

The Makhnovshchina, Nestor Makhno and Anarchist Revolution in Southern Ukraine:

Throughout Anarchist history, and the history of Anarchist Revolutionaries, few individuals stand out as notably as Nestor Makhno. A peasant boy from a typically Ukrainian background under Russian rule, he rose to become the figurehead of a protest and revolutionary movement that marked one of the most successful anti-White and simultaneously anti-Bolshevik movements in the Russian Civil War. Why was he so successful, what drove him to popularity and renown in Southern Ukraine, the former Russian Empire and around the world? And why, when all was said and done, did he seemingly renege on his Anarchist beliefs and make amends with his previous, White-allied reactionary enemies? This piece of research will examine, and detail, the life and times of Nestor Makhno, his movement and what, ultimately, went wrong for both.

Makhno:

Nestor Ivanovich Makhno was born in South-Eastern Ukraine in 1888, at a very opportune moment for revolution in the Russian Empire (Avrich, 1967, Pg. 209). In just under two decades, the Russo-Japanese war (1904-1905) and its humiliating result for Imperial Russia led to the 1905 Revolution, the first real cracks in the structure of the Tsardom. The creation of a state *Duma* laid the groundwork for a more democratic system to emerge later, but also showed that the Tsar and his advisers were coming around to the idea of compromise and liberalisation within Russia. Makhno lived through both of these events as an impoverished peasant boy in the Ukraine, working on farms and eking out a life as a subsistence worker. It was only in the next two decades that he would rise to prominence within the Anarchist movement in Ukraine, the former Russian Imperial lands, and globally. This steep rise to a leading position was perhaps not as unusual as it may seem - afterall, Stalin had been a background figure for most of the buildup to revolution.

When the February revolution removed the Tsar from power, and created the Russian Republic, Makhno was one of many political prisoners held in Imperial prisons that was released. After his return to his home city, he took on a leading role within multiple regional political and union groups. It was in these positions, and in taking a leading role within the local Soviet, that he began to lead armed forces in the appropriation of land (Avrich, 1967, Pg. 210). This was Makhno's first venture into leading an armed force, and it was to quickly become one of his strongest and most formidable skills. Makhno's tactics involved hit and run partisan attacks against weak and disorganised, and often overextended, enemies. Whether these were forces of the White Russian movement, the occupying Central Powers or the Bolsheviks, the fast moving and responsive tactics succeeded in keeping the enemy forces guessing and unprepared for conflict. Following attacks, members of the advancing party would disappear into the local population, acting as farmers or workmen to avoid suspicion. Any repercussions taken against population centres for sheltering, or aiding, those who were involved in attacks on military formations and supply lines would lead only to more resentment towards the attackers and support towards the Makhnoist movement. This style of partisan warfare would be seen time and time again throughout the rest of the Twentieth Century, from the jungles of Vietnam, to the steppes of the occupied Soviet Union behind German lines. This method of fighting suited an army that was smaller and less well equipped than its opposition, and was subsequently one of Makhno's greatest advantages in dealing with occupying forces and enemy positions (Avrich, 1967, Pg. 210).

With the outbreak of open Revolution between the reactionary Whites and Bolshevik Reds, the whole of the former Russian Empire was plunged into a prolonged, complicated and deeply divisive civil war. Most of the fighting, however, took place in the Western reaches of the former Empire, and disproportionately in the Ukraine. It was here that White General Piotr Wrangel's forces fled after their crippling defeats, it is where the Polish-Soviet war played out in its most spectacular moments, and was of course the homeground and turf of Makhno and his movement. Of all the factions that battled for control of this fertile, resource and population rich area, Makhno and his army were initially the most successful. Their first real test was in confiscating and redistributing the properties of rich landowners, with Makhno at the head of "a small band of armed peasants... distributing the land to the poor peasants" (Avrich, 1967, Pg. 210). However, the armistice that followed the signing of the Brest-Litovsk treaty put an end to Makhno's redistribution of land, and saw a huge influx of German and Austrian troops into Ukraine. Understanding that his forces were too weak to mount a successful resistance at this time, Makhno left the region and wandered Russia, meeting with Lenin and other leading figures in the revolution.

While Makhno and Lenin were subscribed to different forms of Marxism - Lenin, a Bolshevik revolutionary and Makhno, an Anarchist revolutionary - their meeting was an important event for both men. Avrich writes in his work *The Russian Anarchists* that Makhno's meeting with Lenin left him "feeling the impact of Lenin's forceful personality" but at the same time "no less hostile to what he derisively termed the 'paper revolution' " (Avrich, 1967, Pg. 211). This divide between the Anarchist and Bolshevik splinters of the revolution would not rear its head just now, but throughout the rest of the armed conflict. After his meetings in Moscow with leading figures in the Bolshevik and Anarchist causes, Makhno returned to Ukraine and began to organise resistance against the Austrian occupying forces and their nationalist allies under Symon Petliura and the Hetman, Skoropadskii. Here was where Makhno's military genius began to develop, and his victories began to mount. Forces under his command succeeded in taking the city of Ekaterinoslav, nowadays Dnipro (Beevor, 2023, Pg. 261), and in expelling the occupying forces of the Central Powers, as well as White, Red and Ukrainian nationalist forces from the region. During this lull in fighting, Makhno attempted reform. To this end, a "series of Regional Congresses of Peasants, Workers, and Insurgents" met to "discuss economic and military matters and to supervise the task of reconstruction" (Avrich, 1967, Pg. 213).

Makhnovist Reforms:

Whilst he had met with the Arch-Bolshevik and head of the revolution in Russia, Lenin, Makhno was by no means a communist, at least in the sense that the revolution defined it. In fact, as we have seen so far, he was more disillusioned by communism. Calling it the "paper revolution" (Avrich, 1967, Pg. 211), Makhno "turned against their dictatorial state Communism later" (Beevor, 2023, Pg. 261). In this sense, Makhno remained more true to the teachings of Marx than many of the revolutionaries who would rise to prominence in the Soviet Union and the hierarchy of the revolution. His beliefs were heavily influenced by those of Mikhail Bakunin and Peter Kropotkin, and the movement advocated for the "nationalisation of all land and its distribution among the peasantry" (McCauley, 1998, Pg. 220), as well as the "federation of local communities [with] far reaching autonomy to regulate their own affairs" (McCauley, 1998, Pg. 220). This system of local movements to redistribute land was something that Makhno had been involved with since the start of his role in the Russian Revolution, as we have seen. The fact that it remained at the cornerstone of his role

during the rest of the conflict shows his ideological commitment to the tenets of Anarchism, or at least his definition of it.

Understanding the root of Makhno's ideology, and that of his movement, is important in how we discuss the successes and failures of both. Makhno grew up in a home that had just recently lost a father, and was reliant on the young children to support and sustain it. This led Makhno down the path, first as a farmhand and later as a worker in a foundry, common foundations for a life in socialist movements in pre-revolution Russian history. With this background, it is unsurprising that he grew to become an anarchist, and additionally opposed to the Bolshevik method of revolution and management of the state. His move towards local control of land, labour and capital is in line with Kropotkin and Bakunin, and allowed him to gain the support of the local peasantry, who had been living under Tsarist rule for centuries. His strong base allowed him to recruit forces numbering "20,000 fighters" (McCauley, 1998, Pg. 220), and to appeal to other guerilla forces, who while previously independent, "accepted Makhno's command and rallied behind his black banner" (Avrich, 1967, Pg. 212).

His prowess as a military leader, and his zeal and devotion to anarchist ideals made Makhno a prime candidate to lead anarchist revolutionary movements in Southern Ukraine. Throughout the rest of the former Russian Empire, there were no other successful anarchist movements against either White, Red or Allied forces. The only exception to the rule is, possibly, the rising in Kronstadt, however that was anarchistic only in the sense that there was no organisational structure, as was present in Makhno's. The Kronstadt uprising lasted only a few days, whereas Makhno remained at large for years, and until his death in 1935 he remained the only successful anarchist leader to have been in power throughout the entire Russian revolutionary period.

Conclusion:

Nestor Makhno was a man with a legacy unlike most others involved in the Russian revolution. His movement was the only anarchist movement within the former Russian Empire that succeeded, even temporarily, in resisting the Reds and Whites. The uprising in Southern Ukraine allowed for reforms, anarchist ideas and projects to happen at a time where it would be otherwise impossible. The resistance that was put up against the occupying forces of the Central Powers, White Russian forces, Ukrainian nationalists and Bolshevik armies was, pound for pound, one of the most successful and, as we have seen, revolutionary. Throughout all this, Makhno was an integral figure. Anthony Beevor describes him as "one of the most extraordinary leaders of the civil war", and as a man who "rapidly proved to be a brilliant and persuasive organiser" whose "reckless bravery and clever tactics" (Beevor, 2023, Pg. 261) made him a legendary figure throughout Russia and the Ukraine.

His belief in anarchism trumped any loyalty that he had to the Bolshevik party and its associates, and his meetings with Lenin proved to him that the bureaucratic approach taken by the communist forces in Moscow would lead back to a "paper revolution". His opposition to the Bolshevik movement eventually led to his removal from Russia and Ukraine, with his appeal to the soldiers of the Red Army to join an anarchistic congress falling on deaf ears, and with his headquarters being overrun by Red Army forces. The crackdown on the Makhnovist movement saw the Cheka secret police forces arrest, or execute, dozens of

anarchists across the entire former Russian Empire, and Makhno escape to several bouts of imprisonment in Romania, then Poland and finally, to Paris.

While Makhno was a typical revolutionary in many ways - he had been a farm and industrial worker - he rose to a position unlike most of his peers, and successfully led a years-long uprising against all forces involved in the Russian Civil war. His competency as a military leader and ability to lead forces was down, in no small part, to his quick wit and skills in leadership. The impact that this had on the men under his command was massive: it earned him the affectionate nickname *Batko*, meaning father (Beevor, 2023, Pg. 260). His meetings with other leaders within the revolution, including with one of the most powerful and influential figures in the history of the entire Twentieth Century, Lenin, did not change his indomitable belief in anarchist teachings, and reinforced his belief in the methods which he had been leading in Southern Ukraine. As we have seen, his refusal to work with the Bolshevik forces and bureaucrats in Moscow left him in a position that, ultimately, led to his forces being crushed and overrun in Ukraine, and his eventual exile. This, however, speaks not just to his greatest failure but also to one of his greatest strengths and biggest victories - despite everything that he had witnessed and experienced throughout the Russian Civil war and his life, he refused to bow to "dictatorial state communism" (Beevor, 2023, Pg. 261), as many other anarchists chose to do.

His eventual fate, and those of many of his followers and fellow anarchists was sealed by a man who many consider to have been a powerful anarchist in his own right - Leon Trotsky. When Trotsky is discussed, there is often an omission made of his role in crushing the more left-wing and traditional anarchistic factions within Russia and the communist party, which was most prevalent in the aftermath of the defeat of Piotr Wrangels forces - the final deathblow to Makhno's forces, in the wake of their final desperate temporary alliance with the Bolsheviks fighting against them. Trotsky's crushing of the anarchist cause throughout the former Russian Empire did not end in southern Ukraine, and was continued in his destruction of the Kronstadt uprising. Use of the Cheka secret police and the mass arrests carried out in the wake of the Bolshevik victory in the civil war laid the groundwork for what was to become one of the key features of the post-civil war era, and what was to later become the Stalinist era. Makhno was so influential and successful a figure in fighting against Bolshevik tyranny that some of the biggest internal crackdowns until the times of the Great Purge, happened against him, his forces and his movement. Anarchism as an opposition force within the Soviet Union was crushed, finally and totally, in the banishing of Trotsky after the rise to total power of Stalin. The irony seemed to be lost on Trotsky that his role in crushing the anarchist remnants after the victory and his banishment to life in exile. The role that Makhno played in the Russian Civil war meant that he was one of the most dynamic, influential and energetic military, domestic, and political leaders. His personal charm earned him the respect of his men, and made him such a large target for the Bolshevik hierarchy that he had to be eliminated once total victory was assured.

Makhno has a legacy as one of the most successful leaders of any uprising in the entire period of the Russian Civil war. His influence and history of strong leadership made him a force that could stand up against the disproportionately more powerful opposing forces that occupied and fought in the Ukraine throughout the Russian Civil war. His victories made him the prime opposition to the Bolsheviks and their "dictatorial state communism" (Beevor,

2023, Pg. 261), and the only successful leader of any anarchist uprising against Soviet, or White, rule.

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