists had already absorbed into their ranks several thousand semi-armed insurgents from Priazove, and were suffering from a lack of ammunition and rifles. After several days’ fighting with the Whites they had used up all their ammunition, and the insurgents had been forced back to Gulyai-Pole. They did not want to surrender their “capital”. From 24 January to 4 February bitter battles were fought, with varying success.

Notwithstanding their disagreements with the Bolsheviks, the Makhnovists had no option but to unite with them under these circumstances. The Red Army was the only possible source of arms and ammunition. Already at the beginning of January Makhno told Chubenko: “Maybe we will succeed in uniting with the Red Army, which is rumoured to have seized Belgorod and has gone on the offensive along the whole Ukrainian Front. If you run into [the Red Army], form a military alliance with it”.<sup>55</sup>

Makhno did not give Chubenko authority to conduct any political talks with the Reds, however, and the Batko’s emissary was thus confined to announcing that “we are all fighting for Soviet power”. Following talks with Pavel Dybenko on 26 January 1919, the Makhnovists were supplied with ammunition that enabled them to go on the

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<sup>53</sup> TsDAGOU, L. 115.

<sup>54</sup> Quoted in Piotr Arshinov, *History of the Makhnovist Movement, 1918–1921*, London: Freedom Press, [1923] 1987, 210.

<sup>55</sup> V. Verstyuk, *Kombrig Nestor Makhno: Iz istorii pervogo soiuzu makhnovt’ssev s Sovetskoj vlastiu, Khark’kov: Nabat, 1990, 6.*

offensive as early as 4 February. By the 17 February, having taken Orekhov and Pologi, the 3rd Brigade of the Makhnovists' First Dnepr Division, under Dybenko's command, occupied Bakhmut.

Bolshevik rifles enabled the Makhnovists to arm the peasant reinforcements, who had been waiting in the wings. As a result, the 3rd brigade of the First Dnepr division grew so rapidly that it outnumbered both the original Division and the 2nd Ukrainian army in which the brigade had earlier fought. Whereas in January Makhno had had around 400 troops, by the beginning of March he had a thousand, by mid-March 5,000, and by April 15—20,000.

Having thus carried out this voluntary mobilization, the Makhno forces launched their offensive to the south and to the east. After covering more than 100 km over a period of a month-and-a-half, the Makhnovists captured Berdyansk. Lieutenant-General Anton Ivanovich Denikin's White western bastion was destroyed. At the same time, other Makhnovist units moved the Front a similar distance to the east, entering Volnovakha. The Makhnovists seized a special train from the Whites, loaded with 1,467 metric tons of bread,<sup>56</sup> and sent it on to the starving workers of Moscow and Petrograd. The Makhnovists' insurgent army was called upon to defend the population and social structures not only from external threats, but from internal threats in the district.

Periodic outbursts of lawlessness were, in general, extremely common in this period of the revolution: "In the city robbery, drunkenness, and debauchery are beginning to sweep over the army", declared V. Aussem, commander of a military group within the Red Army, following the occupation of Kharkov.<sup>57</sup> And in another episode: "At the end of April the regiment was waiting at the Teterev station, where Red Army soldiers committed numerous excesses without punishment—they robbed and beat the passengers unmercifully and killed several Jews",<sup>58</sup> recalled Antonov-Ovseenko, describing the exploits of the 9th regiment of the Red Army.

During the revolutionary period, large numbers of civilian Jews were killed in pogroms across the former Russian Empire, including the Ukraine. There were a number of pogroms in Directorate territory (leading the Ukrainian anarchist Jew Sholom Schwartzbard to assassinate Petliura in revenge in Paris in 1926). Here it is appropriate to mention a fragment of conversation between a Ukrainian People's Commissar, A. Zatoniskii, and Red Army soldiers whom he was seeking to persuade not to turn towards Kiev in order to "get even with the Cheka and the Commune": "Finally one quite elderly man asked whether 'it is true that Rakovskii is a Jew, since they say that earlier the Bolsheviks were in control, but now the Jews had established the new communist Rakovskii government.'

I assured him that comrade Rakovskii is of the same orthodox lineage as the

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<sup>56</sup> Or 90,00 pudi.

<sup>57</sup> V.A. Antonov Ovseenko, *Zapiski o Grazhdanskoi voine*, Moscow-Leningrad, 1932, vol. 3, 191.

<sup>58</sup> V.A. Antonov Ovseenko, *Zapiski o Grazhdanskoi voine*, Moscow-Leningrad, 1932, vol. 4, 268.

Communists—they are all Bolsheviks.”<sup>59</sup> On this occasion his argument was persuasive. But we know that the Red Army participated in numerous pogroms against the Jews.<sup>60</sup> Anti-Semitism was also rife among a significant section of the Whites. If Chubenko is to be believed, the ataman Andrey Shkuro, attempting to get Makhno on his side, wrote to him: “After all you beat up the commissars anyway, and we beat up the commissars, you beat up the Jews and we beat up the Jews, so we’ve no reason to fight about that.”<sup>61</sup> Indeed, supporters of the Whites also wrote about their anti-Semitism and pogroms “We don’t relate to the ‘Yids’, just as they don’t relate to the ‘bourgeoisie’. They shout: ‘Death to the bourgeoisie’, and we answer: ‘Beat up the Yids’”.<sup>62</sup> (The Ukrainian atamans were autonomous paramilitary leaders, who easily shifted from nationalist yellow and blue flags, to red banners, or black, and back).

As far as the revolutionary troops are concerned, the outbreaks of lawlessness among soldiers, which were often anti-Semitic, can be explained by the peculiar psychological situation of soldiers in 1918–19. They secured power for the various parties, and regarded themselves as entitled to “impose order” when necessary. This power engendered a feeling that everything was permitted, while the endless interruptions in provisions and wages gave rise to a sense that the authorities were ungrateful. And here, the situation of social catastrophe, marginalisation and radicalism brought to the surface dark anti-Semitic instincts, and fostered the urge to commit pogroms.

Against this background the Makhnovist territory represented a relatively peaceful model. The fact that the Makhnovist army consisted of local peasants constituted a serious obstacle to any lawlessness in the heartland of the movement. The territory was also relatively safe in terms of Jewish pogroms. In general, anti-Semitism was weaker in Priazove than in the Right Bank Ukraine. Moreover, the slightest manifestations of anti-Semitism were severely punished by the Makhnovists. As mentioned above, a Jewish national detachment fought with the Makhno troops.

While most members of the Makhnovist forces were ethnic Ukrainians, the movement included Greeks, Caucasians and other groups, and it appealed to the working Cossacks to join up. The one documented instance of a Makhnovist pogrom—in the Jewish colony of Gorkaya on the night of 11th–12th May—led to a thorough investigation and the execution of the guilty parties. A speaker at the investigating commission in Mogil characterised the incident as “a rabid, bloody outburst by half-mad people who had lost their conscience.”<sup>63</sup>

After this there were no more instances of pogroms on the territory controlled by the Makhnovists, a point well-established in the literature. As early as January 1919 Makhno himself and his officers took part in savage killings—although arguably not of

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<sup>59</sup> 59 *Oktyabr'skaya revolyutsiya*, 1–2 pyatiletie, Khar'kov, 1922, 520–521.

<sup>60</sup> See M. Goncharok, *Ukaz. soch.* (“Selected Works”), 53–54.

<sup>61</sup> TsDAGOU, F.5, O1., D. 274, L.36.

<sup>62</sup> V. Sul'gin, *Dni*. 1920 g., Moscow: *Moskva Sovremennik*, 1990, 291, 292, 295–296, 298.

<sup>63</sup> TsDAGOU, F.5, O1., D. 351, L.36.

the systematic nature to be found in territory controlled by other regimes.<sup>64</sup> But after that such reprisals against the peaceful population ceased for a long time. The Makhnovists continued to kill prisoners, as did all the warring armies in the region. The Whites hung captured Makhnovists, and the Makhnovists beheaded captured Whites.

The mutual hatred between “peasant” and “gentry” civilizations, based on a cultural rift that went back to the time of Peter the Great, bubbled up to the surface in the bloody carnage of the civil war. The political forces of Russia and Ukraine could not resolve this age-old conflict in any other way, and now the participants in the tragedy were obliged to act with measures adequate to the situation, and notions inherited from their ancestors about the justice of revenge.

Subsequently Makhno came to feel oppressed by this side of the revolution, and he wrote of the harshness of the civil war: “In this harsh struggle the moral aspects of the aim we were pursuing would inevitably be deformed and would appear distorted to everyone until such time as the struggle we undertook was recognised by the whole population as their struggle and until it began to develop and be preserved directly by themselves”.<sup>65</sup> In the spring of 1919, the first union between the Makhno movement and the central Soviet government entered a state of crisis.

The Makhnovists defended their vision of free soviet power, while the Bolsheviks looked on these peasant fellow-travellers with mistrust. The peasants were disappointed: the communists refused to hand over to them the extensive lands owned by the sugar refineries, turning them into state farms (*sovkhozy*). Then, on the 13th April a system of food requisitions was imposed upon the peasantry. In Bolshevik-held territory, national conflicts also played a role: the new communist bureaucracy was drawn for the most part from the urban population, the majority being Russians and Jews. Jews were particularly active, since in the Russian empire they had been barred from state jobs.

The revolution opened up amazing career opportunities that would have been unthinkable in the past. Encountering an unaccustomedly large number of Jews in their capacity as executors of decisions made by the communist government, the peasants easily decided that “The commune is a realm of Yids”. Many peasant uprisings broke out in spring 1919, directed not against soviet power as such, but against the Bolsheviks, and as a rule were anti-Semitic.

A further cause of the increasing mutual mistrust between the communists and anarchists was afforded by the ataman Nikifor Grigorev, who on the 6 May unleashed a revolt in Right Bank Ukraine.<sup>66</sup> On the 4 May Grigorev’s men (then part of the Red Army) launched pogroms against Jews and Bolshevik commissars. The leadership asked Grigorev immediately to put an end to the situation. The ataman was faced with a

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<sup>64</sup> TsDAGOU, D.274, L.12, 25–26.

<sup>65</sup> Makhno, *Pod udarami kontrrevolyutsii*, 87.

<sup>66</sup> Grigorev had been, by turns, a Russian officer, a supporter of the Central Rada, the Hetmanate, and the Directory, and aligned with the Red Army in February 1919.

difficult choice: either to continue cooperating with the Bolsheviks (whom part of his army had already turned against), or to maintain unity in the army through an uprising against the Bolsheviks (with whom he, too, had no sympathy). After some hesitation, he decided to side with his soldiers. On the eve of Grigorev's revolt a representative of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, Ya.

Gamarnik, reported that Grigorev's situation was much more favourable than Makhno's.<sup>67</sup> On the 8 May, Grigorev called in a Universal for an uprising and the creation of a new Soviet Republic in the Ukraine through re-election of all soviets on the basis of a system of national government, in which the Ukrainians would get 80 percent of seats, the Jews 5 percent, and the rest 15 percent.<sup>68</sup> But this was just the theory, and in practice the Grigorevists killed Russians and Jews in their thousands. Sixteen thousand Grigorevists dispersed in different directions, which dissipated their resources, and also extended the scope of the uprising almost to the Right Bank (Zeleny and other atamans had already been fighting further north since April).

The rebels occupied Aleksandriya, Kremenchug, Cherkassy, Uman, Elisavetgrad and Ekaterinoslav, thus approaching Makhno's core territory in earnest. The Bolsheviks were obliged to urgently deploy their forces against the developing "Grigorev front". The anarchists fought on their side—in particular with the (anarchist) sailor Anatoli Zhelezniakov's Red Army armoured train—although they were increasingly critical of Bolshevik policies. At the same time, however, a group of Red Army soldiers who had been deployed against Grigorev began discussing whether they should join up with the ataman. On the 14–15 May, the Bolsheviks launched a counter-attack from Kiev, Odessa and Poltava, threatening Grigorev's scattered forces.

In the second half of May, all the towns Grigorev had seized were cleared of his men. One can agree with Grigorev's biographer, Viktor Savchenko, that "Grigorev proved to have no talent as an officer, lacking as he did the ability either to plan a military operation or to predict the consequences of his actions, and being moreover in a permanent state of anti-Semitic rage".<sup>69</sup> The main threat posed by the Grigorev uprising lay in the fact that many Ukrainians within the Red Army moved over to his side. At this point, however, what the Bolsheviks feared most was a lack of control over Makhno.

Kamenev clearly distrusted Makhno, to whom he sent a telegram, which insisted that in this "decisive moment" he must "Inform me immediately of the disposition of your troops and issue a proclamation against Grigorev... I will regard failure to answer as a declaration of war".<sup>70</sup> Kamenev's attempt to exploit the extreme situation to force Makhno to put his trust unconditionally in the central authorities was unsuccessful. The Batko answered ambiguously: "The honour and dignity of revolutionaries oblige us to

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<sup>67</sup> Volkovinskii, *Ukaz. soch.*, 89–90.

<sup>68</sup> V. Savchenko, *Ukaz. soch.* ("Selected Works"), 113.

<sup>69</sup> Savchenko, *Ukaz. soch.* 119.

<sup>70</sup> Piotr Arshinov, *Ukaz. soch.* ("Selected Works"), 107.

remain true to the revolution and the people, and Grigorev's outburst against the Bolsheviks in the battle for power cannot force us to abandon the front" against the Whites.<sup>71</sup> On the 12th of May, a Makhnovist military congress was held, bringing together the commanding officers and representatives of the various units and the political leadership of the Makhno movement, in order to decide on their strategy vis-à-vis Grigorev. According to V. Belash, Makhno made the following statement:<sup>72</sup>

The Bolshevik government of Ukraine has appointed itself the guardian of the workers. It has laid its hands on all the wealth of the country and disposes of it as if it were government property. The Party bureaucracy, once more hanging a privileged upper class around our necks, tyrannises the people. They scoff at the peasants, usurp the rights of the workers, and do not allow the insurgents to breathe. The efforts by the Bolshevik command to humiliate us and Grigorev's men, the tyranny of the Cheka [the Bolshevik's All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counter-Revolution and Sabotage—A.S.] against anarchist and SR organisations, all speak of a return to the despotism of the past.

(The military staff, in fact, sent a message to Kamenev complaining of the emergence of a party dictatorship). Yet Grigorev took a nationalist position that was alien to the Makhnovists, and the congress decided "immediately to take up armed resistance against Grigorev" pending more information, and meanwhile "to maintain friendly relations with the Bolsheviks". This meeting "on the quiet" also took the decision to expand the Makhnovist 3rd brigade into a division and (with Makhno's and Antonov-Ovseenko's agreement) to begin talks with the Soviet government on according autonomous status to the Mariupol, Berdyansk, Melitopol, Aleksandrov, Pavlograd and Bakhmut districts—in other words, to the Makhno territory and its immediate periphery.<sup>73</sup>

At the same time, Makhno sent his emissaries to the area of the Grigorev mutiny in order to clarify the situation, and, if possible, subvert his forces. This was misconstrued as an attempted to form an alliance with Grigorev; the emissaries were arrested as spies by the Bolsheviks, which meant that the Makhnovists' final decision on strategy towards Grigorev was postponed until the end of May. Makhno's emissaries were, however, released, and were able to acquaint themselves with and report on the results of Grigorev's raids: the bodies of the victims of Jewish pogroms. At the same time

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<sup>71</sup> Arshinov, *Ukaz. soch.*, 109.

<sup>72</sup> TsDAGOU, F.5, O1., D.274, L.21.

<sup>73</sup> TsDAGOU D.351, L.31.

Makhno read Grigorev's Universal, which struck him as chauvinistic. Makhno then issued a proclamation, "Who is Grigorev", which stated:<sup>74</sup>

Brothers! Surely you must hear in these words the sombre call for a Jewish pogrom! Surely you can feel Ataman Grigorev's attempts to tear apart the living brotherly connection between the revolution in Ukraine and the revolution in Russia? We are convinced that the healthy intuition of the revolutionaries will tell them [soldiers who joined with Grigorev's troops—AS] that Grigorev has duped them and that they will leave him once more under the banner of the revolution.

Makhno went on to say that:<sup>75</sup>

We have to say that the reasons behind the emergence of Grigorev's whole movement lie not only in Grigorev himself... Any opposition or protest, indeed any independent initiative has been crushed by the extraordinary commissions... this has engendered bitterness and protest among the masses and a hostile attitude to the existing order. Grigorev exploited this in his adventure... we demand that the communist party answer for the Grigorev movement.

The local anarchist press was even more categorical: "It's no secret to anyone", wrote Ya. Alyi in *Nabat*, "that all the activities of the Bolshevik party are aimed solely at keeping power in their party's hands and not giving any other tendencies the chance to propagate their ideas".<sup>76</sup> The commissars "through their clumsiness and their imperious style have set the insurgents against the Bolsheviks and handed a trump card to the Black Hundreds" and "Only the clumsy and anti-revolutionary policies of the Bolsheviks could have given this opportunity to Grigorev and his company to exploit the dissatisfaction of the masses and lead them into these black, treacherous deeds". Makhno's statement against Grigorev could not alter the Bolshevik leadership's position with regard to the anarchists. The transformation of his 3rd brigade into a division further aggravated relations between the two parties. The Makhnovist army represented a foreign body practically within the Red Army, and it is not surprising that, by February 1919, Trotsky was demanding that it be reorganised on the model of the

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<sup>74</sup> Arshinov, *Ukaz. soch.*, 113.

<sup>75</sup> Arshinov, *Ukaz. soch.*, 114.

<sup>76</sup> *Nabat*, No. 16, 26 May 1919.

other Red units. Makhno replied boldly:<sup>77</sup>

The autocrat Trotsky has ordered us to disarm the Insurgent Army of Ukraine, an army created by the peasants themselves, for he understands very well that so long as the peasants have their own army, he will never succeed in forcing the Ukrainian working people to dance to his tune. The Insurgent Army, not wishing to spill fraternal blood, avoiding clashes with the Red Army, but submitting only to the will of the workers, will stand guard over the interest of the workers and lay down arms only on the orders of the free all-Ukrainian Congress of Labour through which the workers themselves will express their will.

Conflicts between the Makhnovists and the Bolsheviks grew. The Makhnovist congresses criticised Bolshevik policies, while the communist leaders demanded an end to the movement's independence. Supplies to the Makhnovists were stopped, putting the front at risk. Bolshevik propaganda reported the Makhnovists' poor state of battle readiness, although later the army commander Antonov-Ovseenko wrote: "above all the facts bear witness that statements about the weakness of the most vulnerable place—the district of Gulyai-Pole, Berdyansk—are untrue. On the contrary, precisely this corner turned out to be the liveliest on the whole Southern Front (according to the April–May reports). And this is not of course because we were better organised and equipped in military terms but because the troops here were directly defending their own homes".<sup>78</sup>

Makhno's decision to transform his excessively swollen brigade into a division was construed by the Bolsheviks as a lack of discipline, and their Southern Front commanders finally took the decision to crush the Makhnovists. The Bolsheviks clearly overestimated their own strength, all the more so since it was precisely at this point that Denikin's forces launched an attack.<sup>79</sup> They struck the junction of the Makhnovists and the Red Army just at the moment that the Bolsheviks were attacking the Makhnovist rear. To resist the pressure on both fronts was impossible.

On 6 June 1919 Makhno sent a telegram to the Bolshevik leadership, stepping down from his position in an attempt to avert conflict, and asking that "a good military commander who, having acquainted himself through me with our business here, would be able to receive from me the command of the division".<sup>80</sup> On the 9 June he

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<sup>77</sup> TsDAGOU, F.5, O1., D.153, L.116–117.

<sup>78</sup> *Antonov-Ovseenko, Zapiski o Grazhdanskoi voine*, vol. .4, 331.

<sup>79</sup> Cf. Aleksandr Shubin, *Anarkhiya—mat' poryadka. Nestor Makhno kak zerkalo Rossiiskoi revolyutsii*, Moscow: Eksmo, 2005, 202–212.

<sup>80</sup> TsDAGOU, F.5, O1., D. 351, L.77.

telegraphed Lenin, repeating the offer and complaining that “the Central Government regards all insurgency as incompatible with its governmental activity”, and had set itself on a path that would “lead with fateful inevitability to the creation of a special internal front, on both sides of which will be the working masses who believe in the revolution... an enormous and never-to-be-forgiven crime before the working people”.<sup>81</sup>

The Bolsheviks attempted to arrest Makhno, but with a small detachment he evaded his pursuers. The Cheka then shot some of the Batko’s staff, including their own envoy, chief of staff Ozerov. Recognising that this was the end for his staff, Makhno embarked on a partisan war in the rear of the Reds, who had launched a military campaign against the Makhnovist region.

### **PARTISAN WAR IN THE REAR OF THE REDS AND WHITES**

Makhno seems to have tried to keep his distance from the rear of the Red Army in order not to hinder unduly their defence against Denikin. According to the memoirs of Voline (who joined Makhno’s army and became head of the culture and enlightenment commission of the VRS), Makhno said that ‘Our main enemy, comrade peasants, is Denikin. The communists after all are still revolutionaries’. But he added: “We’ll be able to settle our scores with them later”.<sup>82</sup> Nevertheless, on 12th June Makhno unsuccessfully attacked Elizavetgrad, which was occupied by the Red Army. On the following day, the Makhnovists encountered the remnants of Grigorev’s detachments.

The first encounter left no doubt as to Grigorev’s intentions: “When Grigorev Said... do you have any Yids, somebody answered that we did. He declared: ‘then we’ll beat them up’”, recalled Chubenko.<sup>83</sup> United on the need to fight both the Bolsheviks and Petliura’s men, the ataman could not agree on the question of the Whites: “Makhno said that we would beat up Denikin. Grigorev objected to this... he had not yet seen Denikin and was therefore not planning to fight him”.<sup>84</sup> To this Makhno made cautious objections, implying that he had only slight disagreements with the Grigorev Universal. Makhno’s actions were explained at a meeting of his staff, discussing their strategy in relation to Grigorev:<sup>85</sup>

Makhno started saying that, come what may, we had to unite, since we didn’t yet know what kind of people he had, and we would always be able to shoot Grigorev. We needed to capture his people: they were innocent victims, so that come what may we had to unite.

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<sup>81</sup> TsDAGOU, L.81.

<sup>82</sup> TsDAGOU, D.330, L.14.

<sup>83</sup> TsDAGOU, D.274, L.40.

<sup>84</sup> TsDAGOU, L.41–42.

<sup>85</sup> TsDAGOU, L.42–43.

Makhno succeeded in convincing his staff: the need for more people was obvious, and the prospect of eventually liquidating Grigorev reassured those who opposed any compromise with this perpetrator of pogroms. Grigorev became a Makhnovist commander (Makhno as the chair of the VRS was formally his superior) but his actions soon showed that such a union would discredit the Makhnovists.

On the 27 June, at a meeting where Grigorev was surrounded by Makhnovist officers, Chubenko (according to a pre-arranged plan) launched an indictment. “First I told him that he was encouraging the bourgeoisie: when he took hay from the kulaks, he would pay money for it, but when he took it from the poor and they came to him begging, since this was their last hope, he drove them away... Then I reminded him how he had shot a Makhnovist for grabbing an onion from a priest and swearing at the priest”.<sup>86</sup>

It was typical that Grigorev should have executed someone for insulting a priest, while Makhno executed for murdering the Jews. However, the main accusation was that Grigorev had refused to attack the Whites who had occupied Pletenyi Tashlyk. The *ataman* attempted to argue but, having understood where all this was leading, seized his gun. The Makhnovists already had their pistols ready and Grigorev was killed. It seemed that Makhno was fulfilling his plan in relation to Grigorev and his men.

They were disarmed, and after appropriate campaigning work incorporated into the Makhnovist detachment. With a sense of a duty fulfilled, Makhno sent a telegram into the ether: “To everyone, everyone, everyone. Copy to Moscow, the Kremlin. We have killed the well-known ataman Grigorev. Signed—Makhno”.<sup>87</sup> While despatching this telegram to the Kremlin, Makhno also issued a proclamation concerning the assassination of Grigorev, in which he said: “We have the hope that after this there won’t be anyone to sanction pogroms against the Jews... but that the working people will honourably take a stand [against enemies] such as Denikin... and against the Bolshevik communists, who are introducing a dictatorship”.<sup>88</sup> On the 5 August, Makhno published a proclamation stating that:<sup>89</sup>

Every revolutionary insurgent should remember that all people of the wealthy bourgeois class, irrespective of whether they are Russians, Jews, Ukrainians or any other nationality, are both his personal enemies and enemies of the people. Those who protect the unjust bourgeois order, i.e. Soviet commissars, members of the punitive detachments, extraordinary commissions who drive around the towns and villages and torture working people who don’t wish to submit to their tyrannical dictatorship.

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<sup>86</sup> TsDAGOU, L.46–47.

<sup>87</sup> Kubanin, *Ukaz. soch.*, 83.

<sup>88</sup> Quoted in Goncharok, *Ukaz. soch.*, 59.

<sup>89</sup> Makhno, *Vospominanija*, 154–155

Every insurgent is under obligation to arrest representatives of these punitive detachments, extraordinary commissions and other organs for enslaving and persecuting the people, and dispatch them to army headquarters, and in case of resistance to shoot them on the spot. But those guilty of using force against peaceful workers, regardless of their nationality, will succumb to a shameful death unworthy of a revolutionary insurgent.

However, it proved impossible to overcome the anti-Semitism of Grigorev's men, and soon Makhno was forced to dismiss these extra troops. He had to find another way to replenish his troops. Under pressure from Denikin, the Bolsheviks were forced to retreat from Ukraine. But the soldiers themselves did not want to retreat to Russia. On the 5 August those units that had been left under the command of the Bolsheviks rejoined Makhno. The Batko was once again in charge of an army of thousands. By late September, the Makhnovists' situation had become critical.

Denikin's superior forces pursued them through the entire Ukraine, pushing them into the Uman district where Petliura's forces had their stronghold. The local population did not support the Makhnovists, who were strangers to these parts. Progress was impeded by the caravan of wounded men. In these circumstances, Makhno entered a temporary alliance with Petliura, who was also fighting Denikin. Having transferred the wounded to his apparent ally (later Petliura, breaking his agreement with Makhno, handed them to the Whites), the Makhnovists turned back and attacked the units of Denikin's Voluntary Army that had been pursuing them.

The sudden strike delivered by the Makhnovists at Peregonovka on the 26–27 September was shattering.<sup>90</sup> One of the enemy's regiments was captured, two fully destroyed. The Makhnovist army broke into the rear of Denikin's army, and moved through the entire Ukraine in three columns in the direction of the Gulyai-Pole district. "Operations against Makhno were extremely difficult. Makhno's cavalry was particularly effective, being at first incredibly elusive; it often attacked our wagons, would appear in the rear and so on". In general "the Makhnovist 'troops' differ from the Bolsheviks in their military skill and fortitude",<sup>91</sup> recounted Colonel Dubego, head of staff of the Whites' 4th division. Denikin's headquarters at Taganrog now came under threat.

The infrastructure of the Voluntary Army was destroyed, which hampered Denikin's efforts to move north towards Moscow. He was forced to redeploy ataman Shkuro's frontline units in order to contain the rapidly expanding zone controlled by the Makhnovists. Having recovered from this first blow, Denikin's army recaptured the

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<sup>90</sup> Makhno, *Vospominanija*, 72–76.

<sup>91</sup> Quoted in *Volkovinskii, Ukaz. soch.*, 133.

coastal towns and turned towards Gulyai-Pole. But at this moment Makhno was plotting an unbelievably daring manoeuvre. “25 October in Ekaterinoslav was market day”, recalled a member of the Ekaterinoslav Committee of the Communist Party:<sup>92</sup>

Lots of carts rolled into town from the steppe, loaded with vegetables and especially with cabbages. At around 4 p.m. a deafening machine-gun battle erupted in the upper market: it turned out that machine guns were concealed in the carts under the cabbages, and the vegetable traders were an advance detachment of Makhnovists. This detachment was followed by the entire army, which appeared out of the steppe, whence Denikin’s army were not expecting to be attacked.

Denikin’s men managed to repulse the attack, but their defences were weakened. On the 11th November Ekaterinoslav passed for one month (up until 19 December) into the hands of the Makhnovists. During this time 40,000 men were fighting under Makhno’s command.<sup>93</sup> In the liberated area, the constructive anarchist project resumed yet again. Multi-party congresses of peasants and workers took place. All enterprises were transferred into the hands of those working in them.

Peasants producing foodstuffs, and workers who found consumers for their products—bakers, shoemakers, railway workers and so on—benefited from this system of “market socialism”. However, workers employed in heavy industry were dissatisfied with the Makhnovists, and supported the Mensheviks. The Makhnovists set up a system of benefits for the needy, which were distributed without undue red tape to virtually all those wishing to receive Soviet money. Using more reliable forms of currency, obtained in battle, the Makhnovists bought weapons, and published literature and anarchist newspapers. The inhabitants of Ekaterinoslav assessed each of the various armies that came to the city in terms of the amount of pillaging that took place. Against the general background of the Civil War, the measures Makhno took against pillaging could be regarded as satisfactory. According to the testimony of one of the city’s inhabitants “general pillaging of the kind one got under the Volunteer Army did not happen under the Makhnovists” and “The reprisals that Makhno himself took single-handed against several robbers caught at the bazaar made a great impression on the population; he immediately shot them with his revolver”.<sup>94</sup> A more serious problem was the Makhnovists’ counter-intelligence service—an out-of-control organ that permitted

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<sup>92</sup> *Pyataya godovshchina Oktyabr’skoi revolyutsii*, Ekaterinoslav, 1933, 227.

<sup>93</sup> Kubanin, *Ukaz. soch.*, 162.

<sup>94</sup> Kubanin, *Ukaz. soch.*, 186.

arbitrary violence against peaceful citizens. Voline confirmed:<sup>95</sup>

... a whole string of people came to me with complaints, which forced me constantly to intervene in cases of counter-intelligence and to appeal to Makhno and to the intelligence service. But the wartime situation and the requirements of my cultural-educational work prevented me from investigating more thoroughly the alleged abuses by counter- intelligence.

Makhnovist counter-intelligence officers shot several dozen people, a great many fewer than the equivalent organs of the Whites and the Reds. But there is no doubt that among those shot were not only White spies, but the Makhnovists' political opponents, such as the communist commander M.L. Polonskii, whom the service alleged to be fomenting a plot against Makhno. Makhno later admitted: "In the course of the work of the counter-intelligence organs of the Makhnovist army mistakes were sometimes committed which caused us to suffer spiritually, blush and apologise to those injured".<sup>96</sup> In December 1919 the Makhnovist army was locked down by an epidemic of typhus.

Thousands of soldiers, including their commanders, were temporarily unable to fight. This allowed the Whites for a short time to regain Ekaterinoslav, but by then the Red Army had already entered the region in which the Makhnovists were active. Despite the fact that Makhno's real military strength had significantly declined (due to the outbreak of typhus in the army), the Bolshevik command continued to fear the anarchist forces. It decided to resort to a stratagem of military cunning, behaving as if there had been no execution of Makhnovist staff by the Cheka, no order to hand Makhno over to a military tribunal, and no "Polkonskii affair". That is, behaving as if the old alliance was still in effect.

The Bolsheviks ordered Makhno to leave his district (where the local population supported the insurgents), and move towards the Polish Front. On the way they planned to disarm the Makhnovists. On the 9 January 1920, without waiting for an answer from Makhno, the All-Ukrainian Revolutionary Committee (revkom) charged him extrajudicially. On the 14 January the demand to disarm was issued. On the 22 January, Makhno declared his willingness to "march hand in hand" with the Red Army, while still preserving his own independence. At this point more than two divisions of Reds were already carrying out military operations against the Makhnovists, of whom only a few remained in fighting form after the epidemic. "It was decided to give the insurgents one month's leave", the Makhnovists' head of staff, Belash, recalled. "One Soviet

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<sup>95</sup> TsDAGOU, F.5, O1, D.330, L.116.

<sup>96</sup> Nestor Ivanovich Makhno, *Makhnovshchina i ee byvshie soyuzniki bol'sheviki*, Paris: n.p., 1929, 44–45.

regiment came from the direction of Ekaterinoslav to Nikopol; it occupied the city and began to disarm the typhus-infected Makhnovists... In the city itself there were over 15,000 insurgents with typhus. Our commanders were all shot, whether sick or healthy".<sup>97</sup> An exhausting partisan war began against the Reds.

The Makhnovists attacked the smaller detachments, and people working in the Bolshevik apparatus, and warehouses. They put a stop to the existing food requisition system, handing out to the peasants the bread that the Bolsheviks had appropriated. Soon, there were almost 20,000 soldiers in Makhno's army. In the area where they operated the Bolsheviks were obliged to go underground, emerging in the open only when accompanying large military units.

### **THE LAST ALLIANCE AND THE LAST SKIRMISH**

But Makhno's actions undermined the rear of the Red Army to such an extent that they contributed to the successes of General Pyotr Nikolayevich Wrangel's White Army. Makhno did not want to play into the hands of the landowners, and on 1 October 1920 he struck a new alliance with the Bolsheviks. His army, and the Gulyai-Pole region, were to retain full autonomy, and anarchists in Ukraine were to have freedom to agitate, and be released from Bolshevik prisons. The Makhnovists quickly succeeded in dislodging Wrangel's army from their district. Peace was restored to Gulyai-Pole. Around 100 anarchists came to the district, and engaged in cultural and educational work.

The cream of the Makhnovist troops (with 2400 sabres, 1900 bayonets, 450 machine guns and 32 guns) under the command of Semen Karetnikov (Makhno himself was wounded in the leg) continued their attack on Wrangel under the general command of the Reds. At the same time the Red Army began mobilizing additional troops, and the peasants responded more favourably to this, in light of the alliance between Makhnovists and the Bolsheviks.

A peasant volunteer corps took part in storming Perekop, and Karetnikov's cavalry and a detachment of Foma Kozhin's machine-gunners participated in the assault on Sivash, in which four Red divisions were also involved. With victory over the Whites, new trials loomed for Makhno and the anarchists. On 26 November 1920, with no declaration of war, the Bolsheviks launched an attack on them. Already that morning Karetnikov and his staff had been summoned to a meeting with the Bolshevik commander of the Southern Front, Mikhail Vasilyevich Frunze: here they were arrested and shot. But with Karetnikov's units things were not so simple: they scattered the Red units that had surrounded them and with great losses forced their way through from the Crimea.

North of Perekop the group clashed with superior Red Army forces, after which only

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<sup>97</sup> Makhno, *Vospominanija*, 99.

700 cavalry and 1500 bayonets remained. In Gulyai-Pole there were more grounds for concern. On the afternoon of the 26 November it became known that the Makhnovist staff in Kharkov had been arrested (some of its members would be shot in 1921). On the night of 25–26 November around 350 anarchists were also arrested, including Voline, Mrachnyi, and anarchist instigators of workers' strikes in Kharkov. Units of the 42nd division and two brigades attacked Gulyai-Pole from three sides.

One cavalry brigade attacked the Makhnovists from the rear. After shooting at the Red Army units attacking from the south, the Makhnovists left Gulyai-Pole and headed east. An international Bolshevik cavalry brigade entered the town from the north. The units that had pressed in from the south, suspecting nothing, attacked the cavalry that had occupied Gulyai-Pole. A heated battle broke out between the two groups of Reds, which allowed the Makhnovists to escape.

On the 7 December, Makhno joined up with Marchenko's cavalry detachment, which had pushed through from the Crimea. But at this point, Frunze deployed units from three armies (including two cavalry units) against Makhno. Virtually the entire Red force of the Southern Front fell on the anarchist insurgents, on its way destroying smaller groups that had not succeeded in joining up with Makhno. One small detachment was overwhelmed along the way by partisan units that had survived the first blow.

The Makhnovists were also joined by soldiers from Red Army units that they defeated. After several unsuccessful attempts to surround the insurgents, a huge number of Red Army troops drove them back to the Andreevka district on the Azov coast. On the 15 December the Red Army command reported to the Soviet cabinet (*sovnarkom*): “continuing our offensive from the south, west and north on Andreevka, our units after a battle captured the outlying districts of this point; the Makhnovists, squeezed from all sides, bunched together in the centre of the settlement and continue stubbornly to hold the line”.<sup>98</sup>

It seemed that the Makhnovist epic had drawn to a close. However, Frunze had not reckoned with the unique character of the Makhnovist army. Having explained the task, Makhno dispatched his army in all four directions, in full confidence that it would gather at the appointed place in the rear of the enemy and launch an attack. Moreover, the Makhnovist army was highly mobile: it could move almost entirely on horseback and in machine-gun carts, achieving speeds of up to 85 kilometres a day.<sup>99</sup>

All this helped the Makhnovists, on the 16 December, to escape from the trap that Frunze had prepared. “Already by this time, during the battle, small groups of Makhnovists evaded our units and stole into the north-east... the Makhnovists approached the village and opened confused fire in the darkness, thereby successfully

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<sup>98</sup> *Russian State Archive of Social-Political History* (RGASPI), F.5, O1, D.2475, L.10.

<sup>99</sup> Or 80 versts.

causing panic among the Red Army units and forcing the latter to scatter”,<sup>100</sup> recalled a Red Army officer. Hunkered down in their machine gun carts, the Makhnovists emerged into a strategic space from which to threaten oncoming Red Army units, who had never imagined that the enemy would break out of its encirclement. The Bolsheviks’ inability to defeat the Makhnovists by military means prompted them to step up Red Terror.

On 5 December, the armies of the Southern Front were given the order to carry out comprehensive searches, to shoot any peasants who did not hand in their weapons, and to impose contributions on villages within whose precincts Red Army units had been attacked. This purge of the Makhno movement even affected those who had subsequently moved over to the Communist Party. Thus at the end of December the entire local revolutionary committee (*revkom*) in Pologi was arrested, and several of its members executed on the grounds that they had served under Makhno in 1918 (i.e. in the period of the war with the Germans).

In order not to unnecessarily endanger the people of his territory, Makhno crossed the Dnepr in December and moved deep into the Right Bank Ukraine. This move seriously weakened the Makhnovists: they were not known in these parts, the area was unfamiliar, and the sympathies of the local peasants inclined towards Petliura’s men, with whom the Makhnovists had cool relations. At the same time, units of three Red cavalry divisions moved forward against the Makhnovists. Bloody battles took place in the area around the Gornyi Tikich river.

The Makhnovists moved so swiftly that they were able to take the commander of one of the divisions, Alexandr Parkhomenko, unaware; he was killed on the spot. But the Makhnovists were unable to resist the onslaught of the enemy’s superior forces in alien territory. After sustaining great losses at Gronyi Tikich, the Makhnovists withdrew to the north and crossed the Dnepr at Kanev. They then carried out a raid through the Poltava and Chernigov districts, and moved on to Belovodsk. In mid-February 1921, Makhno returned to his native district. He was now obsessed with a new idea: to spread his movement widely, gradually attracting more and more new territories and creating reliable bases everywhere.

Only thus would it possible to tear asunder the ring of Red Army forces that surrounded his mobile army. But this led to the dispersal of Makhno’s forces. In April Makhno had up to 13,000 troops under his general command, but by May he was able to deploy only around 2,000 men under the command of Kozhin and Kurilenko to deliver a decisive strike in the Poltava area. At the end of June and beginning of July, Makhno’s shock troops suffered a painful blow at Frunze’s hands in Sula. By this time almost 3,000 Makhnovists had voluntarily surrendered to the Red Army.

The movement was melting away before Makhno’s eyes. Once the New Economic Policy (NEP) had been declared, removing the hated impositions of War Communism,

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<sup>100</sup> *Sbornik trudov voenno-nauchnogo obshchestva pri VoЕННОI akademii*, Moscow 1921, 219.

many peasants no longer wanted to fight. But Makhno had no intention of being captured. With a small detachment of a few dozen men he managed to cross the entire Ukraine and reach the Romanian border. Several cavalry divisions attempted to track down this detachment, but on 28 August 1921 it made its way across the Dnestr to Bessarabia. Once in Romania, the Makhnovists were disarmed by the authorities. Nestor and his wife Galina Kuzmenko settled in Budapest.

The Bolsheviks demanded that he be handed over, and in April 1922 Makhno chose to move on to Poland. Here, too, Soviet diplomats sought to have him extradited as a criminal. Meanwhile, Makhno did not conceal his views, continuing to campaign for free soviet power, and for safety's sake the Polish administration sent this group of Russian anarchists to a camp for displaced persons. The Poles suspected Makhno of attempting to foment rebellion in Eastern Galicia in favour of the Soviet-ruled Ukraine.

The prosecutor of the Warsaw circuit court was evidently not interested in investigating in detail the disagreements among the revolutionaries, and came to his own interpretation of Makhno's statements in support of the soviets, revolution, communism and the free self determination of Ukrainians in Eastern Galicia. On 23 May 1922 criminal charges were brought against Makhno.

On 25 September 1922 Makhno, his wife, and two of their comrades, Ivan Khmara and Ya. Dorozhenko, were arrested and sent to Warsaw prison. On the 27 of November, Makhno stood before a court for the second time in his life. He was accused of contacts with the Soviet mission in Warsaw, and with planning an uprising. When the absurdity of this charge became obvious, the prosecutor started arguing that Makhno was not a political émigré but a bandit. There was always the threat that Poland would use the prisoners as small change in the diplomatic game and hand them over to the Bolsheviks.

The criminal charges were not proved, and on 30 November Makhno was acquitted. He settled in Toruni, where he began to publish his memoirs and prepare for new battles. At the same time Arshinov published the first History of the Makhnovist Movement in Berlin.<sup>101</sup> With Makhno openly declaring his intention to pursue armed struggle against the Bolsheviks, the Polish government expelled him from the country in January 1924. By this time it was clear that any attempt in the near future to foment rebellion on Soviet territory was doomed to failure. Makhno crossed Germany to Paris, where he lived the remainder of his days

## CONCLUSIONS

Makhno's final years were not as stormy as his earlier days, but there was none of the quiet fading away that marked the lives of many émigrés. In Paris Makhno found himself at the centre of political discussions, and once more "got on his horse". The

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<sup>101</sup> Arshinov, *History*.

French anarchist Ida Mett recalled that Makhno<sup>102</sup>

... was a great artist, unrecognisably transformed in the presence of a crowd. In a small gathering he had difficulty expressing himself, since his tendency to loud speech-making seemed comical and inappropriate in intimate surroundings. But no sooner did he appear in a large auditorium than one saw a brilliant, eloquent, self-confident orator. Once I was present at a public meeting in Paris where the question of anti-Semitism and the Makhno movement was being discussed. I was deeply struck on that occasion by the power of transformation of which this Ukrainian peasant was capable.

Makhno became, with Arshinov and others, one of the authors of the *Organisational Platform of the General Union of Anarchists*: this advocated anarchist struggle on the basis of tight theoretical and organisational unity and provoked heated debates in international anarchist circles in 1926–31.<sup>103</sup> Makhno spent his last years in a one-room apartment in the Parisian suburb of Vincennes. He suffered from severe tuberculosis, and was badly troubled by the wound in his leg. He worked as a carpenter, stage-hand and factory worker, and his wife supported the family by working as a laundress in a boarding house.

Sometimes Makhno wandered the streets. Left-wing organisations held meetings against fascism which at times led to clashes. Given Makhno's character, it is quite possible that he took part in some of these. For a seriously ill sufferer from tuberculosis, this was mortally dangerous. His health deteriorated, and he died on 6 July 1934. Galina and their daughter, Helena, were later deported to Germany as forced labour, and Galina got a further sentence of hard labour under the Soviets after they occupied Germany.

Makhno remains in history as a rebel and the personification of the distinctive nature of the revolution and the civil war in Ukraine. At the same time he was an internationalist and a mirror of the whole Russian revolution—not only its Ukrainian theatre—with its tragic collision between the communist agenda and the primordial spirit of the people, a man who sought to synthesise struggles against all authoritarianism and domination with a class-based social revolution via the anarchist project.

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<sup>102</sup> Makhno, *Vospominanija*, 129.

<sup>103</sup> Cf. Aleksandr Shubin, *Anarkhistskii sotsial'nyi eksperiment. Ukraina i Ispaniya. 1917–1939*, Moscow: Institut vseobshchei istorii RAN, 1998, 106–133.

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