

Anti-Semitism and the Makhnovists



Malet finds that - despite false allegations - Makhno was not anti-Semitic and that incidents of anti-Semitism among the Makhnovists were less than in rival military forces, including the Bolshevik Red Army.

An anarchist who later turned Bolshevik nailed the lie of Makhno's anti-Semitism, though this does not necessarily mean that the Makhnovschyna was also free from it. Makhno, Teper said, was neither nationalist nor anti-Semitic. Another anarchist who spent some time in Palestine between the war convinced some of her fellow Ukrainian Jews that Makhno had not been a perpetrator of pogroms by saying that if he had been, so had she, and by refuting their erroneous and highly variable personal descriptions of him. Makhno was deeply concerned by the accusations of anti-Semitism against himself and the movement. In June 1926 he had a debate in a Paris club with a novelist named Kessel who had written a romanticised story about Makhno, on the subject. In an article republished at the time of his death, Makhno said:

I challenged for the first time the Jews - bourgeois, socialist, and Yanovski (Soviet) type anarchists - who accused both myself and the revolutionary peasant and worker liberation movement of the Ukraine of having made pogroms against the Ukrainian Jews. I have told them that, instead of spreading this wicked calumny, they would do better to state frankly where and when I or my insurgents provoked or took part in pogroms. Up to the present, such proofs have not been forthcoming.[1]

Even apart from these sources, there is overwhelming evidence that Makhno himself was not anti-Semitic. Antonov states that in the spring of 1919 there were no grounds for accusing Makhno on this, who was rather fighting anti-Semitism as much as he could. Antonov reprints an appeal put out at the time against anti-Semitism by the Hulyai Pole RVS executive committee over the signatures of Makhno and Veretelyk. Alexander Berkman, on his tour through Russia and the Ukraine with the train of the newly formed Museum of the Revolution in 1920, spoke with the daughter of his host in Mykolaiv. She had heard Makhno speak there, threatening merciless punishment for any pogrom-maker. On 5 August 1919, *Izvestiya* reported the killing of Hryhoriyiv and quoted the resolution at the meeting afterwards, in which one of the charges against Hryhoriyiv was anti-Semitism. Two months earlier, *Pravda* had published a Makhno appeal against pogroms. Even Denikin, while alleging that the insurgents were anti-Semitic, said that Makhno himself was not.

Most of the allegations are of a very vague and general nature, and the authors concerned not very reliable. One not only suggested that Makhno had murdered and tortured thousands of Jews and destroyed all the Jewish colonies in the southern Ukraine, but had also issued a proclamation against pogroms because of pressure from Petliura, in turn pressurised by the Western Allies of the Great War! Kessel tells a similar tale.

The numerous orders and appeals of Makhno against pogroms were not issued merely for appearances. It will be clear from the above that any incidents (we shall refer to a few later) in the

Makhnovschyna took place against Makhno's own strong beliefs, inclinations, and orders. In this respect he stands out from the other otamany in the Ukraine. One author lists Struk, Hryhoriyiv, and Shepel as responsible for many of the pogroms of 1919 (the worst year) and also ascribes a number to other otamany, and to the nationalists: not one is alleged against Makhno. For the period January to September 1919 the Central Committee of Zionist Organisations in Russia gives the following statistics: 210 pogroms in Kiyiv province, 56 in Volyn, 62 in Podol, 23 in Kherson, 1,5 in Poltava, 7 in Chernihiv, and one in the town of Katerynoslav. The worst offenders were the Nationalists with 15,000 victims, then the Volunteer Army with 9500, and Hryhiriyiv; followed by Sokolovsky, Struk, Yatsenko, and Soviet troops (500 victims). Again no mention of Makhno, and it is further significant that almost all these pogroms occurred on the right bank, western Ukraine, where the local otamany and the Nationalists were strong. Very few took place on the left bank, where Makhno's influence predominated, the nearest being in Katerynoslav town and Kherson province: none in the provinces of Katerynoslav or Tavria. Even granted the lower level of Jewish involvement in left bank trade, the almost total lack of anti-Semitic manifestations would show that Makhno's appeals, at a time when anti-Semitism was fast becoming fashionable, did not go unheeded by the population. There were a number of Jewish colonies in the south-east Ukraine.

There was an unfortunate incident during the advance of the Central Powers and Rada on Hulyai Pole. A Jewish volunteer company was won over by the local nationalists. This, together with the treachery of a member of the anarchist group, Lev Schneider, who ripped down the portraits of Bakunin and others in the group's office, led to ill-feeling against the Jews among the local people. On his return in July, even Makhno had a hard time pointing out that the Jews as a race had not been to blame, rather the invaders: Jews, he said, were divided into rich and poor classes, just like any other race.

In February 1919 Makhno called together the leaders of the local Jewish colonies, and, on hearing that there had been a few robberies and beatings, urged them to organise their own self-defence, and gave them rifles and ammunition for this purpose. When there were murmurs at this-continued anti-Jewish feeling in evidence-he and the newly-formed cultural-educational section of the army held a large number of meetings on the subject.

There is other evidence of this feeling. In the first of three known incidents, a detachment of soldiers in the Tsarekostyantynivka area refused to obey their commander, Kurylenko, and plundered Jewish colony no. 2. Makhno does not record any specific action against them, but declared the death penalty for such activities in future. On the very day that Kamenev came to see Makhno, the latter was travelling up the Berdyansk line to meet him at Hulyai Pole. En route at Kyrlyivka station he noticed a placard saying `Smash the Jews, save the revolution, long live batko Makhno!`[2] On finding out that the person responsible, the stationmaster Khizny was an insurgent, a personal friend who had fought against the Whites, Makhno nonetheless had him shot soon afterwards. On 12 May 1919, about 20 Jews were murdered at the Jewish settlement of Gorkaya. It is not clear whether insurgents under Dermendji were responsible, or whether local peasants were taking revenge on hearing that three insurgents had been murdered at the colony, but a special commission of Nikolai, brother of the well-known insurgent Olexander Chubenko, Petrov, chief commissar attached to the Makhnovist forces, and three rank and file insurgents, was set up to inquire into and judge the case. It was decided that all the accused, having been found guilty of the pogrom, should be sent to the front. Makhno did not think this good enough, had the case reopened the following day, and persuaded the commission to have the ringleaders shot. In August 1920, after uniting with some nationalist detachments, a pogrom took place in Shishaki village. Makhno had ten to fifteen of the ringleaders shot at once. The Makhnovist paper described the incident as `a pollution on the good name of our movement'.[3]

Apart from certain personal considerations - a Jew helped him to cross the Russo-Ukrainian border in July 1918, and friendship with a number of Jews, including Volin and Yosif the Emigre - the basis of Makhno's hostility to anti-Semitism was his anarchism. Anarchism has always been an international creed, explicitly condemning all forms of racial hatred as incompatible with the freedom of individuals and the society of equals. This view shows in many of the Makhnovist proclamations and leaflets, and is most explicit in 'Order No. 1', issued at the end of July 1919, just after Hryhoriyiv had been dealt with:

1. The goal of our revolutionary army, as also of every insurgent who has just joined it, is a strenuous struggle for the emancipation of all toilers of all Ukraine from all oppression. Thus every insurgent must constantly remember, and put into practice wherever he may be, the idea that there can be no place for those who seek, under cover of the revolutionary insurrection, to satisfy their instincts for profit, violence, or looting at the expense of the peaceful Jewish population.

2. Each revolutionary insurgent must remember that the enemies of himself, as well as of the entire people, are the rich bourgeoisie, Russian, Ukrainian, or Jewish; their enemies are all those who defend the unjust regime of the bourgeoisie, such as the Soviet commissars, members of repressive expeditionary forces and extraordinary commissions, who go from town to town and village to village, torturing the toiling people who refuse to submit to their arbitrary rule and dictatorship. Every insurgent is instructed to arrest and forward to the army staff any member of these expeditionary corps, Chekas, or other institutions which aid in the suppression and subordination of the people; in case of resistance, the only alternative is shooting on the spot. On the other hand, all violence against the peaceful toilers of any nationality whatsoever is unworthy of a revolutionary insurgent, and should be punished with death.[4]

If further proof were needed of the low level of anti-Semitism within the Makhnovschyna, and not just Makhno's personal record in the matter, then the continual participation in the movement of both intellectual Jews from outside, and Jews from the local peasant colonies, would provide it. One of the Jewish anarchists who left him in 1919 has stated that she did so because of his distortion of anarchism, not his anti-Semitism or that of his followers. In early 1919, despite the bad experience of the Jewish company in 1918, a special battery was set up, serviced by a Jewish half-company. Some at least of the artillerymen had seen service in the Great War. Makhno had a moving meeting with them just before they left for the front. They later fought stubbornly against the May White offensive, many including their commander being killed.

As in many other revolutionary movements in the Tsarist Empire, the influence of Jews was very strong on the intellectual side. This was largely caused by the anti-Semitic activities of the Tsars. Makhno himself, increasingly preoccupied with military affairs, tended to leave propaganda, including the combating of anti-Semitism, to the intellectuals then arriving in Hulyai Pole. Of the leading members of the cultural-educational section of the army, one, Arshinov, was Russian, the other, Eikhenbaum-Volin, was a Jewish doctor. As already noted, Volin was active in the RVS, involved with 'The Road to Freedom', and in the negotiations over clause four in October-November 1920. Other Jewish members of the section included the printer Aly-Sukhovolski, Yosif the Emigre, and the secretary of the section, Yelena Keller. Yosif was at one time a member of the RVS, and a close friend of Nestor. Kogan, a Jewish colonist, was chairman of the RVS in the first half of 1919, but then left once more to work in a poor Jewish settlement. The head of the kontrrazvedka, Lev Zadov-Zinkovski, was Jewish. The leading anarchist in the Makhnovschyna in 1920, Aron Baron, was also a Jew: Sukhovolski was also active in the movement at that time. When Baron quarrelled with Makhno, there is not even a hint of accusations of anti-Semitism, nor in the resolutions of the Nabat conference in September 1920, at which Baron expressed his disillusion and disappointment in the Makhnovschyna.

Among the more serious allegations of anti-Semitism are reports from Bolshevik activists among the Makhnovist forces in the spring of 1919. Once again, the accusations are not specific. In the second half of March, a special committee of the Supreme Military Inspectorate considered that there was 'anarcho-anti-Semitic' agitation in Katerynoslav, disrupting the garrison; anti-Semitism was on the increase in Makhno's brigade. In mid-April, Lukomski, divisional commissar to Dybenko, reported disorganisation and strong anti-Jewish feeling in the 'Truth' detachment, but does not mention any in the other Makhnovist units, four regiments and the artillery. A propagandist on an armoured train at the end of April stated that political activists were refusing to work in Makhno's units, resulting in banditry, pogrom agitation, and the beating up of Jews. It can be observed that the Bolsheviks might well have found a hostile atmosphere without disintegration and anti-Semitism being necessary causes or consequences.

There are many other similar allegations, and I have been careful to examine those that were either contemporary, or could quote chapter and verse, and preferably both. There is for example the evidence of Igrenyev, a lecturer at Katerynoslav university, who had a Makhnovist machine-gun detachment quartered on him in December 1918. Its commander stated that

Our batko is a real general, a second lieutenant in the Tsarist Army. He's a true communist, not like the Petliurists, who have been bought by the Yids. . . . We only kill Yids and Germans - they're the main bourgeois anyway.[5]

This is truth hopelessly mixed up with fantasy. This would be a charitable description of Gutman, Lvovski, Hodgson and others on this subject.

The last word should go to the Jewish historian Cherikover, with whom Volin recorded an interview, but who has also testified independently. Volin records him as saying that

1. It is undeniable that, of all these armies (in the civil war) including the Red Army, the Makhnovist behaved best in regard to the civilian population in general and the Jewish population in particular. I have numerous testimonies to this. The proportion of justified complaints against the Makhnovist Army by comparison with the others, is negligible.

2. Do not let us speak of pogroms alleged to have been organised by Makhno himself. This is a slander or an error. Nothing of the sort occurred. As for the Makhnovist army, I have had hints and precise denunciations on this subject. But, up to the present, every time I have tried to check the facts, I have been obliged to declare that on the day in question no Makhnovist unit could have been at the place indicated, the whole army being far away from there. Upon examining the evidence closely, I established this fact every time, (that) with absolute certainty, at the place and on the date of a pogrom, no Makhnovist unit was operating or even located in the vicinity. Not once have I been able to prove the presence of a Makhnovist unit at the place where a pogrom against the Jews took place. Consequently, the pogroms in question could not have been the work of the Makhnovists.[6]

Footnotes

1. *Le Liberaire*, 3 August 1934.

2. Arshinov, *Istoriya Makhnovskovo Devizheniya*, p. 208.

3. Lebed, D., *Itogi i Uroki Tryokh Let Anarkho-Makhnovschiny* (Kharkiv, 1921) p. 43.

4. Arshinov, *Istoriya Makhnovskovo Devizheniya*, pp. 211-13.

5. Igrenyev, G., 'Yekaterinoslavskie Vospominaniya avgust 1918-iyun 1919g', ARR 3 (1922) 234-43 p. 238.

6. Volin, *The Unknown Revolution, Kronstadt 1921. Ukraine 1918-21* (London 1954), pp. 265-6.

Source; Chapter 12 of *Nestor Makhno in the Russian Civil War*, Michael Malet, Macmillan, London 1982.