

# **MAKHNOVISTS IN UKRAINE AND RUSSIAN REVOLUTION**

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## **SOCIAL REVOLUTION IN GULYAI-POLYE**

After nine years' absence, Makhno was understandably moved when he came to breathe again the air of home. Now aged twenty-seven-and-a-half years, the best years of his youth had been spent in the jails and dungeon recesses of a despised Tsarism. He had vengeance to take against life, but he was a militant of repute and only action could slake his thirst for social achievement.

He went first to the home of his twenty-year-old mother who struck him as greatly aged and stooped by the years. He saw again his Ider brothers Savva and Emilian; his other brothers who had set up homes of their own while he was away were still serving at the front.

He came upon the surviving members of the Gulyai-Polye libertarian communist group, discovered what had become of this one and that, and made the acquaintances of the new young members of the group whose main activity consisted of surreptitiously distributing leaflets. Many peasants, male and female, showed up to greet this "man back from the dead", as they called him, and this gave him a chance to gauge how receptive they were to libertarian ideas. This sampling of opinions set him at his ease, and he cobbled together a meeting with his comrades from the group. To them he spelled out his analysis of the situation; without waiting for the libertarian movement nationwide to recover its strength and start to organize itself, anarchists ought to be in the vanguard of mass revolutionary action. His activism clashed with the opposition from certain traditional anarchist militants who were calling for a propaganda drive to target the workers and designed solely to familiarize them with libertarian ideas. He and his friends found themselves outnumbered in the group. Not that that mattered for on no account could he make do with such a passive approach and the urge to act, suppressed over so many years, was seething inside him. From the moment he arrived back, he took the initiative by suggesting that local peasants appoint delegates and establish a Gulyai-Polye Peasants' Union. Some days later, on March 29, 1917, they did precisely that: the union represented most of the commune's peasants and in the ensuing days was to

embrace the peasants from the district and then of the whole region. Hot on the heels of this, the metalworkers and woodworkers organized committees of their own; a contingency fund was also set up. Infected by Makhno's radical enthusiastic speechifying, they all elected him as their chairman, ignoring his wishes!

Although this amounted to a relative infringement of the anarchist teaching that forbade acceptance of any formal authority, Makhno accepted all the posts that they sought to confer upon him and was everywhere at once, in the committees and at the anarchist group; he also toured the surrounding militants, he even undertook to ransack the archives of the local police; thus it was that he discovered that an erstwhile group member, Piotr Sharovsky, had denounced Alexander Semenyuta for the 2,000 ruble reward posted for his capture; not that his greed had been fully satisfied, for, according to the very same archives, only 500 rubles had been paid out to him! Nestor in this way came to realize just why this old friend had been nowhere to be found since his return.

Whenever he was further elected as chairman of the communal committee, Makhno refused the appointment, for, on the one hand, he still did not know how anarchists stood nationally with regard to such elections, and anyway, if he had accepted the chairmanships of other committees, it had only been in order to reduce the authority of those committees and forestall the election of party political representatives in his place. If the latter were to succeed in gaining the upper hand over the wishes of the workers, he reckoned that they "...would inevitably kill any creative initiative in the revolutionary movement." So if he did take up these various responsibilities, it was temporarily only, in order to be better informed about the actions of the formal authorities and to get the workers used to doing without "tutors" and to learn to shift for themselves.

He was also dabbling here and there and indeed, once the operation of these committees had been well "run-in", he handed them over to a thoroughly reliable comrade, while keeping "one eye on business."

His tireless activity led to his being delegated to the Alexandrovsk regional peasant congress. There he pushed through a vote to have the estates of the big landowners handed back to the peasant communes, without payment of compensation, to the great displeasure of the Social Democrats and Cadets who advocated a buy-back policy.

His calls for collectivization of the land, factories and workshops had a tremendous resonance throughout the region, and many a person traveled for a great

distance to consult him and take a lead from him. So much so that even the anarchists from the big cities of Alexandrovsk and Ekaterinoslav, learning of his successes, called upon him to come and take up a place in their organization or lend them a hand in their undertakings.

But Gulyai-Polye was his priority, and there, constantly on call, he never shirked. We might cite the case of the strike by the commune's workers, of whom he had been elected trade union chairman. Begged by the workers to assume leadership of the strike, he agreed, for one thing because it was incumbent upon him by virtue of his office, and for another, because he hoped to win the most pugnacious of the workers over to the libertarian communist group. Before launching their strike, the workers, gathered together in a general assembly, called upon him to draft and present their demands to the bosses. After lengthy common discussion, he summoned the bosses and demanded of them an 80-to-100 percent wage increase under threat of an immediate and complete stoppage. The furious employers refused; he gave them one day to mull it over; the following day they showed up with proposals for a 35-to-40 percent raise. He "deemed that offer an outright insult" and urged them to take another day to think it over. Meanwhile, he arranged with the factory committees and workshop representatives to have the strike declared simultaneously throughout, should the bosses again refuse to meet their conditions. He even proposed to the workers that they proceed immediately with seizure of all capital assets whether on company premises or in the Gulyai-Polye bank, with an eye to utterly disarming the local bourgeoisie and to forestall possible steps by the authorities against strikers, pending their taking effective control of the firms upon themselves. The workers decided to leave this latter move until a later date, for they reckoned that they were ill-prepared for it, and they preferred to have the expropriations of the firms contemporaneous with the writing of the estates from the big landowners.

The next day, the employers came back and, after two hours of quibbling, came up with an increased offer but one that was still less than had been asked for, hoping to hold out for a compromise. Whereupon Makhno told them that the negotiations were over and that he was winding up the talks. At this point, Kerner, the richest of the businessmen and onetime employer of Nestor as well as of his father Ivan, -an old fox sensing that things were taking a turn for the worse - hurriedly told him: "Nestor Ivanovitch, you were too hasty in winding up the meeting. I reckon that the workers'

demands are justified. They are entitled to have us meet them, and I for my part am going to sign right away."

Willy-nilly the other bosses followed the example of their most prominent colleague and the protocol of agreement was signed. "Henceforth, the workers of Gulyai-Polye and surrounding area take all firms under their control, examine the economic and administrative implications of the affair and make ready to take over effective management."

Incidentally, Makhno and his comrades disarmed the local militia and rescinded their powers of arrest and search and reduced them to the role of town criers. Then they assembled the pomieschikis, confiscated title deeds and on that basis, conducted a precise inventory of all these land holdings. It was at this point that the region's peasants refused to pay the usual farm rents to these landlords, hoping to recover the land from them once the harvest was in, without "bandying words either with them or with the authorities which looked after them, and then to share the land out among all, peasant or worker, desirous of working it."

In view of all these moves and of the positive results that flowed from them, Makhno was startled by the smallness of the anarchist movement in the Ukraine and in Russia, whose militants were quite numerous at several tens of thousands but ultimately rather passive compared with the left-wing political parties when not swept along in their wake. Indeed, the majority of anarchists were content to peddle libertarian ideas and notions among the working population and simultaneously to organize communities and clubs. Makhno found all this very regrettable and he deplored their failure to organize themselves into a powerful all-Russian movement capable of espousing a shared tactic and strategy so as to play an active part in the movement of the revolutionary masses, thereby shaping events and linking up life and activity in towns with those in the countryside. Only thus, he reckoned, would it be possible to keep the social movement on course for libertarian communism. All his life, Makhno was to regret the chronic disorganization of anarchists. For his part, Makhno feared nothing in that year of 1917 and carried away by the sort of faith that moves mountains he contributed to the most radical, most daring ventures. On August 29, 1917, General Kornilov's thrust towards Petrograd, intent upon overthrowing the provisional government of the socialist Kerensky and establishing a strong authority, accelerated events. A committee for defense of the revolution was hastily set up in Gulyai-Polye; chairmanship of it was entrusted to Makhno. As he was simultaneously chairman of the

Peasants' Union which had now become a "soviet", he had to divide his time between the two tasks. To counter the attempted counter-revolution, he suggested "... disarming the entire local bourgeoisie and abolishing its rights over the people's assets: estates, factories, workshops, printing works, theaters, cinemas, and other public enterprises", which would henceforth be placed under the collective control of the workers. The defense committee accepted his proposal; however, as Kerensky had managed to cling to power, the balance of forces did not make it possible to implement every decision made. For the time being, the peasants made do with withholding rents from the landlords and with assuming control of the land, livestock and machinery. Only several huge estates were collectivized; some farming communes, made up of landless families and small like-minded groups settled on them. Each commune numbered about 200 individuals. There was a huge number of communes dotted around the whole region. Let us look more closely at the ones that Makhno personally organized in the former German settlements of Neifeld and Klassen.

These libertarian communes were founded upon the principle of equality and fellowship among all their members, male and female. Cooking and dining facilities were shared although any individual could see to his own meals provided proper notice was given. Everyone rose early and set to work right after breakfast. In the event of absenteeism, the commune member would let his neighbor know so that a replacement could be found. The work program was arranged by common consent at general assemblies. Farming was not the sole activity; there was also craft production and even a machine shop.

As a member of one of these communes, Makhno helped out with the work on two days a week; come the planting in the spring, he helped with the harrowing and sowing; the rest of the time, he busied himself about the farm or even lent a helping hand to the mechanic at the electricity station. At this point he was living with a companion, Nastia.

All of the participants looked upon this free communal lifestyle as the "highest form of social justice." Certain landowners came around to that way of thinking and set about working the land for themselves. Indeed, it was left up to the former landowners to choose whether to take an equal share in the commune's lifestyle and work.

From Victor Kravchenko, the future sensational defector, we have a description of yet another libertarian commune set up in the same area, near Korbino on the Dniepr. Kravchenko's father was one of the promoters of this commune which was named

"Nabat" (The Tocsin). It was comprised of about 100 worker families from Ekaterinoslav who had settled on the central portion of an old state, comprising 200 hectares of wheat land and some orchards, as well as the seigneurial home and its outbuildings. Victor Kravchenko's father had refused to join the Communist Party for he "... had no taste for dictatorship and terror, he bluntly confessed, even if these were wrapped in the folds of a red flag" and so he wanted "...to remain free and to struggle on alone for a better world." The settlement proceeded with the agreement of the local peasants who had divided up the remainder of the state:

The local Soviet, endorsing the initiative, had divided up the estates; it had also provided the provisions and livestock needed to complement what was left of the assets of the former owners. In the towns, industry had ground to a virtual standstill due to lack of raw materials and food rationing was so strict that people were all but dead of hunger. So the flight to the land, which held the promise of well-being for everybody, had been well-received. The wish to appease certain intellectual urges had also prompted many to throw in their lot with us. Many men, in fact, burned with the desire to put into effect, within the narrow parameters of a cooperative farm, some of the theories that had been the stuff of their dreams over years of revolutionary fervor. The Tocsin, they told themselves, would ring out as a constant reminder of the ideal of brotherhood that seemed to have been forgotten completely in the tumult of the fratricidal war in which the communists, with their Cheka, were carrying out mass arrests and wrongly shooting folk on the most absurd pretexts.

[...] To the farm workers the urban workers brought the energy of despair. Of course, above all else, they wanted to be able to feed their loved ones, but they also sought to justify the sacrifices they had made in the past for their Cause. The local peasants made fun of these city workers-turned-farmers: We shall see, they used to say with a wink of the eye, how these 'communists' shall work our land!

At bottom such teasing was without malice; it was, rather, symptomatic of friendly interest. Many peasants hastened to advise us and to help us every occasion that they had the chance. Far from resenting our experiment, they looked upon it like good neighbors, with sympathetic interest. More than once, when we were overloaded with work, they supplied us with precious assistance, and it was they who made a success of our first year.

Later this commune was to fold, a victim of events. The idyllic dream of "cooperative enterprise" was to dissolve in discord and bitterness, or even in "dismal despair," with commune workers quitting one after another.

The work of the Gulyai-Polye soviet's procurement section was remarkable also. It established contacts with the textile factories in Moscow and elsewhere, with an eye to arranging direct barter with them. Despite hindrance from the "new powers that be" at the center - Bolsheviks and Left SRsB in coalition, die-hard statist to a man - who

could not tolerate barter between the towns and the countryside unless channeled through State agencies, two trade-offs were arranged; several wagon loads of wheat and flour, against wagon loads of cloth ordered by the soviet's procurement section. It was not a question of simple barter of goods of equivalent value, i.e., of circuitous commercial dealings, no; This was an exchange of goods in quantities that varied and determined only by the stated needs of both parties.

It is also interesting to learn how dealings between the commune's different committees and the delegates whom they appointed were handled. These delegates, did they not become bureaucrats jealous of their prerogatives, uncontrollable and thus unaccountable, as has often been the case in history? The "Leon Schneider" case is a perfect illustration of the control that the committees sought to exercise over their elected or appointed officers. Schneider was a militant of a local anarchist group, delegated by the metalworkers' and woodworkers' committee as their representative to the Ekaterinoslav departmental soviet of peasants, workers and soldier deputies. His task was to oversee the supply of iron, cast iron, coal and other vital raw materials to the factories and mills of Gulyai-Polye. Schneider, contaminated by the "bureaucratic" atmosphere, neglected his duties and when called to account over the tardiness or absence of supplies, his answer was that he had no time to bother with that anymore, that the departmental soviet had assigned him another duty, and he invited the Gulyai-Polye committee to appoint someone else in his place. He then received a telegram hinting that he should return to Gulyai-Polye forthwith to render an account of his stewardship; otherwise, two comrades would be dispatched to bring him back. Suddenly more solicitous of his rank and file, he went back, delivered his report and was sent back to his workbench in the Kerner plant. Mortified he was to seize the earliest opportunity to avenge himself, as we shall see.

As for Makhno's role, at this time it is hard to get the precise measure of it; for all his offices and intense activities, he was regarded only as a sort of number one advisor, which is to say his advice and opinion were forever being sought but were not automatically adopted, far from it, either in the anarchist group - where he was often challenged, especially by the younger members - or in the soviet or indeed on the committee for defense of the revolution. In short, his responsibilities were enormous but his power small. In that he was indeed the consistent libertarian militant.

However, dark clouds were gathering in the blue skies of revolution; first of above all challenge all of the social changes made by the revolutionary peasants. Faced

with this situation, the Gulyai-Polye soviet decided to come to the aid of Alexandrovsk which was threatened by the troops of the Central Rada (Council), the government set up by the Ukrainian nationalists. That decision faced the local anarchists with a problem, for it had them support governmental forces here which, even if they were of the "left," were nonetheless potential enemies of the masses' autonomy. Makhno reckoned at the time that..." as anarchists we must, paradox or no paradox, make up our minds to form a united front with the governmental forces. Keeping faith with anarchist principles, we will find a way to rise above all these contradictions and, once the dark forces of reaction have been smashed, we will broaden and deepen the course of the revolution for the greater good of an enslaved humanity."

On January 4, 1918, a detachment of some 800-to-900 men was formed, some 300 of whom were members of the Gulyai-Polye anarchist group. Nestor's older brother, Savva Makhno, assumed command and off they went by train to Alexandrovsk to join up with Red Guards commanded by Bogdanov. Then Nestor was appointed a member of the city's revolutionary committee. He was placed in charge of the commission of inquiry into imprisoned officers accused of conspiring against the revolution: generals, colonels, militia commanders... He was startled to discover among them the former prosecutor who had handled his case in 1909 and who had had him placed in the "hole" for complaining about his conditions of imprisonment. Makhno in turn had him placed in the very cell that he had occupied in those days, prescribing identical conditions for this ex-prosecutor. The wheel had turned; an irony of history that should still give all who bear the responsibility for repression good pause for thought.

Nestor availed of his position to secure the release of workers and peasants still imprisoned under Kerensky and whom the Bolsheviks had refused to set free for fear that they might revolt against them too!

It was at this point that Nestor underwent his baptism of fire by confronting several Cossack regiments from the Don who were returning from the front to link up with Kaledin. In view of the lively resistance that they encountered, they surrendered; their weapons were taken from them and then they were sent home. That operation over, the Gulyai-Polye detachment made for home, though not without ferrying away some additional weaponry.

Makhno ran up against the thorny problem of finding funds for the activities of the soviet and commune. To be sure, he could have obtained any sum from the



Alexandrovska revolutionary committee, but in that case he would have acknowledged its authority and thus that of the Lenin government; Makhno would have none of that at any price. So he suggested to the soviet that it commandeer 250,000 rubles from the local bank. His suggestion was unanimously accepted. The money was seized from the bank in the name of the revolution to meet the needs of the soviet; delivered within a few days; was shared, at Makhno's instigation, between a home for war orphans set up in the residence of the former superintendent of police, and the soviet's procurement branch; the remainder was to meet the needs of the revolutionary committee.

So it was that in the space of a year the Gulyai-Polye libertarian communist group, at the instigation of the compulsive Nestor with his multifaceted activities inside agencies representative of the working class, managed to contrive the winning of new social rights and, thanks to that, awaken a radical revolutionary consciousness in the region.

## **EBB AND FLOW IN THE 1917 REVOLUTION**

Thus far we have followed events as they occurred in the southern Ukraine; the better to understand the narrative which follows we would do well at this point to recapitulate in brief the general situation in the erstwhile Russian Empire.

The days of rioting in February 1917 - known under the name of the February revolution - I put paid to the Romanov dynasty which was incapable of resolving the problems posed the modernization of the country and its assumption of its place among the most advanced nations. The world war of 1914 cruelly exposed this impotence. Commanded by generals whose sole concern was for their own personal advancement - often proportionate with the number of their troops killed - poorly armed and haphazardly equipped, the Russian army had suffered colossal losses - upwards of nine million dead and wounded, including the Poles - and had no precise notion of why it was fighting. Officially the goals were the capture of Constantinople and the independence of a reunified Poland; in fact, the backstairs intrigues of French and British imperialism against the German could hardly but leave the Russian peasant masses cold as they profoundly yearned for peace. To that basic aspiration were added the claims of the Empire's numerous nationalities and above all, the pressure for the agrarian reform urgently desired by the peasantry which accounted for almost 85 percent of the total population.

The provisional revolutionary government that succeeded the Tsar felt itself obliged to honor the alliance agreement with the Western allies and continued the war, which was increasingly unpopular in the land. As for the urgent nationalist and land questions, it put these off until after the election of a Constituent Assembly - the old dream of Russian democracy - which, equipped with full powers, would resolve all these thorny issues for the best. This political foot-dragging and legislative formalism sparked off an initial left-wing revolt by the Kronstadt sailors, limply supported by the Bolsheviks in July 1917 and then there was an attempted military putsch from the right in August 1917, by General Kornilov, the army's supreme commander, seeking to restore discipline and prosecute the war to victory; both threats were contained without much problem and they merely bolstered the power of Kerensky, an incorrigible chatter-box and "cardboard Robespierre." Kerensky continued to play for time and lost all credibility to the advantage of Lenin whose influence was ceaselessly growing in that he was promising the masses so much and then some.

Identical causes produce identical effects, and Kerensky's "house of cards" was collapsed in turn by an uprising of several thousand workers and Baltic sailors. Lenin capitalized upon this windfall, picked up the power "lying in the street" and cobbled together a new government, this time of people's commissars."

The Bolshevik coup d'etat was generally well-received by working people.

Indeed, the watchwords on behalf of which it had been mounted..."All power to the soviets!", "Land to the peasants, factory to the workers", "Immediate peace" and "national autonomy for the different peoples of the Empire" could not have been better attuned to the aspirations of the populace. However, the "shrewd Lenin" (dixit Makhno) had merely played upon these aspirations for the sole purpose of ensconcing himself in power; once at the controls, he was to devote himself primarily to consolidation of his tenuous authority for it seemed the soviets and other factory committees or soldiers' committees were there for appearances' sake only, all decisions being made without any consultation with them, through decrees handed down and railroaded through by the "new worker and peasant government."

Armistice was arranged with the Central empires; the soldiers' committees were overseen by Bolsheviks who wasted no time in getting rid of hostile officers and generals.

However, Lenin and his cohorts did not dare prevent the elections for the Constituent Assembly scheduled for late November, or over a month after their coup

d'etat. The elections -the only free elections in Russia's entire history-provided the Social Revolutionaries with a very substantial majority; almost sixty percent of the votes, whereas the Bolsheviks, even by stuffing the ballot boxes in the big cities which they controlled, picked up only a quarter of the votes. This was a resounding repudiation. In principle, the new assembly, due to meet on January 5, 1918, was to assume the reins in the country and form a government representative of the generality of the citizenry. The Bolsheviks, though, continued to act as if nothing had happened and indulged themselves with a "temporary" ban on hostile liberal newspapers, set up the Cheka at the beginning of December 1917 and set about winning over the so-called Left faction of the Social Revolutionaries by offering them some portfolios and junior positions in the government. They succeeded in this latter undertaking by adopting wholesale the agrarian program of their allies and immediately declaring the land socialized, without compensation or conditions, thereby usurping the General Assembly that was to have pronounced upon this. The measure was favorably received by the peasant masses for it often sanctioned a *fait accompli*.

Hence the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly on the day following its opening session on January 6, 1918 triggered no great or immediate upset in the country. The Social Revolutionaries and their Social Democrat allies - the Mensheviks - the big losers in the episode, were convinced that in the end their legitimacy would win through, and they omitted to conduct a military operation (for which they did not in any case have the wherewithal) against these usurpers, having no wish to see even..." a single drop of Russian blood spilled" (Chernov, the Social Revolutionary speaker of the Constituent Assembly) this sort of squeamishness was to lead to an unprecedented bloodbath (the blood being shed was not just Russian but all types).

Confronted with this confused situation, several nations of the erstwhile Empire realized their ambitions: Finland, Poland, Georgia, and the Ukraine seceded and set themselves up as independent countries. The Don, Kuban and Terek Cossacks too wished to become autonomous and to set up a Cossack federation.

The Austro-German armies, hitherto observing a watching brief, capitalized upon the situation to unleash a mighty offensive in February 1918. They forged irresistibly ahead, for the Russian army had been demobilized and there were only Red Guards, who more readily fired on unarmed civilians than tackled real soldiers<sup>4</sup>, to stop them. The Germans got to within 150 kilometers of Petrograd, passing through the Baltic lands, signed a separate peace treaty with the Central Rada; the government of

independent Ukraine, and threatened the Bolshevik regime with complete collapse. Lenin insistently sued for negotiations, first of all without annexations or tribute, and then, with his back to the wall, agreed without further ado to all conditions imposed by the people who, in April 1917, had allowed him to return to Russia aboard the famed "sealed train"! He had the treaty hastily ratified by his party's central committee and the agreement was signed on March 3, 1918 at Brest-Litovsk. It provided for dismemberment of the former Russian empire, i.e., formal recognition of the independence of Finland, Poland, the Baltic states and the Ukraine, which is to say of territories covering an area of 780,000 square kilometers and a population of 56 million, all of them placed under the protection of the Austro-Germans.

Paradoxically, this situation worked to Lenin's advantage, and the operation proved a boon to him; he had had his power recognized by the central Empires, and he had no control over the ceded territories anyway; on the other hand, this capitulation afforded him some respite during which to better consolidate his shaky authority.

For Ukrainian revolutionaries it was a real stab in the back. Their units had to let themselves be disarmed or evacuate the country and be disarmed anyway by Red Guards under Moscow's orders.

The Austro-Germans swooped on the Ukraine, guided by their local allies and bringing in their wake all the former great estate owners thrown out the year before by the revolutionary peasantry. Almost a million Austro-German troops occupied the territories ceded by Brest-Litovsk. The exactions and repression of the occupiers and of the Ukrainian oligarchy quickly triggered a popular resistance movement; dozens of local insurgent detachments sprang up to harry enemy troops, engaging in a savage war of national liberation.

This was the context in which Makhno found himself. At first, he thought of resisting the invasion of the German and Austro-Hungarian troops, in all several hundred thousands of well-equipped and organized soldiers - Makhno sets the figure for the Ukraine at 600,000. To this end, he proposed in Gulyai-Polye the formation of several battalions and companies, totaling nearly 1,500 volunteers. With this detachment he meant to join up with Red Guards and partisan groups that looked likely to stand up to the invaders. He managed to secure arms from the Ukrainian Red Guard command and received several carriage loads, containing 3,000 rifles, some cartridges and six cannon complete with shells. The city of Alexandrovsk asked the volunteers of Gulyai-Polye to come to its aid. A battalion of peasants plus the cavalry detachment

made up of the members of Gulyai-Polye's libertarian communist group made for Alexandrovsk. As for Makhno he was drafted on to the staff of Yegorov, the commander of the front. While trying vainly to get there, the rout having worsened, Makhno found himself stuck in a railroad marshaling yard. It was there that he got the stunning news that Gulyai-Polye had been occupied by German troops.

In fact, a handful of Ukrainian nationalists, capitalizing upon Makhno's absence and that of the region's most dependable units, had managed to bribe the company formed by the town's Jewish community and abetted by them had arrested the available members of the soviet, the revolutionary committee and the anarchist group on April 15 and 16. Their treachery complete, these conspirators had then called in the Germans; Among these Ukrainian nationalists were some landowners keen to recover states confiscated for the use of the farming communes, which is scarcely surprising, but there was also Vassili Sharovsky, the artillery chief, who had been led astray. The worst thing was the part which the town's armed Jewish company had played; its leader, Taranovsky (who later on was also to be the last chief of staff of the Makhnovist movement) had refused to get involved in the plot; his adjutant, Leimonsky, had jumped at the chance to replace him and with the backing of the company membership - shopkeepers afraid of libertarian collectivism, their children and other young folk misled by the demagogic speechifying of the Ukrainian nationalists - had carried out arrests of local revolutionaries, as well as tricking into disarming the anarchist detachment just back from the front.

To make matters worse, Leon Schneider, the delegate called to order by those who had mandated him, had played an extremely active role, sacking the premises of the libertarian communist group and going so far as to trample upon portraits of Bakunin, Kropotkin and Alexander Semenyuta.

Makhno was flabbergasted by the news; he was devastated that such a tiny number of conspirators -a few dozen -should have been able to undo so rapidly the achievements built up at the cost of so much effort over a year. He was immediately worried about the dangers of anti-Semitism that might be evoked in the peasants by the conduct of the Jewish company under arms. He wanted to get home but was talked out of it, for the Austro-Germans were already in control of the commune, and he would have been shot out of hand. He then thought up a title for an appeal that he set about drafting: "The traitor's soil and tyrant's conscience are as black as a winter's night." Yet the enemy troops' advance was lightning fast, and, in order to avoid encirclement, the

partisan groups to which he was attached fell back to Taganrog, a port and, railroad junction on the Sea of Azov. Towards the end of April, a conference drew together all the anarchists from Gulyai-Polye and its environs who had managed to reach Taganrog. The situation was reviewed, and it was decided that some-of them should make a tour of revolutionary Russia in order to gauge the difficulties that she faced. Others were to remain behind to work on clandestine organization of revolutionaries. A rendezvous was set for late June - early July, a time that it was reckoned would be favorable for a return to Gulyai-Polye, and the initiation of a general uprising against the occupiers and their allies. [...]

## **INTERVIEW WITH LENIN**

Makhno went on frequenting Moscow's revolutionary haunts and paid a visit to the peasant branch of the central Pan Russian executive committee of Soviets. In short he briefed himself so well that he had no further need to continue his tour as far as Petrograd, and he decided to make back to the Ukraine. However, he needed some phony identity papers if he was to cross the border established between Russia and could arrange for him to meet the "supreme guide" but was utterly powerless in the matter of his lodgings! What a disparity of powers!

Nestor was taken in by a friend he had met inside the Butyrki, and back he came the next day, brandishing all his passes. Lenin welcomed him "paternally"; he took him by the arm, placing a hand on his shoulder and had him sit in a comfortable armchair. Then he set about questioning him minutely: from where did he come? How had the peasants of the region understood the slogan "all powers to the local Soviets?" How had they reacted to those who were against this watchword, especially the Ukrainian nationalists?

Makhno answered that the peasants had understood the watchword as the expression of the consciousness and will of the workers themselves, that the village, district or regional soviets were merely the units of a revolutionary ralliement and of a self-managing economy serving the struggle against the bourgeoisie. Lenin came back to this matter three times, asking him if he regarded that interpretation as correct: when Nestor answered in the affirmative, Lenin then stated that the region had been contaminated by anarchism, and that that influence would not last.

Sverdlov joined in the conversation and asked Makhno if anarchism should be fomented among the peasantry. Whereupon Lenin pronounced that would the occupied

Ukraine. He made up his mind for apply to the "bureaucratic center" - the holy of holies - in the Kremlin. Passed from bureaucrat to bureaucrat, he eventually wound up before Sverdlov, the chairman of the central-executive committee of Soviets, with whom he engaged in a discussion of the overall situation in the country and the Ukraine. Sverdlov found his views of such interest that he suggested an interview with Lenin himself for the following day. An appointment was made. By contrast, Sverdlov proved incapable of obtaining a room for Makhno who was without lodgings. So, the boss of the "blotting paper revolutionaries" be to usher in counter-revolution and lead the proletariat to perdition. Makhno then lost his cool and protested that it would be nothing of the sort; Lenin set about rephrasing his comment; in his eyes, anarchists, having no large-scale organization of any substance, could not organize the proletariat and poor peasantry and thereby safeguard the revolution's gains.

The conversation moved on to the activities of the Red Guards for whom Lenin had a high regard. Pulling no punches, Makhno gave him an eye-opener by explaining that unlike the partisans who fought deep in the countryside, the Red Guards preferred to hold the railway lines, staying aboard their armored trains and raking their heels at the first sign of danger; that was why the populace, never having laid eyes on them, could not lend them their support. Lenin concluded from this -oddly enough -that the creation of a Red Army was the best solution and then he launched into a diatribe against the idealism of anarchists which would lead them to neglect the present for the sake of the future: "The anarchists are always full of self-denial and ready for every sacrifice but as fanatics and longsighted, they see only the distant future and ignore the present." Yet Lenin begged Makhno not to think he was applying this thought to him, for he looked upon him as a "man with a grasp of realities and the necessities of our age"; if only Russia could boast of one "third of anarchists of his ilk" the communists would be ready, under certain conditions, to march alongside them and cooperate for the sake of free organization of producers.

Soothed by these fine words, Makhno felt welling up within him a feeling of profound regard for his interlocutor, of whose acrobatics, chicanery and opportunist turns he as yet knew nothing. As for anarchists' alleged concern with the future at the expense of the present, he raised the example of the Ukraine - correcting Lenin, who, like many Russians of every persuasion, had used the expression "south of Russia" or "southern Russia" - where most of the partisan groups that had fought against the reactionaries were led by anarchists. Moreover, nearly all the communes or associations

had been set up at their instigation. In quoting these tangible examples, he showed that it was dear that anarchists stood foursquare in the "present," where they looked to what might bring them closer to the future to which they gave, to be sure, every consideration. As he finished speaking, Makhno looked Sverdlov directly in the eye;

Had he known at that precise moment that, a few years on, Makhno would be giving him sleepless nights and that he would be making him the quarry for his pack of Cheka lists and special units of the Red Army, Lenin would have realized that he was indeed mistaken. And without any doubt at all he would promptly have repaired his error, for all his ingratiating manner and sweet words, by having his enemy-to-be cast into the dungeons of the Cheka. The conversation limped along a little while longer, but, the essentials having been covered, Lenin, again in his "fatherly" mode, asked Makhno's requirements in respect of identity papers and promised to do the needful for him. Some days later, towards the end of June, kitted out with these papers, essential if he was to get through the various checkpoints, Makhno took the train bound for Orel.

His month-and-a-half long tour, which had when him across the country, had enabled him to "take the temperature of the revolution," gauge the weakness of the anarchist movement, a weakness both organizational and due to the depredations of the Bolshevik authorities, observe the "leading" echelons, meet with the most influential personages... in short, to formulate an exact idea of what had been done and of all that remained to be done in order to keep the revolution on the right course.

**\* This text is part of Skirda's book *Nestor Makhno, Anarchy's Cossack: the struggle for free soviets in the Ukraine 1917-1921* (AK Press, 2004).**