

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.¹ 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.

¹ This paper, commissioned for this volume, was translated from the Russian by Sally Laird, with the support of the International Institute for Social History and the University of the Witwatersrand. It is drawn primarily from Russian language sources. The reader seeking secondary literature in English and in German may wish to consult A.E. Adams, *Bolsheviks in the Ukraine: the Second Campaign, 1918–1919*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1963; Paul Avrich, *The Russian Anarchists*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1967; Dittmar Dahlmann, *Land und Freiheit: Machnovščina und Zapatismo als Beispiele agrarrevolutionärer Bewegungen*, Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1986; Michael Malet, *Nestor Makhno in the Russian Civil War*, London: Macmillan, 1982; Michael Palij, *The Anarchism of Nestor Makhno, 1918–1921: an aspect of the Ukrainian Revolution*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1976; Victor Peters, *Nestor Makhno: the life of an anarchist*, Winnipeg: Echo Books, 1970; and Alexandre Skirda, *Nestor Makhno: anarchy's Cossack: the struggle for free soviets in the Ukraine 1917–1921*, Edinburgh, San Francisco: AK Press, [1982] 2003. Also of interest is J. Himka, “Young Radicals and Independent Statehood: the idea of a Ukrainian nation-state, 1890–1895”, *Slavic Review*, 4: 2, 1982, 219–235.

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 22 percent of all agriculture in the region.² 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,³ a view that even in the Marxist historiography is regarded as “extreme”.⁴ 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.⁵

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.⁶ 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.⁷ Of these, 860 metric tons were exported outside the province.⁸ 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

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

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

⁴ Yu. K. Strizhakov, *Prodtryady v gody grazhdanskoi voiny i inostrannoi intervetsii 1917–1921 gg.*, Moscow, 1973, 225.

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

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

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

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

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.⁹ 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-yet-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.¹⁰

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 percent in Moscow.¹¹ 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.¹²

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

⁹ M. Kubanin, *Ukaz. soch.* ("Selected Works"), 18–19.

¹⁰ *Vsya Ekaterinoslavskaya guberniya*, 9–10.

¹¹ Kubanin, *Ukaz. soch.*, 11.

¹² *Vsya Ekaterinoslavskaya guberniya*, 42.

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 money-lenders, 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 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.¹³ The workers

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

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.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵

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. 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

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

¹⁵ Makhno, *Vospominanija*, 134.