

NESTOR IVANOVICH MAKHNO*

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Nestor Ivanovich Makhno thought that he was born on 27 October 1889. The birth registry says that on 26 October 1888 a son, Nestor, was born to the family of Ivan Rodionovich Mikhno and his legal wife Evdokia Matveevna. On the next day he was christened. His parents distorted the year of birth of their son, in order to put off giving him up to the Army for longer. Although the young Nestor never entered the Czarist army, his parents' invention saved his life, when his death penalty was changed to imprisonment with hard labor because of his minority. After receiving a basic education, Makhno became a laborer at the Kerner iron foundry.

Makhno's life before 1906 reminds one of the story of the shoemaker who according to his ability was the most outstanding military commander in the world, but who never encountered war in his life. However, in 1906 he joined the terrorist "Peasant group of anarchist communists" – a group of "Robin Hoods" in Gulyai-Polye, attacking landowners and the police. Makhno took part in exchanges of gunfire, and was frequently arrested, but only in 1908 could sufficient evidence to convict him be found.

Nestor awaited the execution of his sentence. He did not know that the bureaucratic organs were still deciding his fate. The forged date of his birth played a deciding role – Makhno was still a minor. This permitted the authorities to take into account that his crimes did not involve anyone's death. With this consideration, Stolypin¹ himself personally authorized the commutation of his sentence to life imprisonment at hard labor.

On 2 August 1911, Makhno was sent to the Moscow central transit prison (Butyrki), where he "settled". At the prison his mutiny continued, and he argued with the jail officials, for which he was frequently sent to an isolation cell. This resulted in tuberculosis, the disease which led to Nestor Ivanovich's death in 1934. During this

¹ Peter Arkadevich Stolypin, Minister of the Interior for Nicholas II (1906 – 1911), charged with countering the revolutionary movement.

time the world view of the young revolutionary was still being formed. Destiny again strengthened Makhno's anarchist views, when P[iotr] Arshinov became his cellmate. Arshinov had formerly been a Bolshevik, but after 1904 was an anarchist-communist and a follower of Kropotkin. Arshinov laid out for Makhno the basic ideology of anarchism, as he understood it.

The collapse of the empire in February of 1917 led to a political amnesty. Makhno returned to Gulyai-Polye. He was supported in his activities by the re-formed *Group of Anarcho-Communists* (which became the GAK – *Group of Anarchist Communists*). The group was composed of his comrades from the pre-revolutionary period. Makhno appeared before the group immediately on arriving in Gulyai-Polye. He determined that the most important goals were “the break up of governmental institutions and the proscription in our region of any right whatsoever to personal property in land, factories, plants or other forms of social undertakings.”

Makhno and the GAK quickly established a system of social organizations under their control: a peasant union (later a Soviet), trade unions, factory committees, committees of the poor, and cooperatives. Soon the Soviet became the single power in these places. Makhno was the chair of the Soviet. At the same time he headed the local trade unions.

On 7 October, 1917 a conflict at the Kerner metallurgical factory (“*Bogatyř*”) was discussed. The administration thought it was possible to raise the wages of all categories of workers by 50%, but the workers themselves insisted on a differential model, under which wages would be raised by 35-70% in different categories in order to approach level rates. After negotiations with the representatives of the trade union, M. Kerner agreed to the union's terms.

Makhno's union gained great influence in the region. In October, the workers of the “Trishchenko & Company” mill, who had not joined the union, applied to the organization with a request “to compel the owners” to raise wages. It is probable that Makhno, who combined direction of the union with leadership of the strongest local political group (an armed group at that), used the method of “compulsion” of the entrepreneurs to observe the rights of the workers under conditions of escalating inflation. However, it was not Makhno's intent to use such “American” methods to

benefit workers who had not joined the union. The “union boss” considered the interests of his organization, and demonstratively refused the request of the workers at the Trishchenko mill, on the grounds that they had not joined the union. In this way Makhno stimulated growth of the membership: In order to make use of his protection, the workers had to join the organization. The case of the workers at the Trishchenko mill nudged Makhno to make membership in the union obligatory, while transforming the union into an organ that could give orders to the administration in the social sphere. On 25 October, 1917 (the day of the Bolshevik revolution in Petrograd), corresponding to a decision of the assembly of works of 5 October, the union board resolved:

To require the owners of the named mill to carry out work in three shifts of 8 hours, and to accept needed workers from the union. Workers who did not belong to the union are charged with the obligation to immediately join the union, failing which they risk losing the support of the union.

This syndicalist reform nearly eliminated unemployment in the region and strengthened the organizational support of the Gulyai-Polye regime. A course was set for the general introduction of an 8-hour working day.

Peasants were drawn to Gulyai-Polye for advice and help from the neighboring volosts (administrative districts). The peasantry wanted to seize the land of the large landowners and the kulaks (rich peasants). Makhno presented this demand at the first sessions of the regional Soviet, which were held in Gulyai-Polye. The additional proposal of the anarcho-communists to unite in communes was unsuccessful, although Makhno himself and his young wife Anna worked on a commune. The agrarian program of the movement proposed the liquidation of the property of the landowners and kulaks “in land and in those luxurious estates, which they could not work with their own labor.” The landowners and kulaks retained the right to manage, but only with their own labor.

By June the peasants had stopped paying rent, violating thereby the directives of the government officials. The immediate introduction of the agrarian transformation, however, did not succeed. At first they were held up by the sharp conflict with the Uyezd commissar of the Provisional government B. Makhno, and then by the harvest. They put off their fundamental reforms until spring in order not to disrupt production. In

August Makhno implemented the elimination of land titles. According to Makhno's memoirs "at this time they limited themselves to refusing to pay the rent, taking land under the authority of the land committees, and placing livestock and equipment under guard in the face of the managers, so that the owners could not sell off the inventory." Even this reform had rapid results. The peasant worked on the former landowner's land not out of fear, but conscientiously, collecting the biggest harvest in the Gubernia. On 25 September the congress of Soviets and peasant organizations in Gulyai-Polye proclaimed the confiscation of the landowners land and its transformation into social property.

In the spring of 1918, the German attack on Ukraine began. Makhno prepared for resistance, but in his absence from Gulyai-Polye a nationalist revolution took place. He had to leave Ukraine. Makhno traveled around Russia, and even visited the Kremlin, where he met with Lenin. The Bolshevik leader made a big impression on Makhno, but their views did not coincide.

On 4 July 1918, Makhno, assisted by the Bolsheviks returned to his native land and drew together a small partisan detachment, which on 22 September began military operations against the Germans. The first battle of Makhno's detachment was in the village of Dibrivka (formerly Mikhailovka) on 30 September. Makhno's forces united with a small detachment under Shchus, which had been earlier engaged in partisan struggle. With a troop of 30 fighters Makhno managed to defeat the superior forces of the Germans. The authority of the new detachment grew in the area, and Makhno himself was given the honorific "batko" (father). When the German revolution broke out in November of 1918, the Germans left Ukraine and a broad region of Priazovya came under Makhno's control. For a short time the "batko" even took one of the greatest cities of Ukraine, Yekaterinoslav, but because of differences with his Bolshevik partners he could not hold the city from the attacking Petlyurovists².

At this time Makhno took steps to convert the movement from a destructive peasant uprising to an organization that would become the supreme authority in the territory controlled by it. Conflicts intensified between Makhno and some of his commanders. In

² Followers of the Nationalist anti-semite Petlyurov.

response to recurring savagery of the semi-independent commander Shchus against German colonists, Makhno arrested him and promised to shoot him. Shchus, who until recently had demonstrated his independence from Makhno, could no longer resist the “batko” whose power in the region at this time rested not only on military force: “Shchus gave his word not to repeat the murders and swore his loyalty to Makhno” remembers Chubenko. In consequence, Makhno was able to maintain firm discipline within the command structure. Thus, one of the colleagues of Kamenev remembered Makhno’s style of leadership in command debates, at the time of a visit of the president of the Council of Labor and Defense (STO, whose president was Kamenev) to Gulyai-Polye: “Making little noise he threatened them: ‘I will expel!’” The first social-political organization implementing the policies of Makhno and influencing them was the Union of Anarchists, which originated on the basis of the GAK and a number of other anarchist groups. Many Makhnovist commanders joined the group, as well as anarchists who arrived in the region. Having taken a relatively stable territory, Makhno decided that the time had come to return to the social-political system of 1917, and to change the accidental anarchist-military circle into a reliable democratic institution – the Military-Revolutionary Council (VRS). Towards this end, the first congress of regional soviets was called for 23 January in greater Mikhailovka (the numbering of the conferences in 1919 ignored the forums of 1917).

As in 1917, the congress considered the Makhnovist movement as the ultimate authority. Their decisions came into effect in this or that region after acceptance by the village assemblies. In 1919 there were three such congresses (23 January, 8-12 February, 10-29 April). Their resolutions, which were accepted after heated discussion, were in harmony with anarchist ideas:

In our struggle of rebellion we need a single fraternal family, which will defend land, truth and freedom. The second regional congress of front line soldiers emphatically calls our peasant and worker comrades, that they, as they stand at their posts, and without compulsive orders and decrees, build a new, free society against the tyrants and oppressors of the entire world, without rules, without oppressed slaves, without rich and without poor.

The delegates of the congress strongly denounced the “parasitical officials” who were seen as the source of the “orders of compulsion.”

The most important organ of power was Makhno's staff, which involved itself even in educational work, but all of its civil activity (formal and military) fell under the control of the executive organ of the congress – the Military Revolutionary Council (VRS).

The Bolshevik V. Antonov-Ovseenko, who visited the region in may of 1919, reported:

Juvenile communes and schools have been set up. Gulyai-Polye is one of the most cultured centers of the New Russia. There are three middle educational facilities, etc. Makhno's efforts opened 10 hospitals for children, organized workshops for the repair of weapons and supplied bolts for guns.

Children learned reading and writing, practiced military exercises, predominantly in the form of war games (sometimes very fierce ones). But the basic educational work was conducted not with children, but with adults. The cultural-educational work of the VRS, comprising education and agitation of the population, was staffed by anarchists who came into the region and by left SRs. Freedom of agitation was preserved for all of the other left parties, but the anarchists dominated ideologically in the region.

The ideology of the movement was determined by the views of Makhno, and those of Arshinov, who had come to him. Makhno called his views anarchist-communist in the "Bakuninist-Kropotkinist sense". Later Makhno proposed the following State-Society structure: "The sort of system I have conceived is only in the form of a free soviet system, under which the entire county is covered by local, totally free and independent social self-governance of the toilers". At the end of 1918 a delegation of railroad workers came to Makhno. The workers, according to Chubenko's account,

asked how they would relate to the organizations of power. Makhno answered, that they needed to organize a Soviet, which should not be dependent on anyone, that is, a free Soviet, not dependant on any party. They then applied to him for money, since they were absolutely without any funds, and they needed money to pay the wages of the workers, who had gone unpaid for several weeks. Without saying a word to them in reply, Makhno ordered that 20,000 be given to them, and this was done.

On 8 February 1919, in his proclamation, Makhno advanced his goal along these lines. "The construction of a true Soviet system, under which the Soviets, elected by the workers, will be a servant of the people, executing those laws and those orders which

the workers themselves have written at a Ukrainian national congress of workers...” A voluntary mobilization, announced at the second congress, led to a change of the semi-independent troops of the “batko” to an organized militia with a single command. The troops were maintained by the region itself. On Makhnovist territory only a single instance of a pogrom, with which the history of the civil war³ is replete, occurred. The guilty were apprehended and shot.

Corresponding to the decision of the third congress of soviets, each settlement had to furnish a regiment (80-300 men), which then would supply itself with arms, elect command, and march off to the front. People who had long known one another fought together and trusted the commander. The countryside, which had furnished the regiment, was glad to provision it – after all, the regiment consisted of the relatives of the peasants. The soldiers, for their part, knew that to retreat 100 kilometers meant to place their own huts under threat.

Meanwhile, the Makhnovists, who had by the beginning of November taken a few thousand poorly-armed Priazov insurgents into the ranks, were suffering from a shortage of ammunition and rifles. After a few days of battle with the Whites their ammunition was exhausted. They were driven back to Gulyai-Polye. They did not want to surrender their ‘capital’. From 24 January to 4 February they waged a bitter fight with variable result.

Despite conflicts with the Bolsheviks, the Makhnovists were doomed, under the developing circumstances, to a union with them. The only possibility of ammunition and weapons was provided by the Red Army. By the beginning of January, Makhno had ordered A. Chubenko: “A unification with the Red Army might work. Rumor has it that the Red Army has taken Belgorod and gone on the offensive along the entire Ukrainian front. Arrange a meeting with them and conclude a military alliance.” Makhno did not give Chubenko the authority to conduct any sort of political negotiations with the Reds, and the emissary of the “batko” limited himself to the declaration that “we are all marching for Soviet power.” After negotiations with Dybenko on 26 January, cartridges were provided to the Makhnovists, which permitted them on the 4th to go back on the

³ Civil War – ‘The Whites’ organized counter-revolutionary armies under Kolchak, Wrangel and Deniken, which invaded Russia from the North, South and East.

offensive. Orekhov and Pologa were taken, and 17 February the Makhnovists took Bamut. The Makhnovists joined the first Zadneprovski Division as the Third Brigade, under the command of Dybenko.

The Bolshevik rifles permitted the arming of those peasant reinforcements who were waiting their turn. As a result, the Third Brigade of the First Zadneprovski Division began to grow by leaps and bounds, and outstripped in numbers even the Second Ukrainian Army, in the ranks of which the Third Brigade had most recently fought. If Makhno had about 400 fighters in January, in the beginning of March he had 1,000, in the middle of March 5,000, and in April 15-20,000. Reinforced as a result of the “voluntary mobilization”, the Makhnovist brigade launched an offensive in the South and East. Initially the Red commanders were skeptical towards the Makhnovist formation. “At Berdyanska the matter was tobacco. Makhno shed tears and screamed about support”. A week later, having covered 100 km in battle over a month and a half, the Makhnovists flooded into Berdyanska. Denikin’s western bulwark was liquidated.

At the same time, other Makhnovist units fell back a similar distance to the eastern front, and entered Volnovakha. The Makhnovists seized about 90,000 puds of bread from the White echelons, and distributed it to the starving workers of Petrograd and Moscow.

The Makhnovist Army was a foreign body in the RKKK⁴, and it is not surprising that in February L. Trotsky demanded that it be transformed to the model of the other Red units. Makhno answered:

The Autocrat⁵ Trotsky commanded that the Insurgent Army of Ukraine, created by the peasants themselves, be disarmed, since he well understands that while the peasants have their own army which defends their interests, it will not be possible for anyone to force the Ukrainian working people to dance to his tune. The Insurgent Army does not want to spill fraternal blood and has avoided clashes with the Red Army. It is, however, subject only to the will of the toilers, and will stand on guard for the toilers, and will only lay down its arms on

⁴ The Workers’ and Peasants’ Red Army, under the leadership of L.D. Trotsky.

⁵ Makhno uses the term “Самодержавец” here, an official title of the Czar, and doubtless intended to evoke the memory of Czarist excess.

the orders of the free Ukrainian Workers Congress, in which the toilers' will is expressed.

The conflicts between the Makhnovists and the Bolsheviks grew. The Makhnovist congress criticized the politics of the Bolsheviks, and the communist leaders demanded an end be put to the autonomous movement. They stopped supplying the Makhnovists, which created a threat to the front. Bolshevik propaganda reported a low military capacity of the Makhnovists, but later Army Commander Antonov-Ovseenko wrote:

first of all the facts will testify that the assertion about a weakness of the most infectious place – the region of Gulyai-Polye, Berdyanska, is untrue. On the contrary, just this corner was the most vital in the entire Southern Front (report for April – May). And this was not, of course, because we were better organized and educated in the military regard, but because the forces there were defending their own hearths and homes.

In order to solve the problem of supply, Makhno decided to transform his excessively extended brigade into a division. This was perceived by the Bolsheviks as a breach of discipline, and the Southern Front Command decided to crush the Makhnovists. The Bolsheviks clearly overestimated their strength, especially since it was just at this moment that the attack by Denikin's forces was beginning. It was impossible to resist pressure on two sides at once.

On 6 June 1919, Makhno sent a telegram to Lenin, Trotsky, Kamenev and Voroshilov in which he said:

While I feel myself to be a revolutionary, I consider it my duty to the cause we have in common, despite such injustices as accusing me of dishonesty⁶, to propose that you immediately send a good military leader, who is familiar with me and the tasks at hand, to take over command of the division. I think that I must do this as a revolutionary, responsible for every unfortunate step concerning the revolution and the people, when he is accused of calling congresses and preparing some sort of attack against the Soviet Republic.

On 9 June, Makhno telegraphed Lenin:

I will send you an account of the central state power in relation to me. I am absolutely convinced that the central

⁶ The transcript of the telegram is somewhat unclear on this word.

state power considers the entire Insurgency inconsistent with its State activity. Incidentally, the central power considers the Insurgency to be connected to me and all hostility to the insurgents is transferred to me...I consider this hostile. The recent conduct of the central power towards the Insurgency will lead to the fatal inevitability of the creation of a special internal front, on both sides of which will be the working masses who believe in the revolution. I believe this to be the greatest crime ever committed against the working people, and I consider myself obligated to do everything possible to avert this crime...The most credible means to avert this impending crime on the part of the authorities is my resignation from the post I now hold.

The Bolsheviks tried to arrest Makhno, but he went into the forest with a small band. The Chekists then shot his staff, including even the chief of staff, whom they had sent, Ozerov. When he found out about the destruction of his staff, Makhno began a partisan war in the rear of the Red lines. He tried to hold back a distance from the rear of the front-line fighters, so that he would not interfere too much at that time with the defense against Denikin. The views of the “batko” at that time are reported by the Red Army soldier P. S. Kudlo. His evidence should be taken with some correction for language:

The Soviet power [he means the central Soviet power – A.Sh.] is not just, with its Chekists, commissars. I despise all of this...The Soviet power allowed the state of affairs in which there were no cartridges, no mortar shells, and as a result of this, we had to retreat.

Makhno accused the Communists of deliberate withdrawal of munitions “to the Soviet of Deputies” and of handing them over to the Whites. Makhno’s strategic plans foresaw the establishment of control over a large territory, in which it would be possible to create a more orderly economic system than had existed to that time. In the report of the soldier this is said thus:

Citizens, when we have the Donetz Basin, we will have manufacturing and in general everything that is needed for the subsistence of the peasant. When we conquer Asia Minor, we will have cotton, when we conquer Baku, we will have oil.

These plans, at first glance Napoleonic, are not military projects (Makhno did not like to lose touch with home), but rather hopes for the world revolution, when the toilers would conquer their countries and establish connections with the Ukrainian peasantry. Makhno hoped for a restoration of a temporary union with the Bolsheviks. According to the

memoirs of V. Voline, who had been in his Army (he headed the cultural educational commission of the VRS), the “batko” said: “Our chief enemy, peasant comrades, is Denikin. The Communists – they are all the same revolutionaries.” He added: “We will settle with them later.” On 27 July, the Makhnovists killed the famous enemy of the Bolsheviks, the nationalist ataman Grigoriev.

Under pressure from Denikin, the Bolsheviks were forced to leave Ukraine. The soldiers did not want to go to Russia. On 5 August, Makhno was joined by his units, who had been under Bolshevik command. The “batko” again had an army of some thousands.

The superior forces of the whites pushed the Makhnovists back to western Ukraine, near Uman. But an unexpected blow, inflicted by the Makhnovists near Peregonovka on 26-27 September was crushing. One enemy regiment was taken prisoner, and two others were completely cut down. The Makhnovist army broke through the rear of Denikin’s forces and moved across all Ukraine in three columns, towards the region of Gulyai-Polye.

Operations against Makhno were extremely difficult. His cavalry operated extremely well. Although at first they were imperceptible, more recently they frequently attacked our convoys and appeared at the rear, etc. In general, the Makhnovist ‘forces’ were distinguished from the Bolsheviks by their capacity for battle and by steadfastness,

reported the chief of staff of the Fourth Division Colonel Dubego. Denikin’s headquarters in Taganrog was under threat. The infrastructure of the volunteer army (of the Whites) was fairly in tatters, which impeded Denikin’s attack on the north, towards Moscow. Shkuro’s unit had to be urgently moved from the front, in order to localize quickly the expanding zone that the Makhnovists controlled.

Recovering from the first attack, the Denikin forces took the cities along the river and deployed at Gulyai-Polye. But at this moment Makhno prepared an unbelievably audacious move. “In Yekaterinoslav, 25 October was a market day”, remembered one of the members of the Yekaterinoslav Regional Committee of the RKP(b).

From the steppe rolled many wagons into town, loaded with vegetables, and especially cabbages. At 4 in the

morning from the upper bazaar, a deafening machine gun battle began. It happened that under the cabbages on the wagons there were machine guns, and the vegetable sellers were actually the vanguard of the Makhnovists. Behind them followed the entire army, coming from the steppe, from which direction the Denikin forces did not expect an attack.

His assault was repulsed by the Denikin forces, but their defense was weakened. On 11 November, Yekaterinoslav came under control of the Makhnovists for a month (almost until 19 December). At this time there were 40,000 men under the command of Makhno.

In the liberated region multiparty congresses of peasants and workers were held. All businesses were turned over to those who worked in them. The beneficiaries of this system of “market socialism” were the peasant producers of foodstuffs, and those workers who found a market for their products (bakers, shoemakers, railroad workers and others). The workers in heavy industry were dissatisfied with the Makhnovists and supported the Mensheviks. The Makhnovists set up benefits for the needy, which distributed the inflated Soviet currency to almost all who wanted them, without unnecessary red tape. With the more secure currency, taken in battle, the Makhnovists purchased weapons and issued literature and anarchist newspapers.

The residents of Yekaterinoslav in the main considered each of the Armies that entered the city to be robbers. Against the general background of the Civil War the measures of Makhno against robbery can be considered successful. According to the evidence of one of the residents of the town

such mass robbery as occurred among the volunteers, did not occur among the Makhnovists. Makhno made a great impression on the population by his personal reprisals with certain robbers who were apprehended at the bazaar. He shot them there with his revolver.

A more serious problem was presented by the Makhnovist counter-espionage unit, an uncontrolled organ that permitted arbitrary rule against peaceful citizens. The leader of the VRS, the anarchist V. Voline stated:

... an entire line of people came to me with demands requiring me to constantly interfere in the affairs of the

counter-espionage and to report to Makhno and the counter-espionage. The battle conditions and the goals of the cultural-educational work prevented me from really understanding the misdeeds, in the words of the complainants, of the counter-espionage.

The officials of the counter-espionage shot some tens of individuals, which is considerably fewer than the corresponding units of the Whites and Reds. However, among those executed were not only White spies, but also political opponents of the Makhnovists, for example the Communist commander Polonsky, who according to the counter-espionage was preparing a conspiracy. Later Makhno recognized: "In the course of the activity of the counter-espionage the organs of the Makhnovist army committed occasional errors, which caused me to feel pain, to blush, and to apologize to the injured."

In December 1919, the Makhnovist army was "hit" with an epidemic of typhus. Thousands of fighters at the center, including their commanders, lost the capacity for battle. This permitted the Whites to take Yekaterinoslav for a short time, but the Red Army had already entered the area of Makhnovist movement activity.

Despite the fact that Makhno's real military strength was significantly weakened (the army being hit with typhus), the Red command continued to fear the batko and decided to use "military cunning" to appear as though Makhno's staff had not been shot by the Cheka and to give orders of his judgement by military tribunal, "the Polonsky Case". The Bolsheviks ordered Makhno to abandon his region (where the insurgents were supporting the local population) and move to the Polish front. They planned to disarm the Makhnovists on the road. On 9 January, without waiting for Makhno's answer, the Ukrainian Revolutionary Committee declared him an outlaw. On 14 January came the demand to disarm. On the 22nd, Makhno declared his readiness to "go arm in arm" with the RKKA, while maintaining autonomy. At this time more than two divisions of Reds had developed battle operations against the Makhnovists, among whom hardly any maintained battle capacity after the epidemic. "It was decided to grant the insurgents a month's leave of absence", recalled the Makhnovist chief of staff Belash.

From Yekaterinoslav towards Nikopol came a Soviet regiment, which took the town, and began to disarm the typhus-infected Makhnovists...In fact there were some

15,000 typhus-infected insurgents. Our commanders were subject to execution, whether they were well or ill.

An exhaustive partisan war against the Reds began. The Makhnovists attacked small troops, workers of the Bolshevik apparatus, warehouses. They instituted “reverse appropriation”, distributing bread taken from the Bolsheviks to the peasants. Soon Makhno’s army was nearly 20,000 soldiers. In the area of his activity the Bolsheviks were obliged to go underground, appearing in the open only when accompanied by large military detachments.

The activity of Makhno so disrupted the Reds’ rear, that it permitted successes of the White army of Wrangel. Makhno did not want to “play into the hand of the landowners”, and on 1 October 1920, he concluded a new union with the Bolsheviks in Starobelsk. His army and the Gulyai-Polye region maintained complete autonomy, anarchists in Ukraine received freedom of agitation and were released from prison. Peaceful life returned to Gulyai-Polye. There were about 100 anarchists in the region, occupied in cultural-educational work.

On 7 November the assembly of workers and employees of Gulyai-Polye were deciding the questions of social regulation. They decided: “enterprises should provide part of their production to the cooperatives for distribution among all members of the cooperative.” On 15 November they considered the prospects of “the constructive work of anarchy” in the region. However, they also expressed the skeptical opinion: “The Bolsheviks will never permit us autonomy, and will not permit that there be a place infected by anarchy in the state organism.” Meanwhile the cream of the Makhnovist forces (2400 Sabres, 1900 Rifles, 460 Machine Guns and 32 field guns) under the command of Karetnikov (Makhno himself was wounded in the foot) were sent to the front. At the same time an auxiliary mobilization began in the RKKA, to which the peasants were more benevolently inclined, in light of the union between Makhno and the Reds. The peasant militia took part in the storming of Perekop, while the Karetnikov’s cavalry and machine gun detachments took part in Sivash’s forced march, which also passed four Red divisions.

The victory over the White forces brought new ordeals for Makhno and the Makhnovists. On 26 November, “without a declaration of war”, the Reds attacked them.

In the morning, Karetnikov and his staff had been summoned to Frunze⁷ for consultations, arrested, and then shot. But with Karetnikov's units things were not so simple – they scattered the Red forces surrounding them, and with great losses broke out of the Crimea. To the North from Perekop, the group clashed with the superior Red forces, and only about 700 cavalry and 1,500 rifles remained.

In Gulyai-Polye there was more cause for discomfort. In the afternoon, the arrest of the Makhnovist representatives in Kharkov became known (the members would later be shot in 1921). On the evening of the 25th and into the 26th about 350 anarchists were also arrested, among them Voline and Mrachny, the instigators of strikes in Kharkov. Units of the 42nd Division and two brigades attacked Gulyai-Polye from 3 sides. A cavalry brigade appeared to the rear of the Makhnovists. After shooting at the Red units that were attacking from the South, the Makhnovists left Gulyai-Polye and went east. Units suspected by no one, pressing from the south attacked the cavalry that was holding the town. A heated battle among the Reds began, which allowed the Makhnovists to break out of encirclement. On 7 December, Makhno was united with the cavalry detachment of Marchenko, which had broken out of the Crimea.

At this time, Frunze launched units of three armies (including two mounted units), against Makhno. Nearly the entire Southern front fell upon the insurgents, wiping out small groups on the road, who had been unable to join Makhno. Some small units on the road remained intact after the initial attacks by the partisan units. Red Army soldiers of RKKA units that had been beaten by the Makhnovists also joined. After a few unsuccessful attempts to surround the insurgents, a great mass of Red Army troops pressed them against the shore of the Sea of Azov in the region of Andreevka. On 15 December the red command reported to the Sovnarkom: “Continuing our attack from the south, west and north on Andreevka, our units, after a battle, overcame the Makhnovists on the outskirts of this place. The Makhnovists were pressed from all sides, and consolidated themselves in population centers, where they continued a stubborn defense.” It seemed that the Makhnovist epic had come to a close.

⁷ Mikhail Vasilyevich Frunze, commander of the 4th Army of the Eastern Front.

However, Frunze did not take into account the absolutely unique abilities of the Makhnovist army. After explaining the goal, Makhno was able to dismiss his Army to the four corners in complete confidence that it would gather itself at the indicated place to the rear of the enemy, and would strike him. In addition, the Makhnovist Army was “motorized” – it was able to move almost completely on horseback and in gun-carts, and had developed a speed of up to 80 versts⁸ per day. All of this enabled the Makhnovists to slip out of Frunze’s trap on 16 December. “Small groups of Makhnovists at this time, at the time of the battle, avoided our units and slipped out to the north-east. The Makhnovists approached the village, and opened a disorderly line of fire in the darkness, which created a fortuitous panic among the Red Army units. This forced them to scatter”, remembered one of the Red commanders. Loading into the wagons, the Makhnovists went along the operational line, destroying the Red units that they met along the way, which could not imagine that the Makhnovists would be able to break out of their encirclement.

The inability to defeat the Makhnovists by military means pushed the Bolsheviks to an increase of terror. On 5 December, an order was given to the Armies of the Southern Front to carry out general searches, and to shoot any peasants who did not surrender their arms. Additionally, indemnities were imposed on villages from whose precincts attacks on the Red units originated. “Uprooting” Makhnovism affected even those who went over to the side of the Communist Party. At the end of December, the “Revolutionary Troika” arrested the entire Revolutionary Committee in Pologa and shot part of the members, on the basis of their service with Makhno in 1918 (that is, during the period of the war with Germany).

In order not to subject his compatriots to unnecessary danger, Makhno crossed the Dniepr in December and went deep into the right shore of Ukraine. The movement to the right shore seriously weakened the Makhnovists – they were not known there, the territory was unfamiliar, and the sympathies of the peasantry inclined to the Petlyurovists, with whom the Makhnovists had cool relations. At the same time, parts of 3 cavalry divisions moved against the Makhnovists. A bloody battle ensued in the area of the river Gorny Tikich. The Makhnovists moved so rapidly that they were able to

⁸ Berst – Russian distance measure of about 1.06 km.

take the Commander of one of the divisions, A. Parkhomenko, unawares. He was killed on the spot. But the Makhnovists could not resist the pressure of superior forces of the enemy on foreign territory. Suffering great losses at Gorny Tikich, they went north and crossed the Dnepr at Kanev. Afterwards, a raid was made across the Poltavsky and Chernigovsky gubernias and onward to Belovodsk.

In the middle of February, Makhno returned home. He was possessed by a new idea – to extend the breadth of the movement, gradually involving more and more land, creating bases of support everywhere. Only in this way could Makhno break up the circle of Reds around his army. Despite the fact that in April under the general command of Makhno there were up to 13,000 fighters, in May he was able to concentrate for a decisive strike in Poltavshchina only about 2,000 fighters under the command of Kozhin and Kurilenko. At the end of June/beginning of July, in a battle at Sula, Frunze did considerable damage to the Makhnovist shock troops. At this time almost 3,000 Makhnovists voluntarily surrendered. The movement was visibly wasting. After the declaration of the NEP, the peasants did not want to be at war. However, Makhno was not ready to be taken prisoner. With a small unit of a few dozen men he broke across Ukraine to the Romanian border. Some cavalry divisions tried to find his unit, but on 28 August 1921 he crossed the Dnestr into Bessarabia.

When they appeared in Romania, the Makhnovists were disarmed by the authorities. Nestor and his wife were settled in Budapest. The Bolsheviks demanded his extradition, and in April 1922 Makhno decided to take himself to Poland. The Soviet diplomatic service there procured his extradition as a common criminal. Besides, Makhno did not hide his views. He agitated for Soviet power and the Polish administration in any case sent the group of anarchists from Russia to a camp for displaced persons. In June 1922, Makhno applied to the authorities to help him immigrate to Czechoslovakia, a more democratic country. But the batko was refused. The Poles suspected him more or less of attempting to raise a rebellion in Western Galicia in favor of the Ukrainian Soviet Republic. The prosecutor of the district court of Warsaw clearly did not wish to inject himself into a disagreement between Russian revolutionaries, and in his own way interpreted Makhno's statement as supporting Soviets, revolution, communism and free self-determination for the Ukrainians in Western Galicia. On 23 May 1922, a criminal prosecution was brought against Makhno. On 25 September, his second wife,

Kuzmenko and two of their comrades in arms, I. Khmar and Ya. Doroshenko, were arrested and sent to the Warsaw prison.

On 27 November, Makhno stood before a court for the second time in his life. They accused him of contacts with the mission of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic in Warsaw, and preparing an uprising. After this, as the absurdity of the charges became apparent, the prosecutor began to claim that Makhno was not a political immigrant, but a bandit. The suspicion arose that Poland was using the captives as small change in the diplomatic game, and would hand them over to the Bolsheviks.

The criminal accusations were not proved, and on 30 November Makhno was acquitted. He moved to Torun where he began to publish his memoirs and prepare for new battles. At the same time in Berlin, P. Arshinov was publishing the first “History of the Makhnovist Movement.” After open declarations by Makhno of his intention to continue the armed struggle with the Bolsheviks, the Polish government expelled him from the country in January 1924. It then became clear that any attempt to raise a rebellion on the territory of the USSR in the near future would not succeed. Makhno got across Germany to Paris, where he lived out the rest of his days.

His last years were not as turbulent as those preceding, yet all the same they were not a quiet dying down, like the life of many émigrés. Makhno appeared at the very center of Parisian political discussions. Here he was again “in the saddle”. The French anarchist [da] Mett remembered that Makhno

was a great artist, transformed beyond all recognition in the presence of a crowd. In small company he could only explain himself with difficulty, and his habit of loud speech in intimate surroundings seemed humorous and out of place. But put him before a large audience, then you saw the dazzling, eloquent, self-confident orator. Once I was present in a public meeting in Paris, where the question of anti-semitism in the Makhnovist movement was discussed. I was deeply astonished then by surprising power of transformation of which this Ukrainian peasant seemed capable.

Makhno became one of the authors of the draft platform of the Union of Anarchists⁹, around which in 1926-1931 keen arguments boiled among anarchists internationally.

In the grim conditions of emigration the batko held himself with dignity: “I very often met with him over the course of three years in Paris, and I never saw him drunk. A few times, I accompanied Makhno, in the capacity of interpreter, to dinners given in his honor by the Western anarchists. Nestor drank from the first glass of wine, his eyes began to sparkle, he became more eloquent, but, I repeat, I never saw him drunk. I was told that in his last years he starved...”, I. Mett remembered. Makhno spent his last years in a one-room apartment in the Parisian suburb of Vincennes. He suffered greatly from tuberculosis, and was much bothered by the wound in his foot. His wife fed the family by working in a boarding house as a laundress. All week he remained alone. He occasionally strolled along the streets. These were turbulent times in the history of France. The ultra-right hungered for power. The left-wing organizations held meetings against fascism, which sometimes ended in clashes. Knowing the character of Makhno, it is not possible to avoid the conclusion that he took part in some of these. For a man greatly suffering from tuberculosis this was a mortal danger.

“In the winter he got worse,” remembered G Kuzmenko, “and around March 1934 we visited him in a French hospital in Paris. On Sundays I often visited him there. I met with many of his numerous comrades there, both Russian and French.” Nestor Ivanovich’s health continued to worsen, and was not helped by an operation in June. G. Kuzmenko remembers the last day of Makhno’s life as follows:

The man lay on a pale bed with half-closed eyes and arms exposed, separated from the others by a large screen. There were some comrades with him, who, in spite of the late hour, were permitted to visit him. I kissed Nestor on the cheek. He opened his eyes and, turning to his daughter said in a weak voice, ‘Daughter, stay healthy and happy.’ Then he closed his eyes and said, ‘Excuse me, friends, I’m very tired, I want to sleep...’ The day nurse came in and asked him ‘How do you feel’. He answered: ‘Bring me the oxygen bag...’ He fell asleep and never woke up.

⁹ Platform of the Union of Anarchists, also known as the Organisational Platform of the Libertarian Communists, drafted by the Dyelo Truda group of which Makhno, Mett and Arshinov were members.

It is hard to imagine how the history of Russia, and perhaps that of the world, might have developed if Nestor Makhno had been executed in 1910. Historical forks in the road sometimes depend on such circumstances. Without a talented leader, there could be no revolutionary army. No Makhnovist “republic” would have been set up at Denikin’s rear, the communications would not have been destroyed, the military forces would not have stretched themselves out. The White army would have broken through to Moscow. The Bolshevik regime would have fallen. But would that other power, the dictatorship built on the revenge of the aristocrats, have been better? The perpetual problem of European history in the 20th Century is the choice between communism and fascism. Without Makhno the forced march of Sivash in 1920 might not have been successful. Without Makhno the military-communist machine of the Bolsheviks would have functioned in a more orderly manner, and who knows, might have broken through to Central Europe in 1919. What of the New Economic Policy of 1921-1929, which taught peace to many? The Bolsheviks might never have come to that, without the successes of Makhno and Antonov, without the Kronstadt uprising, which itself was partly inspired by the Makhnovist experience. A significant part of the antifascist fighters at the time of the Civil War in Spain remembered the name of Makhno, and spoke it on attack. Makhno died, but his model inspired people to resist Red and Brown totalitarianism as it spread across Europe.

Glossary of terms and abbreviations:

Ukrainian honorific nickname, meaning roughly, father.

Batko

Cheka, Extraordinary Commission (initials Ch K, short for чрезвычайная комиссия по борьбе с контрреволюцией, спекуляцией и саботажем – Extraordinary Commission for struggle with Counterrevolution, speculation and sabotage.) Early Soviet organ of compulsion and suppression.

GAK Group of Anarchist Communists

RKKA Workers’ and Peasants’ Red Army (organized by Trotsky) usually referred to as the Red Army.

RKP(b) Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks), the name used by the Communist Party of the USSR during this period.

Soviet	Совет – translates as council, but the term has acquired a specialized meaning in Russian history, indicating a fundamental social institution.
Sovnarkom	Council of Peoples Commissars
SR, Eser	The Social-Revolutionary Party. Revolutionary/Terrorist party. It had strong connections to the peasantry. Left wing of the Party joined with the Bolsheviks in a coalition government. Repressed by the Bolsheviks in the 20s.
STO	Council of Labor and Defense, a State Executive Bureau significant during the Civil War.
Volost	<i>Volost, Uyezd, Gubernia</i> are the provincial entities in Russia, ranging from the smallest to the largest.

*** Translation, glossary and notes by Mark Harris**