

ON THE 10TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE MAKHNOVIST INSURGENT MOVEMENT IN THE UKRAINE

Nestor Makhno

As we know, the Bolshevik leaders' shameful betrayal of the ideas of the October Revolution led the entire Bolshevik party and its "proletarian revolutionary" authority, once in place all across the country, to conclude a disgraceful peace with the German Kaiser Wilhelm II and the Austrian Emperor, Karl, followed by an even more deplorable struggle inside the country against anarchism, first of all, and then against the Left Social Revolutionaries and socialism in general. In June 1918, I met with Lenin in the Kremlin, at the instigation of Sverdlov, the then chairman of the All-Russian Executive Committee of the Soviets. Citing my mandate as head of the Revolutionary Defense Committee in the Gulyai-Polye region, I briefed Lenin on the unequal struggle waged by the revolutionary forces in the Ukraine against the Austro-German invaders and their allies on the Ukrainian Central Rada: he discussed this with me and, having noted my fanatical peasant attachment to the revolution and to the anarchist ideas it encapsulated, he assured me that the soviet authorities had initiated a struggle in the urban centers of the revolution, not against anarchism per se, but rather against the bandits who professed to be its followers:

With those anarchists engaged in organized revolutionary activity, like the ones you have just been talking about, our Bolshevik party and I myself will always be able to speak the same language with an eye to building a joint revolutionary front. It is quite another matter with the social-traitors who are the real enemies of the genuine emancipation of the proletariat and the poor peasantry: with regard to them, my attitude will always be unbending: I am their enemy. The degree of guile and hypocrisy that Lenin exhibited on that occasion is but rarely encountered in a master politician. By that point the Bolshevik authorities had already orchestrated repression against anarchism, in the very deliberate intention of discrediting it in the country. Lenin's Bolshevism had placed an X against every free revolutionary organization and anarchism alone was still enough of a danger to it, for, had it but learned to act in an organized and strictly consistent way among the broad masses of the workers and peasants, so as to steer them to victory in political and strategic terms, anarchism alone could have conjured up all

that was healthy and utterly committed to the revolution in the country and expected to make the ideas of freedom, equality and free labor practical living realities through its struggle. Let it be noted that, vis-a-vis socialists, Lenin employed equally insulting tones.

The Bolshevik authorities' offensive against anarchism and socialism rendered great service at that juncture to the foreign counter-revolutionaries, whose troops were making easy headway into revolutionary territory in the Ukraine and swiftly ousting all the revolutionary fighting detachments led by anarchists, Social Revolutionaries or indeed by the odd Bolshevik. Thanks to this disgraceful treachery by the Bolshevik leaders, the counter-revolution was able in short order to paralyze all revolutionary links between the towns and villages of the Ukraine, before turning to massive repression. In this way, the Ukrainian revolution found itself quite unexpectedly before the gallows of its executioners and was well chastened in this first stage of its development.

Those were dark days filled with bloody horrors. Under the agreements reached with the Central Emperors, the Bolshevik leaders evacuated all the well armed and disciplined revolutionary detachments of Russian workers from the Ukraine, at a time when the Ukrainian workers were poorly armed, direly equipped and compelled to fall back in the wake of their Russian brethren, powerless to confront the revolution's enemies. In sometimes bloody skirmishing, they clashed with the Bolshevik authorities who were refusing them entry into Russia with their weaponry. It was in those days, when all seemed lost, that the revolutionary peasants, united around the libertarian communist group in Gulyai-Polye and dispersed in numerous groups and detachments, also retreated towards Russia, where, they reckoned, the revolution was still on course and might help them recover the strength they needed to tackle the counter-revolutionary invaders again. Unfortunately, even at that stage in the revolution, the Bolshevik leadership could be seen turning clearly against all that was healthy and revolutionary in the toiling masses, who were systematically denigrated to the benefit of their party privileges and the runaway counterrevolution lurking behind them. On the approaches to the town of Taganrog, the Bolshevik authorities set up ambushes of independent revolutionary groups and detachments in the intention of stripping them of their weapons.

This circumstance led the forces from the proud revolutionary region of Gulyai-Polye to break up into tiny groups, some of which made their way home surreptitiously, whilst others gathered equally clandestinely in Taganrog to determine what should be done thereafter.

In Taganrog, I was commissioned along with Veretelnikov (by the group of comrades there) to organize a conference. It went ahead. Its resolutions were short but to the point, in that no participant had decided to continue the fall-back. With the exception of myself, Veretelnikov and three other comrades, all the others decided to rejoin the front lines and work away there discreetly among the peasantry, with the utmost caution. My four colleagues and I were commissioned by the conference to spend two or three months in Moscow, Petrograd and Kronstadt so as to familiarize ourselves with the progress of the revolution in those revolutionary centers, before returning to the Ukraine by the first days of July, to the areas where it had been determined that free Revolutionary Defense battalions were to be organized, the clear intention being not just to fight but also to win.

Alone of my comrades, I was able to make it back to the Ukraine in time: there the Austro-Germans and their stooge, the Hetman Skoropadsky, were indulging their political and economic whims. I found but few of my old comrades there, most of them having been killed or jailed pending execution. Deeply convinced of the necessity of carrying out the task with which I had been entrusted by the Taganrog conference, I made contact with the region's peasants with an eye to choosing from among them persons disposed to commit themselves to the struggle. I had meetings with numerous peasant men and women whom I had earlier had occasion to bring around to my way of thinking.

With their help, I managed to trace certain of my comrades who had escaped the arrests and shootings by the Austro-Germans and the executioners of the revolution, and who were still determined to fight back. Not waiting for our comrades to return from Russia, and undeterred by the risks involved in our sojourns in villages, which were forever subject to raids and search operations by the occupiers and their allies, often followed by the arrest and execution of our most active comrades, we managed quite quickly to get up and running an organization designed to pave the way to the

revolutionary uprising of the peasant masses against the Hetman and his feudal-agrarian regime, as well as against their protectors, the Austro-Hungarian-German troops. Our language at the time went like this:

Peasants, workers and you, the working intelligentsia! Support the rebirth and expansion of the revolution as the most reliable weapon in the fight against Capital and the State! Support the creation and strengthening of a free society of workers in your life-time, our common objective! You must organize yourselves, form partisan style revolutionary combat detachments and battalions from among your ranks, then rise up, set upon the Hetman and the Austro-German emperors –those who sent their savage counter-revolutionary armies against us -and at all costs defeat these executioners of the revolution and of freedom!

The toiling masses listened to us and they understood us. Villages and hamlets far removed from Gulyai-Polye itself sent their delegates to see us, seeking to join the anarchist group and then bring one of its members back with them for discussions and to prepare the way for the uprising. At that time I used to travel either alone or with three or four comrades: I held clandestine meetings with the peasants from these villages and districts. After two months of this demanding and dogged propaganda and organizing effort, carried out by the region's peasants, our Gulyai-Polye libertarian communist group observed that a swarm of workers stood ready to follow its lead, among them many armed rebels determined to put an end to the economic and political arbitrariness of the Hetman and the Austro German junkers.

I recall one time when the delegates from the units which we had already organized spent a week touring the region in an attempt to link up with me. I who was the man the bourgeoisie and the Austro-German command loved to hate. For my part, I too traveled around from village to village in the company of two or three comrades, carrying out my organizing drive. They manage to link up with me and on behalf of those who had sent them, they asked me not to postpone the unleashing of the general armed insurrection against the revolution's enemies to some date deemed more opportune. They informed me:

(...) Nestor Ivanovitch, come back to Gulyai-Polye to raise its inhabitants in revolt! If they rise, all villages, districts and regions will

follow suit. With your band of agitator comrades, by dint of your zealous efforts, you have already brought your township of Gulyai-Polye to a rare fever pitch of revolutionary revolt against the Hetman and the Austro-Germans. Your summons, issued from rebel Gulyai-Polye, will do more for the work of insurrection for which we will all prepare ourselves, than all these weeks you have spent touring the villages to prepare the way for this undertaking with verbal agitation, exposing your very life to the greatest risks.

I did not let myself be swayed by such trust and the tribute paid to our group and to me personally. Devoid of any revolutionary vanity, I strove to inculcate the same precept into my friends and the masses among whom we were operating; it was a matter of retaining the lucidity and understanding that we had conjured into existence for the prosecution of the revolution, which had been stalled for the time being by the counter-revolutionary executioners. My travels through the revolutionary centers of Russia, the experiences and observations I had garnered from them, had all opened my eyes to a lot of things. It was for all these reasons that along with my friends from the Gulyai-Polye libertarian communist group, I had devoted myself to the organizing of the peasant uprising against the enemies of the revolution and been scrupulously watchful lest any underplaying of our role make us forgetful of the real tasks that had fallen to our lot. Thus to all the importunate demands from peasants that the rising be unleashed, I continually repeated, in my capacity as instigator and chief of the insurrection:

Down your way, are all your forces connected enough with your group in organizational terms? Have you all understood that the insurrection must erupt everywhere at the same time, even though the different districts are far from one another?

- If you have realized that, it would not be a waste of time to reflect one more time on the most productive way of launching our armed struggle! Especially as we are a long way from having access to the same technical resources as our enemies, when indeed our first blows we strike will have to secure us a number of rifles and artillery pieces, as well as twenty cartridges and shells for each rifle and cannon.

- Such a success will be doubly satisfying to us, for we shall promptly derive greater determination from it, politically, organizationally and in fighting terms alike. Following that initial SUCCESS, all our partisan detachments will fall upon the enemy from every side, thereby sowing the most utter confusion among the Austro German command and the Hetman's government, in our Lower Dniepr and Donet Basin region at any rate. Then, during the summer, events should take a more favorable turn for us and allow us to step up our struggle even further.

These were terms in which we anarchist peasants addressed the toiling masses at a time of dire difficulty for the revolution and our movement's ideas. The question

might be posed: Why were we so very, perhaps even unduly, cautious about our influence over the masses, when they were the first to call for an uprising against the oppressors? Why, it might be asked, when we were naturally carried away by the spirit of revolt, had we not simply placed ourselves at the head of these masses, so imbued with the elements unleashed by the revolutionary anarchist tempest which was quite bereft of ulterior political motives? Now this might seem odd, but our attitude was determined solely by the circumstances of the time especially by those that in the libertarian movement are only rarely acknowledged as crucial. Indeed, for an active revolutionary vanguard, this was a time of great strain, for it required painstaking preparation of the uprising. Our Gulyai-Polye libertarian communist group was just such a vanguard and events led it to pose the question of whether it should assume complete responsibility for leading the movement of the seething toiling masses or surrender that role to someone of these parties with their ready made programs and which also had access to direct support from the “revolutionary” Bolshevik government in Moscow?

That question made life difficult for our group, especially as in such busy times there was no question of invoking anarchism's abstract notions with their rejection of disciplined organization of revolutionary forces, the upshot of which was that anarchists would have found themselves isolated in revolutionary activity and stranded by the very existence of the creative and productive part that was in principle theirs to play. For all the revolutionary ardor and first hand experience that impelled us to spare no effort to thwart the counter-revolution, we aspired to act as anarchists with an abiding faith in the correctness of the doctrine's fundamental principles. However, we were well aware of the disorganization prevailing within the anarchist movement, doing it considerable damage and playing into the hands of the Bolsheviks and the Left Social Revolutionaries. We also realized that this habitual disorganization was a lot more firmly rooted among most anarchists than the positive aspects of their teaching and that as a result, this disorganization was so much the chief trait of the anarchist movement that it could not be either comprehended or supported by the masses, who had no desire to go blindly to their deaths in some pointless struggle.

We had furnished the best possible solution to this problem by organizing the insurrection directly and paying no heed to the possible carping from our fellow-

believers regarding this vanguardist stance which they saw as ill suited to anarchist teachings. Thus in practice we disposed of such inconsequential blather that was so damaging to our cause and concentrated instead on seeing the struggle through to complete victory. However, this required that revolutionary anarchism, if it sought to play its part properly and fulfill its active task in contemporary revolutions, face up to immense demands of an organizational nature whether in the training of its personnel or in defining its dynamic role in the early days of the revolution when the toiling masses were often groping their way.

Cognizant of the atomization of anarchist circles and their semi-legal existence towns and cities, where the Bolsheviks were set upon destroying them or making them into auxiliaries of the Bolshevik authorities, we peasant anarchists operated in the countryside in such a way as to ensure that the voice of our anarchist movement got a hearing there and to draw out all that was best and healthiest from the towns so as to raise the flag of revolt against the Hetman and his Austro-German sponsors.

It was with this in mind that our group schooled the region's toiling peasantry whilst not surrendering one iota of basic anarchist principles: it boosted the armed struggle and drafted the political program of the insurgent movement which soon came to known everywhere as the "Batko Makhno revolutionary units."

So strong and productive were the group's influence and my own that no political force inimical to anarchism, particularly the socialist parties, had any chance of prevailing against them in the minds of the insurgent masses, who heeded neither their slogans nor indeed the speechifying of their orators. Makhno's words and those of the members of the Gulyai-Polye libertarian communist peasant group regarding the freedom and independence of workers vis-a-vis Capital and its servant, the State, were taken on board by the masses and their import regarded as the basis for the struggle to replace the noxious organization of bourgeois capitalist society by the free organization of toilers.

It was in the name of that objective that the peasant masses created a mighty armed force, placed it under the command of the Staff organized by the Gulyai-Polye libertarian group and thereafter sustained it on a permanent basis. These economic and

psychological ties were never broken after that, with the toiling population unstintingly rallying around the movement even in its darkest days, keeping it supplied with manpower and provisions.

In this way the Gulyai-Polye region quickly became a land apart, for all statist tendencies were banished from its self-organization. The savage hordes of Austro-Germans who had hitherto known no restraint upon their arbitrariness, were smashed and disarmed, with their weaponry being taken over by the movement.

Consequently these troops began to scurry out of the region: as for the Hetman Skoropadsky's men, some were hanged, others driven out. The Bolshevik government soon learned of the existence of this proud region as well as of the anarchists who were the inspiration behind its insurgent movement. It was at this point that Bolshevik newspapers used to make no bones about citing the name of Makhno on their front pages, reporting daily the successes of the campaign waged under his leadership.

The insurgent movement forged ahead. Having routed the Austro-Germans, then driven out the Hetman's men from a succession of districts in the Ukraine, it encountered the beginnings of the Denikinist backlash and the Ukrainian Directory - better known as the 'Petliurovshchina' - against which they promptly deployed all their efforts under the direction of the anarchist peasants, as ever, they being the revolution's most devoted sons. A broad front was built up against these new foes and heroic military operations conducted in the interests of the revolution and a new, free society of toilers.

Against this backdrop, the anarchist peasants organized the insurgent movement of the Ukraine's toilers, which subsequently grew into the Makhnovist movement. In light of this summary, albeit an incomplete one, those who have encountered the fairy tales peddled by the enemies of the Makhnovshchina and on occasion by certain of its "friends" daring to suggest that this grassroots movement had no ideology, that its doctrinal and political inspirations alike were drawn from outside, will be in a position to conclude that such allegations are utterly without foundation.

The guides of the movement, as well as the toiling peasant masses who backed it from start to finish, are well aware that it was organized by the Gulyai-Polye libertarian communist group and that it always enshrined the anarchist expectations of those who were not misled by revolutionary verbalism nor by the chaotic tendencies and irresponsible mentality so frequently encountered in the towns. The inspirations and organizers of the insurgent movement such as the Karetnik brothers, Alexis Marchenko, the Semenyuta brothers, the Domashenko brothers, the Makhno brothers, Lyuty, Zuichenko, Korostelev, Troyan, Danilov, Tykhenko, Moshtchenko, A. Chubenko and lots of others, were all anarchists. Many of them had been active among the peasants back in 1906-1907 and were in fact the movement's pioneers. It was they, along with others from inside the movement, who sustained it in terms of its political ideas as well as of its military and strategic organization. Any help from anarchist organizations, the ones closest in terms of their thinking, was eagerly awaited but to our great regret was never forthcoming in an organizational way. For the first nine months of its military operations against the revolution's enemies, the anarchist movement saw nothing from what should have been its natural friends, the urban anarchists. It was only later that some came out to join it, in an individual capacity mainly, especially those who were indebted to the movement for their release from enemy hands. The libertarian communist group from Ivanovo-Vosnessensk, headed by comrades Makeyev and A. Chernyakov, was the only one to throw in its lot with the Makhnovist movement, in an organizational way. It rendered it needed and significant help, but unfortunately only temporarily, for most of its members drifted away a short time later.

Throughout these tough years of an unequal, exacting and (politically and historically) telling struggle, the Makhnovist movement drew all its sustenance exclusively from its own internal resources. This, I am convinced, was the essential reason why it was able to stick staunchly to its revolutionary post and, despite the endless fighting due to its being encircled at all times, the reason why it followed no other path but that of anarchism and social revolution.

Abiding by its anarchist ideas, forbidding the State and its supporters from interfering with the self-direction of the urban and rural toilers in their endeavors to build a free society, the Makhnovist movement could not of course expect any help from the statist political parties: on the other hand, it was entitled to look for such help

to the anarchist organizations in the towns, which help, unfortunately, never came. Disorganizational practices were so deep rooted at that time among the bulk of the anarchists as to blind them to what was going on in the countryside.

On the whole, they failed to notice or to grasp in time the anarchist spirit abroad in the peasantry, and, as a result to bring their influence to bear on the urban workers' organizations. Having taken note of this dereliction, the Makhnovist movement thus has no reason to feel grateful for this defect in the anarchists' urban organizations. Out of this appreciation arose its faith in the rightness of the positions it adopted regarding the revolutionary endeavor. It was able to abide firmly by these, which enabled it to fight on for so many years whilst relying solely upon its own resources. In thereby living up to its revolutionary duty, which was both onerous and crucial, the Makhnovist movement made but one serious mistake: it joined forces with Bolshevism to wage a joint campaign against Wrangel and the Entente. While that compact lasted, and it was certainly valuable practically and psychologically for the success of the revolution, the Makhnovist movement was mistaken about the Bolsheviks' revolutionism and failed to take preventive steps in time against their treachery. The Bolsheviks treacherously attacked it, with the assistance of all their "soldiery" and, albeit with great difficulty, defeated it for a time.

* Dielo Truda N° 44-45. The struggle against the state and other essays. MAKHNO, Nestor Ivanovich. Janeiro-Fevereiro de 1928, pp. 3-7. Editado por Alexander Skirda. Ak Press, 1996.